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THE HERMIT AND PAL TOOK MANY A TRIP INTO THE FOREST.

FOLLOWERS OF THE TRAIL

BY
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FOLLOWERS OF THE TRAIL

1

PAL

In the depths of the green wilderness, where dark spruce and hemlock guard the secrets of the trail, are still to be found wild creatures who know little of man and who regard him with more of curiosity than of fear. Woodland ponds, whose placid waters have never reflected the dark lines of a canoe, lie like jewels in their setting of green hills; ponds where soft-eyed deer come down to drink at twilight, and where the weird laughter of the loon floats through the morning mists. Toward the south, however, man is fast penetrating the secrets of the forest, blazing dim trails and leaving fear and destruction in the wake of his guns and traps.

Occasionally a hunter, unarmed save perhaps for a camera, enters the wilderness to study its inhabitants, not that he may destroy them, but that he may the better understand them, and through them draw closer to nature. Such a man was the Hermit, who dwelt alone in a log cabin where the southern border of the wilderness terminated abruptly at an old snake fence. Tall forest trees leaned toward the clearing and many a follower of dim forest trails approached the fence during the hours of darkness to peer curiously, though somewhat fearfully, at the lonely cabin.

2

Perhaps the visitor might be a black bear in search of the berries which were sure to be found at the edges of the cleared ground; perhaps a lynx, staring with pale, savage eyes upon the cabin, hating the man who occupied it, yet fearing his power. Again it might be an antlered deer who paused a moment, one dainty hoof uplifted, brown eyes, wholly curious, fixed upon the silent dwelling. Only the smaller woodfolk such as rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, porcupines, and now and then a fox, dared make a closer investigation of the clearing.

As for the man himself, he would, if possible, have made a friend of every wild creature who came near his dwelling. Broken in health, he had turned wearily from the rush and clamor of the city to the clear, balsam-scented air of the woods, where he was fast gaining a health and vigor that he had not believed possible. Out of a lean face, tanned by exposure and wrinkled with kindly humor, a pair of keen gray eyes looked with never-flagging interest upon the busy world about him.

3

The Hermit, in spite of his comparative isolation from those of his kind, was far from leading a life of uselessness. Having been from boyhood an enthusiastic student of botany, he had located in the big woods many a leaf, bark and root which, when sent back into the busy world, proved a blessing to ailing humanity.

He knew where to find the aromatic spice-bush to cool the burning of fever, and where in the spring grew the tenderest willow twigs whose bark went into cures for rheumatism. Sassafras yielded its savory roots for tea and tonics, and the purplish red pokeberry supplied a valuable blood purifier. So he harvested the woods for others, at the same time finding for himself health and contentment.

Twice yearly he took his harvest to the nearest shipping center, setting forth as the first streaks of dawn appeared in the east, and returning when the serrated wall of the wilderness was etched sharply against the sunset sky, and the songs of the robin and the hermit thrush gave voice to the twilight.

4

Since his arrival at the cabin the Hermit had been much alone, his only visitors being occasional hunters or trappers who passed his home by chance, or asked shelter when overtaken by the night. At infrequent intervals one of his distant neighbors would drop in to chat or to ask aid in case of illness or accident, for many had found the Hermit a help at such a time. They were, for the most part, busy farmers wresting a home from the wilderness, a task which left them little idle time.

One summer evening, as the fiery ball of the sun was sinking out of sight behind the forest wall, leaving the world bathed in the hush of twilight, the Hermit heard a scratching upon his doorstep. Looking up from the fire over which he was cooking his supper, he saw in the open doorway a small black and white dog, its forefeet upon the sill, its great brown eyes fixed in mute appeal upon the face of the man. A moment they looked into each other's eyes; then, without a word, the Hermit held out his hand.

It was a simple gesture, yet it heralded a change in the lives of both. Into the eyes of the homeless dog sprang a glad light, followed by such a look of adoration that the man experienced a warm glow of pleasure. Out of their loneliness each had found a friend. 5

From that day the two were never far apart. When the Hermit went into the forest for his harvesting, Pal, as the wanderer had been named, accompanied him, his proud protector. While the man worked, Pal often ranged the near-by woods, his sensitive nose eagerly seeking out the latest news of the wild; yet he was never out of sound of the Hermit's call. To the dog, as to the man, the woods were a never-ending source of interest, and he seldom offered to molest the wild creatures unless they seemed unfriendly toward his master. Pal would have attacked the biggest beast of the wilderness unhesitatingly in defense of the one who had befriended him.

In going about his work the Hermit, as a rule, saw few of the forest inhabitants, but from tree or thicket bright eyes were sure to be following his every movement with keen interest. Fear, when once instilled into the wild creatures, is not easily banished, but little by little they came to regard this quiet man as a friend. 6

An instance of their trust was shown one day when, as the Hermit worked in his herb garden at the rear of the cabin, a rabbit slipped through the fence. With great bounds the little animal crossed the garden toward him, its ears lying along its back and its gentle eyes wide with terror. The Hermit glanced up in surprise; then his face set and he raised his hoe threateningly. Close behind the fleeing bunny came a weasel, its savage red eyes seeing nothing but its expected prey. In another bound the rabbit would have been overtaken and have suffered a terrible death had not the Hermit stepped between with his uplifted hoe.

With a snarl the weasel paused, its eyes flaming with hatred. For a moment it seemed inclined to attack the man. At that point Pal rounded the corner of the cabin to see the savage little beast confronting his adored master. The sight aroused all the ferocity in the dog's nature. The light of battle flared in his usually mild eyes and the hair rose stiffly along his back. With a sharp bark, he charged. The weasel, seeing itself outnumbered, turned and sped toward the forest, where it vanished with the dog in hot pursuit. The Hermit returned to his hoeing, glad that he and Pal had been the means of saving one life from the cruel fangs which kill purely for the lust of killing. 7

On another day the Hermit owed his own life to the faithful dog. He had gone some distance into the woods to visit a bed of ginseng which he had discovered a fortnight before. In the rich leaf-mold the plants grew lustily, covering the forest floor for some distance with their spreading green umbrellas. With delighted eyes the Hermit stood gazing upon his rich find, but when he stooped to ascertain whether or not the roots were ready for drying, his outstretched hand was quickly arrested by Pal's frenzied barking. He quickly withdrew his hand and moved slightly until he could follow the dog's gaze. There, scarcely a foot away, lay a coiled rattler, the ugly head raised. Even as the man looked, the tail sent out its deadly warning.

The Hermit was surprised but not alarmed, for he had dealt with rattlers before. With one blow of the mattock, which he always carried for digging, the head of the big snake was crushed and its poisoned fangs buried in the earth.

"Good old Pal! You probably saved my life. I would never have seen the reptile in time," the Hermit said feelingly, as he patted the head of the gratified dog. The rattles were carried home as trophies and the love between man and dog was deepened, if such a thing were possible. 8

Thus, with long rambles in the forest and with hours of harvesting and drying roots and berries, the days sped by, lengthening into weeks and the weeks into months. Birch and maple dropped their leaves, a rustling carpet about their feet. Wedges of wild geese winged their way southward through the trackless sky, making the nights vocal with their honking. The bear, woodchuck, skunk, raccoon and chipmunk, fat from their summer feeding, had retired to den or hollow tree where they were to sleep snugly through the cold months.

Then one night the Storm King swept down from the North, locking the forest in a frozen grip which only the spring could break. A thick mantle of snow covered the wilderness over which a deep silence brooded, broken now and then by a sharp report from some great pine or spruce as the frost penetrated its fibers. The sun, which now shone but a few hours of the day, could make no headway against the intense cold, but those creatures of the wilderness which were still abroad were prepared to meet it with warm coats of fur, through which the frost could not penetrate. 9

The Hermit and Pal enjoyed the short crisp days and took many a trip into the forest, the man upon snowshoes, the dog with his light weight easily upborne by the crust. Then there were long, quiet evenings by the fire, when the Hermit studied and Pal drowsed beside him, one eye on the man, ready to respond to the least sign of attention.

At this season of hunger many wild creatures, which in the days of abundance were too shy to approach the cabin, overcame their timidity, to feast upon the good things spread for them about the clearing. The birds, especially, grew so tame that they would fly to meet the Hermit the moment he stepped forth. The bolder ones even found a perch on his shoulders or head, chatting sociably or scolding at each other. Occasionally one of the larger animals visited the banquet, and though these were regarded somewhat askance by the regular frequenters, a truce which was never violated held about the food supply.

One clear, crisp day in the late winter when the snow crust sparkled under the sun's rays as if strewn with diamond dust, and the cold was intense, Pal frolicked away by himself into the woods as the Hermit was feeding his wild friends. That was nothing unusual but, as the 10

afternoon wore on and he did not return, his master began to feel a slight uneasiness. Pal had never before stayed away so long. Occasionally the Hermit went to the window which looked out upon the dark wall of the wilderness, but there was no movement in its borders and the cold soon drove him back to his warm fireside.

At length, when the sun was well down in the western sky, there came a familiar scratching on the door of the cabin. The Hermit sprang to open it, giving a relieved laugh at sight of Pal upon the doorstep. But, strange to say, the dog would not enter. With a sharp bark he trotted a short distance down the path, looking back at his master.

"No, no, Pal, I don't want to take a walk to-day. Come in and get warm, you rascal, and give an account of yourself," the Hermit called, still holding the door open though the air was chilling.

The dog wagged his tail, but made no move toward the house. Instead, he whined, trotted a few steps farther and looked eagerly back into his master's face. It was clear to the Hermit that Pal wished him to follow, but for a moment he hesitated, contrasting the warmth within the cabin with the bitter cold and loneliness of the forest. Then he looked again at the dog, who had not taken his pleading eyes from his master's face.

"All right, Pal, just come in until I bundle up. This cold would freeze a man in no time if he were not well protected."

The Hermit turned back into the cabin and the dog, apparently understanding, no longer hung back. His adored master had not failed him. A few minutes later both issued from the house with the dog in the lead, soon disappearing from sight in the shadows of the forest.

In the morning of that same day Dave Lansing, a young hunter and trapper, had left his rude cabin some miles to the north of the Hermit's clearing to visit his trap line. Ill luck seemed to be with him. In the first place he had been delayed long after his accustomed time for starting. Then, one after another, he had found his traps rifled, until he had turned away from the last one angry and disgusted. Still a perverse fate seemed to be following him. Several miles from his cabin, he stumbled upon something buried in the snow; there was a sharp click, and with a sudden grunt of pain he sank to the ground, his axe flying from his hand and skimming for some distance over the smooth snow crust.

Dave sat up, dazed. The pain which he suffered, however, soon cleared his brain and he found that he was caught in the steel jaws of a trap. The trap was not of his own setting, but this made him no less a captive. He tried to press open the jaws but they held stubbornly. Then he remembered his axe. Crawling as far as the trap would permit, he stretched himself at full length upon the snow and reached desperately. The instrument which would have been his salvation was six inches out of reach. Moreover, the strain upon his foot was so unbearable that he was obliged to draw back in order to ease it.

Now, as the full significance of his plight dawned upon him, even Dave's stout heart quailed. He was helpless to free himself without the axe, and so far as he knew there was no human being within ten miles of the spot. Moreover the intense cold was beginning to penetrate his warm clothing. He no longer felt the pain of his imprisoned foot. Circulation had slowed down and numbness was fast creeping up his limb. He swung his arms and beat his hands upon his breast, but in spite of all he could do the chill penetrated more deeply into his bones. He realized that if he were not rescued within a few hours he would freeze to death, for no one could long remain inactive in that biting cold. Dave smiled somewhat grimly as he reflected that he was now in the predicament of the helpless creatures which every day perished in his traps.

Suddenly his unpleasant thoughts were interrupted by a scratching in the snow behind him, and turning quickly he saw a small black and white dog regarding him in a friendly manner. Dave's heart leaped. Surely, where there was a dog there must be a man. He held out his hand to the dog while he shouted again and again with all his might, waiting breathlessly each time for the answer which did not come.

At length he gave up the attempt and turned his attention to his small companion. It was evident that the dog was alone, but perhaps if he could be made to understand, he might bring help. With this thought new hope returned. Pointing in the direction from which the dog had appeared and looking intently into the great brown eyes, Dave commanded, "Go, sir! Go get your master."

Several times the words were repeated while Pal stood undecided. Then suddenly he seemed to understand and with a joyous bark trotted swiftly away and soon disappeared down a white corridor of the woods. It was not until he had gone that Dave remembered the axe which the dog might have brought to him had he not, in his eagerness, forgotten it. He groaned and buried his face in his hands, but the opportunity was gone and he resolutely fixed his thoughts upon the hope of the dog's return.

The woods were very still. As the coppery sun sank lower, it cast long blue shadows upon the snow, while the cold grew more intense. Dave shivered and huddled down as far as possible into his coat.

Gradually there grew upon him the feeling that he was not alone; that he was being watched by hostile eyes. A strange prickling of his scalp under his fur cap caused him to turn his head slightly and so meet the unwinking gaze of a pair of pale yellow orbs. Involuntarily Dave stiffened. The creature's round, moon-like face, gray-brown fur and tufted ears proclaimed it a Canada lynx, one of the most savage of the cat tribe.



As a rule, the lynx, in common with other wilderness inhabitants, is shy of man; still he is not to be trusted. The winter had been a hard one, game was scarce and the animal was emboldened by hunger. Moreover it seemed to know that the man was crippled. Slowly it advanced, its body almost brushing the snow, its huge furry pads making no sound upon the smooth crust, its unwinking eyes fixed upon those of the man. 16

The perspiration stood out upon Dave's forehead as he stared back into the brilliant, cruel eyes of the lynx. He was unarmed save for his hunting knife, a poor weapon against so savage a beast, yet he drew it, determined to die fighting.

A few paces away the lynx paused and the trapper could see the muscles of its powerful hind legs gather for the spring. His own muscles braced instinctively to meet it. But strangely the animal's attention wavered. It sniffed the air uncertainly. An instant later there came a furious barking and a yell which seemed to shatter the silence as a delicate vase is shattered by a blow. The lynx shrank back and with one bound melted into the shadows of the forest. At the same moment Pal, closely followed by his master, rushed up and with a friendly red tongue licked the trapper's face.

"I didn't know I could yell so," chuckled the Hermit. "Like to scared the beast to death. It is a good thing Pal found you when he did, though. You look about frozen." 17

He had picked up the trapper's axe, which he now used to good effect. In another moment the cruel jaws of the trap had been loosened and the foot was free, though Dave was unable to stand. Good woodsmen as they were, they were equal to the emergency. The axe again came into play, and on a rude sledge made of thick spruce boughs, the wounded man began the trip to the Hermit's cabin which was nearer than his own. Pal frisked joyously about, now at the head of the little procession, again bringing up the rear, growling deep in his throat at some imaginary enemy of the wonderful beings whom it was his duty to protect. It was some distance through the heavy forest, fast growing shadowy with the coming of night. Before the old rail fence came into view, the Hermit was spent with fatigue, while Dave Lansing was all but fainting from the pain of his rough ride.

At length, however, the cabin was reached. The almost frozen trapper was gradually thawed out and his wound dressed, the Hermit showing himself wonderfully skillful in the process. This done, the host set about the preparation of supper while Dave lay comfortably in the bunk watching him, with a warm glow of thankfulness for his rescue and a determination to be more humane in his dealings with the creatures of the wild. As for Pal, he dozed contentedly before the fire, his eyes occasionally turning to the man whom he had rescued from death, but for the most part following every movement of his adored master. 18

THE CALL OF THE SPRING

As the days began to lengthen and the sun climbed higher, the forest country of the north stirred under the icy fetters that had bound it for long, weary months, during which the snow had drifted deep and famine had stalked the trails. Under the influence of a warm south wind the sunlit hours became musical with the steady drip, drip of melting snow, while new life seemed to flow in the veins of the forest creatures grown gaunt under the pinch of hunger. Only Kagh, the porcupine, had remained full fed, but Kagh had been unusually blessed by a kind Providence, in that every tree held a meal for him in its soft inner fibers.

It was yet too early to expect the final breaking up of winter. There would still be days when the 19

cold would be intense and snow would drift in the trails. Nevertheless spring had called, and even the sluggish blood of the porcupine responded. Every day the earth's white mantle grew more frayed about the edges, leaving a faint tinge of green on warm southward slopes.

20

It was on one of these mild days that Mokwa, the black bear, shouldered aside the underbrush which concealed the mouth of the snug cave where he had hibernated, and stepped forth into the awakening world. Half blinded by the glare of sunlight upon the snow, he stood blinking in the doorway before he shambled down the slope to a great oak tree where a vigorous scratching among the snow and leaves brought to light a number of acorns. These he devoured greedily and, having crunched the last sweet morsel, sniffed eagerly about for more. Mokwa had fasted long, and now his appetite demanded more hearty fare than nuts and acorns.

The nights were chill, but each day brought a perceptible shrinking of the snowy mantle, leaving bare patches of wet, brown earth. One day Mokwa, breaking through a thick clump of juniper bushes, came out upon the bank of the Little Vermilion, its glassy surface as yet apparently unaffected by the thaw. For a moment the bear hesitated, his little near-sighted eyes searching the opposite bank and his nose sniffing the wind inquiringly; then, as if reassured, he stepped out upon the ice and made for the opposite shore.

21

On the surface the ice appeared solid enough, but in reality it was so honeycombed by the thaw that it threatened to break up at any moment and go out with a rush. Mokwa was in mid-stream when a slight tremor beneath his feet warned him of danger. He broke into a shuffling trot, but had gone only a few steps when, with a groaning and cracking which made the hair rise upon his back, the entire surface of the river seemed to heave. A great crack appeared just before him. With a frantic leap he cleared it, only to be confronted the next moment by a lane of rushing black water too wide for even his powerful muscles to bridge. Mokwa crouched down in the center of his ice cake, which was now being swept along in mid-stream with a rapidity which made him giddy. The weight of the bear helped to steady his queer craft, and unless it should strike another floating cake, Mokwa was in no immediate danger.

Thus he drifted for miles, while the banks seemed to glide swiftly to the rear and the stream grew gradually wider. At length a faint roar, growing louder every moment, caused Mokwa to stir uneasily as he peered ahead across the seething mass of black water and tumbling ice cakes. Suddenly his body stiffened and his eyes took on new hope. His cake had entered a side current which carried him near shore. Closer and closer drifted the great cakes all about him until at length, with a hoarse grinding, they met, piling one upon the other, but making a solid bridge from shore to shore. The jam lasted but a moment, but in that moment the bear leaped, as if on steel springs, and as the ice again drifted apart and swept on to the falls not far below, he scrambled ashore, panting but safe. Here, with tongue hanging out, he stood a moment watching the heaving waters which seemed maddened at the loss of their prey. Then he turned and vanished into the forest.

22

Mokwa now found himself in unknown territory, but, as he managed to find food to supply his needs, he accepted the situation philosophically and was far from being unhappy.

One day his wanderings brought him to the edge of the wilderness where, inclosed by a zigzag fence of rails, he caught his first glimpse of human habitation. Concealed in a clump of young poplars, he gazed curiously at the Hermit who was chopping wood at the rear of his cabin, and at Pal who ran about, sniffing eagerly here and there, but never far from his adored master.

23

At length one of his excursions into the border of the forest brought to Pal's keen nostrils the scent of the bear. Pal hated bears. The hair stiffened along his back while a growl grew in his throat, rumbled threateningly and broke forth into a volley of shrill barks.

"Bear! Bear! Bear!" he called in plain dog language; but the ears of the Hermit seemed to be strangely dull and, thinking that the dog had taken up the trail of a rabbit or at the most that of a fox, he whistled Pal back to the clearing. Pal obeyed reluctantly, stopping every few steps to look back and voice his opinion of the intruder; but, by the time he had joined his master, the bear had slipped into the forest.

Late that same afternoon, as Mokwa stood at the top of a small hill, a bright glitter from a grove of straight, smooth trees below, caught his eye. The glitter was alluring and, with no thought save to gratify his curiosity, the bear shambled quickly down the slope and brought up before a tree on the trunk of which hung a small, shining bucket. The sunlight reflected from the tin dazzled his little eyes, while to his ears came a curious, musical "plop, plop."

24

Without even taking the precaution to glance around him, Mokwa reared upon his haunches and examined the pail into which a clear fluid splashed, drop by drop, from a little trough inserted in the tree. A faint but delectable odour drifted to the sniffing black nose of the bear. It was Mokwa's first experience with maple sap and he proceeded to make the most of it.

Though unable to reach the liquid, owing to the smallness of the pail, he could easily lick the spile which conveyed the sap from the tree, and this Mokwa did with evident relish. His tongue sought out every crevice and even greedily lapped the tree about the gash; then, growing impatient at the slowness with which the wonderful fluid appeared, he turned his attention to the pail. Mokwa wished, no doubt, that several inches might have been added to the length of his tongue, but, though that useful member failed him, necessity found a way. He soon discovered that it was possible to dip in one paw from which the sweetness could easily be licked. However, the pressure of his other paw upon the rim of the pail caused it to tip, and sliding from the spile, it rolled upon the ground.

25

The accident did not dismay the bear. On the contrary it filled him with joy, for it served to bring

the contents of the pail within reach, and he lapped up every drop before it could soak into the earth. The pail, too, was cleansed of sap as far as the eager tongue could reach, though, during the process, it rolled about in a way which sorely tried the bear's patience. At length it came to rest against the trunk of a tree, with which solid backing Mokwa was enabled to thrust in his muzzle far enough to lap up the last sweet drops.

But alas! when he attempted to withdraw his head, Mokwa found himself a prisoner. With the pressure against the tree the sap-bucket had become wedged so tightly upon his head that it refused to come off. Though the bear twisted and turned, banging the tin upon the ground and against trunks of trees, the endeavor to rid himself of this uncomfortable and unwelcome headdress was in vain. Mokwa grew more and more frantic and the din was so terrific that a horrified cottontail, with eyes bulging until they seemed in danger of rolling down his nose, sat frozen in his tracks at the edge of a spruce thicket. The Hermit, on his way to inspect his sap-buckets, broke into a run.

26

Mokwa, in his mad scramble, had paused a moment for breath. He heard the man's footfalls and the sound filled him with fresh alarm. With a last despairing effort he rose upon his haunches and tugged at the battered pail. This time his efforts were rewarded. A peculiar twist sent it flying, and the bear, free at last, made quick time to the friendly shelter of the spruce thicket, sped by the loud laughter of the Hermit.

"Guess that bear will never bother my sap-buckets again," the man chuckled, as he picked up his bright new pail, battered now past all recognition.

On the day following his harrowing experience in the sugar-maple grove Mokwa was a much chastened bear, but the incident soon faded from his memory and he once more trod the forest trails as if they had been presented to him for his sole use by Dame Nature herself. In the swamp the pointed hoods of skunk cabbage were appearing, the heat generated by their growth producing an open place in the snow about them. The odour from which the name is derived was not at all offensive to the bear who eagerly devoured many of the plants, varying the diet with roots and small twigs swelling with sap.

