

CHAPTER II

A CHANGE OF HORIZON

MR. LEACH was not half so much impressed by the news of the panther's death as might have been expected. In fact his father was, as Bob had intimated to Susan, apparently somewhat disappointed by it.

"It's lucky for Simmons' pigs, that's all I can say," he remarked. "He'd have had 'em sure if old Blackie hadn't up and killed him. As for myself it don't make any difference."

Mrs. Leach put down her flat-iron and looked at him with round eyes.

"Doesn't make any difference, pa!" she repeated. "Why, what a thing to say. Of course it does."

Mr. Leach smiled and poured himself a large mug of steaming coffee. "Get me a couple of lumps of sugar from the pantry, Saphronia," he requested. "And don't finger 'em too much."

There was something in his manner that spoke of mystery, and the family waited impatiently while the sugar was slowly dropped in the cup and the sweetened beverage shaken by a careful circular motion of Mr. Leach's hand. Then, having taken a long, invigorating sip, he poised himself firmly on his stockinged feet and smiled again.

"No, ma," he said. "It makes no difference because I've disposed of this place and all that pertains to it, lock, stock and barrel, to young Archie Winans and his wife. Raising pigs is a low business and I'm done with it. That's all there is to do in this part of the world, so I made up my mind we'd pack up and move out to the coast where there's more opportunities for a man like myself. It's time Bob was learning to do things, too."

On the whole, after the first feeling of surprise had worn off, it did not seem such a bad plan after all. Raising pigs was not, as Mr. Leach had said, a very high order of business, and the family were all convinced that the head of the house needed only the opportunity to become a millionaire. It is true that so far he

had not stuck to one thing for any length of time, but that of course was owing to the fact that it was not the right thing. On the coast where there were thriving towns and an annual army of wealthy winter tourists, something really worth doing would surely turn up.

Bob and the twins found the preparations very interesting. It was a little hard to say good-by to the white leghorns and old Gabriel, the gobbler, and his flock, but the hens and turkeys were not at all sentimental over it. It was almost worse to leave the other things — the pecan trees and live-oaks, the big azalea bushes and all the silent companions of their romps and games for seven long years. The place was home after all, even if pigs had paid for it.

There were not many children of their age in the neighborhood. Houses were very few and far apart. Saphronia and Maria played mostly by themselves and often got very tired of each other. A small colored boy named Jeff sometimes joined them secretly, and then the twins had a delightful time; but they made him play such laborious parts in their games that he always had to take a rest of several days afterward.

Besides, he was much afraid of Mr. Leach, and would scamper off the moment he saw him. Except Nancy there was really no one whom the children felt that they would miss.

The day came at last when they were actually to begin their journey. Everything had been sold except a few household necessities, and Alice and Holly. Alice was a diminutive mule with a nose as white as frost and a sleepy eye that belied her temper. She was a little vixen when anyone asked her to do any work, and regularly every Sunday on the way to church she either ran away or balked.

Holly was a red steer not much larger than Alice. He was broken to harness and would pull very well when the ground was soft. On a hard, oyster-shell road he kept looking round to see why his feet made such a noise and then staring over his shoulder at his driver as if to ask him to do something about it. Because of this embarrassing habit he was never driven to church, but was used for plowing and farm work in general.

Early on the eventful day Bob hitched Alice and Holly to the two-wheeled cart, which was

already laden with the few household things left from the sale. Mrs. Leach and the twins climbed in and perched themselves recklessly on top of the swollen bags, and Clipper took his customary place under the tail of the cart.

“Get up, Alice!” commanded Mr. Leach, with a flick of his long rattan.

“Good-by, good-by!” screamed the twins. “Good-by, Jeff!” added Maria, whose sharp eyes had detected a familiar little figure lurking behind the sour orange trees on the outskirts of the place.

Bob’s throat swelled strangely. The house where he had had so many happy times already looked so deserted. Its windows, from which the white curtains and the rows of potted geraniums had been removed, seemed to watch them depart with an air of pathos. But Bob was young and the little feeling of regret passed in a moment as he turned to follow the creaking cart wherein the twins sat jubilant.

Ahead lay the fascinating unknown, the threshold of the land lapped by that wonderful great ocean of which he had heard so much. There would be birds and beasts and fish there he had

never met. His father would find something better to do there than raising pigs. Bob, himself, would become a fisherman and live on the wide, blue water. He was firmly resolved on that.

At the first turn in the road Nancy popped out from among the pines, bare-legged as usual and swinging her sunbonnet in her hand.

"Howdy!" she said, as she joined Bob at the rear of the cart. "Thought I'd walk a piece with you-all."

"Wouldn't you like to ride?" called Mrs. Leach. "There's plenty of room up here."

