

MY FIRST COON HUNT

by Jacob Holdfast

Illustrated by Dudley Ward



MY first coon hunt has always struck me as fit to line up with the twelve labours of Hercules and the Argonaut's journey after the golden fleece; and it was a great deal more realistic to me than either. In fact, it was the first hunt of any kind I had ever taken part in, and as it took place at night it impressed me with a large element of mystery.

I remember that I had been in the country but a year or two, and had come to the age of fourteen without any clear idea of the various animals which inhabited that part of the Ontario bush. At the corner store I had listened to many a yarn about bears and wildcats and wild turkeys. But I had only the vaguest notions about what sort of animals these were; and whenever I heard a story about coons being hunted at night I always imagined that a coon was a very fierce and very sizable animal. For instance, a man has gone deer-hunting alone and fox-hunting in pairs, and men have even been known to hunt bears singlehanded. But so far as I could make out, it always took a gang to hunt a coon. No one had ever been known to go coon-hunting by himself.

"No, I guess not," I remark to myself as intimations of a coming coon hunt began to thicken up around the diggings where I was the hired boy. "No siree, it takes a lot of 'm to hunt a coon. I guess it's a very terrifying animal. It must be."

These notions I never breathed to any of the gang that came booting in from the road in twos and threes—Tom Rickets, Jumbo Hackett, Bill Blindey and four others, all of whom that day had done hefty works of loading manure, cutting corn, threshing and the like, and could any one of them have gone to sleep on a pile of rails. But when Blindey's old dog threw himself into a tantrum at sight of the axe and the lantern and the full moon just whoozing golden-red out of the big lake none of those people had a tired bone in his body.

Neither had I. Being a shy hired person I hung about on the outskirts of the gang wondering if by any chance they would invite me to go along—to hold the lantern, or to help to skin the coon animal in the bush, or to bury the great carcass, or beat him up out of the cornfield, or whatever it might happen to be. As a matter of fact, I was a bit timid about the whole matter.

"Whatcheh jigglin' about, skeesicks?" blatted Jumbo, the thick one, who that day had forked forty huge loads of barnyard manure.

"Nuthink at all," says I.

"Figgerin' on goin' along?"

"Nope. Donno as I be."

"Awright. Stay to hum, then. Go to roost with the hens."

He laughed in a sort of asthmatic way, and I knew he had for my insignificant size and puny prowess a very great contempt. The old dog made a terrible row when two of the lot got grinding the axe by lantern light.

"I wonder," say I to myself, "what they will do with the axe?"

I had an idea they might use it to cleave the skull of the coon after the dog had him cornered in a jampile. I knew this much, anyhow—that the dog was only taken along to get track of the animal, as I suspected, in some field of corn where I had see traces of ravages wrought by coons along the edge of the bush.

"All hunkadory, Bub," says one of the gang, who seemed to be a ringleader. "I guess you c'n come along. But we'll trail the dog-gone boots off yeh, and y'll come home at two in the morning as wet as a drowned rat. Grr!"

"I don't care," says I. But I did. I was just middling scared as I fell in behind the gang.

A full moon was just rising as we gathered the gang and started back Blindey's lane—one of those long lanes that reach a mile and a quarter back

from a certain large lake into the great hind land of the bush. We were all leg-booted and smocked. I carried the lantern. Tom Rickets carried the axe. The dog went ahead. It was a splendid warm evening. Bob Hackett was chewing tobacco. Every twenty rods I could see the black mark of his libations in the dust of the lane.

I felt somehow that we could have encompassed and slain a tiger or something bigger. But the idea of six men, a dog and a boy banding together to snare one twenty-pound coon did not strike me as ridiculous. I didn't know what a coon was. Still it's the things that used to be absurd when we took them seriously and look back upon them now with amusement that make life worth having a past at all.

BY the time we reached the edge of the first cornfield next to a large wedge of solid bush on the other side of it there was a fine heavy dew. We all sat on the fence while the old dog went on an expedition among the corn. Some yarns were swapped when Jumbo Hackett said with great energy:

"I move we go and beat up that bumble bees' nest I seen las' week along that south fence there next the clover field."