27

In the damp hollows the coarse grass was turning green, and before long the swamps were noisy with the shrill voice of the hylas, while the streams once more teemed with fish.

As the season advanced Mokwa grew fat and contented, exerting himself only enough to shuffle from one good feeding ground to another. He would grunt complainingly at any extra exertion, as, for instance, that which was required to reach the small wild sweet apples which he dearly loved, and which were clustered thickly on their small trees at the edge of the forest. At this season Mokwa's diet was almost strictly vegetarian and the smaller creatures of the wilderness, upon which he sometimes preyed, had little to fear from him.

The long summer days drifted by and autumn was not far away. Mokwa grew restless; both his food and surroundings palled upon him. At length, following a vague though persistent inner impulse, he turned his face northward toward the hills which had been his birthplace and from which he had been so strangely carried.

28

Long before daylight he had taken the trail and, in spite of the protests of his overfed body, had pushed steadily on, pausing at the edge of the tamarack swamp long enough to open with his sharp claws a rotting log that lay in his path, a log which yielded him a meal of fat grubs. Then he shambled on, drawn by some irresistible force. The mist which hung like a white veil over the low ground bordering the swamp was fast dissolving in curling wisps of vapor under the ardent rays of the sun. The forest was alive with bird song; squirrels chattered to him from the trees and the rattle of the kingfisher was in his ears, but Mokwa held a steady course northward, his little eyes fixed on some unseen goal.

About noon he came out upon the bank of the Little Vermilion, not far from the place where he had so narrowly escaped death on the floating ice. The roar of the falls came to him clearly on the still air and the big bear shivered. If he remembered his wild ride, however, the memory was quickly effaced by the discovery of a blueberry thicket, a luscious storehouse that apparently had never been rifled. Mokwa feasted greedily, at first stripping the branches of fruit and leaves alike; but at length, the keen edge of his appetite dulled, he sought only the finest berries, crushing many and ruthlessly tearing down whole bushes in his greed to get a branch of especially choice fruit. Then, his face and paws stained with the juice and his sides uncomfortably distended, he sought a secluded nook in which to sleep off his feast.

29

Toward evening, when the shadows grew long and the hills were touched with the red and gold of the setting sun, Mokwa again took up the northward trail, to which he held steadily most of the night. Morning found him emerging from a thicket of juniper upon the banks of the river at a place that he instantly recognized as the one from which he had begun his unwilling travels.

Turning sharply to the right, the bear's eager eyes discovered the trunk of a hemlock which had been blasted by lightning. Rearing himself upon his haunches against it, and reaching to his utmost, he prepared to leave his signature where he had so often left it, always above all rivals. Ere his unsheathed claws could leave their mark, however, he paused, gazing at another mark several inches above his own.

30

The hair rose along his back and his little eyes gleamed red while he growled deep in his chest; yet, stretch as he would, he could not quite reach the signature of the other bear. Mokwa dropped to all fours, rage filling his breast at this indication of a rival in what he considered his own domain. He hurried on, keenly alert, growing more and more incensed at every fresh trace of the interloper. Here he came upon evidences of a meal which the rival had made upon wake-

robin roots. Satisfied before he had devoured all he had dug, some of the roots still lay scattered about, but, though Mokwa was hungry, he disdained the crumbs from the other's table. He dined, instead, upon a fat field mouse which he caught napping beside its runway. Again he pressed on, his anger steadily fanned by fresh evidences of the hated rival who seemed always just ahead.

Mokwa slept that night in his old den, but the next morning found him once more on the trail of the enemy, a trail which was still fresh. He had not gone far when his rival was, for the time being, forgotten, while he sniffed eagerly at a new odour which drifted to his sensitive nostrils. It was the scent of honey, a delicacy which a bear prizes above all else. At that moment, as if to confirm the evidence of his nose, a bee flew by, followed by another and another, all winging their way back to the hive. The red gleam faded from Mokwa's eyes as he followed their flight; then he broke into a shuffling run as he came within sight of the tree to which the bees were converging from all directions.

31

About half way up the great trunk Mokwa's eyes discovered a hole which he knew at once to be the mouth of the hive. He quickly climbed the tree on the side opposite the hole, peering cautiously around until he had reached a point directly opposite the hive. Then, craftily reaching one paw around the tree, with his claws he ripped off a great section of bark, disclosing a mass of bees and reeking comb.

At once the bees seemed to go mad. Their angry buzzing filled the air, but failed to strike terror to the heart of the robber. His thick fur rendered him immune to their fiery darts, though he was careful to protect his one vulnerable spot, the tender tip of his nose. In another moment he would have been enjoying the feast had he not discovered something which caused the hair to rise along his back and his eyes to glow with hate.

32

Advancing from the opposite direction was another bear, a bear larger than Mokwa and scarred with the evidences of many battles, a bear who trod the forest with a calm air of ownership. Across Mokwa's mind flashed the memory of a certain tree with his own signature the highest save one. The owner of that one was now approaching with the evident intention of claiming the sweet prize.

Mokwa's anger rose. He scrambled from the tree and, with a savage roar, was upon his rival almost before the latter had become aware of his presence. And then occurred a memorable battle, a battle for sovereignty and the freedom of the trails. Mokwa's rival was the larger of the two, but Mokwa had the advantage of youth. Sounds of the fray penetrated far into the woods. Delicate flowers and vigorous young saplings were trampled underfoot; timid little wild creatures watched with fast beating hearts, ready for instant retreat should they be observed, while above their heads the bees were busy carrying the exposed honey to a safer hiding-place.

33

Back and forth the combatants surged. For a time it was impossible to judge to whom the victory would go; but at length youth began to tell. The older bear was pushed steadily back. At last, torn and bleeding, his breath coming in laboring gasps, he turned and beat a retreat, far from the domain of the bear whose claim he had preempted.



Mokwa, too exhausted to follow, glared after him until he had vanished among the trees; then, much the worse for his fight, he turned again to the spoils, now doubly his by the right of conquest as well as of discovery. The owners of the hive, too busy to molest him, went on about their work of salvaging the contents and Mokwa made a wonderful meal, although he licked up a number of bees in his eagerness for the honey. Then, gluttoned with the feast, he crept away to lick his bruises and recover from the fray.

34

Mokwa fell asleep with the pleasant assurance that no more would the hated signature appear above his own on the hemlock trunk. The spring had called him to great adventure, but the summer had led him home and left him master of the forest.

35

As the moon swung clear of the pointed fir tops and shone full upon a tall spruce tree in the wilderness, a dark object, looking not unlike a great bird's nest upon one of the branches, suddenly came to life. Kagh, the porcupine, had awakened from his dreamless slumber and, though scarce two hours had elapsed since his last satisfying meal upon tender poplar shoots, he decided that it was time to eat. With a dry rustling of quills and scratching of sharp claws upon the bark, he scrambled clumsily down the tree. Then, with an air of calm fearlessness which few of the wilderness folk can assume, he set off toward the east, his short legs moving slowly and awkwardly as if unaccustomed to travel upon the ground.

Now, when Kagh left the spruce tree, it seemed he had in mind a definite goal; yet he had not gone far when his movements took on the aimlessness characteristic of most of a porcupine's wanderings. Here and there he paused to browse upon a young willow shoot or to sniff inquiringly at the base of some great tree. Once he turned sharply aside to poke an inquisitive nose into a prostrate, hollow log, where a meal of fat white grubs rewarded his search. 36

Kagh emerged from the thick, tangled underbrush upon a faint trail, invisible to all save the keen eyes of the forest folk. Here travel was easier and he made better time, though it could not be said that he hurried. He had not gone far upon the trail when he heard behind him a soft pad, pad. At the sound he paused a moment to stare indifferently, expecting to be given a wide berth, for, though Kagh seldom takes the offensive, even the savage lynx, unless crazed by winter hunger, will let him severely alone. This time, however, Kagh was disappointed, for the newcomer was a furry bear cub who had never had experience with a porcupine to teach him wisdom.

The cub stopped and sat upon his haunches to stare curiously at the strange creature in his path, while Kagh, incensed by the delay, tucked his nose under him until he resembled nothing so much as a huge bristling pincushion. He lay still, his small eyes shining dully among his quills. The cub regarded him for a moment; then he advanced and reached out an inquisitive paw toward the queer-looking ball. For this Kagh had been waiting. There was a lightning swing of his armed tail which, if it had reached its mark, would have filled the paw with deadly quills. Fortunately, however, the cruel barbs failed to reach their mark, for, an instant before the swing, the small bear received a cuff which sent him sprawling into the bushes, and Mother Bruin stood in the trail confronting the porcupine. 37

Kagh, like most of the wilderness folk, knows that there is a vast difference between a full-grown bear and a furry, inquisitive cub. Though he was not afraid, the appearance of the mother bear was more than he had bargained for, and he immediately rolled himself into a ball again, every quill bristling defiantly. The old bear, however, wise in the lore of the dim trails, paid no more attention to him. Calling her cub, she shambled off through the bushes, the youngster casting many a backward glance at this little, but seemingly very dangerous creature. Kagh went on his way well satisfied with himself. As before, he traveled leisurely, pausing often to browse or to stare at some larger animal upon whose path he chanced. 38

Of all the creatures of the wilderness the porcupine seems the most slow and stupid, yet he bears a charmed life. In the woods, where few may cross the path of the hunter and live, the porcupine is usually allowed to go unhurt. Because he can easily be killed without a gun, his flesh has more than once, it is said, been the means of saving a lost hunter from starvation. As a rule, the creatures of the wilderness, too, let him strictly alone, knowing well the deadly work of his quills, which, when embedded in the flesh, sink deeper and deeper with every frantic effort toward dislodgment.

Only under the stress of winter hunger will an animal sometimes throw caution to the winds and attack this living pincushion. And then his dinner is usually the price of his life, for there is no escaping the lightning-like swing of the barbed tail.

In the course of time Kagh came to the edge of a tamarack swamp. Here the ground was soft and spongy. The prostrate trunks of a number of great trees lay half submerged in lily-choked pools, beside which stalks of the brilliant cardinal flower flamed by day in the green dimness. Scrambling upon one of these decaying logs the porcupine made his way, almost eagerly for him, far out among the lily-pads. Kagh reveled in succulent lily stems and buds, and as he feasted he uttered little grunts of satisfaction. 39

Here he would probably have been content to spend the remainder of the night had not an interruption occurred. Another porcupine crawled out upon the same log and proceeded confidently toward the choice position at its farther end. At sight of Kagh he paused a moment; then he went on, his quills raised. Kagh looked up from his feasting, astonished that any one should thus intrude upon his hunting-ground.

And then on the end of the old log in the tamarack swamp was fought a bloodless battle, a conflict mainly of pushing and shoving. Much to his disgust, Kagh was hustled to the very end of the log and was at length pushed off, splashing into the cool water beneath. For a moment the victor peered down at him with indifferent eyes, then deliberately turned his back and began to feed upon the lilies, leaving Kagh either to sink or swim. The latter, however, was in no danger. Buoyed up by his hollow quills he soon reached the shore, none the worse for his sudden bath, save for his sorely ruffled feelings. For the time being his hunger for lily-pads had been satisfied but, as he shambled out of the swamp toward the dryer woods, he grunted complainingly. 40

A dim light among the trees warned him of the approach of day, and Kagh looked about for a place to take a nap. Immediately in his path a prostrate pine trunk with a snug hollow at the center offered an inviting shelter, but when the porcupine poked in his blunt black nose, he found the retreat occupied. A red fox lay curled in a furry ball, fast asleep. Even in slumber, however, a fox is alert. At the sound of Kagh's heavy breathing the occupant of the log was instantly wide awake.

By right of discovery and occupation the hollow trunk belonged to the fox, but Kagh's moral sense was either lacking or undeveloped. He wanted the hollow. Therefore he set about securing it in the easiest and most effective way. By pressing his quills close to his body and backing into the log, the sharp points presented a formidable front against which the fox had no protection. So, as Kagh backed in, the fox backed out, incensed but helpless. In a very few moments the porcupine was fast asleep, his conscience quite untroubled. As the sun rose higher, a bloodthirsty weasel thrust its pointed nose into the log and glared with red eyes of hate upon the sleeping porcupine, then went his way, spreading terror and destruction among the smaller wood folk.

41

About noon Kagh awoke and, crawling to the opening of the log, looked about him. As a rule the porcupine travels and feeds by night, but Kagh was a creature of whims and he decided that he had been fasting quite long enough. Accordingly he set out in a leisurely search for food, loafing along the base of a sunny ledge of rock. A meal of grubs and peppery wake-robin roots left him happy, but still he rambled on, following his nose and alert for any new adventure.

Suddenly he lifted his head and sniffed the air. To his nostrils drifted the faint scent of smoke, and smoke in Kagh's mind was associated with campfires and delectable bits of bacon rind or salty wood. For the first time since leaving his spruce tree the evening before, Kagh hurried. He blundered along the trail in a way which would have scandalized the other forest inhabitants, among whom silence is the first law of preservation.

42

Near the camp a rabbit had crept timidly from the forest and was sitting erect upon its haunches, its quivering nose testing the wind, its bulging eyes missing nothing that went on around it. Kagh paid no more attention to the rabbit than to the bush under which it sat. He blundered into the camp, from which the hunter was absent in search of game, but the next moment he backed off, squeaking with pain and surprise. He had walked straight into the warm ashes of the campfire.

His discomfort was soon forgotten, however, as he came upon a board saturated with bacon grease. Kagh's teeth were sharp as chisels and the sound of his gnawing could be heard far in the still air. He ate all he could hold of the toothsome wood, then started upon a tour of inspection of the camp.

An open tent-flap drew his attention. Forthwith he walked inside, knocking down as he went, an axe which had been propped close beside the entrance. Kagh sampled the axe-helve and, finding to his liking the faint taste of salt from the hand of the man who had wielded it, he succeeded in rendering it almost useless before his interest flagged. His inquisitive nose now drew him to a small bag of tobacco beside which lay a much blackened cob pipe. Whether Kagh did not care for tobacco, or whether some new fancy at that moment took possession of him, no one can tell. At any rate he nosed the pipe from its place, scattered the tobacco to the four winds, and then shambled from the tent and disappeared among the trees.

43

Ten minutes later he was sound asleep in a poplar sapling. What the hunter said when he returned to camp and beheld the work of his visitor is not recorded.

Kagh's was a restless spirit. Moonrise again found him abroad in search of food and adventure. This time he traveled far for a slow old fellow. At length he came to the zigzag fence of split rails which prevented the wilderness from encroaching upon the clearing of the Hermit.

From the top rail of the fence he could see the gray roof of the Hermit's cabin, silvered with the radiance of the full moon. At no time was Kagh troubled with bashfulness and now, under the influence of that flooding radiance, he decided to investigate the cabin and the clearing. The fence, ending in a rough wall of field stone, made a capital highway along which he shuffled happily until brought to an abrupt halt by the appearance of another fence traveler. The white quills with their dark points erected themselves from his blackish-brown fur until he looked twice his normal size. This time, however, his armor failed to strike terror to the heart of the enemy.

44

Kagh, the porcupine, was scornful of man and feared but one beast, the one who now advanced toward him along the wall. That long, silky fur, jet black save for two broad white stripes running down the back, and that plummy tail, could belong to but one creature. The skunk, returning from a neighborly visit to the Hermit's cabin, probably with a view to a meal of fat chicken, advanced with its usual air of owning the earth. This time the porcupine did not dispute the passage. Instead, he curled up and dropped to the ground, whence he proceeded on his way, complaining peevishly to himself.

All was still about the cabin. Kagh circled it until he came to the lean-to at the back that served the Hermit as a storehouse. Here the animal's useful nose caught an alluring scent. The logs of the building were thick, but patient search was at length rewarded by the discovery of a large chink. His keen cutting-teeth at once came into play and the sound of his gnawing, which carried clearly in the still night air, awakened the Hermit.

45



"Only a porcy," he said to himself, after listening a moment, and he went peacefully to sleep, little dreaming of the havoc which that same "porcy" was to make.

In a very short time Kagh had succeeded in gnawing a hole large enough to permit his entrance into the storehouse. Then indeed he found himself in rich pasturage. The first thing he came to was a small basket of eggs, a delicacy which he prized highly. When these were neatly reduced to shells, he gnawed a hole in a barrel near by and sampled the little stream of flour which ran out. This was not to be compared with eggs, however, and after scattering a goodly quantity about the floor, he finished his meal on a side of fat bacon. When at last he turned his face toward the forest, he found that the hole, which had been a tight squeeze when he entered, was now out of the question, and he must do some further gnawing before he could squeeze his fat sides through. 46

Once in the open he set a leisurely course toward the borders of the forest, only to be interrupted by a series of staccato barks as Pal rounded the cabin and glimpsed the night prowler. Like the bear cub, Pal had had no experience with a porcupine to teach him prudence. He felt that the beast had no business in the clearing and accordingly charged, barking furiously, only to be met by a round ball of bristling quills. Pal stopped, clearly astonished. Then, as the ball lay deceptively still, he rashly tried closer investigation, and was met with a smashing blow from the barbed tail. 47

Several quills fastened themselves in the dog's soft and tender nose and there they stayed, paining him unbearably. The aggressive challenge changed to yelps of pain and, as swiftly as he had charged, Pal retreated to the cabin, vainly trying to free his muzzle of the fiery barbs. With his efforts they but sank the deeper. He suffered agony until his master, aroused by the outcry, came to his relief. Holding the struggling dog firmly with both hands, the Hermit extracted the quills with his teeth. It was a painful process and both were glad when the last quill was out.

Meanwhile, Kagh continued on his placid way toward the black forest wall, just beyond the rail fence. He had fed well and had quickly routed his enemy. Altogether he considered the world a happy place for porcupines. In the darkness which precedes the dawn he took his way to a slender poplar sapling standing near the border of the woods. This he climbed as far as his weight would permit and, seated comfortably on one branch, with his hand-like paws tightly clasping another, he went peacefully to sleep, lulled by every passing breeze.

48

THE TRAIL OF THE MOOSE

On a bare, rocky promontory far up in the north country, where the turbulent waters of the Little Vermilion cut through lanes of pointed fir and dark spruce, a gigantic moose stood, his ungainly body and huge antlers silhouetted against the sky of sunset. Below him the noisy, hurrying waters were churned into foam over innumerable hidden rocks; to the rear lay the wilderness, green, shadowy and mysterious.

The moose was a magnificent beast, the ridge of his shoulders rising to a height of little less than seven feet. His great antlers, the admiration and desire of every hunter in the Little Vermilion country, showed a spread of almost six feet from tip to tip. As if carved from the rock the big moose stood, his eyes on the distant waters, only his ears moving slightly to test the wind. Then, as some vagrant whiff from the gently moving air assailed the sensitive nostrils, or some faint sound reached his ears, the great beast turned and vanished into the forest, as light and soundless as thistledown for all his twelve hundred pounds of bulk. Not even a twig snapped under his feet. 49



As night shrouded the dim trails, the moose turned southward through the darkness. In spite of the dense wilderness he advanced rapidly, his huge antlers laid along his back that they might impede his progress as little as possible, his nose thrust upward, sifting the wind. In about an hour he came out upon the shore of a lonely pond among the hills. A faint breeze ruffled the mirror-like surface upon which the delicate white cups of water-lilies seemed to hold a light of their own among the dark green pads. 50

With a sigh of satisfaction the moose waded in and plunged his muzzle into the clear water, breaking the star reflections into innumerable points of light as the ripples widened over the pond. For some time he fed greedily, moving slowly along the shore. At times his great head was wholly submerged as his long, flexible upper lip sought out the succulent roots and buds; again it was raised, while from the gently moving jaws the water dripped with a musical plash into the pond.

Suddenly the wilderness was startled from its calm by the appearance of a dazzling finger of light which crept across the pond and came to rest upon the dark bulk of the moose at his feeding. The great beast raised his head to stare into the strange, blinding radiance. He could not see the dark form crouched in the boat behind the light, nor the long sinister object leveled upon him. He could only stare, fascinated, an easy mark for the hunter behind the jack-light.

From the forest in the rear of the moose came a faint sound. It was only the crackling of a twig, yet it served to break the spell under which the beast stood, for in the wilderness the snap of a twig is one of the most ominous of sounds. The animal wheeled sharply just as the hunter pulled the trigger. There was the sharp crack of a rifle which woke the echoes and startled the wilderness into an added alertness, while the ball sped across the water, barely missing the form of the moose. Before the disappointed hunter could again pull the trigger the great beast had reached the shore with a bound and was crashing through the forest, over windfalls and through thickets with the speed of an express train. Lesser wilderness folk watched his flight with startled eyes, keeping well out of his path. Even the fierce Canada lynx knew better than to attack that living whirlwind, though his pale eyes gleamed maliciously and his claws dug deep into the bark as the moose passed directly beneath the branch on which the big cat crouched. The fleeing animal did not see him. 51

That night, far from the pond, the moose made his bed on a wooded knoll, lying, as is the custom of his kind, with his back to the wind. Should danger approach from the rear his keen nose would give him warning, while eyes and ears would protect him from anything approaching against the wind. 52

With the first light of day he was on his feet, enjoying a breakfast of birch twigs, obtained by breasting down a sapling and holding it beneath his body while he fed upon the tender tips. His meal finished, he backed off, leaving the sapling to spring up again unharmed. His fear of the night before had vanished and once more he was lord of the wilderness, a beast to be admired but let severely alone.

Again he turned southward, stepping daintily, the "bell," or tuft of coarse hair beneath his chin, swinging to his pace. Occasionally a cottontail leaped from his path and paused to stare, big ears alert and nose twitching sensitively; or a red squirrel, that saucy mischief-maker of the woods, chattered derisively at him from the safe side of a spruce trunk. But the moose paid no more heed to them than to the lofty trees which arched above his path.

Gradually the shadows lengthened and again dusk swathed the forest aisles in gray mystery. As the darkness deepened, the moose moved more cautiously, testing each step for crackling twigs. His great head swung much lower than the ridge of his shoulders as he paused occasionally to listen, his gray-brown form melting into the shadows as if he wore a cloak of invisibility. 53

Thus he came again to the wilderness pond where he had so nearly met fate in the form of the hunter's bullet. The glare was gone and peace once more brooded over the placid water. For a long moment he stood upon the bank, listening and looking; then a vagrant puff of air brought to his nostrils a strange odor. His great muscles tightened, but, as no sound broke the stillness, he moved cautiously in the direction of the scent.

At the edge of a small natural clearing among the trees he paused to reconnoiter. In the center of the clearing glowed the embers of a campfire, the smoke of which had reached him at the pond. A small tongue of flame occasionally leaped up, illuminating a circle of darkness. On the side opposite the moose lay a still, dark form wrapped in a blanket.

