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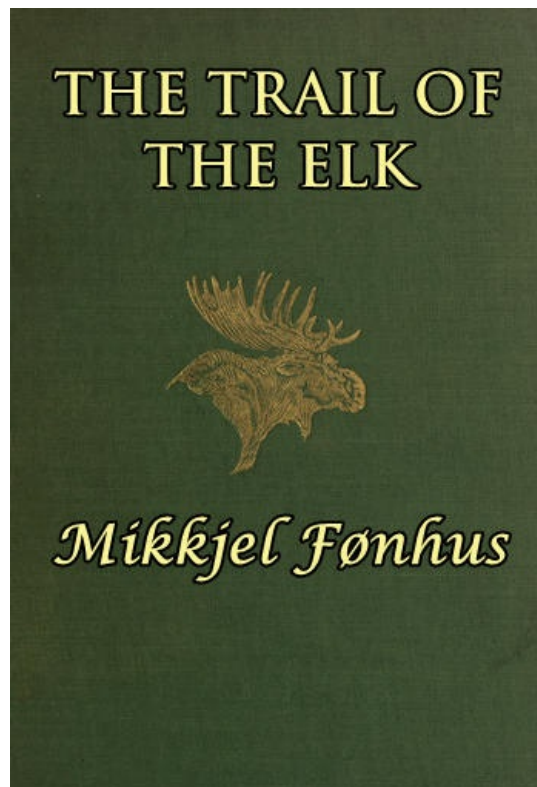
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The Trail of the Elk

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THE RÉ VALLEY SWEDE

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The Trail of the Elk

*from the Norwegian of H. Fonhus
illustrated by Harry
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Jonathan Cape
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The Trail of the Elk

§ 1

THIS is the story of a wizard elk—Rauten, as people called him. He was a human being in animal guise.

The story begins in Ré Valley, which lies like a yawning gap between mountains, long and flat with borders of forests so dark that they look as though part of the blackness of night lingered in them. A river moves sluggishly along the bottom of the valley, making its way slowly and carefully between stretches of light-red sand. It runs northwards, a rare thing in Norway.

There are bogs along the banks of the river, bearing tall, stiff sedge, and when the weather is calm they appear to be bristling. But in sunshine and wind they sway to and fro like undulating carpets of silk. Sometimes a long neck appears, and a crane moves with his measured stride, in which there is peace and contentment. For the crane does not trouble himself about the past or the future. The present with its long round of days suffices for him.

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An ancient mountain farm lies there with its fence all tumbled down. The thin pasture is covered here and there with copses. The

houses rot and are never rebuilt. At one time bears were so troublesome round about Tolleiv Mountain Farm that it was impossible to remain there, and even to-day it often happens, especially in the autumn, that a bear is seen feeding on berries far up the mountain side.

But in the spring, life seethes in all the animals of the valley. The capercailzie stretches his neck, shuts his eyes, and hisses passionately towards the sunrise. Each night is a time of fierce unrest. Wings flap, claws tear and rend, and slavering rows of teeth snarl angrily at each other in the purple moonlight. Above the forests the Ré Mountains rise like white swans.

§ 2

It was in the summer-time a good many years ago. On the slopes between Svart Mountain at the upper end of Ré Valley there might have been seen an elk with her calf. The strange feature of the calf was that it had lost half one of its ears. I will tell you later on how this happened. The calf was born amongst the patches of hard snow below the region where the snow melts in spring, and at the time of which we write he was still quite small. But as by degrees the weeks passed by he developed gristle, he gained in bulk, marrow formed in his bones, and he grew heavy. That calf was bound to grow into a giant elk if only he were allowed time enough.

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Even the elk oxen with their seven-tined antlers, who scrub the young trees in Ré Valley, were once young calves like this.

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He is feeding from his mother; the warm milk, trickling slowly from her body into his, gives him his first sensation of pleasure. Consciousness grows clear just as the clouds roll away and leave the blue sky above him. He gains his first notions of time, which is made up of light and darkness. He learns that still water is silent, and that running water makes a sound, and may lick his legs as with wet and cool tongues—and that when the wind rises the trees wail like young fox cubs. He also learns how to distinguish the shrill call of the hawk and falcon that hover beneath the sky like shivering leaves. At night countless little eyes gleam from the vault above him; they are stars. But stars may gleam even from dark copses and gullies, from marten and from fox, from all the animals that rise when the sun sets.

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The nights of midsummer draw their soft veil over the valley, and the glaciers, forgotten and abandoned in the mountains, light their

shining silvery lamps. Deep down in the Gipsy Pond a golden cloud has gone to rest like a pyre in the night, a sacrificial fire to the god of peace and loneliness. And above its flames the leaves of the waterlilies sway on the face of the water like great green hearts. Some days bring thunder and lightning, as if the heavens would be rent asunder, and after the storm the sun gleams on showers of rain trailing over the mountains like dew-wet shimmering cobwebs.

But on autumn nights the earth seems to be wrapped up in a golden fleece and the moon glares from the sky like a yellow eye.

About this time the elks of Ré Valley grow strangely restless. Old bulls stand snorting against the wind, and they may be observed to veer round for nothing more than the fresh tracks of a man. What ails them? They do not know. But here and there spoors of dog and man form, as it were, zones of terror across the wilderness.

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There they go, the man and his dog, across the bogs along the Ré River, where tufts of dying dwarf birch lie blood-red like open wounds. The man and his dog walk for an hour. They go on for another hour.

The man is short and compactly built, and people never call him anything but Gaupa (The Lynx). His beard is long, dark, and bristling like lichen. His eyes have almost the same colour as his beard, and they are so piercing and cold that a glance from them seems to give physical pain, and so small that they appear to be on the point of disappearing. Around the left corner of his mouth the skin is everlastingly twitching; it started years before when he was a lad, but it still goes on whether he is awake or asleep.

Gaupa wears grey homespun, with real silver buttons on his waistcoat. The buttons gleam in the sun, becoming in their turn tiny shining suns. Over his shoulder hangs his rifle, which he has named the "Tempest" and the dog he leads is large, dark and shaggy, and his name is "Bjönn" (The Bear).

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Gaupa does not walk like other people, he is always half on the run. When his path is barred by a fallen tree or such like he does not stride across it, he jumps. He seems to be in incredible haste, and yet few people have more time to spare.

Wherever he goes he reads the signs before him. A bog to him is a written page, a short story written by the animals themselves with their hoofs or claws. There is the spoor of an elk, but somewhat old, for dry weather has fallen in and the grass has straightened itself. Bjönn puts his nose to it, but remains indifferent.

And the man and his dog walk on and on.

Late in the day a rumble is heard from the Ré Mountains, long and heavy. The lesser mountains catch the sound and send it on. It floats along the slopes from one side to the other till it dies away behind a shady hill far to the south. One might imagine it was Silence itself moving only to listen for more. And throughout the valley startled elks raise their heads. That is how things were when the shot cracked.

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The warm evening sun glows on a pine-clad hillock on the western slope. Moss grown rocks take a deeper tint. Two elks come running out of the forest, a cow and a calf. A shaggy deer-hound follows, his dripping tongue lolling. The cow starts walking again, but stops as if suddenly remembering that there is no longer any hurry. She sways a little and nearly falls, but regains her balance. Her flanks work furiously and with each breath golden-red clouds emerge from her nostrils, falling like a red rain on the little calf frisking before her. He seems to be ruddy all over his back from his mother's breath.

Standing thus the cow begins to nod her head. Her eyes are moist, shiny, living, like mirrors catching the picture of the little calf before her—oh, so clearly, as if they would fain take the memory of him away with them far away into the land of shadows.

In a little while she falls on one side, felling a young pine with her weight, and now the animal has no more soul than a tree-stump, a monstrous heap of flesh and bones devoid of life.

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Bjönn follows the calf, baying deeply. After a while he is heard once more, more shrill and eager. Then once again the evening sun throws a peaceful glow over the pine-clad hill. The huge grey heap on the moss does not move.

Very soon Gaupa is there; he leans his rifle against a tree and draws his knife, and whistles softly, coaxingly, for Bjönn.

It is night, and cloudy weather; no stars twinkle coldly over the Ré Mountains. Outside a tiny wooden hut on the eastern banks of Gipsy Lake Gaupa stands, his hands covered with blood. The tree-tops crowd together against a background of cloudy sky, and somewhere in the western mountain a brook murmurs.

Gaupa is bareheaded and his hair is raven black. With his hand on the door handle he stops suddenly in the act of entering. Was there a sound in the silent darkness? He thought he heard something, but could not decide from which direction it came. Yes—there it is, quite clear now. From somewhere up in Black Mountain a strange animal cry reaches his ears. It is not a bear or fox—it is most of all like a despairing moan of a human being. Icy waves seem to run down his spine. He remains immovable, listening for more cries from the Black Mountain. But nothing more is heard and the man enters his hut, locking the door.

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Soon after he is outside again, listening. But there is nothing to be heard, and he re-enters the hut.

The Gipsy Lake Hut is cosy and warm. The roaring stove devours the logs, and from the draught-hole in the iron stove door a light steals out to flit in ever-changing play over the timber walls. Gaupa and Bjönn lie on the bed side by side, the dog barking in his sleep once in a while.

For a long time nothing is heard but the deep contented muttering from the stove.

Then Gaupa rises with a start and sits immovable.

“There it is again,” he thinks. But soon he sees clearly that no animal cry could possibly have reached him from the Black Mountain through those walls of timber.

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He understands what animal it was that uttered the cry. It was the elk calf whose mother he had killed. Now that poor mite was searching the wood calling upon his mother. Gaupa had heard such calves in distress call often enough, but the cry from the Black Mountain that night made him shiver. No ordinary elk calf could wail like that.

Gaupa lay down again. Sleep had left him, and strange memories visited him instead.

Some ten to twelve years before a half-demented old Swede roamed about in Ré Valley. People called him the Ré Valley Swede. For two whole summers he wandered about with a divining rod and a pickaxe, looking for the Ré Valley treasure. According to an ancient old legend, seven pack-horses loaded with church plate passed up the Valley at the time of the Black Death. Four men led them. When they reached the bogs near the Tolleiv Mountain Farm, the plague overtook the men. They had barely the strength to bury the silver, before they lay down to die with the name of Our Lady on their lips.

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This treasure lived like a ghost in the imagination of the people. Somewhere in the Ré Valley lay the plate, that much was certain. When the half-witted old Swede heard of it he commenced haunting the Ré Valley from end to end. He used his pickaxe diligently enough. Every wound in the bogs bore traces of his exertions.

Thus he went on one whole Summer. During the Winter he went timber-cutting in the lower valley, but Spring saw him in Ré Valley once more wielding his divining rod and his pickaxe untiringly.

People met him when they happened to pass that way. At times he was starved to the point of exhaustion; but when they gave him to eat of the food they carried, the old Swede grew strong and full of energy once more. He would half bury his pickaxe in the earth, then straighten his huge body, saying: “To-day I am as poor as a church mouse. But to-morrow I shall be as rich as the King at Stockholm.... I am pretty certain of the treasure now.”

And his voice, which began in a deep bass, would rise upwards to the shrillest falsetto.

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Once some lads placed a few bits of an old stove in a pit where the Swede was digging. He found them, and the next day he went home to the Lower Valley delirious with joy. When he understood that it was not the real Treasure after all, he wept like a child, but went straight back to Ré Valley and resumed his digging.

The Ré Valley Swede suffered from epilepsy. Sometimes when he

reached the summer mountain farms he fell down in a fit. Therefore people either expected some day to find him dead up in the lonely valley or else never to see him again.

During the third summer of the mad Swede's digging Gaupa stayed near Gipsy Lake fishing. One night he took his road northwards across Ré River. A few stars twinkled. A glacier shimmered in the Western Mountains, long and narrow like a white bird with wings outstretched. Gaupa moved slowly, slowly northwards along the River.

Towards morning he observed a light coming from a small pine-covered mound, and he went to investigate. A few sparks flew up, and the pine needles were still pink in the glow from a burning log. [27]

He heard a noise, the loud though not unmusical sound of iron on stone, and he thought, "There is the Swede."

A moment later he saw him. He was bent towards the earth, digging, and Gaupa could not help thinking of a bear digging his winter shelter, just as he had seen one some years before about Michaelmas time. Gaupa advanced and the Swede straightened himself, his face streaming with perspiration.

Gaupa greets him with "Evening." "Now I shall soon have the Treasure," mutters the Swede. "It is in here, and to-morrow I shall be a rich man, as rich as the King at Stockholm."

Then he tells his tale, how the night before he was sitting on the slope resting, when he suddenly saw a tiny blue light moving along the banks of Ré River, bounding along till at last it stopped at the mound, where he saw as it were a bluish shimmer for a long time, much like a firefly on a summer night. He at once understood that this was a sign to him. He went round the mound with the cleft birch wand, and when he reached the spot where he was then digging an invisible hand seemed to pull the wand downwards, until it seemed to writhe in his hands, pointing to earth like a finger. [28]

Gaupa saw that there was a small cellar where the Ré Valley Swede had been digging, with reddish sandy soil and small round stones heaped up round about. Gaupa gave the old man food, which he wolfed down like a starving dog, but he had no time for rest, for as he said, when the sun rises, it will sparkle on the Ré Valley Treasure, which has not been exposed to the light of day for hundreds of years.

Gaupa remained near the fire watching the Swede as he dug. He wore an old pair of sheepskins, stiff with dirt like dried deerskin. He would never leave Ré Valley though, he said. When he got rich he was going to build a small palace on Black Mountain, and there he would sit drinking fine wine and gaze upon the earth stretched out before him.

Then he straightened himself, the pickaxe hung loosely in his right hand, and with his left he wiped the perspiration from his bald head, and the hand left a mark, it was so dirty with digging. The red bearded face worked itself into a half-witted smile, the eyes grew large, lost all keenness and became troubled. Then he said: "And when once I die, then I will return to Ré Valley in the shape of a beast." [29]

Gaupa saw how the Swede was becoming strange, as if he were listening. Then he uttered an ugly roar, and fell on his face almost into the fire.

Quick as lightning Gaupa pulled him away, and there lay the old Swede prostrate in a fit. His hand held the shaft of the pickaxe too tightly for Gaupa to wrench it open, but he succeeded in forcing a stick between the teeth of the sick man to prevent him from biting off his own tongue. His legs were pulled up crooked under his body, a muffled groan from the depths of his throat was heard off and on, his mouth was smothered in foam.

At last the body twitched no more, the Swede began to breathe evenly and heavily; he slept like a man tired to death.

"He'll soon be himself again," thought Gaupa. He had seen epileptics before and knew that such attacks most often end in deep sleep. [30]

But the Swede slept on and on, and Gaupa noticed how his breathing grew fainter. At last he had to lie down close beside the body to catch it at all. The time came when the Ré Valley Swede did not breathe any more. He lay crouching over the plate which was to have been the great adventure of his life. But the pine-log fire burned on beside him red, resinous, and alive.

After that night Gaupa was unable to rid himself of the last words of the old man with the glassy troubled eyes: "in the shape of a beast."

When evening spread her dark mantle over the sky, when the tree-trunks ceased to be, and he saw the wild beasts gliding like living shadows across the wooded glades, then he heard it: "in the shape of a beast—beast." And however much he willed it not to happen, his heart would beat in his breast like the sound of far-off muffled guns.

When at dawn he waited for the capercaillie's love song, the mystical peals of bells of the forest, he heard what he had noticed since his earliest youth: although the silence was absolute, there seemed to be someone talking somewhere, far away in no particular direction only far away. He had often thought of the People of the Hills, for Gaupa believed in them most sincerely; he had both seen and heard inexplicable things, but ever since the death of the Ré Valley Swede the low distant murmur became words, "Beast, Beast, Beast...."

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Gaupa was constantly expecting something to happen. The tension of it was like music to his soul. Ever since that time when he watched through the night beside the dead Swede, felt his hands growing cold, saw his lips growing blue, ever since that time the night and the forest seemed to attract him even more strongly than before. The possibilities hinted at by that one word "beast" ran through his brain like an icy trickle, became a sweet pain—"Beast, Beast...."

Gaupa had never known fear in the woods, not even when once he killed a bear cub and the mother bear rushed straight towards him with huge leaping strides—even then he was not afraid. He just sent a bullet through the head when she was four paces away. And it is easy to understand that the last words of the Ré Valley Swede did not frighten him.

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Only he acquired a strange habit. After shooting an animal he invariably looked into its eyes. It had become such a confirmed habit that he did not think about it, for ten or twelve years had elapsed since the corpse of the Ré Valley Swede had been carried away to civilisation on the back of a horse, and in Gaupa's thoughts the memory had grown somewhat blurred. All the same he could at will recall the face of the dead man in the glow of the fire, a face as red as the trunk of a pine tree in the evening sun.

The old Swede had said he would return to Ré Valley in the shape of a beast.... Gaupa remembered what had happened some time before on a farm north in the Lower Valley, a farm where the outlying meadows mingled with the highest birch copses just below the bare mountain.

The farmer's son married the prettiest maid in all the valley—oh, what a beauty she was!—but pale and delicate as a winter's moon. And just as the moon dies and vanishes before the light, so life ebbed out of her slowly, oh so slowly. But she clung to life, and she said that if she died she would return to her boy husband in the shape of a bird. And she did die.

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The following summer the people of the farm were astonished to see a mountain grouse amongst the poultry. At first she was shy and disappeared every night, but she was always there in the morning. At last the bird grew so tame that the lad who had lost his girl-bride could hold it in his hands.

When winter came the grouse changed her feathers and became snowy white, and one day she flew to the mountains straight towards the sun. The shimmering sunshine absorbed her, and to the lad she seemed to be a white angel flying into heaven.

When Gaupa first heard the story he felt himself start. The girl had kept her word. Would the half-witted Swede keep his?

Then in the Spring, something happened. Gaupa was stealing through the wooded slopes of Ré Valley one morning about four o'clock. The surface of the snow, thawed once and frozen to hard ice afterwards, bore his weight. Big socks outside his boots allowed him to walk without a sound, for the capercaillie is easily alarmed.

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A tiny fluffy cloud flamed red in the eastern sky. Water from melting masses of snow rushed down the mountain-sides, making a sound like gusts of wind in the forest-clad mountains.

Then he heard a raven croaking above him, and he raised his face to the sky in search for it. What might the black bird be crying

out for? Gaupa saw warnings in many things, and he knew that a raven's croak generally means something sinister. He remembered an autumn night when he was spearing trout somewhere west in Three Valley Mountain, how in the moonlight he saw such a bird fly up from the ground. Gaupa went up to the group of young spruce out of which the raven came and there he found the skeleton of a man, with a half-rotten leather pack lying beside him. It was the wandering pedlar who many years before had insisted on crossing the mountains to the next cultivated valley, and had never been seen again.

Gaupa felt quite convinced that the raven is a sinister bird. What might that black eater of carrion be croaking about now? wondered Gaupa as he stole along lightly on the Black Mountain slopes. The raven was sure to have seen something down there in the forest, quite sure. "Arrp!" he cried—"arrp!"

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Gaupa continued his way southwards, stopping once in a while to use his ears when the snow did not crunch under his feet. He had not known sleep since the evening before, when day fled from the horizon and he threw a lump of snow on to his fire farthest up the valley and walked into the darkness, for Gaupa preferred the darkness to broad daylight. He loved night.

Dawn was approaching and he was growing sleepy, a heaviness in his head took away his interest in everything about him. But when he reached a ridge overlooking Gipsy Lake, all drowsiness left him instantly, for before him in the pearly dawn he saw an enormous grey elk cow bending over and licking a newborn calf. He stopped short, but the elk cow seemed to think that Gaupa himself was nothing more than an animal, black as soil, with hairless skin round eyes and nose. Terror engulfed her, and when Gaupa drew near the cow fled. He went up to the calf. The little animal was wet and warm, steaming in the cool air of the dawn, its breathing laboured, uneven—it was newly born.

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Gaupa caught his eyes and gave a start; he felt an icy chill run through his being, and he remained kneeling holding the animal's gaze. Those eyes were not soulless and empty like those of other newly-born animals. They were human eyes, plainly and undoubtedly the eyes of a human being.

Above him the raven circled round and round croaking its steady "Arrp," "arrp" until the bird turned westward and the cry died away, an ugly threatening sound amongst the dark clouds.

Gaupa held the elk calf with both his hands. He felt the pulse shaking its frail body, and he noticed that it was a bull. Once more he had visions of the Ré Valley Swede, and heard the ugly roar that opened the epileptic attack, heard that last gasp—"Beast, Beast...."

