



## **THE PHANTOM DEER**

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### 1

## HICKEY'S DISCOVERY

Most of the Keys, the wooded islands scattered from the south tip of Florida in the direction of Cuba, were small, low, and swampy. Around them for miles the sea was very shallow except where a few channels carried the tides backward and forward between the Atlantic Ocean on the east, and the Gulf of Mexico on the west. The water was the abode of various monsters, but on the land the few kinds of wild animals were, for the most part, small and harmless.

Old Man Hickey lived in a little shack on the Gulf side of Big Pine Key. He had always lived there—at least that was what other natives of the Keys said. At one time he was all alone, for people had no way of going from key to key except by boat; then came the railroad to join the mainland with the outermost island, Key West. The railroad ran partly on land and partly on long causeways across the water between the Keys. The distance from the mainland to Key West was one hundred and nine miles, and the trains crossed twenty-two keys, the largest being Key Largo, which was the nearest one to the Florida shore.

The railroad was abandoned after troubles with the sea during violent storms, and in its place was built a fine highway with higher and better bridges or causeways than the railroad ever had. Then automobiles dashed, night and day, over the highway, and clusters of little houses began to appear wherever the land was high enough to give them some safety from the tides and waves. Before long, there were filling stations, restaurants, inns and small buildings to house sport fishermen and other pleasure seekers. More of these were built every year, though the menace of the hurricanes hung always over them, and the mosquito-infested swamps hemmed them in until more high land could be made by dredging sand from beneath the surrounding waters.

Hickey saw all of these changes. He hated them, but he could do nothing to stop them. He was not a hermit by nature, for he liked what he called the right kind of people, the

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people who were simple at heart and, like him, worked hard to earn a living from the sea. The other kinds of people, tourists, innkeepers, and those who came to fish just for sport, he did not understand and called "foreigners." They, in turn, looked at him suspiciously or with curiosity, and they seldom were friendly.

"The place is getting cluttered up with the wrong kind of people, restless people," he complained to himself, "the kind that never leave things alone, but have to hack down bushes and trees, tear up the ground, and make the world over, just to suit themselves. Why can't they stay on the mainland where they belong? They spoil island after island. Maybe they'll even try to spoil Big Pine someday!"

Most of all, he disliked the noisiness of the foreigners. Their automobiles roaring up and down the highway, their motorboats "put-putting" loudly around Big Pine Key, and their guns banging at every wild creature they could find.

"Maybe I've lived too long for any more peace," mused the old man. He looked at himself in the square little mirror that hung next to the window in his one room, noted how gray his long hair and heavy whiskers had become, and turned away almost angrily. But though nearly seventy, he knew he was still strong, very strong. Six feet tall and wiry, he could row his heavy skiff for miles when the rusty old engine refused to work, and he could pole it over the shallows all day, even though the wind blew and the tides sucked against him.

That night he sat at his table, writing a letter in pencil. The only light in the cabin came from two small candles, one on each side of him, but outside, a low new moon was trying to shine on the water, and stars were twinkling.

Like all who live alone, he was keenly aware of sounds. The rhythm of the water lapping against the pilings of his broken-down old pier, where he tied his boat, was ever present. The weather-scarred cabin was so near to the water that it looked and sounded almost like a part of it. Fish sometimes splashed at his doorstep; on the bank, herons gave weird cries, raccoons quarreled shrilly, and rats squealed at each other.

But on this night, at a moment when all was quiet, except the sea during violent storms, and in its place was built a fine highway with higher and better bridges or causeways than the railroad ever had. Then automobiles dashed, night and day, over the highway, and clusters of little houses began to appear wherever the land was high enough to give them some safety from the tides and waves. Before long, there were filling stations, restaurants, inns and small buildings to house sport fishermen and other pleasure seekers. More of these were built every year, though the menace of the hurricanes hung always over them, and the mosquito-infested swamps hemmed them in until more high land could be made by dredging sand from beneath the surrounding waters.

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Straightening up in his chair, he listened intently. Minutes passed, then he heard it again—a sound new to him and therefore all the more noticeable. It was a lispig bleat, so gentle that only a man of his kind would have heard it. He turned his head to one side to bring his left ear, his good ear, nearer to the open window. He was wondering what could make such a sound, wondering whether it was a friendly sound or one which should put him on guard. Behind him, the clock was ticking, and from the shallow pools back in the woods came the steady rasping chant of the frogs.

"Something's mighty close to me," thought Hickey. "I'd best have a look." He rose slowly, taking care that his shadow did not fall on the window; then he picked a

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flashlight from among endless tools on a side table and silently moved to the closed door. With one hand on the latch, the other around the flashlight, he waited a few seconds, then swung the door open with one sweep of his arm and flashed the light into the woods.

At first, he saw only bushes. He moved the beam of weak light slowly to the left where lay the water, then to the right. Here it caught and reflected itself into two large eyes. Unwinkingly they stared, and unwinkingly Hickey stared back, astonished and suddenly unnerved. The dense mangroves were high, and clustered near the cabin on that side. They hid all but the eyes.

"Only two good jumps away!" thought Hickey. "Could be a panther or a bear or something I've never seen before, maybe from a circus." He moved back into the room and looked around for a weapon. The handle of an axe caught his eye and he grasped it.

"No varmint can lick me now, I guess!"

It was not in his thoughts to try to harm the creature. Curiosity was uppermost in his mind. He wanted to see what it was that had invaded this part of his lonely Key, but he planned to be able to defend himself.

When he stepped out again and flashed the light, the eyes were still there, glowing and unmoving, but just a little closer. Hickey hesitated, peering intently into the shadows, trying to make out the hidden form of the creature. Then he took a step toward it, the axe gripped in his horny right hand and poised as high as his shoulder. Still the frogs croaked, but now he did not notice them. Instinctively, he was treading as softly as one of the wild creatures, his feet feeling their way among the stiff, growing things in their path.

"Be ready for a spring!" he kept repeating to himself. "It may come low or it may head straight for the light!"

Suddenly, he stopped. His taut muscles relaxed and a surprised whistle escaped his lips. The light had passed over a leafy clump of low bushes and exposed in its thin glare a spotted animal no larger than a cat. A fawn was standing there, its ears extended and its over-large eyes regarding him with frightened intensity.

Hickey felt both disappointment and relief. There were plenty of deer on Big Pine Key, the miniature Key deer, no larger than a dog. He was accustomed to seeing them nearly every day, and their dainty tracks were everywhere. Slowly he lowered the axe, took one more look at the tiny animal, then turned around and retraced his steps. But he reckoned without the deer. Scarcely had he reached the doorway when he found the little creature directly at his heels. It was following him, almost nudging his legs.

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Now Hickey stopped again, realizing the unusual, and wondering what was wrong. He stamped one foot, but the deer did not run. It stood there looking at him, propped on wide-apart, shaky legs.

"Thunderation!" muttered the man. "It must be lost. It's sick maybe, or just crazy. Where's the old one?" He stepped into the room. The fawn stayed in the doorway, hesitating to place its little hoofs on the boards. "Well," mused Hickey, "this is something new!"

He regarded the little animal for some moments, then stooped and put an arm around it, drawing it over the threshold. The little thing's hoofs, only the size of thumbnails, slipped on the smooth boards and it fell toward him, trying vainly to regain its feet. Presently, it just lay there, panting.

Hickey's heart warmed toward it. He got down on his hands and knees and examined the tiny creature, which seemed nearly all legs and scarcely three pounds in weight.

"Lost, and starved nearly to death," was the man's verdict. "It doesn't seem to be hurt anywhere."

He closed the door, set one of the candles on the floor nearby, and flashed his light around the room. The beam played across the shelf on which stood his meager groceries, and rested on his three cans of milk. Quietly he stepped to the shelf, took down one of the cans, and punched two holes in its top. Half of the contents he poured into a bowl, diluted it with water from a bucket, and placed the bowl under the nose of the fawn, which still lay on the floor, but with its head up.

The little deer showed no interest in the bowl, but grasped Hickey's thumb and sucked violently. With instant understanding, the old man lowered his thumb into the bowl and drew the mouth of the fawn into the milk. Still holding hard to the thumb, the little creature sucked and sucked, and the contents of the bowl gradually vanished. In the same way, a second bowl was consumed, the deer now standing up and working earnestly and fast.

"Isn't that enough for a little thing like you?" chuckled Hickey, getting up from his knees. "You better sleep awhile now." The fawn walked gingerly around the room, then lay down close to Hickey's chair.

The old man took up his pencil and added a final paragraph to his odd letter. "And so, favorite niece," he wrote, "you can send me that eldest boy of yours. Tell him I've got a pet waiting for him, a little young deer that lost its mother. It traipsed in here from the woods 'bout ten minutes ago. You're wrong if you think I'm lonely; I'm not. But for you, as a widow-lady now, I'll give up my perfect independence here and I'll board that hardheaded boy somehow, while you and your other kids get settled down again. Don't

thank me. Just send the boy on the bus with some old clothes. And remember, he stays only two weeks!"

## 2

### THE FAWN

Hickey slept on a narrow cot in one end of the cabin. This being springtime, he needed over him only a cotton sheet for warmth and a mosquito net to keep out the swarms of winged pests. He did not worry about the brown woods roaches and the various kinds of spiders that ran over the floor, or the mice and rats that climbed the walls in their attempt to filch food from the tin cans he kept on the high shelf. Lizards, land crabs, and snakes, which were plentiful on the Key, did not often try to come inside.

He arose with the sun, donned faded blue overalls and blue shirt, put on battered old shoes and lit the small wood stove. After that he dipped some water from the bucket and washed in a tin basin. Coffee was all that he heated and drank, but he ate three thick slices of bread, well covered with slabs of yellow cheese taken from a large tin container that kept out the ants. The fawn walked around his chair and silently watched him eat.

"You're next," he laughed gruffly. Still the fawn would not drink out of the bowl; but it eagerly sucked his thumb as before and soon finished a small can of evaporated milk.

"You're so awfully little, you can't be more than a day or two old," he thought, "maybe less. All you Key deer are so small that I know you're no runt, just normal. But for goodness sake, learn to drink right. I'm no nursing mother!"

The fawn regarded him with its big dark eyes, then rubbed its brown head against his trousers and stayed so close to him that he could scarcely move without falling over it.

Hickey opened the door, stepped out, and took a look at the water and his boat. The fawn followed him.

"Say, you!" warned the man. "This won't do. Go back inside before some critter gets you. I'll be home in time to feed you again." He gently pushed the soft little creature into the cabin and shut the door, not daring to look at the big accusing eyes.

"It's going to be a nuisance," he thought. "Seems to love me like a mother. Well, I've got to catch fish if I'm to buy feed for it, too." He started toward the boat, then impulsively turned around and tiptoed to the window. He saw the fawn standing forlornly beside his vacant chair.

"That critter's getting me down," he mumbled. "I feel mean all over leaving him there."

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Most of the morning he fished hard with a bamboo pole, using pieces of shrimp for bait. Whenever he felt a bite, he jerked quickly and pulled in the little snapper almost wickedly, in his zeal. Before noon, he cleaned the fish, thirty in all. Two he laid aside, then wrapped the others into a neat paper package, tied with tough string. The old engine grudgingly answered his efforts to start it, and he headed the boat for the causeway that joined Big Pine to the other keys extending in the direction of Miami.

Under the causeway itself, he beached the boat and carried his fish up to the highway where the south toll booth stopped the motor cars. A genial voice hailed him and the toll collector came out of his booth.

"What's new?" asked the man. He was a young chap, rather stout and quite short.

"Only snappers," answered Hickey. "Can you take this parcel to the store when you go, Shorty? Tell them to credit the fish on my account and give you a dozen cans of evaporated milk for me. I'll stop by here for them this evening. And here's a couple of fish for you. This time I caught little fellers. They run around a pound and a half to maybe four pounds. Oh, yes, and mail this letter."

"Fine!" answered Shorty. "But why all the milk? You getting sick or getting a baby?"

"A baby," said Hickey. Shorty took this as a great joke and laughed loudly.

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy," said Hickey, "of course."

"Well, bring him around sometime!" laughed Shorty. "That I want to see!"

"Any accidents on the road yesterday? Anyone run into a deer?" Hickey asked, guardedly.

"Well, there was a deer run over two nights ago. A doe, I believe. Nobody hurt, though. They took the deer up to Marathon."

Hickey nodded, as if the news were not unexpected.

"Be seeing you," he said, casually, and moved away.

All the way to his boat he was thinking about the motherless fawn. "Don't do to tell anybody too much about anything these days," he mused. "They might take the little critter away from me."

His cabin was less than a mile from the causeway.

"Hi, little feller!" he called at the door. A soft bleat greeted him. When he swung the door open, the fawn ran to him and capered around his legs.

"Frisky, eh?" he said delightedly. "You're going to be all right!" He picked up the little animal and stroked its head around the pliant soft ears. "How about some milk?"

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This time the fawn kept on sucking up the milk when he took away his thumb. "Jiminy, if it isn't weaned," Hickey chuckled.

After that, each day was the same as the one before, except that the fawn grew stouter and more frisky. Hickey no longer tried to make it stay indoors, and sometimes even took it with him in his boat. It was not at all afraid. If he walked to the water hole where he filled his bucket, or if he wandered along the beach that was bared at very low tide, it was always with him, either at his heels or dashing about like a playful puppy. Already it could run amazingly fast and jump over bushes higher than its head.

Hickey's niece, to whom he had sent the letter agreeing to a visit from her eldest boy, Jack, wrote him in reply that Jack would arrive by bus on the eleventh of June, when he would be through with school for the summer. The old man had never seen his great-nephew, but had heard that after his father died, he was a very difficult child to manage at home. The mother had three other children besides him to care for, in a small house near Miami, and had almost begged Hickey to take the headstrong Jack off her hands for a while. "If he needs it, spank him plenty!" she had written, knowing very well that her uncle would not spank anyone.

"I never even liked myself as a boy," thought Hickey, "and taking care of this twelve-year-old brat is going to be the worst thing that could happen to me. My whole life will be topsy-turvy for those two weeks. No telling what the brat might do in the way of making trouble." Then he weakened and added, "I guess I've grown selfish and too comfortable all by myself here. A spell of trouble is overdue."

The fawn came to him then, and began to nuzzle his hand, putting him at once in a better humor. "If that kid hurts you," he said to the little creature, "I'll really whale him!"

June the eleventh dawned like other June days, the bright sun rising slowly over the mangroves and shining hotter every minute against the rough boards of Hickey's shack. The old man had not gone fishing at dawn. Instead he had tried to trim his beard and cut the hair where it was long around his ears. He was passably good-looking when he got himself "all dolled up."

A second cot had been installed in the little room, where the old side table used to stand, and now, instead of one cup and one glass, there were two of each in readiness, with the plates on the shelf. The friendly toll man, Shorty, had bought these for him. Hickey did not own a necktie, but he had donned the better of his two blue shirts and made sure that all the buttons were still in working order.

"Might think I was going to a wedding," he muttered, "instead of just meeting a kid; but he's sure to write home about me."

The fawn was in and out of the house and all around the place while this was going on, but always it kept an eye on Hickey lest he go somewhere without it. When at length he

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was ready to start for the highway, it sensed this and tried to keep out of his reach when he wanted to shut it in the cabin.

"You'll soon need a collar and a rope," thought Hickey. "But when that time comes, you'll be old enough to take care of yourself in the woods. Now get in there and be nice! No jumping on the beds when I'm gone!"

At length, he managed to shove the little creature inside and slam the door tight shut. A few minutes later he was heading the boat for the causeway and for a big change in his lonely life, though, at that moment, he did not even guess what was ahead for him.

Big Pine Key lay to his right, low, green, and beautiful. The quiet water barely rippled around the boat's blunt bow and not even the gulls and terns were stirring.

Hickey looked around and sighed. To him it was all like home, a wonderful home.

"I hope the brat likes it," he mused.

### 3

## GETTING ACQUAINTED

The great-nephew's manner of arrival was deceptive; he stepped off the bus like a little lamb. He looked at Hickey, then up and down the highway, then back at his great-uncle.

"You my unc?" he demanded, not too flatteringly. Hickey, who had been at first agreeably surprised, began to revise his opinion downward.

"Yes, Jack," he answered. "Glad to see you and to welcome you to Big Pine Key. Your mother and the kids are well, I hope?"

The boy was short, but he was thickset. His eyes, like his hair, were dark brown, and his face was tanned. There was a smile about his mouth as he looked at his tall, bearded uncle, standing there so straight and ill at ease, and saying the very words the boy had guessed he would say. Hickey saw the smile and realized his mistake. He tried to correct it.

"Boat's waiting. Lug your bag down this bank, boy, and pile in," he commanded. "Keep your legs out of the sandburs and don't slip." He led the way, not looking again at his nephew. But his nephew looked at him, keenly and appraisingly, though without any real interest. When they reached the shore, the boy stood on the bank regarding the boat with evident disgust; it was not like the snow-white pleasure craft around Miami. At length he gingerly stepped in and planted himself on the front seat.

"Let's go!" said Hickey, priming the engine and giving it the turn which should have started its throbbing. But this time it did not start at once and required several minutes

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of expert tinkering. Hickey wiped his brow; the boy slapped mosquitoes. Then, after a mighty swing on the starter, the engine began to roar.

"It works better than that—sometimes," commented Hickey, almost apologetically. "We're off."

They chugged along the edge of the mangroves without further word, Hickey in the stern, the guide ropes in his big hands. Egrets and blue herons flew up from the little bays they passed. Schools of minnows spattered here and there from the water's glassy surface. As they rounded the last bend, the cabin came suddenly into full view, and Hickey, turning off the engine, let the boat slide up to the little dock.

"You live here?" the boy asked, incredulously.

"Yes," answered the old man, "and so do you, for two weeks."

Jack said no more and climbed out with his bag while his uncle fastened the boat. Hickey watched him as he walked to the cabin door and opened it. Out bounded the fawn, almost knocking the boy down; but the fawn was more startled than he. It had expected to greet Hickey, not a stranger, and now, in sudden fright, it bounded into the bushes.

Jack looked inquiringly at Hickey, then cautiously went inside as if expecting other strange creatures to burst forth. Presently he came out. "No dogs?" he asked.

"No dogs and no cats," answered Hickey, grimly.

"Isn't it sort of lonely without anything—except wild deer?" Jack added. Hickey smiled to himself, but he saw that the boy was serious.

"You'll find plenty of wild critters to keep us company," he laughed. "Didn't your mother tell you about the fawn? There're lots of coons, too. And rats. Go inside before the mosquitoes eat you." Hickey felt very unhappy and almost hostile toward the boy. He had not expected anything quite like this. How, he wondered, could he and Jack get along together for two whole weeks?

Before going into the cabin, Hickey searched for the fawn. He found it hiding miserably behind some bushes, picked it up and carried it back in his arms. When it saw the boy again, the little thing struggled to get away, but Hickey shut the door before placing it on the floor, and began at once to prepare its usual bowl of milk. The fawn stayed close to his legs and followed him, its eyes, however, always on Jack, who was unpacking his bag. Its hunger got the better of its fear when the milk was ready and while it drank it seemed to forget the boy.

"Perhaps you'd better feed it next time," suggested Hickey. "It will get to know you real quick if you treat it right. It has no mother and I'm raising it as best I can. Milk is about all it eats, except sometimes a little grits mixed in."

"Smallest deer I ever saw," said Jack.

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"Yes. All the deer on these keys are very small.

They've been here as long as any man can remember. Because of the wide stretch of water you crossed on the Seven Mile Bridge they can't get to the mainland for better food, and so they just do the best they can with what grows among the cactus and the sand piles on a tightly bunched little group of ten keys. Years and years they've been eating about everything they could find, and living, but never growing big like the deer that have the whole of Florida to roam over.

"The coons around here are small, too, only half the size of those you've seen. They have the same trouble getting enough of the right foods. The birds can fly across the wide channels and go to all kinds of places. They're all right and never hungry or thirsty or too hot or eaten up by mosquitoes."

The boy was silently examining everything in the cabin, the tools, the fishing tackle, the provisions, and even the water bucket. He had hung his spare clothes on nails that he found hammered into the boards over his cot, and now he went out to take a look at the dock and the ground around the little house.

"Well," said Hickey, when he returned, "how do you like the layout?"

"I guess it's all right."

"But you wonder why I enjoy it?"

Jack regarded him solemnly before answering. "I sort of wonder why you ever came here at all," he said suddenly. "It's lonely, it's hard to reach, it's uncomfortable, it's all mud and mosquitoes and work, and, and . . ." he hesitated before continuing, "I don't see how you can stand this dump!"

Hickey puckered his bushy brows and swallowed hard. He knew that he must keep his temper and try not to show how much his feelings were hurt. He looked around the little room which he loved so deeply and tried to see it as young Jack saw it, Jack who was used to cities and friends around him, to the noises and brightness of civilization, and the comfort as well as the gaiety of mainland life.

Finally he answered quietly, "Jack, I think I understand."

The boy looked up in surprise. He felt ashamed now, and small instead of cocky and superior as at first. How different his uncle was from anyone he had ever known. His eyes wandered to the fawn that he thought was very unusual, too. The little creature was nosing about the room. Sensing, however, that it was being watched, it looked up and stood still, regarding him. Presently it walked toward him and began to nibble at his shoes.

Slowly Jack lowered one hand and began to rub the little head. From him, the fawn walked to Hickey to be patted, then back again to Jack, who had been sitting unhappily

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on his cot, thinking hard and trying to justify his ill-humor. Jack patted the fawn and could not help thinking less of his troubles; in fact he almost forgot his ill-humor when the little creature pranced in front of him and began to butt his knees.

Presently the fawn teased Jack into getting up and chasing him around the room, a losing game for the boy because the fawn was too quick and nimble to be caught. But it was good fun and it did wonders in making the two like each other. When Jack sat down, the fawn came to butt and tease him some more.

"He's quite a character already," laughed Hickey.

"Why, he's wonderful," shouted Jack. "Watch him dodge." And Jack chased him again without a chance of touching any part of him.

"That's how fawns like him escape their enemies," said Hickey. "Something is always after them."

"Even out here on the Key?"

"Yes, every day. You'll see."

Jack pondered this. "You mean to say that the little thing has to be watched every minute to save him from being hurt or killed?" he asked.

"That's about it," answered Hickey. He saw that Jack was deeply impressed. "The mother takes care of a fawn when she's alive," he continued. "This one lost his mother. We've got to do her work somehow, and never let it out of our sight unless it's well locked up."

"You got any kind of a gun?" asked Jack, suddenly.

"Yes, but a good stick is all right to scare off anything that tries to attack him. Look over there in the corner."

Jack looked and saw two very handy sticks, somewhat longer and heavier than canes. He picked up first one, then the other.

"I like this one," he said while he swung it at a make-believe enemy and nearly hit the ceiling.

"Cut your initials on it," said Hickey. "It's yours."

When it was time to turn in for the night, Jack was still brandishing the stick, practising high and low strokes. Hickey smiled contentedly. "Breakfast at six," he warned, as he went to his own cot.

## ENEMIES OF THE DEER

Hickey did not snore, and Jack awoke after an all-night, dreamless sleep to find the fawn curled up beside him on the cot. When he stirred, the little deer got to its feet, stretched, and stood on the cot looking down at him and pawing with one front foot. Jack had no time to begin thinking of his troubles before he was lured into a wild chase around the room, during which he stubbed a toe and tore his pajamas, but managed to catch the fawn and laughingly put it to bed again. Both of them were in high good humor and ready for another chase, when Hickey suddenly jumped up from his cot and shouted that everyone had to get dressed for breakfast.

It was a gay meal, kept lively by the fawn's antics around the table, for the little creature would not stay still and frolicked all the time. Jack allowed it to taste the slice of cheese he was eating on his bread, then filled its bowl with a whole can of milk.

"That ought to give you some weight," laughed Jack. "You're too little. Any old cat could lick you with one paw. You must grow!"

Finally Hickey pushed back his chair. "We've got to go for water," he said. He was fairly beaming over the friendly relations the fawn had established. "Come along, everybody." He picked up the almost empty bucket and led the way along a little path that took them inland.

On both sides were masses of bushes and cactus, with here and there a thin but tall pine. Jack noticed that his uncle stepped cautiously, so he asked him why.

"In rattlesnake country, you learn not to hurry," the old man answered. "The poison snakes don't get out of your way like the others. Maybe we won't see one in a week, but maybe there will be one right in the path; you never can be sure about them, especially in hot weather like this."

"Don't you kill any?"

"Usually I don't," said Hickey. "They eat the rats, and they protect the deer, keep hunters off the Key. I get along all right with them." Jack pondered this; evidently his uncle liked the deer very much indeed.

"Are there lots of deer?" he asked, glancing at the fawn.

"About a hundred of them; but every year more are killed. Soon there won't be any left. They're the grandest animals on the Keys, but they haven't a chance. Somebody is always after them."

"Will they shoot our fawn?"

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"They sure will if we don't watch out." Hickey noted that Jack said "our fawn" and chuckled. "Now then," he continued, "quiet, everybody. I want to show you a dangerous critter."

Hickey silently led the way to an almost-round little pool, a natural well in the hard rock which at this place was very close to the surface of the ground. The pool was only a few feet wide and shaded by palms and pines.

"See her?" whispered the old man. Jack peered but could see nothing that moved or looked unusual. "In the water at the far side," whispered Hickey.

Then Jack saw it, a long snout, with nostrils at one end and bright eyes at the other, the top of an alligator's head. It lay so still on the surface of the water that it looked like a piece of floating wood.

"She's waiting for a small deer, a coon or perhaps a heron to come to the fresh water," Hickey explained. But even as he spoke, the head gradually sank out of sight, leaving not even a ripple on the surface.

"Whew!" breathed Jack, "How big is she?"

"About eight feet long. Someone named her Big Bertha. She isn't always at this fresh-water well; at night she often crawls overland to some of the salty ponds. You can see her paths in the sand and mud."

"Is the water with that alligator in it all right to drink?" asked Jack, as the old man strode forward and dipped his bucket.

"Yes, it's fine," laughed Hickey. "I put some minnows in there to eat all the mosquito larva and keep things fresh. See the little frogs, too? The coons don't dare come here to catch them."

Jack did not venture very close, but Hickey showed no fear; he knew that the wise old 'gator had gone to her cave deep down in the rocks.

"There's a 'gator in or near each of these big water holes," said Hickey. "I like them; they won't touch you or me. Other people shoot at them every chance they get." Jack didn't like them, but he said nothing.