Nancy shook her head.

"No'm, thank you," she replied. "I'd rather walk."

She and Bob trudged along in the sandy loam for some minutes in silence. Presently he felt a warm little hand touch his, which stiffened in embarrassment. Nevertheless after some fluttering the small fingers found a shy resting place at last, and Bob's thoughts of the sea faded away. Poor, little Nancy! She had so few friends that it seemed mean to desert her.

"Pa says it's a right mean place where you're going," observed Nancy suddenly.

Away went Bob's pity in a moment.

"It isn't either," he retorted indignantly. "It's a much nicer place than this. There's lots and lots of people there, and the ocean's there too."

"So pa said." Nancy's tone was calm, even commiserating. "He says it's all damp and windy and 'most everyone gets drowned, and it smells like Salter's old fish-boat on Bass pond."

It was just like a girl to be sorry for you when you considered yourself very fortunate. Bob withdrew his hand coldly and pretended to be interested in a buzzard which was sweeping over the pines.

"Don't be cross," said Nancy. "I hope you won't get drowned at any rate. Now I've got to go. Good-by everybody."

There was no hint of regret in her calm voice, and, smiling, she stood and waved her faded sun-bonnet vigorously; but Bob suddenly felt sorry for her again and ashamed of his irritation.

"Hope you'll come out, too, Nancy," he shouted back.

He couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw a flash of impertinent red tongue. However, he had not committed himself very deeply, and he

consoled himself with the thought that he would have extended such an invitation to all those he had left behind except, perhaps, humble little Jeff.

They had passed the last house and were now fairly in the woods that stretched clear to the coast unenlivened by a single village. The growth as a rule was not heavy. The long-needed pines stood far apart and rose twenty or thirty feet before a branch sprang from their straight trunks. In between them the sandy soil was only half hidden by the coarse grass and the big fans of the palmetto scrub, whose roots ran sprawling across the trail like huge red worms.

Here and there were dense clumps of trees knit together with vines. They were called "hummocks" and were almost impenetrable except to wild animals and the half-wild hogs. Bob thought they looked like splendid places for game, and when the little cavalcade halted at noon, he tucked old Bess under his arm and set out to explore the nearest one.

It was not a favorable time to hunt and Bob saw nothing but a robin and a pair of mockingbirds singing in a magnolia. He listened to them a few minutes and then went back and joined

the family at their dinner of cold roast yams, hard boiled eggs and coffee. Alice and Holly dined frugally on the coarse grass and made less objection than usual when Mr. Leach harnessed them to the cart again. This hot, waterless country had no fascinations for them.

In the afternoon Bob took a ride now and then to rest his tired legs, and sometimes his mother dismounted from the jolting, creaking cart and walked a little way with him. On one of these occasions Alice, instead of being grateful for the lightened load, threw back her ears viciously and refused to move another step.

Mr. Leach tried persuasion and then a moderate form of violence, but Alice stood with her eyes closed and her four legs rigid as steel.

"It's no use," said Mr. Leach despondently. "We might as well make up our minds to sit here until Alice gets over it. Argument is wasted on her."

The twins got down from the cart and they all sat in the small disk of shade cast by one of the tall pines and stared crossly at the obdurate Alice. It was very hot and not a breath of air was stirring. The heat reflected from the parched

ground made a quivering haze through which a neighboring hummock looked like a stretch of solid dull green wall. It was a little island of dense verdure among the widely scattered pines and it spoke of heavy shade and moisture for such clumps usually spring up only around wet ground.

As Alice looked good for a prolonged fit of balking, Bob picked up old Bess and whistled to Clipper, who was panting noisily under the cart.

"I reckon I'll run over there and see if I can't get a cat squirrel," he remarked.

"Don't be gone long," said his mother. "You know if Alice starts we shall have to humor her and go too. You might not be able to find us."

"Oh, I can pick up this trail all right," said Bob confidently. "Come on, Clip."

Just then a rifle cracked sharply and the still air rang with the sudden baying of hounds. Two horsemen came dashing round the corner of the hummock in a glitter of sand dust, and the one in the lead fired again. It seemed as if he had aimed directly at them, and Mr. Leach jumped to his feet with unusual animation for him, while

Bob, puzzled and flushing, raised the muzzle of old Bess.

There was a fleeting glimpse of several dogs running silently toward them through the palmetto scrub, and then the cause of it all appeared in the form of a lank red lynx. The creature leaped into the road directly in front of the team and, confused by this unexpected encounter, halted irresolutely with its ears laid back and long fangs exposed in a spitting snarl.

