

CHAPTER X

IN PIGEON HAMMOCK

THE warden dropped the letter beside his chair and stretched his bleached and unsteady hands before the pitch-pine blaze.

“It’s mean to be laid up when there’s a call like this,” he complained. “Sandhill cranes never did seem like game to me and quails is ondignified little birds, but you can’t find fault with a turkey whether you sleep well or not. It cuts right acrost the grain to hear that some ornery fellows are trapping turks and shipping ’em to the Tarragonia — to fat up a lot o’ rich Yankees!”

“How long do you cal’late to be sick?” asked Bob.

The warden hitched his chair somewhat nearer to the blaze.

“It’ll take about a cord o’ wood to thaw me out this time, Bob. I’m chilled clean to the marrer.”

“Well,” began Bob with some hesitation and

eyes bent upon the red coals, "it seems like I might run down there and look 'round while you get warmed up. It wouldn't do any harm, would it?"

Jeppson lifted his drooping head and eyed his young assistant, half-amused, half-irritated. But it was not in him to be jealous. A blind confidence in his own abilities effectually prevented him from seeing or feeling those of others, and he looked upon Bob as a tool, useful only when he chose to make him so.

"H'm!" he said. "You did all right last month with that fellow Braithe we caught plume hunting, I'll allow. But without me you'll find it mighty different. If you go careful and don't say nothing or do anything, I dunno's you'll do much harm — or much good either. I'll join you soon's this chill's gone."

"Thank you, sir," said Bob, as pleased as if the careless permission had been a command, and after a few moments more of talk he left the sick man shivering over his fire.

He was respectful and even diffident, was Bob, in the presence of his superior, but he had a mind of his own and something moreover that the war-

den never would have, a pair of observant eyes and a love for nature. A knowledge of the ways of birds and beasts seemed to Jeppson of no value in his profession, and there he erred, for the trail of the hunter is closely correlated to that of the hunted.

The brisk, complacent warden, radiating an atmosphere of officialdom, seemed to thrust aside the shy advances of nature; but this time Bob was to make his entry, at least, alone. Where Jeppson would have been conscious of nothing but the jolting wagon and the length of the pale road, his assistant felt the mystery of the life, hushed yet virile, that thickened about him with every additional mile beyond the disturbing borders of the little town. The gregarious pines seemed sentient creatures standing in watchful ranks, their tops thick with conjectures about him. Some of them were stately and dignified; others almost threatening, and some were weak, unhealthy or actually deformed. But lusty or ailing they were the lords of this soil and looked down upon the rank palmetto scrub as upon a coarse and permanent peasantry.

Occasionally the uniformity of the open forest

was broken by a "hammock," a clot of renegade trees crowding blackly together as if conspiring against the rule of the pines. One of these, or rather a series of such matted groves united under the name of Pigeon Hammock, was Bob's destination. Long before it was reached the road faded to an indefinite strip of cleared soil, so little travelled that the plump red roots of the palmetto roughened its surface. Ignorant, poor and lawless the crackers of the hammock took small interest in the outside world and resented any expression of its curiosity in their direction.

To Bob's relief the gun and bag of cartridges together with his youthful appearance suggested no unusual possibilities. At least when he applied for board and lodging at the first house he came to, the only concern of the owner, Mr. Gale Travis, was over the matter of remuneration, and that satisfactorily settled he was all hospitality. At the conclusion of the bargain a woman with sagging hair and dress appeared in the doorway, her arms somewhat truculently akimbo. Behind her peeped a row of circular-eyed children.

"My wife, sah," announced Mr. Travis, proudly, but without removing his feet from their

elevated position on the verandah post. "And the young-uns — Millicent, Mabel and Mortimer!"

Bob's bow was met with a hard stare. He turned to the man.

"You ain't Fluridy born, I reckon," he said.

Travis was surprised and pleased.

"Huccome you to guess that, sah? I reckon book-learnin' shows on a man. No, sah, I'm from Car'lina." Then looking with new interest at Bob he added: "How old might you be, sah?"

"About old enough to be brother to Mrs. Travis, I reckon."