The three started back to the cabin by another path, one that led along the edge of marshy, salt ponds surrounded by dense mangroves with odd root stems descending from their limbs into the water. Greenish-brown gallinules ran or swam furtively ahead of them, and white egrets flew from shallow places where they had been wading and watching for minnows.

Suddenly Hickey stopped, his head cocked to one side for better listening. Jack listened, too. The Key was very quiet, but far off sounded two short, dog barks. Hickey looked

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around at the fawn, which had been trotting behind Jack's heels, then moved quickly into a thicket of mangroves. Here, well hidden, the three waited.

"Hear anything?" asked Hickey, in a whisper. "Watch the path we just left!"

A minute passed. Then Jack saw something brown moving swiftly through the bushes. A moment later he could make out the form of a deer the size of a sheep, bounding along the path. Close behind it, came other little deer, beautiful creatures, running single file in a long line. "I thought so!" grunted Hickey. "The dogs are after them again.

"Pick up the fawn!" he commanded. "Hold it tight while I teach those dog brutes a lesson." There was a hard glitter in his usually kind eyes as he poured the water out of his bucket and strode close to the path.

Once more there was silence. The hot sun beat down on them and only overhead was there motion, where two nearly black buzzards were circling. Suddenly Jack heard an odd thumping noise and glimpsed two reddish-brown animals coming in bounds along the path. He saw Hickey raise the bucket over his head and hurl it in front of the leading dog. It struck the hard ground and bounced straight up at the long muzzle with such a clatter of tin that both of the surprised dogs almost turned somersaults. Yelping shrilly, they retreated, running faster than when they came.

"That's that!" exploded Hickey. "Same old gang from Key West is out here hunting deer with their cur dogs to drive the little fellows around to them. They don't care whether it's hunting season or fawn time. I wish I was a warden!" The old man was so angry that he surprised Jack.

"Put down the fawn," Hickey continued, "and let's get out of here before they see him. They wouldn't mind shooting us, too, if we got in their way. The law means nothing to that gang." Still fuming, he walked so fast that the boy could scarcely keep up to him, and the little fawn had to gallop.

With the fawn once more indoors, Hickey's anger subsided. He set down the empty and battered bucket and began to rig a fishing pole for Jack.

"There's still some drinking water in the boat," he explained, "so we'll go out and try to earn our supper. Ever catch snappers and such?" he asked.

Jack, still awed by the happenings of the morning, nodded. But when he was out at the edge of the channel with his uncle, he saw fishing such as had never before come his way. The two pulled in fish, one after another, some of them eight and ten pounders, until all their shrimp bait was used up. Jack, when his pole was bending, often shouted with the excitement of such sport.

When they could fish no more, they started for the causeway. They cleaned fish and threw entrails overboard as they went chug-chugging over the water. Gulls followed them in a screaming, feeding mass.

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"It's a rough life, boy, but it's sort of fun," laughed Hickey, "and we're earning a living, you and I!"

"I think it's great!" was Jack's reply. "How much will they give us for these different kinds of fish?"

Hickey glanced at the catch. "Oh, about twelve dollars, I guess, maybe more. But we'll give some to Shorty, the man who takes them to the fish market and we'll keep enough for ourselves. We'd better hurry and get back to cook something. No lunch makes a man mighty hungry for supper."

"I'll say it does!" agreed Jack. Until then, however, he had not even thought of food. Suddenly a dull "boom" sounded from the interior of Big Pine Key. The boy looked inquiringly at his uncle.

"Another little Key deer gone!" sighed Hickey.

## 5

### JACK AND THE FISHING

Jack had a swim near the dock in three feet of water. It was deliciously warm and was made lively by the persistent mosquitoes and Hickey's anxious warnings to watch out for sting-rays on the bottom. Near the bank, the fawn waded about, but would not swim to him. The sun was beginning to set behind reddish-purple clouds, and flocks of brown pelicans and bluish-white gulls were flying to their island resting places. Before the chuck-will's-widows awoke and began to fly, Hickey had supper on the table, a grand meal of baked fish and potatoes, and beans mixed with salted pork.

"I'd like to write home for my dog, Towser," Jack suddenly told his uncle, between swallows. "He could be sent in somebody's automobile if the family knows anyone who is driving to Key West. He's part bulldog, and a fighter if he's not scolded. He ought to take good care of the cabin and the fawn and us. How about it?"

"All right," said Hickey. "However, I never thought before of having a dog out here."

"He'll fix those curs that chase the deer," boasted Jack. "He can lick anything and he never gets lost or stolen. Everyone's sort of afraid to mess with him. I'll write home tonight."

And that was how, in a few days, Big Pine Key acquired a new resident, the ugliest but best-natured dog Hickey had ever known, Towser, whose mother was a bull terrier and whose father was a collie. He proved to be a big animal, yellowish-red with dark brindle markings, and he had long hair around his head that gave him a comical, whiskery look. When Jack and Hickey, with the fawn in the boat, went to meet him at the causeway, he

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heard Jack's voice, broke away from the man who brought him and rushed down the bank to greet them. He barked and jumped about until he had mud over everything.

The fawn was only a quarter of his size. At first it struggled to get out of Jack's grasp, but soon grew accustomed to Towser's wild excitement. The dog did not notice it for several minutes, then stood on his hind legs to sniff at it in Jack's arms. After that he tried to lick its face and lure it to play with him.

"Now I've seen everything!" laughed Hickey, much relieved. "Imagine a dog treating a deer that way. And the deer likes him!"

They thanked the man who brought Towser and started the trip back to the cabin, with the big dog seated like a king in the stern and the fawn trotting around the boat without fear. Hickey watched the two animals as if fascinated.

"Maybe I'll wake up soon," he chuckled. "This just can't be true!"

Soon they were at the cabin and ready for the evening swim. Towser swam, too, and chased sticks or any-thing that Jack threw into the water. The fawn walked guardedly on the bank, but was not afraid. He was young enough to accept anything as just a natural part of life. That night Jack had two pets sleeping on his cot, the fawn on one side, Towser at his feet.

When Jack's two weeks were up, he begged to be allowed to stay longer. He had fished every day with Hickey, either with a pole or with the long nets that were placed across the channels to catch by the gills any fish that tried to force its way through. He had grown stouter and browner, and had worn such holes in his clothes that he and Hickey had to run the boat to Marathon, miles away, to get more shirts and another pair of overalls for him.

When Towser and the fawn were not in the boat, they were generally playing together. The big dog, though clumsy, took great care not to hurt his little playfellow, who could outrun him, anyway. Every day was like one big adventure, full of excitement, full of fun. Two weeks grew into four, then into six, and finally eight, and Jack still could not bear the idea of leaving. His mother, he knew, would let him stay.

"The fawn's growing at last," said Hickey, one day. "He's no longer just a jack rabbit." It was true; though the baby white spots still showed in his hair, he was already more than half the height of Towser and weighed, Hickey guessed, about fourteen pounds. No wonder, for now he would eat leaves and berries on the bushes and almost anything at table except meat and fish. It surprised Jack to find that, like old deer, he had front teeth only in the lower jaw, though in the back of both jaws he carried good grinders. With these he chewed his cud in the manner of a cow.

Hickey knew so much about the Keys, the channels and the sea for miles around them that he could go to the right places to catch whatever kind of fish the market at

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Marathon wanted. And sometimes when the big tarpon were rolling on the surface, he lent Jack his special rod and reel and took him out to catch one of them just for fun.

Often, too, Hickey went spearing in the boat at night with a lantern that had a reflector to increase its light. All sorts of queer creatures came into the clear shallows after dark. Sharks, rays, sawfish, barracuda, eels, and endless little fish of many shapes and colors, as well as sea turtles, Florida lobsters, and big crabs. Jack, of course, wanted to spear everything, no matter how large, but Hickey made a rule that sharks and sawfish over three feet in length were to be left untouched.

When one of the really huge sharks came slowly swimming toward the light like an evil shadow, the old man would sometimes grab the boy to make sure that he did not yield to temptation. Jack seemed to have no fear of anything. The two would stop poling and watch the big creature until it was out of sight, then wisely turn in another direction, for there would be no small fish where the monster of the sea was cruising.

"You haven't seen what those ten- or twelve-footers can do when they're mad," said Hickey. "Let them alone! They're no good except for their livers. Your spear wouldn't more than dent their hides a little, anyway. But then what a fuss there would be!" This made Jack's eyes sparkle, but he said nothing.

Occasionally, they would pole near a manta ray that was cruising over the bottom like a great flat skiff, the tips of its flippers coming out of water with each of their strokes.

"One of those boys could tow us all night and then sink us!" was Hickey's favorite remark.

Whenever they saw beautiful conch shells on the bottom, Hickey would get out his dip net and deftly scoop them into the boat. He liked conch chowder and he could sell the big pink shells after he had pulled out the animals they contained.

One night they caught the reflection of their light in several pairs of large eyes above the surface of the water.

"Deer!" whispered Hickey. "They are on the bar, on their way from Big Pine to No Name Key. The tide is low and they can cross without much swimming." He poled the boat silently toward the eyes, which glowed unwinkingly in the darkness and did not move. Soon Jack would see the bodies of the deer, black against the water beyond.

"Five of them! Four just about the size of Towser; one a little fellow like our fawn!" he breathed.

The boat moved closer still, until the lantern brought out plainly the five forms. The deer were gazing at the light as if charmed. Almost blinded by its glare, they could not see the boat or its occupants.

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"That's why the rascally poachers can kill them at night," whispered Hickey. "Look at that buck on the right with the velvet still on his antlers. He'll be able to rub that off as soon as the horn has grown to its full length and hardened. It's just thick skin with some short fur on it." He stopped for a minute to watch the deer, then continued, "Shedding the antlers happens every year. Down here, bucks often shed later than in the North; the new antlers, just little soft knobs at first, grow full size in about four months' time. Then the buck can use them to fight."

Suddenly there was tremendous splashing. The deer had seen or heard the boat or perhaps scented the occupants and were dashing back to Big Pine Key. They bounded through the shallows, straight toward the land and in a minute or two were out of sight. There were deep places where the fawn's shorter legs caused him to drop behind the others, but always he managed to catch up to them again.

"Phew! What a stampede!" cried Jack. "Don't the old sharks ever get them when they're in the water?"

"They sure do," answered Hickey. "Some of the fishermen who used to go after the sharks for their big livers found chunks of deer in their stomachs. But the deer are cagey about keeping as much as possible to shallow places and swimming mighty fast where the water's deep. They know about sharks, I guess."

Just then a school of good-sized fish appeared ahead of the boat. Jack lifted his spear.

"Let them go!" warned Hickey. "See their stout shape? They're bone fish, what the sports fish for. We couldn't get a cent for a dead one, so it would be a shame to spear any. Funny thing about them; the sports pay thirty or forty dollars a day to any fellow with a rowboat just so's they can go out and try to catch these no-good boners. Boners don't jump all over the place like tarpon or lady fish, they just make one run, then swim around a couple of times. And most of them are small, only three or four pounds, with a few going seven pounds, and an old granddaddy perhaps up to eleven pounds. The sports can't eat them, they just weigh them and throw them overboard. Don't understand why anyone goes boner fishing."

After that, Jack managed to spear two small barracuda and one twelve-pound redfish that nearly pulled him over the side. Already they had a number of shiny mullet and a brownish grouper in the boat.

"How about that ray?" he asked suddenly.

Hickey took a look and grabbed the boy with a sharp "No!" It was a manta that looked as if it weighed a thousand pounds. It cruised majestically away.

Returning to the dock, they "shined" the eyes of three deer near the cabin. With the bushes so close, the deer seemed almost tame.

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"They're naturally friendly," Hickey whispered, "and I guess they smell or hear our fawn."

When the deer had walked away, they saw a coon running along the edge of the water, and they "shined" the bright eyes of a chuck-will's-widow perching on a stump, and of a big brown spider busily mending her web.

"All the creatures that can see well at night seem to have eyes that reflect light," remarked Hickey. "Did you notice the shining eyes of the little shrimp under water? And do you see the eyes of that owl in the pine ahead of us?"

"What a place this is!" exclaimed the boy. He opened the cabin door and let out the fawn and Towser for a run before they all retired. "I don't see how I can ever leave it all!"

## 6

### THE FAWN GROWS UP

September was a rainy month. Heavy clouds filled the sky every day and released deluge after deluge. Big Pine Key did its best to absorb the water, but its ponds grew in size and its marshes flowed over the grass and bushes.

"Won't it get lots cooler now?" asked Jack. He was looking out of the cabin window, watching the big drops shake the green leaves and spatter on the soaked ground. Hickey shook his head.

"Wait until the wind goes around to the northwest," he answered. Just then two mourning doves lit on a tree near the cabin, followed by a flock of nearly a dozen.

"There," said Hickey, "is your first real sign of Autumn. The doves are flying south on their way to Cuba for the winter. I guess it won't be long before cool weather comes and you see lots of birds."

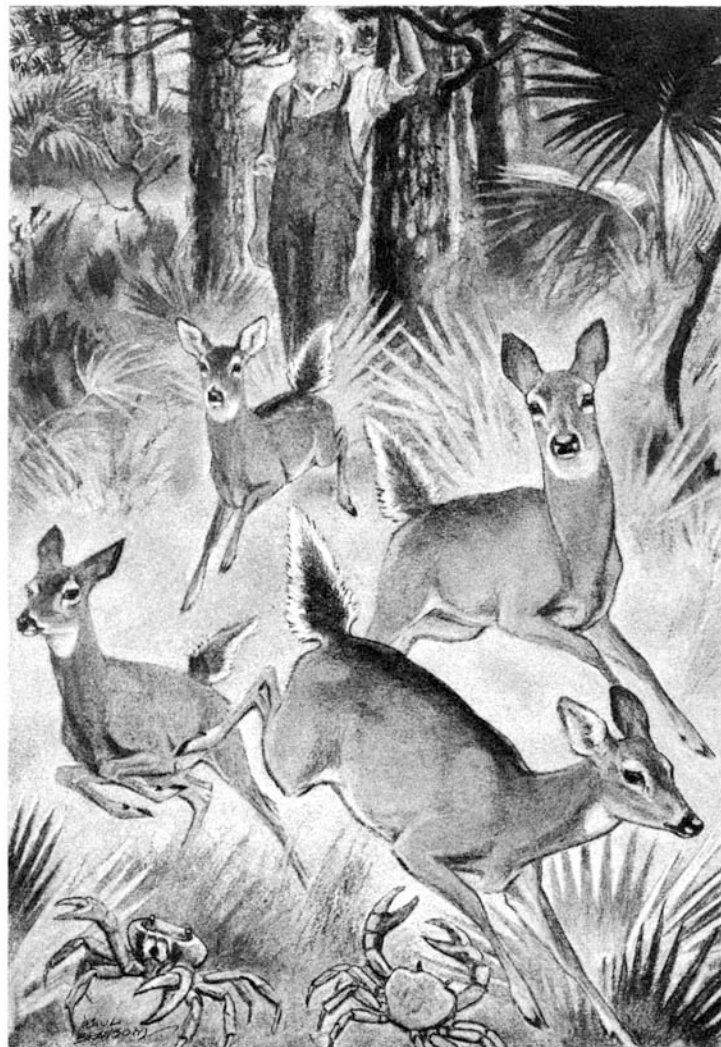
Suddenly there was wild commotion among the doves; a red-shouldered hawk had darted among them and seized one before it could even leave its perch. The hawk flew away with its burden, to pull out the feathers and eat the meat in some safe, secluded place, far from the cabin. Jack clamored for his uncle's gun to punish the marauder, but Hickey was not disturbed.

"Boy," he said, "you've got to get used to the ways of Nature. Big fish eat minnows, herons and coons eat frogs, hawks eat mice and little birds, but only enough of them for food so that they can live. If they didn't do that, the way Nature intended, the whole place would soon be cluttered up with minnows, frogs, mice, and little birds and these wouldn't find enough food to keep lots of them from starving and dying. It's man who upsets the balance and kills too many of the kinds of birds and animals he wants."

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"What about the deer?"

Hickey smiled. "That's quite a story. Before the white man came to these Keys, there must have been panthers and bobcats and lots of alligators and crocodiles, as well as sharks. If these killers took so many deer that there weren't enough left for them, some killers then died of starvation or had to go somewhere else where there were more deer. They couldn't catch all the deer because the wise ones that were left had learned how to keep away from them. But even wise deer couldn't escape man's rifles when dogs and fire were used to chase them out of their hiding places. Man, and only man, can kill the last deer." Then he added, "And some men are so greedy and lawless that they won't hesitate to do it."



"And if all the panthers, bobcats, alligators, sharks, and men left the deer here to themselves, then what?"

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"The deer would increase in numbers until they ate up all the green things they could reach, and you know they can stand on their hind legs. Then as many of them would die as couldn't find enough food. Those that were left would just balance the amount of green things that grew up each year.

"Right now," Hickey continued, "there are no bobcats and panthers here, and only a few alligators and crocodiles; man has hunted them because he is a killer and they competed with him. But man has been killing too many of the deer. He is overdoing it. Where a thousand could live and thrive, there are less than a hundred now, yet man goes on hunting them and will keep it up until the last one is gone or man is stopped by laws that are enforced. On these flat, narrow little Keys the deer can't get away from him."

Jack pondered this for several minutes. "There will be a last deer?" he asked.

"Of course. Probably a wise and lucky old buck. One that knows almost everything, one that they can't find even if they see tracks and know he's around, a sort of phantom deer."

"And, Uncle, you can't do anything about it? You can't even save the fawn?"

"Don't see how I can. The fawn will soon want to go with the other deer."

"Then," said Jack, "we've got to educate him. He's got to be the last deer; the wise lucky one; what you called the phantom deer, the one that will live longest."

Jack was so in earnest and so worried that Hickey looked at him in surprise.

"Boy," he said, "there is just one thing we can do; try to teach him not to run from dogs and from fire. He must fight the hunter's hounds instead of letting them drive him to the guns, and when the hunters set a wooded key afire to scare him into the water where they are waiting in boats, he must run through the line of flames, not away from it."

"Let's start right now!" cried Jack.

"How about waiting till this rain stops before we try to build fires," chuckled Hickey. "Anyway, your Towser will do lots to teach him not to fear dogs. Do you see that the little fellow is shedding his spots? His back's almost all brown, and his stomach pure white. He's growing up!"

"And," said Jack, "besides eyelashes and eyebrows, he has some hairs around his mouth like whiskers."

The fawn, indeed, was no longer a baby. He had a will of his own and was becoming independent. If Towser teased him too much he would defend himself by striking at the dog with his front feet as well as butting him, and when evening came and Jack wanted him to come into the cabin, sometimes he would stay in the bushes where he liked to

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browse. But if Hickey and Jack took a walk, he was sure to follow them and stick close to their heels.

Before Jack had to leave the Key for the opening of school, the skies cleared and the sun shone so brightly that the woods dried quickly and he and Hickey were able to build bonfires around the cabin to accustom the fawn to flames and smoke. The little deer took his cue from Towser and showed no fear of either.

"Couldn't be better!" was Hickey's verdict, after several trials.

Then came the expected cool weather and Jack's departure. When the day arrived, Hickey felt so badly at the idea of losing his companion that he made a mess of cooking breakfast. He had planned hot cakes and sausage for this special occasion, but the cakes were almost like leather and had to be given to Towser and the fawn. Neither he nor Jack felt like talking and the gloom settled even on the two pets.

"Will you let me come back at Christmas?" Jack asked at last, and his uncle gave him a friendly whack on the shoulder and replied, "You'd better come or I'll go and fetch you!" That was the spirit in which they parted at the highway when the bus arrived. Jack left Towser to help take care of the fawn, and turned his back on Big Pine Key with far different feelings than those with which he had arrived in June.

That night, Hickey noticed that both Towser and the fawn missed Jack. They wandered aimlessly about the cabin and went again and again to the door as if expecting him to come in. The old man petted them but got little response.

"They want the young one," thought Hickey. "Maybe they won't stay with me!"

However, in the morning, the three in the cabin felt better. The day was beautiful and there was much to do. First Hickey, with his two companions, went for water. They did not see the alligator or any snakes, and they felt good after the walk through the greenery. Then Hickey packed some bread and cheese for lunch and took the two in the boat for a tour of the nearest keys. At each of these islands he landed, pushed through the mangroves, and made an inspection trip. Though the islands did not belong to him he liked the wild growth of trees and plants on every one of them and enjoyed his visits. Often he gathered from the tree trunks on which they grew, pink orchids to take back to the cabin.

Both Towser and the fawn followed him faithfully, the former exploring every path, the latter nibbling at bushes, weeds, and grass clumps. When the tide was at its lowest, they walked over the beaches and bars, Hickey occasionally stooping to pick up a colorful shell.

On Little Pine Key they startled three deer that were resting among low bushes. Towser was some distance away, but the fawn was close to them and showed interest instantly. When they ran, with white tails held high over their backs, he followed and was quickly

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out of sight among the trees. Hickey stood for a time, looking after them, then made a circle which brought them again into view. The fawn made a fourth in the group and ran with them when the other deer again took fright.

"This won't do," muttered Hickey. "Sometime, perhaps, but not yet. You're too young and what would Jack say?" He went back to the boat and sat down with Towser beside him. An hour passed. The sun was very hot, and Hickey grew restless and worried. He pushed his way inland once more and strode the length of the Key. There were deer tracks everywhere, but no other signs of the deer. He shouted and called.

Slowly the day drew to a close. The sun began to set, and the gulls flew to their roosting place. Hickey gave up. He took one more look around, then went to the boat and started the engine. Soon Little Pine Key was far behind him and Towser; the fawn was on his own.

## 7

### **A CREATURE OF THE WILD**

Little Pine Key was full of mosquitoes, small, large, and middle-sized. The four deer tried to feed among the bushes in spite of them, but finally had to rush to an open place on the windward side of the Key where the breeze could blow away the humming swarms. The deer's thick hair protected their bodies, but nothing kept the hungry probers from attacking eyes, noses, and ears.

The fawn did not realize that he should have stayed with his friend, Hickey. The instinct to follow others of his kind was so strong that it swept him along, regardless of everything. So he had run with the three does, happy over the fact that they had not rebuffed him. One of them was scarcely more than a fawn although nearly two months older than he. She belonged to the larger of the old does and, like him, was eighteen inches tall at the shoulder. All three treated Hickey's pet fawn as if he were just another wild deer who had every right to be with them.

Following the September rains, there was plenty to eat everywhere on the Key, and there was fresh water in all of the potholes. This being one of the keys not touched by the highway, the animals were numerous and tame; frogs were singing lustily, and the powerful land crabs, like huge blue spiders, were crawling over all the woods. As usual, the coons were ever after the frogs, but dared do nothing to the old crabs whose big claws could almost crush bones and who, if attacked by more than one enemy, simply sidled into their burrows. No coon would try to dig one out.

The older deer moved very cautiously as they fed, always looking at the ground and scenting the air before each step. Behind them came the fawns, watching, learning and copying, Hickey's fawn just as careful as the other. Twice that evening they made

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detours around rattlesnakes in their path, and once they ran from an eager alligator. At many places they avoided crabs and leggy brown spiders guarding their webs.

In the middle of the night the deer lay down to rest. The moon had set and left the Keys in comparative darkness. It was quiet now except for the ceaseless lapping of water on sand and rock. Each deer chewed its cud and felt safe and contented, the old ones because they knew so much, the young ones because they knew so little. Man was the real menace to them, and now man seemed nowhere near. Even the mosquitoes were temporarily hushed.

Before dawn there was another feeding period. The deer nipped leaves, buds, and fruits here and there, never taking too much of any one kind. When the sun neared the horizon and the mockingbirds gave their morning cries, the deer were again bedded down, this time where they intended to hide during the whole day. The old does had chosen a dry place near the center of the island.

When Hickey, who had the fawn very much on his mind, came at noon to circle the Key and look for his pet, he saw no sign of any deer and decided that the fawn had really gone back to the wild. He had known that this would happen, and here it was, but much sooner than he had expected. No good-byes, no thanks, just a shifting of allegiance in a matter of minutes: such was the way of the wild, he decided. And Hickey, feeling suddenly bitter, pulled at the tiller and turned his back resolutely on Little Pine Key.

That night, at low tide, the two old does decided to move to No Name Key. They looked at the water for a long time, then into the shallows they stepped, followed by the wild fawn. Hickey's fawn held back, ran twice along the beach but then plumped bravely into the water after them and splashed his way to their side. When at length they had to swim a channel, he, too, made the plunge into the deep coolness and swam as fast as the others. When once more in shoals, they shook themselves and walked quietly to the shore. To the older Key deer, swimming was nothing new; it was indeed often a nightly occurrence in late winter when they went from key to key looking for food.

Many deer were on No Name to eat the berries of the palms and the luscious fruit of the sea grape which grew there in profusion. Most of them were too busy with their feeding to take more than little notice of the newcomers. One buck, a two-year-old who quarreled most of the time with older bucks and annoyed many of the others, came loping over to have a close look at them. After touching noses, the two older does ignored him. He turned then to Hickey's fawn and at once did not like him. Bucks, whether young or old, might, he knew by instinct, sooner or later make trouble for him, so he started at once to show the youngster who was boss.

With growing animosity, he leveled his antlers and prodded the fawn with a sweeping blow. The points hurt, the fawn flinched and leaped away, followed furiously by the bully. In a panic, the fawn rushed toward a group of other deer and nearly collided with

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an old buck who turned like a flash and leveled his sharp points, not at the fawn, but at the bully. There came a clash of antlers as the two heads met, then a great pushing about as each buck tried to shove the other into a defenseless position.

The bully was strong and mean and tricky, but he was no match for this fine old herd buck, boss of the Keys for years. So gradually he was pushed back until, to protect his sides, he had to turn tail and run. The victor followed for only a few jumps, then, stepping proudly and confidently, returned to the herd. The fawn watched in awe and thought him wonderful, the most wonderful buck in the world!

On all the Keys, and especially on No Name, the deer had to compete for the choice fruit with the coons, crabs, mice, rats, insects, and several kinds of birds; therefore the supply, after it had ripened, did not last long anywhere. The deer were always the first to move along; they could not climb or fly to the height at which the last berries and grapes still hung.

Three old does led the way under the moon, when the deer made up their minds to wade the shallows between No Name and Big Pine. Among the last of twenty-two who deserted No Name in one night were the fine old herd buck and Hickey's fawn. The fawn stayed close to the buck, partly for protection and partly because of admiration. He had become separated from his friends, the does.

