

CHAPTER III

PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

IT was five o'clock the next afternoon when the travellers sighted the coast town of Ordville through the thinning pines. They had been on the road since dawn, but tired as they were, the glimpse of the friendly white houses and the caress of the sea breeze so invigorated them that they were all full of curiosity and delight immediately. Even Holly and Alice shared their pleasure, for the brutes seemed to realize that they had reached the end of their journey. They quickened their steps and emerged from the spicy shade of the woods on to a hot white road of crushed shell without the least objection on the part of the usually fussy steer.

Just ahead the road crossed a bridge of planks laid above a little stagnant stream. It did not seem as if any self-respecting fish would care for such thick, weed-choked water, but three

young anglers, pole in hand, were sitting side by side on the jutting ends of the planks, so much absorbed in their work that they hardly glanced at the travellers.

Bob, however, stared at them with all his eyes. Boys of his age were not common in the tiny, scattered settlement by the cane-brakes, and this liberal forestallment of the pleasures of town life struck him as most promising. He lingered behind as the cart rumbled across the bridge, candidly studying these possible playmates.

One was red-headed and lean, the opposite in every way from the tow-haired, good-natured looking boy who sat at his elbow. The third bore the stamp of his light-hearted, shiftless race in his sooty skin and loose lips.

"Whatcher doing?" asked Bob, addressing the motionless backs.

"Fishing," responded the red-headed boy gruffly.

"Catch any fish?" said Bob, with genial interest.

"Naw."

"Get any bites?"

"Naw."

Bob glanced along the plank ends swiftly.

“Got any bait?”

“Naw.”

“Then whatcher doing?” he queried again.

“Fishing.”

The red-headed boy closed his lips firmly to intimate that the discussion was ended. The other two had not moved so much as an eyelash, their whole beings concentrated in the rigid attention with which they gazed upon the water. Evidently a boy was no novelty to them. Bob was baffled and irritated. Suddenly the red-headed boy glanced over his shoulder.

“What’s the pup worth?” he asked in a sneering tone.

Bob’s eyes flashed.

“He’s worth more than you could rake and scrape together, I reckon,” he retorted.

“Is that so!” The red-headed boy leisurely put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a peculiarly dingy cent. “Well, here’s his price right here, only I don’t want to buy him.”

He restored the penny to his pocket, and winked at his companions, a wink so full of insolent meaning that it made Bob’s hands clench.

Ordinarily he was a peaceable boy, but there was something about the red-headed youth that filled his soul with anger. It seemed to him that he was face to face with a crisis, and that his future position in the town would depend largely on the way in which he stood up to this impudent fellow.

“ You think you’re smart, don’t you? ” he said. “ For less ’n a cent I’d push you into that mud-hole.”

This was being rather more violent than the occasion seemed to warrant, but Bob felt instinctively that the red-headed boy was a bully, and that sooner or later they must come to blows if both were to live in the same town.

Bully or not, the boy was no coward. He promptly laid his rod upon the bridge and leaped to his feet. His arms — they looked surprisingly long — began to revolve in a scientifically threatening fashion, and he danced a sort of jig-step that rapidly carried him down upon Bob.

This was more interesting than fishing. The two disciples dropped their rods and gathered behind their champion in joyous expectation. At first glance the odds seemed all in favor of the red-haired boy, whose reach and height and ex-

perience were plainly greater than his opponent's, but Bob had not worked hard in the open all his life for nothing. His reward was there in the firmly-knit, broad-shouldered figure, the muscles of which were beginning to show a hint of the unusual power they were to have later on.

"Yah!" cried the red-headed boy. "Cracker! You'll push me, will you! Yah!" He danced before Bob with an expression of deepening contempt as he noted the other's unskilful position. One of his revolving fists suddenly shot out and landed with a smack on Bob's cheek just below his eye.

The sting of the blow was all that was needed to drive Bob to action. If he was not a boxer like the red-headed youth, he was something more dangerous when fully roused, a natural fighter. Blindly oblivious of the jabs and swings that rained on his face and head he closed upon his opponent, both sturdy arms working like piston rods.

The red-headed boy was used to fighting and never had he fought better, but none of his blows seemed to count. Punches that would have made an ordinary boy weaken only served to nerve

Bob's arms. The red-headed one felt daunted. Such fierceness and ability to assimilate punishment was unfamiliar to him. It was like fighting a wild animal. And an animal that could give as well as take punishment. His body was sore with the battering and his breathing grew painful. He gave ground, but Bob bored in like a little demon, dealing his short-arm blows with undiminished fury.