This naked flattery was received with appreciation. The woman thawed into a sudden laugh, and her husband, smiting his bony knee, exclaimed:

"You're smart enough to find the turks, I reckon!"

"I hope so," said Bob, smiling. "Can you tell me where to look?"

Travis's manner became dignified.

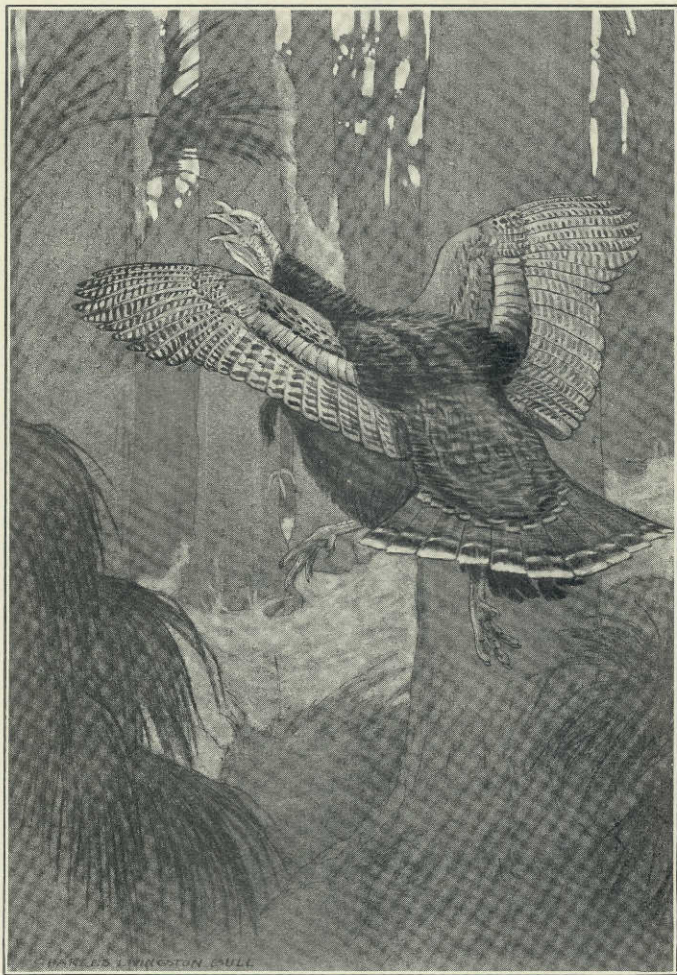
"No, sah. My time's took up keeping hogs out o' this yere truck patch." He picked up a short-

handled whip and with a deft turn of the wrist sent the long, heavy lash swinging out in a flight that ended in a report as sharp as that of a rifle. "I'll bust 'em wide open if they come trifling round yere," he added belligerently.

Mr. Travis's labors were a fair sample of the activities of Pigeon Hammock. Bob had never seen a place so poor and apathetic. The dozen shacks were all falling slowly to pieces and weeds and bushes were gaining ground in every garden patch. The gardens and a common herd of gaunt hogs furnished practically the sole sustenance of the village, though occasionally a lank cracker sauntered forth into the woods in a half-hearted pursuit of game.

From the beginning Bob was made to understand that his presence was not wanted on these hunting trips. And he was quite willing to go alone. He knew that these surly, suspicious crackers would hide any evidences of law breaking from him whether they were satisfied that he was a market gunner or not. They were as clannish as mountain men.

It was a turkey country, but the birds had been hunted so much that their ordinary craftiness was



“ THE GREAT BIRD HURTLED OFF AMONG THE WATER-OAKS.”

doubled. Day after day Bob crept through miles of stiff palmetto and thickets of live and water-oaks. Sometimes he shot a few quail or a string of wild pigeons for the sake of appearances, but of the royal game he found no trace until he gave up still-hunting and took to "calling."

His place of ambush, a grove of water-oaks, was selected after much thought. In it he built a screen of boughs behind which he sat and sucked upon a hollow wing-bone, imitating now the prideful yelp of the gobbler, and now the demure clucking of the hen.