On the following morning, the two were still together on Big Pine when Hickey and Towser happened to run across them on their way to the water hole. Here the fawn was in territory he knew well, so he felt at home and was not surprised when Towser ran toward him. Indeed, he recognized his playmate instantly and turned to meet him. They greeted each other boisterously, prancing about amid the barking of the dog and the shouts of Hickey. The old herd buck had quickly faded out of sight without a sound, but not before the man had glimpsed his long antlers. Hickey was surprised to see the little fawn in such very important company.

With so much fuss made over him, it was only natural that the fawn should again follow old Hickey just as he had done so often in this same place. In fact, he led the way to the cabin and went inside exactly as when he was last there. Hickey, almost pathetically pleased by his return, gave him some grits and a slice of bread, scratched his head and fussed over him as if he were a child long lost but suddenly found again. The fawn and Towser capered around the room, the deer remembering, however, the exact spots on the floor where his hoofs usually slipped if he were not careful.

"Come along, you!" at length boomed Hickey. "I'm taking you with us in the boat today. Think I'll have to give you a name or just call you No Name. Never thought of naming you before. You're just like No Name Key which never had a true christening, I guess. Come along, you No Name!"

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Hickey boosted the pets into the boat and turned the prow toward the channel that separated Big Pine and Little Pine. There he drifted and fished but caught little, so he left that section and started along the shore line of No Name Key, looking for better signs of fish. That was when it happened; overboard leaped the fawn!

The old man guessed that the sensitive little creature had received some signal or message from deer on shore. He looked carefully but could see nothing moving except the fawn, which was then struggling through the last stretch of shallows. Presently he reached the shore and vanished in the thick mangroves.

"Somebody's got more power over him than I have," thought Hickey. "He can act quick! Maybe it's all right, if only he can stay away from the poachers; this cool weather will bring them sure, and the first key they'll visit will be No Name!"

The fawn had followed a signal. The two old does, with whom he had traveled before were on No Name and, frightened by the boat, had wigwagged danger with the white of their long tails, followed by the signal "run with me." To the fawn it was like a command, and he did follow. His eyes, sharp as they were, had seen little more than flashes of white, but on the shore he caught the deer's scent and trailed them inland, finding that they did not go far before stopping to look back. And since the other fawn was there, too, the group of four was again complete, and Hickey's fawn once more a creature of the wild.

## 8

### **TOWSER SHOWS HIS METTLE**

Hickey seldom bothered himself over other fishermen; there was elbowroom for everyone on the water. However, he had strong regard for law and order, and he resented deeply the way fishermen sometimes took advantage of the apparent innocence of their pursuit by shooting the poor deer out of season or at night and killing all kinds of beautiful, protected birds. They could safely do this, not only because of the remoteness of the Keys and the scarcity of wardens, but also because, as fishermen, they were generally not suspected of lawbreaking with guns. But worst of all, in regard to the deer, there was a lack of public interest, a feeling of "who cares?"

The old man cared. He grew angry whenever what he called the spirit of fairness was violated. But there were not many like the old man. Just because of his complete honesty he was disliked and ridiculed by the dishonest, and when he interfered with them in their dirty work he was openly threatened. Indeed, there was a fierce feud between him and a group of hardboiled poachers led by a racketeer called Fat Finney King. This gang hunted deer whenever any of them wanted fresh meat or found a chance to get easy money for a deer carcass. The law meant nothing to them. Fat

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Finney, indeed, backed by some friends in important positions, considered himself above the law and able to do openly just about anything he pleased. And he was not even a fisherman.

"Sooner or later I'll have to knock the daylights out of that meddling old geezer on Big Pine!" was a remark that showed how Fat Finney felt about Hickey. "And won't I enjoy doing it!" he added. But Hickey resolutely continued just the same to do whatever he could against the gang's unlawful deer raids. Now, with the coming of cool, late October weather, he expected more raids and, sure enough, heard the baying of Fat Finney's hounds on a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

They were on Big Pine Key, which meant that the gunners would place themselves on stand somewhere along the old deserted road that once led across the whole island to the ferry slip. They would not bother to go into the bushes and catcus clumps; they would simply sit down comfortably at places where the deer generally crossed the old road, then wait until the hounds drove the little animals to them. At such close easy range, they could use with deadly effect, automatic shotguns that they had for shooting birds, and there was no telling how many deer they would have chances to murder.

Hickey stood at the open door of his cabin, listening. The proper legal shooting season would not, he knew, begin for nearly a month. His wrath grew. The conscienceless poachers would shoot fawns and does as well as bucks, and the fawns were still so young! Two shots sounded in quick succession, then a third. Hickey could stand it no longer; picking up one of the sticks he kept in the corner of the cabin, he started out through the bushes to see if he could stop the hounds.

He knew exactly where to go, for, when pursued, the deer followed regular paths around the Key, keeping as far ahead of the hounds as they could on this island that was ten miles long but only two miles wide. He strode fast though silently, avoiding swampy hollows and dense thickets. So intent was he on the obstacles in his path that at first he did not notice Towser slipping along cautiously at his heels, fully aware of this being an important mission.

Suddenly they heard animals running and saw ahead the white flags of several deer. Hickey stopped to listen intently. He decided from the direction of the baying that these were deer the hounds were following. There was a well-worn path at this point, with bushes on each side in which he could hide. It was not his intention to hurt the hounds, but, as usual, to give them such a scare that they would stop their trailing and be afraid to resume it that day. This was always a good joke on the hunters who then would be waiting for the deer, hour after hour, without knowing why they did not appear.

More deer ran along the path, mostly does and fawns. Hickey, hiding even his face and scarcely daring to look, could not be sure that one of them was not the pet fawn. Constantly nearer came the baying. Presently the dogs' whining and the thumping of

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their big feet could be heard. Hickey tightened his muscles, ready to leap out with fearsome yells and waving arms. He could see the yellow and white lead hound, then two black and tans, the same able trio that always worked for Fat Finney. "Now!" thought Hickey. But he did not have a chance to move.

Towser was ahead of him. At exactly the right moment, the smart dog burst from the bushes directly in the path of the lead hound who, every hair on end and nearly paralyzed by surprise and the shock of seeing a weird-looking fuzzy beast almost on top of him, went back on his haunches. Into his rear piled the two others, unable to stop. For a few moments all the actors were motionless, as if part of a wild scene, frozen in a photograph. Then pandemonium broke loose!

With shrill yowls the cowardly hounds retreated, followed furiously by the growling barking Towser. So complete was the rout that Hickey had to laugh out loud. Never had one of his surprises been more successful!

But Towser pushed his luck too far. When the big hounds realized that he was just a dog and not some dangerous new creature from the unknown, they rallied in a jiffy and came back for revenge. With three mighty roars they were on top of him, and he went down like a ninepin, rolling under a mass of kicking feet, heaving bodies and biting jaws.

So furious was the fight that Hickey was powerless to stop it or to interfere in any way. None took the slightest notice of him dancing around and shouting. Into the bushes they rolled, then through a clump of tall cactus, back to the path, then into the bushes again. The yowling and roaring continued unabated as if the fiends of another world were loose!

"I've got to save him!" groaned Hickey, frantically. "Three'll murder him! They'll eat him up!" He was still jumping around the boiling mass of dogs, trying somehow to get poor Towser out of it. He pictured Jack's face when he heard that his dog was dead, and he pictured himself sadly trying to explain.

He could not see all the details of the fight in the midst of the bushes. "Perhaps that's just as well," he thought. "I couldn't bear it! Poor Towser!" Then the growling roaring mass burst across the path again and Hickey saw a surprising thing; there were only two hounds fighting Towser! He looked around and caught sight of one of the black and tans sneaking away between the cactus stems. He was holding his head very low and shaking it oddly. And when Hickey saw the fighters clearly again, another black and tan had had enough and was missing, and the fight was between Towser and just one hound, the white and yellow leader.

Now it was a determined grudge fight, out in the path, with both dogs on their feet sparring, feinting, and boring in. The confident hound was enjoying it, actually wagging his tail after every success. But Towser wasn't wagging his; he still had a job to do and he was going to finish it! Hickey saw him stop dodging and calmly receive a bite on the

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left ear, one on the jaw, one on the top of his head. The dog did not flinch; he seemed to be waiting grimly for some special opportunity; good-natured Towser was furiously mad.

"The bulldog blood, it's boiling in him!" thought the man, now full of fear. "This isn't just a scrap. He's made up his mind to get the other by the throat and not let go!" And suddenly this happened. The hound became overconfident and careless. Towser lunged then, quick as the kick of a horse, and had him by the neck.

The hound tried to break away; wildly he rolled, whirled and heaved; in a moment he was panicky, beaten.

Hickey couldn't let the fight go too far. He dashed his hat against them, belabored them with bushes that he tore up by the roots, tried to choke Towser and make him loosen his grip. All without effect. Then, in desperation, he seized the hound by the hind legs and somehow dragged the two for many yards through the thick bushes to a salty pool into which he hurled them. Bubbles and swirls, then splashing, and the two bodies came to the surface still locked in that fearful grip!

Hickey had forgotten all about the danger of getting bitten himself in the mix-up. He got ready to leap into the pool and hold them under water until Towser, gasping for air, would have to let go. But in the pool Towser's head was underneath the other dog and unable to reach the air. Towser held on until he was drowning, then his jaws relaxed.

The hound found himself free and plunged for safety. Towser's body spun in circles, kicking aimlessly. That was when Hickey made his jump. Grabbing the dog around the middle he held him high and waded waist-deep for the shore. He stumbled over stumps and limbs on the bottom, then fought his way through the fringe of mangroves and reached hard ground.

Towser was breathing. Hickey, dripping wet and muddy, sat beside the dog and watched him slowly recover. Soon, he thought, the dog would be able to walk with him back to the cabin. The old man shook his head over the adventure. It had been a close call, too close. Towser had gone too far, but Hickey was very proud of him.

Hickey listened long to the sounds of the woods. There were no more gunshots, but after a time there were several violent signal blasts on an automobile horn. No doubt the beaten hounds had slunk back to their master.

"I'd give a penny for your thoughts right now, Fat Finney!" mumbled Hickey, grimly. "I'm afraid I'll be seeing you before long."

## THE TWIN BUCKS

The fawn and Hickey found each other again early in November. Boats of fishermen had been spending a number of nights close to No Name Key, which fact, coupled with the noise of shooting after dark, indicated just one thing—the killing of deer out of season and with lights. Each lawbreaker could have been fined one hundred and fifty dollars. A jail sentence might have been added. The overworked wardens were not there, however, and if they had been near the Key instead of on the mainland at the time, the poachers might have recognized their boat a long way off and hidden all evidence of their crimes.

Hickey stopped his fishing for a whole afternoon while he ran his boat around the ten keys most frequented by the deer. He wanted to have a good look at the "fishermen." One of their cabin cruisers, anchored beside No Name Key, had two guns laid out openly on the deck; another had sets of antlers dangling from side stays where they were fastened to dry out the skulls in the breeze.

The old man guided his boat into the shore of No Name Key and worked his way through the tangles and around the various ponds and water holes. He found only a few fresh deer tracks.

"Perhaps as many as four deer," he thought. "I wonder how these got away." Suddenly he saw white tails flying through the bushes. "Anyway, they're plenty wild," he added.

Moving back to his boat, he could not shake off the feeling that he was being watched, though he could see no man or animal. Moving along cautiously, he heard a twig crack behind him and saw the outline of a little deer following him through the woods. Hickey sank slowly to the ground and tried to hide. For some moments the deer stood stock still, then it moved very slowly forward along Hickey's trail until within fifteen paces, when it stopped again as if it knew where the man crouched, and were waiting for some sign of friendship.

There was no doubt now that it was the fawn. Hickey's heart gave a bound when he recognized him, but at the same time he felt a twinge of fear for the deer's safety. He was too trustful, too tame. If he encouraged his trustfulness, there would be even more likelihood that the gunners could murder him. If, on the other hand, he scared him or drove him away to make him safely wild, the fawn might never again dare come near a man; Hickey would have blasted his friendship and made him just another wild deer. The beautiful little thing stood there looking and waiting, while Hickey made up his mind.

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Then resolutely and almost sadly the old man sprang to his feet and ran at the fawn with fearful yells. Seizing a stick he beat the bushes to add to the noise and confusion. The fawn looked at him unbelievably, then bounded into the woods.

In December, when Jack arrived for the holidays, Hickey tried to explain everything to him. By that time, the deer had been hunted so hard, both legally and illegally, that they dared not show themselves at all. The Keys were as wonderful as ever, but seemed strangely deserted.

And in June it was the same, though the summer heat, the snakes and the mosquitoes had put a temporary damper on the poaching. Hickey was afraid the pet fawn had been killed, so was Jack; therefore they avoided talking about him. They fished and swam and took walks with Towser and gathered shells and studied tracks in the sand; but always they missed the little fawn.

There was a serious drought that summer. The woods began to turn brown; most of the water holes became nearly dry caverns; the deer and the coons, the alligators and even the crocodiles traipsed from one island to another hunting fresh water and food.

Hickey's favorite water hole was one of the few that continued to be serviceable though the old alligator stayed there and made much trouble for the animals. Finally the old man bought two buckets and placed these back of the cabin; he kept them always filled with fresh water. Soon the animals and woods birds discovered these and used them regularly. At night came the deer, particularly a spike buck more trustful than others of the herd.

"I think that may be our fawn!" Hickey suddenly told Jack while they watched through the window in the moonlight. "A yearling has spikes like that." Every day the young buck seemed a little more tame; and when, one evening, he ran around with Towser, there seemed no doubt about his being the fawn. Now Hickey and the boy felt gayer than ever, as if the one thing that dimmed their complete enjoyment of the Key were removed. Yes, the fawn had not been killed.

When another year went by, the same thing was to be repeated by a buck with two-point antlers, in the words of gunners a "Y" buck. Two feet in height at the shoulder, he could have been called a perfect example of a dainty little Key deer. In his fourth year, he showed four points on each antler, and in his fifth year five points, all of them long, thin, and sharp. His was then a "mature head" of a grand total of ten points, and he himself was a magnificent little buck.

There was only one like him on the Keys and that was the old herd buck who had befriended him as a fawn. These two were of the same size, and they had the same kind of antlers. Indeed they looked just like twins as, that Autumn, they ran together through the arches of the forest. And, strangest of all, no two deer could have been more

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friendly or more together! They became the talk of the Keys where wonders never ceased, anyway.

Jack, then sixteen, and nearly as tall as his uncle, was the only one who could tell the twins apart. If he saw them and called, one would run its hardest while the other would always waver as if anxious to stop and investigate.

"That one is our fawn!" was Jack's verdict. "He hasn't ever forgotten us."

In late October, both bucks fought all males except each other, but the herd buck stayed on No Name Key while Jack's fawn remained on Big Pine. In December the twins were together again, more devoted than ever.

Fat Finney's gang had tried several times that year to shoot them with lights, and once with hounds. Neither plan succeeded. Fat Finney had learned a thing or two since Towser lived with Hickey. He never risked running his hounds on Big Pine without giving them a bodyguard in the form of two wicked-looking bull terriers, "ketch dogs," used by farmers on the mainland to seize and hold the wild razorback boars of the swamps. Towser would gladly have tangled with these brutes, but Hickey knew about them and prevented him.

On the day that Fat Finney next decided to use the hounds against the twin bucks, elaborate preparations were made to insure success. Four men with guns were to go on stand along the road, and two boats with gunners were to guard the shallows between Big Pine and nearby keys. Everything started well; the three hounds and their bulldog escort were soon running deer and guns were booming. At lunch time, the men brought in three does and a fawn, regardless of law.

After lunch and a rest they went out again. More running, another doe and a fawn; but this time the men were excited-they had glimpsed the twin bucks several times! Around and around Big Pine went the chase, the bucks uncanny in the way they could stay together and avoid the gunners. The men were becoming nervous with the strain, and the hounds wildly excited, but still the twin bucks ran and refused to be driven from the Key.

At evening, as the shadows lengthened, the hounds were so tired that they could scarcely run any further, and the twin bucks though they seemed still fresh, were very tired, too. It was then that the bucks took to water, not in the Gulf but in a secluded salt pond only a foot deep. They waded into the mangroves and waited there for the pack.

The three hounds came first, caught the body scent of the deer and set up a great baying. They were smart enough not to go too near the waiting bucks. Behind the hounds came the two bull terriers who were keyed up for battle and feared no creature. Into the water they plunged, straight for the bucks who stood side by side, more than knee-deep among the mangrove limbs, heads low, antlers pointing at the advancing

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enemy. . Suddenly Hickey's fawn charged, catching the leading dog under the chin and throwing him backward. Before the deer could move back, the other dog was up to him and about to spring when the herd buck lunged forward with his antlers and caught him full in the head and chest. But this time, the hounds, encouraged by the terriers, were in the water, too, plunging for the deer's hind legs to cut the tendons. Around whirled the bucks, first one, then the other charging. All were hampered by the water and the mangrove limbs, but the dogs most of all.



The fight, as far as the dogs were concerned, was an angry, wicked affair, hideous in its intensity and loud with snarling, barking and baying. With five against two, it seemed inevitably in favor of the pack. Finally it took a definite battle formation, the hounds standing together facing the herd buck, and the bull terriers opposite to them facing Hickey's fawn. The bucks were side by side but heading in different directions. All were

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nearly the same in weight, but the deer, being slimmer, were taller and they were much quicker on their feet.

From the road, two of the gunners, guided by the uproar, were coming to the scene as fast as they could. With the tangles of bushes, the cacti, the swamps, and the fading light, they were having a very hard time. Nevertheless, they were making headway and already they were shouting encouragement to the pack. This made the dogs bolder and the deer more worried. The fight at times became a raging whirlwind of flying water as the fighters thrust and dodged.

The fawn was using his pointed front hoofs as well as his antlers. Again and again he struck one or the other of the grim terriers until he had both of them groggy and just about able to stand on their feet. Then he rested and listened. He knew that soon the men would be there to shoot; after that, tired as he was, he would have to run again.

The weary discouraged dogs, waiting for help from the men, retired to the shore, leaving the two deer standing together in the pond. All of them heard bushes crashing and the echo of voices. Then there was sudden ominous silence.

"Hey, Bill!" all at once yelled the nearer of the men. "Do you hear it?"

"I sure do!"

"Can you see anything? I think there're two of them!"

"I know there are! I'm getting out of here!"

Even the combatants heard a sound now, a strange buzzing noise, the war song of the rattlesnake!

In the growing darkness, the hounds silently followed the retreating men back to the road. Their tails were dragging, they slunk along, they were beaten. In the bushes the two terriers lay exhausted, licking their injuries.

Hours later, the stars over the quiet Gulf shone on two bucks wading through the silvery waters that separated Big Pine from Howen Key, lying to the west. Antlered heads held high, sometimes they went single file, sometimes side by side, so much alike that they could have been twins!

## 10

### LIKE PHANTOMS

There were hardy people who thought that farms could be made of the higher portions of Big Pine Key; those parts that were a few feet above the high-tide levels. They wanted to grow crops rather than perch beside the noisy highway and get their livelihood by feeding or boarding the winter tourists. Several families built little houses in the woods

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where Indians once camped, and cleared a few acres of ground around each. The sandy soil was fertile from rotted leaves, but was dry part of the year, and the native bushes and cacti fought hard for their right to thrive there in spite of the ploughing. Also the worthless little coons, the cotton rats, and the longtailed roof rats moved in on the crops immediately and defied all fences.

It was also said that the little deer did damage and therefore were in the same class as vermin, but this probably was used by many as an excuse to shoot deer whenever meat was wanted.

"The trouble about the deer," Hickey said to Jack one day during the latter's Easter holiday, "is that they are good to eat. Unless you can change that, someone will always be trying to kill them."

Hickey did not look a bit older, thought Jack. But he knew that each winter, now, the old man caught a bad cold which kept him miserable for many days.

"That must be my age," explained Hickey. "It's beginning to break me up in the bad weather. Fishing is a wet business; I'll have to buy a cabin boat someday so's I can burrow under cover like a mole when it rains." But he used one excuse after another for not getting a cabin boat; he loved his old open skiff that gave him the full breeze and a view all around.

As peppery as ever about the foreigners who were building ugly houses and changing the wild loveliness of the Keys, he railed particularly against their bulldozers and steam shovels.

"When those pesky things fill in the swamps they kill out the last hiding places of my deer," he complained, and when he used the word "my" he showed how personally he was still feeling about the gentle animals he had watched and tried to protect for so many years. There were fewer of them now than ever before.

"Is our good old buck still safe?" Jack asked, with misgiving.

"Never can be sure till my eyes are on him," Hickey answered. "There's shooting nearly every day. He moves from key to key just to keep the gunners guessing, and only turns up here now and then. He always knows me, though, and comes real close. Sometimes he follows me when I'm out walking around. He's got a great set of horns this season, horns the like of which I never saw on a Key deer! That's why people are always after him, trying to get those horns just to hang up over their door." Hickey almost growled the last sentence.

Jack knew just how the old man felt; he felt that way, too. He thought of the time not so long ago when he had played with the tiny fawn and fed him from the bowl and run with him to the water hole, carrying the tin bucket. He, too, had been very young then.

"Before I have to leave, I want to see him," he declared.

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"Maybe we can manage it. I hope so. Anyway, at evening we'll scout around. It's about time he turned up here on Big Pine, if he's alive." Hickey uttered the last words almost under his breath.

"What about Finney King?" Jack asked. "He still around and mean as ever?"

"Fat Finney and I don't do much speaking together, but he's around and he still has brutes of hounds. I can't let Towser tangle with his dogs any more—he's beginning to get too stiff and old; but you should hear him growl when they're running! He goes to the door and just stands there listening and hoping I'll tell him to go after them. Makes me feel awful mean sometimes." Hickey looked toward the dog lying in the shadow of the cabin, and Towser rose at once to his feet and came walking to him. The old man patted his head, and for a moment man and dog looked understandingly into each other's eyes.

"You know he's really yours," said Hickey.

"No," answered the boy gravely, "not since the day I brought him here to you when I was a kid." Who, he was thinking, would ever want to part these two companions?

"Thank you, Jack," was the old man's reply. Then he added, "There was a time when I got along fine without a dog or any company at all, except the wild critters; but you came along and changed all that. Yes, I miss you when you're off at school, and then Towser here sort of takes your place and tides things over until you come back again."

"I sure like it here with you!" Jack exclaimed. He felt glad and at the same time a little disturbed over the old man's words.

Hickey remained silent for some time, then returned to the subject of the deer.

"You remember the twin buck? He's still running with our old friend. Those two are never separated for long, and it's a good thing, for they guard each other against trouble all the time. No one can sneak up on two. They know teamwork and have more signals than you'll ever see between any other critters. I believe that one can eat or sleep while the other stands guard, and in that way both of them keep healthy and fresh. The trouble is that our buck has the bigger horns now, so he's the one the gunners try to get. I've heard it said he has the finest head anyone has ever seen on the Keys. I'm sort of proud of him, for maybe he wouldn't be alive if I hadn't acted like a mother to the little fellow."

"I know," said Jack. "Yes, I feel just that way; I don't see how he managed to live as long as he has."

That ended for a while the talk about the deer. Boy and man went out in the old boat and had a wonderful afternoon with the fish, trolling with white feather lures along the channels and around the reefs. Jack's biggest catch, a tough, old, twenty-seven pound amber jack, he unhooked and let go because it was not saleable. Hickey had taught him

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to do that. As usual, they left the best fish at the highway, snook, mackerel, muttonfish, groupers, snappers and dolphin; then they came slowly back to the cabin. The tide was getting low and exposing the sandbars, so the plover and the sandpipers were flying from the salt flats and inland pools to hunt little sand fleas, baby crabs, and clams that were now left on the bars.

Myriads of minnows were escaping the big fish by seeking the shoal water, but here they encountered dozens of egrets and various kinds of herons. Pelicans, too, and terns were after them, dropping sometimes from dizzy heights and hitting the water with big splashes. Where the minnow schools were swimming in fairly deep pools, the pelicans could plunge straight down and thrust their bills far under water, but in the shallows they slanted down to avoid striking bottom.

Where the minnows were playing almost on the surface, they were suddenly attacked by a flock of black and white birds, slightly larger than the terns, which flew fast just above the water with their lower bills raking the surface. These Jack recognized as skimmers he had seen earlier in the day, resting together on a beach.

There were two laughing gulls that followed the pelicans and picked out of the water stray minnows which the dives of the larger birds had partly stunned. These gulls sometimes lit on a pelican's head or back when he was resting on the surface, preparing to swallow his prey after letting the water drain out of his great bill.

"They are hoping to make the big bird drop his fish," was Hickey's explanation.

"Regular thieves!" exclaimed Jack.

"Not half as bad as the big man-of-war bird," laughed Hickey. "He chases any tern or gull that has picked up a fish and makes him drop it. He's so quick he catches the fish then, before it hits the water. Also," added Hickey, "there's the noble bald eagle. He sits calmly on a tree while the fish hawk tries to catch a nice-sized fish with his claws; then, when the hardworking hawk is carrying the fish to his nest or someplace where he can eat it, the eagle chases him and makes him drop it. An eagle is very quick, too, at grabbing a falling fish in the air. If a hawk is stubborn and won't drop the fish, the eagle strikes him with his feet and knocks him into the water."

"There ought to be birds that serve as policemen!" thought Jack. "But where could they have the jail?"

Suddenly there was splashing in the mangroves close to the boat and two little deer went bounding into the thicker bushes.

"Never saw them till they jumped!" laughed Hickey. "Two does. That means the deer are stirring early today. Keep an eye out for our buck." But they arrived at the dock without seeing any more animals.

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"It's after six," said Hickey, "but it won't be really dark for an hour. Let's walk around a bit."

They shut Towser in the cabin and started inland, stepping quietly but taking care not to look as if they were stalking like gunners. The old man led the way, avoiding the cacti and the worst tangles, but heading always for a wooded hummock in the western edge of the Key where deer liked to rest during the day. They saw deer tracks in the sand, also twigs that had been nipped, and they surprised a coon in his rambles.

Jack had the strange feeling of being watched by some creature that he did not see. Suddenly he glimpsed the ears and eyes of a doe that was nearly hidden in the bushes a few yards to his right. He said nothing and walked on. Further on, he saw a doe and her fawn regarding him in the same way. The woods seemed full of deer.