Gaupa felt for his hunting-knife, wrenched it out of its sheath, and drew it straight across the left ear of the calf. Then he walked away with crackling steps.

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The sun reached the pine-clad ridge behind him, played softly round the little calf's head, kissed him and wished him welcome to life and to the forest.

§ 4

But Gaupa lay awake in Gipsy Lake Hut, full of memories. The dog was lying silent in sleep. Once Gaupa struck a match to light his pipe, and in one corner his rifle reflected the glow. "The Tempest" had roared once that day, and there was one elk less on the slopes of Ré Mountains.

But what Gaupa saw that morning, when aiming at the elk cow, was the calf's left ear—it was only half an ear. It was the same calf he had handled the spring before, the elk calf with human eyes. It was he who had just cried out so uncannily like a human being under the Black Mountain, more weirdly than Gaupa had ever heard a beast cry before.

There was also something strange about the calf's spoors that day. The clefts were not side by side as elk clefts usually are. They spread out obliquely from each other. He knew he would be able to distinguish that spoor from a thousand. Gaupa had seen many elk spoors in his life, but never any like these.

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The stove in the hut ceased muttering. The flue cooled down with tiny dry cracking sounds.

Below the hut a fox stopped to smell the smoke which still lingered in the air.

Up in the mountain the brook murmured incessantly. Under the Black Mountain an elk calf was licking the skin of his mother which was hung up on a pole fastened to two trees. The calf kept poking at it with his muzzle, but the skin was dead, lifeless, with no warmth of blood in it, and the young elk raised his head and whimpered plaintively, hoarsely and brokenly.

In Gipsy Lake Hut Gaupa was on the point of going to sleep when he suddenly became wide awake again. The hut was quiet as the tomb, but the silence slowly grew pregnant with that inexplicable murmur which Gaupa knew so well. It was as if spirits were whispering around him. "Beast, beast, beast."

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§ 5

The next day Gaupa went northwards to Lower Valley, where people were living. They struggle through life as best they can, and when they die they are taken to the ancient tarred wooden church that calls them back to earth with dismal deep-toned bells.

Gaupa's home was a timber hut on a stony birch-clad ridge, jutting out into the river. The building was so near to the water's edge that if the spring flood was unusually high the water almost lapped against its walls.

There Gaupa and Bjönn lived alone. Gaupa was a confirmed old bachelor, over fifty years of age. He had reached the evening of life, and women and love had never been anything to him. No one had ever heard him sigh on account of a petticoat.

His real name was Sjur and he hailed from a spot far north in the valley, a crofter's place called Renna. His parents died when he was young. Sjur was not cut out for a crofter, and so he built the little hut for himself down by the river, and it stands there to this very day.

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Sjur was believed to be a shoemaker by trade and he was handy both with awl and thread. But what use was it to take your shoes to him when he never finished them? If you left them with him during the potato harvest in the autumn you could not expect to get them back until the cuckoo was heard in the following spring. Therefore work grew more and more scarce, and heaven only knew what he lived upon. But Gaupa would gorge like a dog when there was food, and could starve like a dog when food grew scarce.

People gave him his nickname "The Lynx" because of his strange habits. He slept during the day and was up and about at night, like a wild beast—like a lynx in fact.

When the dalesman locked his door, blew out his candle, and crept into his sheepskins, then the light gleamed as bright as ever from Gaupa's hut. About midnight he would often steal out into the forest only to return at day-break, when he would creep into his hut, lie down and sleep as a wild animal does in its lair after its hunt for food. Gaupa was indeed a strange man.

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There was an old schoolmaster in the valley, who went from one farm to another teaching for a time at each place. He wore spectacles and was exceedingly learned, and he always sang the corpse out of the house at funerals. He was the oracle of the valley. He knew everything, and could tell you why Gaupa slept by day and went out by night.

There were two kinds of people, he used to say. Some were born by day and some by night. Those born by night often had a strange longing for darkness. "Look," he would add, "at that singular being at the Lynx Hut. He was born by night and avoids the day."

The schoolmaster was quite right about that. To Gaupa the sunshine was not warm, but cold, while the moon was quite different. In the moonlight the shadows in the forest moved like the shades of dead animals, a steady movement, hardly noticeable and yet unmistakable. Then Gaupa felt as if he himself were stealing about on hairy soles. What a delightful thrilling, silent restlessness there was around him! He seemed to be watched by unseen eyes from the heaps of rocks and wooded copses, where soft paws trotted over the moss, sinewy bodies crouched, the whole copse felt like one mighty enchanting mystery. There was magic music in the air about him, a subdued melody, and he seemed to hear the burning stars

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sparkle in the firmament.

On such nights Bjönn would often accompany him. The manner of Bjönn's arrival at Lynx Hut was as follows. One winter a dalesman from Lower Valley was travelling towards the plains with a load of butter and cured fish. When he left the town of Hönefos on his return, he noticed a large deer-hound following him. It was dark in colour with a grey head and grey legs. The man drove on, wrapped in his black sheepskin coat, with his old horse drawing the sledge. The dog followed.

But on the evening of the second day the dog disappeared, and a week later the same animal, all skin and bones, crawled up to Lynx Hut. Gaupa gave him food, and the dog remained there. No one asked questions about him, and Gaupa named him Bjönn.

Towards the spring, in April, Gaupa happened to show the dog a huge spoor in the crusted snow under Ré Mountain. Bjönn went absolutely mad, and the elk ox who was at the other end of that spoor was unprepared for such a terrible pursuit by such a tiny animal as Bjönn appeared to be. The elk sank through the snow crust, but Bjönn kept on top, and three days later Gaupa carried home venison which no one was allowed to see.

From that day Bjönn grew to be the best elk-hound in the valley. Wonderful stories were told in the district of Gaupa and his dog. When those two started to follow a spoor they never gave up. They had their meals on the spoor, they rested, and even slept there. They followed it from one horizon to the other, from one county to another, till at last the elk lay dead.

Gaupa and Bjönn were like the animals they were called after, wild and ferocious. People would say to Gaupa, "You'll kill yourself yet with such mad chase"—but the prophets fell ill and died, whilst Gaupa ran on as mad as ever.

He was a great teller of stories and a popular musician at dances. Then he played on a fiddle on the head of which the devil himself, horns and all, was carved out. And when he had had a little brandy the stories would come pouring out between his bearded lips. He was inexhaustible like a spring, and in everything he told there was an alluring mystery.

One night he was at a dance, telling of the Ré Valley Swede and the elk calf from Black Mountain—of the elk calf whose mother he had killed two weeks before and of the ugly cry he had heard the night afterwards, while he spoke silence reigned, and the young girls shivered.

A few days afterwards these things were the talk of the Valley. Such a story amongst those people was like leaven in dough. It grew and grew. Old sagas and old superstitions were added, and even the Sacred Word of God. For in those days the people of Lower Valley had nothing else to speak of but what actually took place within the limits of the mountain ridges before their eyes. Kings might die in the great world beyond—that was a matter of minor interest to them as compared with the death of a six-weeks-old piglet belonging to a crofter at Cool Hill.

Therefore it is nothing to wonder at that when Gaupa told the story of the elk calf of Black Mountain, the Ré Valley Swede was in a manner of speaking resurrected from his tomb.

Then suddenly everybody remembered a number of things about him. The Ré Valley Swede was not a true believer, he did not accept the Word humbly with a Christian's heart. The Bible says that when people die they either go to heaven or hell, and no one in Lower Valley doubted for one moment that as a rule they all went straight to heaven from their Valley—that is, if we may judge from their funeral sermons.

But the old Swede believed that many things might happen after death; he even seemed to believe that the dead might return—as beasts!

The schoolmaster explained that there was another religion which taught such a belief. But people did not care two straws about other religions. The Ré Valley Swede was a mocker, a free-thinker; a cold blast followed him wherever he went. Martin Ormerud recalled how when he entered the barn where the Ré Valley Swede was laid out, a big black bird rose from his head. "Mercy upon us!" people cried.

Thus they gossiped; old wives eighty and ninety years of age, spectacles on nose and Bibles on their knees, read aloud with

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trembling voices how "the Lord endures not a mocker." The old Swede was a living testimony to the truth of the Word. As a punishment for his sins and his mocking of God, his restless spirit was now condemned to roam about Ré Mountains imprisoned in an animal's body. God have mercy upon the poor soul when once the old sinner died, once more up there among the pines along Ré River.



§ 6

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Years passed.

In the wilderness between Gipsy Lake to the South and Lower Valley to the north there roamed about a wizard elk that no dog and no marksman could conquer.

The dalesmen called him Rauten; why, no one could say. Such names come floating on the north wind, and have no origin. Perhaps the name stuck because when he was still a calf he would low, for all the world like cattle on an autumn evening.

Rauten wandered about Ré Mountains, not like an ordinary earthly elk, but like a being half body and half spirit. No lead bullets could wound him. He was rarely seen by human eyes.

During the mating season, at dawn and in the gloaming, foresters sometimes heard his mating call. It sounded more human than animal, and it made the foresters realise that they had nerves after all.

Now and then they happened to see his spoor, unlike all other elk spoor. The clefts pointed outwards, like the spoor of a man walking toes outwards. The Ré Valley Swede had also walked toes turned outwards. When he went along the high road northwards one foot pointed east, the other west.

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Long-limbed men strode miles and leagues after Rauten, but his spoor never ended. Dogs chased him, and returned limping and moaning.

There was a black-bearded man whom they called Gaupa. He and his dog Bjönn followed elk spoor from one horizon to the other, from one county to the other. But whenever they happened to see an elk spoor with the clefts pointing apart they turned away. Chasing a spirit is like chasing a shadow.

Years passed.

§ 7

On Bog Hill, near the outskirts of Ré Valley, an elk bull was standing immovable.

It was dawn, when light and darkness intermingle, when the wild animal threads softly to his lair, tramples in a circle for a little while, and then crouches down and closes his eyelids. The few hours out of each twenty-four when death and life are locked in each other's arms have come to an end. Here and there a drop of blood lies on the earth like some moist red flower, or a heap of loose feathers seems to tell where a bird has undressed; only that particular bird no longer needs feathers.

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Still the bull elk on Bog Hill did not move a muscle. His head stood out clearly against the dawn which flooded the eastern sky like a lake of yellow light. His antlers resembled young bushes, and between the tines a dying star twinkled in silvery paleness.

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It was no mortal animal standing there; it was a ghost from dead generations, an animal spirit from the eternal hunting-grounds.

Daylight grew more and more whilst the elk stood still. A grey film of dawn decked the side of the pine trunks turned to the east. The light filtered through the pine needles as through a sieve. A bird chirped a while and then became silent again, like a life that dies just as it is born.

Then the elk's head turned, quite slowly from west to north. In his slightly curved muzzle there was the dreaming melancholy of wooded dells. His nostrils worked incessantly, expanding and contracting, the cold morning air running in and out of his nose. His eyes were large and wide awake. For the call of sex burned in his mighty body—the call to mating which rises and falls from time to time in eternal rhythm, from generation to generation.

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One ear of that elk was only half an ear. It was Rauten, the largest and wildest of all elks between mountain and valley. Mating time had come, when bull seeks cow, and cow seeks bull, when angry eyes stare into angry eyes in the fight for the female, when antler meets antler, breaking the silence of the forest with mighty crashes.

Rauten sniffed and listened. Into his nostrils entered the smell of rotting leaves and boggy marshes. It was late autumn, and the life which spring had created was on the point of returning to earth. But no scent of the female was borne on the slight breeze from the north that fills his nose. All the same he remained; now and then he cocked an ear, backwards and forwards, but no sound was heard from any living throat.

Then he lifted his head, opened his mouth and gave the mating call, a deep nasal sound which floated over the bog and died away again.

Again Rauten listened. The western slopes took on a lighter shade, but the valleys and gullies still yawned black.

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Then he turned and went northwards along the ridge, with long strides, covering the ground at great speed. One cleft hoof splashes into a tiny pool of water, the other crushes a small spruce which has been ages about sprouting in the shallow soil, and might have grown to be a big tree.

Rauten knew of a cow living thereabouts. He had come a full

league to find her, and soon a strange scent greeted his nostrils—a kind of burnt acrid smell, recalling a billy-goat at mating time.

Rauten went on till he found a marshy place with yellowing birches. On a hill-top close by, a small hole had been dug out in the earth—and not long before, for a couple of torn roots appeared fresh and white where they had been broken, not brownish as they are when they have been exposed for some time.

The hole had been dug out by mating-mad elk bulls, and the strong scent emanated from it. The hole seemed to breathe out that scent, and Rauten was in the middle of it.

He nosed the earth, but there was no breath of a cow. Then he rubbed himself against a small spruce.

Suddenly a soft-eyed elk cow came out on to the marsh below, and both animals stood still for a moment, heads raised eyeing each other. Rauten felt as light as light; he ran—no, he floated towards her. Passion was boiling inside him. He ran in rings round her, that shy female with lowered ears and patient, expectant eyes.

Then he broke loose upon her: He followed the same almighty law of Nature which compels the unconscious capercailzie and his cackling hen, the valiant wood-cock—yes, and even the little anemone which stealing the blue of the heavens spreads new life out of tiny soft stamens.

For a short time silence reigned over the marsh, except now and then for the crack of a breaking twig under the elks' hoofs.

Then another elk appeared. It was a three-year-old, with slender horns. He saw the two in front of him and made as if he would jump. In him also the forces of nature were at work. Strength pulsed through his young body, each muscle trembled impatiently with longing for a contest. For that cow with Rauten belonged to him, to him alone. She had gone with him the day before; she was his, his own. The three-year-old grew large-eyed and wild-eyed, his withers bristled like a brush. Rauten must be vanquished, Rauten must die.

The two elk bulls faced each other on Bog Hill like two living springs of force. There were four eyes full of madness, four antlers, and those antlers mean death.

Rauten was like one suddenly waking from a trance. He was quivering, wide awake; for the cow who was peeping at them curiously from behind a crooked spruce was his. He had mastered her, he had floated with her through golden sunlit mists; she was his, his own. That youngster must be conquered. The youngster must die.

The first war-cry was raised, a hoarse cry from a savage soul on fire. "Yah! Yah!"

The younger elk lifted his upper body, a hoof was flung through the air, making a dark line across the pinewoods, stopped and fell.

"Crack!" The sound was at once soft and firm. Rauten felt a fierce burning sensation under one ear, a slight mist shadowed his brain for a moment, then all was clear again.

In that brief second the other hoof from the youngster struck his neck. Hair and skin was flayed off, a fire licked Rauten where the hoof struck, and then....

There he stood, half rampant, a thunder-cloud, a storm. He turned his eyes, turned them slowly, threateningly. They were no longer brown, but white. It was as if all madness raging in that huge body had concentrated in the eyes, turning them white. Rauten towered as tall as the young pine beside him, his jaws opened, breath steamed out and his tongue protruded, long, wet, slavering. Then Rauten struck back. His forelegs were no longer skin and bones and muscles belonging to a body. They were shadows, spirits, ghosts, sinister forebodings of blood and destruction. Lightning gleamed and thunder crashed. The storm had broken loose and the three-year-old was there to meet it. The God of the wilds have mercy on his body!

The sun had not yet risen, but was still resting somewhere behind the hills. But when Rauten struck, the three-year-old saw the sun all the same, not only one, but a number of suns, a swarm of them. They danced in his head like round sparkling disks of wonderful colours. They gleamed green like fireflies, metallic like a bluebottle, copper-red like the harvest moon.

Another blow fell on the heels of the first one. It struck above one eye. And once more the tapestry of the firmament was rolled up before the sight of the youngster. There were no suns that time, but

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stars—what a host of stars, as numerous as dewdrops on the grass, sparkling like snow in spring! They leapt and danced inside his head, whirling madly together.

They went out suddenly, all of them, disappeared like a mist, and then he saw the old sun peeping red-eyed from behind the eastern mountains.

The three-year-old went backwards and retreated, for this was so sudden. He had attacked a rocky wall and found it hard. But Rauten did not let go; he followed, followed, and up from hot gorges and reeking inner bodies came the war-cry again: "Yah! Yah!"

Their antlers met writhing into each other. Snouts touched the earth, the bulls groaning as if to rid themselves of something. The sinews of their hind-quarters shivered, trembled, rage gave life to every hair in their manes, their stumpy tails were raised angrily. Two sharp backs stood out against the sky like monsters. Every fibre of their bodies was taut, muscles writhed like worms and red-hot blood boiled rhythmically through their veins.

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Their antlers were still interlaced in fierce contest; those of the youngster pale grey, Rauten's brown, watered, lined like iceworn rocks, as if some unknown hand had written strange runes on them. They hammered and crashed, their hoofs cut gaping wounds in the moss, the dew fell like tears from the sedge, and dark spoors appeared on the bog where the mighty ones walked. But the three-year-old went backwards.

Their antlers released each other, their bodies rose, and once more legs turned into fleeting shadows. The blows sounded as if someone were beating sheepskins with a stick; hoarse sounds escaped from their throats, hair flew in the air like driven snow.

The cow looked on, slightly dazed, nodding as it were her approval, for that was what she liked. The tension between the bulls invaded her; she could not remain calm any more, she leapt forwards, stopped, stamped a little, and once she lowed loudly, out of sheer excitement. It was for her they were fighting, for her their sharp hoofs made their bodies bloom red with blood.

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The red rose over Rauten's shoulder grew and lengthened into a long narrow leaf, changing shape continually, but not changing colour. The three-year-old wore a number of such roses, which easily grew out of his young, well-beaten body.

The cow's sympathies, however, were all for Rauten. He was the stronger, and she wanted the stronger. Even then she felt deliciously faint after their mating.

Rauten's madness was that time sky-high, his muscles tautened and relaxed and in their rhythmical movement made a wild song.

Both bulls had now begun to feel the strain. The mouths of both were white with bubbling foam, and their heads felt heavy, but their haunches stood up like bushes, and Rauten's eyes were alight with savage madness. It was as if he wanted to use to the fullest extent that opportunity of working off all the superfluous vitality which had accumulated in him in the course of a long, long year.

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A few small bushes seemed to jump forward in the bog to see the fight. Tree-tops stretched their necks one behind the other, staring. Sparks of light flew up from the grass; it was the cool breath of night which remained like dew on the earth.

Once more the cow lowed with excitement. A woodpecker sat on a dry, hollow spruce tree. She was green as the slimy stones in the brook. She turned her head, listening in shiny-eyed astonishment at all the noise. Then her beak hammered on the wood once more. "Knrrr!" said the hollow tree-trunk.

Rauten's skin was wet with sweat, and under his belly, on his flanks, flakes of foam boiled as if on a fleeing horse. And still his muscles sang their mad song, and again the three-year-old saw suns and stars. He staggered, retreated to the edge of the bog, sank on his knees, but rose at once. He had fought and lost, he had become a smaller beast in the woods. He was giving in, only he did not want to turn round and run away until he was obliged to do so.

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At the edge of the bog the unexpected happened. A little hill runs down there, and a high stump of a tree stood close beside a spruce. The stump was about the same height as an elk, and it looked as if a storm had once felled a spruce. The younger bull retreated towards this stump, and without giving warning Rauten ran his antlers under him. Then he made a mighty effort which will not soon be forgotten in the Bog Hill forest. The three-year-old was raised on end, stood

for a second on his hind legs, was pushed over and fell down on his back—between the tall stump and its neighbour the spruce tree, and was wedged in securely between them, fast as if in a vice.

Rauten stood with head uplifted looking at his helpless foe whose legs uselessly beat the empty air. Rauten wanted to use his antlers again, to kill, but he could not reach. The younger bull's legs worked like a windmill, and a blow from them would hurt. Rauten remained there a long time, the youngster on his back, mouth wide open, steaming.

Then the cow joined him, and Rauten went to meet her. The storm within him calmed down. For the cow began to lick him, and her tongue was soft, so caressingly soft. His shoulder blazed red like the sunrise, and his neck wept warm tears on to the moist earth. Every touch of the cow's tongue was a reward, humble admiration of him only—the greatest and the strongest among the elk bulls of valley or mountains, the crowned king of elks in Ré Valley. Nothing could stand up before him. He broke down everything before him like a falling tree in the bushes. He trotted southwards with the cow by his side across Bog Hill, like Victory itself, even though one ear was but half a one, and his body wept blood. Round their legs the white heads of the bog down-grass moved like fat white birds, while the elks ploughed their way, dark grey under the sloping rays of the newly-risen sun.

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The three-year-old lay on his back all the morning, wedged in between the stump and the tree-trunk.