For some time the animal stood, the pupils of his eyes contracting or expanding as the glow of the embers waxed or waned. Then a brand in the campfire burned through and broke with a snap, sending up a shower of sparks. Whether the sound reminded him of the rifle report of the previous night or whether the man-smell at that moment startled him, is uncertain. At any rate his eyes suddenly grew red with anger and, with a roar, he charged straight toward the sleeping form beside the fire.

54

Immediately the hunter awoke to action. In order to free himself of the entangling blanket he rolled over, a fortunate move which accomplished a double purpose in that it took him just out of reach of the charging animal. Before the moose could stay his mad rush and turn, the man had scrambled up a tree. From that safe perch he watched helplessly the destruction of his camp. The hunter being out of reach, the big moose charged upon his camp supplies, and the night was made hideous with the crashing of pots and pans.

The noise seemed to drive the brute to a frenzy. With a wild bellow he crashed away through the forest, the remains of a frying pan impaled upon the sharp point of an antler. As he rushed, it banged against trees and drove him to greater speed until it was left behind on a branch. As for the hunter, he could only gaze wrathfully upon his wrecked camp and bemoan the fate which had twice brought to him the coveted game, only to snatch it away again unharmed.

55

The night tumult had aroused the Hermit in his cabin, a mile distant at the edge of the forest. With the coming of daylight he set out to ascertain what had happened. By good fortune he stumbled upon the camp just as the disgusted hunter was leaving and he heard the story of the charging moose, the evidence of whose mad flight was apparent for some distance. He invited the hunter to spend a few days in his cabin, an invitation which the man thankfully accepted. Though each morning found him abroad, armed and eager, he caught no further glimpse of the big moose.

Meanwhile, the wilderness was becoming an uncomfortable place for the hunter. The myriad swarms of insects gave him no peace by day or night, while the big moose was spending long peaceful hours far away at the edge of a tiny, wood-girt lake. During the day the moose dozed on a cool mud bed in the shallows, his body submerged save for the tip of his nose. This, too, disappeared from sight occasionally as the flies became too persistent. At night he wandered abroad, searching out the best feeding-grounds.

56

Late summer gave place to autumn with its warm mellow days and its nights tinged with frost. The sun shone through a faint haze, touching to glowing color the maples in the swamp and the golden birches on the knolls. Now and then a leaf drifted to the ground with a faint rustle.

At the edge of the wilderness where stood the cabin of the Hermit and those of his widely scattered neighbors, the aromatic smell of burning leaves hung all day in the still air, while the early stars looked down on bright heaps of burning rubbish. It was the outdoor cleaning time.

On several occasions, as the Hermit stood dreamily watching the thin wisps of smoke curl upward from the burning heap, he heard the call of a moose to its mate or its challenge to a rival. The sound thrilled him as no sound had for years. He longed to answer the summons. Accordingly, one day he made a trip into the borders of the wilderness where a group of slender birch trees huddled. Like Hiawatha he stripped one of a section of its bark.

The next evening found him seated comfortably on the top rail of the snake fence which separated his upland pasture from the closely pressing forest. The sun had set, and a mellow twilight with a tang of frost in the air was fast obscuring the black stumps and welding together the clumps of blueberries and wild raspberries.

57

The man sat so still that gradually the small inhabitants of the wilderness went fearlessly about their hunting or playing. If they noticed him at all, perhaps they mistook him for a stake of the fence upon which he sat. As he watched dreamily, the dusk grew deeper and the first stars came out, one by one. Then the harvest moon appeared, peeping over the tops of the firs and finally riding clear in the dark sky, throwing a mysterious radiance over the clumps of juniper in the pasture and trying vainly to penetrate the thick stand of second-growth fir, spruce and maple at the edge of the forest.

Now the Hermit slowly raised to his lips the birch-bark trumpet which he had fashioned. The next moment the brooding silence of the night was startled by a harsh roar. The Hermit chuckled softly. "If there is a moose within a mile he can't help hearing that," he thought.

He waited, his heart beating fast with excitement. The echoes rolled for a moment among the hills, then died away, leaving the silence unbroken.

58

Again he raised the trumpet to his lips and sent out a call into the night. This time the sound had scarcely died away when an answering challenge rolled from a pair of great lungs back in the wilderness. In his excitement the man almost lost his perch upon the fence. "That's an old bull, sure enough. Probably the same one that broke up the hunter's camp," he said, speaking aloud, as is often the custom of those living alone.

He listened a moment. Hearing no further sound, once more he raised his trumpet, this time giving a low, seductive call. The effect was immediate and unexpected. A short distance back in the forest there came the crash of trampled undergrowth and, the next moment, a huge black bulk detached itself from the dark background and stood forth in the moonlight, alarmingly close.



THE HERMIT TOOK THE ONE CHANCE THAT PRESENTED ITSELF.

The Hermit caught his breath. It was without doubt the big moose, and that he was in no gentle mood was soon apparent. He listened a moment, motionless as the trees at his back; then he brought forth a harsh roar that sent a chill to the heart of the unprotected man. When he had come to the pasture to try his trumpet, the Hermit had little expected an answer, or at best had hoped merely to call up a cow moose. Instead, he found himself confronted by the biggest bull moose he had ever seen. Though his heart thrilled at sight of the great head and antlers, he wished ardently that there might have been some stronger protection than the frail fence between them.

Absolute immovability was his only hope and, like Molly Cottontail, he "froze." Incensed at the silence where he had expected to find either a mate or a rival, the big moose began to grumble deep in his throat and to shake his antlers threateningly. Then he advanced a few steps. Perspiration stood out upon the face of the Hermit, but he made no movement. The moonlight was deceptive and the beast did not see the man until he was uncomfortably close. Then a great bellow of rage burst from him. At the same moment the Hermit took the one chance that presented itself and dropped on the opposite side of the fence. The charge of the big moose smashed the slight barrier as if it had been straw, but it gave the man the chance he desired. He sprinted as he never had sprinted before to a wild cherry tree which stood in an angle of the fence. With an agility which he would not have believed possible, he drew himself into its branches just as the moose reached the spot. There the Hermit sat panting while the animal raged underneath, trying vainly to spear his enemy with the bayonet-sharp points of his antlers. 62

Finding the man out of reach, the moose turned his attention to the fence which he quickly reduced to kindling wood. The Hermit could only watch the destruction of that which had taken days of labor. He used vigorously the only weapon which he possessed, his tongue, but the big moose cared nothing for the sound of the human voice raised in protestation. Having vented his rage upon the hapless fence, he took up his position beneath the tree, rumbling threateningly and tearing up the ground with his sharp hoofs, one blow of which would have instantly killed the man.

Occasionally he stepped into the fringe of the forest but at the least movement of his prisoner in the tree he was back on guard, shaking his huge antlers threateningly. Thus the time wore on. As the air grew frostier, the Hermit shivered and huddled closer to the trunk of his tree. "Wish I had your hide!" he muttered, looking wrathfully down at his jailer. 63

Now and then the Hermit could hear Pal howling lonesomely. Fortunately, he had shut the dog up in the house when he set forth upon his rash adventure. "Never mind, Pal," he said aloud, "you may be glad you *are* alone. I only wish I were." He aimed a vicious kick at the antlers, which were not far below, but was forced to draw up his foot quickly.

At last, when the Hermit's cramped position had grown distressingly painful, there came a welcome interruption. Suddenly the big moose ceased his pawing and listened intently, his great ears strained to some sound which had been inaudible to the Hermit. Both waited expectantly. Far off, but unmistakable, came the call of a cow moose. Instantly the bull sent out his rumbling reply, though he did not desert his post. Again came the call, this time much nearer. The Hermit in his interest forgot that he was a prisoner, that his feet had gone to sleep, and that he was chilled through and through.

Now a crackling sounded from among the trees and a moment later a shadowy bulk, followed by 64

a smaller one which the Hermit rightly judged to be a yearling calf, emerged from the dark forest. The bull, with a low bleat ridiculous in so large a beast, sprang to meet them. The man in the tree was forgotten as the two big animals followed by the calf, vanished, three shadows among the darker shadows of the woods. The Hermit was glad enough to lower himself from the tree and make his way painfully to the cabin and the comfort of his fire and his dog. He had had enough of moose-calling for a season.

The big moose reigned supreme in all the northland. When the snows of winter began to whiten the wilderness, he led his herd to a sheltered nook deep among the hemlocks. There the yard was formed, a labyrinth of intersecting paths, kept free from deep snow and leading to the best places for food and shelter. The herd lived in comparative comfort until spring returned to the wilderness, and the bull moose, having shed his great antlers, sought seclusion until a new pair should once more clothe him with strength and courage.

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IN THE BEAVERS' LODGE

Ahmeek, the beaver, swimming slowly with only his eyes and the tip of his nose above the water, came to a stop at a spot where the shores of the stream were low and flat. He was soon joined by his mate and the two clambered out upon the bank where they looked about with satisfaction.

It was an ideal location for a beaver settlement. Poplars, yellow birches and willows on the banks offered material for a dam and assured an abundance of winter food; the low banks would enable the stream to spread out, making a pond deep enough to prevent freezing to the bottom in winter; best of all, it was a lonely spot where there was no evidence of man.

Dusk had fallen like a gray mantle upon the wilderness when the beavers began their work. Ahmeek selected a poplar to his liking, not far from the bank of the stream. Grasping the trunk with his hand-like paws and turning his head to one side in order to bring his great cutting teeth into play, he bit out a huge chunk, following it with another and another until the tree swayed and crashed to the ground. Then both beavers set to work to strip it of branches and lay the foundations for the dam.

66

The dam, when finished, was a work worthy of a trained engineer. The twigs and trunks of trees Ahmeek and his mate laid lengthwise with the current. On the upper face, where the force of the water would but drive it the more tightly, the mass was plastered and bound together with a cement of mud and stones, which in the freezing days of winter would become impenetrable. Here again the beavers showed their wisdom by leaving several low places over which the water could trickle, thus relieving the pressure that otherwise would have broken the dam. Now the stream overflowed its low banks, making a deep pond, soon to become the home of pickerel and trout and of a great colony of water-lilies, a delicacy for the beaver larder.

The next work was the construction of the lodge, a hollow mound of mud, sticks and stones twelve feet in width and four in height, within which was a dry room, its floor safely above the high-water mark. Two passages led to this room, one straight, for carrying food, the other winding. The main entrance was cleverly concealed beneath the roots of a great tree which had fallen across the stream.

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Ahmeek and his mate were soon joined by other beavers, pioneers from farther south, who, finding the spot to their liking, decided to establish a colony. As with the human pioneers, there was a great felling of trees and hours of heavy labor before the dwellings were finished and the various families ensconced in their snug homes.

That first winter in the new colony was uneventful and when the ice broke up in the spring the beaver city was swarming with sleek brown youngsters who, while learning the serious business of life, found time to indulge in play just as do the children of their human neighbors. At twilight one after another would appear upon the bank, where he would make his toilet, combing his

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thick, chestnut brown fur until it shone like satin. No beaver is untidy about his dress.

Among the young beavers there was one who from the first took the lead. Born in the lodge of old Ahmeek, king of the beavers, he showed every indication of following in the footsteps of his father. He it was who led the others in their frolic in the pond and upon the banks, and when the sharp slap of a tail upon the water told of danger, none was more quick to obey its warning.

The young beavers did not spend all their time in play. The dam constantly needed repair; wood must be cut and stored at the bottom of the pond, so that the colony might have food through the winter. At this work Flat Tail, son of Ahmeek, laboured manfully. His teeth were not yet long and sharp enough for felling trees, but they could cut off the smaller branches. Flat Tail was very proud when he could swim back to the lodge with one of these branches over his shoulder, kept in place by his fore-paws held close to his body.

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One day toward the end of the summer Flat Tail had a narrow escape. He was sitting on the bank, combing his glossy brown fur, of which he was very proud, when a prowling panther discovered him. The big cat's mouth watered, for beaver at all times is a delicate morsel for the flesh-eating animals. The green eyes narrowed to mere slits as, silent as a shadow, the panther climbed a tree and made its way out to a point from which a straight drop would land it upon its unsuspecting quarry. In another moment Flat Tail, intent upon his toilet and oblivious of his danger, would undoubtedly have furnished a meal for the panther had not old Ahmeek appeared, swimming upward from the lodge. Immediately his keen eyes discovered the crouching animal and, with a sound like the crack of a rifle, his flat, horny tail descended upon the water.

It was a sound which all beavers are taught to obey instantly and without question. Even as the big cat dropped, Flat Tail dived backward into the stream. The panther, with a scream of rage, dug its claws into the earth where its prey had been sitting a moment before. The beaver was out of reach, however, and there was nothing for the panther to do but continue on his hungry way, his scream having warned every animal for miles around to hide. As for Flat Tail, he swam directly to the lodge where he crouched trembling.

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The summer passed, and autumn with its flaming colors and hint of frost came to the wilderness. On a warm Indian summer day the Hermit, in his search for healing roots, came out upon the shore of the stream which sheltered the beaver colony. As he approached he heard a resounding slap and saw a number of sleek brown forms dive into the water. Thus, when he stepped out upon the shore, there was not a beaver in sight, though evidences of their work were all about. The Hermit's eyes had grown keen and his brain wise in the lore of the wilderness, so that now he knew beyond a doubt that the colony was busy building the dam higher and raising the lodges farther above the stream.

"Must be expecting a freshet," he mused.

For some time he waited, concealed in a clump of bushes, hoping to catch sight of the inhabitants of the pond or perhaps even watch them at work. His waiting was vain, however, for the bright eyes of the wily little beasts had penetrated his hiding place and not one ventured forth until the Hermit gave up in despair and went on his way. Then immediately the shining face of Ahmeek appeared at the surface and the pond once more swarmed with activity.

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Under Ahmeek's direction the dam was made much higher and the floors of the lodges were raised above the highest mark which the stream had ever reached. Then the whole colony turned its attention to providing food for the winter. Aspen, poplar and willow branches were carried to the pond where, as they became waterlogged, they sank to the bottom, there to remain until needed. Lily-pads floating lightly upon the surface of the pond gave promise of white succulent roots which penetrated the ooze beneath. Sweet flag was abundant, and close by grew a clump of dark green, spicy mint.

The warm, hazy days of Indian summer passed. The leaves drifted to the ground where they spread a rustling carpet, hiding the sweet three-cornered bechnuts upon which squirrels and raccoons waxed fat and contented. The activities of the beavers continued until, one morning after a clear cold night, when the stars seemed to twinkle immeasurably far above the wilderness, a film of ice covered the surface of the pond.

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Then, in a night, winter descended upon the forest. The ice grew thick and solid. The domes of the lodges froze as hard as stone and only a thin, almost imperceptible wisp of steam, arising from the ventilating holes, gave indication of the life within. This was the beavers' season of rest and they made the most of it. Snow covered land and water alike. Icy gales swept over the wilderness, sending the inhabitants to cover and lashing the great trees until it seemed as if they could not stand. For most of the wilderness folk it was the hunger time, when game is scarce and exceedingly wary.

For the beavers, however, it was a time of plenty. On their warm beds of leaves under the frozen domes where never a cold breeze touched them, they dreamed away the hours or, waking, nibbled a bit of aspen bark thoughtfully provided on the floor of the lodge. The sticks were then carried out and used in strengthening the dam. Occasionally a black, whiskered face would appear beneath the ice where the snow had been blown away, and stare out for a moment at the wintry world, but it would be quickly withdrawn as the beaver returned to his comfortable lodge.

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One day in midwinter, when the sun shone upon a world of sparkling white, the Hermit, this time upon snowshoes, again visited the beaver pond. The white domes of the lodges dotted the snowy surface but there was no sign of life. The man stepped out upon the dam and hacked at it

with an axe which he had brought to provide himself with firewood. There was no penetrating its stony surface, and, as he looked out across the hard, rounded domes, he smiled to himself, picturing the beavers in their snug retreats. He knew that beneath the ice was a fortune in valuable furs, but the thought brought with it no desire for possession. In the Hermit's opinion the skins were of far greater value to the beavers than to himself.

Knowing that the forest folk, after having been storm-bound for days, would now be driven abroad by hunger, the Hermit concealed himself in a fir thicket not far from the pond and waited to see what of interest chance would bring to him. He had waited scarcely ten minutes when a lithe, tawny form appeared, sniffing at his trail and pausing often to look suspiciously about. "Panther," thought the Hermit, with a thrill of pleasure that his watching had so soon yielded results. 74

It was the same panther who had so nearly made a meal of Flat Tail several months before. The beast, finding food scarce, had drifted south far from its usual haunts and, locating the beaver lodges, had decided to winter in the locality. Following the man's trail the panther, too, stepped out upon the dam. It soon caught the faint, warm scent rising from the ventilating hole of a near-by lodge. Frantically it dug at the top of the dome, but it yielded no more than had the dam under the man's axe.

Baffled, the big cat gave up its useless scratching and again turned to the trail which had led it to the pond. As the beast came nearer, and the Hermit realized that it was probably made bold by hunger, he blessed the forethought which had led him to bring his axe along when he left his pile of firewood and struck off through the forest to visit the beaver pond. 75

The panther advanced, its body close to the ground and its great feet bearing it upon the crust as if it wore snowshoes. It was coming uncomfortably close and the Hermit began to experience a creepy sensation. He had little fear that, armed as he was, the beast would dare attack him in broad daylight, but nevertheless it gave him an unpleasant feeling to see his trail stalked.

It was evident that the panther had scented him. It stopped and crouched lower, motionless save for the tip of its long tail which waved back and forth in a way which fascinated the man. The beast seemed more curious than ferocious, but in spite of that the Hermit thought it high time to create a diversion.

Remembering the effect of his shout upon the lynx the day he had rescued Dave Lansing, the trapper, he was about to spring to his feet. Suddenly a deer came into sight, stopped an instant, terrified at sight of its hereditary enemy, and then leaped away with the panther in pursuit. Thus the Hermit was left free to return to his firewood and the safety of his cabin.

Before leaving, however, he scraped the snow from a spot upon the surface of the pond and, putting his face close to the ice, looked down. Through the clear water he saw the storehouse of the beavers and even caught a glimpse of a brown shadow which at once vanished into a dark passage. But, though the man lingered for some time, he caught no further glimpse of the pond's interesting inhabitants. 76

The winter was extremely cold. Many smaller streams and ponds froze solid, though the depth of the beaver pond prevented this calamity. When spring came at last and the ice broke up, the water began to rise. Higher and higher it came, fed by the melting ice and snow toward its source. The homes of the muskrats, some distance farther upstream, were flooded, many of the occupants being drowned and others driven for refuge to higher ground. The beavers had no fear, however, for old Ahmeek had prepared for just such an emergency.

Still the water rose. It reached and passed the highest mark that it had attained for many years. And then came the big freshet. The streams became torrents, hurling great masses of driftwood and even trees before them. Constant vigilance on the part of the beavers was required to keep the dam from washing away. When a drifting log or mass of brush caught, and threatened to wreck their hope, the entire colony turned out and literally "worked like beavers" tearing away the obstruction and allowing it to slide on down stream. Each small leak was found and mended before it had become large enough to be dangerous. 77

The water rose within an inch of the floor of the lodges. The Hermit, remembering the beavers and concerned for their safety, made another trip to the pond, noting with anxious eye, long before he reached it, the havoc wrought on every hand by the freshet. It was with a distinct sense of relief that he found the dam still intact and the domes of the lodges still above the water. He paused at some distance from the bank and watched the beavers as they went about their repairs without a thought for his presence. And he marveled anew at their skill and forethought.

Still the water rose, spreading out into a vast lake and reaching to the floor of the lodges. Now the beavers became alarmed and watched anxiously. For if the stream rose higher, the dam must go and the lodges be flooded. The crest had been reached, however, and the flood came no higher. Instead it began to recede, vanishing as rapidly as it had come. It left the low ground around the beaver pond a mass of sticky mud and tangled wreckage. 78

The flood was followed by the opposite extreme and the water fell until it threatened to expose the entrance to the lodges. In that event nothing could have saved the beavers from their enemies. Fortunately, however, the stream soon returned to its normal level and life once more became peaceful for the beavers, though there was much repair work to be done. And so, by his forethought, Ahmeek had saved the whole colony from destruction.

The summer was uneventful, but the winter following the great freshet came near being a

disastrous one for the thriving colony. Two half-breed trappers on their way north for furs came upon the pond. As they noted the number and size of the lodges dotting the surface, their eyes shone. Here indeed was a find, for beaver pelts brought much money.

They made their camp near the pond and the next morning set a number of snares. The ice was not thick and it was an easy matter to drive stakes about the pile of wood which was the storehouse of the beavers. The stakes were set so close together that a beaver could pass between in only one place, where a slender, pliant branch had been set. Then the trappers waited, their eyes fixed expectantly upon the tip of the branch which extended above the water.

Before long a big beaver left his lodge to visit his wood-pile which was also his pantry. Strange to say, it could only be reached in one place. Here there was a slender branch, but the beaver easily pushed past it and entered the trap. As he did so, the tip of the branch quivered and the trappers, knowing their quarry had entered the trap, closed the opening securely with stout stakes.

Thus the beaver, unable to escape and reach the air, soon perished miserably and was taken from the water. Several others were taken in the same way before the Hermit discovered what was happening and intervened to save the colony.

Knowing that sooner or later, unless protected, the beavers would be killed for their pelts, the Hermit had made a trip to the city and had purchased the land through which the stream ran. Thus the trappers found themselves poachers and were forced to leave empty-handed. The Hermit removed the snares and departed, leaving Ahmeek and his colony once more free to dream away the winter unmolested.

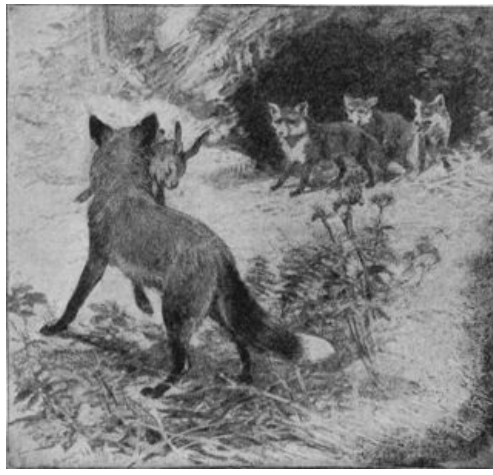
SILVER SPOT

Near the southern border of the wilderness the aisles of lofty spruce give place to second-growth birch, maple and ash, and these in turn to wild meadows and stump lots. The country is rugged, broken here and there by upthrusts of gray rock. Protruding ledges shelter dark caves, and protect their moss-carpeted entrances from sun and wind. Dense thickets of pawpaw, hazel and wild cherry offer coverts for the shy and furtive kindred of the forest: goggle-eyed rabbits, restless as wind-blown leaves; mice, with their intricate system of runways among the grass roots; slow-moving porcupines, prickly as huge sandburs; and occasionally a stately buck or savage-eyed Canada lynx.