They came to the edge of the thickly tangled hummock and skirted it for a time, then turned back.

"See anything?" whispered Hickey.

"Yes, three deer."

"Good boy! I saw them, too, but no buck."

The shadows were deep now and the walking more difficult. Jack's legs were getting scratched and his neck and arms eaten by mosquitoes. The wind had dropped to almost nothing, and the woods had the silent, spooky feeling of approaching night.

"Hear anything?" whispered Hickey.

"No."

"Look behind you without stopping." Jack looked and caught the merest glimpse of a grayish-brown animal melting into the bushes. He looked again and saw another creature moving, about two stone's throw back of him. He kept on walking and watching those two cautious animals who followed, but kept always in the deep shadows. They had no antlers. When Jack looked too hard, the deer vanished miraculously. He rubbed his eyes and looked again and wondered whether he had really seen them or just imagined that he had.

"They're like phantoms," he thought. "Phantom deer!" And when he and Hickey entered the almost-in-darkness cabin, the two deer were still appearing and disappearing in the bushes behind them.

"Of course they're the twin bucks!" exclaimed Jack. "They've shed their antlers, but they can't change their size. No one could take them for does!"

Hickey's face was all smiles as he muttered happily, "Yes, they're still alive and," he added, "they recognized us!"

## 11

### TRAGEDY ON BIG PINE KEY

The No Name buck, really Hickey's buck, stood for some time behind the cabin, watching the human figures silhouetted against the light in the window. He had often come to the cabin and stood like this. He sniffed the friendly, familiar odors and remembered the days when he ran in and out of the doorway and played with Towser among the low bushes. He felt a longing to be friendly now, but he was afraid to go closer, for too much had happened since those early days, too many things that made him wary and shy.

Presently the door opened and Towser was allowed to go out. The buck saw at once that the dog knew he was nearby. Towser, the smell of the deer in his nostrils, stood looking into the bushes, trying to see the buck among the deep shadows. At length the dog walked carefully toward him, his head high as he followed the scent on the moist, night air. The buck did not move while he approached, and all at once Towser stopped, for at that moment he saw the buck. Deer and dog, still some distance apart, looked at each other, long and steadily, each one thinking hard, wanting to be friendly yet not knowing how.

Then Towser sat down and still looked. The buck stamped a front foot and retreated several steps, but the dog did not move; instead he whined. This struck in the deer a deeper chord of memory, and he turned and slowly advanced. For the moment he forgot his years of fear and came within a few paces of the dog. Towser wagged his long tail and whined again. Dog and deer sniffed cautiously toward each other.

Perhaps the two would have renewed some of their former close friendship if the other buck had not suddenly coughed a warning from the shadows. He had been standing at some distance, watching the dog with growing fear. Now he was sure that Hickey's buck was foolishly courting danger. Into the bushes he leaped and behind him dashed Hickey's buck who did not know just what had frightened his companion.

Towser did not turn back to the cabin. His interest in the two deer, especially his old friend, had been aroused, and he wanted to stay with them, but he avoided following too soon or too close. Keeping well behind them and to one side, he traveled silently in the direction they were taking. When they slowed down to a walk, he did the same! Near Big Bertha's pool, all three stopped and reconnoitered before proceeding, for the 'gator was always a possible danger.

Gradually they approached the highway, the deer browsing lightly, but intending to cross in order to feed in the low scrub on the eastern edge of the Key. The lights of an approaching automobile were visible, but so far away that they seemed safe enough; so, after a moment's hesitation, Hickey's buck led the way across the road. He went over the concrete in two leaps, then stopped, for the scent of good grass on the shoulder of

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the road caught his attention. The other buck stopped, too, and began to nip grass here and there, and Towser crossed the highway many yards beyond but continued into the bushes.

The lights came nearer. Hickey's buck threw up his head and bolted into the safety of the woods, but his companion stayed for two more bites, then leaped to the first fringe of bushes where he thought he was hidden. And hidden he was, except for his eyes which the bright lights made glow like hot coals. There was no screaming of brakes as the car slowed down. Instead this was done with ominous quiet.

Hickey's buck, well back in the woods, saw that something about the approach of this car was different from the others he had often watched. He gave the alarm cough, so quick and scared that it was almost a bark. But his companion stood stock-still as if fascinated by the glare of the lights. Again Hickey's buck coughed and yet again. At last the other buck suddenly caught the danger fright. He gave a bound, a beautiful, graceful leap, the last that he was ever to make, for a terrific roar blasted the quiet night, a pencil of white flame leaped toward him, and he fell, crushed by the shattering charge of leaden pellets.

Out from the car jumped a man who then waded his way gingerly through the bushes to reach the stricken deer. The light was not too good, and always there was the chance of stepping into a hole, treading on a snake, or encountering long thorns. He was still looking for the body of the deer when a deep-throated growl from the bushes beside him nearly raised the hair on his head. Thunderstruck, he stood stock-still, trying to see the creature that was threatening him. There was no further sound now and the night hid the animal, but the moment he moved again another growl struck fear into the very marrow of his bones. He began to feel weak in the knees and panicky.

"Well, what's biting you? Can't you find it?" shouted a companion from the car. The hum of the running motor beside him had prevented his hearing the growls.

Suddenly the man in the bushes began to run and jump toward the road. He rushed to the car and clambered in.

"Drive!" he cried. "Get going! There's a bear or something in there! Drive, man, drive!" But his companion saw nothing in the darkness and thought the man had gone crazy or just turned coward in the shadows.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" the second man muttered. "There's nothing in there and we're not leaving that meat. Either you go back in or I do."

"All right, you go!"

"Of all the idiots, you're tops!" growled his friend. "All this fuss and delay for nothing! Suppose a warden or a cop comes driving up to see about the shooting and finds us still

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here. Maybe you only heard the deer still kicking. I'm going in this time!" With that he jumped out of the car and strode into the bushes.

When he was beyond the car's orbit of direct light, he felt less brave and began to wonder whether there might really be a dangerous animal in hiding. In such a place there would be no chance to dodge its attack even if he could see it. He stumbled over a low cactus and flinched from the sharp pain of the thorns, then slowed down until he was barely moving and almost groping his way in the blackness.

"The dead critter should be right about here," he thought. "Yes, unless it crawled away. Wish I had a flashlight." At that moment his foot hit against something big but soft, and he stooped to make sure it was the deer's body. At once a fierce roar broke almost in his face. He leaped backward, tripping on bushes and falling flat in the brush. Struggling frantically, he regained his feet and ran for the car, leaping over anything in his path and yelling at the top of his lungs.

Already his companion had the car moving, and all he had to do was dive in the open door and sprawl on the floor as the vehicle gained speed. Neither man tried to speak until they had reached the south end of the Key and caught the bridge in their headlights.

"What was it?" yelled the driver.

"A panther as big as a cow!" The other shouted back hoarsely. "I kicked it and it jumped at me! Why I'm here alive, I don't know!" They drove in silence for a time, then the man at the wheel could not resist gloating over the other's loss of bravado.

"Well," he sneered, "I guess you'll listen to me after this. I was in there first and I didn't yell like that. The way you hopped over those bushes nothing could catch you anyway."

"Shut up!" muttered his companion. After that, they drove a long distance without further words.

In the bushes of Big Pine Key, Towser crouched near the body of the slain buck, guarding it and waiting for more visits from the miscreants. When some time passed and they did not return, he relaxed and eased his quivering muscles, but remained in the same spot. The years with Hickey, watching over the deer, had made him feel about lawbreaking poachers much as Hickey felt. They made him mad and deeply resentful, and the respect he felt for mankind did not apply to them. They all smelled alike, different from other men, for they all had the unpleasant fear scent. They were doing something mean and nefarious, and they were fearful of being detected.

From the bushes on the far side of the road, Towser had watched the car slow down, heard the loud report of the gun, and seen the first man go sneaking into the woods. Instantly alert, he ran across the road and followed the man. Quickly he had encountered the blood scent of the fallen deer and known that the man was to blame

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for something entirely wrong. Coming close to him in the dark as he blundered about, Towser had growled the throaty, furious growl that would scare man or beast, and the man had run. Then Towser found the dead deer and crouched there, not knowing what else to do. As the second man approached and reached the deer, his anger grew until the fury burst out of him in the roar which had upset the second man's nerves so completely.

After a time he moved a little way from the deer and again crouched down. Duty was inherent in his nature and he did not want to leave the spot. Around him now were only the usual night noises; but suddenly he detected the sound of some animal approaching. The sound would stop, as if the creature were reconnoitering, then commence again. Towser crouched lower and listened. Minutes passed. Then into his view came a deer. Towser recognized him almost instantly. Hickey's buck was hunting for his companion.

Long the buck stood near the dead animal. Perhaps he expected him to get up. Death was something he knew little about. Blood from wounds he had scented before, but this seemed somehow different. Presently he walked to his fallen companion and carefully sniffed his body. Once he pawed the ground and snorted. Then suddenly he knew that this was death, the something which takes away and ends companionship. He did not understand it but he knew what it meant. Throwing up his head and tail, he walked stiff-legged around the dead buck, then slowly away.

Towser went up to the dead deer then. He, too, carefully sniffed, then raised his nose into the air and gave the long howl that signifies dejection and loneliness. Again he raised his nose and put into his voice all the weird wildness of his wolf ancestors, and after those howls, the noises of the night woods died away and an uncanny stillness settled over the scene.

All night long the dog kept vigil beside the dead deer, and behind a screen of bushes, Hickey's buck stood almost motionless for a long time, then suddenly rushed away to the heart of Big Pine Key.

The hungry little coons that came furtively toward the blood scent smelled the dog and circled or turned away. At dawn, the dead deer and the dog were quite alone.

## 12

### THE LOST BUCK

The early morning light awoke Jack. He yawned and rolled sleepily, then suddenly threw off the sheet that covered him and jumped out of the bed. He had remembered that Towser had not returned to the cabin when Hickey and he shut the door for the night. He looked out at the woods and still saw no sign of the dog. The bushes and trees and

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clumps of cactus stood motionless in the quiet of the dawn. The Key seemed deserted except for him and the sleeping man across the room.

Walking to Hickey's cot, Jack stood for some time looking down at him, wondering whether to disturb his rest. The old man's head lay across his right arm, for he never used a pillow. His white hair, uncut for many days, covered his ear and surrounded his fine, weather-beaten face. There was something dignified and good about his features; he looked as he had lived, a rugged, self-reliant, grand old man.

Jack tiptoed to the door and watched the light increase. In the east, the sun was just beginning to show in a cloudless sky, and now many gulls were flying eastward above the water. He heard Hickey stir and turned to find the old man looking at him.

"Boy, it's good to see you," Hickey said, feelingly. "I'm used to waking up and just looking at a bare wall."

"There's nothing I like more than being here," Jack managed to reply. Then he thought of Towser. "Towser didn't come back," he said.

"What! He never did that before! Call him. See if he isn't at the boat landing."

"Towser!" shouted Jack. "Towser! Come on, old fellow. Here, here!"

"No sign of him? We'll have to look around!" Then the old man remembered the shot they had heard in the night. He was out of the cot in an instant.

"Come on!" he cried. "We'll start hunting for him. If Fat Finney has done something to him--" He could not finish the sentence.

Without thought of breakfast, into the woods the two started. Hickey, stooped over, with eyes always on the ground, searched for telltale tracks.

"Deer!" he muttered. "The buck! We had him right here beside the cabin last night. Another buck, the twin! The two came!" Then he began trailing. It was no trick for his trained eyes to follow the route taken by the deer; he moved along fast, noting the hoof marks in the sandy soil, pointing out to Jack the nipped twigs.

"Don't see Towser's tracks. He wasn't with them." "What about this?" suddenly called Jack, who was walking a little way to the side. Hickey joined him. "That's Towser!" he muttered. "He's following them!" Hickey stood still to consider their next move.

"Anyway, he wasn't poisoned," he thought to himself. "That's good. But the shot! That came from the road. But would he go that far?"

"Boy, let's go to the turnpike," he said gloomily. And Jack understood; Hickey, he knew, feared that the dog had been shot.

They threaded their way through the woods without a stop and came out on the wide road, now deserted and stretching as far as they could see in both directions. Hickey

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shaded his eyes and studied the sides of the highway. He could see only short grass, with the bushes along its edge and the pines above them.

"Don't see a thing," he growled. "Let's walk a ways." Slowly and disconsolately, they wandered down the highway. The sun was up now, warming the air and making the concrete look white and shimmering. All at once they saw a brown animal come from the bushes far ahead. It moved to the edge of the concrete and stood there.

"Towser!" they shouted, like one voice. They walked fast now, each wondering what could have happened to keep him out in the woods.

"There's more to this than we see," muttered Hickey. "Something's wrong, very wrong. Our buck! That may be it! They've got our buck, at last!"

A buzzard dropped from the sky and circled the woods near the dog. Another, seeing one descend, came down, too. Others appeared as if by magic. They soared around and around, preparing to alight. Hickey stopped.

"That's it," he said sadly. "We've lost the buck!"

Suddenly, the dog dashed into the bushes. The buzzards flapped their wings and rose higher.

"Good old Towser!" muttered Hickey. Then he added, "I just can't go there. You walk over and tell me all about it!"

Jack hesitated, then started fast down the road. Where Towser had stood, he turned off the concrete and entered the bushes, following the direction taken by the dog. Towser ran to meet him, then quickly turned back to the woods. There it lay, the brown body of the buck, crumpled up and spotted with red, the head out flat and the big eyes open but unseeing.

Jack stumbled toward it and stood looking down. He had a queer feeling in his eyes, and his heart was pounding. This the end of the once little fawn! This the finish of a great deer who could run like the wind, and swim like a dolphin from key to key! Then suddenly he bent down and looked more carefully. He raised a front leg and searched for the broad white stripe on the throat that he had known so well. He found a patch of white but not like that worn by their buck. It was another deer!

Running to the highway, with Towser at his heels, he waved frantically to Hickey, almost joyfully.

"Come on!" he shouted. "It's not the fawn. Come and see!"

Hickey did not exactly run, but he reached the scene in record time and stood looking down.

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"It's the twin buck!" he announced, with finality. "They were the same size and almost alike." He patted Towser and looked all around, then set about studying the ground with his usual thoroughness.

"A man came in from the road," he interpreted from the tracks. "He ran back! Look at those broken bushes! Towser must have gone for him, must have fought him off. What a dog! The man wasn't hurt, he just ran. Maybe there were two men. See where the car's tires scraped rubber when it started off? The driver was really scared! Maybe he didn't have a light and couldn't see it was a dog. Anyway, the man or the men ran and left the deer." Thus did the old woodsman, trained in the signs of the forest floor, interpret what he found.

The two carefully lifted the poor animal and carried it to the edge of the concrete.

"We're going to find a warden now," explained Hickey. "The next car will take us." They crouched beside the deer and waited.

"Couldn't weigh over fifty pounds," commented the old man, still looking at it. "They're all small; but look at those slim, clean legs. No deer on the mainland, no deer anywhere can beat them on looks. No two-hundred-pound or three-hundred-pound Maine buck could be so pretty! See how the shades of brown fit into each other and the white on the belly shines snow-white! I wish he still carried his antlers!"

Then came a car. It was going in the wrong direction but slowed up and turned around when the man and woman occupants saw the deer. The man jumped out, asked questions, helped to fasten the buck across the hood of the car. The woman said, "Poor thing, poor, poor thing!" Almost in silence they drove toward Marathon with the buck and Towser.

At the highway patrol station beyond the town, they telephoned Warden Finton's house on the mainland. He happened to be home and promised to come as fast as he could.

"You take over now," Hickey said to him when at length he drove up.

"I will do just that," he promised. "Glad I was around when you phoned the house. Have too much territory to cover right. But someday we'll catch those night-shooters. You help me all you can."

"Don't worry about that!" said Hickey. A number of cars had stopped by this time, the occupants climbing out to have a look at a real Key deer, one of the last of its kind.

"I used to see little deer cross the road ahead of me often," commented an elderly man. "How many little fellows are left?"

"About fifty, maybe sixty," answered Hickey.

"Only fifty or sixty! Why there were hundreds, maybe thousands when I first came to the Keys! Think of that!"

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"Yes, think of that!" said Hickey.

"They ought to do something about it!" exclaimed the man. "I'll talk to them in Key West. I'll write the bigwigs in Tallahassee!"

Warden Finton snorted. "Don't they know all about it!" he exclaimed disgustedly.

"Maybe Washington--" the man began, then stopped. "The Federal Government could do it," said Finton.

"It could if it wanted to."

"Got to arouse the people!" another man suggested. "Makeup a slogan such as 'Save the Key deer!' But the work has to start right here on the Keys."

Hickey nodded. This was the kind of thing he liked to hear. When the elderly man was driving him and Jack back to Big Pine Key, he said, "You won't forget about writing Washington?"

"Count on me!" he answered. "I'll do it and I'll do it plenty. But you work on the islanders, the people living on the Keys, all around here. The outsiders don't do all the killing, I guess."

Standing on the highway after the automobile was going out of sight, Hickey looked at the sky. He saw no buzzards now.

"Our fawn is all right, I think," he said to Jack. "Only heard one shot, and it's not easy to hit two deer at once, even with a lot of buckshot in a gun. I wonder what he'll do without his twin. Maybe he'll go to one of the other keys, perhaps No Name, find a new companion, and never come back here. The two must have been together or near each other when it happened, and I'll bet our buck got a bad fright. Wonder," he added, "how Towser happened to be there, too. That's very strange. Perhaps he's closer to the buck than we know. Anyway, we'll see."

There was no way for him to know that at this moment the buck, lonely and worried, was hiding in a thicket close to the cabin where he sensed he still had a friend.

## 13

### AGAIN THE HOUNDS

April had been a pleasant month. The weather had been mostly clear and not too hot. The mourning doves had gone North, cooing on their way, and the Bahama white-crowned pigeons had come in droves to nest on the smaller Keys where there were no rats and coons. Fish of many kinds and sizes had swarmed in the channels and over the flats, rolling, swirling, and jumping in their daily pursuits, and many bushes and trees

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had brought out their flowers and started their fruits. Even the stolid cactus had put forth beautiful blooms, as if to make up for its hated thorns.

Jack had left the Keys, not to return until the summer vacation. Hickey and Towser lived alone and stayed together in the old boat during the day, while the man fished or searched the clear water for the Florida lobsters and the colorful conches. The only change in routine was due to the buck. Every evening at about sundown he approached, back of the cabin, to be with Towser and near Hickey. While he never allowed the dog to come too close, he seemed most contented when he and Towser, as pals, wandered around Big Pine, or when the dog sat on his haunches and watched him browse. When darkness settled down in earnest, Towser would return to the cabin and the buck would drift further into the woods for more food.

All through May and into June it happened that way. The buck's new antlers, mere knobs in the beginning of May, grew fast; his thick, long, brown hair was shed for a lighter and shorter coat. Hickey would sit evenings on a box in front of his door and admire him, even gloat over his graceful form and beauty. Often he would smoke two pipefuls before turning in to prepare his supper. For him, the dog and the deer took the place of both children and friends, and always they were interesting to watch and to guard against possible harm.

There was, however, a lull in the shooting; the hot weather lull which Hickey knew could not last. Meanwhile, the old man declared war on rattlesnakes and kept those dangerous reptiles well away from the vicinity of the cabin. He had a feeding station for the buck, a wooden box staked to the ground, in which he placed crusts and handfuls of raw cereals. Soon the deer always came straight to the box from his retreat in the woods; and if he scattered any of the food, this served to entice to the cabin a number of birds. Scraps from the table and the cereal also brought rats which Hickey did not like.

"Someday," he thought, "I must buy a hen to clean things up," but weeks rolled by before he actually secured one, an excitable, reddish-black chicken, with flaming comb and wattles, that laid an egg every other morning in a corner of the cabin where Hickey had piled an odd assortment of discarded clothes. When the hen cackled, the egg was sure to be there. The hen was induced to roost in the cabin every night to be safe from the roving coons, and in daytime when hawks threatened, she ran under the cabin.

"I've got quite a family now," thought Hickey. "Maybe someday I'll add a goat, a milker, and call the family complete, but she must be a white one so that she will never be mistaken for a deer." More work meant nothing to him, in spite of his age. He was almost as hale and hearty as ever.

"I wonder if I'll live to be a hundred?" he sometimes questioned.

He was growing more benign toward the neighbors and the tourists. The people who had tried to make little farms out in the woods had given up and drifted away, one by

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one, but many fishermen passed his way and these always hailed him, for he returned their greeting now, though he rarely stopped his work to talk. More than ever he was known as a "character," a queer one, almost a hermit, but a kind sort of fellow everyone secretly admired. They knew that if any help was needed he would give it.

Every Sunday morning, Hickey took a big bath in the warm salt water close to his dock. As he was not a good swimmer, he stayed close to shore where his feet were always on the firm sand. After that, he combed his hair very carefully and sometimes even clipped off straggling ends with a large pair of scissors grown dull from long use. His bristly beard he kept to a fairly neat length. But the expected arrival of Jack for holidays always meant special preparation, for that was the one very big event in his lonely life.

Jack was driven to Big Pine Key in mid-June by his mother. Hickey met them at the highway, standing awkwardly and tall on the edge of the concrete, looking like one of the key pines. His niece looked him over, got out of the car, and kissed him on his furrowed, brown cheek.

"You're a wonderful old dear!" she said with feeling. "And you haven't changed one bit! Maybe you don't know it, but you're weaning my boy away from me, and I don't mind, for he's the better for all you do with him." She went with the two in the old boat as far as the cabin and bustled around the place almost like the hen.

"Stop moving my things!" cried Hickey at last, with one of his broad grins. After lunch in the cabin, the good little lady was ferried back to the highway. As she drove away in her car, she looked back several times at the two tall figures standing together with right arms upraised in farewell.

Chugging cabin-ward in the boat, Jack relaxed with a long sigh. "Well, here I am again!" he said. "More than anything else, it's like coming home."

That evening, when the shadows grew, he saw the buck. The deer looked long at the new figure in the cabin doorway, then calmly stepped forward to his feed box. Jack was surprised, but even more so when he saw the deer and Towser wander off together for their ramble. He looked at Hickey who was feeding the hen at his feet.

"Guess you're never really lonely," he remarked. Beyond the pier, the quiet blue water stretched unbroken to green No Name Key. The gulls and pelicans were flying over the shallows. "It's a wonderful, wonderful place!" the boy added.

Towser came back to the cabin just after they had finished dinner. He ate from his plate, then curled up near the hen in her corner of the room. Outside, in the water, the fish splashed and the herons occasionally squawked harshly. Coons chattered when they met and all the night life of the Key was at its height.

"To bed, boy!" warned Hickey. "Tomorrow we must catch a boatload of fish." That was the wonder of it all to Jack. Always there was an interesting tomorrow.

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Soon after dawn, they were up and out in the boat where the grouper and other good fish were feeding, deep down. In a few hours, Hickey's fish well was almost full, the prize fish being two large red snappers landed by Jack. "That about does it," said Hickey, well satisfied.

Back to the cabin they came to rest in the shade until the pitiless sun would be far enough down in the west to render its rays less oppressive. It was so hot that even the mosquitoes refused to leave the shadow of the shrubbery. Jack took a swim in the over-warm water and lay out on the dock for a few minutes to give his city-white skin its first coat of tan. Toward evening, they took the fish to the highway, then started back to the cabin. A breeze had sprung up to ruffle the incoming tide, and the air seemed cooler.

Jack looked at the fringe of mangroves on the bank they skirted. The limbs reached over the water and dropped long roots which ran their pointed ends into the sandy bottom. Gradually they anchored themselves there and built up a fence against the wash of the waves on the shore. Among these roots sand would gather and form more land. Each year, the Key would gain a little in width and creep out very slowly into the shallows.

Hickey turned his head to one side so that his good ear was toward the shore.

"Do you hear hounds?" he asked, suddenly. Jack straightened up and listened.

"Yes, I do," he answered. "Very far away, maybe near the highway." Hickey gave the engine more gas.

"They're after the deer!" he announced with finality. "It's months ahead of the season, but what does Fat Finney care! We'll go ashore and do what we can."

At the dock, they found Towser walking up and down restlessly and looking toward the woods.

"No fighting for you, old fellow," exclaimed Hickey. "Into the cabin you go!" Poor Towser understood and drooped his tail. He would have liked to tackle any number of hounds.

"Now then, boy," directed the old man, "listen hard and tell me which way they are heading."

"I think toward the gate house on the highway," said Jack, after a minute or two.

"Good!" commented Hickey. "That means the deer, unless they are shot, will take the path around this side and pass right back of the swamp behind the cabin. Come on, let's get ready!"

Jack got his stick out of the cabin, and Hickey collected his empty buckets. The two then entered the woods and took their stand a few yards from the well-worn, narrow deer trail, making sure that the light breeze blew their scent into the woods and not in the direction of the path. Here they squatted down and waited, fanning away the mosquitoes while they listened to the baying.

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"At least three hounds!" said Hickey at last. "But I don't recognize any of their voices. Maybe they aren't Fat Finney's. Maybe some new fellow is breaking the law. Anyway, there's been no shooting." The baying approached very slowly, as if the hounds were having trouble in following the scent on this dry ground. Hickey picked up a handful of earth and let it slip between his fingers. "Just dust," he commented. "Can't understand why the rains don't begin."

Then they glimpsed the brown bodies of deer a hundred yards up the path. The animals were running in long leaps, but stopping every now and then to look back and listen. There were three; in the lead a little doe, then her tiny fawn, and last a yearling buck with only inch-long spikes on his head.

"Keep still!" whispered Hickey. They crouched there almost without breathing while the deer passed, unaware of their presence. Then the old man stood up and took a long look up the path. "No more coming," he said. "Creep forward to the edge of the trail. We'll sure surprise those hounds!"

There were four, as large as the doe, in the pack of hounds that came down the trail, two of them black and tans, the others marked with black and brown blotches on white bodies. Their long ears touched the ground as they nosed along it, then, at intervals, threw up their heads to bay joyfully.

Suddenly Hickey sprang up with a fierce yell and threw his buckets. Jack yelled too, and beat the bushes with his stick. The tin buckets bounced and clattered on the ground and, as always, gave the hounds such a surprise that they nearly fell over backward. With yelps, they turned tail and ran up the trail.

"After them!" yelled Hickey. "Scare the living daylights out of the brutes!" He was hoarse from excitement. They ran loudly after the retreating dogs.