There was no possible means of getting out again. He could not turn, the space was too narrow, and his legs could get no hold in the empty air. He worked till he grew weak. Then he lay still, knees bent heavenwards as if he were praying to the sun for help. His tongue lolled limply out of one corner of his mouth, and the sun burned his face pitilessly. Then he shut his eyes.

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§ 8

That same day in the afternoon Bjönn from Lynx Hut was following an elk spoor southwards through Ré Valley.

Bjönn ran quickly, nose to earth. He crossed wide marshes and small bogs where the dwarfed pines spread their wide, flat crowns like noses. He crossed ridges and valleys, and at last his course went towards Bog Hill.

There his song grew wildly excited. Gaupa was half a league farther north, but he overtook the dog within an hour. He went straight up to the helpless elk, whose legs still pawed the air. He aimed, pulled the trigger, and the bull elk moved no more.

"H'm"—Gaupa wondered.

"That is an elk bull," he mused, "but in what a strange position! How in all the world did he happen to lie on his back between that stump and the spruce tree? It is inexplicable."

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He investigated the bog, picked up a tuft of hair which was dark, and then another which was lighter. But the whole bog looked as if someone had driven a harrow from end to end, and from side to side criss-cross.

"H'm," Gaupa mused once more. Lord, what a fight there had been! He walked about studying the spoors. His eyes searched the earth. Two bulls had been here. One remained down there on the slope, and he had blown life out of him with his own "Tempest." But the other bull was larger—and why, of course it was Rauten, the wizard elk. The cleft spoors stood out with curved outer edges as the spoors of a bull generally are.

Gaupa raised his head reflectingly. Round about him the calm glow of autumn burned in the air and on the earth. The slopes were multicoloured with pinewood and leafage intermingled, spotted like the coat of a lynx.

He began to flay the dead elk; but as it was too late in the day to go down in Lower Valley with the news that he had killed an elk, he decided to go east and spend the night in the nearest highland farm.

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On his way he meditated on Rauten, but he was not such a fool as to try to trace him. That would be sheer waste of time. He was not such a fool as to try that. For many are the hunters who have

returned with sore-pawed and worn-out dogs when they have had the wizard elk before them.

Rauten had peculiar ways. He rarely ran faster than the dogs could go, but he never really stopped, never long enough for the hunter to overtake him. He sought out all the lakes and ponds in existence, and crossed them. You might follow him for hours and hours if your dog did not give up—as he was sure to do sooner or later. Very eager dogs were known to chase Rauten till they completely lost their way, and they had been found in far-off districts past the mountain gap. Also all foresters in those parts agreed that bad luck went with the wizard elk. Petter Kleivaberget fell and broke his arm when chasing Rauten. Arne Öigarden shot his own dog in mistake for the elk—a fine dog, too, worth a hundred dollars. And the man from Krödsherred who attempted to run down Rauten on ski one winter broke both skis and as nearly as anything died in the snow. He was so weak when he reached the Tolleiv Mountain Farm that he could not walk across the pasture—he crawled on all fours and was a whole hour about it too, so it was clear to anybody how near to death's door he had been.

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No, Gaupa would not follow Rauten.

He went east to Morsæter. The house lies in a little valley branching out from the Ré Valley proper. As he walked he felt uneasy. His head was heavy and he coughed now and then; he breathed heavily going uphill—he who never used to notice a hill, he who could mount the slopes at a run. Presently he began to perspire also. Gaupa did not usually perspire for just nothing.

It was probably because he had sat down on a peak last night and felt exceedingly cold, after sunset. He had been running pretty hard just before, so that he was a little moist. And that mountain peak was quite bare, and such places are invariably rather cold.

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Some years before Gaupa had had pneumonia. An epidemic raged in the district at that time, and there were many funeral parties and many sad-looking pine branches along all roads. And the young people did not dance again until Midsummer Eve.

Gaupa had really been very bad at that time, and Harald Övrejordet, the lay preacher of the valley, the high priest as they called him, came up to him and begged him to be converted from all his sins. Perhaps he would have turned from his evil ways, if he had not felt that selfsame day that the sickness had taken a turn for the better, and that he was going to get well. Therefore he was in no hurry, he would wait and see. He recovered completely and remained in sin for the time being.

But ever since then Gaupa found that if he ran really very hard a sharp needle seemed to run through his right lung. That needle was a perfect nuisance. It had cost him several horse-loads of meat, for it had forced him to stop while the elk ran away.

He felt that needle now, but, curse it, it was sure to go away again.

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Towards evening the sky grew filmy, the sun dull-eyed, the earth grey. A lake to the north was just then gleaming pale under the wooded slopes. The fire went out and the lake was nothing but water.

The wet, naked rocks in the east mountains were also fiery while the sun shone. They seemed to be drops of fire which had fallen amongst mountain peaks and forests. They too went out.

Gaupa walked towards Morsæter, Bjönn on the lead. The needle in his lung was burning—a confounded nuisance and no doubt about it. It came like lightning, and so unexpectedly that it jerked his whole body. But it was sure to go away again.

In the gloaming he saw the flat pasture round the Morsæter. The forest yawned, and he reached the fence. The roof had been freshly shingled, and looked very white and clean.

He searched for the key of the door. It was usually to be found in a hole in the wall, but not so that day. He tried other places, but there was no key.

As a matter of fact Gaupa was man enough to open a lock. He also knew how to take out window frames, so tenderly and carefully that they bore no mark of axe or knife. No house was locked to him, and if the worst came to the worst he would crawl down the chimney!

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The padlock was opened without trouble. Gaupa merely gave it a few mysterious taps with his sheath knife. The hook released the

body of the lock and seemed to say, "Please enter."

While Gaupa was cutting wood for the night behind the house, the echo from his axe beat his ears like shots. The sky was sleepy and cloudy. Perhaps there would be rain.

He stood by the hearth cutting chips to start a fire, and felt his head reeling. But his will controlled the knife, so that the fat pine-root chips curled before him like small bouquets.

The fire was lit, and then three living things were in the hut—Gaupa and Bjönn and the Fire. Gaupa sat on the hearth stone, creeping close to the fire. For it was cold and shivery that night, ever so cold. The boiling-hot coffee helped a little against the cold, glowing inside him for a little while, but very soon he shivered again. Cold blasts went down his spine, and they made him start and say "Damn" to the fire.

He pulled his bed near the fire. Two sheepskin rugs were there, and he found another in the next room. He went to bed with one under and two over him, but even then he felt cold. It was as if his body had ceased to produce warmth, he was cold from within, and a pang shot through his right side and would not leave him, however much he rubbed himself with his hard hand.

After a short time he fell asleep and dreamed—that he was chasing Rauten, running till he was quite winded—it was quite absurd how very much he was out of breath. And Rauten with the half-ear stood before him looking at him out of deep human eyes, but Bjönn lay still beside him licking his paw—what an idiot of a dog! But when Gaupa fired he saw the bullet leap out of the muzzle of the gun and run slowly through the air as if time was of no account, and when at last it reached Rauten's forehead the bullet rolled down as if it were a pea, which Rauten bending low picked up and chewed, very much as Bjönn did when you gave him sugar.... And at that moment Rauten was changed into a man, the Ré Valley Swede, only he had those enormous elk horns on his head. Gaupa's hand fumbled for another cartridge, but then he woke up, perspiring.

Morning came—after a long, long night. Gaupa wanted to go to Lower Valley with news of the elk. He flung his legs out of bed and stood on the floor. But what the devil was the matter? His head had grown so heavy; the floor rose, he had to stretch out a foot to keep it from upsetting him. He had never felt anything like it! Perhaps he was going to be taken ill out there! Perhaps he would remain in that bed as helpless as a baby! "No," he muttered, "I'm damned if I do."

He sat down again and put his shoes on. That was better, but he could not swallow a bite. The food seemed to grow in his mouth as soon as he had bitten it. All the same he packed his sack and went outside.

Mist engulfed him like an enormous white wave. He saw the trees like shadows, and the little barn in the meadow was hidden from sight.

With Bjönn on the lead he staggered across the meadow; and when he opened the gate in the fence, nature was so silent that the slightest noise seemed to saturate the air with sound.

He crossed the brook that runs from the little lake, and a few fish ran back into the lake, their backs so high that they moved the surface of the water. They are playing already, he thought; the trout are laying their roe now about Michaelmas time.

Gaupa sat down. Bjönn pulled at the lead as if wishing to investigate the mist.

Gaupa felt that he was far from being well. For by that time there was a hot pang in both his sides, and his chest seemed too small for his breathing. It was four full hours' walk to the Lower Valley. He might meet people before that. He had seen wood cutters at a place near Spæende Lake, where he passed a couple of days before, but even that is two hours' walk, and Gaupa, the Lynx, was so uncertain of himself that he doubted whether he could manage that little bit in two hours.

In fact he began to see himself as he was that winter with pneumonia, a helpless man, whom his legs would not carry. At times he was in this world and at times in another, where everything went awirl and upside down.

If now he should lie like that under a spruce tree between Morsæter and Spæende Lake, it would be anything but funny, No one would find him, for who could know the ways of the Lynx? It would

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be better to crawl back to his bed of last night than risk a sick-bed under a spruce tree.

And then Gaupa behaved in a strange way. As usual he was wearing his brown cap with a very small peak, which he had worn for ever so many years. It may seem strange that he should drag about such a rag of a cap, but there is nothing so strange about it after all, for it was a Lucky Cap, and after Bjönn and "The Tempest" it was Gaupa's most cherished possession. Gaupa, it may be said, never went into the woods without that cap, and it showed signs of wear, for in the middle of the crown there was a round hole all through to the lining. The branches had made that when he moved about under the trees.

Gaupa took off his cap as solemnly and earnestly as if he were entering the Lower Valley Church on a Mass Sunday, but he was sitting by a mountain lake, bareheaded and black-haired in the mountain mist.

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Then he flung the cap through the air, watching its flight with tense eyes. The cap turned a few somersaults, described an arch, struck the heather with a soft whisper, and lay still. Gaupa walked softly up to it and noticed very carefully the direction of the peak. It pointed to the house, and Gaupa knew then that he would go back. There could be no doubt about it.

For he believed in the power of the cap, and had never had cause to regret it. Many a time the cap had shown its remarkable power of giving good advice. When uncertain about the direction to be taken in order to find game, he had often thrown his cap, and where the peak pointed when it fell, there he went, and there the elks were, even when he could never have dreamed of finding them there. The cap was as good as a dog with a supernaturally fine scent.

Gaupa returned to the hut, and one need not laugh at him for that. Anyone living like he did sees many strange things which sound even strange in the telling. Beasts and bird and fish, yea, even trees and grass possess strange powers and may tell the future to those who have ears to hear.

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Inside the hut Gaupa tore off some bits of stale bread, hard as stone, for Bjönn, and then he crept in under his sheepskins.

It cleared up later in the day. The earth changed her face and began to smile, the last flakes of mist vanished in the air as if by magic.

At sunset a red eye seemed to shut among the peaks. A long ridge of shadows made its way up an eastern slope. It rose slowly, inexorably, like water in a lock. The last rays of the evening sun covered a hill like a red cap.

Dusk fell, but the yellow birches round the bogs seemed to have drunk the sunshine and kept it in them, so that even in the gloaming the silver birches stood out like patches of sunlight that had been forgotten. On the fence round the pasture a tiny bird poured forth clear ripples of song into the stillness of the evening.

There were no signs of life near the hut.

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Inside, Bjönn was crouching at the foot of the bed, his nose under his tail and his ears flat. The hearth was black and dead, under the sheepskin rugs Gaupa lay, a quick breathing was heard. Once the dog rose to lick Gaupa's hairy head. Then a rough hand with black nails was extended to stroke him. "Poor doggie," someone whispered.

Then the dog curled up again at the foot of the bed, swallowed noisily a few times, and then there was no sound but the laboured breathing from the bed.

A silent fight was fought in that lonely mountain hut. A hardened body rose up against something intangible something that could not be hit, a trembling of every muscle, a heaviness in head and chest not to be shaken off. At last he was conscious that his whole body noted every single sensation, and he could not ward off a feeling of dread. Nobody had any errand up there at that time of the year. The manure had been spread over the pasture, and he could not think of any other work for the people from the valley, knowing that they had no wood-cutting to do.

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Then he thought of Bjönn, whom he could feel like a warm cushion across his feet. Bjönn was a wise dog. Often when the elk had fallen, far away, the dog returned to him to tell with eyes and gesture, and he followed him to where the elk lay. Would he not also be wise enough to fetch people, if his master rose no more?

Dusk came, even in Gaupa's brain. The sheepskins were so hot that he longed to throw them off, only he knew it would be dangerous to do so.

Sometimes his eyes opened, and then they were moist as if he were moved to tears or as if he had done a long, hard sprint. The corner of his mouth worked incessantly; he was never without that, but it did not disturb him then.

A sharp gleam of light played upon a tin pan on the wall for a very long time. Then the face of night lay close up to the window panes, looking in, and the pan ceased to gleam! Only the newly-shingled roof of the cowshed stood out white in the darkness.

§ 9

On such September nights moonlight in the mountains seems like magic.

That night the moon was full and round, a glowing pupil in the blue eye of heavens. A light mist floated over the lake, the outlines of the mountains blurred like shadows. The western Ré Mountains looked as if they had opened to let out all their hidden treasure of silver. The streamlets wormed their way like molten metal down the steep slopes; far below they foamed like avalanches of snow. When the water went to rest in the lakelets down at the bottom of the valleys, the silver gleam moved lazily below the wooded slopes. A big animal crossed a moonlit glade. It was not an animal at all, but a dream which the forest and the night see in their sleep. Long shadows fell on the glade and the deer waded in them. But the rays of the moon caressed its back with soft, trembling touch, and its eyes were wet.

Noiseless like a cat Rauten went forward, no sound under his hoofs, no crack from a broken branch. He walked as if careful not to waken what sleeps about him; but he did not quite succeed. A capercailzie was perched in a tree just above him. Her head crept out from under her wing and her hairless eyelids opened; her neck hung down as she stared, but Rauten disappeared, and the bird hid her head under the wing once more.

A hare jumped up—a spirit in flight.

Now and then Rauten's nose nearly touched the earth. He sought the scent of a cow elk. For he was alone again to-day. The cow he had fought for so valiantly the day before no longer wanted him. Cows are unstable like all females. Rauten was not the one and only elk for her any longer.

But Rauten might find other mates; he was never at rest, because of the cows. He wanted to fight for them all, to strike terror in the heart of every bull he met, beat them with his antlers till they would writhe limply like willow twigs.

He stopped sniffing towards a faint movement in the air, his ears eagerly caught a tiny sleepy murmur from the brooks. But there was no scent but that of bogs and woods.

He went on silently with enormous strides—a fairy-tale walk towards sunrise.

In the mountain hut there was nothing but that laboured breathing from the bed. Every once in a while Bjönn would sigh deeply as if he were greatly troubled. Then he would lick his jaws a

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few times and sleep on, while the moonlit square moved across the floor like a living thing.

A breath of wind soughed round the walls—hush—sh—sh; a loose window pane let in a tiny draught.

Then the dog's head was raised instantly, suddenly as when a wild animal is disturbed in his lair. Bjönn was awake and alert. Eyes glowing, nostrils alternately large and small. He smelt some scent which that breath of air had carried into the hut.

He jumped on to the floor with a soft thud and stood with both forepaws on the window-sill. His triangular ears were stiff with eagerness; he saw something out there, growled deep down in his throat as if in anger. What did he see?

Suddenly he left the window and stood by the door. With an impatient bark he scratched the door to get out. Realising the futility of that, he rushed back to the window and the floorboards groaned beneath his weight. Again he stood up, his forepaws on the sill, howling as if in pain. What did he see out there?

In the bog below the pasture there was an elk. No bush could be more immovable than he. The elk seemed to sleep or to listen for something. His antlers appeared to float on the silvery lake below—full of shining silver bowls gently rocking on its surface.

Gaupa sat up in the bed. There must be something very special to make Bjönn carry on like that....

He could see through the window from where he sat, and it seemed to him that never before were air and mountains so fiery yellow and so strange-looking. They seemed to him to be burning with fever....

Farthest away and highest up he saw the sky, blue and teeming with stars. Below there swam a mountain, revealing its bristling back, and the slope was wrapped in a misty veil. Nearer to him at the bottom of the valley the lake flamed so brightly as to hurt his eyes, and on the bog nearer still he saw ... he saw—

He stroked his eyes with his finger and looked again.

An elk was standing on the bog between the pasture and the lake, asleep or listening.

Gaupa wondered whether he was losing his senses or beginning to see visions.

Once more his hand touched his eyelids, and he felt how weak and limp his arm was. He turned his head. There was Bjönn, whining and scratching at the door, so the fever had not quite mastered him. There was his rifle, "the Tempest," leaning against the wall. It had the same flashing steel trigger as always, and he saw the elk's head which he himself had carved on the butt. These could not be mere visions. He was quite in his senses, and there *was* an elk down there on the bog.

He threw off the sheepskin rugs, stepped out of the bed, leaning on the bedpost. He was no longer the Lynx, the man of muscles and sinews—no, he was a staggering uncertain thing, bereft of his strength. His head throbbed as if a thousand little animals were trying to break out through his skull. His chest was too small, and he drew in air in short laboured gasps....

Gaupa somehow managed to get across the floor and seize "the Tempest." How delightfully cool the steel felt to his hot palms!

After a while he reached the window and stared out. The elk remained immovable, looking northwards towards the Big Bear which unceasingly runs along its azure path in the sky.

Then Gaupa pushed the muzzle of his gun straight through the window-pane. A crisp clang of breaking glass followed, some pieces falling on the window-sill, others on the floor.

Dead silence reigned in the hut once more. The dog stood erect beside the man, his ears cocked, trembling with excitement, waiting for the shot.

Gaupa crouched, his knees bent, his chin pressed against the butt. How nice and cool it felt! He took aim, and when his eye caught the shining sight on the muzzle a calm relief seemed to fill his body, killing the fever....

Rauten stood down there. What was that he heard in the moonlight? The sound immediately begot a picture in his brain. He saw and heard an icicle breaking from a precipice and falling down on to the glacier below. It was broken to pieces and shattered with a shrill clang.... It was the sound of the falling window-pane.

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Up in the hut Gaupa took aim. First his aim sought the starry flowers in the sky. Then it sank past the multitude of stars, sank lower and lower, crossed the mountain slope, skirted the lake, stole along the bog, fumbled for the elk's antlers and found them. There it rested awhile, only to glide downwards along the dark body, stopped again, and remained.

Gaupa's forefinger crooked. His eyelids did not move, nor did Bjönn's.

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Rauten was listening all the time for that icicle. Then a hot pang in his left shoulder startled him, but the sensation was drowned in a roar of thunder which broke upon the stillness of the night. The elk stretched out and lay flat in the air, touched the earth, and stretched out in the air again. Moonlight streamed between the tines of his antlers when he ran, each leap double the length of his own body. He was chasing a mad shadow in front of him, chasing it into the forest which swallowed shadow and elk alike.

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Shortly afterwards something splashed in a lake to the north, and the water spouted white before Rauten where he started to swim. He swam across the lakelet, swam across molten silver. On the farther side he rose, dripping, and ran on.

§ 10

Gaupa lay in bed once more. The hut was filled with nauseating fumes from the powder, and Bjönn ran from window to door and back again. Finally he stopped at the door, nose to the chink, scenting the draught.

Gaupa knew what elk that was. It had incredibly large shovel-shaped antlers, like Rauten was said to have. Few elks in these parts have shovel-shaped antlers nowadays. Undoubtedly it was Rauten. Lead could not wound him, and he had vanished through the moonlight when the shot rang out, like one possessed.

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After a time Bjönn lay down before the door. Once more silence reigned. But to Gaupa it was as if he and Bjönn were not alone in the hut. A breath of wind came down the chimney, and to Gaupa's ear it was as if something breathed. The silence afterwards was filled with that strange murmuring which comes from nowhere and everywhere. Was it the voices of the dead returning? It sounded like

a faint whisper, always the same intonation, always alike. The whisper grew into words: "Beast, beast, beast...."

Even the hills round that hut bore marks of Ré Valley Swede's pickaxe, deep holes, mossgrown by now. Did he hear steps outside? Two stealthy steps at long intervals? No, surely not. Bjönn would have barked if there had been real steps.

And lying there with his eyes shut, Gaupa recalled many strange things which had been told in Lower Valley during those last years.

One day the cow-boy at Lyhussæter came running home struggling to regain his breath. The dairy maid stood agape. At the same time Martin Lyhus scrambled up with his packhorse, and he heard the nonsense the boy had to tell.