In such a country, in a cleverly concealed den about a mile from the Hermit's cabin, Silver Spot was born. A projecting ledge, crowned with hazel brush, concealed the mouth of the den which looked out upon a small mossy clearing, sloping warmly toward the rising sun. It was an ideal location, for, though it lay so near the outposts of civilization, no human foot had ever trodden the spot until the Hermit discovered it quite by accident one day while harvesting a store of golden seal, a root of great value in the drug market.

Drawn by the peace and seclusion of this shadowy, green world, he laid aside his mattock and wandered to the edge of the hazel thicket. Thinking the spot a likely one for a fox den, he parted the bushes and, as noiselessly as one of the forest creatures, crept forward until he could look into the mossy clearing under the ledge. He had been there but a moment when out into the sunshine rolled a furry ball which, upon dissolving, proved to be three sturdy fox cubs. For a moment they sat on their tails, blinking in the sunlight; then, as if at a signal, they rose upon their haunches and began a good-natured rough and tumble, biting and clawing as they rolled over and over on the moss.

All were appealing, as are young animals at play the world over, but to one the Hermit's eyes turned in admiration again and again. He was larger than the others, with a snowy white spot on breast and tail. His movements were quick and sure and, though he still possessed some of the awkwardness of the kitten, he showed every indication of making a splendid animal when grown.



In his study of the wild creatures of the forest the Hermit had learned a valuable art, that of keeping still. Assuming a comfortable position with his back against a tree, he let himself blend into his background of green and brown until even the keen eyes of the forest people were deceived. A chickadee regarded him inquisitively from a branch over his head, talking softly to itself the while; a rabbit, hopping by on some apparently urgent business, came upon the motionless figure, stopped suddenly and then, as the Hermit did not move, went on indifferently. It was a busy and interesting world, but the attention of the man was upon the fox cubs.

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Suddenly the play came to a halt as all eyes turned toward the thicket on the opposite side of the little clearing. Following their gaze, the man saw a full grown fox standing motionless in the sunlight, a rabbit hanging limply from her jaws. Now a singular thing happened. The cubs, who had made a wild dash toward the mother, stopped abruptly, stood an instant, and then, silent as little shadows, vanished into the dark cave. So far as the Hermit could observe, the mother fox had made no sound, yet some communication had passed from her to the cubs and they had instantly and unquestioningly obeyed. The mother stood a moment longer, alert but unmoving; then, instead of entering the den, she slipped away. The Hermit caught a glimpse of her circling the thicket suspiciously, so, not wishing to alarm her unnecessarily, he stole quietly away, leaving her free to return to the cubs.

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Almost daily he paid a visit to the den, keeping well out of sight but becoming more and more interested in the big cub that he had named Silver Spot. Often, as he waited, the mother fox would return with food, and before many days she appeared to become accustomed to the motionless figure among the hazel bushes, for she no longer sent the cubs to the den with her silent warning.

The meal finished, she would lie down in the warm sunshine and let the cubs play rough and tumble games about her, such as those of puppies or kittens. Worrying her plummy tail and tobogganing from her back seemed to be favorite pastimes with two of the cubs. Silver Spot had a mind of his own and would sometimes wander alone to the edge of the clearing, his attitude expressing intense interest in the world beyond. He never went farther, however, for his mother, apparently engrossed in the play of the others, would suddenly raise her head and look intently at the big cub, who would at once return to the family circle. The Hermit could but wonder at the perfect understanding which needed no sound audible to human ears.

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The cubs grew fast, but Silver Spot outstripped the others. His fur grew long and thick and glossy, his brush magnificent. His trim, pointed ears allowed nothing to escape his active brain. The family, when grown, soon separated, but Silver Spot, much to the satisfaction of the Hermit, remained near the home den. Occasionally Pal, in his private explorations into the edge of the forest, would take up the trail of the fox. At such a time it would have been difficult to decide which animal more enjoyed the chase, the dog or the big fox.

Silver Spot possessed an abundant share of that alertness and sagacity necessary to a fox or any other animal in the wilderness. He did not fear the dog, but seemed to enjoy making the trail as complicated as possible, while Pal, nose to the ground, would patiently follow its intricacies. Solemnly the fox would trot around in a large circle, then, leaping as far to one side as possible, would saunter off with an amusing air of indifference, pausing to listen for mice or rabbits. Later, round and round in the circle would go the dog until, becoming aware of the deceit practised upon him, he would range the neighborhood until he struck the scent. Often the fox doubled on his trail. From a ridge some distance away he would sit down and watch his puzzled pursuer, who was always "it" in this game of tag.

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One day, from a slight elevation, the Hermit followed the course of such a race as well as was possible in the heavy forest. Pal had profited by his experience and was, the Hermit concluded, giving Silver Spot a stiff run. As the man stood leaning comfortably against a tree, though he had caught no glimpse of the fox, he could hear the dog coming rapidly nearer. Then suddenly Silver Spot, with the lightness of a wind-blown leaf, drifted into view a few paces away among the trees. He paused at sight of the man. As the beast stood, alert and graceful, one paw daintily lifted, with no sign of fear in the eyes which questioned the motionless figure, he made a picture which the Hermit carried in his mind for many a day.

From his brief survey the fox evidently decided that the intruder was quite harmless and

consequently uninteresting. Though the dog was hot on his trail, Silver Spot paused a moment longer to give an unhurried look about him. A little to one side lay a tree which, in falling, had lodged among the branches of its neighbor. At a point where it was raised about four feet from the ground Silver Spot leaped upon it and thence into the middle of a little forest stream beneath. In another moment he had disappeared, keeping to the water which he well knew would leave no tell-tale scent.

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He was scarcely out of sight when the dog appeared, passing his master as unheedingly as if the latter had been a part of the tree against which he leaned. At the foot of the inclined trunk Pal stopped, plainly puzzled. No trace of the alluring scent could he catch, though he eagerly nosed all about the tree and even partly up the trunk. Not having the agility of the woodland creature, however, he could not proceed far enough to recapture the scent. So he was obliged to content himself with ranging the neighborhood in the hope of picking up the trail, a fruitless search from which he was at length recalled by the whistle of his master. And though the trail invariably ended in some such manner, Pal never seemed to weary of the chase.

As a rule a fox frequents a somewhat restricted territory in which, if he is strong enough, he rules supreme, driving away all trespassers. Silver Spot, however, was an unusual fox in many ways and often demonstrated his individuality by wandering far afield.

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Late one afternoon, while ranging the woods several miles to the east of the home den, he paused beside a clear forest stream to drink. As he raised his head from the refreshing water, his alert ears caught a faint stir. Soundless as a shadow he melted into the bushes at his back just as a queer procession came into view. At the head, advancing with an air of slow dignity, walked a shining black animal with two broad white stripes down her back and fur so long that it rippled silkily in the breeze; behind, in a row, came five little ones, exact counterparts of their mother. Upon a flat stone at the edge of the stream they all crouched for a drink. Silver Spot did not offer to molest them, but watched curiously as, their thirst quenched, they again took up their slow march. He even followed at a discreet distance, watching the youngster who brought up the rear and who often had to be hustled back into the line from which his curiosity had led him.

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Night found Silver Spot in an upland pasture at the edge of the forest, a place of black stumps and thickets of juniper and wild berries, silvered over with the radiance of the full moon. He drifted lightly across the pasture, alert for any adventure which the night might present, and brought up beside a rude building from which came an enticing odour. Silver Spot had not tasted chicken since, as a cub, he had rushed to meet his mother returning from a foraging expedition, but the recollection of the delicacy was still strong with him. He worked industriously, and before long dug out an entrance under the building. Then, before the plump hen which he had selected could wake and cry out, Silver Spot had killed her and was out and away. He traveled swiftly and, safe in his own den, enjoyed the feast.

Having acquired a taste for plump chicken, Silver Spot decided to revisit the henhouse the following evening. This time, however, his intentions were thwarted in a way which almost put an end to his career. Eyes other than those of the Hermit had been watching the growth of Silver Spot, eyes burning with greed when they looked upon his handsome coat. Fur such as this sold for much money in the city and the desire for money left no room for pity or admiration for the animal in the mind of the half-breed, Sam. He had bided his time, but now, though it was not the best time for furs, he dared wait no longer. Very soon he was to guide a party of hunters and fishermen far into the north, and he must take the fox now or never.

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Most cunningly he had baited and concealed his trap, which had been purged by fire of all human touch. Then he had scented the ground all about with the carcass of a freshly killed chicken. Thus Silver Spot, the memory of his feast still upon him, caught the alluring scent. Swerving from his path, he was suddenly caught in the steel jaws which closed with an ugly click. The big fox was a prisoner, the victim of a trapper's greed.

He tore savagely at the thing which held him, straining every effort to gain his freedom, but without avail. The trap seemed only to close more tightly, cutting through fur and sinew, staining the ground red. At length, exhausted, he sank down in the leaves only to rise again and again to renew the struggle.

The hours dragged on. He was hungry and unbearably thirsty, with water only a few yards out of reach. His brave heart almost failed him, but as the darkness began to pale and the wilderness to waken, desperation gave him fresh courage. He set his sharp teeth upon the imprisoned foot and at last was free once more, two toes missing. He took a long drink from the stream before limping off to his den where morning found him licking his wound, thus cleansing it of all impurities and assuring a swift recovery.

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A few hours later the half-breed visited his trap where his keen eyes read correctly the evidences of the night's struggle. Sorely disappointed, he returned to his cabin, save for the trap as empty-handed as he had left it.

For a time the big fox was lame, but nature soon healed the wound and he was able once more to roam the forest as free as the air itself. He had learned a lesson, however, and no trap could be so cleverly placed as to lead him into its cruel jaws. He paid no more visits to the farm in the clearing, but kept almost entirely to his own domain.

Late in the summer came a wet period when for days dark clouds hung over the wilderness and the rain fell steadily. When the sun did appear, scattering the clouds, the woods were soaked and dripping, and showers still fell from the heavy branches.

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It was on such a day that a hunter with a pack of trained fox hounds entered the forest a mile to the west of Silver Spot's den. It was not long before the dogs had found the trail of the big fox and the chase was on, a chase destined to try the cunning and strength of the hunted to the breaking point.

At first the fox felt no anxiety. He thoroughly enjoyed mystifying a pursuer. Ordinarily in a straight-away run he could outdistance the fleetest foxhound. Now, however, even Nature seemed to conspire against him. He was soon drenched with spray. The water clung to his long fur, and his brush, usually carried blithely aloft, drooped heavily. In spite of all his tricks, circling and doubling, leaping from fallen trees and taking to the water, the hounds clung to his trail like bees to honey. Their deep baying sent the chill of fear to the staunch heart of Silver Spot. Realizing that here was no play such as he had indulged in with Pal, the Hermit's dog, he bent all his energies toward outstripping his pursuers.

For a time he kept well ahead of the dogs, but at length, as his old wound made itself felt, the pace began to tell upon him. His tail drooped lower until it all but swept the ground, while with it the courage of the fox seemed to fail. His breathing became labored. His foot-pads were cut by thorns and sharp sticks, leaving now and then a trace of blood upon the moss. He thought with longing of the home den which he was widely circling, but to which he dared not turn. With the pack in full cry, the hunted beast broke from cover at the edge of the wilderness where stood the cabin of the Hermit. 94

At once Silver Spot realized his mistake. Here in the open there was no means of avoiding the dogs, nor could he return to the woods. Even as he paused in despair, the leader of the pack burst into view, eyes gleaming savagely and cruel teeth bared. There was but one alternative and the fox took it.

Across the clearing the door of the log cabin stood open. For some time the Hermit had been following the course of the chase from his bench outside the door, his first feeling of exultation at the cunning and fleetness of his pet gradually giving place to uneasiness and then to genuine alarm for his safety. As Silver Spot came into view so closely pressed, the Hermit sprang to his feet, but the fox heeded him not. With a last effort he leaped the fence, sped across the clearing and through the door which the man closed in the very teeth of the foremost hound. The wild creature whom he had come to love had turned to him for sanctuary, and not in vain. 95

The hunt was over and, while the big fox crouched in the corner regaining his breath, the dogs raved unavailingly without. The hunter soon arrived upon the scene and coaxed and threatened, but the Hermit was firm. He told of his interest in the fox since the time he had found him, a furry cub, playing before the home den, and of how again and again he had watched him outwit his own dog. The hunter was at length won over and departed with his hounds, even going so far as to promise to hunt outside of Silver Spot's domain in the future.

The Hermit waited until man and dogs had vanished from sight; then he opened the door of the cabin and stood aside. There was a flash of reddish fur as Silver Spot bounded forth and away to the forest, his splendid brush once more aloft and new courage in his heart.

WHEN THE MOON IS FULL

One summer night when the moon hung so low that it seemed to have become entangled in the branches of a giant spruce, a comical furry face wearing a black mask across the eyes appeared at an opening high up in a tree. A moment later Ringtail, the big raccoon, scrambled to the ground and set off in search of food. His brown fur was long and thick, and his big tail with its seven dark rings was the pride of his heart. In the wilderness, life is a serious business, yet the big raccoon enjoyed to the utmost the blessings which Providence had heaped upon him.

Not far from the home tree lay a tamarack swamp to which Ringtail now made his way, having in mind a certain still, deep pool, bordered with rushes and lilies and teeming with fish, frogs, and tadpoles, fare beloved of raccoons. While yet some distance from the pool he could hear the chorus of the frogs, the shrill tenor of the smaller ones accented at regular intervals by the deep base of bullfrogs, and at the sound his mouth watered in anticipation. 97



Stealthily though Ringtail advanced, sharp eyes noted his approach. The chorus stopped abruptly and when he stood upon the edge of the pool not a frog was to be seen. The raccoon, however, being wise in the ways of frogs, was not discouraged. He crept out to the tip of the half submerged log, where he crouched, prepared for the long and patient wait which is so often the price of a meal in the wilderness. As he had hoped, the inhabitants of the pool soon forgot the presence of the motionless animal, taking him for a part of the log upon which he crouched. Gradually the chorus was resumed, at first on the farther shore, then coming nearer until, close at hand, sounded a hoarse, deep bellow which betokened the presence of a big bullfrog. Ringtail's mouth watered afresh, but he moved not so much as a muscle. The frog was as yet too far away to risk a catch.

98

A moment later its bulging eyes appeared, almost under the nose of the raccoon. Quick as a flash a little black, hand-like paw was thrust into the water and the big frog was flipped out upon the bank. Having secured it, Ringtail returned to the tip of his log where he proceeded to dip the body of the frog into the water again and again until every speck of leaf mold and dirt was washed away. Then he dispatched it with great relish.

As the commotion had disturbed the rest of the inhabitants of the pool, Ringtail now wisely turned his back upon the swamp and set out for fresh hunting-grounds. He wandered through the forest until he came to the bank of a clear stream which he knew of old to be well stocked with fish. Owing to recent rains at its source the stream had risen and the current was swift and strong. In the shallows where it had spread over its low banks, Ringtail found an abundance of food and fed daintily. Each morsel was thoroughly washed before he swallowed it, a habit of all raccoons, even though the morsel may have only that moment been taken from the water.

99

Ringtail's feast suffered a sudden interruption. A few paces farther on another raccoon had been having a similar meal when Ringtail appeared. Now the first comer believed the feast to be his by right of discovery and therefore advanced threateningly upon the intruder. Ringtail was surprised but not disturbed. Fighting was almost as much fun as feasting. Accordingly, when the other animal appeared ready to quarrel, Ringtail, although he had eaten all he desired, advanced joyously to the fray.

The two were evenly matched and for a time they rolled about, locked in each other's embrace, neither gaining the advantage. A porcupine dawdling along the trail stopped to look at the belligerents with cold little eyes; then, grunting disdainfully, he waddled to the edge of the stream to see what prize could be worth so great an exertion. As they fought, the raccoons drew nearer and nearer to the porcupine, who did not offer to move. Another lurch would undoubtedly have brought them into contact with his bristling quills had they not in the nick of time discovered their danger. Instantly they separated and leaped back. The leap brought them to the slippery mud at the edge of the stream and the next moment both rolled helplessly into the flood.

100

They rose gasping, but the current, which at that point set well in toward the bank, seized and bore them struggling for some distance before they managed to scramble upon a large branch that the stream was carrying. There they clung, all desire for fight wiped out by the sudden plunge.

For a time they rode, looking longingly at the banks which seemed to glide rapidly to the rear. Then their queer craft was swept into a side current and grounded, while the raccoons lost no time in wading to shore. On the bank they cleaned and smoothed their bedraggled fur until it was once more dry and fluffy; then, without a backward glance, each hurried away, Ringtail to his home tree, where he arrived just as the rosy fingers of dawn appeared in the east. The warmth of his snug hollow felt very grateful after his sudden immersion and his ride in the cool night air.

101

The next night found Ringtail entirely recovered from his adventure and once more abroad. He wandered until he emerged from the forest at the edge of a bit of cleared ground. Before him lay a moon-washed open space and beyond that rose tall, green ranks of corn, a sight that filled the raccoon's heart with joy. He quickly crossed the clearing and, bearing down a stalk, stripped it of its husk and sank his teeth into the milky kernels. Ringtail dearly loved sweet corn and he ate until his round, furry sides were distended and he could hold no more. Then he ran up and down through the rustling field, bearing down great quantities, merely sampling their sweetness and leaving behind a wide swath of ruin.

The next morning when the farmer beheld the work of destruction, his wrath was great and he vowed vengeance upon all the raccoon tribe. That night he lay in wait at the edge of the field with his gun. No marauder appeared, yet in the morning he found that a new section had been visited. It looked as if a dozen raccoons had feasted. A grand hunt followed, but Ringtail, safe in

his hollow tree at the edge of the tamarack swamp, heard the distant barking of the dogs without alarm. The hunt swept off in another direction and quiet again fell upon the wilderness.

102

Thus the summer with its long, sunny days and velvety nights sped by and was succeeded by the moon of falling leaves. The air was tinged with frost and the forest flamed with color. The cornfield no longer held a lure for Ringtail, but the beech trees were dropping their little, three-cornered nuts and the big raccoon was still fat and happy.

Late one night, when he had feasted well and was making his way slowly homeward, he heard the barking of a dog. He paused in the trail to listen. His sharp ears soon assured him that but a single enemy was upon the trail and he started on again, not at all alarmed. He made good time for so fat a fellow but it soon became apparent that he would be overtaken before he could reach the home tree. Accordingly he sought out a large beech tree and, backing up to its great trunk, waited for his foe.

He did not have long to wait. A black and white dog soon burst into view, nose to earth, and almost ran into the waiting Ringtail before he became aware of the raccoon's presence. With a yelp of surprise Pal halted so abruptly that he skidded in the dry leaves, while the big raccoon hissed warningly. For a long moment the two eyed each other, each seemingly unwilling to offer the offensive. Pal barked sharply, but the sound produced no effect upon the raccoon. Then the dog began circling the tree. Ringtail circled with him, always presenting a formidable front.

103

Ordinarily the peace-loving canine would hardly have attacked the raccoon, but the madness of the season was racing in the veins of the Hermit's dog and he longed for heroic adventure. So, after slowly circling the tree several times, he threw caution to the winds and closed in. Ringtail was ready, and for a time there was an inextricable tangle of raccoon and dog. Then Pal backed off, bleeding in several places, while the big raccoon, panting and disheveled, still stood with back against the tree.

For a moment the two glared at each other. Then Pal's look wavered. He glanced up into the tree and thence into the forest. Then he yawned as if he had lost all interest in the affair and, trotting off, was soon out of sight among the dark trees. Ringtail was free to continue his way homeward, limping slightly but proud of his victory. Before going to sleep he spent some time cleansing his matted fur and restoring it to its usual soft and lustrous state.

104

A few nights later Ringtail met with a strange adventure, one which left him thoroughly puzzled. He had left his hollow tree early in the evening, very hungry after his hours of fasting. Coming upon a bed of wake-robins, which covered the forest floor with their spotted leaves, he stopped to dig up a few of the peppery roots. Washing them in a near-by stream, he devoured them, blinking his eyes comically over an unusually hot one. Then he wandered on in search of beechnuts, his appetite only made keener by this peppery salad.

Not far from the rail fence which guarded the clearing of the Hermit, he came upon a little open glade carpeted with moss and surrounded by great trees. From the side opposite Ringtail a strange yellow radiance streamed out over the glade. In its brightness a number of rabbits were disporting themselves, jumping about as if in some queer dance, pausing occasionally to stare into the center of that fascinating glow. Now and then one would vanish into the darkness to right or left, but another was sure to take its place.

105

Ringtail stared, the light reflected from his bright little eyes. Slowly he crept nearer, lured by that strange radiance, fearful, yet unable to resist. The rabbits vanished at his approach, while a tiny wood-mouse which had stolen up, fled with a squeak of panic. But for once Ringtail had no eyes for plump wood-mice. He stared a moment, then moved aside into the darkness where his eyes were not so blinded, and looked about him.

The light came from a small object set upon the ground. Ringtail walked all around it, passing within a few feet of a spot where the Hermit sat concealed in a thicket of wild cherry. The man had secreted himself behind his dark-lantern in such a way that the wind would blow toward him, so no scent of human presence reached the inquisitive raccoon, who continued his cautious circling until he emerged again into the radiance of the lantern. His fur bristled and the rings upon his tail stood out sharply, while his queer little masked face held such a puzzled look that the Hermit chuckled to himself.

"You would make a fine pet, old Ringtail, but I suppose it would be a shame to deprive you of your liberty," thought he, as he looked admiringly at the big animal. His experiment with the light was proving even more successful than he had hoped.

106

For some time Ringtail remained in the vicinity of the light, generally just out of its glow. Several times he circled the lantern, regarding it curiously but keeping at a respectful distance, for it much resembled a trap. At length, however, the pangs of hunger asserted themselves and he went on his way reluctantly, looking back often until the strange glow was hidden from sight. Beechnuts were forgotten, but he made a satisfying meal on fresh-water clams and several big, juicy tadpoles before he turned his face toward the home tree.

By going some distance out of his way he came again to the little open glade. This time it was illumined only by the radiance of the harvest moon, a radiance very familiar and therefore not particularly interesting to the big raccoon. The night was far spent when he reached his hollow tree and climbed to his doorway. There he was sharply silhouetted for a moment against the low-hanging moon before he vanished into the friendly darkness. The bottom of the hole was made soft with a thick covering of leaves into whose warmth Ringtail sank with a sigh of content, and at once fell asleep.

107

The first dull cold days, heavy with their hint of coming snow, found the big raccoon fat and sleepy, ready to go into winter quarters. Ringtail seldom braved the gales of winter. He was an indolent, peace-loving fellow, who would not have been able to cope with the hunger and cold of the snowy months. The home hollow was not quite deep enough to suit his fancy, so for one whole day he wandered about, investigating tree after tree before he found one to his liking. Occasionally he would enter a hole to find it occupied by another raccoon who only looked at him sleepily and went on with his comfortable doze.