Hickey wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hard hand and stood for some time in the path, listening.

"That stopped them," he said, "and I don't hear any hunters." But a moment later he turned to study a movement in the bushes to his right. One of the black and tans was skulking there, tail down, big eyes regarding him sheepishly. As he looked, the hound began to wag his tail slowly and to sidle forward, ingratiatingly. Hickey let his breath come out in a surprised whistle.

"It's just a puppy! Did you ever! Here, fellah. I won't hurt you." The hound came forward shyly, his belly almost on the ground with his nervousness as the man leaned down and patted his head. "What do you think of that?" laughed Hickey. "Now, I've seen everything!" Behind this hound were the other three, more shy but anxious to be friendly. One by one they came gingerly out of the bushes to be petted.

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"They must be only about a year old," suggested Jack. "Is someone training them to hunt? They don't seem to know what it's all about." But the young hounds, now satisfied that all was safe for them, wanted to hunt and began to nose along the trail and give an occasional trial bay as they prepared to follow the deer scent again.

Hickey stopped them at first, but soon found that they were getting out of hand. "Hey, fellahs!" he called. "Come with me! Come with me! Here, here!" With that he started briskly toward the cabin, keeping the hounds with him by talking to them and holding their attention. Jack followed in real surprise. Here was a new side of his uncle's character. Especially was he amazed when Hickey entered the cabin, closing the door to keep Towser in, and coming out holding several cans of meat which he proceeded to cut open and distribute to the hounds. These joyfully wolfed down this unexpected fare and ate also a number of biscuits. Soon they became surfeited, lay down and stretched out happily to sleep. Now, with such full stomachs, they had no thought of hunting. Jack saw his uncle's strategy and had a good chuckle.

"Wonder what the owners are thinking and saying," he laughed. "You've certainly ruined their venison hunt." Hickey sat down on a stump and chuckled, too.

"I'll tell you what they're saying!" The loud voice came booming from the bushes and Fat Finney, gun in hand, walked out with a man following close at his heels. "They're saying," he continued furiously, "you are going to be run off this Key! Yes, you, you blamed old meddler, you old fool! I'm fed up with your messing in my business. You think you own every deer here. Well, I've told you, you don't. What have you done to my hounds this time? Confound your old hide!"

"Easy, Finney, easy," admonished Hickey, quietly. "I just let them eat some of our groceries." His manner only increased the man's fury.

"I ought to beat you to a pulp!" Fat Finney snarled. "Someday I will. What good is an old idiot! I warn you. Once more of this kind of thing and I'll--I'll--" He stopped there.

Jack, looking rather taller than usual, was suddenly standing directly in front of him. The man's round face, almost turkey-purple with rage, changed expression perceptibly. A very old man like Hickey could, he thought, be bullied, but here he saw something a little different; one never could tell just what rashness might come from a big, rawboned teen-ager like this. He thought it over, then tentatively spit on the ground, not once but twice. Jack took no notice of this; he kept cool, very cool. It was up to Fat Finney to make the next move. Jack almost smiled at the emotions he could see struggling in the man's face, and he said, "The law, I'm told, is on our side." But the very word "law" was just what Fat Finney needed to start him again in a wild outburst.

"The law," he yelled. "So that's it! The law! What do you know about the law! I'll show you all you ought to know about it!" He stamped around in fury, aimed a kick at a cringing hound, spit again on the ground, waved a fist toward the cabin, then strode

back to the bushes, his silent companion still at his heels. When the backs of the two were nearly out of sight, Hickey motioned to Jack.

"Come into the cabin," he cautioned. "A man that crazy-mad might let a charge of lead come this direction by mistake!" After closing the door, he looked at the boy. "I'm quite a bit proud of you," he said quietly. "Not for the reason that I guess you think of, but because you have learned to keep your temper. There is no better way to win. And besides that, it's only decent. Maybe a man can't help getting riled up sometimes, but I believe he doesn't ever have to show it or act on it, even with a chap like Finney."

"If I've learned things," thought the boy, "it's been right here on this Key with Uncle Hickey!"

## 14

### FIRE ON BIG PINE KEY

Jack awoke with a start. He could scarcely breathe, for something seemed to be choking him. The blackness of the night filled the cabin and he could not make out what was wrong! Towser was whining and some small creature was pitter-pattering as it ran over the roof. Jack jumped up and looked out the open window. In the sky was a weird yellow glow. "Uncle Hickey, wake up!" he cried. "There's a fire!"

Hickey groaned and turned over in bed, then he, too, jumped to his feet and came to the window. "Big Pine is burning," he said quietly. He walked to the door, swung it open and stepped outside. "It's on three sides of us," he called to Jack. "Not far away and coming with the wind. Run out and make sure the boat will start!"

Jack, coughing in the dense smoke, pulled on his trousers and almost groped his way to the dock. He jumped into the boat and fumbled with the engine. Three times he cranked it before there was a sputter and a sudden roar as the gasoline caught the spark. Jack let the engine run for nearly a minute, then turned it off and groped his way back to the cabin. Hickey was soaking his trousers with water; he told Jack to do the same with his. "Wet your shirt, too, and put on shoes," he directed, "and come with me as fast as you can." They ran into the scrub and set fire in a ring about thirty yards from the cabin. They beat out with a broom and a shovel all of the flames that started in the direction of the cabin.

The scrub, though dry as tinder, burned slowly at first, then the fire gained momentum and leaped high. The two humans worked furiously to keep it heading away from their little house; always the breeze seemed to be driving it toward them, making the work more and more difficult. Jack dashed the sweat from his brow and shoveled with might and main, throwing flaming bushes from him and kicking out glowing embers. He could see that the flames were gaining strength in their march away from the cabin and losing

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their hold on the ground between. Soon there was a burnt area many yards in width between the ring of fire and the line of brush where it had been started. Hickey could be heard to Jack's left, beating and gasping in the smoke, yet, at the same time, chuckling.

"Boy, we're licking him," he cried. "This backfire is going to save us!" Slowly they worked the ring of fire further around the cabin, to the very edge of the mangrove swamp beyond which was the deer path. Now the flames, at a safer distance, were roaring and crackling, shooting high into the air and traveling fast toward the other fire in the distance. Hickey came to Jack and ran his horny hand over the boy's arms and shoulders. "You aren't singed anywhere, are you?"

"No, I guess not. What did you mean when you said we'd licked him?" asked Jack. Hickey chuckled again.

"Fat Finney thought he'd burn us out. Planned the thing pretty well with that breeze. You can see that he started the fire to windward and planted it in a circle. If it had started from a match or cigarette at the turnpike, it would have come down the Key in a long streak."

"What about the deer," asked Jack, suddenly. "Will they take to the water?"

"They'll take to the water all right," answered Hickey. "The old ones are used to this, and the fawns will follow them. The trouble is that some will be confused in the smoke and maybe not reach the other Keys. It is high tide and there are no bars."

The roar of the fire was increasing momentarily as the two lines of flames approached each other.

"Ever been so hot?" gasped Hickey. "But think of what it is out there in the scrub!"

They returned to the cabin and lit a lantern. Smoke filled the room, but they could see two pairs of glowing eyes close to the floor in a corner of the room.

"Just coons," said Hickey. "Call Towser."

The dog came in and, growling, dashed at the coons who quickly scrambled out. Hickey followed them and walked around the outside of the cabin, making sure that no sparks were catching hold. Now the whole sky was yellow and red around them except in the direction of the water. Smoke obscured the stars and Jack had the feeling of being shut in, almost as if he were in a cell.

Hickey groped his way toward the dock and clambered into the boat. "We'll watch it all from here, boy. It's a great show, but it's terrible to see. Maybe we'd better pull out a little ways. The smoke just about has me down." In spite of the roar, Jack could hear fish splashing. They, at least, were unaffected by the burning Key, but what about the animals? "No doubt," he thought, "those who can move fast enough are running ahead of the fire, panicky and not knowing just where to go. Old ones and young ones leaving

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their thickets and their homes, some perhaps climbing trees, others trying to escape by going into holes." He could imagine the birds flying through the smoke, the snakes crawling through the tangles, the frogs and toads hopping into every available puddle, beetles trying to bury themselves under leaves. How many would die, suffocated or burned alive?

"Well, anyway, the Key is ten miles long, and a fire won't cover all of it for a long while," said Hickey, between coughs.

The breeze, however, increased; little waves rippled against the boat and the smoke coursed by, low and fast, like acrid fog.

"Just might be," mumbled Hickey, "that rain is coming."

After an hour, rain did come, a sudden, quick downpour—the beginning of the wet season—the first shower that would inevitably be followed by others, day after day. The two did not move from the boat for a long while. They let the water soak them; they enjoyed every big drop, exulting over this strange phenomenon of Nature which had come in the nick of time to save a large part of Big Pine Key. The reddish-yellow glow was already subsiding and a white light spreading over the sky. Dawn was on its way and another day was coming with the sun.

Soaked to the skin, the two poled the boat to the dock and in the gray light, stumbled to the cabin. Hickey peeled off his wet clothes and almost fell on his cot. In a few minutes, Jack could see that he was asleep, but the boy lay on his own cot thinking of what he had just seen. On the roof the rain beat steadily, and presently Jack, too, was asleep, with Towser on the floor beside him.

The sun was high before the two awoke to cook breakfast. The rain had ceased and only a few heavy clouds indicated that it might not be over for long. They ate in silence, fed the hen who, on that morning, had not laid an egg, then walked out into the woods to view the damage in the path of the fire. Only the treetops, the marsh, and some ground around the cabin were still green. Everything else was black.

"A good thing we have no near neighbors now," remarked Hickey. "The shacks along the turnpike weren't in the line of the fire." He glanced at Jack and gave his little chuckle. "Did you look at yourself in the glass?" he asked. "You are scratched up pretty bad; if anything, worse than I am, but we did the trick! We saved the cabin!" He stooped to pick up a singed, dead coon by the foot. "This little fellar couldn't save himself, but nothing will be wasted, I guess. See the buzzards coming from all directions. They know what fire means. It seems as if they can smell it further than their eyes can see."

The old man searched for tracks but found none after the rain. They came to Big Bertha's pool and found the alligator's long head as usual in the middle of its glassy surface. The head sank until only the nostrils and the eyes showed, then these, too,

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vanished without a ripple. Near the turnpike, the greenery could be seen stretching in a long line toward the north and south.

"Some place here is where Fat Finney lit the scrub," growled Hickey, "but I'll bet he's back in Key West establishing an alibi. You'll never pin it on him!" On the turnpike were several parked cars and a number of curious sightseers. Men and women from the fisher, men's shacks were wandering about, thanking Heaven that the fire had not come in their direction. They talked to Hickey, glad that he was safe, for all knew that the cabin must have been in the direct line of the flames.

"How did it start?" was the main topic, but no one seemed to know; and Hickey spoke no word about Fat Finney. Jack wondered why. Evidently, the old man wanted to fight his battle his own way. "What will happen next?" Jack asked himself. "It can't just end like this. Fat Finney will try again."

Then came more rain. The people scattered; those who had automobiles drove away. Hickey and Jack turned toward the cabin and traipsed through the black, wet woods. Even the cactus was shriveled, and once-green branches on all sides stuck out as mere sticks.

Again they changed their clothes and built a fire in the stove to dry the wet ones. Jack stood at the window, looking out at the rain and the gaunt trees. "Something must be done to take Unc Hickey away from here," he thought, "before something worse happens. What can I do? He won't ever want to leave Big Pine Key. He won't desert the deer. Perhaps when something happens to our buck, he'll feel differently; but when he no longer sees the buck, what will he have left? Wonder where the buck is now. Will he ever come back to Big Pine?"

Jack did not know that Nature works very fast to cover up the scars left by fire. He could not realize then that within a few days, new buds would be forming, seeds dropping roots to sprout new verdure. The life-giving rains would do all they could to hasten and encourage the growth and to transform the blackened woods into another jungle. The rotting leaves on the sand, the humus that supported plants, might be burned, but in the sand, deep down, would be enough plant food to start the transformation. Then, again, the falling leaves would form more humus, more fertility.

"No fishing today," called Hickey. "If the rain stops we'll do more clearing away of the brush around here, just to make sure that we'll never be caught like that again. I hate, though, to cut down bushes and see things die from being hoed up. Of course, where there is farming, that is necessary and a different thing!"

"Why not start a garden around the house?" suggested Jack. "Potatoes, corn-anything in the way of crops that will grow." Hickey looked at him.

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"Maybe you've got something there," he said, suddenly, "let's plant things that the deer and the varmints will eat, so they won't have to live on cactus and sour mangrove."

"I'll start getting things ready for the garden right now," said Jack. "You show me how to go about it and where you want it."

"Boy, you're a worker," answered Hickey. "It must be dug right around the cabin, almost up to the boards, particularly on the east side where there is more moisture. You'll have to count, though, on carrying a lot of fresh water to keep things growing, and when the bugs come on the crops we'll have to pick them off, for we'll do no poisoning."

Jack could see that the old man was growing excited, enthused over the idea of feeding the wild creatures, and thinking nothing of his own needs. "He'll never be rich," thought the boy, "or will he? After all, I guess he has what he wants."

The rain was slackening. Between two clouds a streak of blue appeared and the sun's rays came through in a stream of bright light.

"Give me that shovel!" said Jack solemnly.

## 15

### THE NO NAME BUCK

The fire on Big Pine Key had scarcely gained any headway before Hickey's buck smelled the smoke and stopped his feeding in the dense verdure of a hummock. He was alone and already nervous, but at first the smell of burning brush and the glow in the distance did not frighten him. He stood quite still, looking and listening, and not until deer and coons began to run past did he change his position. Then, with a snort and head held high, he trotted toward the east side of the island which was nearest to No Name Key.

On high ground between two salt ponds that were rimmed with a cover of mangroves he stopped to look and listen again. A scared doe, running from the pine forest, passed him and, noticing that he was not panicky, stopped near him. Soon another doe joined the pair, and later a third, accompanied by a fawn. The last to join them were two young bucks who were equally impressed by the fact that the older buck stood his ground instead of running. The herd of little deer would have been meat for Fat Finney had he known where to take his stand, but no humans were near and the fire alone presented the immediate danger. It was coming so slowly as compared with the speed of deer that the herd calmed down and waited for the older buck to take the leadership.

It was the new fire around Hickey's cabin that first really alarmed the buck. The sparks and flames were flying high then, and the wind was carrying much more crackling and roar. Suddenly the buck turned east again and ran toward the shore, the others close behind him. He stopped at the water's edge to look and listen, then quietly waded into

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the shallows that pointed toward No Name Key. He wanted to go quietly in order not to attract the attention of possible enemies, but the other deer began to splash and make such a noise that he sensed danger from more than the fire and began to plunge through the water.

Now the deer were in a long line approaching the channel. The tide was rising and the water moving fast against their legs. The buck was first to strike the deep water and to be forced to swim. At once he put forth all his strength in speed, well knowing that sharks might come from any direction. The water boiled behind him from his efforts; his head, shoulders, and even some of his back rose above the surface. Behind him still came the other deer, each striving not to be left behind, for all knew that it was the last one who would be most in danger from creatures of the sea.

First, the buck struck the shallow water and rose gradually above it until once more he could plunge instead of swim. Ahead was the dark line of thickets of No Name Key where new dangers might be waiting.

But speed meant much and the buck dashed for the little path that led into the mangroves. Presently he and then the others were on dry land among the shadows, safe at least for the moment, and able to shake some of the water from their hair. Now they could stop and again look, listen, and sniff. Behind them was the vast glow from Big Pine but from that they seemed secure.

Hickey's buck had not tried to make the others follow him, but he felt the responsibility of their trustfulness and undertook to lead them further. Up went his white tail in token that he was about to move and that they were to follow; then slowly and carefully he moved across No Name Key to explore it and be sure that nothing had made it unsafe. Near the center he came across the fresh trails of other deer. Since they had left no fear scent, all things seemed well. Moving in a circle to confuse any enemy that might be following, and to have a view of the trail by which he had come, the buck reached some high, dry ground where he felt they could rest.

He stood for several minutes listening to the night noises, then, scraping the earth with a front hoof to assure a bed free of thorns and bumps, he lay down on the scraped spot but kept his head erect. Others of the band lay down nearby, and several deer that had been in other parts of the Key, scenting them, came quietly to join the little herd. When excitement was in the air, young and old herded together for mutual protection.

As soon as the hard rain began to fall, they moved to the thickets and stood wherever each could find some shelter. The drops only wet the surface of their coats, then rolled off. Their eyes were screened by lashes, and the interior of their ears by long hairs and the curve of the ear itself. The downpour, which would have soaked their enemy, man, bothered them very little unless they lay down where puddles could form on hard ground.

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No sooner was water collecting in low places than they began to drink it in quantities to make up for the little that they had had from the scattered brackish pools and to get any extra salt out of their systems. They felt better almost immediately, the fawns showed this by dashing about and leaping. Some nibbled the wet bushes and found the leaves more palatable. Every land creature and plant sucked up the good fresh liquid which, for months, had been denied them in anything like large quantity.

The heavy cloud did not drift away before it had soaked the surface of No Name Key. The light of day was then spreading fast and showing other rain clouds on the way, to help complete the work of reviving the parched verdure. An unusual hush enveloped the Keys, for the motorboats of fishermen were not on the move.

But, after a time, there came a strange purr of motors. The buck stepped out of his thicket to cock his ears toward it, for well he remembered that this meant speedboats and danger. Poachers did not come in ordinary craft. Men like Fat Finney wanted speed to carry them far away quickly after their evil deeds.

The purring grew louder and fiercer. Straight to No Name Key it came, then suddenly died down; after that, louder engines began to pound the air. The buck moved from deer to deer in the herd, spreading the fear that had taken possession of him. His tail was up, his hair bristling. Every one of the deer was alerted, every one standing with ears straining and nostrils wide. They heard voices, bumping of oars, a yelp or two from uneasy dogs. Then the buck began to run.

To the eastern end of the Key he fairly flew, only to find voices there also. The herd crowded around him. He turned and bounded back to the heart of the Key. Here he listened attentively, heard men to the west, men to the east, men in other directions. Then hounds began to bay.

A scared fawn bleated in the bushes behind him. She could not find her mother. The buck bleated in reply and stamped impatiently. He knew he must run from the men; but where? The baying increased, came nearer. It showed that the hounds were coming from the direction of Big Pine Key.

Two does became panicky and began to jump away in the opposite direction. The buck wanted to follow, but knew better. Up went his white flag and away he dashed, straight toward the hounds. The bulk of the herd followed blindly. A shot rang out to the north, then another. The buck was going south and he did not falter. He knew every path, every bush, and he was flying.

The baying ahead was not excited as yet. The hounds were on old scent that was rain-washed, and they were almost feeling their way. The buck could tell exactly where they were and he passed them with a thicket between, a dense thicket of cactus and bushes that he knew they could not go through. He had slowed up in order to move silently. Each jump was calculated to land his hoofs on ground that would make no sound, and

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every deer behind him in that long line landed in his tracks. They passed like phantoms without the busy hounds once raising their heads.

Now the buck was approaching the rim of dense mangroves on the edge of the Key. Beyond that was the water. He stopped to listen. There were no voices ahead, no movements in the greenery. The buck clamped down his tail over his white rump, lowered his head to the level of his knees, and skulked cautiously forward. The path he followed was wet and sticky. It wound among the mangroves like a snake and ended in white sand at the tide level. Here was where a gunner might be in hiding, waiting for the deer to come out.

While there was no breeze, there was a drift of air from the water inland. It carried the scent of wet sand, decaying seaweed, and the salt water itself; but there was something else noticeable to the deer—the smell of a boat. Quietly the herd changed direction and slipped along the inside edge of the mangroves, heading west until more than a hundred yards beyond where the boat gave forth its telltale scent. Then Hickey's buck picked his way through the bushes until he was nearly at the water's edge and could peer up and down the Key's shore without showing more than part of his small head.

There was something ominous in the stillness. No herons stalked in the shallows, sea birds kept well out in the channels. Some distance down the Key, a deserted skiff lay with nose almost in the mangroves. The buck studied the skiff; it meant danger, but it was beyond the usual shooting distance and there was no one in it.

In the Key's center, the hounds were baying excitedly, now. Their voices joined together in a melodious cry that even the thickets could not muffle. The buck looked around at the expectant faces of the herd all turned toward him, waiting for his signal. Then he gazed over the water at Big Pine Key which seemed so far away. The bars were covered by the tide; the water was deep for most of the distance.

Again he looked at the empty skiff, then made up his mind and stepped out of the bushy cover into plain view. Nothing would stop him now; he was heading for Big Pine.

Back of him came the herd, single file, their brown bodies scarcely above the surface of the water as they picked their way in the leader's wake. Fifteen in all, bucks, does, and fawns, the main remnant of the Key deer. Ears cocked, eyes searching, hearts pounding, quietly and noiselessly they sneaked away from the land and their enemies. This was not one of the regular crossing places where, at low tide, the bars stretched nearly half the distance; it was a new route that even Hickey's buck had to explore. For that very reason it was not closely guarded by the enemy.

The buck wanted to run, to dash as quickly as possible to the far shore, but he held himself to that quiet, tense walking pace until gradually he got beyond his depth and had to swim. Now he could put forth all his speed without telltale splashing. He struck out with all his might, the water boiling behind him and rising in a rippling wave in front

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of his chin. Each deer, as he or she plunged into the deep, did the same. Their heads and backs showed; they looked, all together, like a giant sea serpent.

Out of the corner of his left eye, the buck saw a man step into the skiff, then suddenly straighten up and gaze in his direction. In the next instant, the man leaped to the stern and tried wildly to pole the skiff away from the shore. The buck surged forward; he knew he was discovered!

The roar of an outboard motor burst forth. The skiff turned in a short circle and headed for the deer. Every animal knew what that meant and put on just a little more heartbreaking speed. It was a race for life.

On and on and on, with the skiff gaining. Seemingly endless water ahead, but they had to keep going. In front, always the antlers of Hickey's buck leading them straight as an arrow, so that all the herd need do was follow. The skiff was closing in. They could see the man plainly—a big man with a very red face who leaned forward as if trying to push the boat to greater speed. He was close now to the last of the frantic swimmers, a fawn, but he kept on as if trying to reach the head of the column.

Suddenly he jumped into the bow of the skiff and raised the black barrels of a gun. There was a deafening roar and immediately little splashes all around those leading antlers. But he had taken his hand from the tiller, and the boat, lacking guidance, turned to the right in a swift circle. The man nearly lost his balance but managed to reach the tiller safely and turn the boat back to its course. He had lost much ground in the race but had plenty of time to catch up again, and now he had the gun with him in the stern.

There was another roar, more little splashes near the buck but behind him. In the excitement the man's aim had been poor. The man jumped to his feet and aimed again, with the tiller held between his legs and the boat at full speed. It seemed a sure shot this time, and the man, gloating, held his finger on the trigger and waited for the best moment to fire. The No Name buck, Hickey's great pet, was his now!

There was a shot! But it went straight down into the water beside the boat and so did the man. He had not watched his course and had struck the tip of a submerged bar. The boat stopped as if it had hit a pier, and he was hurled overboard.

The deer did not stop. Their feet felt sand and they began to plunge. They splashed through the shallows until, almost before they knew it, they were among the mangroves. All of Big Pine Key that was not burned over was theirs to hide in, and they still had their leader.

Sides heaving, mouths gasping, they stood among the bushes. The fawns flopped down on the ground, the does hung their heads, but soon they were on the move again, quietly now, following the safe, white flag of Hickey's buck.

Behind them, Fat Finney, standing in the water, was trying to push his skiff off the bar. He heaved and swore and sweated. The rain began again, but he was wet anyway. After a time, his big speedboat came around No Name Key, looking for him. There were three men and several dogs aboard it, and the men waved to him and laughed.

"Good hunting on that bar?" they shouted to Fat Finney. "Or are you trying to catch crabs?"

"Never mind that stuff," came the answer, "I almost got the No Name buck!"

## 16

### RAIN AND THE COON MEN

Hickey and Jack were sitting on chairs in front of the cabin watching a black cloud approach. They knew that it meant more rain and they were glad, for much water would be needed to make the burned bushes send up new shoots from stumps so badly charred.

"Wasn't that a shot?" suddenly asked Jack. They listened. "There's another one!" A third shot brought them to their feet, and far out in the water they saw Fat Finney's skiff. By that time it was stationary on the bar and the deer were not in their field of vision.

Jack went into the cabin for the old binoculars. He focused them and took a long look.

"I think it's Fat Finney!" he exclaimed. "All alone and wading in the bay. What's he up to? I can't see any birds around." Then Hickey took a look, but his old eyes could make out little.

The expected rain began to fall, big scattered drops at first, then a deluge. The two men moved to the cabin, and from the doorway could see the dark edge of the storm advancing over the glassy surface of the bay until it reached Fat Finney and almost blotted him from view. Hickey chuckled. In the midst of the rain, they saw the speedboat approach and, after some maneuvering, take the skiff and Fat Finney away.

"That ends his hunting for today!" chuckled Hickey. "Wonder what he was after. Right now, that man is really wet!"

Towser, who had been standing with them looking out at the rain, pushed by their legs and gazed toward the interior of the Key. Fifty yards away, brown bodies were moving, silhouetted against the blackened area; the deer were leaping past. They seemed to rise and fall in perfect rhythm as the line wound along the old path toward the highway.

"What a gang!" gasped Jack. "Must be all the deer in the Keys." Hickey growled out something and glanced quickly toward the now-deserted bay.

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"Same old story!" he muttered. "First, Finney chases them off Big Pine onto No Name, then he and his crowd surround No Name and chase them off that. They shoot them in the water or anywhere they find them. Now I know what the fat sinner was after out there. It's a good thing that most of Big Pine didn't burn when he tried to smoke us two out.

"These deer that are left will be safe for a while anyway, back in the hummocks. Finney won't dare tackle Big Pine again right away. He's smart as a rat about that. He won't risk arousing the authorities by overdoing it. And in case of trouble, he'll be back at Key West in jig time. There doesn't seem to be any way to catch him unless they put a team of full-time wardens on every large key with a speedboat handy that can beat his, should he take to the water. There isn't even one regular Key warden now."

How it rained! Cloud after cloud discharged its load of excess moisture while the wind blew steadily from the east. Hickey did not try to fish. He cleaned or polished everything in the cabin that looked dirty or rusty, and he put a few more nails into the rickety chairs. Also he hauled out all the old newspapers and magazines he could find, read a page or a headline that caught his eye, then threw the whole assortment into a corner for burning when the rain slackened.

