

The Gunning Partners

THE WINTER OF 1898 had so far been fairly mild on the island. Oh, there had been some snow and cold but no big freezes like some years. On this December day, the sky was gray like snow, and the smoke from the chimneys of the houses was being blown straight down to the ground. It was going to snow. You could feel it in the air. My grandfather, John Crockett, who lived in a small house in Cannon, was making himself ready to go down to the little dock. He was going gunning for ducks over on Watts Island. He picked up the two bags of sea oats that his wife had sewed back together for him. They had been ripped apart the night before when he had killed a good mess of redheads. He picked up a little bag with some food and went out the door.

When he got to the wharf, his gunning partner, Dick Spence, was already there. He had pulled the two sneak

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skiffs over the stern of his boat. His boat was a small flat bottomed skipjack called the *Flatty*. She was a good sound boat.

“Good afternoon there to you, Uncle Dick. Do you think she is going to snow?”

“You know she is a going to snow there, Old Man Brooks, but maybe she won’t blow. The snow will give us good cover.”

Every one on the island called Dick Spence “Uncle Dick,” and he was an Uncle Dick. I mean to say; he was a character and he was tough. Some would say he was tough as the old dickens, and I’ve heard others say he was tough as an old lighter’s knot. You can believe me, he was tough. Old Man Brooks was what everyone called John Crockett. He wasn’t old, he just looked old. His face was scarred from powder burns from his big gun. He died young. He was only thirty-nine, but he did look old.

“I heard the ducks are feeding heavy over on Watts,” Uncle Dick said.

“That will tell you right there, Dick, we’ll get a good snow or a good freeze tonight.”

Uncle Dick and Old Man Brooks had been gunning partners for a number of years. They had grown up on the island, lived next door to each other, and were good friends.

“Brooks, I sold those redheads yesterday for five dollars a pair. They were shipped to Baltimore. That is not bad money, do you think?”

“By golly, I say it isn’t bad,” said Old Man Brooks.

They always split the money equal no matter who got the most ducks on a night. Sometimes Old Man Brooks got more and other times Uncle Dick got more, and sometimes they didn’t even get a shot, but on this particular night

things looked real good. There was no wind ablowing and if it snowed, which it sure was looking that way, they would have good cover to sneak up on a raft of ducks.

After they got everything ready, they got in the *Flatty* and sailed her over to the east side of Watts Island. The east side of Watts is ideal for gunning with the big gun. There are lots of small coves and sandbars with plenty of shallow water. One bar we all called Robin Hood Bar. It goes out a good half-mile, and that was Old Man Brooks's favorite spot. There is a lot of marsh there, and on the shore was a good stand of trees that at certain times would throw shadows on the water. Those shadows gave him good cover, and many a duck was killed at that spot. The west side of the island has a lot of deep water. It wasn't safe for big gunning.

The sun was still high. They checked their gear. Uncle Dick tied two small hand paddles to his skiff so as he wouldn't lose them overboard. Old Man Brooks was looking over his gun. She was an 0-gauge that held one-half pound of shot.

Uncle Dick would tease Old Man Brooks about his little gun because he had a big gun that used two pounds of shot. But, they both had killed many a duck. Old Man Brooks was thought by most to be the best shot around. The old folks used to say he could kill brant by the sounds of their wings—that would have been pretty good shooting.

"I see you got those bags of sea oats fixed. You are lucky she didn't go right through the stern of her," said Uncle Dick.

"The bags held the gun fine. Just when the stock hit, she busted the bag and sea oats went everywhere," Old Man Brooks explained.

"You know what happened to Captain Thomas over on Smith Island don't you? The gun went right through the stern, and he froze to death trying to get back to the boat."

They loaded their guns, pushed their sneak skiffs into the water, and off they went in separate ways hoping to kill a good mess of ducks.

The small hand paddles they used were fine for shallow water and where there wasn't much wind blowing. But if they got into a strong current which pulled them into deep water, or they got caught out in a gale, they best pray real hard if they wanted to stay alive.

They went out before dark, so as to get themselves in a good spot to kill a mess. It doesn't take much to scare a raft of ducks. Old Man Brooks went to his usual spot at Robin Hood Bar. Uncle Dick went in the other direction and found him a spot farther from the boat than Old Man Brooks.

Everything was still, like it is sometimes just before a storm. It started to snow, not much at first, but as it got dark it started blowing a little with the snow. The snow was good, but the wind was bad.

Old Man Brooks could hear the ducks talking. There was a good raft feeding not far from where he had hid in the marsh. In the dark he began to paddle his skiff toward the sound of the ducks. The wind began to blow a gale before he could get in position to get a shot. Luckily the wind was blowing in his face going out. He turned her around and made it back to the bar. He got out of his skiff and waded for awhile pulling her behind. The snow was blinding. He couldn't see the shore to get his bearing. He stopped because he was weak. He crawled back into his skiff and let the

wind take him, knowing that he would probably freeze to death if he drifted into deep water.

Meanwhile Uncle Dick, half frozen, got back to the *Flatty*. He opened the door to the cabin and the warm air from the stove rushed up into his face. He called for Brooks but he wasn't in the cabin. Uncle Dick didn't stop to warm his hands or anything.

He yelled, "Brooks, Brooks, where are you there?"

The snow was still coming down. He knew he couldn't wait for it to slow down. Over the side of the boat he went, yelling as he waded in the icy water. Brooks could hear Dick, but he was too weak to answer. By and by Uncle Dick found Old Man Brooks, so cold he could hardly move. He threw him over his shoulder and started back.

"Dick, don't leave my gun!"

"The devil with the old gun," said Dick.

"No, no, Dick, don't leave her!"

So, Uncle Dick grabbed the gun and carried Old Man Brooks and his gun to the warmth of that cabin fire. When they got back, they both just laid on the floor of the warm cabin until they thawed out. They stayed there all night.

The next morning when they awoke, the sky was clear. They could see the snow covering the ground on Watts Island.

They sailed the *Flatty* home. There was no thank-you from Old Man Brooks. Uncle Dick didn't expect it. He knew Brooks would have done the same for him. They were gunning partners and part of being partners was keeping each other alive. They knew they were lucky just to be alive.

They laid off a night, but the next night they went out and got a good mess of ducks.