

BY REEF AND TRAIL

CHAPTER I

"YELLOW - EYES"

THE lean black boar wriggled the moist disk of his snout. "*Woo-oof, woof-oof!*" he warned. Then with a stamp he bolted, clearing a way through the rattling cane for his troop. But one tender little piglet was a fraction of a second too late, and his thin shriek of despair lent wings to the heels of the others.

The big cat stood with a forepaw on the suckling, and swept the tiny clearing with a menacing glance, the tip of his tail twitching. He shrank with a snarl and an upward look as a Carolina dove swung above the cane; then seizing the pig by the nape of the neck, he started back to his lair.

Usually the brake was moist and green, but

a dry autumn and drier winter had left it a yellow, dusty shell of its old self. The panther, lithe and stealthy as he was, made more noise in his retreat than he liked, and as the dry reeds chafed and creaked, he quickened his steps and growled uneasily. All his senses were sharpened by the kill he had made; but the wind was travelling with him, and he did not smell the odor of man until it was too late, and he stood on the edge of the cane-brake face to face with a tall boy.

The boy was more surprised than the panther. He had never seen one before, but he recognized the little spotted pig. It was his property, or had been before the panther appropriated it, and the boy felt a sudden fury at the theft. He swung his gun up to his shoulder and fired both barrels at the tawny head. When the smoke lifted he had the dead pig fast enough, but the panther, very much alive, was leaping back through the brake at top speed.

“Well, I swan!” said the boy, reflectively. “I didn’t know there were any of those critters about here. Wish I’d had something besides snipe-shot in old Bess.”

He turned the pig over and examined with interest the deep holes made by the cat's fangs.

"There's some roasting-meat on it, anyway," he thought. "But he would have been an awful fine pig if he'd had a chance to grow. He always was the fattest. Reckon that's why Yellow-Eyes picked him."

As he had hoped, his news created a great sensation at home. His two little sisters wept with fright at his description of Yellow-Eyes, and his mother scolded him for firing at the beast, but even more satisfactory was the impression produced upon his father.

Mr. Leach was a man who belied his name. He never stuck to anything, and very few things — money included — stuck to him. With high momentary hopes he had engaged in various occupations, one after another, but something had always happened to "settle" each and all. His favorite expression of defeat was, "That settles it."

"I came to this place to raise pigs," he said, mournfully. "It's a first-rate place for 'em; plenty of mast in the uplands, and roots and such in the brake. I did have hopes, ma, — I'll say

it now, — but Bob's seen a panther, and that settles it."

"Why should one panther settle it?" asked Bob, somewhat defiantly.

The news had so depressed Mr. Leach that he felt the immediate need of substantial nourishment, and it was not until "ma" had placed some "white meat" and grits and a cup of well-stewed coffee before him that he would speak about the matter. His information was really three parts superstition, but of that his audience were unconscious.

"Panthers," said Mr. Leach, "are peculiar. They move here and there," — he waved his knife to indicate the migratory habits of the creature, — "until they land on a place that has good food, like my pigs, and they'll stay there till they've eaten up every last scrap of it. Particularly pigs. When a panther finds a drove of pigs, you might as well give him the pigs at once and be done with it. This critter'll finish mine, and then he'll move on to Simmons's, and wind up with Hedge's. You can't trap 'em, and there isn't any use to gun for 'em unless you've got a trained dog. The pig business is settled

in these parts, and that's the long and short of it."

"Perhaps Clipper could smell him out," suggested Bob.

Mr. Leach laughed mirthlessly.

"Unless you're tired of Clipper, you'll leave him behind the stove," he said. "There's no sense giving that panther all our live stock."

"Well," said Bob, "I've met old Yellow-Eyes once, and I may again, and if I do old Bess will have something different to say to him. I'm going to make him work for our pigs, at any rate."

The work seemed mainly on Bob's side. He knew no more about panthers than his father had told him. In other words, he knew nothing at all of their real habits, except that they had an appetite for pigs. The beast had had its fright, and hunted with redoubled caution. At the end of the week it had killed two more young pigs, and the alarmed drove deserted the great cane-brake for the upland. But the first day on the new feeding-ground saw another murder, and back went the pigs into the canes again, so distracted that they could not be driven home at all.