All day dark clouds had hung over the wilderness. Late in the afternoon a few big flakes, harbingers of the coming storm, drifted slowly to earth. The sight caused Ringtail to hasten his investigations and at last he discovered a place quite to his liking. It was a warm deep hollow, well up from the ground in a big beech tree, its doorway opening toward the south.

When Ringtail poked in his furry face, he found another raccoon already in possession of the snug hollow, but this fact did not trouble him at all. He slid down into the hole, which was carpeted almost a foot deep with beech leaves, and, instead of resenting the intrusion, the other raccoon only sighed comfortably and went back to sleep. Ringtail squeezed his big body into the warm bed of leaves, cuddling his nose into the thick fur of his bedfellow and protecting his feet with his own bushy tail. And there the two slept contentedly, a furry brown ball, until the warm spring sun peeping in at their doorway called them forth.

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF RINGTAIL, THE RACCOON

Late one summer afternoon a hush lay over the wilderness. The air was so still that even the poplar leaves, which move at the slightest breath, hung motionless. The swamp steamed in the heat, and even in the more open forest the air was sultry and oppressive. Birds and wild creatures waited panting for the relief of darkness, seeming to move more silently and furtively than usual. The sun sank behind a bank of angry-looking clouds, but even after dusk had shrouded the trails there was only slight relief from the heat.

Ringtail climbed from the home tree to which he had returned in the spring, and set out for the swamp, eager for a meal of frogs and fish in spite of the strange, oppressive feeling in the air. About midnight, while he was still abroad, the storm broke and swept over the wilderness, leaving its path strewn with a tangled mass of brush and fallen trees. Fortunate it was for Ringtail that he was not at home, for the great beech crashed to the earth, where it lay upon the forest floor, the entrance to the raccoon's house buried from sight. Thus Ringtail found it when he returned from his fishing, having safely weathered the storm under a ledge of rock.

His comfortable home was gone, but Ringtail was not one to complain. The next night found him abroad in search of a new dwelling, moving being no trouble at all for him. In the course of his wanderings he came to the rail fence which protected the clearing of the Hermit. Standing with his front feet on the lower rail, Ringtail surveyed the house and the cleared ground flooded with moonlight. A dark object at the top of a tall pole caught his attention and he decided to investigate.

Ringtail was a skillful climber and he soon stood on a stout platform at the top of the pole. Before him was a rude, though inviting-looking cabin of sticks; but, alas for poor Ringtail's hopes, the doorway was much too small for him to enter. He poked in his inquisitive, pointed nose, thereby causing a great commotion among the sparrows who had made the place their home. Aroused by their noisy chirping, the Hermit appeared in his doorway and in the moonlight discovered the dark bulk before his birdhouse.

Wondering what it could be, he approached noiselessly and turned his flashlight upon the visitor. The light revealed a pair of bright little eyes set in a comical, black-masked face peering down at him over the edge of the platform.

"Old Ringtail, as sure as I am standing here, and by the looks of things, trying his best to roost in my birdhouse!" The Hermit chuckled as he looked up into the eyes of the animal, who did not seem at all alarmed.

After the two had gazed sociably at each other for a few moments the Hermit bade Ringtail a cheery good-night and withdrew to his own cabin, calling to Pal, who had been arousing the echoes with his excited barking. The next morning Ringtail had disappeared, but, deciding that the raccoon would make a far more interesting neighbor than a colony of noisy sparrows, the Hermit tore out the nests and enlarged the doorway enough to permit the animal to enter. Then he awaited developments, trusting to the raccoon's curiosity to bring him back.

He was not disappointed. The following night Ringtail again visited the birdhouse. To his joy he

discovered that it could now be entered, even though the doorway was a tight fit. The sparrows, who, in spite of the destruction of their nests, had returned to the cabin to roost, he evicted without a qualm of conscience. The first streaks of dawn found him curled up snugly, sound asleep in his new home.

From that time on, the big raccoon made himself very much at home about the clearing. At night he investigated everything on the place and nearly drove Pal to a frenzy until the dog's master gave him to understand that the raccoon was to be one of the family. Pal was surprised and disgusted, but from that time on he tried to ignore his old enemy. This was not an easy matter. Ringtail, who had grown extremely bold with the protection accorded him, seemed to take delight in making Pal's life miserable. He would tag the dog around the clearing until Pal, in desperation, would turn upon him with a savage growl. Then his tormentor would take to a tree, or his pole, or even the roof of the cabin, there to wait until the dog's anger had cooled.

Ringtail had, also, another habit which annoyed Pal greatly. In the shade just outside the cabin door was the dog's drinking-pan which the Hermit always kept filled with fresh water from the spring. This pan the raccoon always used for washing his food. Poor Pal, coming up hot and thirsty, was sure to find it full of leaves, twigs and earth. He bore this affront for some time but at last his patience was exhausted. There-after he did his drinking at the spring, approaching it always by a round-about way lest the raccoon discover it and pollute its clear water. The Hermit watched the two animals with amusement, but he did not interfere. Gradually the feud was forgotten. Indeed, before many weeks had passed, the two had become firm friends, though Ringtail still delighted in teasing the dog. 113

In a surprisingly short space of time, too, the raccoon came to trust the Hermit, even to the point of entering the cabin and eating from his hand. This friendliness, however, led to trouble, as the man soon discovered. Ringtail's curiosity was never satisfied and the cabin furnished a rich field for exploration. Shining objects of all kinds seemed to hold a fascination for him. One day when the Hermit missed his watch, and found it eventually in the raccoon's house, he decided that it was time to put a curb upon that animal's explorations. 114

Ringtail developed another habit which came to be very annoying to the Hermit. On warm summer nights the man slept in a hammock swung between two trees in front of his cabin. Ringtail, returning from his nocturnal hunting, would run along the low branch of one of these trees until he stood directly above the sleeper. Then he would let go and fall with a thud, sometimes into the springy hammock, but more often upon the man.

Nothing that the Hermit could do would break Ringtail of this playful habit. At length he was compelled to move his hammock, swinging it between a corner of the cabin and a small spruce having no long, horizontal branches. Here for a time he slept in peace, until Ringtail discovered that he could take a few steps on the rope and so get into the hammock, where he would sleep contentedly until morning. At least this was better than having the raccoon's weight descend upon him without warning, and the Hermit permitted him to remain. Sometimes he even used Ringtail for a pillow, a liberty which the animal never resented. 115

As has been mentioned, Ringtail was extremely fond of bright objects. A bit of glass or tin glittering in the light would draw him irresistibly. And one night this attraction led him into serious trouble. At dawn Ringtail was still absent, and as the morning passed and he did not return, the Hermit grew uneasy. Pal, too, seemed to miss his playmate. He wandered aimlessly about and at last disappeared into the forest.

Late in the afternoon Pal returned and signified by his actions that his master was needed in the forest. Remembering the plight in which Dave Lansing had found himself, the Hermit carried his axe with him into the wilderness. Pal ran on ahead but his eager barking enabled his master to follow. Coming to a mossy spot under a big pine, he beheld a sight which moved him to pity.

Long before, a trap had been set under the tree and forgotten. It was covered from sight and badly rusted save for one spot, where a moonbeam had made a dazzling point of light in the darkness. Lured by its gleam Ringtail had stopped to investigate and his foot had been caught fast in the trap.

For hours he had torn at the thing which held him so tightly, until, bleeding and exhausted and almost dead with thirst, he had crouched down among the leaves in despair. Thus Pal had found him and, unable to do anything for his playfellow, had brought his master, confident that to him all things were possible. When the Hermit came upon them, Pal was licking the face of the big raccoon who seemed much comforted by the dog's presence. 116

The Hermit, with his axe, soon freed Ringtail. As the latter limped painfully, he carried him in his arms to the cabin, Pal frisking joyfully about them. Ringtail had the best of attention and in a few days was as lively as ever, his spirits undampened by his harrowing experience. He worried Pal continually, but the dog bore it all with a look of mingled resignation and pleasure which was comical to see.

About this time a new trick which the big raccoon had developed became very annoying to poor Pal. When presented by his master with an unusually fine bone, the dog would sneak off back of the cabin, look suspiciously around and then quickly bury his prize, concealing all traces of its location. Almost invariably, however, a pair of bright eyes set in a masked face would be watching from some place of concealment and the dog would no sooner turn his back than the mischievous Ringtail would dig up the treasure. Pal generally discovered him in time to save the bone and the friendship appeared not to suffer in the least. 117

Once Pal, in his turn, owed his life to his friend. At dusk the two wandered together into the

borders of the wilderness. While Ringtail was catching mice, Pal went on by himself. Early that spring a lynx had taken up its abode in a rocky cave not far from the Hermit's clearing, and several times had watched hungrily as Pal trotted through the forest. Pal had always been accompanied by the Hermit and, though the lynx could see no gun, it was suspicious of mankind and dared not attack. Now, however, it found the dog alone and unprotected.

Without a sound the beast crouched and leaped. As it sprang, however, a sound deflected its attention and the leap fell short, the long claws raking cruelly across the dog's unprotected back, but causing no fatal injury. Pal uttered a howl of terror and pain and, before the big cat could launch itself again, a raging whirlwind of claws and teeth descended upon its back.

118

Ringtail, at his hunting not far away, had heard the agonized cry of his playmate and the sound had filled him with rage. Now, perched upon the back of the astonished lynx, he bit and tore, holding his place in spite of the animal's frantic efforts to dislodge him. At length, cowed and exhausted and with bleeding flanks, the lynx was glad to escape to its den. From that time on it showed no interest in either dog or raccoon.

Late summer came, with a full moon flooding the world with its silvery radiance. The nights were almost as bright as the days and seemed to hold a witchery which ran like fire in the veins of the forest folk. Ringtail slept in his log house the greater part of the day but was seldom to be found about the clearing at night. He was round, full-fed, and jolly.



RINGTAIL HAD HEARD THE AGONIZED CRY
OF HIS PLAYMATE.

One night the Hermit fell asleep thinking of Ringtail. As he slept, he dreamed of walking in the forest and of hearing the distant barking of dogs. Louder and louder grew the sound until suddenly he awoke to find that it had not all been a dream. So close at hand as to startle him, he heard a wild clamor in which he could distinguish Pal's excited voice. Leaping from his hammock he quickly rounded the corner of the cabin and beheld a weird sight. A torch borne in the hand of a tall man cast a flickering light over a mêlée of dogs, leaping and barking about the foot of the pole which held Ringtail's snug home. Another but smaller figure stood near, pointing to the spot where, upon the platform before the birdhouse, two shining eyes looked down at the group. Pal was here, there and everywhere, loudly voicing his opinion of the intruders.

121

The Hermit strode up to the group. "What does this mean?" he asked in a stern voice, of the man who held the torch.

Instead of replying to his question, the man asked, "Is that your coon?"

"No, it isn't my coon, but it is kind enough to be boarding with me at present," the Hermit replied.

"Well, you'll have to kill him. My name is Graham. I live a mile up the river and this coon has just about ruined my cornfield," was the truculent answer.

"How do you know it is this one?" the Hermit asked. "There are other raccoons in the woods."

122

"How do we know?" The man was growing angry at the delay. "Didn't we just track him here? After he had ruined a choice patch last night, I made up my mind to get him. Sure enough, he came to-night and the dogs brought us here."

The Hermit's face grew grave and he raised troubled eyes to those of his old friend twinkling down at him. "If this is true," he said slowly, "of course something will have to be done. I only ask you to make sure first. Will you do what I propose?"

He talked earnestly for a few moments while the farmer listened in silence. Then Mr. Graham said, still unconvinced, "Well, we will try it, but if we find that it is your coon, he will have to be killed."

The Hermit nodded and, calling their dogs, the strangers departed without their game. The Hermit returned to his hammock and silence once more settled over the clearing. It was long, however, before the man slept. Ringtail, with his mischievous ways and funny masked face, had become a favorite member of his little household. And now disgrace and death were probably to be his portion. With a sinking of the heart the Hermit remembered Ringtail's long absences in the moonlight and his full-fed, happy appearance upon his return. 123

The following morning, in accordance with his promise to the farmer, the Hermit lured Ringtail to the cabin by means of a cooky. Snapping a chain about his neck he tethered him securely to a young pine before the door. Ringtail ate the cooky, nosed the Hermit's hand for more and then started for home. The chain, however, brought him up with a jerk and he turned such a bewildered look upon the man that the latter's heart almost failed him.

"I'm sorry, old chap, but I promised," he said. "If you would take just a little corn it would not matter, but I have seen a field ruined by your tribe and I know it cannot be permitted."

Ringtail tried in every way to gain his freedom but the chain was strong. Pal, too, seemed much bewildered at the sudden curtailing of his playmate's liberty. He stood at attention, looking from the Hermit to his old chum and back again.

"It's no use, Pal. I promised to keep him chained to-night. Then if Mr. Graham's field suffers again, he will know that it was not Ringtail who visited it." The Hermit patted the dog's head and turned back to the cabin. When he came out some time later, he found Pal and the raccoon asleep side by side. 124

So Ringtail became a prisoner of war, though, it must be confessed, a very pampered one. During the day he seemed quite contented with his lot, playing with the shining links of his chain or sleeping with his tail over his eyes. But when night came and the moon again flooded the wilderness with its radiance, the raccoon strained at his leash and whimpered like a child, so that the Hermit was forced to harden his heart anew. Meanwhile, he hoped against hope that the jury would not find his pet guilty.

Both the man and the animal spent a restless night. The Hermit rose early and was just preparing his breakfast when he heard a commotion in the clearing. Looking out, he beheld Farmer Graham and his son, guns over their shoulders and two weary dogs at their heels.

"Well, I guess you can keep your coon," the farmer chuckled, as the Hermit stepped out to greet him. "The thief came again last night and we treed him much nearer home than this." He patted a bulky bag at his back. "The trails of the two must have crossed the other time. Anyway, we'll give your Ringtail the benefit of the doubt. Sorry to have troubled you." 125

"That's all right and I will confess that I am glad Ringtail has not been found guilty. I am just getting breakfast. Come right in and help eat it, won't you?" the Hermit invited, heartily.

The farmer declined, on the plea that breakfast would be waiting at home, and the men parted friends. Ringtail was then released from bondage and given a good breakfast, after which he climbed to his home in the birdhouse and fell asleep, unconscious of his narrow escape from death.

THE HAUNTER OF THE TRAIL

Toward the close of an early autumn day the Hermit might have been seen leaning comfortably against an angle of the old rail fence, pleasantly engaged in doing nothing. At his feet lay a bundle of freshly dug roots, the rich forest mold still adhering to their leathery, brown surfaces. At his back stretched an upland pasture covered with coarse brown grass and dotted with clumps of jumper and wild berry-bushes; before him lay the wilderness, the golden tints of birch and poplar and the scarlet of maples in sharp contrast with the dark green of pine and spruce.

The Hermit was puzzled. On several occasions when harvesting in the woods, he had become conscious of being watched by unfriendly eyes, yet when he turned there was nothing to be seen, save perhaps an inquisitive chickadee or a squirrel peeping at him from behind a tree trunk. That very afternoon, while digging his roots, he had experienced the unpleasant sensation and, stopping his work, had searched the forest all about him. Yet, a little later, the feeling had returned, and Pal had growled deep in his throat, the hair along his back bristling defiantly. The dog, however, did not leave his master and after a moment of silent waiting the Hermit had turned again to his work, resolutely dismissing the matter from his mind. 126

Now, as he leaned against the fence looking back toward the forest, he resolved to visit it again the following afternoon for the sole purpose of seeking out this mysterious haunter of his trail. In the mean time the shadows were growing long and a number of tasks were still to be done, so he picked up his roots, whistled to Pal, who was investigating a woodchuck hole, and turned his face homeward.

The next afternoon the Hermit entered the wilderness alone, for he wanted no excitable small dog to balk his quest. Seating himself comfortably with his back against a log and partly screened by a thicket of young alders, he waited motionless. A deep hush seemed to clothe the forest as in a garment. All about him rose great trees, their branches shutting out the sunlight and making a mysterious green dimness.

128

For a long time nothing unusual appeared and the Hermit grew impatient, half believing that his experience had been but a trick of the imagination. He had just about made up his mind to abandon the quest when suddenly he caught his breath, thankful that he had not stirred. He was aware of neither sound nor motion, yet not many paces distant stood a tawny, gray-brown animal whose round, moon-like face, pale savage eyes and tufted ears proclaimed it to be a lynx, or, as it is more commonly known in the backwoods settlements, a lucivee.

The animal stood a trifle over twenty inches in height, his hind legs somewhat longer than his front ones, giving him a queer, humped-up appearance. His feet were huge, furry pads which could tread a cracking forest floor as silently as shadows; his eyes beneath the tassels of stiff dark hair glowed with a pale fire, giving the beast a most sinister appearance. Save for the nervous twitching of his stubby tail, the lucivee stood as motionless as the trees about him.

As the wind was blowing toward him, the Hermit felt sure that the lynx was not yet aware of his presence. He was glad of this, as it would give him an opportunity to study the beast. The attention of the lynx was directed elsewhere, and even the ears of the man, dull in comparison with those of the wild creature, gradually became aware of a faint rustling which grew momentarily louder. The animal drifted behind a tree where he melted into the shadows and became invisible. The effect was uncanny and the Hermit ceased to wonder that he had been unable to catch a glimpse of this haunter of his trail.

129

Now the rustling sound grew louder and, turning his eyes, the Hermit beheld a strange spectacle. Coming slowly between the trees was something which resembled a huge burr covered with brown leaves. The Hermit stared for a moment, scarce believing the evidence of his eyes; then, as the queer object came nearer, his face relaxed in a broad grin. The apparition was Kagh, the porcupine, who had apparently been enjoying a nap in a bed of dry leaves which had adhered thickly to his spiky covering. He was indeed an odd looking object as he blundered along. The Hermit had much ado to keep from chuckling aloud, especially as he watched the lynx who seemed interested but altogether puzzled. The animal peered out from behind the tree trunk, round eyes fixed unwaveringly upon this stranger who advanced, calmly indifferent to the scrutiny.

130

As the porcupine passed, the lynx came cautiously forth from his concealment and padded after him, his curiosity still unsatisfied. Kagh had not gone far when some whim caused him to turn about as if to retrace his steps. The lucivee was close behind, but with a motion like the bounding of a rubber ball he quickly vacated the spot and again stood peering from behind a tree.

And now the Hermit witnessed an amusing performance. Some strange freak seemed to possess the porcupine, for he slowly circled the tree behind which the lynx crouched, stopping every few steps to sniff at the bark or to peer up into the branches. For a moment the big cat held his ground, but the sight of the queer apparition bearing down upon him was too much for his high-strung nerves. With a snarl he scrambled up the tree, where he crouched upon a branch, glaring down at the animated leaf-pile. Kagh shambled around the tree, his nose to the ground as if hunting for something. Then he continued on his placid way, disappearing down the gray vista of the forest, apparently ignorant of the fact that there was a lucivee in the woods.

131



A sudden puff of wind now carried the scent of the man to the crouching lynx. By a stiffening of the animal's muscles the Hermit knew that his presence had been detected. As the branch was close enough to bring the cat within springing distance, he deemed it time to assert himself. Accordingly, he sprang to his feet with a shout, while the lynx, horrified at the sudden clamor, dropped to the ground. Shrinking off into the shadows the lucivee vanished as completely as if swallowed up by the earth.

132

The setting sun was casting long shadows among the trees and the air was fast growing chill with the coming of night when the Hermit climbed the rail fence into his clearing, to be met by an enthusiastic Pal. The man had learned what it was that had been haunting his trail and, his mind at rest, he felt no further uneasiness. He did not believe that the lynx would attack him, at least while food was abundant. Though he rarely carried a gun, he always bore his mattock or something which could be used as a weapon in case of need.

The big cat, too, had come to know all he desired of the man whose footsteps he had been dogging for days. His savage nature craved the deeper solitudes and the next evening found him journeying northward, away from the settlements with their danger from men and guns. Wood mice were plentiful and once the lynx caught a deer, dropping upon it from an overhanging branch. In this feast he was joined by another lynx, smaller but more savage, and thereafter the two traveled together, selecting their home among the ledges of a heavily wooded country. 133

Autumn passed. The wild geese drifted southward in search of open waterways, and the moon of snowshoes was ushered in. For days a fierce storm raged, the keen wind lashing the branches of the forest trees and piling the drifts deep. Few indeed of the forest folk ventured abroad, most of them keeping to their dens until the storm should pass. When the sun again appeared, it shone upon a world of pure, glistening white, where the frost particles in the air sparkled like diamond dust.

Hunger drove the creatures forth, and by evening the snow was interlaced with their innumerable trails. The bigger lynx emerged from his dark den high up under an overhanging ledge, stretched himself and yawned mightily, then set off in search of a meal. For a long time he was unsuccessful. The creatures were shy and frightened by their own shadows upon this white coverlet which made the night woods almost as light as day. The lynx was obliged to be content with a rabbit caught at the edge of a snow drift, though his fierce appetite craved stronger food.

Weeks passed and the plight of the forest creatures grew steadily worse. Icy gales swept down from the far north, following each other in rapid succession and making it impossible for any forest creature to stir abroad, sometimes for days at a time. The lynxes grew steadily leaner and their temper more savage. Like gaunt shadows of doom they drifted down the snowy aisles of the forest, now and then coming upon a grouse, which had burrowed into a drift for the night, only to find itself imprisoned by the freezing of the crust above. Even wood mice were difficult to obtain, though their runways branched everywhere deep down under the snow, which to them was a blessing. The nights were cold and still, lit by the great fan of the Aurora Borealis which pulsed upward to the zenith, glowing with its ever-changing colors—delicate green fading into violet and blue, flaming redly or dying away in a pure white light. 134

About this time the female lynx met her fate in an encounter with a fat porcupine who dawdled across her trail. The sight of good eating so tantalizingly near caused her to lose all caution. With her long claws she endeavored to turn the porcupine over that she might reach his unprotected under parts. In her eagerness, however, she forgot the barbed tail which dealt her a smashing blow, full in the face. One of the quills mercifully penetrated the brain and at once put an end to the painful struggles. Thus the male lynx was left to walk the trails alone, but in spite of the odds against him, he succeeded in holding his own. 135

The beginning of March saw no break in the intense cold. In fact, March in the wilderness is the most bitter month of the winter. Food is reduced to a minimum and the survivors of cold and hunger are exceedingly wary.

One night when the moon, far off in a cloudless sky, sent pale fingers of mysterious light creeping down the dark forest lanes, the surviving lynx appeared in his endless search for food, his huge pads making no sound as he kept himself cunningly concealed among the shifting shadows. The hush of death brooded over the frozen forest, a hush in which the scratching of a dry leaf across the icy snow crust could be plainly heard for some distance. Occasionally the silence was broken by a loud report from some great tree.