Jack washed clothes and sheets and hung them on ropes he fastened across the room. Soon the place looked like a laundry.

"Smells good!" suggested Hickey.

At evening when the rain had slackened for a time, the deer returned. They were walking now with the quick, graceful gait that could carry them miles without effort.

Hickey stood in the doorway, watching them pass on the path and trying to count them.

"Nineteen this time!" he called to Jack. "I guess they found too much burned ground and are going to other keys."

One of them turned aside and stood looking at the cabin. Hickey saw his fine, widespread antlers, and chuckled exultantly. "Again Finney didn't get the buck!" he exclaimed. "He'll try often, though, just to be mean to us." The old man watched the last little deer pass out of sight behind the mangrove pool. It was switching its tail to keep away some of the mosquitoes.

The rain fell at intervals, day after day, making much of the over-thirsty ground into a steaming marsh.

Hickey put buckets where the water flowed from the roof and collected plenty to meet all needs in the cabin. Rain water, he knew, was pure, out there on the Keys, though it might be warm and tasteless.

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Often during the days that followed, the sun would shine hotly for a few hours; then the two companions would bail out the boat and go fishing for just enough to satisfy their appetites for the next two or three meals. Towser and even the hen ate fish, too, and the coons gathered the scraps at night.

Middle July brought sunnier days, though the rain clouds still came occasionally. Mosquitoes, hatched and raised in the endless pools of fresh water, swarmed everywhere and bit ravenously; there were several kinds, some as large as crane flies. Bluish-brown land crabs, with shells the size of coffee cups, combed the woods for land snails and the fruits of some of the bushes. Jack found one of them proudly walking off with a beautiful, banded tree snail it had secured by climbing. Lush growth covered everything and hid the burned ground with a carpet of new shoots, on which the deer already browsed.

A horde of young coons were hard at work on the frogs, tadpoles, and small water snakes. Every hollow tree contained a mother with her litter, and some little ones had been born in the bushy hummocks under the cover of palmetto leaves. It was a great year for coons and a wonderful year for alligators and crocodiles, who ate coons as well as fish, turtles, and herons.

Big Bertha had made a huge nest of marsh grass and leaves for her eggs, laid layer on layer in its interior. It

was placed on the ground beside her favorite water hole, where she could watch it continually and manage to guard it effectively from the coons and rats, and later keep these nimble thieves away from the swarm of little alligators that hatched with the warmth of the sun and the heat produced by the fermentation of the tightly packed wet grasses and leaves. These lively little fellows hid around the pool as soon as they were hatched and for days afterwards whenever danger threatened them. Gradually they spread out among the shallower pools, gobbling insects, frogs, and minnows at every opportunity. Unlike the young crocodiles, none were eaten by their mother.

Hickey had visitors in August. A motorboat drew up at his dock early one afternoon. The two men who occupied it waited there until Hickey and Jack came back from fishing. The old man did not like visitors and could not hide this fact, but the men did not seem to care. They told him that they had a plan for catching the little Key coons and shipping them north where the cold winter could make them grow long fur that would be valuable.

"Need your help," said the elder man, cordially. "We'll have a hundred, maybe a couple of hundred traps set every day in good places. They have to be baited with fish, so that's where you come in. Every day we collect the coons that are caught and put them in crates for shipment. You can help us with the coons and re-bait the traps with any kind of fish you catch. You know all about the Keys and can guide us, to start things."

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To Hickey, this sounded like a foolish venture. He talked it over with Jack who was quite excited about it. The old man scratched his head and looked perplexed.

"Six dollars to each of you every day," resumed the elder of the men. "We'll start next week. Is it agreed?"

"The coons do no good around here," commented Hickey, "but I don't like torturing the poor things. They're a part of these Keys, and they belong just as much as the herons or the deer. Besides, there are snakes, and it's a hot, wet job you won't like."

"I'll make it seven dollars a day," said the man, hopefully.

At that, Hickey glanced at the two with disgust he could not hide, but he had to admit to himself that they looked like good fellows. He scratched his head some more and looked toward Jack. The latter he could see was anxious that he accept the proposition.

"Six dollars a day is plenty," he said at last. "If my nephew agrees, we'll try it. If things don't look right, we'll quit." Then he added, "You've got to use traps that won't hurt the coons."

"Of course we will," answered both men together. "Glad you agree! Let's shake hands on it."

They all sat down together after that and made plans. Everything went pleasantly, and the men left in the best of spirits; they knew they had the right guides.

On the following Monday, the two coon men returned with boatload after boatload of box traps which, under Hickey's guidance, were baited and placed along the deer paths and ponds on Big Pine.

Before the men were through, that day, they had already caught a small coon which was carried to the motorboat, trap and all. On the following morning, Hickey, Jack, and the others looked at all the traps and found dozens of coons, frightened by being caught but ready to bite if given a chance. Some were sour old ones, others pretty little chaps that would tame easily. The men were exuberant. They filled three crates with the animals and ferried them to their truck on the highway. The crates had compartments, were not overcrowded, and were arranged for a supply of drinking water and food on the journey. Even Hickey was satisfied with the treatment.

They trapped on Big Pine for several days, then moved the boxes to No Name. After that, to Little Pine and other Keys. They worked hard, killed a lot of mosquitoes and never had a dull moment. The coons were not stupid but they were uneducated in regard to traps and were easy game until those that were left grew more suspicious. By the time Jack had to leave for school, the haul had run into many hundreds and was still mounting.

"It's better than we dared hope!" the men often exclaimed. "We'll soon fill all the pens at the farm."

"It beats anything I've ever tried," ruefully agreed Hickey. "Also I'd like to say you're good fellows to work with!"

Best of all, while the men were spending so much time on the Keys, no law-breaking deer hunters dared take a chance on being seen harming the deer herd.

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### THE FIGHT ON HOWEN KEY

The deer became accustomed to seeing the little boxes in the woods and scenting the two strangers who helped tend them. They had often seen botanists wandering about, studying the plants on the Keys, and collectors of insects, colorful tree snails, and Indian relics. Such people acted innocently and never disturbed them much.

During September, Hickey's buck completed the growth of his antlers. They were colossal for a deer so small. Five tines on the left side, six on the right. There was not another buck on the Keys with a head anything like his. Four points on each antler was the usual, with the tines short and the sweep narrow. The antlers of Hickey's buck had a wide, graceful spread which brought the tips well out beyond his shoulders. At that time, they still carried the velvet skin under which the bony horn material developed, and the young antlers were still just tender enough to be treated with care in the bushes. But in less than a week they became so hard that the velvet skin began to dry and stiffen.

Then the buck, in all his autumn strength and grandeur, tested them furiously against the very bushes he had previously avoided, tearing away the drying velvet, piece by piece, until the points showed sharp as rapiers. Soon the last shred of skin was rubbed off; the perfect antlers, grayish-brown from sun and the sap of the bruised shrubs, were ready to meet all enemies.

Now he took more determined leadership of the herd, courting the does instead of avoiding them, chasing the other bucks whenever they showed signs of wanting to compete with him. Sometimes he moved from one Key to another, just to visit scattered deer and keep the other bucks respectful. He found less and less time in which to feed, yet looked his best; powerful, sleek, and full of confidence. No wonder the younger bucks cowered and ran during his fighting moods; but there were two old ones that did not run.

One of these was a crafty old fellow who had often chased him when he was young. His favorite island was known as Howen Key, and on it he reigned like a king, angrily driving away the younger bucks who dared come to its shores. Four does spent most of their

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time on Howen Key which, though scarcely a mile long, had many mangroves and much dense cover in which to browse and hide. The does did not particularly like the irritable old buck and usually fed and rested far from his regular haunts. They did, however, like Hickey's buck, so one evening, when he came across the narrow strip of water separating Howen from Big Pine Key, and found them in a small glade near the shore, they recognized their friend and made a big fuss over him.

Suddenly, into the glade strode the old buck. He was furious at the sight of a popular rival and came straight for Hickey's buck, head down, antlers pointing forward. Hickey's buck was not one to run from him again. He stamped and pawed the ground, lowered his head, and waited.

The Howen Key buck did not like the looks of things. He was angry, but he hesitated. He, too, stamped and pawed the ground, swung his antlers, and glared, stalling for time and a better chance to catch his enemy off guard. Each buck knew that this would be a hard fight, for in size they were well matched.

The three oldest does moved away to await the outcome of the fight, but a young doe foolishly walked over to Hickey's buck and playfully pranced around him. Instantly, the Howen Key buck lost control of his temper and charged. Hickey's buck had no chance to make a corresponding rush and was almost knocked off his feet. Now he, too, was really angry. His eleven antler-points were locked with the eight of the other, and he struggled to free them and, at the same time, block the furious pushes of the enraged beast in front of him. The other was striving to turn him sideways for a thrust that would drive his eight points into the neck or body and make a serious wound.

With heads together, they pushed each other backward and forward, their bodies revolving in a circle, their hoofs tearing up the ground and stamping down the low bushes. Eyes glared into eyes, antlers scraped and clashed, muscles heaved and strained. Neither could turn the other for a thrust. Neither could push the other backward into a tree trunk or a tangle of bushes that would throw him off balance. Both were magnificent creatures, ready to kill each other, but unable to break the tie.

They began to breathe hard, with sides heaving and mouths open. Around and around they moved, sometimes nimbly, sometimes heavily, but with antlers always against antlers, forehead opposite forehead. Soon the glade was cut up in all directions and the two were all alone; the does had moved away.

The moon, which had been overhead, began to go down; hours had passed. Still the two grimly fought. They were tired now. Their hoofs dragged sometimes, and the powerful muscles in their necks and shoulders ached with strain. Once the Howen Key buck went down on his knees, but Hickey's buck went down, too. Both rose quickly and shoved and butted with new vigor. Each had hurt the other whenever his antler points had managed

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to strike the skull opposite and tear the skin; gashes showed and bled a little, but scarcely were felt in the heat of the battle.

Dawn found the two still facing each other, with antler pressed against antler, but neither animal moving much. Every few minutes one of them would muster enough strength to make a plunge, then rest after the effort. The does had returned and were browsing nearby, just as if the life-and-death struggle going on so close to them mattered little or not at all.

The buzzards were interested. When the light grew strong, first one, then another circled overhead to have a look, then slanted away on the constant search for some creature that was already dead. They could not hurry things like this, so they patiently, ominously bided their time.

When the sun's first hot rays penetrated the glade, the Howen Key buck sank to his knees. Hickey's buck managed to make a final thrust, then just stood in front of the other with head drooping. The old Howen buck's hindquarters gave way then and he collapsed and lay there with chin on the ground. Hickey's buck stood looking at him. He pawed the ground, lowered his head to the other's and waited to renew the struggle. But the Howen buck did not move; he could not, for all his strength was gone. Only his eyes showed that he was still alive, and they were full of fear, for now had come the time when his adversary could finish him.

Hickey's buck was not excited. He had proved himself the stronger. He had conquered, and that, for him, was enough. The fight was over, he would rest. Slowly, painfully but with head up, he walked away. The does stopped feeding and watched him, but he glanced neither to right nor left as he moved grimly into the bushes, found a shady spot, dropped to his knees and lay down.

All day, the birds rustled in the leaves, chirped and played, or stopped to peer at him, but he did not move. The does came, to rest nearby, but far enough not to disturb him. He did not even look toward the spot where he had left his adversary. Only his ears remained active, ever catching the sounds around him, ever alert in case of danger.

When the sun sank out of sight and the heat lessened, he rose to his feet. His muscles ached, but he was rested. He shook his head proudly, pawed the ground in challenge to the world, and looked around for the does. They had moved away, but not far. He pawed again and raked his antlers loudly against a bush, then called to them with gentle but demanding bleats. First one, then the other three appeared and stood in the bushes looking at him. Again he proudly raked his antlers against the nearest twigs, stamped a front foot, and stood at full height with head up in all its grandeur.

The does, however, pretended that they were not impressed. They nipped leaves here and there, they turned their backs and even began to walk away. But when the buck loped forward, they turned to touch noses and caper around him. He was the victor, the

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finest male deer on the Keys, the one they admired and liked the best. They would tease and perhaps ignore him at times, but they would follow him anywhere.

For a week Hickey's buck stayed on Howen Key, resting, playing, and enjoying life. He knew that the other buck had left the Key, so there was nothing to spoil the quiet happy days. But suddenly his adventurous spirit got the upper hand, and he took the trip across the water to Big Pine. With him went the young doe who had scarcely left his side, and with whom, as a companion, he felt the most contented.

It was after that he encountered the second old buck who had now established himself as head of the herd on Big Pine. But he did not meet this old one at once.

The other buck was cagey and moved from place to place as if avoiding his rival and trying to keep the Big Pine does out of his way.

Hickey's buck did not hunt for him. He had a companion in the young doe; but he found the scent of the other buck wherever he went, and he began to dislike him. There was plenty of room on Big Pine for more than one old buck, but not for two that disliked each other. Each wanted to be sole ruler of the deer, so a fight could not be avoided for long.

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### THREE RIVAL BUCKS

It had not rained since the last week in October, but enough water had fallen during the September-October rainy season to leave every growing thing green, and the ponds watery enough to please quantities of gallinules and teal. The nights were cool and the breezes so strong that they made the palmetto leaves clash together and the pines whisper.

The old deer knew the season was almost at hand when many gunners would invade the thickets. They were nervous and restless. None moved about much in daylight, and at night they stayed away from the highway. The high, dry hummocks were the favorite retreats of Hickey's buck and the does, fawns and young bucks that made up his small herd. The second old buck stayed beyond the highway in a mass of greenery where once the Calusa Indians had encampments. He, too, ruled over a small herd and tried hard to keep them from straying.

While this old buck had recently skirmished with youngsters who tried to be rivals, none of these fights had been anything like the battle between Hickey's buck and the ruler of Howen Key, so he was unscarred and very sure of his superior strength. But he had carefully avoided a meeting with Hickey's buck whom he had fought in previous years and not forgotten. The two might not have met in a fighting mood had it not been for the

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Howen Key buck who, tired of his temporary retreat on Big Torch Key, had come across the intervening water to roam on Big Pine.

The Howen buck wandered here and there and suddenly found himself again face to face with Hickey's buck and two does. They looked at each other for a few moments; then Hickey's buck started purposefully toward the other and chased him into the nearest thicket. Not sure that his rival would go far enough, Hickey's buck began to trail him. This was easy, for the scent glands on the old buck's hind legs left odor wherever he traveled. The two went through the woods on the run. The Howen buck in his fear headed for the highway and crossed it. He did not go far before he scented the old Big Pine buck; but he would rather fight a dozen old-timers like him than tangle with Hickey's buck again, so he kept running.

Behind him he could still hear his pursuer, and presently he realized from the hoofbeats that there were two following him. He struck a path and bounded along it until he reached a low section of the Key where the salt from the ocean had prevented bushes from growing. Salt grass and salt ponds were everywhere and he could see all around him. No enemy could slip up on him here unobserved, so he stopped and waited, his watchful eyes on the trail he had left.

He did not have to wait for long. Out of the bushes came the old Big Pine buck on whose territory he was trespassing. His pursuer looked this way and that, but did not see him, so he put down his head and began to search for the scent trail. Then out of the bushes behind him bounded Hickey's buck. In the starlight the three powerful bucks, all with fine antlers, presented a remarkable sight as they stood near each other in the clearing.

Hickey's buck and the Big Pine buck looked at each other long and carefully. Neither wanted to fight the other just then, but neither wanted to be the one to move aside. They were only a few yards apart, while the Howen buck was a number of jumps away. The two pawed the earth and shook their heads menacingly, then pretended to graze, almost side by side, but their dislike for each other would not let them drift apart. Suddenly they leaped together and locked antlers with a clash that made even the feeding coons jump out of the ponds in alarm.

Instead of straightforward pushing, the crafty old Big Pine buck used a trick of swinging his body close to his adversary's, then rising on his hind legs to strike viciously with his sharp fore hoofs. Hickey's buck was quick enough to dodge these thrusts and to whirl around for plunges with head down. However, the other was always ready for this and met antler with antler. They scrambled about with lightning speed, unhampered here by any trees or bushes. Only the shallow ponds slowed down the fight, the slippery mud causing hoofs to slide and bog down whenever the bucks swung themselves or each other off the hard ground.

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Meanwhile, the Howen buck stood watching. Only when the straining fighters veered in his direction did he move at all. This was not his fight. Let the two try to kill each other if they wished. He would stay out of it, even though he disliked them. But when the two grew tired and weakened, the idea slowly came to him that he could now easily whip both. Confidently he came forward and circled them, waiting for a good chance. They were too busy to give him any notice. Their sides were heaving and they no longer pranced about. Head to head they stood mostly in one place, first one, then the other, after a rest, trying fiercely to shove his adversary backward or to his knees; and around them ominously walked the old Howen buck, biding his time.

So bitter was the shoving that the two pairs of antlers became jammed, with the tines locked so firmly that the antlers could not be pulled apart. They fastened the two heads together. Now there was wild straining and tugging as each buck tried desperately to release himself. Again and again they rose on their hind legs and pawed the air, only to come down to earth still locked together. One would trip and fall and pull the other down with him. They would scramble to their feet and strain and tug all over again, only to trip once more. And still the Howen buck walked around them, watching, waiting. He was free. He could leave at any moment, find the does and take some of them with him, but he wanted revenge and he knew that now he was the master, that he could stab both of his enemies, punish them to his heart's content, make up for all that he had ever suffered.

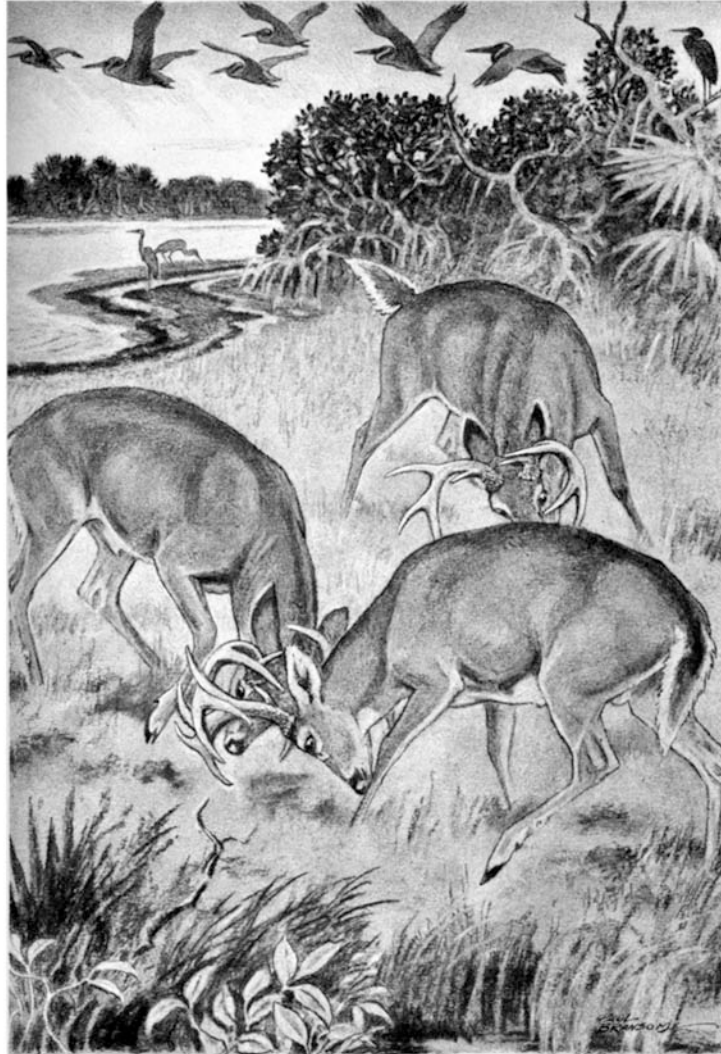
The two fighters were very much aware of the Howen buck now. His strong scent was mixed with theirs in the quiet air, and they saw him constantly out of the corners of their eyes. Their tightly jammed antlers gave them no chance to turn on him or to escape him; it was just as if they were caught in a trap, and they knew only too well that the Howen buck could strike at any moment.

And suddenly strike he did. He had been controlling his temper very well, waiting for the right moment, and when he had the long, brown body of Hickey's buck directly in front of him, unprotected and motionless except for the heaving of the sides, his fury flamed up and he made his charge. His antlers hit square on the shoulder. Had they been aimed a few inches back of the shoulder and lower, the points might have reached a vital spot and finished the battle then and there. As it was, Hickey's buck was bowled over, dragging the Big Pine buck over with him. The two were on the ground, with the Howen buck standing above them, ready to thrust again and spear with his hoofs.

It was then that the Howen buck got his first surprise. Hickey's buck rallied his remaining strength and kicked into the air with all four legs. He hit the body above him with ripping thuds. His pointed, hard hoofs tore hair and hide and bruised the muscles beneath, almost breaking a rib. Back leaped the Howen buck in sudden pain and terror.

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Neither of the deer on the ground could rise at the moment. They lay on their sides in salt grass, and the Howen buck did not see that they could kick only in one direction. He backed further away. After a minute or two, he walked slowly toward the bushes. He was not badly hurt, but he was scared. All the fight had been knocked out of him. In the bushes he lay down and waited for the pain to lessen.



Hickey's buck struggled to his feet and tugged at his heavy burden. The other buck did not try to move, allowing his head to be pulled sideways by the other. The tough tines strained and scraped against each other. Then Hickey's buck gave a backward leap. Something had to break. One of the Big Pine buck's tines cracked and crumpled. A pause, then another leap. Another tine cracked.

Hickey's buck raised his tired head. It felt suddenly very light; he was free! He stood looking down at his adversary, his body swaying with exhaustion. Presently he slumped to the ground. Dawn was whitening the sky, a beautiful, cloudless day was breaking.

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Hickey's buck dropped his chin to the earth and rested his neck muscles. In front of him lay the other buck; the air reeked from the fight, the grass on all sides was trampled and bruised. He saw the Big Pine buck move his feet, raise his head, then drop it down again. He saw the herons flying to the pools from their roosts in the mangroves; he heard the many sounds of day. Then came the distant boom of a gun, the shooting season had commenced!

The buck did not care just then. He listened to a second boom. A startled flock of herons flew overhead, winging their way to another key, but he did not stir.

He should be on the alert, ready to dash for the thickets, perhaps to run into the water and swim wildly to No Name or to Little Torch Key. Hounds would be rushing in all directions, gunners treading the paths, heartlessly hunting down a buck like him. He knew he could outwit them, had he the strength. He knew he could hold the hounds at bay, threatening them with his polished tines, cowing them with his pointed hoofs; but a great fatigue held him down. Every part of him ached and he was stiff in all his muscles. Let them come! He must rest.

And come they did, four big, scrawny hounds, thumping the ground, filling the air with their baying as they circled the open, salt flat which was so full of scent. At any moment they might find the two deer, summon their masters, end the career of the grand bucks that deserved to live. So much scent excited but confused them; they ran this way and that, probing here, probing there.

One hound found the trail of the Howen buck who had run away. He nosed along it, made sure of the direction it had taken and gave a series of excited yelps. To him ran the other three. They sniffed, caught the full scent and let go their voices, too. In a wild chorus they dashed through the bushes. Ahead of them were deer, running for their lives, little deer scarcely taller than they. These were what they had been trained to chase, to fight, to kill. They roared with the joy, the excitement of it all, and they left behind them the salt grass flat and two bucks too tired to run.

## 19

### **GUNNERS ON THE KEYS**

Deer died on that opening day of the legal hunting season. The Howen buck was among these; in his fright he had run near a waiting gunner on the edge of the burned-over ground where he was in full view. The hounds, following, had sniffed at his body, yowled and run on to find live deer that would give them the excitement of another chase. The gunner, seeing that the buck was dead and hoping that one or more others would be driven in his direction, stayed crouched behind a stump, so motionless that even the most wary deer would not notice him unless it happened to catch the man scent.

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Soon deer were splashing and swimming from Big Pine to nearby Keys where, however, other gunners were waiting. Some of the men were bad shots and missed the moving targets, others only wounded their quarry; but often the deer managed to avoid the gunners entirely, passing them like ghosts in the thickets, then hiding in dense tangles of mangroves where water lay underfoot. The sun beat down on the Keys and the heat became intense. The hounds panted and drooled saliva from their open mouths; they tried to drink at every pool, but found only salt water. Presently they lost interest in the chasing and lay down in shady spots; the hunt was over.

Hickey hated the gunning season, but was powerless to interfere. He stayed shut up in his cabin with Towser, that morning of the opening, grumbling and wincing whenever he heard a shot. As the air became hotter and the firing ceased, he grew more calm and remembered to comb his tousled hair. Then he opened the door and took a walk as far as the deer path beside the mangroves. Here he studied the tracks of several running deer and stood for some time listening to weird yelling that came from the general direction of the nearest hummock. There seemed to be two voices. His hearing had become dulled by age, but at last he made out one word that was repeated again and again. It sounded to him like the word "help." He looked at Towser, noted the exact direction in which the alert dog's nose and ears were pointed, then started to walk fast toward the spot where Towser had located the calls.

The further Hickey tore his way through the wet tangle of mangroves the clearer he made out the voices. The word he heard repeated was certainly "help." There was no burned-over ground here, and beyond the mangrove pools he soon became hemmed in by vines, thorn bushes and climbing cactus which did their best to hold him back. Trying to go in a straight line across the Key was very different from following the winding paths of the deer.

The old man was too wary to shout that he was coming. It was better, he thought, to have a look at the yelling men and to find out what was happening before he made his presence known. Soon he was very close and by parting the bushes could see one man standing in a glade. Hickey, himself hidden, tried hard to spot the other and suddenly saw him lying on the ground. Both men were yelling "help" at intervals. Cautiously Hickey edged toward them until he was in the glade. The man who was standing had his back toward him, so the one who was lying down was the first to catch sight of Hickey, looking and acting like a wild man of the woods. Up he sat suddenly and gave a hoarse yell. His companion whirled around, then jumped backward. His eyes fairly bulged. Before him stood the tall, gaunt old man, tousled hair and whiskers nearly hiding his face, his old blue shirt plastered to his body with sweat, and his bare arms streaked red from cuts the thorns and bushes had made.

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"Great goodness!" shouted the fellow. Then, after a pause: "Who are you?" Hickey ignored the question. He felt an immediate dislike for this man. Still out of breath from his exertions, he stood looking at the two.