"What did I tell you?" said Mr. Leach. "He's

got three of 'em already. We might just as well say good-by to the rest."

When Bob came home one day and reported that he had found the remains of a fourth victim, his father was almost triumphant. He seemed to have acquired a kind of pride in the relentless cunning of the animal.

"When he finishes me he'll move on to Simmons's," he said, rubbing his hands. "He's a smart one, as Eben Simmons'll find out pretty soon."

Still Bob would not give up. He toiled through the brake and the oak-crowned uplands, and lay in wait for hours at a time near the deer-paths. He learned that migrating warblers travel in bands; that many birds never went into the cane, although they lived happily at its edge; that the cat-squirrels play games among themselves; that what little movement there is at noon is mainly confined to the ground-haunters.

These and many other interesting things the boy learned, but they were apart from his mission.

That would have seemed to have no place in the drowsy, orderly region if it had not been for the few red-smirched bones and the beans which

Mr. Leach dropped into a tumbler as a record of their losses.

It was like hunting a ghost. Bob gradually relaxed his vigilance and wandered farther away from the drove to secure some of the small game on which the family depended.

One afternoon, as he was returning from a longer trip than usual, he saw smoke hanging over the brake in the direction of his house. He stood in the edge of the woods he had just left, wondering whether it would be wise to take the usual short cut through the canes. The smoke was drifting toward him, but it was not heavy or wide-spread, and concluding to risk it, he began to jog along one of the numerous narrow hog-paths that threaded the dry swamp.

He had seen fires there before, and knew their violence, even in moister seasons than this. In his judgment, however, he had time to make the two miles across the brake before the conflagration was well started, but he had underestimated the force and direction of the wind. His error was soon apparent. When he mounted one of the little bare island-like mounds scattered through the brake and looked out over the split,

yellowed tops of the canes, he saw, leaning toward him, a long curtain of smoke whose base was pierced and reddened by up-darting flames.

As he watched it a young girl came into the small opening by the same path he had travelled. It was Nancy Simmons, barefooted and bare-headed, and carrying a little package of freshly dug roots.

"Hello, Bob!" she said, and joined him on the mound. "My!" she added. "It looks big, doesn't it?"

Bob regarded her gravely. Her presence complicated matters.

"It is big!" he said, irritably. "What in the world are you way out here for, Nan?"

She looked up at him with her clear blue eyes, and smiled.

"Oh, to get some roots for pap's ague," she said. "How are we going to get home?"

Frowning, Bob considered the situation, while Nancy, fearless and interested, watched the advance of the red-stained smoke.

"I reckon we'd better go to the pond and let it pass," said Bob presently. "I can carry you to the island."

Nancy tossed her brown head.

"I can wade as well as you," she said. "The water's mighty low. Come on!"

A few minutes of rapid running brought them to the pond. The water was very low, as Nancy had said, and in only one or two spots reached as high as their knees. But if it was low, it was wide, and a feeling of security cheered them when they stood on the small island, with its half-dozen rotting stumps and the single water-oak that reared its head high above the canes, a landmark for many miles.

"Let's climb the tree," suggested Nancy. "Then we can see things."

The fire was worth seeing now. From their seat on the lowest limb of the oak they commanded the whole scene. The smoke had drifted over and beyond them, and underneath it whirled gray flakes of ash. The dry canes were burning with a roar and a series of explosions, sharp as pistol-shots, as the air in their hollow joints became heated and burst through the thin walls.

On the east the leaping flames had almost reached the shore of the pond, and wheeling in a steady advance before the long red line were a

number of sparrow-hawks. The fire was beating the covert for them, and every frightened bird that rose above the canes found itself confronted by an enemy almost as savage as the element from which it sought to escape.

"The nasty things!" cried Nancy. "Please shoot at them, Bob."

"They're way out of range," said Bob, laughing, "and besides, I left old Bess down there on the stump."

He turned to look toward the west, where the flames were as yet more remote. There on the shore, his hind quarters still hidden in the reeds, stood Yellow-Eyes, his head turned toward the fire with an expression of fear and vindictiveness. The next moment the lean, long creature ran into the water, and half-swimming, half-wading, struck out for the island.