Panic seized the red-headed boy. He retreated rapidly, trying only to defend himself. The two on-lookers suddenly raised a warning cry, but Bob, at least, did not hear it. Putting all his body into the blow he planted his fist on his opponent's chest, and saw him topple over and vanish. There was a rousing smack and a muddy geyser of water leaped up almost into his face. He had knocked the red-headed boy off the edge of the bridge.

All Bob's anger left him in a minute. He threw himself on the planks, and when the red-headed boy's dripping head and shoulders appeared he clutched him by the collar.

"Catch a hold of here, you two snipes!" he ordered peremptorily.

Very meekly the fat youth and the darkey precipitated themselves upon their stomachs and seized their fallen champion. The water was shallow and stagnant, and it was not very difficult to pull the red-headed boy from its depths to terra firma. He was as black as a horn-pout with mud, but otherwise undamaged.

"Had enough?" asked Bob mildly.

"What!" said the red-headed boy.

"Want to fight some more? We can go down the road a piece."

The red-headed boy turned a pair of pale, startled eyes upon Bob, and shook his head weakly.

"Sure?" asked Bob.

"Yes, I'm sure." His tone was shrill with conviction. He had never felt so certain of anything in his life.

"Golly, I don't blame you," exploded the fat boy. He stared at Bob with fervor. "Say, he can fight some, can't he, Rufus?"

The small darkey uttered an unctuous clicking sound.

"Hm'm! Same's one o' these yere raid lynx cats. Reg'lar bim-bam, don't care anythin' 'bout

nothin' fighters, dey is. Punched Hal Skillets right offen de bridge and pulled him on agin and wanted to punch him offen agin. Hm'm!"

"Shet your mouth," growled the dripping Skillets.

Rufus shut his mouth with a kind of liquid smack more irritating than words. Plainly Skillets's downfall was not a depressing incident to his friends. There was an awkward pause, broken by a shout from Mr. Leach far down the road.

"That's my pa," explained Bob. His telltale bruises suddenly felt as big as saucers. "Look here," he added to the red-headed boy, "were you fellows really fishing?"

The red-headed boy grunted an affirmative.

"And you had some bait?"

Skillets pulled a mustard box from his coat pocket and tilted it so that Bob could see its writhing contents.

"And did you catch anything?"

"Only a couple o' little cats, and we chucked 'em back," growled Skillets.

"Oh, all right," smiled Bob. "If you'd said

so right off there wouldn't have been any fight. So long, fellows."

He ran down the road to face the parental eye and take the lecture he knew would be forthcoming.

"I'm ashamed of you," said Mr. Leach sorrowfully, at the close of his rebuke. "I don't know where you get that temper. Not from me, I'm sure. It must come from your mother's family. I can distinctly remember how violent her father was on a certain occasion."

The twins whimpered when they saw Bob's swollen nose and discolored cheek, and his mother looked upon him sadly. Altogether he felt that he had cast a shadow upon the threshold of their new home, but though penitent, he could not help believing that the fight would have its redeeming consequences.

The next day brought some proof of this. The Leaches had spent the night in a vacant warehouse to the north of the three long, low brick stores that formed the nucleus of the little town. Holly and Alice were temporarily pastured in the plot in front of the building, and could be

seen from either end of the short main street as they browsed somewhat scornfully on the brown grass. The good-natured friend of Hal Skillets was leaning on the fence watching them as Bob emerged after breakfast, but it was evidently Bob and not the animals in whom the stranger's real interest lay.

"Hullo," he said. "Pritchard told me you-all are going to live here."

Pritchard was the town grocer and owner of the warehouse.

"Not right here," replied Bob. "But we reckon to get a house in this place."

"That's great," said the boy. "My name's Jim Murray. I live round the corner on Hybiscus street."

"Mine's Bob Leach," said Bob, advancing to the fence. "Going fishing again?"

Young Murray had a tapering cane rod and a squat, covered tin pail in his hand.

"You bet," he said. "Real fishing, too. Pritchard says the sea-trout have struck in, and he pays two cents a pound, undressed. Want to come?"