Mrs. Leach and the twins screamed. Spunky little Clipper rushed to the attack, but old Bess forestalled him. The lynx was so near that Bob needed only a hasty sight along the brown barrels, and a quick touch on the trigger sent the charge of bird shot, compact as a ball, into the lank red side just over the heart.

The heavy report was still ringing in the air when half a dozen black-and-tan hounds burst into the road and threw themselves, yapping and growling, on the twitching lynx. Clipper sprang at the pack, quite beside himself at the increased number of his supposed enemies. The huntsmen dashed up with a great crackle and snapping of breaking palmetto fans. Their shouts to



“ HOLLY AND ALICE SUDDENLY BOLTED DOWN THE ROAD.”

the hounds added to the confusion, which reached its climax when, with a bawl and a bray, Holly and Alice suddenly bolted down the road, just grazing the heap of dogs struggling in the sand.

"Whoa, there! Whoa!" shouted Mr. Leach. Darting from behind the pine tree he started in pursuit of the runaways.

"Come here, Clipper!" bawled Bob. The safety of his pet terrier was more important than anything else to him. He was going to throw himself into the middle of the bunch, but one of the horsemen brusquely ordered him to stand back.

"Don't you mix in there, sonny," he said. "You let me talk to 'em."

He swung a black bull-whip round his head and brought the long lash down among the dogs with a tremendous crack. One of them leaped up as if he had been shot and whirled round to lick a raw, bleeding spot on his haunch as big as a twenty-five cent piece.

Down came the lash again and at its loud report and the ki-yis of its victim the fighting group melted apart and scattered in every direction, leaving little Clipper, dusty and trampled, but

still defiant, on the ground he had endeavored to defend.

“That’s the kind of talk they listen to,” grinned the man. “You got the cat, didn’t you, son. Laid him out with your scatter-gun as neat as a pea.”

“Won’t you please help my husband stop our team?” interposed Mrs. Leach, half-tearfully. “If anything should happen to it I don’t know what we should do.”

The horseman looked at her, then at his companion.

“Blame if I didn’t forget the team trying to save the pup,” he laughed. “But that don’t let you off. Where’re your manners, Bill?”

“Forgot ’em, I reckon,” said Bill tersely. “Same as you forgot the team, Ed.”

“Oh,” cried Mrs. Leach, “do please hurry!”

“Sure we’ll hurry, ma’am,” said Ed. “Won’t we, Bill?”

“Sure.” Bill gathered up the reins and spit swiftly into the road. “But a good pup’s always worth saving, ma’am.”

They clapped their spurs to the little saw-grass

horses and were off at the same wild, reckless pace they used in hunting.

"Did you ever see such men!" exclaimed Mrs. Leach.

Bob, however, could not quite agree with the implied condemnation. Anyone who could appreciate Clipper at first sight must have a bit that was good in him. He tied a string to the terrier's collar and clutched the other end firmly.

"It won't take those horses long to catch Alice and Holly," he said. "Let's follow them, mama."

On their way they picked up Mr. Leach, who was resting in a patch of shade. He was dusty and hot and out of breath, and his spirits had sunk to a low ebb.

"This is a mighty poor beginning," he said despondently. "I'm not superstitious, as you know, ma, but this looks like a bad omen to me. Perhaps we'd have done better to stay at home and go on raising pigs."

Mrs. Leach denied this cheerfully.

"Alice has often run away, pa, so it can't mean anything special. I only hope they haven't smashed the cart."

"I expect to find it in pieces — small pieces," said Mr. Leach gloomily.

Nothing so deplorable happened, however. Alice and Holly had kept to the rough road and had not even spilled one of the bags. They were a panting and repentant pair, and did not need the restraining hands of Bill and Ed who stood guard over them until Mrs. Leach and the twins perched themselves once more upon the luggage.

"You folks aiming to get to the coast?" asked Ed, as the cart began its dismal creaking.

Mr. Leach briskly replied in the affirmative. The fortunate termination of the incident had quite restored his courage.

Ed looked at him pityingly.

"'Tain't my business, of course," he said, "but I don't see how any sensible man can do it. There's too much water there, ain't there, Bill?"

"One side of it's all water," said Bill dismally.

"By gum, Bill's right!" exclaimed Ed. "What can you do in a one-sided place like that?"

"Want to sell the pup, son?" asked Bill abruptly.

Bob clutched the string tightly and shook his head.

"Well, so long then," said Bill, turning his pony into the scrub.

"So long," said Ed, following his companion's manœuvres. "Wish you-all were going to a better place than the coast."

Mr. Leach looked back at them with a smile that broadened as they loped farther and farther away.

"Well, there's one thing about the coast that suits me," he remarked. "Bill and Ed won't be there."