Bob was so taken aback that he sat there dumb, but with an impulse of protection, he caught Nancy by her round arm.

"What is it?" she asked, and then breathed a frightened "Oh!" as she saw the wading cat.

In fascinated silence they watched the animal gain the island, where it paused to shake itself

and give an intent, malevolent look at the sweeping fire. But when it trotted straight for the oak, Nancy screamed.

The panther dropped as if it had been struck across the face, and with flattened ears, glared upward at the boy and girl. It was so close that they could see the subtle change in the rigid form as alarm gave way to curiosity, and its naturally vicious and irritable nature gained control.

The broad fore paws began to knead the damp ground stealthily, the eyes widened and the flattened, snake-like look disappeared in a kind of expanding movement of the whole body. It feared human beings, but these young tree-dwellers did not seem to have all the awesome characteristics of men, and hemmed in by fire, the panther was in the mood to resent their presence.

Catlike, it hated to lie exposed on the bare island. All its instincts impelled it to seek the cover of the oak.

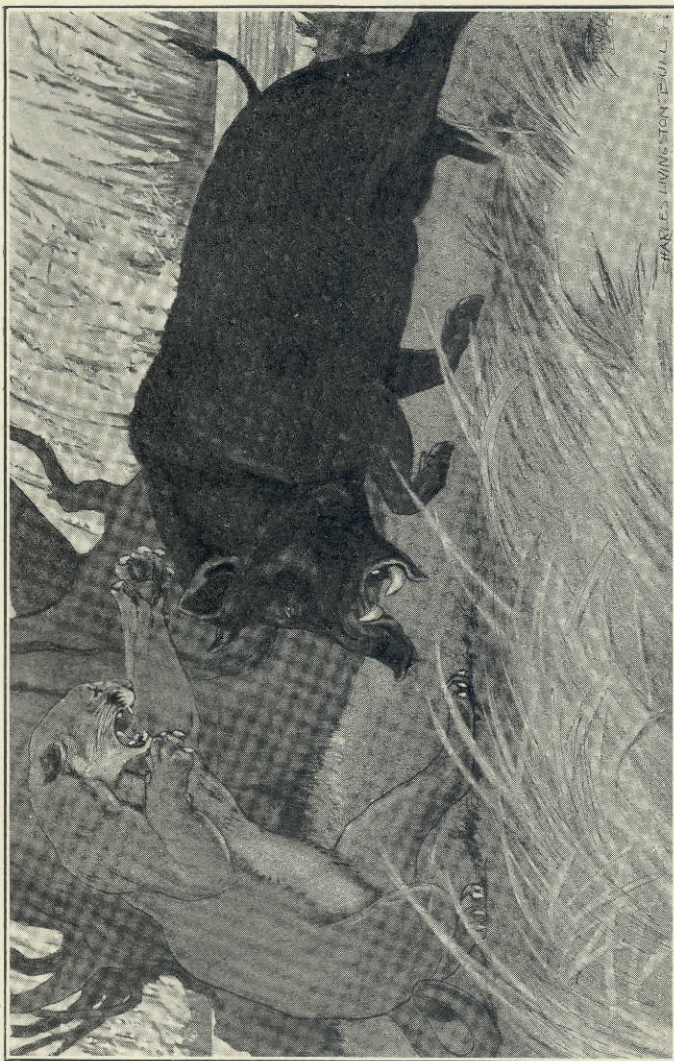
The still figures in the tree did not seem so very formidable, but they had the daunting human odor, and that was a check in itself.

It took a few gliding steps forward and glanced irresolutely about, its mind unsettled by the noise and fearful splendor of the fire. The flames had reached the lower part of the eastern shore, rolling like a wave through the brake, and tossing up a yellow spray as hundreds of blazing canes exploded. On the west the fire was coming rapidly. The growth was heavier there and the flames so fierce that the panther winced as it looked and glided nearer the oak. But at the moment it seemed about to spring, the old black boar and three sows of the scattered drove crashed through the canes and dashed headlong into the water.

They made a clumsy and grunting progress. At last they landed, the boar in the lead. He stamped upon the firm ground, flirted his ridiculous tail, and trotted forward; but suddenly he halted, and his little nervous white eyes grew fixed. He grunted hoarsely.