"An elk bull has mounted our 'Drople'!" he says.

Martin tied his horse to the fence.

"What ails ye, lad? Don't you come here to grown-up folks with child's talk. What you say has neither rhyme nor reason."

"But it's gospel truth," the boy maintained, and Martin noticed that he was purple with running.

"That elk had antlers as big as never was," says the boy.

The outcome was that Martin went with him. They found "Drople" not far off, but no elk bull, only to the farmer's eye the cow looked strangely shamefaced. He also found elk spoor, so evidently the lad had spoken the truth. But that spoor was Rauten's, for Martin recognised it.

Now, as the dairymaid knew, "Drople" had been ready for play, but strange to say she did not seem to care for a strange bull which happened to come near their mountain farm.

Nine months later "Drople" was kicking and raving in the Lyhus cowshed in the Valley and she could not give birth to her calf. The dairymaid went in and woke up Martin Lyhus. Her white kerchief gleamed in the light of her cowshed lantern, the ends hanging under her chin like long ears, when shaking her head she declared that the farmer himself had better come out and take that calf. He wasn't no real cattle crittur, that he was not, for "Drople" had mated with that wizard devil's beast in Ré Mountain. Now she could not drop her calf.

Well, Martin went out, but for all he strove and laboured he could not bring that calf. Then he fetched Tolleiv Skoro, who was something of a vet. And Tolleiv bit his tongue, as he always did when treating cattle, and he worked and worked till that calf lay beside "Drople" in the straw.

But what a miracle of a calf! Mercy upon us!

Its legs were half as long again as they should have been, its colour was dark, snout long like an elk's, and there was next to no tail!

The dairymaid trampled across the shed in her dirty boots.

"Martin," she said, "you look into its eyes."

Martin did not see anything remarkable in the calf's eyes.

"You kill him as soon as ever morning comes," said the woman. "I won't handle no crittur with eyes like human beings."

They killed the calf and buried it.

"Such foolish womenfolks," Martin Lyhus pooh-poohed; but he had to give in; for his wife was at one with the maid in the matter, and you know the ways of womenfolks....

Only that was not the end of it all.

"Drople's" milk had such a queer taste that no one in all Lyhus farm would drink it. They could only use it for cheese and such-like, and the next autumn the skin of "Drople" hung inside out on the back wall of the barn.

Something else happened the summer after "Drople" was killed. It was at the Lyhus Mountain farm, which lies in a wooded valley west of Ré Valley, and elks used to live there in summer.

One night the dairymaid saw a head in the forest, half a human head and half an elk's head it was, poking out from a closely grown spruce tree. She saw nothing else but the head, nobody, only a tremendous pair of antlers.

The head stared at her and did not move, only stared. She felt as if she were standing in icy-cold water up to the chin. She whispered the name of Jesus towards the head and then took to her heels towards the hut, mumbling bits of the catechism while she ran, from

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the Ten Commandments to the Creed, and she was half dead when at length she was safe in the hut.

"What's the matter?" asked the farmer's wife.

The maid was silent. She sat down and said nothing.

"Dear me, what ails thee?" the housewife asked again.

"I am too scared to tell."

"Scared?"

"Yes, it's more like blaspheming, it is. I saw a deer's head round by Grey Hill."

Anne Lyhus had rolled up her sleeves. She was at work salting and kneading a lump of butter. [93]

"Haven't you seen a deer's head before this?" she asked.

"Yes, but that deer's head had eyes like a human being. And worst of all I recognised them!"

Anne gasped.

"Recognised them?"

"'Twas the eyes of the Swede. If it's my last words on earth. I swear they were the eyes of the Ré Valley Swede!"

§ 11

The moonlight had reached Gaupa in the hut. Bjönn jumped up to him in bed, nosed his head and licked his hair, tail wagging. Gaupa stroked Bjönn's head.

"Poor doggie mine," he whispered. The dog lay down beside him, but with raised head, and stared through the window across the marshes.

In a little while the bed started falling over. The bed turned over and Gaupa turned over against the table. It felt as if the bed was trying to throw him out and get rid of him, and he grabbed the skins with both hands, holding on as tight as tight. He had never felt such a sensation before. [94]

There now, he was level again—how delightful! The bed calmed down; but what a number of lakes and brooks there were in that square of moonlight on the floor! A flood of little brooklets.... And then the bed began to tilt again, it turned upside down, and Gaupa clenched his fists, holding on for dear life till the perspiration ran down his skull.

Day dawned. Gaupa was talking to himself with eyes closed, while the stars vanished one by one.

On the brink of the precipice towards the Ré Valley stood Rauten.

He could feel that gadfly constantly stinging in his left shoulder. He nosed the place, but only found the hole where the gadfly had crept in. His skin bled from the bite of that gadfly which bit into him, when the thunder roared, over near Morsæter. What a strange gadfly!

But that gadfly was lying close by a bone, on the shoulder-blade. It was hard and thick and flat. Once it had lived inside the barrel of Gaupa's rifle, but the night had been so bright and it had flown out into the moonlight. [95]

Another day came into being.

The man abed in the mountain hut cried out aloud again and again, "Bjönn!" he called, and each time the dog crept up to lick the man's face.

About noon a wind arose, blowing somewhat hard. The broken pane rattled and there was a draught in the room. The wind falling down the chimney played a little with some fine cobweb under a beam in the roof and escaped through the window again.

The wind blew hard and then calmed down, blew hard and calmed down once more, and between each gust the hut only seemed to wait for the next.

Suddenly there was a sharp noise in the lock of the door and Bjönn jumped down from the bed, barking. But the door swung on its hinges, and made a yawning gulf out towards the sunlight outside. Probably the wind did it, or was it the forewarning spirit of a man following behind? Several hours passed and no man entered, so it could not have been a spirit after all. [96]

And there was another night and another day.

Outside Bjönn wailed to the heavens, while the wind thrashed the forest till it waved like a dark green sea.

After a while the dog trotted eastwards along the path by the lake. He grew smaller as the distance increased, he trotted steadily along the beaten path. When there was a dip or a mound he disappeared, to dive up again soon afterwards, but finally there was no reappearance.

Then Gaupa was quite alone in the mountain hut.

Only he was not there at all. Suddenly he had entered strange underground passages where breathing was difficult and which were so narrow that he could scarcely move. He lay flat, he tried to bend his knees and sit up on his haunches, but the place was too narrow. Then he attempted to pull himself forward on his stomach, tried with all his might, for soon there would be no more air in there. It was half dark and he could not find his way out. The passage was crooked like a fox's lair, with no beginning and no end. He crawled forward in mad terror, lest he should never find a way out.

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Then suddenly a shot rang out there, and all was blank.

After a while he crawled again, crawled—crawled to find a way out which he could not see.

§ 12

Bjönn trotted down the path to Spænde Lake. Here and there yellow and brownish leaves were in his path, and when he trampled them they rustled like a fire of twigs.

Where the slopes began to fall steeply towards Lower Valley, a wood-cutter stood beside a marked spruce. At the height of a man's head a strip of bark had been flayed off so that bare flesh of the tree could be seen. The strip of bark hung down like a long tongue; one might imagine the tree putting its tongue out at the forester.

But the wielder of an axe is not one to defy! "Bang!" said the tree trunk, when the lightning steel cut a chip from its body.

The strokes of the axe sounded even and regular from the forest; they might almost be the pulse of the woods.

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Bjönn stopped a little to the west, listening. The sounds reminded him of something and called up a picture of Gaupa outside Lynx Hut cutting firewood, bending and straightening his body as the axe was lifted and fell. The stroke of axe and human beings go together, Bjönn knew that. Over there in that woodland slope there must be people.

Soon afterwards the wood-cutter heard the heather whispering behind him. His axe was still in the middle of a branch, and he turned his face bearded with a week-old stubble.

He saw a dog standing there, looking at him, wagging his tail, and saying as plainly as anything:

"Good day to you. I see you are cutting timber."

"That is the deer-hound belonging to Gaupa," the wood-cutter thought, for everybody knew Bjönn just as everybody knew the parson or the sheriff. Bjönn was an elk hunter by the grace of God; he provided long elk hams for their store-rooms and long elk antlers over their doors. Yes indeed, everybody knew Bjönn.

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"Is that you, Bjönn?" the wood-cutter said softly; he left his axe and went up to the dog to stroke him with a hand sticky with resin.

But the dog behaved very strangely—just like a puppy. He jumped off as if in play, made a leap and stopped to look backwards at the forester. He wagged his tail a little as puppies do when they want to play.

"You're a funny dog," the wood-cutter thought.

The dog made several leaps, looked backwards, asking the forester to follow him. But that wood-cutter had only a tiny space in his head where his wits lived, barely space enough to contain the idea of timber, axes, pork, and coffee. Therefore he understood nothing at all of what the dog wished to say, and started cutting timber again. An enormous spruce fell down, a giant of the forest which stood at his post and fell there like a faithful veteran.

Bjönn waited. The man cut off a slice of bread and gave it to him. Bjönn wolfed it down. He would have liked more for sure, but the wood-cutter could not afford it, for a man who fetches his living

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from between the bark and the wood does not readily throw away good food into a dog's mouth.

Bjönn waited. He wanted the man to go with him to the Morsæter Hut. It was not as it should be that his master remained in bed day after day without moving, and without getting up.

"You be off and find your master," said the wood-cutter, making as if to chase him with one arm. "You go along after Sjur."

Bjönn only cocked his ears and remained.

"Fool," said the man; "changeling," he said.

Evening came, and the man met two of his mates at their hut. Bjönn was still with him, and they soon agreed that he must have lost his way, and God only knew where his master was.

Then the wood-cutter told the others of the dog's strange behaviour when he first arrived. One of the men, who had much beard, many years and much experience, said thoughtfully:

"It can't be possible that something wrong has happened to Gaupa?"

"Certainly not," the first one replied. "No wrong'd ever befall Gaupa, he who is for ever making his bed under the nearest tree. Gaupa can look after himself, no doubt about that."

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Bjönn had been sitting still near the door, but then he scratched to get out. The door was opened and fastened again. Pork spluttered in a pan, a kettleful of coffee boiled over and vomited at the spout.

§ 13

Bjönn trotted westwards again. The wind had calmed down, and in the sky above a low ridge God had lit a tiny star.

In a brief hour Bjönn entered the fence at Morsæter.

The door of the hut had been thrown back and was only slightly ajar. A narrow grey nozzle entered the gap, and Bjönn stepped in. Breathing was coming from the bed.

The dog jumped up and crawled lazily forwards to the sack of provisions which formed the sick man's pillow. Gaupa was uncovered, lying on his back fully clothed, his beard streaming over his chest.

He was conscious now, and clearly recalled how he shot the elk in the moonlight, but how long ago that was he did not know. Time was blurred in his mind. Anything not connected with the elk he could not recollect.

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There was Bjönn. The dog placed a cool wet nozzle against his chin. He saw that the door was open and remembered seeing him enter, and the thought begot the idea that sooner or later the dog would seek people, and the important thing would then be that he should carry something which would take a message to anyone he met.

After some reflections he loosened his watchchain from his waistcoat and tied it round the dog's collar.

Was it morning or evening, dawn or gloaming? It might be either, but after a time the darkening dusk, which came like something soft and fleecy, convinced him that night was advancing.

What about that shot at the elk?...

Perhaps he had struck the beast somewhere in the body. It was impossible to say, for the deer might well run as it did even if it were hit. Perhaps he struck the belly, and Gaupa's imagination clearly pictured how that bullet would tear the intestines until their contents would run out like a thick butter. The elk would run with a flaming fire inside—Gaupa could almost feel it inside himself.

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He wondered at himself for his pity—it was more like a woman than like him, Gaupa, who never before had cared whether he only wounded an elk or killed it. But now a curious tenderness invaded his whole being, and the bare thought of a wound gave him pain, downright physical pain. Most distinctly of all he could feel the possibility of a hit in the lungs—if the elk could no longer draw a full breath, but had to gasp for air. The lungs filled with something that stopped breath and blurred sight. The nose began dripping blood—the elk would be choked....

And Gaupa thought that if he went out alive from that mountain hut he would never more be careless where he sent a bullet into an

animal. Either he would be sure that his shot could kill, or he would not shoot.

He was fully conscious throughout the evening.

Those eyes came back to him, as he had seen them off and on during later years, when dreaming or half asleep. [104]

He saw a forest at dusk, it may be one summer evening. Everything was asleep about him, but over there amongst the spruce something was alive, two moist, brownish, living spots side by side. And in another direction he also saw two living eyes, and he knew them. They were the eyes of dead elks shot years ago, calves bereft of their mothers. Such eyes looked at him from behind every tree and every bush; they blamed him and accused him, the elk souls from the land of shades.

A trembling fear assailed him; he turned and turned to get away from the staring glances which caught his own irresistibly. He ran with feet like lead that would not move; but the eyes were everywhere, they seemed to move, staring till madness entered his soul.

Then he noticed two unlike the others. They were deer's eyes and yet they were not. They were the ones he had met eight years before on the slopes of Black Mountain. Then he threw himself forward, his face in his hands. [105]

§ 14

The next day the farmer Halstein at Rust in Lower Valley saw Bjönn, the dog from Lynx Hut, trotting towards the farm. The dog came into the passage and scratched at the door. Halstein opened, and noticed that the dog was soaking wet. Big wet marks on the floor showed where he placed his paws. He had probably swum across the river.

What was hanging on the dog's collar?

Halstein loosened the well-worn brass chain, looked at it, and said to his wife:

"This chain belongs to old Gaupa. I'm thinking something must have happened to him."

Halstein had often followed both Bjönn and his master in the forest, and that was why the dog fetched him for help. The dog behaved exactly as he did with the wood-cutter the day before, running from the door to Halstein and back again.

"Well, well, I'm coming sure," said Halstein, packing his sack. He took his gun from the beam in the roof, and the two walked quickly across the meadow. When he reached the bank of the river the dog jumped first into the boat, and on the other side they were swallowed up by the forest. [106]

The man and the dog walked for hours, along narrow forest paths, across murmuring brooklets, and through birch bush. Bjönn never wavered, he was going back on his own tracks, and he never walked so far as to be out of Halstein's sight.

All the time Halstein was wondering what might be the matter with Gaupa. Perhaps he had had an accident, broken a leg.... As far as he knew Gaupa was on the Buvas Slopes a week before, and since then nothing had been heard of him.

The man and the dog walked on, not towards Ré Valley, but farther east. Once they crossed a mountain ridge and stood with their feet on earth and their body in the clear sky. Then again they descended into a narrow valley. Morsæter Lake regarded them like a bright blue eye. They came to a dense copse of healthy young trees, as is usually the case near mountain summer farms, and then they were at their goal. They saw a hut with a brown mossy roof and a cowshed with bright, new-shingled roof.

Halstein Rust stopped outside the door. Bjönn forced his way in, leaving the door ajar. Where Halstein stood in the sun he could see nothing of the interior of the hut, it being darker in there, and he was blinded by the sunlight. He heard Bjönn's steps on the floor, but no sound of man. Why did not Gaupa say something? Surely he must have heard them both coming. [107]

He cleared his throat and struck his iron-shod heel against a stone with a loud noise, but not a whisper came from the hut. He noticed a thin, worn-out horseshoe lying on the ground before him,

and a bunch of fir twigs which the dairymaid had made to scrub her wooden milk-pans with last summer. He hesitated to enter, with the same icy feeling which seized him when about to enter barns and other outlying houses where corpses were laid out....

Then he cleared his throat once more, decisively this time as if driving away an uncanny feeling. He walked to the door with the long, fine steps of the forester, the latch clattered, and he stood before a bed with a man on it. It was Gaupa. Gaupa was alive.

"Good day to you," said Halstein, half astonished with a question in his voice, as if he had not expected to find Gaupa there. "Are you in bed?" he asked.

"I've been sick," Gaupa replied.

Soon afterwards smoke curled up from the chimney, and Halstein Rust carried a wooden pail to the well, north of the pasture. When he returned Gaupa had something ready, which had occupied his thoughts while the other was away.

"The first thing you must do when you go home," he said, "is to send a message to Christopher Hovtun, that there is the flesh of an elk bull awaiting him near the little bog under Bog Hill."

Halstein could not keep back a smile.

"What about a doctor? Would he not be almost as important?"

That same day he returned perspiring to Lower Valley, harnessed his mouse-grey mare in his carriage and drove away northwards through the valley, his stiff, black, Sunday-best hat on his head. And that same night a man with starched linen, spectacles, and thin white hands was riding along the forest paths towards Morsæter. The moon hung in the heavens like a yellow lantern lighting his path, while the farmer's boy from Rust followed him.

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When they reached the hut they heard a deep bark from within. The doctor descended stiffly from the saddle, and it was quite ridiculous to see that from town-habit he knocked at the door before entering.

For three weeks afterwards there was smoke curling up from the Morsæter chimney every day. One day in the fourth week Gaupa and Bjönn stood at the door of Lynx Hut. Gaupa was sickly pale.

But farthest out in Ré Valley where the round head of Ré Mountain seems to bend forwards to look down into the valley, Rauten stood in a marshy place still feeling that nasty gadfly which bit his shoulder. He could not reach it with his tongue, and could only lick the hole where it had crawled under the skin. He did not get rid of that gadfly until winter gleamed on the mountain peaks and Gaupa's lead bullet was surrounded by a covering of tissue.

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Gaupa was not his old self all that winter.

He stayed indoors making shoes, and felt cold if he went out. His body seemed to have become open so as to let in the wind and the cold. [111]

But he recovered when spring came. He resembled a strong tree. A wound is covered with resin and the tree is whole again. The same thing happened to Gaupa. Slowly but surely weakness grew out of him. And by the next autumn any number of old footwear lay under his bed awaiting his treatment. But Gaupa had no time for work. His short, muscle-hardened legs were trotting over ridges and far horizons.

That autumn neither he nor any others learned any news of Rauten, and not even the spoor was seen of the wizard elk. Very likely he had gone to some other forests.

Let me see now—did anything worth recording happen to Gaupa?

Yes, he shot an elk bull on a prohibited ground. If the thing had been made known it would have resulted in a thumping big fine; and as Gaupa had nothing with which to pay a fine, it would have meant prison instead. Therefore he did a very sensible thing. He cut off one of the elk's legs at the knee, then went outside the preserve and made a beautifully clear elk spoor all up to where his elk lay. Then he fetched people and said: [112]

"Here ye are, folks. There is the spoor. I was raising him outside the preserve, and then he ran away in there where he lies."

Well, the men saw what there was to see. The elk had been raised outside, though lying in the preserve. That was clear enough. The spoor was sufficient evidence as good as a sworn witness. The men bit off a screw of twist and would have sworn ever afterwards on their souls that Gaupa raised the elk on lawful ground. The man who owned the forest had half the meat, as is the custom. The sheriff had some of it for his Christmas dinner, and proposed the health of Sjur Renna whom people called Gaupa, the sprightliest man in the forest who fetched such dainty food from the wilderness.

Well, it was no unusual thing. Elk hunters have a special catechism, with the ninth commandment left out, the one about bearing false witness. But when Gaupa skipped that commandment he made an extra special churchy face, as candidly innocent as if his good conscience was covering it externally.

That winter an elk fell through the ice in Lower River, a league or so to the south. Four men helped him out again with great difficulty. That deer had half an ear, and ran off to the western slopes, having come from the east. [113]

The following autumn Gaupa received a letter. It was brought to him specially by a little boy from Rust who had no other errand.

"I was sent with a letter for you," he said.

"A letter?" Gaupa could scarcely have been more surprised if one morning the sun had risen in the west and had crossed the sky backwards. A letter? A letter for Gaupa?

He put down the fat pork he was eating, wiped his hand on his trousers, and took the letter as gingerly as if afraid it would burn his fingers.

The envelope bore some printed letters as distinct and black as those in the Prayer Book: "H. Braaten & Co., Drammen." Below he read "Mr. Sjur Renden, Lower Valley." But that was in pen-and-ink writing.

Gaupa opened the letter with his sheath knife much as he would cut open the skin of an elk's belly. The rustling white paper in his hands for once brought home to his mind the fact that his hands were extremely dirty. The paper seemed too nice for them to touch. Even that bore the printed inscription "H. Braaten & Co., Drammen," and below: "*Wholesale Hardware*," which two words he did not understand in the least. The handwriting did not look like what he had learnt at school, round and readable. That before him was nothing but straight lines and broken ones crowded close together. And what a man he must be at handling a pen, he who wrote it! The words raced across the paper like gusts of wind, and below a whirling curl stood by itself; Gaupa guessed it was meant for "Braathe." He went off at once to find the schoolmaster and have the letter read aloud. By himself he could only puzzle out a few words here and there, like "elk," "Ré Valley," "superstition," and "Yours truly." [114]

H. Braaten & Co. was a man from Lower Valley who had turned

genteel. He hailed from a croft called Vermin Camp, and left home as soon as he was out of school. He sat on a loaded trading cart when he left, and the whole outfit reeked of well-matured old cheese.