One afternoon he got an answer. Softening his note with his hollowed hand he drew the bird nearer until he could hear his stealthy tread among the dead ferns. Suddenly he appeared, a great gobbler, swollen and broad of tail, with wattles as ruddy as Christmas berries. Boldly he looked about him for the hen whose soft invitation had brought him. Then he heard Bob stir and perceived his danger, and his puffed plumage sank. The scrub shook under the beating of heavy wings and with a glint of brown and bronze the great body rose and hurtled off among the water-oaks.

Bob threw down his screen to get a clearer vision. The gobbler thundered through the grove and out into the open where the sun struck metallic sparks from his burnished back. On he flew over the still palmettos, a burly figure, straight for a distant clump of oaks at the edge of which the big wings set stiffly.

After an hour's work Bob marked down the flock of which the inquisitive gobbler was a member in a plain of scrub a half mile beyond the grove. As the sun sank they came together and moved rapidly off in single file, rising at last for the short flight to the roost. Bob was close behind them, and collecting a heap of grass and ferns he burrowed into it and was soon sound asleep.

He awoke before daylight and lay peeping out of his nest while the east grew warm. With the first red gleam of light the turkeys began to gobble and bubble gutturally, mincing back and forth along the live-oak limbs. Then the old gobbler leader launched himself quietly into the air and the whole hungry flock followed. Unconscious that they were watched they proceeded straight for the ground on which, morning after morning, they were accustomed to look for their breakfast.

Sure of this important fact Bob, decidedly hungry himself, started back to Pigeon Hammock. The mist so common in this region still clouded the woods and gemmed the coarse grass with drops of moisture, but the sun was fast dispelling it. Only a few pearl-colored pennons drifted wanly in the daylight when he saw the chimney of Rufus King's house sending up the black smoke of a new fire.

King had seemed to Bob an unusually surly man, and he turned from his course to avoid passing through the unkempt yard. But as he went by he saw the cracker sitting on the doorstep with his head in his hands and such a forlorn look about him that instinctively he stopped and asked him if anything was the matter.

King raised his head and stared at him a moment, not resentfully but as if he had not heard.

"My 'Gusta's sick," he said. Then with a sudden intensity of gaze he added, "Do you know any doctoring?"

Bob walked up to the door.

"Not much. Can I see her?"

King led the way into the house. Like all the

rest in the hammock it had only two rooms, a combined kitchen and living-room and a bed-room. The girl lay on a corn-shuck mattress, flushed and bright-eyed. Bob threw open the small window and then touched the hot little forehead with his fingers.

"I reckon it's malaria," he said. "Pore little kid. She wants the right kind of good grub and a doctor. She's pretty."

"She favors her mammy." King's tone was harsh.

Bob looked up inquiringly.

"She's where we-all won't never see her," said King. "I reckon you know where that is. The chills and fever took her, too."

"Get a doctor for the young 'un. She's sick, but he can fix her."

With unnecessary caution they had stepped to the door. The child, tense with fever, was quite oblivious of their presence. King laughed strangely.

"A doctor and good grub! Hit's easy enough fo' you to say hit. Where's the money to come from? Hit costs a dollar fo' the doctor and I hain't got hit!"

Bob himself had none to spare, but he felt a thrill of pleasure that he had, at least, the necessary sum.

“Will you take this?” He held out two silver coins. “You can pay it back. But it’s no time to talk about that. The young-un needs it.”

King took the money mechanically. Then his expression so changed that Bob, embarrassed, looked away.

“Her mammy’s buried under that live-oak yonder, suh. I reckon hit’ll be thar over her when some rich folks’ gravestones won’t be standing. She never had no money, but she seemed to get a heap out’n life. She laughed right easy, and she gave a heap, suh. I’ve been thinking of what she gave me. I reckon hit was all a man really needs. There ain’t anything mo’ fo’ me now, ’cept ’Gusta — and she’s her mammy’s baby.

“I ain’t aiming to trouble you, suh, but I have to say hit. Hit was two months ago she died and the doctor ’lowed he wouldn’t come no mo’ ’cept I paid him fo’ waiting on her. I sold most everything, but hit ain’t all paid yet. I reckon this dollar’ll bring him though. Thank you, suh.”