The lynx drifted on, seeking vainly for food to stay his fierce appetite. Suddenly he crouched close to the ground, startled, as a weird, hollow cry rang out just above him. It was the voice of doom for many smaller creatures but not for the lynx. As the great owl drifted by on soundless wings, the animal snarled but went on his way. 136

At length he paused again to listen. Far away a mournful howl rose on the still air and died away, only to be taken up by another and another. At the sound the hair bristled upon the back of the listener. It was the cry of the wolf pack.

Now the lynx hesitated, uncertain whether to ignore the sound or to make good his escape. Since game had become scarce the wolves had taken to hunting the lynxes. For a single wolf the big cat felt little fear, but he realized that he would be no match for them hunting in packs. Accordingly, much against his will, he turned back toward the den, stopping occasionally to listen, the tassels of dark hairs upon his ears standing stiffly erect and his pale eyes gleaming fiercely.

It soon became apparent that the pack was coming rapidly closer and in another moment had caught the scent. On they came, silent and swift, until they sighted their quarry among the trees. Then they broke into full cry. The lynx, knowing that he could not hope to escape them upon the ground, hastily scrambled up a tree where, crouching upon a limb, he glared down at his enemies. 137

Maddened at the escape of their quarry, the wolves circled the tree with snapping jaws, leaping

as far upward as possible, only to fall back among their fellows. Their eyes gleamed red, but the lynx, safe on his branch high above, felt only disdain. He knew that they could not reach him.

The moon sank out of sight, leaving the forest in darkness, but still the wolf pack kept watch beneath the tree, moving restlessly but always alert. In the east the darkness paled and the sky became gradually suffused with pink. The lynx thought that daylight would see the end of his imprisonment, but though a few of the pack slunk away, enough remained on guard to make a descent from the tree extremely hazardous.

Soon after sunrise, however, easier game was sighted and those beneath the tree at once joined the chase, leaving the lynx free to stretch his cramped muscles and descend from his perch. That morning he was fortunate in finding the half-devoured carcass of a doe which a panther had killed and left unguarded, and he ate greedily of the life-giving food. His fur had grown ragged and his sides gaunt with hunger, but after this satisfying meal new life and courage seemed to flow into his veins. 138

For some reason the panther did not return to its kill and the flesh of the deer kept the lynx in food for several days. All too soon, however, it was gone, and starvation again stared him in the face. Then he remembered the settlements, with their many dangers, but also with their promise of food. So he drifted southward and found a new den not far from the edge of the wilderness.

Thus it was that, late one afternoon, as the Hermit and Pal were returning to the cabin after a tramp through the woods, the dog became suddenly uneasy and the man again experienced the unpleasant sensation of hostile eyes staring at him. Not caring to have darkness overtake him in the woods, unarmed as he was, he whistled to Pal and went steadily on, watchful but unafraid. The lynx, from the shadows of the trees, watched him hungrily, longing to attack the small, harmless-looking animal but afraid of the man.

Day after day the lucivee watched for a time when the dog might follow the trail alone, but the Hermit did not permit Pal to wander off unaccompanied, and he was careful to arm himself on his infrequent trips into the forest. Though he was often aware of the presence of the lynx, he caught only one glimpse of him, a dim gray shadow among the grayer shadow of the woods. The animal hunted wide. He would occasionally grow so bold as to approach the outlying farms under cover of darkness, and make a raid upon a sheep-pen. This was always sure to bring pursuit, and after the lynx had received a painful flesh wound he grew wary of the abode of man. 139

Thus the days passed, sometimes marked by plenty, but more often by hunger, until at last the winter came to an end, as even the longest winter must do. When the wild geese returned to their northern breeding places and food grew more abundant, the lynx, too, turned his face to the vast solitudes, far from the dangers of the settlements. With him far away, Pal was once more allowed the freedom of the trails, while his master, about his work in the woods, was no longer aware of that grim, unseen haunter of his footsteps.

WHERE WINTER HOLDS NO TERRORS

In a small reed-girt pool near the source of a forest stream which emptied into the Little Vermilion not far from the Hermit's cabin, stood a rough dome of grass roots, lily stems, mud and sticks. Standing at a bend in the stream, it resembled a mass of driftwood deposited by the freshet, yet it was the snug home of a fat old muskrat. 140

The roof of the lodge sloped somewhat toward the south, thus permitting the sun's warmth to penetrate the one loose place in the mass, the muskrat's ventilating shaft. In a snug room about a foot down from the roof of the dome, and well above the water line, he had made his bed of leaves and grass, where he could sleep snugly even when the winter gales shrieked overhead and the snow drifted deep.

The muskrat, as is usual with his tribe, had two entrances to his lodge, one a tortuous passage opening under water and leading inward about a foot, then slanting upward five or six feet, the other leading to the open air, its exit cleverly concealed by a tussock of coarse grass. Here he lived a life of ease and also of adventure, feasting on sweet-flag root, rushes and lily stems, of which there was always an abundance close at hand, and taking his exercise in the water or in his many runways in the long grass bordering the stream. The muskrat had adopted the modern slogan of "Safety First" and had, in addition to his lodge, made a burrow in the bank not far away, a retreat in time of trouble. 141

One warm summer day the muskrat emerged from the lower entrance to his lodge. Swimming lazily across the little pool, he paused under the shade of a mass of overhanging roots where it

was safe to thrust out his nose for a breath of air. Though the air of the wilderness was warm and oppressive, the water of the stream was pleasantly cooled by a number of springs. The sun shining down upon it served only to intensify the green of overhanging grass and leaves, so that the muskrat seemed to be basking in a dim green world. Gnats hovered in a thick swarm in the sunlight close above the calm surface, and a group of birches, leaning over to look at their reflection, trailed their tender green branches in the clear mirror. Occasional flecks of foam from the falls above drifted by, or a leaf fell softly, floating like a fairy boat on a sea of glass.

142

Lured by the peacefulness of the scene the muskrat ventured forth into the sunlight to comb his fur, about which he was extremely fastidious. He had just begun his toilet when a shadow drifted between him and the sun. Without looking upward, he plunged back into the pool, carrying with him a number of tiny bubbles of air which gleamed like silver amid his thick fur. Under the shadow of the root he lay quiet for some time, having no means of knowing that the shadow had been but that of a summer cloud drifting by overhead.

As the muskrat lay quiet, something dropped with a light plash upon the surface of the pool and, looking up, he beheld the flutter of bright wings as a butterfly struggled with the strange element into which it had so suddenly dropped. The next moment there was a swirl of water as a vigorous young trout rose to the surface, and the butterfly disappeared.

The pool was now quiet and, as a muskrat's memory is short, he once more decided to take an airing. At a place where a little sandy beach sloped to the water he climbed out and, seating himself, began a leisurely toilet. With his claws he combed out his fur until it was dry and fluffy and shone with a silky luster where the warm sun touched it. Then he began on his face and ears, rubbing them with both paws in a comical manner. Suddenly, however, his toilet was interrupted in a way which all but put a period to the muskrat's story.

143



He had just finished washing his face when, without warning, there came a sweep of great wings just over his head. The muskrat dodged and turned to the pool, but he was too late. The hawk dropped like a thunderbolt, caught him in its talons and rose swiftly into the air far above the quiet pool. For a moment the big muskrat was stunned with the force and suddenness of the attack; very soon, however, his wits returned, and he squirmed sharply until the hawk had difficulty in holding his prize.

144

A thoughtful Providence, in fashioning the muskrat tribe, has clothed them in a skin which seems several times too large, a fact that is often the means of saving their lives. The claws of the hawk had caught only in the flabby, loose flesh, and with a sudden twist the big muskrat pulled himself loose from the cruel grasp just as they passed over a woodland stream. Fortunately for the rat, his captor was flying low and before the hawk could again secure its prey the muskrat had fallen into the stream. He sank like lead to the bottom and hid under an overhanging bank. As for the hawk, with a scream of baffled rage it flew away, knowing it would be useless to wait for the quarry to reappear.

For a long time the muskrat lay trembling in the darkness, with only the tip of his nose above water. Then he swam warily to the edge of the shadow and looked about. The stream was one that he had, at infrequent intervals, visited before. As it held none of the attractions of the home pool, he had always returned to his original haunts, relieved when the journey by land was safely accomplished. Now he waited until sure that his enemy had gone; then he climbed warily from the water, crouching among the grass roots or under fallen logs at the least hint of danger, but traveling as straight as if guided by a compass to his own stream. There he slid happily into the water and entered his waiting home, glad to rest and recover from his fright.

145

One day, not long after his adventure with the hawk, the big muskrat sat in his favorite retreat under the birch roots, just below a spot where a cold spring bubbled from the sand of the stream bed. He kept under water as much as possible, only coming up to renew his supply of air. While he idly watched the placid surface above, a gaudy fly dropped lightly upon the water and lay still. As on that other day when the butterfly had met its fate, a big trout rose at once to the lure.

146

The fly disappeared but, instead of swimming away, the trout began what seemed to the muskrat a series of exceedingly queer antics. He made a rush downstream near the surface, shaking his head from side to side, while the muskrat could see a long, thin line trailing behind him. Then the fish leaped several times into the air, the sunlight flashing upon the bright carmine spots on his olive-green sides. Next he tried sulking on the bottom of the pool, jiggling from side to side, only to rise gradually to the surface. A net dipped for a moment into the water

and the trout vanished as if spirited away. The muskrat watched with bulging eyes but the trout did not again return to the pool.

After a time the muskrat bestirred himself and crossed the pool to a spot near his own front door. But instead of entering it, he rose toward the surface, having decided to take a brief journey in one of his many runways. A surprise was in store for the big rat, however, a surprise which drove all thoughts of a journey from his mind.

As he approached the surface, he looked up and found himself staring directly into a pair of pale, savage eyes set in a round face, surmounted by a pair of tasseled ears. The lynx lay upon a half submerged log, its face close to the surface of the water, in order that the reflections might not interfere with its vision of the clear depths. As the muskrat came near the surface, a great paw armed with long, keen claws was thrust into the water, but the lynx was a moment too late. With a suddenness which caused him to turn a backward somersault, the big muskrat arrested his upward motion and dived for his subterranean doorway. He did not pause in his swift flight until the long passage was traversed and he crouched, shaken and panting, in the darkest corner of his house. Nor did he venture forth again that day. 147

One day he had a narrow escape from a huge snapping turtle which entered the pool on a foraging expedition. At the time, the muskrat was dozing in his favorite retreat, all unconscious of the invader until he felt his right hind foot taken in a vise-like grip which made him squeak with pain. He twisted about until he could look at his ugly captor, at sight of whom his heart sank. Pull as he would, he could not loosen his foot from the cruel jaws. All would have been over with him had not the Hermit at that moment chanced upon the pool and, seeing his plight, come to the rescue. The muskrat entered his den with a bleeding foot but a thankful heart. 148

It must not be supposed, however, that the muskrat's life was one continual round of sudden dangers and narrow escapes. For weeks at a time no enemy visited the quiet pool, and he played about and fed, occasionally with other muskrats who had their homes in the same stream. They are sociable folk, as a rule, and like to live in colonies. The big muskrat, however, kept much to himself, leading his own life, independent of the colony.

The drowsy summer days passed and with a swirl of snowflakes the Frost King descended upon the world. The muskrat's playground was roofed over with ice, blue as steel, and the wilderness lay under a glistening white mantle. For the fat old muskrat, however, the winter held no terrors. He slept for long hours, curled up snug and warm in his soft, dry bed, while the wind howled and the snow drifted but a foot above his head. Many of the wilderness creatures began to feel the pinch of hunger but not the big rat. Just outside the subterranean entrance to his abode grew plenty of sweet-flag and succulent lily stems and roots, his for the taking. 149

The whole pool was his playground, the season which brought distress to so many creatures proving a blessing to him. The snapping turtle had burrowed into the ground for the winter; the hawk had vanished; and minks, those deadly enemies of the dwellers of the pool, were seldom seen. The muskrat had nothing to fear. The water under the thick ice was comfortably warm and, as it fell below its summer level, it left an air space of several inches along the bank. There the muskrat could travel long distances or seat himself comfortably and look out upon the wintry world from which he was so well protected.

It was indeed a changed world upon which he looked one wintry morning. The depths of the pool were as calm as a summer day, but above the ice the bare branches of the birch trees were lashed by a cutting wind straight from the ice fields of the north. Snow covered the forest floor. Now and then a rabbit, looking like an animated snowball in its white winter coat, drifted past the muskrat's hiding-place, but most of the wilderness folk had denned up, waiting for the storm to pass. 150

The muskrat now bestirred himself and began a leisurely journey downstream, stopping when an unusually succulent root showed itself above the oozy bed. He had traveled far, lured by tempting food always just ahead. Suddenly his heart seemed to stand still and he gazed down stream with bulging eyes. Coming swiftly toward him, swimming with a sinuous ease which struck terror to the muskrat's heart, was a long, brown animal whose keen eyes seemed to bore into every nook and corner of the stream. The one enemy had arrived.

The muskrat knew that he could never hope to reach his home ahead of the bloodthirsty mink. Glancing wildly about, he discovered a small haven under the bank, a doubtful hiding place, but his one chance of escape. Squeezing his big body into the cavity as best he could, he waited with wildly beating heart.

It was indeed fortunate for him that the mink was intent upon other game, or his hiding-place would have been quickly detected. The mink was in pursuit of a big trout and had no eyes for other inhabitants of the stream. He forged swiftly ahead in the wake of the fleeing trout and soon passed from sight, though the muskrat remained for some time in his retreat, afraid to venture forth. As the animal did not return, he at last slid out and turned upstream, keeping near the shore, ready to dart into hiding at the least sign of danger. He reached home without mishap, and drew a breath of relief as he settled for a nap on his warm dry bed. 151

About a week later the big muskrat was again feeding some distance down stream. His fright was forgotten and he was happy as could be, digging in the oozy stream bed for flag roots, raising his head occasionally, his face and whiskers covered with soft mud through which his eyes shone comically as he contentedly chewed a juicy root. Having eaten his fill he climbed out into an air space where the water had receded and the ice made a thick protection over his head, and proceeded to make his toilet.

His fur was soon as clean and dainty as if it had never come into contact with the soil. He was thinking of returning home, when a number of small trout darted past him in a frenzied manner and vanished upstream. The muskrat gave one look, then he, too, took to the water, swimming with long powerful strokes, fear seeming to lend him power. The mink steadily gained upon him, and when the muskrat at length reached his subterranean entrance his enemy was close behind.

152

Now the mink, though a powerful swimmer, cannot hold his breath long under water and, at the time he sighted the muskrat, he was feeling the need of replenishing his supply of air. Knowing, however, that he would never be able to overtake his game if he paused now, he forged steadily ahead, his lungs feeling as if they would burst. As the muskrat darted into his passage, the mink was close behind, his bloodthirsty jaws not a yard from the feet of the pursued. There the mink hesitated a moment. He had entered many of these tortuous, subterranean passages and knew that if it were very long, he would not be able to hold his breath to the end and would perish in its darkness. Moreover, the muskrat would have the advantage of being on familiar ground.

Meanwhile the big rat had reached his den, where he quickly refilled his lungs, and having more courage than most of his tribe, turned, prepared for defense. He did not have long to wait. The mink had wisely risen to the surface to replenish his air supply and now, with fresh vigor, he hastened to the attack, his mouth watering at thought of the meal ahead. He had reckoned without the strength and courage of his adversary, however. The muskrat charged suddenly upon him while he was still in the submerged part of the passage, the force of the onslaught knocking the breath out of him. Before he could recover, the muskrat was upon him.

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There, in the darkness under the water, was fought a terrible battle which lasted until even the muskrat was laboring for breath and the mink could stand the strain no longer. He gulped and his lungs instantly filled with water.

The fight was over. The muskrat, torn and bleeding, reeled back to his lodge to refill his aching lungs. Then, having carried out the body of his enemy, he proceeded to lick his many wounds and make a long and thorough toilet. This done, he curled up into a furry ball and went to sleep, well content at having rid the stream of so relentless an enemy.

154

BROWN BROTHER

For some distance the silvery thread of the Little Vermilion crept between low banks lined with half-grown fir and spruce, and clumps of wild cherry, through which the sunlight sifted to the ground in innumerable flecks of light and shadow. On the north bank, in the densest part of the thicket, lay a fawn, his dappled coat like a garment of invisibility against the sun-flecked background of brown leaves. The little animal lay as motionless as the mossy old log at his back, but the brown eyes looked out upon the forest world with wonder and keen interest.

Suddenly the sensitive ears came forward at the crackling of a twig and the fawn half rose to his feet. The newcomer was not the mother deer, however, and the fawn shrank noiselessly back, though he continued to watch with interest. He had never seen a man before and the sight filled him with wonder.



The Hermit, with his bag of roots on his back, would have passed by unheeding had not a troublesome gnat crept into the fawn's nostril, causing him to sneeze. The faint sound caught the man's keen ear and, like one of the wilderness folk, he instantly became immovable, every sense alert. His glance at once sought the thicket, but it was several moments before he saw the fawn, so closely did the little animal's colors blend with the background. The man found himself

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staring into a pair of great, appealing brown eyes, wide with interest but containing no fear.

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Very slowly, pausing at every step, the Hermit moved forward until he stood close to the little creature. Then he stretched forth his hand. Instantly the fawn thrust out his delicate muzzle and licked the outstretched hand, finding it very palatable with its faint taste of salt. The Hermit then drew from his pocket a lump of sugar which the fawn eagerly devoured, nosing about for more.

As the Hermit sat on the end of the log, gently stroking the velvety ears of the fawn who nestled confidently against him, he suddenly became aware of another figure in this little woodland scene. Looking up he encountered the gaze of a pair of great brown eyes, wide with terror. The doe had returned to find her baby being fondled by one of the dreaded man-creatures, a sight which caused her to tremble in every limb.

Instantly, with a hoarse cry of danger, she threw up her head and bounded away, her tail carried high, showing the white flag as a signal to the little one to follow. From the time a fawn comes into the world he learns to obey this signal and now, instinctively, he sprang to his feet. Then the Hermit held out his hand and the fawn stopped perplexed. Again came the warning cry but the little animal was licking the man's palm and made no movement to obey.

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The Hermit felt a thrill of pride at the trust shone in him by this beautiful woodland creature. He was sorely tempted to prolong the pleasure of the moment but, knowing that the fawn's life might some day depend upon his instant response to the doe's signal, he felt that he had no right to allow the little creature to remain. Accordingly, with a last pat he sprang to his feet, clapping his hands sharply. Fear leaped at once into the brown eyes which had been raised so trustingly to his, and the Hermit felt a stab of pain at the sight; yet, knowing that trust in mankind is scarcely an asset to a fawn, he hardened his heart and said aloud, "Go, little Brown Brother. Never desert the flag."

At sound of his voice the fawn bounded away, his own flag raised, and the man had the satisfaction of seeing the doe join him and lead the way into the wilderness, their progress marked now and then by a flash of white in the green gloom.

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Brown Brother grew fast and soon became wise in the ways of the wilderness. He learned when to lie still and trust to his peculiar marking and color to remain invisible, and when to rely upon his long legs to carry him away from danger. And in spite of the enemies all about him his life was far from being one of fear.

Once, as the mother deer and her small companion roamed the woods together, a fawn not much older than Brown Brother ran up to them and nestled tremblingly against the doe. At the same instant there sounded the crackling of a twig and away the three bounded, keeping together and never stopping until the invisible danger was left behind. The lonely orphan became one of the family, following the doe as if she had been his own mother.

Late one afternoon as the three were drinking from a clear forest stream, they were joined by a lordly buck, his antlers bristling like a thicket, each point needle-sharp. At once he took command of the little herd, showing them the best feeding grounds and protecting them from danger. One night he led them southward to the very edge of the wilderness. Immediately before them a low stone wall bordered a garden patch, the rows of peas and beans and round heads of cabbage bathed in the bright moonlight.

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The low wall was no obstacle, even to the fawns. With graceful leaps they cleared it and found themselves in a land of plenty. They sampled everything, but soon came back to the long rows of peas, sweet and tender in their green pods. Here they gorged themselves until the first light of day appeared, when they returned to the wilderness, leaving the garden a sorry sight indeed.

The next night the enraged farmer lay in wait with a gun but the wily old buck knew better than to return to the same place. He again led his family southward, but this time they left the wilderness at a point several miles east of the spot where the man lay in wait.

Here they paused at an old rail fence to stare curiously at a cabin bathed in the moonlight, and a much smaller cabin set upon the top of a tall pole. The old buck sniffed the wind suspiciously. As no danger seemed to threaten, he decided upon a closer investigation and led the others a short distance along the fence which terminated in another low stone wall. The next moment they were stepping daintily between the Hermit's rows of beets, stopping here and there to browse upon anything that took their fancy.

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Perhaps the Hermit's garden also would have suffered greatly, had not Pal soon discovered the visitors and advanced upon them barking shrilly. The buck lowered his head and pawed the ground threateningly, inclined to defend his position and his herd, while the dog paused uncertainly before the bristling array. His continued barking soon aroused his master who leaped from his hammock and hurriedly rounded the corner of the cabin.

At the appearance of the man the buck's courage deserted him. He knew men and their far-reaching instrument of death and he did not stop to argue even the question of fresh vegetables. Instead, he presented the flag of truce and his little family lost no time in following his example. Only Brown Brother hesitated. Between the rows of beets his tongue had come into contact with the handle of a hoe. The Hermit had that day been using the hoe and his hands, damp with perspiration, had left a faint suggestion of salt upon the handle.

The taste recalled to the mind of the fawn a long forgotten impression. His rough tongue caressed the handle, then he looked up, vaguely troubled. The Hermit, seeing the deer and hoping that it was his old friend, called Pal to heel and advanced slowly with outstretched hand.

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Brown Brother trembled but stood his ground. It is impossible to say whether or not the old association would have held him, for while the Hermit was yet several yards away, a hoarse warning sounded from the darkness beyond the fence. The sound seemed to release a spring, for instantly the fawn bounded away, his white flag raised, and joined the others in the safety of the wilderness.

Providence was kind to the buck and his family and in spite of their many enemies late autumn found them still together. Through October, the hunters' month, when the law permits the shooting of males, they all grew exceedingly wary. The sound of a gun in the still forest would send them fleeing swiftly and tirelessly toward the denser coverts to the north.

Now Brown Brother heard the whining of the wind among the branches and he would pause to look up wonderingly at their swaying tops. Woodchucks, so fat from their summer feeding that it seemed as if their coats must split, were locating their winter homes where they might sleep comfortably during the cold months. Often during the night a wedge of flying geese went honking over the forest, driven south by Arctic gales. 162

The first snow came drifting down like white feathers from some giant flock of birds, falling softly among the spruce and hemlock and covering the wilderness with a carpet that left a tell-tale record of every foot which crossed its smooth expanse. And as the face of the wilderness changed, its inhabitants, also, changed. Some went into hiding for the cold months; others, fierce beasts such as the wolf and wildcat, simply donned warmer coats; still others, notably the hare and the ptarmigan, weaker and therefore in greater danger during the months of famine, put on coats of white which made them almost indistinguishable against the snowy background of the forest.