"I'm wounded!" suddenly cried the one on the ground. "Shot! My left leg's broken. I can't stop the bleeding. Help me get somewhere! Help me to a doctor!"

That was all Hickey needed to know. He came quickly to the man's side and dropped on his knees beside him. He gulped when he saw a pool of blood and a trouser leg soaked red. To check the flow, the man was clasping his hands around the leg high above the knee.

Hickey whipped out a pocket knife and slit the trouser leg off at the thigh, then pulled it down and off at the foot. The wound was small at one side of the leg but large at the other where the bullet had come out, the lead flattened by hitting the bone. Blood oozed out of the small hole and trickled steadily from the larger one. The old man seized a handful of large green leaves from a bush and pressed some into both holes. He plastered others over the wounds and bound them down tight with strips of cloth ripped from his shirt. With two stout sticks, broken to the right length, he made crude splints to hold the injured leg out straight, binding these to the leg with pieces from the trouser. Several times the man had to groan, but stood the pain bravely. His companion watched in helpless silence. Hickey examined the bandages to make sure the bleeding had been stopped and the leg straightened as well as possible, then he got to his feet.

"Lift his legs," he commanded the companion. "Careful, careful!" Meanwhile he put his arms under the wounded man's thighs and raised him until the man could place one arm around his neck and steady himself. He was of slight build and not a very heavy burden. "Now then," Hickey directed the companion, "walk ahead of me for that tallest pine. We'll have to go to my boat landing and from there by skiff to the highway. Go around the clumps of cactus and bushes, not through them."

"Is there any water?" suddenly whispered the wounded man. He had grown limp in Hickey's arms. A moment later he fainted.

"Rest a moment," commanded Hickey. "I want to look at those bandages." They laid the wounded man softly on the ground. "They're O.K. but earlier he bled a lot; how long ago did this happen?"

"Not long before you came. Maybe fifteen minutes."

"Did you shoot him?" At first there was no answer.

"Well, did you?" demanded Hickey.

"I guess so. I'd shot a deer, wounded it, and when I saw something moving in the bushes I shot again. Then he yelled. He was on the ground. I dragged him into the open, but couldn't carry him. Will he live?" For reply Hickey gave the man a withering glance.

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"Take hold again," he ordered. Slowly they moved through the woods, the unconscious man a dead weight. After two more short rests they managed to reach the cabin. Both men were so nearly exhausted that they sank to the ground with their burden. Then Hickey stumbled to the water bucket and came back with a full dipper which he held to the wounded man's parted lips, pouring a little at a time. After a minute or two, they carried the man to the boat and laid him gently on a blanket spread double on the boat's bottom. Hickey started the engine and while steering, continued trying to give water to the unconscious man. His companion huddled miserably on the bow seat.

Presently the wounded man coughed and opened his eyes. He stared at Hickey.

"You're the hermit," he breathed. Hickey nodded.

"You're the one Finney King is out to get. All because of some buck." He closed his eyes for a minute, then stared again at Hickey. "Finney's my friend, but he's all wrong. You've saved my life."

"Keep still!" Hickey growled. In silence they chugged along the edge of the mangroves, each man occupied with his own thoughts.

At the bridge, Hickey climbed the embankment and stopped the first car. With two more men to help, they carried the wounded man up to the highway and placed him on the rear seat of the car where Hickey could hold him as they drove. There was strained silence as they headed fast for the house of the nearest doctor, two keys away.

The doctor was at home and knew Hickey. He took a look at the bandages, then at the old man. "You go home and rest," he said. "You've done a good job; a mighty good job. I'll take over; we're going straight to the hospital." The wounded man held out a hand to Hickey, "I'll not forget you," he whispered. His companion, however, had something on his mind.

"My gun," he said to Hickey. "It's in the woods. Can't you get it and take care of it for me? And the deer. If you find the deer, save it for me. I'll stop for it tomorrow. I'll make it worth your trouble." Hickey's beard bristled, but he turned away in silence.

There were many cars on the highway, and soon one of them gave the old man a lift as far as Big Pine Key. He was as silent as ever, and when once more in his boat, headed it almost mechanically toward the cabin. There he ate some beans and bread, then once more entered the woods and strode toward the scene of the shooting, Towser at his heels. He did not search for guns. Instead, he followed the trail of the wounded deer which had dragged itself into the bushes. It was a little doe and it was dead.

Hickey carefully lifted the animal to his shoulders and carried it back to his cabin. Night was closing in, but in the darkness, and tired out as he was, he buried the little thing, smoothing the earth over it until the grave became a part of the woodland in which the gentle doe had once roamed.

Hickey stood for a time looking at the outline of the trees against the sky and listening. He heard nothing to disturb him, no voices, no boats, no gunshots; but he was very sad, very tired. Presently he went to his bed and lay down, without trying to take off his clothes. When Towser came in to look at him he was asleep.

## 20

### FAT FINNEY'S HUNT

Fat Finney sat on a box in his camp on Big Pine Key, waiting in the early morning light for his breakfast to be cooked. Behind him, on the edge of the turnpike, were the automobiles belonging to his hunting party. In front of him flared the open campfire around which were grouped four men, one of them trying to cook, the others, like Finney, just waiting. Howls from the surrounding woods indicated where hounds were tied. Finney's stout, red face, unshaven and unwashed, looked dark and forbidding. He was in a bad humor that morning.

Nothing had gone too well during the previous day, the opening day of legal hunting. Finney had not shot or even seen a single deer, his companions had secured only two, and one of his party had been wounded by someone from another hunting group. The news of this had come to Finney late in the evening when a car from the hospital drove up. The worst part of the news was word that Hickey had brought in the wounded man and, as the rescuer, had become something of a hero.

"Confound the old fool!" breathed Finney. "It would have to be him!" He knew that the trouble he had plotted for Hickey would descend on the old man sometime during the day now dawning. He had bought the land on which the cabin was built and had arranged to have Hickey evicted. At last he would be even with his enemy; drive him off Big Pine Key forever. Hickey might try to exercise squatters' rights, but Finney thought he could not win, he had even failed ever to file a claim. Finney's face twisted into an odd, unpleasant grin.

"Coffee's coming up!" called the cook. Finney leaned forward for a cup. The men who were standing, sat down near him and busied themselves with breakfast.

"What's doing today?" asked one of them. "Are we going after your big buck again or are we just hunting deer?" Finney grunted.

"First," he said, "we'll take the boat and dogs to Middle Torch and Big Torch Keys, perhaps have a look at Howen, too, then we'll come back here and drive through the middle of Big Pine again!"

"Still after that buck!" exclaimed the first speaker.

## The Phantom Deer

"Yes," answered Finney, "and after that fool hermit, too. I'm having him kicked out today." The four men looked toward him.

"Gee, you're vindictive!" ventured one. All of them were wondering where the old man could go, how he could live without his cabin. They knew Finney's cruelty. The first speaker shrugged and stood up, reached for his coat and gun. He did not feel happy, but the affair between Finney and the old man was, perhaps, none of his business. He wanted to forget it in the hunt.

They separated to untie the hounds and collect their equipment. Finney carried a rifle, the others shotguns. Presently the dogs were prancing around them and howling with excitement.

"Let's go!" boomed the tallest of the men, good-naturedly. The party started for the shore, passing the dead deer that were hung by their heads to a horizontal pole between two pine trees. The men looked at them, "All we need is that buck!" someone laughed.

The four hounds ran ahead and vanished in the greenery. Silent now, they rushed this way and that, sniffing every trail, finding out what creatures had traveled the woods during the night. The men came upon them near the shore, concentrating their sniffing on a deer path that led through the tussocks of dew-soaked grass.

"Strange!" muttered Finney. "Right back of camp a deer must have come to look us over." He squatted down on his haunches to study the tracks. In the mud he saw fresh hoof marks, broad and deep. He scarcely believed his eyes.

"Boys!" he yelled suddenly, "it's the big buck!" The others clustered around him.

"So that's the famous one's track!" exclaimed the tall man. "He must have been hiding on the east point yesterday. Well, well! I see we won't get a boat ride till this is over!"

"Not much, we won't," cried Finney excitedly. "Scatter, everybody! At first I'll keep with the hounds! This is it!"

The trail was several hours old, but the hounds stayed on it, following its twisting, nosing out its deceptive breaks and circles. Their quarry had been feeding in every direction, even to the water's edge, hungrily nipping off the seed heads of the grass, eating tender leaves of morning glory, purslane and seaside lavender, and among the taller bushes, seaside cedar, the white and the red mangrove, buttonwood, sweet acacia and the fruits of the seven-year apple. He had searched also for ground cherries, hog plums, seeds of the Bahama dogwood and berries of the silver palm, a mixed diet, indeed!

Around the hounds flew disturbed ducks, egrets and the killdeer plover with their mournful cries, and from under their very noses sprang sporty Wilson snipe that had stopped there in their southern migration.

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Finney noticed none of these birds, or even the lowflying marsh hawks and great white herons. He did, however, see several little brown water snakes, almost underfoot, and the shuffling land crabs which he detested; and then he began to listen nervously for the dread buzz that would warn of a rattlesnake.

For some time the hounds were too occupied with the difficulties of following the elusive, stale scent to give voice, but when the trail suddenly straightened out as it entered a densely wooded hummock, their joy cry could be heard for miles. They speeded up and left Finney far behind, and then Hickey's buck heard them and knew they were on his track.

The buck did not run at once. He was resting on a sandy spot in the woods, surrounded by cactus, and the hounds were still far away. When they came nearer, instead of going from them, he rose quietly to his feet, made several long leaps to one side, then headed toward them. However, he kept many yards between him and the old trail by which he had come. Deer and hounds therefore passed each other, going in opposite directions.

The buck heard a man moving well to his left and one to his right, and soon he located the puffing Finney. He circled Finney without making a sound and with plenty of bushes between; then with his head held low, he cut back and circled the man who had been on his left. By that time he had spotted still another man and had scented the fifth. Afraid to dodge about among so many, even in good cover, he suddenly ran for the open burned area and crossed it at the high speed possible where bushes did not catch his antlers. He left the men far behind.

In a hummock near the western end of the Key, miles distant from the men, he stood still to listen. An hour passed before the hounds unraveled the circling trail and came to him, but by that time he had heard and scented another group of hunters who were sneaking into the Key from the west. On two sides he could hear motorboats. Giving up any idea of swimming to another key, he cautiously started east on the old path that led past Hickey's friendly cabin; but near the cabin he heard loud voices entirely new to him, so he ran on.

Near Big Bertha's pool he stopped once more to listen. From all sides came sounds indicating danger. He ran again, silently and cautiously, due east toward the turnpike. Where the bushes were thick beyond the burned area he made another stop. The turnpike was near, he could even see the tops of passing cars, but behind him he heard the hounds. Skulking low and silently among the bushes he safely passed a sleepy gunner crouching beside a pine. That unnerved him, however, and he put on more speed. He thought he must cross the turnpike, dangerous though it seemed. At its edge he lowered his body almost to the ground and tried to slip across without being seen.

A bullet zipped past him and the loud shot sounded from in front! He dared not go forward or back. Instead he turned and ran north on the turnpike which then seemed

## The Phantom Deer

free of vehicles. Ahead loomed the causeway. He could not hesitate; he dashed for it and rushed between the causeway's railings, with the water below him and on both sides, but another key ahead. Behind him he glimpsed a man running, and straight ahead suddenly came a car toward him. The car took him by surprise. There was only one thing to do then and he did it; he leaped over the railing, down through the air until at last he struck the water, front feet first. For an instant the wind was knocked out of him, then he began to swim, wildly, furiously, fighting the current and the waves. A bullet tore up water to his left, another to his right. He did not change his course, he was heading for No Name Key, far out in the sea. Another bullet, a fourth and a fifth!

A sudden blow struck him painfully on the flank and he felt a violent pull. A barracuda three feet long, drifting aimlessly along the channel, had waked up to glimpse the flash of his white stern and, thinking it was a fish he could eat, he had viciously slashed at it, tangling sharp teeth in the long hair. The buck kicked himself free. Then a sixth bullet missed his back by inches.

He tried to put on more speed, but he could not. How the water dragged against him! How difficult to get his breath! On and on, in the longest swim he had ever taken, so low among the waves he could see no sign of the Key. Where was it? Did he still head in the right direction?

Behind him a dozen cars had lined up on the causeway. Excited and interested people were cheering, groaning, some holding their breath. Two car drivers were actually wrestling with Fat Finney, trying to keep the wildly excited man from aiming his powerful rifle. To all, the brave little deer with the wonderful antlers soon, however, became a mere speck in the wide water, a speck that headed straight as a die for the distant Key, reached it, rose slowly out of the blue water and vanished in the greenery.

The sympathetic crowd then dispersed, took to the cars and drove away, everyone talking of what he had seen, everyone happy over the little deer's escape and disgusted by Fat Finney's maniacal desire to kill it when it was almost helpless in the water swimming for its life.

Fat Finney, red in the face, stamped on the concrete as he walked back to Big Pine Key, kicked pebbles he found in his way and cursed long and foully. Through so many years he had concentrated on killing the buck that this had become an obsession, more important to him than anything else. And now, after he had succeeded in placing himself in the path of the deer, he had missed easy shots with his best rifle.

He knew it was too difficult and too late to gather the hounds, bring up a boat and try to follow the buck on No Name Key that day. And who could tell where the animal would be when the next day dawned? Fat Finney viciously kicked a pebble clear over the parapet, into the water.

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He was trudging toward camp, still in his worst mood, when a car drew up beside him on the highway. It contained three men, two of whom hailed him familiarly.

"Hi Bill. Hi sheriff!" Finney gave in reply. "Well, how did it go?" The man he had called sheriff was the first to answer.

"We just now came from there. We cleared up everything for you. Put the old man out with all his stuff, including bedding, and packed it in his boat or laid it out on the wharf. Nailed a padlock on the door of the cabin and barred up the window."

"Good!" muttered Finney. "Good!"

"Don't know as it's so good," replied Bill. "It wasn't a very nice job for anyone. The old man took it pretty bad. But he was mighty decent about it. Said he knew he couldn't do anything then to stop it, as long as you had called in the law to back you up. Seeing him setting there on the old wharf with his stuff all heaped up in the boat and around him, and him holding his dog to keep it from eating us, weren't any picnic!"

"But you're certain he's out, not coming back or anything?" Finney showed his anxiety.

"He can't come back, 'less it's with an axe to open the door. He's spending the night on that old skiff of his, then going on to Marathon."

Finney pondered this for several moments; then the odd, twisted smile spread over his face. "I guess you're pretty good at evicting!" he said. "Sounds perfect! I was afraid there might be trouble, but you fixed things fine. O.K.! Now take me as far as my camp down the pike." He prepared to enter the car, but received no help from the occupants. All three were regarding him with anything but favor. The driver let in the clutch; the car moved away, leaving him standing alone in the road, looking after it.

## 21

### WITHOUT A HOME

After the two days of bad luck in his deer hunting, Fat Finney broke camp and motored back to town with his friends and his hounds. He had decided to postpone further chasing of the deer until all other hunting groups had left the Keys and could not shoot deer that his well-trained dogs were driving for him. He hated competition, which was one reason why he liked to hunt before the legal shooting season opened.

With Finney gone, the deer herd had a much better chance to live. The scattered little bands stayed all day in the mangrove swamps and the most impenetrable hummocks, where, without good hounds, the gunners could find little sport in trying to take them. Hickey's buck had headed south, going at night from one key to another until he could hide on Cudjoe Key and later on Sugarloaf where few hunters bothered to look for him.

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Old man Hickey was far from the cabin, and unable to help the deer. With the bulk of his meager supply of household goods, he had chug-chugged the long distance to the town of Marathon, intending to sell skiff and all, then take the bus to Miami. His niece, he thought, might be able to give him a room and steer him to some job, perhaps around boats or piers. He knew that against Fat Finney he had almost no chance of winning; the man was much too powerful. Hickey, for the first time, was feeling aged and tired, as well as sad and discouraged. All he lived for, was on the Keys.

"Should have saved some money," he said to himself, "but, somehow, I couldn't. Never thought I'd come to leaving home!"

The dock people at Marathon saw his loaded boat approaching. They had heard the news about him, for news traveled quickly, and they were anxious to help as much as they could; but jobs on the Keys were for young men and they knew that Hickey did not want to be a bother to anyone. Hickey tied his skiff to some pilings, told Towser to lie down, climbed up and on the pier where he was met by men who, like himself, fished and labored in and around the water. But he said not a word, beyond a brief greeting here and there. Presently, the men drifted away and left him standing alone, which was what he wanted. He had always stood alone.

But one old-timer returned and stood beside him. Together they looked out over the water, at the Keys. Both were thinking of days gone by, good days, hard days. When Hickey turned away at last, his companion turned with him, and they walked along the pier to the land.

"I've got a car," said the old-timer, almost apologetically, "I'll bring it up here and take you wherever you want to go." Hickey's heart was touched. Here seemed to be friendship, understanding.

"It's funny," he said in reply, "but just now I've been thinking of that poor feller in the hospital, the one who was shot in the leg. Is he all right?"

"Guess so, but I don't know for sure. Didn't hear anything today."

"He had a bad hurt," continued Hickey. "And not a whimper out of him! I'd sort of like to stop in there and ask about him." Then he added, "Before I leave the Keys."

"We'll do that!" the old-timer said with finality. "I'll get the jalopy."

Rattling along the road, Hickey and the old-timer, side by side in the front seat, began to talk. Hickey was interested in the new buildings along the highway, and the other changes he saw. The hospital was one of the new things. At its entrance he climbed out of the car and walked to the reception desk.

"I've come to ask about the man who was shot in the leg," he said to the young woman in charge, "Don't know his name." The girl glanced up at him, then took another look. She had never seen anyone quite as picturesque as Hickey.

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"I'll ring his room," she said. Hickey turned away while she used the telephone.

"He wants to see you," said the girl. "His name is Carteret, Mr. John Carteret. This way, please." Before he knew what he was doing, Hickey was following her white-clad figure down the hallway. She opened a distant door.

"Come in, come in!" called a voice as Hickey hesitated on the threshold. Carteret was in a bed by the window. He held out his hand and grasped Hickey's.

"Well! This is fine!" he cried. "The man I owe everything to! I was going to look you up as soon as I was able to move. How's the Key? And that boat of yours?"

For a moment Hickey was silent. "Just wanted to make sure you were doing all right," he said at last.

"I am, thanks to you! Leg's all in plaster, but that won't be for very long. When I'm able to walk to a boat, the first place I go to is your house on Big Pine. I want to see it, and I want to see you. What time in the day am I sure to find you at home?"

Hickey was embarrassed. He glanced around the white-walled room, then shook his head.

"Better not plan to look for me," he said. "I'm moving."

"What? You're moving? You!" Carteret regarded him keenly. "Is this really true? What happened?"

Hickey, more embarrassed than ever, made no reply. Carteret almost sat up in bed.

"I know!" he cried. "Finney has done something! Has he burned you out? I heard him vow all sorts of things. He was mad. Tell me about it!" But Hickey was turning to the door, trying to escape further questioning.

"Wait!" shouted the man, "I'm in on this. I'll make that skinflint build you a new house. Just what did he do? Come back here!"

Hickey, fearful of seeming impolite, turned around. He chose his words carefully. "Finney owns the land," he said. "It's all legal. I'm moving."

"You're moving! You mean he kicked you out! After a lifetime there! Wait till I get out of this place! I'll talk to him!" He lay back on the pillow to get his breath, then asked, "Where are you going?"

Hickey hesitated. He was greatly worried about the sick man, afraid that his visit might have done him harm. "Oh, I'm going to Miami," he answered.

Carteret regarded the old man for several seconds. "I don't believe it possible," he said at last. "You couldn't leave the Keys. Aren't you `keeper of the deer' or something like that? Don't you know every bush, every fish, every bird? Well, you're going to stay. I'm giving you an old houseboat I've had staked here for years. It's no use to me any more.

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Take it, it's yours; moor it next to Big Pine in some nice cove and tell Finney to go chase himself! He doesn't own the ocean! Nurse! Nurse! Come here and give me a pen and paper!"

Later, when Hickey climbed into the old jalopy, the nurse stayed at his elbow, afraid that the tall old man could not make it alone. But her fears were very much in vain, for Hickey's step was firm and there were sparks in his eyes.

"You look a lot better," remarked the old-timer, "is the man all right?"

"He is all right!" answered Hickey.

That was how it happened that the location of the Carteret houseboat was changed to Big Pine Key, close to Hickey's old dock where, with the aid of his skiff, the old man could land to get fresh water from Big Bertha's pool. It was not a large houseboat, but there was room for two, Hickey, and his nephew, when the latter arrived at Christmas time; and there was room for Towser and the finicky hen, though both of these went to shore every day.

The cabin was nailed shut and padlocked, the garden that had been started was growing up in weeds, but Hickey still fished from his skiff, still snorted when he heard shots, still patrolled the Keys and put at least a semblance of fear into the hard hearts of the law-breakers.

Spring came and went. The flights of the whitecrowned pigeons to and from the smaller keys where they nested, simmered down after they had eaten most of the poison wood berries. The young brown pelicans were learning to dive and catch fish for themselves, and the baby deer, still all white spots and big-eyed wonder at the amazing world around them, were nibbling grass beside the cabin and on the burnedover area. The clouds gathered for the rainy season and deluged the dried-out earth, bringing the usual hordes of mosquitos and endless successions of flowers. Hot summer drifted lazily past. September came, with more showers, wonderful fishing and the first migration of birds; then Nature, as if tired of her regular routine, suddenly changed everything in a moment, turned the sky and the quiet sea topsy-turvy, ushered in, with all its mad violence and fury, a tropical hurricane!

## 22

### THE HURRICANE

No one warned Hickey. In the general excitement that followed the radio announcements of the approaching storm, he was forgotten. He fished as usual, while others nailed boards over windows, hurried to bring their boats to the mainland, and then themselves journeyed inland. The Keys were nearly deserted and still Hickey, alone in the skiff, happily and calmly fished.

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Overhead the clouds, very high and thin, were arranging themselves in bands, running nearly east and west; later, lower clouds, resembling fog, drifted over the Keys and partly obscured the sun. At the same time the surface of the water began to rise and fall, as low swells rolled in from the Atlantic and beat against the shores. That was when Hickey first began to take notice; something was wrong.

He had seen hurricanes, but so long ago that he had forgotten the signals they sent ahead. Nevertheless, he began to feel uneasy, and instead of taking the fish to the highway, he returned to the houseboat. Going ashore, he fetched buckets of fresh water which he poured into every empty bottle he could find, these he firmly corked. By that time the sun was setting, not in its usual rosy glow, but in such a blaze of purple and red that it lit up the sky long after it had gone below the horizon.

Other things began equally to disturb Hickey. When on shore, he had noticed that countless land crabs had deserted their burrows and were slowly trekking inland like a moving army. And now he saw that the gulls and pelicans were flying north instead of west, and that an unusual quiet pervaded the Keys, broken only by the crash of the rollers on the shores.

"Things look queer! Could be a hurricane!" he mused. "Just in case, I might as well shift the boat to the west of Big Pine, sort of behind it." He hauled up the two anchors, started the motor of the skiff and slowly towed the houseboat to a new mooring on the Gulf side. After that, he stood on the narrow deck to look all around. The sun's glow had nearly faded away in the west, and from the east a long black cloud was coming. The wind was swishing in the pines, increasing in velocity. "It sure does look bad!" sighed Hickey.

He had no way to escape the storm now, but he was not afraid. He brought out a chair and sat facing the ominous black cloud, intently watching its rapid approach. Presently scattered drops of rain began to fall; big drops that splashed when they landed; the fringe of the cloud was now directly overhead, and the wind came in odd, furious puffs. Then the rain began in earnest, lightning split the skies and lit up the Key, thunder crashed and rumbled. Hickey moved under cover and sat in the dark, listening to the deluge descending on the cabin roof, and to the howl of the gale.

On the Key, the animals were already suffering, running this way and that, trying in vain to escape the furious downpour that was being whipped sideways by the wind. Instinctively the larger animals, the deer and the coons, were seeking the highest ground. Here, however, the pines were scarce and the bushes low, offering no protection. Several deer huddled together miserably, their bodies dripping, their feet in rain water as high as the dewclaws. Many inches of rain fell that night.

Just before dawn, the wind began to increase more rapidly. It bent the smaller pines like whips and flattened the bushes. The tide had risen several feet more than usual and had

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already flooded the mangroves. Then came the real hurricane blow, gusts of ninety miles an hour, of one hundred miles and finally of one hundred and twenty. Trees were pushed over, sheets of rain and spray swept the Key, wave after wave, white-rimmed, came roaring over the land.

In panic the deer rushed into the surrounding water only to find no footing or refuge. Back they splashed to the exact spot where they had herded at the beginning; it was the highest ground, where they could at least keep their footing. Half-drowned coons crawled along beaten-down tree trunks and clung among the limbs. Little was visible in any direction except wildly-swirling water between the crests of high waves. Only the ceaseless roar of wind and water could be heard.



Again and again, the deer were swept from their position, scattered, overwhelmed by the whipping spray. Bravely they fought their way back. One or two of the younger ones, finding this impossible, drifted away with the sweep of the tide. These swam, tried desperately to keep afloat, and then moored themselves precariously in the matted,

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floating underbrush that still marked the Keys. There was little sign of land, just tree trunks and much floating stuff where bushes were moored by their roots.

Then came a gradual lessening of the terrific wind, ending in a lull, deceptive and deadly, for it marked the eye of the hurricane, the central core around which the winds roared. In the eerie, yellowish light, gulls, man-of-war birds and terns could be seen circling in this safety zone unable to escape in any direction. The ocean pounded, but spray was suddenly entirely lacking. Deer that had been swept only a short distance could see their companions now and swim back to them, to cling knee-deep where there was firm ground.

Nearly an hour passed before the winds hit again, this time from the opposite direction. Again the sheets of rain and spray, the endless roar, the blind fury of the water. More deer were swept away; they could not help each other. Boat and pier timber, limbs, whole trees and masses of uprooted bushes were whirled past them; so full was the water of mud and sand that it looked a poisonous dark-brown color.