"If it don't," said Bob gently, "I know one it will bring."

The next day Bob was up before sunrise and on his way to the feeding ground of the turkeys. Everyone in the little community seemed still abed. Some hogs that had taken advantage of the hour scampered from the gardens, woofing with astonishment. This time Bob knew just where to go, and it did not take him long to reach the place; but the turkeys had got there before him. His footsteps sent them booming off in all directions.

As he watched them vanish the heavy throbbing of their wings seemed to linger with curious insistence in his ears. But the sound was more muffled and irregular than that made by a free flying bird, and immediately he guessed the reason.

He had not expected such luck. Guided by the sound he ran forward until he came upon the trap, an old fish seine hung upon low posts, with an entrance like that of a lobster-pot. Two frightened turkeys bounced about in it with a tremendous flapping.

Some palmettos furnished a heavy cover close

by and Bob slipped into them and waited with pounding heart for his man. The denouement was at hand and he hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. This was his own success, but what would the warden say? And who was the trapper? It might be Travis himself.

The daylight strengthened and the mocking-birds began to sing. A cardinal, rich as a flake from the eastern sky, alighted on a branch above the trap and looked at the prisoners with a whistle of astonishment. Across the brightening spaces visible between the tops of the oaks a buzzard wheeled, the under coverts of his wings as dense as black velvet against the steel-gray flight shafts. In an adjoining hammock a squirrel chirred. And as the gold tinge grew, the mysterious daytime hum of the woods rose and trembled in the air.

A myriad small sounds combine to make this hum, but they are all homogeneous. It is easy to detect a foreign note, however faint, among them, and presently Bob was aware of such a note. He could hardly hear it, but he knew it was not made by bird or wild animal. A ground-dove heard it and whirred off on wings

as fluted and rosy as sea-shells. Then the sound became a light steady crunching, accompanied by the crackle of scrub and ferns as the man forced his way through them.

Bob, unable to see plainly, heard the turkeys thrash as the man approached. There was a wild and pitiful scrambling in the trap for a few moments, followed by silence. Then Bob jumped out of the cover and faced — King.

The cracker, half crouching over the trap, stared at him without moving.

“What do you want here?” he said.

“You!” said Bob. Mechanically he threw back his coat and displayed the little nickel shield.

King’s eyes glittered as brightly as the bit of metal.

“You want me? What fo?”

“I’m a game warden,” said Bob, “and I’ve caught you in the act.” But there was no triumph in his tone. Taller by half a head and broader of shoulder, he looked down upon the pale, underfed cracker with pity.

“Sho!” breathed King. “I reckon you will get your dollar back and mo’ too.”

Bob flushed.

"Yes, you'll pay it back. I ain't worrying."

"You'd get half my fine if I could pay hit!" cried King. "Yes, suh, I've trapped a few turks to pay the doctor fo' tending her when she died. I ain't sorry. Seems like it isn't no great harm. But I'm sorry you caught me, 'count of 'Gusta."

"You might 've thought of her before," said Bob. "You've broken the law, but it don't seem such a terrible bad break. Game laws ain't like some laws. Perhaps it's wrong, but 'Gusta needs you and every honest cent you can get. If you will swear to quit trapping we'll jest forget it all."

King straightened slowly and dropped the dead bird.

"You ain't going to arrest me?"

"No, I ain't," said Bob. "It may be wrong for me to do it, being an officer, but — there's 'Gusta."

King's face turned dead white.

"I swear I never will trap any mo'," he said huskily.

"That'll be all right," said Bob.

There was a moment of silence. After the manner of men, both King and Bob felt shy be-

cause their hearts had been touched. Then King with a half-audible "Thank you, suh," turned away, leaving the dead turkeys on the ground.

Bob heaved a sigh. What was his moment of success? The warden would account it as failure; but it was not wholly ashes in his own mouth.

For some time after King left, Bob sat by the dead turkeys thinking hard. He was in an awkward situation: officially he had not done his duty; and, though he did not regret that fact, it was to be supposed that Jeppson would. Bob did not entertain for a moment any thought of concealing his breach of trust, nor could he see any way of bettering King's case. There was nothing for him to do but tell the whole truth and resign from his office.