Nothing could have pleased Bob more, but he

had no rod and he was not sure that he could get the necessary permission from his family. In the unsettled state of their affairs it was quite possible there would be some tedious errands to do.

"This isn't play fishing, it's business," said the sage Murray. "You go and ask 'em and I'll skip round to my house for more tackle. Two cents a pound, remember."

Whether it was this consideration that influenced his father, or the fact that there happened to be no errands to do, Bob departed happily from the warehouse and joined Jim who had brought an extra rod and line.

"I reckon I've got bait enough for both of us," he said. "Any way we haven't time to catch more."

He raised the cover of the tin pail and displayed a mass of silvery little fish in a very meagre amount of water.

"Gudgeons," he explained briefly. "Sea-trout like 'em better than anything else. Fiddlers for sheepshead, gudgeons for trout, and mullet for the bigger ones; that's what I use."

Bob was duly impressed. Fishing seemed

almost as noble a sport as gunning, and he yearned to master its lore.

"I'm mighty glad I saw you," he said earnestly.

"Oh, I came round on purpose," said Jim. "Say, you're the only fellow that ever licked Hal Skilletts. Golly, but it was great to see you do it. He won't dare to be so low down mean now, I reckon."

They turned into an avenue of mule-gnawed palms at the end of which was a long, ramshackle building with double galleries and a huge sign over the door bearing the words: *Coast Hotel*. It was the first hotel Bob had ever seen, but he gave it only a brief glance. Just beyond it lay the thing he had dreamed of so often of late, the great wide sea.

To be sure it was not so remarkably wide at this point, for a long outlying reef or bar a few miles from shore opposed its rounded, mangrove-crested bulk to the direct assault of the ocean. But even the lagoon looked to Bob a vast body of water, and beyond the bar an immeasurable blue expanse led his wondering gaze to the dim mystery of the horizon.

"It's fine!" he exclaimed, pushing back his straw hat.

"What, this hotel?" said Jim. "Well, it isn't so fine as it looks. There isn't anyone in it except Colonel Webber and the cook and slews of rats. Nobody comes now 'cause the food is so poor, and the Colonel gets full nearly every night. When there were boarders here I couldn't fish off the pier, so I'm just as well pleased."

The Coast Hotel stood close to the edge of the lagoon. A little path led from the rear gallery to the pier, a very narrow, wobbly structure that staggered on rickety legs nearly a quarter of a mile out from the shore. Bob wondered at its boldness, for it seemed as if a fair buffet from some youthful wave or a good puff of wind would strew it in fragments on the water. To his inlander's eye it looked shockingly unsafe and the lagoon uncompromisingly deep, but where Jim could go he certainly could follow. So follow he did, his nervousness increasing with every step away from firm land.

On the very tip, which swayed unpleasantly in sympathy with the ceaseless motion of the water, was an open-fronted shed protecting a

bench for such anglers as objected to the glare of the sun. Contact with many pairs of trousers had given this bench a dark polish, and busy jack-knives had decorated it profusely with initials and nautical symbols. These were repeated on the walls of the shed with fascinating additions in the way of fishes large and small, and records of notable catches. Altogether it breathed a very history of the sport, and even Jim, familiar as he was with it, showed himself impressed by its atmosphere.

“I tell you, this old shed has seen a lot,” he observed, uncoiling his line. “Some time when I catch a big one I’m going to put his measurements on the wall with the rest of ’em. Don’t you hope it’ll be to-day?”

Bob hoped so decidedly, but he had small confidence in his own ability to catch anything. His line seemed unmanageably long, and the water very far away. Under Jim’s supervision he impaled a slippery gudgeon on the hook, and swung the wriggling, flashing thing out into the twisting pattern of the current.

“Let it sink,” advised Jim. “And jerk it so — see? Sea-trout like live bait and swift water.

The channel turns in here and runs almost under us. Then she swings out just below and keeps 'way off shore for miles. Don't you see her? Kind of like a dark band and all wrinkly on top. You have to know the channels in this shoal water; but you can always tell 'em by their color."

Bob listened greedily. His eyes were naturally keen, and he soon distinguished the deeper blue of the channel where it wound in long graceful curves between the flats. The gentle swaying of the pier no longer troubled him. Indeed it began to cause him a certain exhilaration, and made him feel in rhythm with the soft play of wind and water. He drew a deep breath of satisfaction, his rod lying neglected across his knees.