But when he returned!...

[115]

He arrived in a hired carriage with a hood on it, and he brought a wife whom they called Mrs. Braathe, and who talked town language. And there was so much gold in his teeth that when he laughed his mouth was like an entire sunrise.... That grand gentleman was Hans from Vermin Camp who left the district on a sledgeful of old cheese.

The schoolmaster first took two or three readings of the letter, his lips forming the words but not his tongue. Then he read aloud:

“MR. SJUR RENDEN,

“From my good friend up there I learn that there runs in the woods a remarkable elk, which no forest-men can manage to kill. Of course a great deal of superstition is connected with the animal, the dalesmen of Lower Valley being presumably as superstitious now as when I was a child. Lower Valley is on the outskirts of civilisation. But if you, who are, as I have heard, the greatest hunter in those parts, would consent to guide me on a trip after the mysterious elk, you would give great pleasure to an old acquaintance. I long for Ré Valley.

[116]

“Please send me an answer.

“With kind regards,

“Yours truly,

“H. BRAATHE.”

The schoolmaster folded up the letter looking as if he had accomplished a great deed, something that no one else in all the valley could manage.

“You’ll answer for me, won’t you?” said Gaupa. “You’ll say he can come?”

And going home to Lynx Hut he felt himself greater than before. A gentleman from Branæs had sent him a letter, saying it would be a pleasure to have his company. The last “Yours truly” sounded so full of respect and so courteous that one might think it had been written in mockery.

§ 16

One day Mr. Braathe knocked at the door of Lynx Hut. Gaupa was at home, but did not answer. What did that knocking mean? After another knock he went to open the door.

Mr. Braathe was a long lath of a man, who seemed to have been pulled too hard length-ways and grown too narrow. Everything about him hung loosely—his cheeks, shoulders, even his clothes. He was as shrivelled up as a bat.

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“Please sit down on the bed,” said Gaupa; “there are no more lice there than the fleas have managed to eat.”

That was a joke he usually quoted to strangers, but this time he swore to himself the moment he had said it. The man before him hailed from Vermin Camp, and might think the words an allusion to his past.

But Mr. Braathe kept smiling, and asked Gaupa to call him plain Hans just as in the old days.

That same evening they stood on the slope above Tolleiv Mountain Farm in Ré Valley. Bjönn was not with them, because Hans did not want him, and in Gaupa’s opinion even a dog could not avail when he was hunting Rauten.

If Gaupa had nursed any ideas about the townsman being worth but little, he was mistaken. Gaupa walked quickly all day, but Hans kept up with him, and there was not a sign of perspiration about him. Once he took out from his bag a strange instrument, a short trumpet of birch-bark with a kind of mouthpiece at one end.

[118]

Hans was a much-travelled man. He once saw nothing for nights and days but sea and sky. He had smelt the smoke from Red Men’s camp fires. While he spoke, Gaupa grew silent and his eyes sought the far distance. He was not there in a boggy hollow on the Ré Valley slopes. He followed this tall man through endless woods on the other side of the earth, in a country which to Gaupa’s mind had always been more dream than reality. They seemed to be under a tree, and beside them crouched a copper-coloured Indian with burning eyes. He had a similar birch-bark trumpet in his hand. The

wilds of Canada spread out under the clouds. It was early morning. Somewhere a beaver splashed into a calm pool. Farther away a duck was heard.

Then the Red Indian, their guide, moved his moccasins with infinite care, turned towards the rosy dawn over the earth in the east and lifted the birch-bark trumpet to his mouth. At first he only breathed into it as if to warm it. It was a cold autumn morning, as silent as death, except for the occasional splash of the beaver....

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The Red Indian lowered his instrument, raised it again, and out of it floated the mating call of an elk, loud and living, luring and treacherous.

Hans arose, saying that that night they would lure the wizard elk. The birch-bark instrument had accompanied him in the wilds of Canada, and more than one crowned head had been turned by it. It would be a strange thing indeed if Rauten were not fooled also.... All that talk about the Ré Valley Swede was the most arrant nonsense, he declared.

Gaupa did not care to show himself superstitious to his companion, for superstition was old-fashioned amongst the genteel. Therefore he guessed that Rauten was an elk like other elks. He ate grass, mated with the cows in the autumn, and when he died he would die like a he goat. No restless spirit would fly out of his nostrils.

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§ 17

It was the following night.

On the slopes of Black Mountain Rauten stood on a rock, listening, his ears waving alternately backwards and forwards. His beard hung stiff and awe-inspiring. He was listening for a cow. They usually can be heard at dusk during mating time.

The weather was not quite calm. A darkish cloud sailed slowly above Black Mountain. Just below him in the river there were mild rapids and the water bubbled incessantly against the rocks like a boiling kettle.

Farther up the slope Hans and Gaupa sat under a spruce tree, the lower branches of which touched the earth. They sat as if in a tent, on soft reindeer moss, hardly daring to move. Hans produced a flask, and Gaupa poured the golden brandy down his throat without a word. Little by little the forest grew veiled. Over the east mountains daylight faded away, the roar of Ré River seemed incessant and more wide awake than ever. The sound was uneven, which meant that there was movement in the air. That was bad luck.

Hans bent towards Gaupa. "I wonder if we shall have an answer to-night," he whispered.

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"This is the best elk ground in all Ré Valley," Gaupa whispered back.

Then once more they sat as still as stones, and Gaupa felt the brandy on his tongue for a long time.

The night before they had tried the trumpet trick, but no bull answered them.

That afternoon they found Rauten's spoor just below where they were then sitting. A young pine showed white spots on its bark and several branches were broken.

There the wizard elk had rubbed his antlers; the marks were so fresh, perhaps only made that day.

As darkness came on, Gaupa's excitement grew. Hearing seemed to fill every part of his body. He was nothing but ears....

Hans regarded this strange being beside him. Gaupa's face was so very short, with next to no chin, and that is rare, for surely energetic people generally have strong chins. Now and then he jerked his head sharply and suddenly, as if he heard something that made him jump every once in a while. Then Hans saw Gaupa smile, and a smile had not been seen on Gaupa's face all that trip. He was smiling, a strange, stiff-lipped smile, and turning to Hans he asked:

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"D'you hear him?"

Hans had not heard a sound. But Gaupa's keen ear had caught a sound so faint as scarcely to be one at all—the mating cry of a bull elk. The sound seemed to come from below and from the north. Silence reigned around them once more. Gipsy Lake had a silvery

streak along its eastern banks. It was the reflection of the northern sky.

Hans carefully pressed the birch-bark mouthpiece against his lips, stuck the other end out through the pine branches, and blew. The call of a cow elk rang out: "Come, come."

Then all was silence.

A quarter of an hour later Hans once more lifted his instrument.... He stopped, startled.

Immediately to the north, silhouetted against the bright sky in the opening of the valley, an elk bull stood on a mountain ridge. Hans could see the sky between its legs and also two ears and enormous, shovel-shaped antlers.

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The elk did not move, and stood out like a statue against the sky above the valley.

Gaupa cocked his gun. "Rauten," he whispered, and it sounded like a sob. He had seen the mutilated ear. At that moment the bull stepped down from the ridge, straight towards them, and darkness hid him from their view.

Then they heard "Örrke—örrk," a kind of nasal grunt, approaching nearer and nearer. A dry twig cracked, and in the clearing a pine stump shimmered with a greyish gleam. The roar from Ré River seemed far distant, as if withdrawn, but suddenly it sounded close again, the forest gave a sigh, and Gaupa saw a lichen tuft move slightly just above Hans's head.

Then the noise of the elk ceased as if suddenly cut off. There was not a sound. The minutes crawled past. There was still silence.

Gaupa turned.

"Weathered!" he whispered.

But Rauten trotted northwards along the edge of the long Ré marshes hour after hour. He had heard the luring call of a cow, went to meet her, and found man. What a strange thing to happen!... And Rauten ran on. It is bad to be where man is.

[124]



§ 18

It was the same autumn, later on in September, one night at Lynx Hut.

Björn was asleep on the bed. "The Tempest" hung on the wall. A wooden box, converted, formed Gaupa's cobbler's workshop. A tiny paraffin lamp gave him a sleepy light for the work he had in hand, mending a shoe. On the box awls, plugs, tacks, waxed thread, and heel irons were heaped together, for Gaupa was very far from being a tidy man.

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The patch finished, he pulled out from under the bed a violin

case, took out his instrument and turned it round in his hands as softly as if caressing it. Then he lifted it to his chin and made a stroke to test the tuning, but when he touched the tenor and bass strings the violin sang so sadly, sweetly, and wildly at the same time, just the tune that will sometimes rise up out of black, hidden river-filled gullies. The violin was tuned for magic.

A lively country dance leaped from the strings. Bjönn woke up and opened his eyes, but shut them again. A few dying embers glowed red through the draught-hole in the stove, and when Gaupa had finished and sat in deep reflection the sound of a watch ticking filled the silence. It was getting on for one o'clock in the morning, but that was Gaupa's most wide-awake hour.

Steps were heard outside, and Bjönn barked. "Whisht," said Gaupa. There was a knock, Gaupa unlocked his door, which as it happened he had locked that night. [126]

"Evening," said somebody in the dark.

"Evening," Gaupa replied; "are you out walking so late?"

Hans Holmen stood outside, exactly in the line between darkness and the yellow lamplight from within. His coat was unbuttoned and a nickel watchchain gleamed across his waistcoat. He carried a fishing-rod over one shoulder, and Gaupa saw the white top move softly in the dark.

"Oh," said Hans Holmen again, "it's early rather than late. It is just about one o'clock."

Gaupa waited. Full well he knew that Hans must have a very special reason for coming in the night like that.

Then Hans began to relate how he was fishing along the river. There was a dense thicket of bushes growing along the bank and he was well hidden. While he was baiting his hook an enormous animal came out of the undergrowth just to the south of him. At first he thought it was a horse, and wondered why it had no bell, and besides it was not quite the shape of a horse either. When the animal waded out into the river he saw it against the sky-line and recognised it as an elk of unusual size. [127]

Hans Holmen went close up to Gaupa. He lowered his voice as if telling a secret.

"'Twas the wizard elk I saw," he said; "I saw the mark of your knife."

He waited.

"Well," he summed up the situation, "I thought I'd better tell you, when I saw the light in your window. That elk waded across the river and went up the other side, so now you know where to find his spoor."

Hans Holmen left, and Gaupa closed the door. He remained for some seconds staring down on the floor, standing in his shirt and trousers.

But out on the high road Hans Holmen went straight homewards and not towards the river.

In Lynx Hut the petroleum lamp was still burning. Gaupa went to and fro slowly, busy as usual. He baked potato flap-jacks on his stove, filled the wooden butter cup, and made ready for a tramp with his knapsack, Bjönn, and "The Tempest."

About three o'clock he went to the corner cupboard, and after some fumbling produced an old-fashioned leather purse. Out of it he took a slightly flattened lead bullet, as big as a small potato, dirty, knobby, and rough. [128]

That bullet had a name, for it was called the Swede's Bullet. Gaupa's father was a soldier at Matrand in 1814, and he shot a Swede who was standing against a tree-trunk. The bullet went straight through him and into the bole of the tree. Afterwards his father picked out that bullet, and ever since the family had regarded it as a priceless possession.

It could heal wounds and cure illness as well as any doctor. Gaupa never forgot the old crofter who had an ulcer in his leg. Gaupa went to him with the Swede's Bullet and stroked the leg with it in a circle round the ulcer. From that day the ulcer stopped spreading; it could not pass outside the circle where the Swede's bullet had touched the skin.

But then Gaupa reflected whether he should sacrifice the priceless lump of lead and melt it into a bullet for Rauten.

Rauten, being no ordinary elk, could probably not be killed by

ordinary bullets. All the old people believed that there are many animals which demand a special ammunition if you want to shoot them.

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But should he really give up the Swede's bullet?

If it could assist him to kill the wizard elk, the whole district would look upon him as a great man. He would be famous in the valley, and the fact would not easily be forgotten that he was the man who killed Rauten.

For many years he had avoided the beast. For to be quite honest he had to admit that bad luck followed the one who hunted it. Why was he so ill when he shot at the wizard elk at Morsæter? They saw the spoor and knew what animal it was which he saw like a vision in the moonlight.

But while he was conscious of his childish fear of Rauten, he always felt a tantalising desire to see the end of him, to kill him, and cart that enormous body down into the Lower Valley, to exhibit it to the dalesmen and listen to their comments.

Oh what a day that would be! The small boys would gaze at him and Bjönn in deep admiration not unmingled with fear, and the old women would shake their heads knowingly and predict disaster to him....

The Swede's bullet weighed heavily in his hand, heavier than ordinary lead. Unknown forces were imprisoned in the metal, and it must not go out of the family's possession. But Gaupa had no relatives in the Valley. He was an only child, his parents were dead, all his other kinsmen had gone away across the Blue Atlantic. When he died the Swede's bullet would be homeless, so to speak, and that ought not to happen.

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Gaupa decided to melt down the Swede's Bullet.

He made a big fire in the stove under a kind of small pan in which he usually melted his lead. He gazed very earnestly at the Swede's bullet as it lost form and flattened down until at last it was one big drop of lead in the pan, glittering like a flame, as mysterious as a mountain lake under the moon.

Suddenly Bjönn, who lay upon the bed, grew restless. He looked up at his master, whimpering softly. What on earth was the matter with the dog? "Quiet!" said Gaupa.

Bjönn rolled himself up again, head under tail. But when Gaupa poured the molten lead into the bullet mould, the dog once more raised his head and whined.

How strange! Was the dog ill? Perhaps it was rheumatism. For Bjönn was growing old. He had the pale-blue eyes and the dimmed pupils which indicate age. But he was fairly brisk as yet. What was it he carried on like that for?

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Gaupa went up to the dog and stroked his head. Bjönn flattened his ears as a sign of content and calmed down.

The lead had cooled, and Gaupa took out the bullet, fresh and shiny. But it was not like other bullets. It had killed once; it knew its way, and wherever this bullet hit the elk's body, death would radiate from it as if from a poisoned arrow. Heaven have mercy upon Rauten!

Bjönn again raised his head, whimpering, when Gaupa placed the bullet in the cartridge.

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It was four o'clock in the morning. He extinguished the lamp and crept to bed beside Bjönn. Now and then he opened his eyes to look for dawn through the window.

That morning an elk bull lay quietly at the upper end of Owl Glen. It was Rauten. He had come from the other side of the valley from the eastern mountains. A dog with a terrible voice in his throat had chased him for half a day, and at last Rauten had swum across Lower Valley River.

But he wanted to go back to Ré Valley, for that was his home. There for months peace reigned in the woods until it entered his own shaggy body and made him at one with the deep silence of the mountains.

Peace was the depth of his nature. He wanted to see, unseen. He liked to stand at the edge of the bogs, looking at the capercailzie hen with all her brood. He liked to see the ever-frightened hare nibbling the grass undisturbed. That was peace, and each day offered fresh joys, however old—a feed of juicy grass not yet withered in some marshy place, a few waterlilies in a mountain lakelet. For him life was food, sleep, and rest, and then feeding again. Life was light and darkness, sun and rain, heat and cold.

[133]

He slept at all times of day and night, but as lightly as if even in his sleep all the tiny sounds of the wilderness reached his consciousness. They floated about his ears, and the least unusual crackling let them all into his brain at once, and he was wide awake.

Rauten lived on his instinct—that is, on the experiences accumulated by countless generations through all ages and in all countries. Experiences had glided into him as murmuring brooklets run into the sea.

When he ran towards the wind, and not before it, it was because he had to do so. When he ran away from the scent of man, elks long since dead whispered soundless warnings in his ears. The fear of man was a seed which had been growing since the first arrow flew twirling and singing into the shoulder of an elk and caused life to ebb out of it.

Rauten was lying in Owl Glen this grey morning, with the sleepy murmur from Lower River before him, and a tiny trickle of water over the rocks beside him. That little trickle was a tiny life. A drop fell, and there was an attentive silence, then another drop splashed. Higher up in the glen an owl sat immovable, big sprouts of feather sprouting from the head, yellow eyes staring blindly at the daylight, her beak still bloody after the night's hunting.

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Far below Gaupa was following an elk's spoor, breathing heavily. He held Bjönn on the leash, and the dog nosed the earth as if seeking something. Once in a while he would snort and tug hard, straight into the mountain, into Owl Glen.

The glen was narrow, with walls of rock on either side, the mountain ash glowing in autumnal glory, and the bracken turning gold. A hawk flew out with a cry, and the sound echoed backwards and forwards from rock to rock, growing into a strong volume of sound, like a loud call in empty space.

The man and the dog crawled upwards. Suddenly Bjönn threw up his head. He had caught the open scent, and Gaupa unfastened the dog's collar, quietly and carefully.

When the foresters lie in their huts on long winter evenings they often tell of Gaupa and Bjönn and the wizard elk.

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The old men amongst them still remember from their boyhood the wild chase which began that morning in Owl Glen, and lasted one day, two days, three days. The end came on the night of the third day.

Rauten lay peacefully in Owl Glen, his ears on the alert, one cocked forwards and the other backwards.

Then he started up from his lair, and ran. The wakeful conscience of the woods had been disturbed. A small pebble loosened and fell clattering downwards, a black deer-hound with a grey nose and grey legs ran out from amongst the scrub, the elk bull turned tail, and strode westwards on his long legs. That was the beginning. Down in Lower Valley the parlour clocks struck seven, and the chimneys gave forth light smoke into the grey morning.

A little later a man stood where the two had left, staring into the west.

He opened his mouth as if to inhale something from the air. He placed his hand behind his ear, inclining his head, his mouth always

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open. His eyes were far away from the world about him. They looked at the earth, but in the far distance.

The hills swam westwards towards the naked bulk of Ré Mountain, wave upon wave in long, easy swell.

Two animals were running towards Ré Mountain, a big one in front, a smaller one after. They were fighting over the distance between them, at times increasing and then again diminishing. The elk ploughed through the undergrowth with his long, heavy body, his antlers swishing through the green pine needles, his legs clip-clapping evenly and surely. When he lifted them his hoofs touched with a sound like dry sticks beating each other. Once in a while an antler would bang heavily against a tree-trunk.

Rauten kept up a steady, even trot; his flight was unhurried and unafraid, as was in keeping with the greatest beast in the forest, the strongest and wildest of elks, between valley and mountain. He ran because somehow it seemed wise, not because he was afraid. His nozzle was raised almost horizontally and his antlers lay along his back.

Bjönn ran after him. His tongue had grown too long—protruding out of his mouth, his eyes were wild, and the earth burnt his paws, which barely touched the ground only to fly up again. He divided up the distance in lightning leaps. Pine needles clung to his fur, and the shaggy body of the dog flew along like some enormous insect.

Gaupa was forgotten in the dog's mind, all men were forgotten. He went back thousands of years when the wolves howled along elk spurs in Ré Valley. He was one of them, a dog which no man's hand had caressed, and no man's eyes had subdued.

Those grey, fleeting elk legs in front of him called up a bloodthirsty song in his sinews. Passion howled within him, and off and on when he gained on the elk his throat howled out. It was not Bjönn from Lynx Hut, it was the voice of dead wolves returning.

His nose no longer sought the earth, he ran through a thick reek of scent. Every breath filled his nostrils with the maddening smell of game, and everything about him seemed to run. Red pine trunks ran to meet him and Rauten, spruce trees crawled forward, jumping across the marshes. They were left behind, but fresh ones came again and again and again.

Gaupa lifted his head. His eyes returned from the far distance and sought a certain point on the western slopes, a spruce-clad hillock where the silver birches blazed like a flame, and there his gaze fixed. From that hillock came a sound, sudden and unexpected, like a spark from a fire of thorns.

"Wow!" It was a dog's voice, clear and strained, let out of a throat which had quite enough to do with mere breathing.

The voice on the hillock spoke no more.

Gaupa remained in Owl Glen. He did not hurry. He wanted to be quite sure where Rauten was going, and from his post he could hear half a league away.

A short time afterwards Bjönn barked from the same place, deep-voiced and growling, as a watch-dog barks at strangers. Rauten was at bay!