Strengthened by this resolution he picked up one of the dead birds, and slinging it on his shoulder, started on the back trail. The knowledge that his brief career as Jeppson's deputy was over was rather pleasing than otherwise. Somehow this tracking down of men, law breakers though they were, was depressing work. He had felt sorry even for the rascal Braithe. To

confine such a man was like caging a liberty-loving hawk; both were children of nature to whom the freedom of the wild places was as necessary as the breath of life.

When he arrived in sight of King's shack the door stood wide open on its leather hinges as if the owner, in his perturbation, had forgotten to close it. Knocking on the lintel Bob stepped inside. There was the clink of a pan in the tiny kitchen and King appeared with a piece of raw bacon in his hand.

"Hello!" he said, and looked from Bob to the turkey in awkward surprise.

"I thought the girl might like this," said Bob. "What's done's done, and there's no use leaving them both to rot. A little soup from it won't hurt her."

King took the bird, and mechanically tested the plumpness of its breast. His drawn face lightened.

"Come and set," he said, and moving quickly into the kitchen, drew a stool from against the wall and flicked his sleeve across it. "I'm going for the doctor directly, but this will hearten her a heap, I reckon. She don't seem to relish bacon.

Sick folks want different grub from what's common to 'em other times."

Evidently the first sight of Bob had aroused the cracker's suspicions; but when he realized that sympathy alone had inspired the visit, his cramped nature expanded in a rare glow of hospitality. He brought Bob a dipper of water sweetened with the crude juice of the sugarcane, lowered the rag across the window to keep the sunlight out of his guest's eyes, and kept up a flow of frank talk concerning himself as he shuffled about preparing dinner for the sick child.

It was plain that he was bursting with gratitude and eager to express it in some practical form; for, as he moved about, he picked up in turn his gun and some poor little belongings that passed as ornaments and seemed to weigh them, with one meditative eye on Bob. But the right combination of feeling and gift was not reached till he took a small glass jar from the cupboard. A look of relief and determination came over his face and he stepped up and thrust it into Bob's hands.

"Here's a little present I want you to have, suh," he said. "Maybe you can make some-

thing out of hit. The nigger that gave hit to me swore hit was worth a pot o' money."

Bob looked at the jar. It was perfectly plain, originally of a bottle-green color, but so worn and glazed by time and other agents that it was as lustreless as ground glass. Its stopper was broken to a mere stub. It looked as valueless as an old tin can.

"Open hit, suh," said King. "There's writing inside."

Bob removed the stopper and drew out what seemed to be a small roll of parchment. It was thick and stiff; but by pressing it on his knee, he was able to keep it spread and read the following words, evidently written with something broader than a pen:

— — Beef Island — —

From the Four Palmetoes 400 Feet North East by North. The Top of the Liveoak then Lies due North. From this Point It Lies East 100 Yards.

M.

"Ha!" cried King. "That's hit. Buried gold, old black Henry said hit was on his death-bed.

Hit was all before his time, but he got hit from a sailor-man who knew."

"Do you believe it?" asked Bob smiling. "I never heard of any Beef Island."

"I'm not a coast man," said King. "I couldn't tell you about the island, but I reckon hit's off there. Old Henry said hit was and he'd sailed a powerful lot. I dragged him home after the tree fell on him, and he pulled this bottle out of his trunk and give hit to me jes' before he died. 'There's a mess o' gold in that for someone,' he says; 'and I'd like for you to have hit 'cause you brought me here to die decent in bed.'"

"Why don't you try to find it yourself?" asked Bob.

King shook his head dispiritedly.

"I'm not a sea-faring man and I don't know one end of a boat from t'other," he said. "I've got my 'backy and I've got my house, and—she's buried out under that liveoak like I told you. No, suh, I reckon to stay right yere long's I last. But I want for you to find hit, suh."

"Well," said Bob, "it seems some late to hunt for it now. But thank you just the same. If anything comes of it I won't forget you, King."

He held out his hand which the cracker pressed gratefully.

“I know you won’t,” said King. “And thank you for what you’ve done for me and mine.”