Late that afternoon the Leaches camped on the shore of a long, narrow lake. Their tent was composed of four sheets and the cart, under which was spread a thick layer of Spanish moss, as soft and elastic as the best mattress. While Mr. Leach was arranging these simple accommodations and the twins were gathering wood for the evening fire, Bud shouldered old Bess again and set out after some fresh meat for supper.

This time the hour and the place were both propitious. Sunset was not far off and the lake looked "ducky." Its shallow waters were fringed with reeds, irregular beds of which lay strung along the shore. The channels between these

small islets were thick with water bonnets and fleshy lily stalks, over which shining-winged insects played.

Bob rolled his trousers high above his knees and stepped out quietly from the shadows of the live-oaks. A tattler jumped from the oozy shore with a startled note, his long, yellow legs dangling, and offered a tempting target; but Bob was after bigger game.

Crouching and wading gently through the tepid, shallow water, he bore down upon the nearest of the little islets. This was nothing but a bed of reeds springing from a rise in the bottom of the lake. The crisp, green blades just covered his head and shoulders as he forced his way through them, but though hidden, he had to be doubly careful now, for it was almost impossible to make a noiseless passage. In fact, he had taken only a few steps into the reeds when a teal rose ahead of him with a vibrating whirr of wings, and set the whole marsh humming.

Beyond the islet a great flock of mud-hens roared up from the water, and hung for a moment like a vast black blanket before they streamed away up wind. Bunches of blue-epau-

letted teal skimmed swiftly above the reeds, and Bob could hear the heavy quacking of mallards and the lighter notes of pin-tail ducks as they rose, alarmed, from their favorite feeding places.

Half-doubled up, he waited tensely for a chance shot. The air seemed full of bullet-like bodies and the thin whistling sound of rapid wings, but nothing came within range. Flock after flock settled back upon the water; the quacking became spasmodic and finally ceased altogether. A brooding calm fell upon the lake, and the big dragon-flies flashed and quivered in the rosy light. With a grunt of disappointment Bob slowly straightened his cramped back and legs.

Flying straight at him just above the tops of the reeds was a bunch of a dozen mallards led by a drake whose head glowed like a huge emerald. The surprise was mutual. The big leader threw up his wings to arrest his flight. The others crowded upon him with frantic flap-pings, and for a brief second the flock was massed together in confusion.

That second gave Bob the opportunity to steady himself, and as the ball of ducks started to ascend he levelled old Bess at the white collar

of the leader. Even before he pulled the trigger he felt that sudden joyous thrill that foreruns success. Through the spurt of the smoke he saw the big drake crumple in mid-air, and shifting his aim he sent a second charge of shot rattling into the thick of the bunch.

Three wilted mallards crashed into the reeds, while the rest of the frightened flock scattered in every direction. Ducks and mud-hens rose from all quarters of the marsh. A pair of fat pin-tails scooted by within easy range, but Bob resisted the temptation manfully. Ammunition was expensive and he had ducks enough for the family's supper. He retrieved the dead birds, and binding their legs together with a strip of tough marsh grass, returned to the camp under the live-oaks.

Everybody was tired, and at an early hour they crept under the improvised tent and stretched themselves on the heaped-up moss. Soon Bob knew from the deepened sounds of breathing that he alone was awake. In spite of his weariness he did not feel sleepy. The soft night sounds fascinated him. The lake played among the reeds along its rim as it had not done before sunset,

and the grove of live-oaks was full of gentle stirrings as if something had set the long beards of moss wagging on the branches. Now and then a mallard quacked raucously, or the peevish note of the rails sounded across the water.

Bob was sinking into slumber when he heard Holly snort and stamp uneasily. Something was moving in the little open space round the tent. There were stealthy footsteps and an odd puffing sound that seemed vaguely familiar to Bob, but did not reassure him.

He was, to tell the truth, a little frightened. Old Bess lay close beside him, and the feel of her long, cold barrels was wonderfully comforting. Yet even with the gun in his hands it required some effort to draw aside the flimsy sheet and look out into the pale moonlight.

Three black, bulky shapes loomed up close to the tent. In the distorting light they looked as big as steers, and for a moment Bob was puzzled. Then one of them lifted its low-hung head and pointing its snout at the tent, uttered an explosive "woof."

"Hogs!" exclaimed Bob. "Sic 'em, Clipper!"

Clipper squirmed under the side of the tent

and launched himself upon the hogs with a menacing bark. They vanished like magic, and after the terrier had returned from his dash Bob could still hear them crashing through the dry vegetation. He felt ashamed of himself for his lack of courage.

“Next time I reckon I’ll know what it is before I get afraid,” he confided to Clipper. He stretched himself pleasantly on the soft moss. The resolution made him feel suddenly comfortable, and with his hand on Clipper’s rough neck he fell asleep.