"Wow! Wow! Wow!"

Then Gaupa began to run, his gun in his hand, its muzzle glaring black, and inside there was a cartridge with the Swede's Bullet.

Gaupa was hidden in the forest, but appeared again on a hillock farther on, stopped listening as he pushed back his lucky cap. Then he was submerged in the greenery once more.

The dog's voice to the west was the only token of life on the slopes, breaking the silence incessantly at short, regular intervals like the ticking of a grandfather's clock.

Bjönn was barking at some close-grown spruce copse. It looked as if he were talking to it, again and again without receiving any answer.

In there amongst the spruce bushes some thin, grey tree trunks seemed to move once in a while. They were the elk's legs. Some rough boughs with brown bark, just like a small bush, moved amongst the spruce needles. They were the elk's antlers.

Rauten stood there. Apparently he was not very much concerned about the dog. He turned his head here and there, as if he had a suspicion of something intangible yet dangerous in the forest around him.

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Whenever Rauten met that tiny, shaggy, barking animal, which smelt of man, the forest seemed to become unsafe for him, wherever he went. Perhaps it was a reminiscence from that autumn when his mother fell north of Black Mountain, when she blew a golden dust out of her nostrils and moved no more. Ever since that day he had the same feeling when he met a dog. Something alive was close to him, something he could not see, but which he knew was there all the same. From every tree, from every copse something spied upon him; fear threatened from them all....

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He felt it then, as he drew his breath after the long run from Owl Glen. He did not catch the scent of Gaupa over there, or he would not have stopped so soon.

“Wow! Wow!”

At each bark Bjönn threw up his nozzle, half closing his eyes, his ears flattened backwards and teeth gleaming. Then he looked at Rauten a little and barked a little again, somewhat quietly, as if to convince Rauten that he was not dangerous at all. He was only out for a friendly chat....

Suddenly the spruce copse vomited a long grey figure, and Rauten’s fore-feet stood where Bjönn had been but was no longer, for Bjönn knew his business and needed no time to get out of the way.

“Wow! Wow!”

[141]

Once more there was nothing but those restless grey tree trunks and those brownish-grey living branches in the undergrowth.

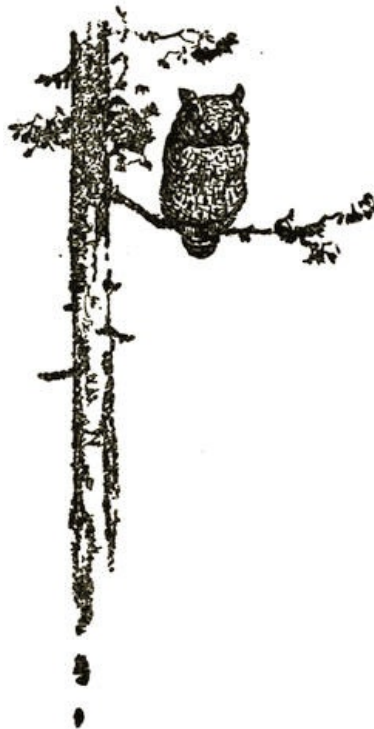
But then Bjönn was once more the dog he really was, the dog from Lynx Hut, a beast who took his food from Gaupa’s hand.

As he regarded the elk’s rough throat until he imagined it between his own teeth, he remembered the throats of other elks, which Gaupa used to cut open so that Bjönn could drink the blood. That happened quite often when the deer were standing still among the copses, and the idea made Bjönn look round expectantly. Gaupa ought to come and make thunder about him, the elk ought to stagger, fall on one side, and remain on the earth. “Wow! Wow!”

But Rauten had come to the conclusion that the thing which disconcerted him was something very real, which made dry twigs crackle, and so he ran on again. Bjönn whimpered with disappointment and followed him. The steady barking ceased.

Beads of sweat appeared on Gaupa’s bald head as he ran. When he heard how the elk had broken away he swore softly, being wholly and entirely out of breath.

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It was late in the day when the snow began to fall.

The first snowflake came alone, thin and light as down.

The flake could not keep its equilibrium, but flew here and there aimlessly, and took its own time about settling down on earth. It had been on earth before, swimming in the white marsh mist one raw morning in the autumn. Afterwards it had lived where the clouds live, but now it came down again and settled on an aspen leaf, white on red, the first snow of winter.

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Little by little the air filled with innumerable white butterflies, floating down from the heavens, a gift from God to earth and man, falling, falling.

On the Tolleivsæter Mountain which falls off steeply towards Ré Valley two animals were crawling, one larger, the other small. The first was Rauten, the other was Bjönn.

They followed a narrow gully in the mountain, a chasm which meandered downwards first to the north, then southwards, and then north again. It was no more than a narrow ledge in the mountain where the animals walked. They were hanging at the edge of an abyss and far below the bottom of the valley made a dark shadow in the white whirl.

Rauten led the way, and there was no longer anything long and clumsy about him now. His feet felt each step, carefully seeking a foothold. The knee-joints bent with a little noise, once in a while his hoofs slid a little and scraped the grey reindeer moss.

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After him went Bjönn, crouching and frightened, without a sound. They were climbing between earth and heaven, but the snowflakes danced past them into the abyss, and Ré River was heard faintly somewhere far below.

Thus the elk and the dog went on, slowly, slowly. Once they passed some large black holes among the rocks, and then both Rauten and Bjönn felt very uncomfortable. Rauten stopped, his nostrils dilated and eyes ablaze, Bjönn lowered his tail and sniffed towards the rocks, his muzzle quivering, for the animal after which he was named had been in there recently to seek for a winter lair.

After a long time the elk and the dog reached the foot of the mountain. Rauten tore through the birch bushes, and the dog's voice woke up again. They came to a deep gully—two rocky precipices and between them water boiling into foam far below.... Rauten leapt twice his own length. He flew through the air before he reached earth once more, and ran on. Bjönn made a detour, found a short cut, and when Rauten sprang into Ré River he was not alone. Two splashes were heard from the river, one for the elk and one for the dog, and they ran on straight up the western slope, Bjönn now and then giving vent to short barks.

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After a while Gaupa reached the eastern slope. He was like a well-wrung rag. His cap was in his pocket now, his hair was plastered to his skull, his eyes were red and strained, like those of one who has kept awake many nights. His mouth was gaping open, the muscles of his jaws being too tired to keep it shut.

He stopped to regain his breath. What time could it be? Nearly two. He thought as much. Six, seven hours had passed since Bjönn had begun driving the wizard elk. Gaupa had heard the song from the dog's throat many times that day, east and west. He had been north and south, God only knows exactly where he had been, running and walking. He had stopped at all the well-known elk stations, but Rauten had passed them all, for he did not run like other elks. And now it was two hours since Gaupa had last heard Bjönn.

Gaupa laid his hand behind his ear as he had done that morning in Owl Glen. He tried to hold his breath so that it should not drown the slightest sound in the silence of Ré Valley. He seemed to listen for a message from the snowflakes, but the flakes bore no message. They were like a whirling swarm of silent butterflies. Only when he turned his back to the weather, the flying atoms battered on his knapsack with a barely audible sound as from elfin artillery.

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He sat down. The mountains about him were changing their colour, growing white. The weather lightened a little and the earth was revealed, far, far away. He saw Gipsy Lake straight below, pitch black amongst the whiteness.

Hark!

Out of the north-west came a sound, the bark of an almost exhausted dog, a slight break in the silence. Gaupa lifted his head;

his entire face, framed in dark beard, stiffened with excitement.

Was that Bjönn? Yes it was! He saw the mountain ridges west of the valley and followed their outlines northwards, as they rose and sank, wave upon wave towards the sky. And farthest north two specks grew out of their white slopes, one larger than the other. First they grew in size, then they rapidly diminished, and at last they vanished altogether.

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Bjönn and Rauten had gone into the western mountains. Well, Gaupa had better follow them.

He found a descent not far from where he stood, and went at a jog-trot across the marshes around Gipsy Lake.

Then came the western slope, a sky-high precipice difficult to ascend. The minutes crawled slowly, as evening shadows pass over the fields. And Gaupa crept slowly upwards.

Once or twice he lay down on his back, face upturned. A few snowflakes settled on his skin. They felt like a wet tongue licking him, pleasantly cool. He gathered a little snow from the heather about him, placing it against his hot head, enjoying the coolness of it.

Then he rose and went on his way. A dry branch hooked on to his trousers and made a big rent in them. He heard the brooks grow strangely mute; their voices were no longer natural, and when close at hand they sounded far off. And in his ears there rang a song, thin and high like the buzzing of a gnat.

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Oh to lie down and rest, rest a long, long time.... Nonsense, Bjönn and Rauten had gone westwards, and Gaupa had better follow them.

In an hour he reached the barren mountain, the naked bulk of which stretched before him. About a league to the west was another valley, Three Valley. Gaupa knew that an elk would occasionally go there when fleeing from a hound. It had happened often to himself and Bjönn. Probably Rauten had gone that way too.

But he had to rest before descending. He took out food from his knapsack and tried to eat, only his mouth was so dry that it was like biting sawdust. There seemed to be no moisture left in his mouth.

Ever since the chase began Gaupa had not rightly considered the fact that Bjönn was following no ordinary elk. Mystical ideas do not generally go with laboured running in broad daylight.

Then his brain was so strangely empty and weak. He felt as if the power of reasoning had been sweated out of him. His head seemed full of mist, out of which the ideas could not find their way. They worked at the things nearest and immediate, with the spoors and the chase.

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But he knew that Rauten would have great difficulty in leaving Bjönn that day. Bjönn was well-rested, his paws hardened and muscles as tough as pemmican—very devil of a rugged deer-hound ready to follow an elk to Hallingdal—or even to the valley beyond that.

Gaupa jogged along west once more. He felt better after his rest, and he began to think. The people of the valley had given him a nickname, Gaupa, the Lynx, although by rights his name was Sjur Renden, as could be seen on his baptismal certificate as well as on his assessment—and they called his hut Lynx Hut, although the correct name was “Elvely” (River Shelter). Christened so by the parson who happened to pass by when they were building it.

But if they had given him a nickname like that, by hell, they should be made to respect it and to recognise the fact that he did honour to the name, for he would show them that he was a Lynx who could go on when other men failed. He would chase him into hottest hell, that elk with the enormous antlers and the restless soul of the Swede. And when he, Gaupa, returned to Lower Valley, clothes in rags and hands bloody, the news would spread like wildfire that Rauten was killed, shot somewhere in the western mountains towards Hallingdal—driven out of Owl Glen at seven in the morning—and the man who shot him was no other than Gaupa—of course.

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And even the papers would print the fact: “The well-known hunter Sjur Renden....”



Thoughts slipped away again, as fatigue filled his body once more after the rest his brain held nothing but mist, mist. But somewhere in his consciousness one thing remained hard and fast, the thing that said, "Run, run, for God's sake run." Such was the will of Gaupa, the slayer of elks.

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§ 21

In the Three Valley a dog had opened full cry, a glorious cry, for his quarry was standing still.

Rauten stood still because he was so tired that he had to. During the last run earth seemed unstable beneath him, and wherever he went he saw a lair before him, full of peace and quiet; he might go to rest under that spruce, or there—and there. Only he could not get rid of that eternal worrying by a big black fox that followed him like his own meaningless shadow. He had tried everything—climbing mountains, jumping across gullies, but the dog followed him with an endless succession of angry barks.

In the course of all those hours those barks had become no more than a habit to the ear; they did not feel like real terror any more, only a slight fear, a subconsciousness of danger. But Rauten was at length compelled to rest now, standing in a spruce copse in Three Valley.

Bjönn was there, lying down. The dog also was nearly spent. His legs seemed to have disappeared of late, and when they ran it was from innate habit.

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Several times he had crossed the spoor of Gaupa. The earth threw up the familiar scent into his nostrils, like a message from his master to say that he was there, only "Go on!" And Bjönn went on, he was going for ever now.

His hair was soaking wet; both he and the elk were steaming like fast-running horses in cold weather. The snow lay on the heather like white wool, a frozen bilberry stood up from it, a reminiscence of summer in the midst of winter. Two pine trunks rose tall, straight, and copper-red behind both the animals.

"Wow! Wow!" said Bjönn. There was an interval between each bark, and his voice was so hoarse as hardly to be recognised. He snatched a mouthful of snow now and then, for his thirst. "Wow!"

Both animals felt themselves stiffening after they stopped. Rauten had a broad gash across one of his thighs made by a dry branch. There was reproach in his eyes as they regarded the little animal before him, whom he had never hurt and who would not let him be in peace. But rest, rest, that was all, the only thing.... Rauten stood still.

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In the meanwhile Gaupa was hurrying westwards towards Three Valley. His footfall made no sound in the snow, as if he were running on soft moss. He jogged along, walked at times, eating snow.

He found the spoor of the dog and elk, indistinct but unmistakable: long lines across a tuft of wiregrass from the elk hoofs, and close by them clear marks of Bjönn's paws. He followed the spoor with childish joy, lost them, found them again, and made straight for Three Valley.

All idea of time had long since left him. Only the mountain seemed endless. The snow continued to fall, and the ever-falling white flakes made him dizzy. At last he saw a tall, narrow rock on a ridge before him, a rock exactly like a tall chimney, that he knew to be on the slope towards Three Valley.

He was soon there. The earth sank before him, the valley could be seen—thin forest on the slopes, long marshes with a sleepy river, a large lake, a white summer pasture with a couple of dark houses, far away near the bend of the valley.

A pang of joy rang through Gaupa, vivifying and exciting, for a

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dog's bark floated out in the grey air straight below him from the slope.

More barks followed; the whole valley filled with the song of it. Gaupa wondered at the sound. "Poor old dog, he has gone hoarse," thought he. But what a dog! He was an animal without blemish, no dog like him. He would soon have assistance, warm drink, a taste of warm meat....

Gaupa slipped down the wooded slopes quickly and carefully. Just down there, just down there, he thought time after time. Ten minutes, five minutes more, and the Swede's Bullet should fly unseen from the muzzle of "The Tempest."

The next day he would return to Lower Valley, clothes in rags, with bloody hands. And Martin Lyhus would have to take his pipe out of his mouth to ask, staring in astonishment:

"What is it you say? Have you shot him?"

Gaupa stopped to make sure of the movement of the air.... He was in luck, it was straight against him. He could see it in the flying snow. But it would soon clear up. The flakes were restless, flying about like gnats, not falling quietly. That was a sure sign of approaching clear weather.

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Gaupa followed a small spruce-grown gully in the slope, and just in front of him, very close now, stood Bjönn holding the wizard elk in check. To Gaupa stealing downwards, the forest grew alive, every tree listened for the dog's barking, he felt as if on the point of discovering a wonderful secret.

He could not see the animals and heard only one, though he knew there were two. He stopped to look round for cover, and observed something strange about his hands. He stood petrified looking at them, he did not recognise them as his own. They were trembling now, however much he willed them not to do—trembling in spite of himself.

Then he felt a slight shiver in his whole body, something he could not control—and a cool feeling across the lower part of his body. The hunter's shivers! he thought.

"Wow!" was heard from below, and then a sudden silence. Gaupa held his breath, waiting for the next bark. Surely he could not have frightened him? The wind could not have turned, taking his scent with it to those sensitive nostrils?... Then the barking started again, Rauten was still standing—like a rock.

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Gaupa could not rid himself of this inexplicable trembling, and he could not shoot while it lasted. He was no longer the master of his own body, he was not the real Gaupa any more. The real Gaupa had never shivered before an elk—the devil he hadn't!

Now he really had to be calm. For ten hours dog and man had been hard at work. At last they were at their goal, nearly near enough to touch it, and his hand trembled; he might make a false movement, and the goal might once more dart away to unknown distances.

He knelt down, filled his hands with snow and held it to his skull. It cooled first, then felt too cold.

Bjönn suddenly gave the angry bark which tokened that his prey was escaping, the bark so well known to Gaupa that the sound of it raised anger within him....

Escaped again!

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Gaupa stayed kneeling while the thawing snow ran in big drops down his head. His dark-blue eyes changed colour. They were lighter and glazed. His lucky cap was white with snow; his gun lay in the hollow of his arm, held tight to his breast—lay as if listening like Gaupa himself.

Silence. Dead silence. Running water somewhere in Three Valley gave an echo of life.

Gaupa rose. Silence. No barking then.

He ran out of the hollow up to a bare ridge. Then he heard Bjönn again and he understood that the dog was running beside the elk, even in front of him now and then. He could even see the two animals on the long marshes at the bottom of the valley. Rauten ran his jogging even trot, long and tall, forever turning his head from one side or the other as if listening. "A hopeless range," thought Gaupa. Distance was simply mocking him. At such a range he would not dare to risk the Swede's Bullet.

The elk crossed Three River and his legs raised white arches of water. Bjönn swam and was on the other side as soon as Rauten. They disappeared, but were seen again, Rauten heading straight for Three Lake.

Gaupa threw back his rifle, breathed deeply and went down the slope.

Rauten and Bjönn came to Three Lake, which lay black and still as night. A waterlily leaf was riding on the surface at rest. The whole lake was all peace, and the green heart-shaped leaf in conjunction with the two animals, the hunted and the hunter, formed as it were a picture of the very life of the wilderness, eternal peace of eternal time, painful efforts of the moment, life or death.

Rauten went straight into the lake, making openings in its smooth surface with his hoofs, cutting it with his thin legs where he waded out quickly, the water rising along his shoulders and flanks. A startled trout ran out from under the bank like a shadow across the white sand into the dark depths. Beside the elk was Bjönn, swimming.

The water gurgled higher and higher about Rauten; at last he swam, his snout so low that he ploughed through the water like a boat's keel. Bjönn scraped the elk's back with one paw, found no hold, and tried again. Then he caught the mane with his teeth and soon stood on the back of the wizard elk who was swimming across

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Three Lake.

The dog did not feel worn out then. He was tasting the fiercest joy. Under him he heard the laboured breath of Rauten, felt the entire huge body trembling with effort, muscles hardening and slackening as the elk trod the water. It was Bjönn from Lynx Hut, sailing! The elderly elk hunter from Lower Valley who never gave up from dawn to dusk—even to another dawn.

Then he poured out his joy from his hoarse, dry throat, and mingling with his song of conquest came the groans from Rauten, who was swimming, wild-eyed. He steered towards a pine top on the farther side of the lake. Terror sat on his back as he swam for his life. Once he felt teeth in his back, and the same icy shiver ran through him as ran through his forefathers when they broke down in the snow with the wolves swarming fiercely over them.

Bjönn bent down and tugged a big tuft of hair out of the elk's back he dropped it on the water, where it remained floating.

"Wow! Wow!"

He plucked out another tuft.

One might say a raft was sailing along the water, with Rauten's horns for rowlocks. [162]

Bjönn noticed a tall tree-stump moving across the marshes. It was Gaupa, his master, and his pride knew no bounds. He could conquer every elk from one mountain to the other, if they were many times his own size. He could drive them, bark exhaustion into them, until at last he would drink his fill out of their throats. "Wow! Wow! Wow!"

Gaupa crouched on the marshes north of Three Lake.

He was in pain. The elk's head and Bjönn floated away farther and farther, and if he were to shoot there was an even chance that he might shoot his dog as easily as the elk. But when Rauten went ashore he would try a shot, however hopeless.

The Swede's Bullet could not be risked at such uncertain range, and therefore he changed cartridges quickly. Then he crouched in position for shooting, left elbow on left knee. His cheek caressed the gun. He sat immovable, a huntsman stiffened in the last decisive movement of the hunt.

He trembled no more, although the tension burnt in him like a hidden fire. He saw out of the water a large body grow through the falling snow. [163]

And one of Gaupa's eyes shut as if sleepy. The other, however, was open, and icy cold. He did not breathe, his whole body was taut calm. "The Tempest" roared, shooting out its breath with a white handful of smoke, and for a moment Gaupa's ears were plugged up with sound.

But Rauten, who was wading ashore, heard something like a woodpecker hammering at a tree on the shore. Then came the roar of the shot, behind him, and he stretched himself off into the forest, a rain of waterdrops about him. Bjönn followed.



§ 22

Gaupa pursued the chase once more.

Dusk was falling. He did not hear Bjönn any longer, but he had the spoor.

The weather cleared up towards evening. The sky seemed to absorb the snowflakes, making them light and dry. The heavens became fixed and formed a pale-yellow dome over the earth. [164]

The silence increased after the shot and the barking. A man followed a spoor in the new snow, but Sjur Renden did not run any more. He walked!