The snow found the herd of deer, under command of the big buck, heading northward to the country of evergreens. Here, deep in a balsam swamp, the winter "yard" was made, a labyrinth of intersecting paths leading to the best food supplies and providing safety and shelter for the deer. The fragrant balsam tips made excellent feeding and, by scraping away the snow, the herd found plenty of moss and lichens for browsing. Here they were quartered safe from all enemies, for though the deer were familiar with the winding paths, an enemy soon became bewildered in their many ramifications and was glad to get out alive without its dinner. 163

As the cold increased, the snow grew deeper. The paths were kept trodden to the ground and, sheltered between their warm banks, the deer did not suffer from the cutting winds. Food was still plentiful, though the lower branches of the hemlocks had been stripped and the tender tips had long since been devoured.

One night in midwinter Brown Brother, in spite of the safety of his fortress, had a narrow escape. The herd had wandered to the edge of the yard where they stood looking out across the great lonely barrens. The snow was deep and soft and the deer knew better than to venture forth. With their tiny, sharp hoofs they would have floundered helplessly at every step, and so become an easy prey to the first enemy that came along.

The wind had died away with the setting of the sun, and the night was very still. Across the barrens a faint tinge of green appeared upon the horizon, spreading outward like a great fan across the sky, changing from green to violet and from violet to pink, while great flaming streamers spread upward to the zenith, pulsating as if with life. It was a magnificent display of the Northern Lights and the little herd stood like black statues in the glow. 164

There they remained, staring out across the vast expanse of snow, until suddenly the buck threw up his head and stamped a warning. Immediately the herd came to attention; then, silent as shadows, they turned and vanished along their sheltering paths—all save Brown Brother. Alert but curious, he paused to see for himself what had alarmed the leader. The next moment a lean, tawny beast launched itself toward him and only his extreme quickness saved his life. Like the wind he fled down the path in the direction which the herd had taken, the hungry panther close behind. Upon rounding a corner, he gave a sudden leap which carried him over the intervening wall of snow into the next path, where after several turnings he found the rest of the herd and knew that he was safe. The panther paused, bewildered, at the spot where the trail ended abruptly and the fugitive seemed to have vanished into thin air. He sniffed hungrily about, then turned and slunk back the way he had come, his stomach still empty and his temper boding ill for any unfortunate whose trail he might cross. 165

As the long winter dragged on, food became more scarce. The ground had been cropped clean of lichens and moss and it was necessary to reach high for the balsam twigs. The doe and fawns would have fared ill had not the buck helped them by bending down the higher branches which only he could reach. As it was, their sides grew lean and their skin hung loosely upon them. In March the big buck shed his antlers, leaving them lying upon the snow where the fawns sniffed curiously at them.

At length the cold was broken, and when the drifts began to shrink together and fill the streams to overflowing, the herd left the yard, glad to be free once more. The buck, shorn of his lordly headdress, craved solitude and wandered away by himself. Soon afterward the doe, too, disappeared, leaving the fawns to shift for themselves. Though lonely at first, they soon recovered their spirits and rejoiced in the freedom of the woods after the narrow confines of the yard, and in the abundance of food which appeared everywhere. Some weeks later the doe reappeared, accompanied by a wobbly, long-legged fawn, its dappled coat giving the effect of sunlight sifting through a leafy screen of branches. At times the herd could be found together, but more often Brown Brother and the orphan wandered off, each by himself. 166

That summer Brown Brother grew his first antlers. Mere prongs they were, but the deer felt very proud of them as he carefully rubbed off the velvet. He often visited alone the gardens of the farmers at the edge of the wilderness. Sometimes in the dark hours before the dawn he went close to the cabin of the Hermit, drawn, it seemed, simply by curiosity. Occasionally at his harvesting in the forest the Hermit would look up to find himself regarded by a pair of great brown eyes. At such times he would assume his old position, standing perfectly still with outstretched hand, his eyes narrowed to mere slits lest they make the wild thing uneasy.

The animal, also, would stand immovable for a moment; then training would conquer curiosity and, with a snort of fear, he would bound gracefully away, his white flag gleaming occasionally between the trees until the animal was lost to sight. One day the Hermit left a lump of sugar upon the log beside which he had been standing and, secreting himself at a safe distance, waited. As he had hoped, the deer returned, eagerly licked up the sweet morsel and nosed about for more. After that the Hermit made it a practice, upon sighting the deer, to leave a bit of salt or sugar in a conspicuous place. The animal would invariably return to it. And so the Hermit was content to have their friendship rest, never attempting to force himself upon the wary but courageous animal.

The summer that Brown Brother attained his first full set of antlers a forest fire devastated a great section of the wilderness to the northward. The animals fled in terror before it, lynx and deer, fox and rabbit, side by side, all personal feuds forgotten in the great common danger. Many perished, overtaken by the flames which, fanned by a brisk wind from the north, traveled with lightning-like rapidity. It had been weeks since rain had fallen upon the forest and the underbrush was like tinder. Great trees became in an instant towers of flame as the fire roared onward like a living thing. The animals, their fur singed by sparks and their eyes red and smarting with smoke, sought the water holes, the strong shouldering the weak aside to get the best places, great fierce animals, once the terror of the forest, whimpering like frightened cubs.

For days the air about the cabin of the Hermit had been hazy and had carried the faint scent of smoke, which grew ever thicker. By day the sun shone red through the haze and at night the dark sky above the forest to the north alternately glowed and dulled as with the pulsations of the Aurora.

The farmers had dug wide fire guards about their clearings and kept cloths saturated with water ready for instant use. The Hermit no longer took trips far into the forest, but remained near the cabin, Pal always trotting uneasily at his heels. Like his neighbors, the Hermit watched and hoped for a change in the wind, which would be the only means of saving their homes.

Early one morning, as he was preparing his breakfast, a slight noise at the door caused him to look up. There, framed in the doorway, stood a noble buck, its great antlers proclaiming it a king of its kind. For a moment the two gazed at each other; then the Hermit held out his hand. At the movement the deer backed away, blowing out his breath gustily. The Hermit laid a lump of sugar upon the doorsill and stepped back.

Brown Brother, for it was he, looked at the sugar a moment, then advanced warily but with a certain dignity, and daintily accepted the offering. The Hermit did not force his advantage, but did everything in his power to gain the confidence of the noble beast which had been driven by the fire to his protection.

"The forest fire brought me one blessing, anyway, didn't it, Brown Brother?" the Hermit said softly, as he watched the buck eagerly drinking from a pail of water which he had thought to provide. Pal, strange to say, paid scant attention to the deer. Something in the heavy atmosphere seemed to weigh upon his spirits, for he crowded close upon the heels of his master. When the man seated himself the dog crept between his knees.

Then suddenly the wind veered, blowing strongly from the west and bringing with it the rain. The fire was checked while yet many miles from the border of the wilderness and was soon extinguished, leaving blackened ground and bare, charred trees to show where it had passed.

With the rain and the fresh air, once more free of smoke, new strength seemed to flow into the veins of humans and animals alike. Pal took a new interest in life and once more roamed about by himself. Brown Brother returned to the forest, stepping with the dignity which befitted the position he was soon to hold as leader of a herd.

IN THE WAKE OF THE THAW

On a day in early March, when the wilderness lay wrapped in its snowy mantle and the winter sleepers had not yet ventured abroad, a big skunk, curled snug and warm in his den, sighed and opened his eyes. The sunlight streaming in at the mouth of the little cave attracted him and he

stepped forth. A warm south wind had risen during the night and the faint sound of running water was borne to the keen ears of the animal, a sound which reminded him pleasantly of spring.

Wide awake now, he began to feel the pangs of hunger, and accordingly he sallied forth to see what tempting morsel might be brought his way. Instinctively he turned south towards the nearest farm, stopping occasionally, his head cocked on one side, to listen for mice which had their runways beneath the snow. He paused a moment on a high ridge to look about him and decide upon his course.

Across a snowy pasture, broken by clumps of juniper and bay and steep upthrusts of rock, he saw the rude but substantial buildings of a backwoods farm. The smoke rising lazily from the chimney into the clear air was the only sign of life about the place. The prospect looked inviting and the skunk quickly made his way down the ridge and across the pasture to the nearest building. A delectable odour assailed his nostrils and he paused to sniff appreciatively. It was the warm, tempting odour of poultry. 172

The skunk walked around the building, the delicious odour meeting him at every turn. As he reached the front there arose a furious barking and a dog appeared around the farther corner. At sight of the skunk, the dog stopped so precipitately as to skid for almost a foot in the soft snow. The skunk stopped and regarded him in a haughty manner. Then with his forefeet he stamped upon the ground, a warning which the dog, versed in the ways of skunks, was quick to recognize. A moment longer they looked into each other's eyes; then the dog turned and strolled back in the direction of the house, his whole bearing indicating a lack of interest in his immediate surroundings. The skunk, too, turned his back indifferently. 173

At one side he found a place where the soil had been partly washed away from beneath the building. He soon succeeded in enlarging the hole enough to permit his entrance. A few minutes later he might have been seen making for the ridge, a plump duck accompanying him.

When about half-way across the pasture, the skunk stopped and deposited his limp burden upon the snow. Then he turned and looked back toward the building which he had just left and which was so easy of access. Possibly he reflected that if one duck were good, two ducks would be better. At any rate he hid his prize under a convenient ledge of rock and retraced his steps.

He had scarcely turned his back when a sleek, red-brown animal appeared on the ridge a short distance away and with bright eyes watched the skunk until he disappeared around the corner of the building. The fox was acquainted with that building and its contents and at once became interested. Deciding on a closer investigation, he crossed the pasture jauntily, until abreast of the ledge under which the skunk had concealed his trophy. Here he came to an abrupt halt, his nose twitching. There could be no doubt about it. The odour was that of freshly killed fowl. 174

Now the skunk, unaware of the presence of this other poultry lover, had taken no pains to conceal his booty and it was soon located by the keen nose of the fox. He drew it forth, threw it over his shoulder and departed for the ridge, where he paused to gloat over his find. This pause, however, proved his undoing. Upon reaching the poultry house, the skunk had encountered an unexpected difficulty. A man was boarding up the hole by which the thief had so recently entered and departed. Knowing it would be useless to proceed, the skunk had turned back unobserved, just in time to see his first prize being carried away on the back of the fox. His eyes turned red with anger and the hair along his back stiffened.

The attention of the fox, meanwhile, had been attracted by a sound from the woods on his right. So it was that the skunk reached the ridge before the second thief was aware of his presence. A slight sound caused the fox to turn quickly and the two stood eyeing each other belligerently across the body of the duck.

The fox knew well enough with whom he had to deal; nevertheless he was hungry and not inclined to relinquish easily his fat prize. He seized a leg of the duck just as the skunk laid hold of its head. Both glared but refused to let go. It was a comical sight but, not being blessed with a sense of humor, neither animal was aware of this fact. Meanwhile the duck was stretched to an alarming length between them. 175



The skunk now believed the time had come to insist firmly upon his rights which were being seriously threatened by this sleek brown upstart. He possessed a weapon against which the fox would be helpless and in this extremity he prepared to use it. Still, the skunk was a gentleman and scorned to attack without warning. 176

He stamped sharply with his forefeet. This had been sufficient warning for the farmer's dog but, though the fox looked uneasy, he clung to the duck. Surprised, the skunk raised his plummy tail like a flag of battle. The fox backed an inch, keeping his eyes on the enemy, but still inclined to

ignore the hint. Amazed at this defiance, the skunk glared at him a moment. There was no need of further demonstration, however. The courage of the fox seemed suddenly to fail, for he relinquished his hold upon the duck and fled, not pausing until he had put the ridge between himself and the dangerous black and white poultry thief. The victor then calmly picked up his prize and retired to his den among the rocks, where he feasted royally.

The next sunshiny day found the skunk abroad. Though the snow-crust had frozen once more, and the air was biting cold, there was a feeling in the atmosphere which stirred the blood of the skunk. He stepped blithely forth, gobbling up a plump wood mouse that had rashly ventured forth from its safe retreat under the snow.

177

High up in a sapling a fat porcupine swayed contentedly with the motion of the branches as he uttered a peculiar sound between a grunt and a squeal. It was his "Spring Song" and, though to sensitive ears it might have been entirely lacking in melody, to the ears of the forest world it was sweetest music, for it presaged the breaking up of winter. The skunk paused a moment to gaze up at the contented little beast, then went on his way strangely light of heart.

Meanwhile, a gaunt gray form was drifting southward through the forest, its passing as silent as a shadow. The lone wolf, having been injured and separated from the pack, had found it increasingly difficult to secure food. Now, emboldened by hunger, he had thrown caution to the winds and was about to invade the haunts of man, and that in broad daylight.

Suddenly the wolf paused, his uplifted muzzle searching the breeze. Then, his eyes glowing with a fierce fire, he glided forward, a sinister shadow. Between the trees a short distance away he had glimpsed a small black and white animal trotting down the trail. It was Pal, returning from an excursion of his own into the woods.

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For a short distance the wolf slipped along parallel to the dog, but to leeward so that no scent betrayed his presence. Several times he could have sprung upon his unsuspecting prey, but caution restrained him. He had seen Pal before but always protected by a man with a heavy club or gun. Now, though the man was not visible, the wolf was suspicious, and not inclined to rush into danger.

It was not long, however, before he decided that the Hermit was not about. Gradually he closed in, and Pal, for the first time scenting this deadly enemy, gave a frightened bark, then bravely turned at bay with his back against a tree. He was no match for the wolf and all would have been over in a moment had not the big skunk unwittingly stepped between them.

Ordinarily the skunk did not court trouble; on the other hand, he did not run away from it. Thus, when he beheld the wolf apparently bearing down upon him, he was startled, but not to the point of losing his head.

Immediately he assumed the defensive. He noticed Pal backed up to the tree, but of dogs he had no fear. It was the wolf upon whom his battery was turned. Pal, at sight of the newcomer, backed discreetly away and then fled for his life. The wolf, however, was not so fortunate, for, before he saw his mistake, he had leaped. In his effort to save himself he turned a complete backward somersault and wallowed upon the snow, his eyes smarting and blinded and his lungs gasping for breath. A moment later he was racing away in a vain endeavor to escape from himself, while the skunk returned to his den quite unshaken by the encounter.

179

A few nights after the skunk's little affair with the timber wolf he returned to the clearing from which he had purloined the fat duck. Much to his disappointment he found the building protected against four-footed marauders and, though the same enticing odour drifted to his nostrils, he was unable to gratify his appetite. In the course of his wanderings he discovered a small structure with latticed front, in which was a good-sized opening. The skunk walked up indifferently and looked within; then his eyes brightened and he stepped quickly inside to procure the chicken's head lying in a corner. As he did so, he heard a click behind him and jumped back, only to find his retreat cut off by a board which had fallen into place across the opening. The big skunk was a prisoner.

180

Vainly he sought a loophole. There was none. Having assured himself of this fact, he turned to the chicken head which had been his undoing, and calmly devoured it. Then he settled himself at the front of the box to wait, manifesting little of the anxiety usually shown by a trapped wild animal.

Early the next morning the farmer's boy, on his way to feed the poultry, discovered the captive. "My, he's a beauty!" the boy said aloud, gazing in admiration at the skunk's thick, glossy fur. "That pelt ought to bring a good price, but I believe I'll see if I can tame him."

Thus the life of the big skunk was saved, at least for the time being. Although the boy made many friendly advances, the animal told him in plain language, "Hands off!" With an air of condescension he would accept the choice morsels brought to him, but if a hand were thrust through the bars, at once would come his warning. And the farm boy, who understood skunks, never forced his attentions.

It was thus that matters stood when one day the skunk had a new visitor. The animal had just finished his dinner and was busy cleaning his fur when a small hand was thrust between the bars of his prison and a voice said, coaxingly, "Pretty kitty!"

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The skunk paused to stare at this person who was unquestionably a human being, yet who was so very small. Surely here was no enemy. The big skunk sniffed daintily at the hand. It was a very small hand and, as it stroked his soft fur, the animal crowded closer. The baby laughed delightedly and thrust her hand through the bars as far as possible. Then she worked at the

fastening of the cage door until she succeeded in wriggling her small body through. There she was, inside the cage with her new playmate.

Thus her mother found her when, a half hour later, she rounded a corner of the house in a search for the runaway. The woman turned pale and with a cry snatched the child away, never stopping until what she considered a safe distance had been placed between them and the skunk. She sniffed suspiciously and was astonished to find that not the slightest odour adhered to the child's garments, for the skunk, as is the way of his kind, was scrupulously clean about his person.

The baby refused to be separated from her pet and, when it was found that the skunk meant no harm, but seemed, on the contrary, quite happy in her company, she was permitted to play with him to her heart's content. Sometimes with a string around his neck she led him about the clearing and, though the big animal could easily have broken away, he made no effort to do so. He was fed with good things until his gait became an undignified waddle. Moreover he loved the petting which was lavished upon him by this small backwoods maiden. 182

One day after a week of intense cold, during which the baby was confined to the house and the skunk to the warmest corner of his box, the two companions were again abroad, the skunk as usual being led happily along. The baby's wanderings took her farther and farther from the house until, upon rounding the corner of the poultry house which overlooked the lonely pasture, she suddenly found herself face to face with a gaunt, gray timber wolf.

She did not scream, but stood as if rooted to the spot. Both were surprised but the wolf was the first to recover. He was starving and here was food close at hand, to be had for the taking. His eyes flamed as he crouched for the spring. Still the child stood, unable to move, her eyes fixed as if fascinated on the savage ones so near. 183

It was a tense moment but the tragedy was averted by the big skunk. With banner unfurled he stepped between the wolf and his prey. One moment the wolf glared at the small black and white animal, whom he remembered only too well. The blood lust quickly faded from his eyes, replaced by a great fear. The next moment, with tail between his legs, he was in full retreat, running as he had never run before, while the child rushed screaming to the house.

The big skunk stood where they had left him, looking across the snowy pasture. The sight of the ridge with its group of birch trees and the gray rocks of the pasture recalled the memory of his old free life, and of the den where he had slept so snugly. His weeks of pampered life seemed to fall from him as if they had not been. Without a backward glance he crossed the pasture and vanished over the ridge, the white string trailing behind, the only link remaining between him and the life of the settlements.

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THE TWINS

The twins were born one blustery winter day in a den hollowed out beneath the roots of a giant beech. They were woolly black bear cubs, who at birth were blind and no larger than kittens. With nothing to do but to eat and sleep, they grew rapidly. Outside in the forest the gales howled and the snow drifted deep, but the cave was well protected and the great bulk of Mother Bruin kept it warm and of an even temperature.

Before the snow had disappeared the old bear left the cave each day, driven forth by hunger after her long winter fast, but the cubs remained at home until the north wind with its blizzards was forced to retreat before the balmy wind of the south. Then they tumbled out into the sunshine, blinking and rubbing their eyes with their little black paws at the abrupt change from dusk to bright daylight.

It was a wonderful world in which they found themselves. Patches of snow still lingered in the hollows, but the earth was rapidly discarding its brown winter mantle, replacing it with one of living green. The gracefully drooping branches of a group of birch trees standing beside the stream were delicately filmed with green; the air was sweet with the breath of arbutus; and from a tree close beside the swollen brook drifted the six plaintive notes of a white-throated sparrow. 185

Scraping away the dry leaves under a beech tree, Mother Bruin disclosed a few of the little three-cornered nuts, moldy from their long contact with the earth but, nevertheless, acceptable food for a bear. A little farther on she dug for roots in the soft mud at the edge of a swamp, now vocal with the spring call of the hylas. The cubs followed her, full of curiosity concerning everything they beheld in this new and fascinating world.

Several weeks later, while the Hermit was roaming the woods with his familiar brown bag upon his back, he was granted the rare privilege of watching the bear family when the three were

unaware of his presence. Mother Bruin, as usual, was leading the way, the cubs, as like as two peas, following single file in her footsteps and imitating her every move so faithfully that the Hermit chuckled to himself. When the big bear halted and looked about her, the small bears also halted and looked eagerly about; when she sniffed at a fallen log, they, too, sniffed; and once when she sneezed, the cubs looked curiously at her and then tried faithfully to imitate the sound.

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The ants were busy making their community dwellings and when Mother Bruin paused to lick up a mouthful, two little red tongues joined hers, the cubs smacking their lips over the treat. At length, their hunger satisfied, the family stopped under a great pine and the cubs began a rough and tumble game, while Mother Bruin sat on her haunches, keenly watchful of every move. Occasionally, for no reason which the Hermit could detect, one or the other of the cubs would receive a boxing from his mother which would set him howling. The punishment was soon forgotten, however, and it is to be hoped that it did them good. Over and over they rolled on the brown pine needles, two furry balls cuffing and biting at each other. Then they paused and sat up panting, exactly as Mother Bruin was sitting.

The effect was so ludicrous that the Hermit had much ado to keep from laughing aloud, but he also had a wholesome fear of Mother Bruin when she felt that her cubs might be in danger. So he stifled the laugh that would have betrayed his presence and at length slipped unobtrusively away.

187

While shambling through the forest one day Mother Bruin made a wonderful discovery. She came to a tree which had recently fallen to the forest floor and from within came a curious humming. She stopped abruptly to listen, her great head cocked to one side and her eyes shining with anticipation. The cubs also paused, cocked their heads upon one side and waited expectantly. Mother Bruin soon assured herself that there could be no mistake. With her terrible claws she ripped open the rotting log, disclosing a mass of well-filled honey-comb and liberating a great swarm of bees. The air was soon filled with their angry buzzing.

The cubs decided that the spot was not a healthful one and retreated to the bushes, but Mother Bruin paid no attention to the enraged owners of the hive. For a few moments the cubs watched wonderingly; then the tree with its appetizing odour called them and they shambled up to it, the bees being too busy carrying away their store to bother them.

One of the cubs thrust a little black paw into the mass of amber honey and then, as any child would have done, transferred the paw to his mouth. Immediately there spread over his comical little face a look of utter happiness. The other cub, seeing her brother thus pleasantly engaged, lost no time in following his example and the two were soon smeared with honey from top to toe. Never were little bears happier.

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The three gorged themselves until they could hold no more. And all the next day the cubs were busy licking their own paws and furry coats, or each other's. It mattered not which, for both bears were literally "as sweet as honey."

As the season advanced and the cubs grew more self-reliant, Mother Bruin occasionally left them for a whole day or night while she traveled farther than their short legs would permit them to follow. Upon one of these occasions when they were left to shift for themselves, the Hermit came suddenly upon them, grubbing for roots at the border of the swamp. Man and cubs were alike surprised and stood eyeing each other. The cubs caught a strange, disturbing odour, but curiosity was stronger than fear and they held their ground.