The panther had swung about and crouched upon the ground, head down. His hard yellow eyes gave the boar look for look, and a deep humming came from his throat.

"O Bob!" said Nancy, more frightened at



"THE BOAR BLEW ONE CHALLENGING BLAST, AND CHARGED."

the thought of a fight than at the possibility of an attack upon herself. "Can't you stop them?"

"Why? I hope the old boar will fix that beast." But Bob's tone was not optimistic.

The boar seemed for the first time to feel no fear of Yellow-Eyes. He blew into the hot, smoke-tainted air one challenging blast, and charged. His big, slab-sided body shot over the ground, and as the panther half-rose to meet it, the wedge-shaped head made a powerful upward and outward thrust that brought a squall from the cat. For a moment the two were locked, the panther wrapped about the boar's head, its claws rasping among the dense black bristles. Then it shot upward suddenly, its tail crooked. It fell upon its feet, but the black boar was upon it again with squeals of rage and the stained tushes slashed again and again.

"He's got him!" cried Bob.

But Nan hid her face in her hands.

With the vitality of its kind, the panther fought for its life, but neither teeth nor claws made serious impression upon the leathery hide of its opponent. There is no more wicked or dangerous fighter in the animal world than an enraged

boar. Frothing with fury and quick as the big cat itself, the pig thrust and slashed with such force and rapidity that the panther had no chance to turn. Soon its squalls died away, and it was tossed and flung about, a limp and harmless body. Nancy, glad that it was over, peeped through her fingers.

"My pap said your pap said we wouldn't raise pigs round here," said she; "but I reckon we can raise pretty good ones, don't you, Bob?"

"Old Blackey is all right," said Bob. "I wish he'd found his courage before, though. Look at him now! He's so proud he's telling the sows they needn't worry a mite about the fire."

The big boar with nape bristling and savage eyes was standing guard over the others, abjectly prone in the mud. Now that his pluck was up he seemed ready, as Bob had said, to fight the fire which was a red ring around the small lake. With such light inflammable material to feed on, however, it was passing rapidly. For a few minutes Nancy and Bob were almost suffocated by the heat and smoke. Then the circle of flames went roaring on and the wind cleared the air.

Instead of the tawny, swaying sea of reeds there was a still, black unfamiliar field with plumes of smoke rising here and there, and vivid red spots to mark where the thickest ranks had fallen. Across this sooty surface ran irregular, scar-like lines — old cattle and deer paths. Though obstructed in places by hot ashes and embers, Bob saw that he could pick his way along the widest without much difficulty.

"Come on, Nan," he said. "We'd better be going home. Your pa'll be scared 'bout your being caught by the fire."

Nancy did not like to be treated as if she were a little girl — especially by Bob.

"I reckon pa knows I can take care of myself," she declared, with a toss of her brown head. "I ain't in a hurry."

She settled herself more comfortably on the branch, locked her bare toes together and gazed blandly at Bob. Approached with proper respect, Nancy was a most obliging young person, but her dignity was curiously sensitive. It seemed to be growing more so every day. Perfectly innocently Bob found himself offending it constantly; but he had learned that innocence would

not be accepted as an excuse. Sometimes it complicated matters still more.

"Please come," he coaxed. "May be you ain't in a hurry, but I am. Just think what I've got to tell! Why, we can raise pigs now all right!"

The bland, grown-up look left Nancy's face. Since Bob put it on that ground, of course she was willing to leave the very luxurious seat in this interesting water-oak and descend to the commonplace exertion of going home. She drew her braid over her shoulder, inspected the curling tip of it with suspicion, and finding as many hairs there as usual she bit it thoughtfully.

"Well, I 'spose I might as well," she conceded, with an air of reluctant generosity. "The pigs are going."

Refusing to take Bob's hand she descended lightly to the ground. Together they approached the big cat and studied its stiffening muscles and fixed, snarling mouth with awesome interest.

"Ugh!" said Nancy, turning away with a shudder. "How glad I'd feel if I was a pig. A real pig, I mean."

Bob was smitten with a sudden doubt.

"I think pa'll be kind of sorry," he said.

" Seems like he'd got proud of putting beans in the tumbler. He'd just naturally made up his mind that Yellow-Eyes was going to get all our pigs and your pap's too."