And then a strange thing happened. Hickey's houseboat suddenly appeared, leaning far over, but still afloat scudding along sideways in the very teeth of the gale. It hit the high ground of the Key, lurched along

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And then a strange thing happened. Hickey's houseboat suddenly appeared, leaning far over, but still afloat scudding along sideways in the very teeth of the gale. It hit the high ground of the Key, lurched along a few yards and came to a dead stop. At once it became an even greater target of the waves which beat against it loudly and heaped masses of debris around its windward side.

A doe, half swam, half plunged toward the boat and stood behind it, protected from the worst of the blast; others followed, until a little herd huddled there, dodging the sticks and pieces of lumber that whirled around them in the sea of water, and lunged at them madly in the crests of the waves.

For a long time it seemed as if the wind would never lessen. Sheets of spray shot over the dilapidated boat and tore along the surface of the water. The hurricane shrieked, howled and roared, and the rain descended in great, blinding cloudbursts. Big birds were beaten down and buried in the sea which seemed to engulf all things. Then gradually, it was noticeable that the gusts were less severe, the spray less biting. Blinding rain continued, but the heart of the hurricane had passed!

## The Phantom Deer

Breaks appeared in the heavy cloud blanket; the rain at times almost ceased. The air seemed cooler, less oppressive, and the waves, though high, grew less fierce. There was more time between the successive gusts of violent wind.

The tired deer could shift their positions now to ease straining muscles. They milled about and even shook themselves to throw out some of the water from their soaked hair. Several took sniffs at floating bushes loaded with green leaves, and one actually chewed the tip of a branch. Slowly, very slowly, both wind and water subsided. Waves rolled in ceaselessly, but the high tide was going down. Soon the deer were standing on land they could see as well as feel. Bent bushes appeared, the Key was rising from its watery grave. In another hour the deer could walk all around the houseboat and along the whole broad spine of the Key.

Everywhere were sand and mud, shattered timbers and masses of matted bushes. Here and there lay big conch shells with the animals they contained trying to drag them back to the ocean floor. Exhausted fish flopped in puddles, stranded octopi tried to hike themselves seaward on their long arms. The coons crawled from the piles of driftwood on which they had been floating.

In the center of it all lay the houseboat, battered, partly on its side but intact. Water trickled from its sprung seams, and all manner of strange ocean creatures crawled around and under it. Strangest of all was a badly soaked, black cormorant that managed to perch on its roof and between gusts, hold out its wings to dry. There was no sign of Hickey.

Another hour passed. A second cormorant lit on the boat and tried to preen its soaked feathers. Then suddenly both birds flew heavily away. A window burst open, a wet, tousled head appeared and Hickey leaned out gingerly, like a chick emerging from its eggshell for a first look at the world.

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### IN THE WAVES

If anyone had told Hickey that he had done something almost impossible, he would have laughed. Although the houseboat had been tossed about like a cockleshell, and everything it contained had been upset and made to slide and dance for many hours all over the cabin floor, he had wedged a chair in a corner of the little pantry and sat on it, safely if uncomfortably, through the blow. His feet were braced against the opposite wall, and nothing that the waves might do, short of upsetting the craft, could unseat him. Towser and the hen fared worse because they did not want to stay with him in the narrow pantry.

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The houseboat had not broken its anchor ropes until the hurricane had swept it, with anchors dragging along the bottom, to the edge of Little Pine Key. There the anchors held; but the strain was too great for the ropes and they snapped. Then the waves, for a time, had the boat at their mercy. They tossed it up and down, spun it in every direction and managed almost, but not quite, to up-end it. Pans, crockery, bottles, beds and the only other chair, crashed and rolled together with every tilt of the floor. Towser dodged about as best he could, and the hen, with flapping wings, steadied herself on a pile of bedclothes.

This lasted until the eye of the hurricane brought respite from the wind. After that, though high waves continued, everything seemed better. Hickey could not see out of the windows, which were very small and covered with foam, seaweed and flotsam, but he thought the hurricane had passed and, after waiting for a while, made the mistake of forcing open the door which could scarcely be moved, so tight was it jammed. He looked out on a wild sea. No land was in sight and his skiff was gone. It was while he was looking out at the water that the eye of the storm passed and the gale commenced from the opposite direction.

Hickey tried desperately to shut the door, but could not fasten it. Spray and waves beat against it, water poured in and, in a few moments, the bottom of the cabin was flooded nearly knee deep. At that moment, however, a wave hit the door with great force and jammed it tight shut, saving Hickey and his pets. Now, the water inside the boat sloshed about with the pans and the furniture, but could do no great harm. Hickey staggered back to his seat in the pantry, and this time Towser allowed himself to be held around the middle, and the hen balanced herself on the man's legs.

The water rushed from one side to the other as the boat tilted this way and that. Things were a bit unpleasant for Hickey, but he never moved. A stick broke one of the windows and let in much-needed air as well as spray, and Hickey was feeling far from down-hearted when suddenly the boat scraped its bottom on land and lurched to a dead stop. From that moment the battering of the waves against it became worse and shook every board in its hull.

When wind and waves began to subside, Hickey was afraid to open the door again. He waited for a long time, fearful that the hurricane might return; but when the tide receded and waves no longer battered the hull, he became almost jubilant and left his safe nook to force open the broken window. What he saw awed him; he had no idea that the boat was high and dry on Big Pine; on all sides were sand, mud and wrecked trees, flattened bushes and struggling sea creatures.

Although rain was falling and the wind still fairly strong, Hickey saw that the hurricane itself had passed. He waded to the door and kicked it open, letting out a flood of pent-up water. Towser gingerly stepped outside on the sandy mud and walked around the

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boat. Hickey shivered. For the first time he realized that his clothes were soaked and he was chilly, but there was no dry wood for a fire. Everything in the world around him seemed wet. Then he remembered a jug of coal oil for his cookstove. With this he fixed up a warming fire inside the boat. There was good food in unopened tin cans.

After half drying pants and shirt, Hickey took a good look around the boat and determined that he was actually back on Big Pine Key, near its western end, miles from the highway. When night arrived, he could do nothing more than try to sleep on a bare cot next to the cookstove; but on the following morning he heard shouts and, stepping outside, saw a skiff containing two men drawing up to the shore of the Key which was nearly fifty yards from the houseboat's stranded position.

The men had come out to look for him, and they were glad and a little surprised to find him alive. They took him, Towser and the hen as far as the highway, which the hurricane had damaged but had not destroyed. There, cruising automobiles carried him to Homestead on the mainland. So Hickey was safe and soon well cared for by hospitable citizens. Perhaps the oddest performance of the hurricane was the beaching of his skiff on Lower Matecumbe Key where Hickey recovered it and later used it to return to his houseboat.

After a few days of uncertain weather, the autumn rains commenced once more and cleaned from the Keys most of the salt left by the ocean water. Hot sun followed and encouraged new growth on the bushes and trees, which gradually straightened bent-over stems and trunks and made the Keys look fairly green and not at all like the desert they first presented. Seeds and roots of new kinds of plants had been swept by the storm from islands far to the south. Many of these would grow and add to the Keys an even more tropical look.

Only the edge of the hurricane had touched the thickly populated sections, so most of the houses were not badly damaged, and the chief worry of everyone was the sand that had been heaped nearly everywhere.

But Hickey's old cabin was no more! It and his pier had been carried away. Sadly the old man looked at the spot for which he would always have affection.

A great quantity of gulls and buzzards spent days in feeding on the dead creatures left on the Keys by the tide and the waves. Flocks of plover, turnstones, willet and sandpipers came to explore the exposed sand and mud. There were new bars, new beaches. And on the ten keys that they had always frequented, wandered the remnants of the deer, twenty-five in all, hungry and low-spirited, more shy than ever because of the destruction of their hummock hide-outs. Among these could be seen one deer with a beautiful rack of antlers, Hickey's buck!

The buck had been caught by the hurricane on No Name Key, and there he stayed with two does for several days after the water receded. After that, he and the does

## The Phantom Deer

wandered from key to key looking for better cover and for food. By the time Hickey had repaired his houseboat which still rested high and dry on Big Pine and was now a house not a boat, the buck was staying in the mangroves near him. Hickey fixed up a feed box and gave him and any other deer that came there, oatmeal and corn bread. Not only the buck, but all deer were tame now when the old man was about. He and Towser would watch them and take care not to make any startling, quick move that might lessen their trust.

For a time, nothing was seen or heard of Fat Finney. Every day, Hickey feared he would turn up to plot some kind of trouble. Once, a lemon and white hound had appeared and chased the deer, but there had been no shots. Hickey did not know that this was one of Finney's younger dogs, released on the Key to give the man a chance to see what, if any, deer remained. The buck, with the others of the little herd, had run from the hound until nightfall, and Finney had seen them. When darkness came, the buck sought a mangrove swamp and there, in the shallow water, fought the hound. When Finney picked up the dog that night on the highway, he was limping and had learned all he wanted to about a buck at bay.

Finney's next move came a week later, in cooler weather, when he brought two of his best hounds in his speedboat and towed a skiff that could be used in going over the shallows surrounding the Keys. With Finney was only his old boatman, for this time it was to be a hunt to the end, with no one except Finney having the chance to kill the No Name buck.

First, they stopped at Sugar Loaf Key but found no deer, then at Cudjoe where two does were jumped by the hounds and chased across the little Ramrod Keys to Big Pine. Finney stayed in his large speedboat, observing everything and waiting impatiently for a view of those perfect antlers that he coveted. The well-trained hounds followed the deer, swimming when they swam.

On Big Pine Key there was much baying at first, then confusion. The does had run east, then circled toward the west where other deer had mixed up the scent and kept the hounds busy untangling trails. Finney followed the chase in his boat, as close to the shore as he could venture without taking to the skiff. He was becoming excited now and very anxious to be where he could get a shot. In spite of the way the hurricane had mauled the Key there was enough cover to hide the deer from him.

Back of No Name Key near Little Pine, Hickey, unaware of what was going on, fished in his lonely way, from the old skiff.

## FAT FINNEY AND THE BUCK

The sun beat down on the Keys from high overhead, and the two hounds took turns in leading each other on the trail of the deer. Occasionally they bayed, and at confusing trail crossings they whined, but for the most part they were strangely silent as if knowing that this hunt was particularly serious. Shrewdly, expertly they sniffed the footprints, likewise analyzed the body scent left by the various deer, trying not to waste themselves in following first one, then another.

Hickey's buck stood among the mangroves, head up, listening intently. Sooner or later, he guessed, the hounds would come his way. He heard the speedboat and knew that danger lurked in its direction; but, also, he expected trouble to come on foot or to lie in wait for him on the land. Restlessly he shook his antlered head and stamped a front foot. And it happened much as he had expected; the hounds, in rounding the western end of the Key on the trail of a doe, came close to his hiding place. He heard them stop running. Had they caught his scent, the buck scent that old hounds would rather follow than anything else?

There was a minute of indecision—exploration by the hounds. He could see them coming toward him through the bushes. The lead hound suddenly raised its head and looked him in the eye. Instantly he was away, with a great crash of breaking brush, and instantly a joyous cry broke from the throats of both hounds. They recognized him, the buck they had chased again and again and fought in the mangrove swamps, the buck whose scent they could distinguish from all others!

"Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!" their voices seemed to say.

Fat Finney heard the new note and grabbed his rifle from the seat of the boat. Now he was really alert, scanning the shore, searching the water to left and right where lay other keys in the distance. He understood his two hounds, knew that at last they were directly behind an old buck, which could scarcely be any other than the No Name buck! He glanced at his boatman who, too, was listening.

"Run for No Name Key!" he shouted hoarsely.

The motor took on speed; they fairly rushed through the water. But suddenly the boat began to scrape and buck along the bottom of the bay; they had run on a new, hidden sand bar built up by the hurricane.

"Back up!" shouted Finney furiously. They backed, the propeller grinding up sand. "Wait a minute! Turn off the motor while I listen!"

They could hear the hounds running straight away, into the heart of Big Pine; the buck was not going to swim to No Name! Finney took the helm and steered fast around the

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west end of Big Pine and straight down the south shore in pursuit. In nearly every direction were keys to which the buck might try to go in order to shake off the dogs.

Hickey's buck listened to the motor and stayed on Big Pine. He watched ahead as he ran and he saw no waiting gunners. Circling along the edge of the Key he ran all the way to the highway, crossed the hard concrete and circled the east point of Big Pine. There was not much cover in which to dodge safely, so he turned and headed back to the west. Still he saw or scented no sign of gunners and felt safe; in the water was the danger. His powerful muscles bore him along easily, sixteen feet at a leap, and they carried him over the beaten-down brush as if he had wings. He felt his power, and he had the intense desire to live. Let the hounds follow! Without gunners to head him off, he would show them how to run!

"First time around!" counted Finney. Later he had to add, "Second time around." When the buck brought the hounds to the western end of the Key the third time, Finney stopped trying to follow them with the boat and directed his companion to run him ashore in the skiff.

"That deer isn't going to take to the water unless we force him," he explained. "I'll have to head him off on land. While I'm trying for a shot, you keep the skiff ready, just in case there's a break for another key."

Then, rifle in hand, Finney waded into the mangroves to take his stand. Quite by chance he had chosen a spot not very far from Hickey's stranded houseboat which was plainly visible when Finney fought his way inside the fringe of bushes.

A half-hour passed. Fat Finney who had gloated over finding the buck's fresh tracks, crouched motionless and waited. From far away an occasional bay reached his ears. Then the baying became louder; the chase was heading his way! The man nervously shifted his position so that the rifle when held to his shoulder could easily be pointed to the side as well as straight ahead. This time he must not miss! Nearer and nearer came the baying. It was almost upon him; then it stopped! Finney stood up in his excitement.

The hounds were eagerly casting this way and that, confused by the lack of scent.

"Confound it!" whispered Finney to himself, "I forgot the wind! The buck smelled me and turned." He was about to hurry back to the skiff when a brown animal in the bushes caught his eye. The animal was chasing one of his hounds; yes, Hickey's good old Towser was lunging at the hound's shoulder at every turn. His blunt teeth would not hold; the hound easily threw him aside each time, snarled and went on. But Finney's temper flared at once; he raised the rifle, aimed and fired. Then he prepared for another shot, but there was no longer any sign of the dog. Satisfied, Finney hurried through the mangroves to the skiff.

The boatman was coming toward him. "You got him?" he asked confidently.

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"No! But I got a yellow dog! That's just as good." The boatman regarded him in surprise, but risked no further questioning.

"Go as fast as you can for No Name!" commanded Finney. "After that shot he'll leave Big Pine Key!" They hurriedly shoved off. The outboard motor of the skiff sputtered, caught and roared. Finney in the bow, was leaning forward in his eagerness. When the skiff hit the hidden sand bar he nearly went overboard.

"You idiot!" he muttered. "Tide's too low here. Go around by the channel." The motor had stalled, and while the boatman was cranking it, the baying of the hounds could be distinctly heard. Finney saw it first, the buck coming out of the mangroves, splashing in the shallow water, running for No Name Key!

He was hundreds of yards away, too far for a shot from the boat. However, the buck knew he was seen and therefore he leaped through the water with tremendous splashing. "Quick!" shouted Finney.

"Quick!" But in the excitement the boatman dropped the starting rope. Then he skinned his fingers against the engine. Finney, exasperated beyond endurance, sprang to the stern, nearly throwing the man out of the skiff. He wrapped the starting rope, yanked it against the pull of the engine and had the boat moving in a moment, around the sand bar and into the channel. Then he was back in the bow holding the rifle.

"Full speed!" he cried, "We've got him! We've got him! Head for No Name, not for him!"

The buck had reached the channel and was swimming to cross it. Far behind him splashed the hounds, still in the shoal water, but preventing his return to Big Pine.

Finney was standing up in the boat, trying to aim. The buck, nearly two hundred yards away, was swimming so fast he left a white wake in the water. Still a long distance ahead of him lay the green shore of No Name. Finney fired.

It was not a bad miss. The bullet struck only a couple of feet behind the buck. He fired again. He fired once more at a hundred yards' distance. Still the buck swam; but at the channel's edge the deer had to rise out of water in the shoals and plunge from there to the mangroves. That was when Finney's aim became deadly; he fired and the buck went down!

Finney went down too! The skiff struck another bar and catapulted the stout man overboard. He rose wildly from the water only to see the buck again on his feet, splashing along on three legs. Finney blew the water out of the rifle barrel, thrust in a cartridge and fired without taking real aim. He was almost beside himself with excitement. After that the buck managed to reach the mangroves, struggled a moment for a footing, then vanished.

As if this were not excitement enough, Finney saw a skiff bearing down upon him from the rear. He leaped into his own boat and somehow got it off the bar and moving

## The Phantom Deer

forward before he recognized Hickey. The old man was holding up his hand and shouting something. He was coming close, gaining rapidly.

"Keep out of my way!" yelled Finney.

The two skiffs raced along the channel, now at equal speed. Where the buck had climbed the bar, Finney slowed down, preparing to run his skiff onto the sand and himself dash after the deer on foot. But Hickey came alongside.

"Don't do it Finney! You're breaking the law! Man, can't you let a grand deer live! I raised that deer! Remember? Be a good fellow! Be a sport! Let him go! I beg you! I beg you--" If Fat Finney heard, he showed no sign of being influenced by the plea. He was preparing to jump as soon as his skiff grounded.

In his earnestness, the old man put his hand on the side of Finney's boat. It was just enough to keep Finney away from the bar.

"Let go that, you old fool!" shouted Finney. "Let go or I'll--" he seized an oar in his boat and rammed it against the side of Hickey's skiff. The oar splintered the old boards, but still Hickey held on. Finney looked wildly toward shore and saw his hounds leaping in the shallow water, nearly at the edge of the mangroves. He turned and glared at Hickey.

"I said let go!" His voice was low, venomous. "I said let go!" He raised the oar, held it high, brought it down on the old man's hand!

Hickey fell back, unable to suppress a groan. He slumped down, hugging the injured limb with his other hand. The boats drifted apart. Finney poled a few times with his oar and leaped onto the shoal, rifle in hand. He splashed toward the mangroves. Hickey's boat, with the old man still slumped on the middle seat, looked low in the water as it drifted strongly eastward in the channel tide.

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### HICKEY AND THE DEER

Finney heard the hounds as he climbed through the unyielding and matted mangroves. Then he followed them to the far side of the Key, expecting at any moment to come across the buck lying on the ground. The hounds were running up and down the shore and there was no sign of the buck. Beyond the Key's rim of mangroves and its mass of floating debris left by the hurricane, the water lay unruffled by any swimming deer. Finney looked quickly on all sides, then made the hounds circle. He kicked brush piles, rooted among the mangroves, made another circle with the hounds.

"He's here!" he muttered to the hounds. "Right here, I tell you! What's the matter with you?"

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Finney tramped resolutely almost the whole length of No Name Key, but no deer; then, with sudden suspicion, he walked again along the far shore before turning back to the skiff, the hounds trailing along at his heels, tired now, and despondent. Finney was beginning to believe that the buck had drowned while he was delayed by Hickey. It was growing dark and the old boatman was tinkering with the skiff's engine.

"It's busted or something," the man announced. "It just won't go!"

"Thunderation! Aren't you a mechanic?" growled Finney. But he, too, tried in vain to start it.

"Worst of it is, I couldn't go to save Hickey," lamented the boatman. "His boat sank!"

"What!" gasped Finney.

"Yes, it went clear down, out of sight, way over by the highway bridge. Tide was taking it fast all the time, right out to the Atlantic."

Finney looked thunderstruck. He stood in the boat for nearly a minute, gazing eastward.

"Grab an oar!" he commanded suddenly. "You row one side, I'll row the other, straight for the speedboat. Do you know what this means?"

"Guess I do," the old boatman said quietly. Finney gave him a quick, frightened glance, then bent to the oar. The tide was against them, and they had to row with might and main. In darkness they finally reached the speedboat, moored beside Big Pine. Followed by the dogs, they clambered stiffly aboard, pulled up anchor, started the powerful engine.

"Drop the skiff! And head fast as you can for the bridge!" Down the channel they roared, lights streaming ahead on the water. On the Atlantic side they slowed down to look more carefully for Hickey or his boat. Finney shouted at intervals. "Hullo! Hullo there!" His voice was hollow, oddly muffled. The old boatman, too, began to call. They covered miles of water, skirting shoals, and twisting around sandy keys, but always following the deep channel.

"Couldn't be further than this, let's go back and throw the lights on the other side." They turned the boat and followed the far side of the channel, still calling.

"Hold on!" called the boatman suddenly, "see that stuff to starboard?" There it was! Hickey's skiff, barely floating, empty! They stopped and turned the lights in every direction. Both men were thinking of the same thing, sharks. And Fat Finney was deeply worried.

"Well?" said the old boatman at last. There was no answer from Fat Finney. After a minute or two the boatman quietly let in the clutch; he was heading the speedboat toward Key West, thirty miles away.

## The Phantom Deer

On the Keys, it was often said, in the old days, that a man's life sooner or later hung by a hair. Hickey did not think of this when he drifted down the channel with the water filtering into the skiff from the shattered side, but he knew that he was in a very serious situation. He could not start the rusty, old engine with his left hand and he could not bail fast enough with a tin can to keep the water from gaining. He tried his utmost. Sweat stood in beads on his forehead as first he cranked then bailed with his one good hand. The other was almost crushed between the knuckles and the wrist. The skin was broken in two places and blood was trickling quietly down his arm as he held up the hand to lessen the pain. But it never occurred to him that he would fail.

As the tide drew the skiff toward the highway bridge, Hickey began to see that the boat was sinking; the engine was heavy, the planks old and waterlogged; lower and lower he was settling in the water.

"I'll go overboard at the bridge and swim for it," thought Hickey, but when he reached the giant concrete pilings the skiff was in the middle of the wide channel, far from land. Hickey knew then that with only one good hand he could not reach the land. He wished that he had been a really good swimmer. He looked at the bottom of the highway far overhead. An automobile was purring over it. He shouted huskily.

"Couldn't hear me up there!" he whispered. "Couldn't see me either. It's getting dark, getting dark fast!" His weight, added to that of the engine, was sinking the boat until it was level with the surface, barely floating. Hickey slid overboard and, with his one good hand holding to its side, tried to keep both it and himself from going down.

Suddenly he saw a wide swirl in the water near him. He kicked toward it, realizing for the first time that his blood was soaking into the water, luring and exciting sharks. Every now and then he saw other swirls, startlingly near. Something brushed heavily against his foot; again he kicked.

"I'll fool 'em!" he muttered, and drew his body over the sunken skiff, so that he was floating on top of it. "As long as it don't sink entirely, I've got 'em bothered now!" Behind him he could see car lights going fast along the highway, people on their way to their dry homes, comfortable people, happy people, who could not be expected to see him and his almost sunken boat far below them, drifting steadily seaward. Hickey shivered. The water was not cold, but it was soaking into his very bones, and he was very, very tired.

"Hold to it!" muttered Hickey. "Something's bound to come. Hold to it!" He watched the sharks with little interest now. He just floated and gripped the old sunken boat.

He was losing consciousness. A brilliant light shone into his old eyes and he wondered dimly. There were voices too. He woke up to see faces over him, to feel hard boards beneath him.

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"He's all right!" he kept hearing, above what sounded like the roar of engines. "To the hospital--" Yes that was it, "to the hospital." He heard no more.

Hickey did not know until late the following day that a car driver had seen him, had given the alarm and started a rescue crew. He lay in the same room, the same bed in which he had visited Carteret, and he saw the same pretty, white-clad nurse. He also saw his niece, and over in a corner, Jack. They all smiled at him. He tried to raise his hand, but found it tied up, massed in bandages; so he just smiled back at them.

He felt much stronger before evening, and he had something on his mind.

"Jack," he pleaded, "I want you to do one thing for me. Take a boat to No Name and look for our buck. He's wounded bad; maybe he just isn't living; but find him! Finney didn't shoot again!"

"Quiet!" warned the nurse, coming to his side. "Tomorrow you can talk!" But before Hickey closed his eyes and drifted into another long sleep he saw Jack hurry out the door.

Next day, all was brightness in the hospital room. Hickey felt stronger, "just fine." His niece fed him his breakfast and he sat up in bed with pillows behind him. Jack came into the room with a broad grin on his face and almost shouted, "Unc, our buck's all right!"

"You mean it!"

"You just bet I do! I found him over by the far shore, lying down. A bullet got him near the hip, but broke no bones. The warden and I are feeding him there, until he can walk."

"What warden?" asked Hickey.

"The new warden, the federal one. Didn't you know? Washington is making the Keys a wildlife refuge! And, the State is acting, too. Signs are being put up everywhere. No more hunting! Everyone's shouting, 'Save the Key deer!' The whole country's aroused!"

Hickey closed his eyes and lay quiet. "I've lived to see it!" he was thinking. Then he straightened up suddenly, "But what about Fat Finney?" he asked.

"Fat Finney," answered Jack, "has come here to ask about you every few minutes! You'd scarcely recognize him. He even went with me to find the buck. How about that! He had an idea the buck must have sunk himself in the water under the floating bushes and kept just his nose and eyes out of water while he was being hunted. I guess that was it, all right. And that isn't all. Fat Finney's deeding you a chunk of Big Pine, rebuilding the cabin, rebuilding your pier, getting you a boat with a top! Can you bear hearing any more? He was terribly scared about you."

Hickey did not reply. His thoughts were in a whirl.

## The Phantom Deer

"Well!" continued Jack. "You'll think this is the wildest thing of all! Fat Finney wants to be a deputy game warden! He threw his rifle overboard, right into the channel, from the highway bridge!

"And if you're worrying about Towser, we found him running around the houseboat. Strange, but Fat Finney seemed real anxious about him, too. And the hen—she laid an egg, right in the middle of your old cot!" Jack stopped there, for want of breath.

Hickey's niece, too, began to talk excitedly. "There's a Miami reporter waiting to interview you about Key deer. And you have a wired invitation from New York to address a sportsmen's club. Oh, and a committee of some kind is coming here next month from Washington to make a study of the Keys and wants you to help them. People have been hearing about you and the deer. Why, you're becoming a great man!" She did not stop to think that Hickey, in his quiet way, had always been great.

The old man once more closed his eyes. He just wanted to dream. He saw again the little brown deer, grazing on Big Pine behind the cabin. They were calm, not looking wildly this way and that, fearful of gunshots, hounds and gunners. And then from the bushes and cacti quietly stepped a buck, leader of the Key deer, a buck with big, intelligent eyes and wide-spreading antlers, six points on one side, five on the other. He looked at Hickey and the old man looked at him--the No Name buck, once the little fawn begging to be taken in at Hickey's doorstep.

THE END