THE OTHER CUB FORGOT HER FEAR AND

Seeing that they had no intention of running away, the Hermit, careful to make no sudden movement, drew from his pocket a lump of sugar which he always carried in the hope of meeting Brown Brother, the deer. He seated himself upon a log and placed the sugar upon the ground in front of him. The cubs also sat down and looked at the man and the sugar. Clearly this strange creature meant no harm and the white object looked good. For a while longer the cubs regarded him keenly while the man refrained from looking directly at them lest his eyes make them uneasy. 191

At length one of the cubs, the one who had first investigated the bee tree, advanced cautiously, keeping his eyes on the man, and sniffed at the sugar. The next moment he had gobbled it up and was licking his lips in appreciation. It was almost, if not quite, as good as honey. Seeing his delight, the other cub forgot her fear and demanded her sugar lump. They then permitted the Hermit to pet them to his heart's content, while they nosed about his pockets for more sweets.

He had made two close friends, as he discovered a bit later, somewhat to his embarrassment. For when he rose to continue his way, the cubs trotted after him as a matter of course. Try as he would he could not rid himself of them. The cubs had found him a source of good and they stuck to him like burrs. Vainly he shouted at them, waving his arms like windmills; the cubs only sat back upon their haunches and looked at him in wonder, until he could not help laughing. Then he tried throwing sticks at them but this method, also, had no effect. Their hides were thick and sticks meant nothing to them. 192

Finally he stopped and looked down at the two small bears with an expression blended of amusement and annoyance. He knew that, should the mother bear return and find the cubs following her natural enemy, she would not wait for explanations. There would be but one explanation in her mind and her vengeance would be swift. The Hermit had seen her and from afar noted with respect her great bulk. Moreover, he was unarmed. To say the least, the situation was an unpleasant one, and he wished heartily that he had not been so quick to make friends. Every crackling twig in the forest brought a quickening of his pulses but, fortunately for him, Mother Bruin was miles away, enjoying a meal of berries. 193

Meanwhile the Hermit's situation was growing more uncomfortable. One of the cubs seemed to have made up his mind that the man had more sugar, which he was deliberately keeping from them. Accordingly he attempted to scale the Hermit as he would a tree, a proceeding to which the man objected most emphatically. The cub was big and heavy and his claws were sharp. With a yell the man dislodged him and sprang aside.

As it happened, this movement was his salvation, for it recalled to his mind the bag upon his back. The bag contained two apples and several cookies which he had carried with him, expecting to be gone from his cabin the greater part of the day. Now as he remembered them, he gave a sigh of relief. The cubs watched him with interested eyes as he drew the good things from the bag and deposited them upon the ground under a big tree. As he had hoped, the bears at once fell upon them and became so engrossed that he was able to slip out of sight behind the tree. He immediately took to his heels, never stopping until he had put a safe distance between himself and the too-friendly bear cubs.

The paths of the man and the cubs, however, were destined often to cross. Not long after this experience they met again. In the Hermit's clearing, close to the fence, stood a sweet apple tree loaded with fruit. Approaching it one day to see if the apples were ripening, the Hermit discovered two furry balls among the branches and found himself looking into two pairs of bright little eyes. Quickly ascertaining that Mother Bruin was not present, he paused beneath the tree and called, in as stern a voice as he could assume, "Come down out of my apple tree, you little thieves!" 194

The more timid bear climbed to a higher branch, but the male cub sat comfortably, his feet dangling, one paw holding to the branch and the other to the trunk, and looked down at the man. His expression so resembled that of a small boy caught stealing apples, that the Hermit laughed aloud and Pal trotted up to see what was going on.

At sight of the bears the dog seemed to go wild. He circled the tree, barking furiously, while the cubs watched him in wonder. Fearing that Mother Bruin might at any moment appear and misunderstand the situation, the Hermit was about to call the dog and return to the house, leaving the bears in possession of the tree. Before he could pucker his lips for a whistle, however, the situation was taken from his hands. One of the cubs, upon shifting his position, loosened a small apple which fell directly into the upturned face of the dog. With a yelp of pain and astonishment Pal scuttled for the cabin, his tail between his legs and his interest in bear cubs suddenly evaporating. 195

The Hermit looked up in mock reproach at the cub. "Aren't you ashamed to treat my dog that way after I fed you sugar and gave you my lunch?" he asked. "And now I suppose I shall have to give you more sugar to get you to come down. I don't care to have Mother Bruin with her three hundred odd pounds roosting in my apple tree."

He went to the house, returning with a number of lumps of sugar and several apples. The cubs at once scrambled from the tree, keeping their eyes greedily upon the good things with which they allowed themselves to be tolled some distance into the woods. There the Hermit left them to feast while he made good time back to the cabin and his chastened dog.

In their wanderings one day in late summer the cubs, now so fat and well fed that their gait was a mere waddle, came upon a great patch of blueberries. Here was a treat indeed. They rose 196

upon their hind legs and greedily stripped the branches until their faces were so stained with juice that Mother Bruin would scarcely have recognized them.

Now it happened that they had found the same blueberry patch on the bank of the Little Vermilion that Mokwa, the big bear, had discovered after his strange ride the year before. And as so often happens, history repeated itself. The cubs wandered to the edge of the river, and seeing a log with one end resting on the bank and the other in the water, the more venturesome of the twins crouched upon it with his face close to the water to look for fish. His weight at the end caused the log to tip. Into the river he went, heels over head, while the log slipped loose from its moorings.

At that point the water was not deep and the bear soon regained his feet but, as he scrambled back upon the log, it drifted farther out. The next moment it was caught by the current and carried swiftly along, the little bear crouching upon it in a frightened heap. The second cub watched her brother in astonishment, half inclined to enter the water and follow. At that moment, however, Mother Bruin appeared upon the shore and at sight of the log and its occupant became greatly excited.

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Down the bank she rushed, scrambling over logs and through bushes, scaring some of the smaller wilderness folk almost out of their wits. She had eyes for nothing except the cub which was being carried rapidly toward the falls. The second cub tried to follow the mother, whimpering for her to wait, but as the old bear paid no attention to her cries, she at length gave up the attempt and followed more leisurely.

Meanwhile, the male cub was being carried swiftly along in mid-stream, the thunder of the falls growing steadily louder. Although he did not understand the sound, it made him uneasy. He whined pitifully as he watched Mother Bruin, trying to keep abreast of him upon the shore, yet so far away. The falls were alarmingly close when suddenly the eyes of the cub brightened. Just ahead, and very near the brink of the falls, the forest reached an arm out into the river, and standing at the extreme end was a man, fishing—the same man who had fed him with sweets.

At the moment when the cub spied him, the Hermit saw the cub and recognized his danger. "Poor little fellow!" he said aloud in compassion. "I wish there were some way of helping him."

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As if in answer to his wish, a way was opened. An eddy carried the floating log directly toward the shore where the Hermit stood, and for a moment he believed it would touch. He soon saw, however, that it would just miss the point and that, unless the cub jumped at the right moment, nothing could save him from the falls. The man groaned; then quick as a flash he saw a way of rescuing the little animal. He rushed out into the water as far as he could safely stand, holding to a tree which leaned horizontally over the stream. As the log came abreast of him, but just out of reach, he held out his hand.

This time the hand held no sugar, but the cub knew it as a friend and did not hesitate. He leaped into the water, battling frantically with the current. At first he seemed doomed to be swept on after the log, which at that moment hung trembling at the brink of the falls before the plunge. The cub's struggles, however, brought him near enough for the Hermit to grasp his thick fur. Then, gripping the tree until his knuckles whitened and exerting his utmost strength, the man slowly drew the animal to safety.

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The Hermit smiled at the woe-begone figure as the cub scrambled upon the bank and stood limp and dripping, but safe. The next moment the smile froze upon his lips. Bearing down upon him was a whirlwind of blazing eyes and gaping mouth, propelled by the powerful muscles of a very big and very angry bear. Seeing the man, the bear at once became convinced that he was at the root of the trouble from which her cub had so narrowly escaped. So she charged, and the Hermit knew that one blow of her mighty paw would either crush him or whirl him into the current and over the falls.

He glanced swiftly about. A few yards away an overhanging bank offered the only possible hiding-place. It meant a ducking and perhaps worse, for even where he stood the current was strong. Nevertheless the Hermit did not hesitate. He turned toward the hiding-place and dived, swimming for a moment under water until he felt his fingers close upon something solid. Then, coming to the surface, he gave a sigh of relief. His dive had carried him beneath the overhanging bank and he was clutching a strong root which had forced its way through the mass of earth and so reached the air. He stood up to his armpits in the cold water, shivering, but glad to be alive, and glad, too, in spite of his predicament, that he had saved the cub.

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Meanwhile, Mother Bruin stood bewildered at the sudden and complete disappearance of the enemy. Her rage evaporated before the mystery and she stood for several moments, staring at the spot where the man had vanished. The Hermit, however, was well hidden and would have escaped observation from keener eyes than those of a bear.

She soon turned to the cub which was whimpering miserably, and in drying his wet fur she forgot the man. They were joined by the other cub just as the Hermit peered out of his watery hiding-place. Finding them still in evidence he shook his fist belligerently at the old bear. He was careful to keep out of sight, however, and a short time later had the satisfaction of seeing them disappear in the woods, Mother Bruin in the lead and the cubs as usual trotting dutifully behind.

The male cub's thrilling ride and battle with the current had for the time being subdued his adventurous spirit. He was content to stand meekly by while his mother tore to pieces a rotting log, disclosing for them all a meal of ants and fat white grubs.

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THE WHITE WOLF

The Little Vermilion, placid river of the plains, has its source in an ice-cold spring high up among the ledges of old Scarface where, after a sheer drop of fifty feet, the young river goes on its way a brawling, turbulent mountain stream. In a cave so close to the cataract that the entrance was often screened by a curtain of mist, a pair of wolf cubs first saw the light of day. It was a wild and savage spot for a home, one that befitted the mate of Gray Wolf, leader of the pack.

In their early infancy the cubs were appealing balls of gray down, rolling and tumbling about on the rocky floor of their cave much in the manner of young animals the world over. And, like other young animals, when they first essayed to walk, their legs had a treacherous way of doubling up beneath them and, without warning, letting them down on the hard floor of the cave. In a remarkably short time, however, they gained control over these unruly members and were ready to begin the training which would qualify them for membership in the pack.

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From the first, one of the cubs gave promise of being no ordinary wolf. Long white hairs appeared among the down upon his back and sides, growing more and more numerous until, when the cub was half grown, they made a coat of pure white. The first time his mother returned from her hunting to see him standing in the sunlight at the mouth of the den, she stopped several yards away, looking at him keenly and half suspiciously. The moment he discovered her presence the cub ran to meet her with a glad whine of recognition and her look changed. From that time on, she accepted him without question.

The white cub grew fast, and as he grew, the wild and savage nature of his surroundings seemed to creep into his blood and become a part of him. His baby growl was drowned by the ceaseless roar of the falls, but as his voice grew stronger and fuller it took on the deep note of the cataract. Long before his brother, he learned to pounce upon the luckless grasshopper or cricket which appeared near the cave and to hold it down with his fore-paws while he crunched it with relish. From grasshoppers he progressed to mice, and from mice to rabbits, until he came to depend but little upon the spoils of the mother wolf's hunting.

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One night, when he was little more than half grown, the cub awakened to find his mother absent at her hunting. The moonlight at the entrance to the cave called him and he trotted out. Save for the thunder of the falls, the night was very still. He stood upon the ledge before the cave, looking down upon the wilderness, mysterious and alluring in the moonlight, and the sight affected him strangely.

Suddenly there came to his ears a long-drawn howl. At the sound, indescribably lonely and wild, the hair rose upon the back of the young wolf and his eyes gleamed. It was the summons of the leader to the pack and, though the cub knew nothing of its meaning, his heart instinctively thrilled to it.

There was a moment of silence. Then, from far diverging points, the cry was taken up as the various members of the pack rallied to the call of their leader. The cub's heart swelled with a new and strange emotion. The next moment, high on his rocky ledge, he lifted his muzzle to the moon and sent out his own answer. The call was lost in the roar of the cataract, but from that night the white cub felt his kinship with the pack of which he was one day to become the leader.

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Time passed, and the white cub was no longer a cub but a grown wolf, unexcelled for fleetness of foot and strength of muscle. His mother and the other cub had long since joined the pack, but for some reason the white wolf kept to himself. When the rallying call reached his ears on a still

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winter night, it ran like fire through his veins; yet he did not answer the call and morning invariably found him curled up in the old den, high on the shoulder of Scarface. Occasionally he was sighted by a lone hunter who returned to the settlements with tales of the great white wolf of the mountain, tales which grew from lip to lip until the animal had attained gigantic proportions. And still the white wolf traveled alone.

Then one night, when the wilderness lay in the merciless grip of winter, and famine stalked the trails, the white wolf joined the pack. It came about in this wise.

Gray Wolf, leader of the pack, had taken up the trail of a lynx. In an encounter between the two, the latter would scarcely have been a match for the big wolf; but it chanced that soon after Gray Wolf sprang to the attack, the mate of the lynx appeared and joined the fray. Thus the wolf became the victim of a double set of raking claws and sharp teeth. He fought savagely but the claws of the male lynx gashed him horribly from beneath, while its mate bit and tore from above.

The double punishment was too much for the wolf. Exhausted and bleeding, he raised his voice in the rallying call of the pack. As the call rang out over the silent wood the lynxes, knowing that they would soon be hopelessly outnumbered, sprang clear. With great leaps they vanished among the shadows of the forest, lost to sight even before the foremost wolf appeared. 207

Thus when the members of the pack had gathered, they found, not the game which they had anticipated, but only their leader, sorely wounded. The winter had been a hard one, with food unusually scarce. The gaunt bodies of the wolves gave evidence of their fast and their tempers had become very uncertain. Accordingly the sight and smell of blood, though that of one of their own number, almost drove them to a frenzy.

Gray Wolf, quickly perceiving the attitude of the pack, drew himself painfully to a sitting posture on a large flat rock and from this vantage point glared at his followers who had hitherto been obedient to his will. And though he was old and wounded, the pack quailed for a time before his glance. His advantage could not last, however. The others soon grew restless, the circle of dark forms tightening in a menacing way about the rock upon which the old leader crouched. Then a young wolf who had long chafed under the leadership of Gray Wolf, sprang for a throat hold. 208

Gray Wolf's mate was absent. There was none to defend him and, though he would not have given up easily, there could have been but one ending to the fight had not a strange interruption occurred. The young wolf was suddenly hurled backward as from a catapult, his neck being broken as he struck the ground, while upon the rock beside the old leader appeared a great white wolf, fangs bared and eyes glowing with savage fire. For a moment the pack stood aghast. Never had such a wolf been seen in all the Little Vermilion country. With tails between their legs they retreated to a safe distance where they paused, uncertain whether to stay or to flee.

The white wolf, however, turned scornfully from them and looked down at the wounded leader. Gray Wolf did not cower, nor did his staunch heart fail him. He tried to rise, but the movement started the flow of blood afresh and the next moment he sank back dead. The white wolf gazed at him; then, standing upon the rock, he raised his muzzle to the stars and sent out a long mournful howl which carried over miles of dark wilderness and seemed the very embodiment of the night and the solitude. Without a sound the pack slunk away, scattering to the four winds just as the first streaks of dawn appeared in the east. 209

A short time later the white wolf might have been seen before the entrance to his den, high among the ledges. He stood as if carved from the rock at his back, while the sky grew rosy with the gleams of the rising sun which drove the darkness before them and made rainbows of the mist that shrouded the cataract. Before the sun itself appeared above the horizon, the wolf had vanished into the dark cave.

Dusk of the following day found him once more abroad. He descended the mountain and swiftly threaded the wilderness until he came to the rock upon which Gray Wolf had perished. Here he stationed himself and as darkness fell, he proudly raised his head, sending out over the wilderness a full, deep-throated rallying-call, the like of which the forest had never known. Lesser creatures of the wilderness shivered with fear, cowering in their burrows for some time before daring to venture forth. 210

One of the lynxes which had so severely wounded the old leader heard the challenge and, though it struck fear into even his savage heart, he stole soundlessly forward until he could see the beast upon the rock. But at sight of the snow-white wolf he shrank back in utter terror and attempted to steal away.

Unfortunately for him the eyes of the white wolf had pierced his hiding-place and in a moment he was hurled from his feet by the force of the attack. The lynx fought but feebly, seemingly benumbed by the strange apparition, and in a few minutes his limp form was stretched upon the ground. As for his mate, she too cowered before the sight of the white wolf and fled afar, never to return. So was Gray Wolf avenged and his avenger, once more mounting the rock, sent his cry of victory echoing over the wilderness.

Now the wolves began to arrive, settling themselves in a ring about the great rock where the new leader stood silent, staring out over the heads of the pack. When all had arrived, as if at some signal they fell hungrily upon the body of the lynx which in a very short time was devoured. Only the big white wolf stood aloof. 211

Without question the pack accepted the new leadership. That same night they started northward, led by the white wolf, traveling always with the tireless lope which enables their

kind to cover great distances. Thus they came out upon the edge of the barrens, a vast, treeless country which few care to penetrate during the snows of winter. Nothing moved in all its white expanse and the silence of death hung over it. Yet without hesitation the white wolf trotted out upon it and the pack followed, only a few hanging back in the shelter of the pines.

Ten minutes later the faith of the pack in their leader was justified. Not far away a gray blur drifted across their path and vanished, hidden by the curtain of snow which had begun to fall. It was a caribou herd, that drifting band which in midwinter is at once the hope and the despair of the larger flesh-eating animals. Wandering as they do at will, none can foretell their movements; yet the white wolf had led his pack unerringly through mile after mile of snowy forest, straight to the path of the herd.

The sight brought fresh courage to the famished wolves and they did not stop to question the wisdom or the instinct which had led them. They soon overtook the herd, but instead of charging into it, a proceeding which would have caused the caribou to bolt at a pace that would have left the wolves hopelessly behind, they followed silently and with apparent indifference. Nevertheless they kept a close watch upon the deer, singling out one who had been wounded before, and was showing signs of weakening. This animal soon lagged and was cunningly separated from the herd, thus falling an easy prey to the wolves. Another was treated in the same manner before the savage appetites were satisfied and the wolves turned back to the woods.

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For a time good fortune seemed to travel with the pack, but, as February dragged by and gave place to March, the most bitter month of all in the wilderness, the wolves once more grew gaunt and famished. This time the white wolf led them, not to the far north, but to the south in the direction of the settlements.

Late afternoon of a bitter March day found Dave Lansing, hunter and trapper, returning from a trip to the nearest town after supplies. He was plodding along the snowy trail, his eyes upon the ground and his thoughts far afield, when a distant, long-drawn howl caused him to raise his head. Dave knew that howl. It was the call of a wolf and, though armed, it filled him with uneasiness. He did not believe that the wolves would attack a man in daylight, but night was coming rapidly and he was some miles from his cabin. For a moment he considered turning back and spending the night with the Hermit, but his heart revolted at the thought. Dave was never one to show the white feather and he pushed resolutely on, though he quickened his steps.

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For a time the woods were very still. With his cabin almost within sight, the trapper had begun to breathe more freely when suddenly the howl was repeated, this time so close that he stopped in dismay. A moment later he saw them coming, flitting silently along his trail or from tree to tree, like gray shadows of the coming night.

There would not be time to reach his cabin. Muttering angrily, Dave kicked off his snowshoes and drew himself into the branches of the nearest tree. He was just in time, for he had scarcely drawn up his feet when the pack closed in. His snowshoes were quickly demolished while the man could only look on, angry but helpless. Then the wolves sat down in a circle in the snow and looked hungrily up at him.

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"Yes, look at me!" Dave remarked, shaking his fist at the pack. "Think you've got me, don't you? Well, you just wait."

He brought his ever-ready rifle into position and looked about for the leader, thinking that if he could be killed, the pack would disband. For a time he hesitated, unable to determine which wolf it might be; then he stared, forgetting his discomfort in his astonishment. Among the pack had suddenly appeared a snow-white wolf, the like of which the trapper, in all his years in the wilderness, had never beheld, though it was said that a tribe of them was to be found in the far north. Here was the white wolf about whom so many stories had been told, stories to which he had listened unbelieving.

For a moment he could only stare in admiration at the powerful animal; then the hunter's instinct asserted itself and he fired. So quickly did the wolf swerve that the eye of the hunter could not perceive the movement. Dave only knew that he had missed, he, the best marksman in all the Little Vermilion country! Again he fired, but the bullet embedded itself harmlessly in a tree.

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This was too much for the hunter. Here was no wolf. He felt sure that the bullets had reached their mark, yet the beast was unharmed. Dave was a mighty hunter but, like most ignorant people, he was superstitious. He had often heard tales of the loup-garou, or witch wolf, whom no bullet could kill. With a hand that trembled slightly he laid his gun across his knees, deciding not to waste his bullets.

He had settled himself for a long cold wait in his tree when, without a sound, the white wolf turned and trotted swiftly away into the forest, the whole pack following. The trapper stared after them, unable to believe his eyes. Fearing an ambush, he waited for some time; then as the wolves did not reappear, he lowered himself cautiously from the tree and set out once more for his cabin, minus his snowshoes and greatly perplexed at the mystery. Dave could not know that the keener nose of the white wolf had scented a deer at no great distance and so had led the pack to the safer game.

Now began a time of annoyance for the farmers at the borders of the wilderness. Sheep and pigs were killed and devoured, and now and then a cow. Many had seen the wolf pack and a few had glimpsed the big white leader, but, although scores of shots had been fired, apparently none had reached the mark. So the fame of the white wolf grew, and many, like Dave Lansing,

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were inclined to the belief that the leader at least was gifted with supernatural powers. Traps and poison, no matter how cleverly concealed, he uncovered or avoided with an uncanny wisdom, while he continued to take toll of the farmers' flocks and herds.

The Hermit in his lonely cabin heard the tales, which lost nothing in the telling, and though he knew them to be greatly exaggerated, he wished ardently for a sight of the big wolf. The beast's cunning and courage had aroused his admiration. Pal was kept strictly within bounds, and when his master went into the woods he carried a weapon which, however, would never be used save in self-defense.

One day the Hermit's wish was granted and he came face to face with the white wolf not far from the clearing. The beast suddenly appeared among the trees, not many paces distant, and the two stood staring curiously at each other. The Hermit made no move to draw his gun and the wolf, on his part, seemed to know that no harm was intended, for he showed no sign either of fear or antagonism. He stood for a long minute gravely regarding the man; then he turned and trotted away without a backward glance and with no sign of haste. The Hermit did not know that for days the wolf had secretly followed him and found him to be harmless.

Spring came at last, and when the snow had given place to the new, eager life of the forest, and food was once more abundant, the pack turned northward to the wilds. It was never seen again, but the fame of the big white wolf lived in the minds of the farmers, and stories of his prowess and cunning were handed down long after the wolf had passed to the Happy Hunting Grounds of his tribe.

THE END

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