Close to the pier he suddenly observed a flock of scaups led by a vanguard of black-headed, gray-backed drakes. Evidently they had been feeding in-shore, and were now bound out to rest and doze on the broad bosom of the lagoon. Though he and Jim were in plain sight, the flock paddled fearlessly forward without swerving. As they passed the end of the pier Bob could have reached them with his fishing line, yet

only a few saucy yellow eyes deigned to notice him. They were wild ducks, certainly. In all his experience such behavior was new to Bob.

"Golly! Wish I had a gun here," he could not help exclaiming.

"You'd find yourself arrested right soon," chuckled Jim. "It's against the law to fire a gun within a mile of the courthouse, and the ducks know it. You can drop salt on their tails here, but wait till they get a little way out. You can't reach 'em with a rifle then. Ducks are wise sure. Hi!"

There was a sudden boil in the water. A series of rings spread away from Jim's line which straightened with such force that the rod bent in a fine curve.

"Pull your line out of the way," said Jim, tensely, and struck as he spoke.

Such a fish as Bob had never seen in the petty inland waters shot from the blue channel into the sunlight. Its long, lustrous body flashed with a pearly light, and it shook bright beads of spray from its polished sides as it curved downward and smote the surface in a violent effort to dislodge the hook.

“What is it?” he cried. “A shark?”

“Shark nothing,” grunted Jim. “It’s a trout. A big one, too.”

“What’s he doing now? Where’s he gone?” asked Bob excitedly, watching Jim’s mysterious manipulation of the rod.

“He’s making out for deeper water. They always do,” said Jim. “Steady now, old feller. Don’t you be in a hurry. Hi, he’s going to jump again.”

The stiff line had fallen limp. There was a second of uncertainty, then up the big trout shot with a suddenness that made Bob start. The instant he struck he bounced high again, and this he repeated four times, so quickly that the froth that marked the first point of contact was still dancing when the final leap was over, and the frightened fish dove deep into the racing water of the channel.

“I reckon he’s hooked good and plenty,” exclaimed Jim jubilantly. “That’s what you get by giving ’em time to suck the bait down. Now you’d have struck quick and only got a lip hold.”

Bob thought it more than probable. He did not resent Jim’s superior tone. He was too glad

to pick up such useful bits of information to care about anything of that sort. There was no conceit in him, but always an earnest desire to master the work that he found interesting, and a complete self-effacement at such times that made him a most acceptable pupil.

"You sure did the right thing," he said admiringly. "I don't see how you handle him like you do."

"Oh, I've had lots of practice," said Jim, squaring his shoulders. "Look at him now! Making off like a railroad train. Watch me slow him up."

The great trout was not visible but the stiff line ripping through the water betrayed his frantic rush. Jim pressed his thumb on the spinning reel, and lowered the butt of the rod. Slowly the strain began to tell. The line moved less swiftly, and finally swung rigidly back and forth while the water bubbled in a wide circle about it.

It was the beginning of the end. The big fish was still sullen, but with reel and rod Jim drew him inexorably toward the pier.

"Gee!" he said, as the dark back rose more and more above the surface. "He's a monster,



“ RAISED HIM, DRIPPING, TO THE STRING-PIECE.”

Bob. Don't know as I blame you for calling him a shark."

Seized with a generous impulse he held out the rod.

"Want to feel the heft of him? Catch hold; he's safe now."

Thrilling with pleasure Bob grasped the rod, and with awkward hands imitated Jim's manœuvres. For one delicious moment the captive awoke as the shadow of the pier fell on him and gave Bob the semblance of a fight. Then he lay inert with his long back exposed. Very carefully the two pairs of hands raised him, dripping, to the string-piece, and then Jim uncorked his enthusiasm with a wild whoop.

"Didn't I tell you I'd do it some day!" he said.

He pulled out a worn tape-measure from his pocket and carefully measured the length and girth of the great trout. These, with the date of the capture and his own initials, he cut deeply into a blank space on the shed wall.

"I wonder if I'll ever do that," remarked Bob.

"Well, you never can tell about fishing," said

Jim. "You've got to keep at it, that's one sure thing."

Noon came, hot and breathless, but no more fish. The boys reluctantly wound up their lines and Jim emptied the pail of gudgeons.

"It's a little early yet," he said. "When the schools really do strike in you'll have some luck, if you'll stick to it."

"I'll stick all right," said Bob simply.