His face showed signs of utter exhaustion. The cheek, chin, and eyelids were hanging down. His mouth, too, hung open, although he

did not breathe heavily. The corners of his mouth were drawn into a grimace of contempt.

The marshes were white, but the ground under the trees was not covered with snow. The woods had assumed an air of solemn grandeur which was not diminished by the oncoming dusk.

Gaupa was fairly staggering. That last effort near Three Lake seemed to have drained his last forces. All the same he went on and on, always showing that grin of contempt, as if he were mocking at the elk spoor before him.

In the middle of an open space where the pines had once been burnt down and never grown up again to their former state, he stroked his eyes with the back of his hand, as people do when they wake up and yet are not really awake. [165]

He walked on a few steps, stopped again and touched his eyes. What devilry disturbed his sight? He saw as clearly as clearly a shiny yellow moon, not quite round, but slightly elliptical as the moon is when she is on the wane. This moon stood in the air a few gun-lengths before his eyes and it moved when he moved. It was so blazingly, glaringly yellow that it made the air gleam yellow. Gaupa felt as if everything glowed and blazed before him. The very dusk flamed. He was dazzled, and shut his eyes for a long time. When he opened them again the air was as it ought to be, soft and nearly dark. But after a few steps that idiotic moon came back.

He knew well enough what moon this was. He had seen it before. Over-exertion, curse it. And his knees felt as they always did when that glaring yellow moon appeared. All the sinews seemed to have been taken out of his joints, all elasticity had left his legs. They moved about anyhow beneath him, without his volition. [166]

Then Gaupa went under a spruce tree and lay face downwards. His face touched some whortleberry ling and he could smell the soil. A bunch of berries caught his eyes, a large, bright red bunch, and they made so intense an impression on him that he seemed to feel the juice seething inside them. Never in all his life had he seen so red a bunch of whortleberries. His eager hands seized them and pushed them into his mouth. He crushed them with his tongue and their juice ran in his dry mouth, an exquisite joy. He looked for more berries, crawling on all-fours round the spruce tree like a child—an oldish man with a flowing beard.

While doing this he saw Bjönn coming, keeping to the spoor, going backwards. The dog gave up before reaching his master, and lay down a little way off. He was utterly exhausted.

Gaupa went up to him, knelt down, talking to him and stroking him. And it seemed to him that those dog's eyes spoke. Why had he not come when Rauten stood still on the northern slopes? they asked. Why had he missed when the wizard elk rose up from Three Lake? Bjönn had done what he could, the dog's eyes declared. All the same Rauten was running about in the valley, free, unwounded. [167]

Gaupa sat still, stroking Bjönn's head.

"I also could do no more," he said aloud; "but wait till tomorrow."

The weather cleared up as evening came on. The sky turned blue as the sea, the stars twinkled like tiny lanterns, some clear white, some dullish red. In a small barn near Three River Gaupa and Bjönn slept.

Farthest out in the valley where the moon was rising like a yellow lantern where earth and sky met an elk stood for a long time snuffing towards the north. He was dripping wet. After a while he lay down, and the snow thawed slowly under him.

Thus Rauten lay all that night, his eyes ever open, ears alive, nostrils working. Towards morning it was so cold that his wet back grew white with hoar-frost. [168]

§ 23

About dawn Gaupa and Bjönn dug themselves out from the hay in the barn.

Gaupa had lost his matches the day before, and could make no fire. The only way was to bury himself in the contents of the barn.

His shoes stood frozen stiff at the door. They were so hard that it was out of the question to put them on. He tried many times, but in

vain. To wait for the sun to thaw them would take too long—so he thawed them with the warmth of his own body. They softened, and soon after he and Bjönn were following the spoor of the wizard elk.

They found his night lair where the snow was thawed and some hairs lay about. But Rauten had left several hours before, Gaupa could read that much in the spoor. It had hardened, there was a crust on, and also Bjönn told him they were not near him yet.

They chased the elk from sunrise to sunset.

The spoor was there, and there was something alive about them. Every mark of the hoofs meant a movement forwards—one footmark after the other from one slope to another, an endless chase.

The spoor, so strangely alive, kept Gaupa's interest warm. It was like turning leaf after leaf of an exciting book where the end cannot be guessed. [169]

Once they found fresh excrements after Rauten, and Bjönn grew doubly eager after smelling them. But Gaupa would not let go until he was fairly sure of being near enough.

He did not think much that day either of the fact that he was hunting no ordinary earthly animal; Rauten was only an elk who had wandered for many years among Ré Mountains, mocking all efforts on the part of those who tried to get at him. He was the elk that Gaupa himself had rather avoided. But now he would measure himself against him. As long as he had a bite of food, as long as Bjönn could move, he would stick to that spoor—and he swore loudly and forcibly.

He went towards the west for several hours. The weather was wonderfully fine. The mountain plains in their majestic calm reflected the sunlight like a mirror. The light dazzled his eyes and made him sun-blind. Little black lakelets looked like spots of ink on a white tablecloth.

Rauten had gone into a long lake, and Gaupa found no spoor up from the water. He went round the lake several times, but no tracks could be seen. [170]

He reflected. Could this lakelet, without even a name, be Rauten's tomb? Could the elk have been drowned out there? It seemed impossible.

He circled the lakelet once more, and in the little brooklet which fed the lake he saw some strange holes in the mud at the bottom. The brook was shallow, and the sun showed him the bottom quite plainly. Those holes down there had a distance between them about as long as the stride of an elk.

He followed the brook for about a quarter of an hour, and found the place where Rauten had left the water. Gaupa had never seen an elk try to hide his tracks so cunningly.

About noon he went straight towards the sun, ignorant of the names of the mountains around him. Then the earth yawned before him, and he perceived a valley so large and deep that it must be Hallingdal.

He heard also that the air was vibrant with some sound, a dull, heavy roar with some sort of rhythm in it. He could not understand what it was. The wind shifted, and into his ears poured the deep, full boom of church bells. Once more the wind shifted, and he heard nothing but that vibrating roar. [171]

Then he remembered that it was Sunday—for ordinary people, but not for him. The elk spoor led straight towards the valley and the church bells—one might think Rauten was going to church. But on a slope the track turned abruptly, and there Gaupa smelt the homely, acrid smell of smoke, the sign of people and houses.

He walked on after the smoke, sniffing his way like a dog on an open scent. A little later he stood before a low Hallingdal cottage with a tall chimney. He touched the doorhandle; Bjönn stole in in front of him, and in a moment was chasing a cat, as red as a fox. But cats made Bjönn mad. He threw one paw over the animal, pinning her to the floor, and then bit twice across her back. There was the sound of crunching as when Bjönn ate bones, and then a cat died in Hallingdal.

They gave him matches and food, and he walked uphill again. He released Bjönn, who soon returned. Rauten was too far in front of them. [172]

Dusk met Gaupa in a bare valley without summer farms where he could spend the night. His axe resounded in the silence as he cut

down dry pines. He slept in the shelter of a rock, Bjönn clasped tightly to his breast.

A few hundred yards from Gaupa's night lair something dark showed up on a ridge. Was it a rock? No, the rocks were not black then, they were white with snow.

That dark thing did not move.

After a while it did move. Two eyes gleamed wet in the moonlight, a tined antler crossed the harvest moon behind it. Rauten was lying there.

He thought he heard some strange sounds in the evening, but there was little wind and he could not make sure.

He was waiting for daylight.

The snow was glittering, the crystals of snow were like innumerable stars which were for ever being lit and extinguished. The mountains were softly moving clouds, cradling the tired body of Rauten, while a few isolated mountain spruces, from which the sun had thawed the snow, were like darkly dressed dwarfs in the hollows.

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It was nearly two days and two nights since Rauten left Owl Glen in Lower Valley.

§ 24

When Gaupa hung up his coffee-kettle over the fire he felt shivery after his cold bed. The kettle boiled, and he swallowed hastily four or five cupfuls of scalding-hot coffee. Then he noticed a strange pattern in the grounds at the bottom of the empty cup. The lines were funny, he thought, they made quite a picture.

He turned the cup round and round, and there was not much imagination needed to make those brown lines mean an elk lying on his back.

Then Gaupa smiled to Bjönn.

"We'll have him before sundown. He lies here."

A little later the fire under the rock wall was deserted, and while it was dying slowly the resinous smoke floated like a dark mist over the neighbouring bog.

Gaupa had not walked far when Bjönn rose on his hind legs and caught the open scent. He would not come down on all-fours for fear of losing it, and went on hopping on two legs several steps, and Gaupa swore prodigiously out of the joy in his heart. He loosed the leash, and let Bjönn storm into the mountains towards the pale-yellow sky of the dawn, from which a faint sheen fell on the snow.

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The snow was crisp now after the night's frost, and it crunched a little under each of Bjönn's steps. A family of grouse flew up like a shower from some osier bushes, a cock grouse called "gak-gak," and soon after the dog sang out farther east. Rauten had company once more.

Three hours later Gaupa was steaming with sweat. He passed unknown summer farms where the windows in the sun shone like fire. It was warm, for summer was still in the air. Winter lay on the ground prematurely born. The trees were dripping, the snow grew wet and heavy, crunching a little under Gaupa's shoes. A young hare sniffed the snow which he had never seen till the day before, big brown eyes staring with wonder at the bewitched world.

The chase went on—and it was evening.

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§ 25

It was night, the third night since Rauten left Owl Glen.

He was lying in a brook in Ré Valley, on Bog Hill where once he fought the three-year-old. On all-fours he was lying in the brook, the water unceasingly licking his stiff limbs, and Rauten enjoyed the refreshing coolness. Once he bent his head to drink, his flanks hollowing.

Before him on the bank of the brook lay Bjönn. He did not say anything, having barked enough throughout the day. It was quite dark, the moon not yet being up and the snow having been thawed on that sun-exposed slope so that no light was reflected by the snow

either. Only the silver bark of a birch gleamed faintly among the dense spruce woods.

A good stone's throw farther south on the slope Gaupa sat, his back against a tree-trunk. His pack lay at his side and his rifle across his knees. Inside it rested a cartridge containing the Swede's Bullet.

Gaupa felt exceedingly cold, for he was wet with perspiration when he sat down, and now he felt as if he were wrapped up in icy-cold sheets. He beat his arms across each other, carefully so as not to make a noise, and sat on.

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In the dusk he had reached Black Mountain and heard Bjönn baying on Bog Hill, but darkness came before he reached him, and he could not discern the sights of "The Tempest" except against the sky.

When he came to the spruce where he was sitting now he heard Bjönn's last bark, and understood from it that the elk was not running, for the barking sounded so feeble.

Rauten and Bjönn were presumably somewhere in that brook, and if he knew Bjönn he would not leave the elk that night. But when the sun rose over the eastern ridges and lit up Ré Valley, then Gaupa would steal forth, as soon as he could make sure where Rauten was standing. The brook in the hollow murmured unceasingly.

Gaupa listened. No, he could not hear that inexplicable muttering far away which belonged to the night and the unbroken silence. The brook deadened it. He felt how the forest about him was asleep, standing, eyes closed. All the same there *was* something, that restlessness which has no origin. He seemed to hear something breathing like a human being somewhere.

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He remembered one incident after the other told of the remarkable animal who was standing unseen somewhere near him.

There was Anton Rud. Last autumn he was cutting resinous pine-stumps to distil tar, far up Tolleivsæter way.

One evening he kept on longer than usual, and it was dusk when he walked slowly down to the hut again.

He stopped to light his pipe, when he heard a cough below, a faint, dry cough, first once and then twice running. He heard also the noise of someone walking, and he sat down to wait, for it sounded as if someone were coming uphill.

But nobody came, nor did he hear that cough any more. He thought it strange, and called out aloud asking whether there was any human being.... No answer.

In the morning he went up to the same place to search the soil a little. He could not understand that cough—it sounded exactly like a consumptive coughing and clearing his throat. There were no traces of a human being, but he found elk spoor like Rauten's, and he stopped stump-cutting that selfsame day.

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Gaupa remembered that story and many others.

In the meanwhile Rauten and Bjönn remained in the same spot in the hollow, the dog looking steadily at the huge deer before him, his nozzle rested on his forepaws, and he looked like a long, narrow mound of grass or peat. Off and on something moved on the mound; Bjönn's ears rose and lay down again.

A big bird, an owl, flew noiselessly over the forest, wings caressing the air.

After a while Gaupa nodded drowsily as he sat by the tree-trunk, but he felt so cold that he was wide awake again in no time, and then he heard somewhere a horse's bell. He turned his head here and there, and the horse's bell was to be heard from every direction. But it was impossible that there should be a horse's bell at that time of the year; nobody put bells on a horse in the summer. He happened to take out his watch, and the horse bell suddenly sounded much louder and nearer. Then he understood that what he had been listening to was the tiny tink-tink of his own watch. It was ten o'clock.

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A little later something trod softly in the darkness—very softly. He turned and the tread grew alive, became something tangible which was Bjönn. The dog came close up to him and laid his head on his master's knee; and Gaupa embraced him, whispering fond words into his ear. Bjönn licked his master's face and he let him do so. Then he fed him from his sack, gave him much food, whispering and prattling with the beast all the time, telling him that Bjönn must be

a clever dog and hold Rauten till either the moon or daylight came, and then "The Tempest" should sing.

But Bjönn did not stay long with Gaupa; he wagged his tail a little, and trotted a few steps away from him. Then he seemed to remember something he had forgotten, went back, sniffed Gaupa's beard and pressed his cold, wet nose close to his cheek. Then he disappeared in the darkness; there was a sound of rustling among the spruce branches, and then the brook was once more the only living thing Gaupa could hear or see.

He thought of Bjönn's strange behaviour, how he came back to nose his beard. And he remembered the night before he left Lynx Hut, when he was remelting the Swede's Bullet, how strangely Bjönn stared at him, whimpering as if in the full knowledge of something evil... However, such things were not worth noticing.

Rauten had not moved the length of a mouse while Bjönn was away.

Then the dog began to walk stiffly in front of the elk, barking once or twice, and Rauten's peace was broken. He got on to his forelegs, rose and stood still. Bjönn became eager, for he knew that Gaupa was close by, and he could not understand that it was difficult for his master to shoot in complete darkness.

Gaupa heard the sharp crack of a twig, then another. "There goes Rauten," he thought.

A little later he heard the antlers striking a tree-trunk, and the dog's bark came nearer, eager and aggressive. "There is the elk coming," he thought.

Over him the branches hung like a wide-meshed net, a faint light from the sky penetrating it. But the under-bush was so black that he saw the trees only like vague shadows and in there the wizard elk was coming. Listen! how the antlers rustle among the spruce needles with a dry swishing sound, as when you sweep the floor of the hut with a broom!

Gaupa did not stir, but clasped his hands round his gun in trembling excitement. He sat immovable like an animal in its night lair, his eyes burning as if they would burn a hole in the darkness enveloping him.

Both beasts were close by and below him. Once he thought he saw a large shadow glide past down there, but he was not sure. He heard the dog throw himself aside and Rauten's heavy steps. But he could not, could not see him.

Slowly Bjönn withdrew a little, following the wizard elk.

Gaupa crawled after them on all-fours, slowly, slowly. He was so close after them that he surely could have thrown his gun at the elk, if there had been light enough, and it seemed to him that he was crawling at the bottom of a black lake with the tree-tops floating on the surface of the water.

Then Rauten stopped and the dog's barking grew rhythmic. Gaupa dragged himself ward on his stomach, and in a glade he caught sight of Bjönn, a dark bundle which glided here and there over the earth. But the elk, the elk?

He did not dare to move farther, and remained where he was, "The Tempest" ready. Over the western ridges the starry sky was sparkling.

Little by little Bjönn calmed down, till finally he remained on the same spot, and from the direction of his head Gaupa guessed whereabouts Rauten must be. For a long time he had been looking for something showing up like antlers against the sky between two tree-trunks, and he was only waiting to see that something move.... It did move, quite distinctly, and Gaupa lifted the barrel of his gun towards the sky, then lowered it towards the antlers, then far enough down to hit the body—and then the Swede's bullet left the mouth of "The Tempest."

The splitting flame from the gun sent a broad beam of light across the glade where Bjönn stood. And in front of the dog Gaupa saw as if in a flash of lightning the head of Rauten above some bushes. The head was lifted high, large eyes staring, and the half ear stood out very clearly.... Then darkness came again. Not a sound, no heavy thud of an elk falling, no eager dog's bark.

Gaupa was half blinded from the sudden change from glaring light to absolute darkness. He listened for the well-known dry crackle of fleeing elk's hoofs, but it did not come.

Then his ears caught the sound of something astir close in front

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of him. It could not be Rauten dying, for he would surely have heard him falling.

He struck a match, and at that moment a cock grouse chattered furiously somewhere up south—a coldly mocking guffaw like the laughter of a lunatic. If the grouse chattered in the middle of the night it must have been roused by the elk, therefore Rauten must be far away already. But what, then, was that which moved before his feet?

The match went out, there was a draught in the air. He scratched another, there was a swish along the box, a tiny explosion, and a little fire was born and burnt uncertainly within the hollow of his hand. Two spruces stood within the circle of the light, staring with wonder as if they had just awakened and wanted to know what kind of tiny sun was dancing on the ground.

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Gaupa went forward to some yellow moss, that showed elk spoor. But in the middle of the glade Bjönn lay on one side. His eyes blinked a little at the light from the match, but there was in them something strained which Gaupa did not recognise. He knelt down beside the dog, stroking him and talking to him, but Bjönn took no notice, and his flanks laboured so strangely and quickly.

Gaupa lit another match and saw blood on Bjönn's hair a little behind the left shoulder. He felt with his hand, which became wet. The dog started to open his mouth as if to yawn—and he gaped, and he gaped, and never finished.

"Bjönn!" Gaupa whispered—"my own dog!"

But Bjönn only gaped.

Gaupa understood what had happened. The Swede's bullet had struck the elk's antler and was shattered, one bit of lead ricocheting and hitting the dog.

"Bjönn! Don't you hear me, Bjönn?" he whispered once more half beseechingly.

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Oh no, Bjönn could not hear anything any more now. He began to nod his head in a strange way, something gurgled in his throat. A large tear leapt out of the dog's eye and rolled down over the grey muzzle. The dog stretched himself. He was tired of the endless chase. He wanted to rest.

The last thing Bjönn from Lynx Hut did in his life was to stretch himself.

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A man was sitting with a dead dog on his knees. It happened on Bog Hill in Ré Valley. The murmur of the river sounded steady and calm, like the very breath of night.

Gaupa thought of the Swede's Bullet. It concealed strange powers; it had travelled through a body before, and it knew its way. Why, oh why, then, did it take away the only friend, the only child he possessed? It would be small comfort walking down to Lower Valley in the morning.

Gaupa waited for the dawn. Bjönn seemed so strangely heavy on his knees. He felt how the warmth of life slowly left the soulless body of the dog, remembered what the two had shared of better things and worse throughout the years, and the tears fell fast down Gaupa's unkempt face.

Daylight came. In his arms he carried Bjönn to a heap of rocks tenderly as a mother carries her sleeping baby to bed.

He displaced some pieces of rock, and when he laid Bjönn down there he felt that he was burying some of his joy in life. He sat down, his shoulders heaving.

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When did Gaupa weep last? He did not remember. It was long ago, long, long ago.

Day broke over Ré Valley.

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§ 26

Time floated over the wilderness.

In summer it is warm, in winter cold. Three days before Christmas the sun ceases to descend lower in the sky, rises again, and after a long while he starts work on a fresh spring down on earth.

Through half the year the lakes lie with their eyes closed, for half a year they mirror the sunset. The rivers stiffen when the immigrating birds go south. While the bear dreams in his winter lair, the trees stand bloodless, breaking in the frost. But when the living ploughshares of the wild geese go northwards once more, then the trees spread out all their branches, embracing life.

Such is time, when beasts are born, eat, and die. Such was time when Rauten went towards old age.

His body followed the all-subduing law of nature. At Candlemass time he lost his antlers, which invariably grew out again, every time with more tines. When the leaves fell he roared his hoarse mating call at dusk and at dawn. In the summer nights his huge, dark body would glide through the forest out to Gipsy Lake where the snow-white waterlilies were floating.

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On some clear, cruel, frosty winter night he would perhaps stand on guard beside a soft-eyed cow and a calf that was his own flesh and blood. Then Venus, queen of the starry heavens, would glow large and bright above Ré Mountains, lending a pale shimmer to the white snow. The Aurora Borealis would shine bright and strange, then the breath from the elks' nostrils would smoke in the night.