That seemed popular.

"Why didn't yeh guzzle it when yeh seen 'm?" we asked him.

He made a noise at me like a backlands dog as though I had asked him the question myself. Jumbo always liked to treat me with contempt. "You wall-eyed whiffit," he said, as we trolloped away to the particular fence corner three panels this side of a young hickory and began rooting about the wire-grass for the honey-pods.

"Jumpin' beeswax!" says Jumbo as he bear-pawed out a small section of the honey. "There's a dog-gone bee up my pant legs."

I am sorry to this day that bee was so drowsy with the dew as not to prod the elephant, for he got twice his share of the honey and I got none.

Still the dog gave no sign from the hefty corn, and we let one another call him dog names as we clambered on the fence again. Jumbo smashed a rotten rail and nearly fell into a large burdock. The world seemed to be swarming with silence, moonlight and

those sweetly solemn katydids. So far as could be observed in all that dreamy bush landscape with the great lake at the front and the barns sticking up like glimmering blobs of shadow along the distant road, there was no other gang but ours on foot. We had several square miles of coonland all to ourselves.

"Cripes! I'm hungry," mumbled Jumbo.

"Gnaw s'm raw corn," suggest I.

"Aw, bite a bunion," retorts he with apt repartee.

"Move we have a corn roast," intimates Bill Blindey, the wiry little tyke that never was outwardly weary.

Which we did on the north edge of the cornfield just where it petered off into the cow lot and the burnt-over log jams. With a bonfire of punkwood from the slash we roasted what few milk-juicy ears we could find along the ripe corn, and sitting on the fence again, gnawed like a pack of wolves, damning the dilatory dog that never had been known to give a false alarm at a coon hunt, but always took his time.

"Wish there was a melon patch handy by we could clean up," grunts Jumbo to the rest—

And just as he said it the old dog uttered his first yelp right over on the edge of the bush. It set the wild echoes flying and sent seven pairs of boots, one axe and one lantern slambang into the wet corn, Jumbo, as I recall it, being last off the fence and myself next, Bill Blindey screaming like a hyena at the dog. The moon took her last glimpse of us for a moment; then the wet corn, twice as high as a man, the ragweeds and the three kinds of burrs from beggar lice to bootjacks and keg-burrs jungled us in among in the fat pumpkins and the crawling vines and stumps, and we were like an army of blue devils advancing to the destruction of a world.

THAT was the most ridiculous rampage I had ever taken part in. The most absurd part of it was Jumbo, who, if he ever tripped over a furtive pumpkin, smashed it and went slambang on, while I sprawled over nine and got burrs into my brown duck clean up to the collar.

"You dang galoot!" Jumbo abjured me once as I ran into him somewhere in the jamboree—I was always gravitating in his direction against my will. "Gimme that lantern—y'll smash it."

Which I did, and we were then out of the corn into the bush where the dew was just beginning to get noticeable in the underbrush, and the moon got no look-in at all, and the gang pulled itself together under seven huge giants of the swamp-elm, hardwood bush to wonder where on earth was that.

"Son of a gun of a dog," as Jumbo paraphrased him, snorting at me as though I had done anything. "To hell and gawn," remarks one.

And so it seemed. Nothing but a faint, smothering yelp that seemed to be miles away in the utterable bosom of the bush, as Jumbo lighted the lantern.

"He's got 'im treed," gasp I.

"Holy Moses," gurgitates Jumbo in unfathomable contempt. "You're sich a wise whiffit, wonder yeh don't go on all fours ahead with the dog."

Sufficiently squelched I fell in behind the gang as it trailed off vaguely in the direction from which the sound of the dog seemed to come. They all went like the devil after a sinner. In five minutes they were all so far ahead that I could only locate them by the glimmer of the lantern, and the smash of their boots. I had never been alone in the bush at night, and I couldn't keep up. Every time I tried to make an extra rod or two I fell over a rotten log or got hung up in a pack of underbrush. I was sopping from head to foot, lost my cap and didn't try to look for it, and was so almighty scared that I didn't even yell "Boohoo!"

They didn't need me, anyhow. I knew it. They hadn't even missed me.