When once in a while Rauten lay on Black Mountain looking out across the forest, all the happenings of which his life was so rich would stir within him. Probably he did not remember, not live his reminiscences once more in his mind. We do not know about that. But each remarkable incident had set its mark in him in the shadowy life of his soul. They had sharpened his instincts, enriched

his experience. There were incidents at all times of the year, in all changing lights of day and night, in sunny heat and in frosty weather—some concerning animals, some human beings.

But he grew solitary and still more solitary as age came on. He sought places where man but rarely made spots on the earth with his shoes of animals' hide, where the steel tooth of the axe but rarely gnawed a tree, where old times were still dreaming.

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For the Ré Valley woods began to be open. Foresters' huts grew out of the earth, creating unrest. Old trees died, changed their existence, and left Ré Valley. Their stumps stayed, time and weather eating them as ravens eat carrion.

Many a dog had chased Rauten, but their muzzles grew grey and their eyes blue, and one day the barrel of a gun blew out their lives. And still Rauten walked across Black Mountains.

But what of Gaupa?

He also aged; he aged rapidly when Bjönn died. For after that time he lost his love of the woods somehow, and then he seemed to shrink within himself.

Soon he was no longer a wild cat, he became a tame, domestic cat. No more his fire shone at the capercailzie's play in the blue spring evenings when the song thrush was silent in the tree-tops and flew away for the night. A sleepy petroleum lamp shone dully in Lynx Hut, where the air was not light and pure as drifted snow, but stank of leather and old footwear.

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He felt as if something had died within him. His mind was like an everlasting rainy day, monotonous, without a gleam of sun. No more tumults, only silence and death, his mind was luke-warm like marsh water.

Gaupa was not well either. He needed but to drink three or four cups of coffee one after the other to make his heart unmanageable. It would not keep time, but beat eagerly and quickly, and then it lagged, nearly stopped as if lame.... Well, well, that heart had seen hard days, as well he knew.

Gaupa's calves grew full of small bulbs under his skin from varicose veins. And then rheumatism came. Working in his shop he could feel the rheumatism, like fine red-hot wires being stitched into his body. It was worst in his knees, for there something was gnawing, gnawing like sharp teeth, everlastingly hungry. Well, well, you know those calves and those knees had been through some hard work in his life.

Once somebody asked him to go to a doctor, but then Gaupa guffawed in mocking merriment.

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Alas, there was small comfort in Lynx Hut now. No Bjönn came to place his head on his knees while he was stitching shoes, no Bjönn met him with tail waving in the open door when he had been out and came home, no Bjönn shared his bed under the sheepskin covering in the night. When he woke up at night he caught himself listening for the dog's breath, for Bjönn used to breathe so heavily, so humanly. Gaupa remembered so well.

When he was seventy years old he was converted. After that time the poor old soul would often sit in one of the foremost desks in the schoolhouse, piously listening to what Hans Uppermeadow, the "high priest," had to announce. He would sit there in his simple blue-striped celluloid collar without a tie. That was the only Sunday best he possessed, and no one knew when last it was washed.

Somehow revivalism did not quite submerge him, for he could not help thinking of other things while the preacher up there threatened his audience with hell and sulphur. It might, for instance, occur to him that the moustache of that fellow was the very spit of the other's whiskers, and in a bound Gaupa's thoughts were far from the schoolroom and its close atmosphere. No, he could not get the real hang of the revivalist business, and before he entered upon his seventy-second year he gave it up and became a worldling once more.

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Only he ceased to swear, and when religious people were with him he might be heard to talk of how quietly time passed down here. Sometimes he would even sigh audibly.

Poor old Gaupa! He was in earnest right enough. He was no Pharisee. Yet his conscience was never quite easy; he was not regularly "saved," and when his heart started beating out of time he would feel as timid as a hare!

One day he was at Rust helping with some wood-cutting. He went to feed the horses in the evening, and remained in the stable so long that Halstein began to wonder and went in.

There lay Gaupa senseless after a blow from the young black mare. There was a hole in his skull, and Halstein saw the brain matter pulsating.

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It was a strange thing, but Gaupa recovered. He was in bed at Rust for a long time, but as soon as he could walk to his own hut he demanded it, and after six months he was very much as before.

One day about Easter time the sheriff, who lived some two miles to the south, saw Gaupa hatless coming across his yard with a long knife in his hand. He wondered a little, and in a moment the maid came rushing into his office and begged him to go out into the kitchen, for Gaupa must have lost his wits.

The sheriff went. There was Gaupa. His hair had withered at the top of his head so that he was quite bald. He wore a blue blouse, and in his right hand he held his knife, shining, freshly sharpened. Yet Gaupa was an exceptionally good-tempered man.

"Good morning, sheriff. I've come to skin him. Where do you keep him?"

The sheriff did not understand, but noticed that the corners of Gaupa's mouth worked harder than ever. "St. Vitus's dance," he thought.

"Skin him, d'you say?"

"Yes, of course; don't you remember I shot the wizard elk in your woods yesterday? I carted him home, large and whole."

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He pointed the knife straight at the sheriff, till the latter felt the blade like a cold pang through his body.

"This knife," Gaupa went on, "has tasted Rauten once before, and still it is sharp enough to manage the skinning of the elk. Where do you keep him? Eh?"

The sheriff understood that Gaupa's mind was queer, and he made believe that everything was as Gaupa said.

"Oh yes," he replied; "I'll find him for you soon enough, but you will have a drink first, won't you?"

Certainly, Gaupa would like a drink; he had one drink, and then another. By that time he forgot his errand and went quietly home to Lynx Hut.

Two days later he went to Lyhus and behaved in exactly the same manner. There was no gainsaying the fact that the day before he had shot Rauten and drove him, in all his bulk, to the farm, so that everyone might see the wizard elk. And now he had come to skin him.

From that time Gaupa was out of his mind. People guessed it was a result from that blow from the horse's hoof, which seemed probable enough.

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Every once in a while he would go to a farm to skin an elk he had shot in their forest, and if only they agreed and said he ought to have the drink due before such a work was undertaken, or they offered him food, he could generally be talked away from his purpose, so that he forgot all about skinning.

The authorities attempted to lodge him at some farm, but Gaupa simply walked home to Lynx Hut, where he would sit busy with his awl and his waxed thread, working quite decently.

But the urchins found great fun in going up to him and showing him a naked knife, for as soon as he saw it he would start telling the story of the elk calf on Black Mountain slopes, always in the same manner, nearly in the same words. He never told anything else than that he cut half an ear from the calf, never anything more detailed about Rauten after the elk had grown up. If they asked him they could see how he strove and strove to remember, but he was never sure. It was always the same story again and again, how he held the calf between his knees, and when he finished they would hear him mumbling something no one understood except one single word: "Beast, beast."

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Later on he imagined he had killed an animal he called Golden Bear. Then he went down the valley to the rich forest owners, to their grand farms with red storehouses and white dwellings with glass balls on the top of their flag-poles, shining like silver in the sunlight. And then Gaupa never stopped till he got speech with the great men themselves, for he could buy their woods and their farms

and everything they possessed. They might have their payment in cash and the price was of no consideration, for he had killed the Golden Bear.

Thus fared Gaupa, the elk-killer, in the evening of his life.

§ 27

One spring Lynx Hut remained locked, at first for days, then for weeks, then for ever. Lynx Hut is still locked.

They looked for Gaupa that spring, every one in the Valley who could crawl in forest or mountain. The sheriff donned his uniform cap, used the law and ordered people out. A long chain of men zig-zagged across the Lower Valley slopes, east of the river and west of the river. But no Gaupa was found. [199]

What little he possessed was put to auction. His cobbling tools were scattered over the valley as if by a gust of wind. Martin Lyhus bought "The Tempest."

I visited Lynx Hut some years ago. It was empty, with naked walls. A hole gaped in the brickwork of the chimney where the stove flue had once gone in, and the window sill was strewn with dead flies. I found a dried-up squirrel on the hearth. The little animal had, I suppose, climbed down the chimney and been unable to climb up, finally lying down mouth open for the food which should have kept it alive.

But also I found something else.

In a corner lay a dog's collar of coarse leather. It had a shiny buckle and the inside of the leather was worn smooth. In the collar was sewn with white cobbler's thread the name "Bjönn." [200]

The man who unlocked Lynx Hut to me was so white of hair that he seemed to carry fresh snow on his head. He wore a waistcoat with silver buttons, and his name was Halstein Rust. It was he who in the autumn after Gaupa's disappearance went to the relief officer in Lower Valley and told him what he had found above Gipsy Lake out in Ré Valley. It was also Halstein Rust who told me of Gaupa and Bjönn and the wizard elk, Rauten.



To-day a cross stands alternately in sun and shade outside the tar-soaked wall of Lower Valley Church. Under that cross rests the body of Halstein Rust. But I clearly remember the evening when the white-haired man sat before me, crooked, trembling fingers pointing southwards towards Ré Valley, and telling me how Gaupa's life ended. [201]

§ 28

That spring there were masses of snow in the mountains. First mild weather came in March and afterwards the frost lasted till far into May, then the weather changed suddenly, the air vibrating with sunny heat from morning till night.

The tributary rivers became roaring mad in a few days, Lower River went greenish yellow like ale, lifting timber jams of hundreds of logs, sweeping them along, sucking them on in their mad rush, until the logs would float peacefully into the big lake two leagues to the south.

The birch buds opened in a night. In the morning the trees were thickly covered with what looked like green butterflies. A strong perfume filled the steaming air.

It was late at night, the distant hills were blue. The northern sky was smouldering, a soft tone of sweet sadness rose from the fiery heavens, lulling the senses, like the melody of soft, slowly rolling waves. The people of Lower Valley were asleep.

A belated snipe flew chirping over Lynx Hut.

Gaupa came out, locked his door, and put the key in his pocket. He carried a knapsack, and took out a pair of skis. He remained there as if making sure in his thought that nothing was forgotten. But his ideas were confused, lacking strength to arrange themselves in any definite order, and Gaupa went towards the River with skis on his shoulder and a sack on his back, but his rifle hung peacefully on the wall inside Lynx Hut.

In the darkness of that May night a man walked on the crusted snow on the slopes towards Ré Valley. The skis made a dry grating sound on the snow crust, the man breathed quickly and heavily, and rested sadly often. He grew so very thirsty, and every once in a while he lay down at some brooklet and drank the water from the melting snow.

After midnight the snow crust became stone hard. The man went south along the flat marshes near Ré River, and for such an old man he went remarkably quickly. Gaupa had not in vain been the man who used to show everybody else his back both walking and running.

About two o'clock the door of Gipsy Lake Hut groaned, and on the hard wooden seat where Gaupa and Bjönn used to rest side by side after many a sweat dripping day Gaupa lay alone, after many years.

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Strangely enough, that night his brain cleared. He felt as if he had awakened from sleep, and without making a fire he lay, looking backwards in time.

He had lived his life as he himself wanted it, poor in possessions, but rich in happenings. Throughout all the years he could remember there blew a cold breeze from windworn trees and naked mountains. His memories stood out like bright flowers, smelling sweetly of heather and moss. Best of all he remembered the three days' chase after Rauten, Bjönn's last chase. Even that time the rumour was true. Bad luck had followed on Rauten's heels.

Gaupa heard a wood-cock swishing by Gipsy Lake. Then all was silence again.

A little later an owl started hooting in the trees outside the hut, and to Gaupa the hooting seemed to come out from the walls, from the ceiling, from the floor.... The owl is a sinister bird and predicts death, and Gaupa felt quite creepy listening to the sound of the voice. He opened the door and peeped up in the half light between the trees. The bird was silent then, but he could not see it. Yet as soon as he lay down the bird's voice was heard again, sad, wailing, almost like broken notes of a dirge. The tune never rose, never sank, always keeping the same level.

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He went out many times to frighten it away, and although that bird sat just above the roof, he was quite unable to see it; he could almost believe it was a spirit sitting aloft, trying to tell him something.

Day sent a grey square of light through the open door on to the floor of Gipsy Lake Hut. Darkness crept into the corners and hid there.

Then suddenly and unexpectedly the old man jerked his head, steadied his hands against the bench, and half rose. His eyes lost the film of deadness they had had lately and had become keen.

Through the open door he heard the crush, crush, crush of the snow crust shattering under steps heavy enough to break it.

Gaupa knew the snow crust to be hard enough to carry a man, even a heavy one. He rose on his feet and stood in the door, crouching a little, both hands holding on to the lintel above his head.

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Crush, crush, crush! he heard from a little mound covered with young trees, just beyond the clearing in front of the hut. Then the sound stopped as if cut off, and the silence afterwards was filled with the boiling rumble from the heath cocks in the marsh by the lake. The owl was silent.

What came over him? Was he afraid? He almost looked like it. His eyes grew keen, staring. His mouth opened, showing his gums with all his teeth still, brown from chewing tobacco.

An elk's head rose from the bushes on the mound, and Gaupa gave a startled sob.

"Rauten!" he whispered, and his excited face showed everything but fear. It was like the yell from an old, half-blind deer-hound who unexpectedly finds big game, a yell of exultation, a dying fire

flaming up.

The elk's head turned abruptly, a long back floated over the bushes, and once more the snow crust crashed where Rauten ran.

Gaupa turned back to the hut. "The Tempest," "The Tempest," his thoughts were wailing. But the rifle was at home in Lynx Hut, rusty with years of disuse. [206]

He was running about on the floor of the hut, his eyes seeking a weapon, anything that could be used for taking life—murmuring all the time: "Sure it is the wizard elk, sure it is the wizard elk!"

Then his hand happened to touch his dagger, hanging at his right-hand side; the touch reminded him of something, and he stopped. He wrenched out the knife, his feet stole quickly across the floor and through the doorway. Shortly afterwards the old man was running on the hard snow, stooping, bareheaded, in his blouse, and with long, homespun trousers flapping round his legs.

Before him were the elk spools, deep holes straight through the rough snow crust, the bottom of them showing the wide-apart hoofs of Rauten, and the grains of snow in the holes were like pearls.

Gaupa saw how the bits of broken snow crust had flown under the elk's hoofs, and once more he was the old Gaupa. Body and soul were taken back across the years. He was no longer a rheumatic old cripple running bareheaded towards the rise of the sun, knife in hand. No, he was a man with playing muscles and foaming blood, a shaggy savage who hunted an animal to eat it and to clothe himself in its skin. [207]

The snow crust was so hard that he ran as if on a floor, the sound of his steps was only a slight scratching as from a lynx's claws in bark. He heard the wizard elk just in front, the beast sinking into the snow till under its belly, and inside him was the song that here was Rauten, Rauten! while audibly he mumbled, "I've got him now, I've got him now."

Above the spring-black woods of Ré Valley, the mountains foamed like white waterfalls. In the east the rosy dawn glowed, sending a breath of whitish yellow before her on the sky which in farthest west was still deep-sea blue.

There was Black Mountain with its white head, and the forest down its breast like a shaggy beard. Just such a May morning it was when Black Mountain first saw the little elk calf that was to become Rauten.

Now Black Mountain saw something different. On the marsh east of Gipsy Lake an elk bull was plunging heavily in the crusted snow. He tried to leap, but could not. He sank through as if falling at each step and he looked strangely short-legged. [208]

But on the back of that elk sat a man...

Now both Rauten and Gaupa, "The Lynx," were animals, one born in and of the forest, the other a human being restored to the animal state by the forest. He sat astride of the elk, feeling its lean, sharp back between his legs. His nostrils were full of the scent of game, and he inhaled it and grew drunk from it, like a beast of prey. His hands held on to the mane and one of them held the knife. He lay forwards along Rauten's neck as if wanting to bite the elk's throat. Under his nose his beard bristled like feline whiskers.

The marsh was empty again, the elk spoor marking it like a deep scar, and the trees about it seemed to wonder at what they had just seen.

But in the copses to the south the crash of the elk's hoofs could be heard, and there was Rauten forcing his way, half mad with terror. Every step was an effort, the man on his back and the difficult snow both increased his fear. He wanted to throw the man off. He strained his body till muscles and sinews groaned inside him, but the snow crust was ever faithless; as soon as his hoofs were on the ground, the weight of his body following, the snow crust broke like brittle ice. No matter however much he willed, willed to go forwards, faster, faster—he could not, it was useless. [209]



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The bushes waved around him, hitting Gaupa's face till it smarted and he closed his eyes for fear of being blinded. Just before him he saw the ear that was only half an ear. He saw fur had grown where the knife once cut. He noticed also that the antlers were growing out again after the winter's moulting. They were covered with fur.

Rauten's breathing was laboured, long and hissing like bellows in a smithy.

Then Gaupa let go one hand from the elk's mane, the hand rose, slowly at first, then darting like a flame, and a newly ground knife's edge drew a shiny line across the dark forest. The knife stopped above Gaupa's head, then sank like lightning. It sank into the elk's back, deep up to the haft.

[212]

Rauten opened his mouth a little, also his eyes, but did not even groan, only took a few leaps out of the undergrowth to a more open place where the sun had been more powerful so that there was less snow. Two weather-grey stumps ran out of it like long tusks.

"Akk," said a capercaillie hen, wide awake and warning—"Akk, akk!" A capercaillie cock had finished his play, a neck stretched out from the brown-flecked pine branches, and his wings beat the air noisily when he rose.

Rauten staggered forwards, Gaupa on his back. Gaupa had a piece of chewing tobacco in his mouth. It was caught between his clenched teeth and a brown juice ran out of the corners of his mouth down into his beard. He caught the knife out of the elk's back and swung it aloft once more. But it drew no shiny line this time, it was wet. Once more it sank into Rauten's body while Gaupa spat out the words:

"Take that for Bjönn."

The same knife met Rauten with the first rays of day on the morning he was born on Black Mountain slopes. The blade was worn and narrow now, but fate decreed that it should sit in Rauten's body at his death-leap east of Gipsy Lake. Perhaps they knew, the dull-red sunbeams which that morning, so many years ago, stroked their warm hands over the little calf bidding him welcome to life and to the forest.

[213]

But now Rauten had lived his life. Trees and grass, air and water had given him of their own, which they now claimed back. Rauten was old; over his melancholy head the sunset was dead. He was entering on the long night which never is awakened by a dawn in

the east.

He had created a number of elks, most of them gone before him into the land of shadows. Now his turn had come to follow them. The Ré Valley woods had no more use for him. His legs were stiff and his steps short. No longer was he a roaring storm at mating time. His muscles sang no more wild songs from bottomless depths of forces; his life was on the ebb, and no flood would rise in him again.

§ 29

That morning a marten sat crouching in a spruce tree near Gipsy Lake. The marten might tell what happened.

That morning a broad-winged eagle soared round and round above Ré Valley. The eagle also might tell what happened.

[214]

Rauten ran out on a southwards slope where the snow was partly gone. He hardly saw anything; Gaupa's knife was diving voluptuously into him. But terror paralysed his nerves so that he hardly felt any pain.

When the elk and the man ran the small bushes nodded after them. But the old trees were indifferent to what happened. Everything was as it should be. The old trees had seen the bear pawing the elk's skull, had seen the adder swallowing live mice. Life takes life. Thus it was when night first dewed the grass, as long as stars have twinkled in the heavens.

While Rauten leapt down that slope the wind slipped in under Gaupa's blue-striped blouse, making it bulge out at the back. He rode on intoxicated, far away from everything and everybody. He gave vent to a long yell, old man that he was, and the yell sank into the spring-time roar from Ré River and was swallowed up by it.

Almost blind, the wizard elk rushed down a precipice, about three or four times the height of a man, sliding with legs stretched out and back straight. Gaupa pressed his knees against the elk's flanks with all his might, but could not keep his seat. He slid forwards along the neck, found the antlers and hung on. The elk's hoofs tore away patches of moss, disturbing a small stone which became a living thing and jumped down; a jay perched on a tree on that rock started a thin piping as if bewailing the scene it saw. High up under a small cloud red with sunlight the eagle soared easily in the air. Then he screamed, long and hungrily.

[215]

Rauten found firm earth below the rocky wall; he nearly fell forwards with the shock, but managed to keep his balance. Gaupa did not let go of the antlers, but his legs slipped off from the elk's body and turned a somersault, his soles high up towards the sky, as if he wished to kick the tree-tops in play. Then he lost his hold on the antlers, turned over the elk's muzzle and lay on the snow, his knife still in his hand.

The wizard elk lifted one foreleg. Gaupa saw it, a helpless look in his eyes. An icy-cold blast ran through him, before he rose to his knees. The light-grey elk's leg was lifted still higher, stopped in the air for a tiny moment, and then fell rapidly. It hit Gaupa between his shoulder-blades. Daylight was extinguished for him as suddenly as when a candle is blown out. With incredible speed he rushed into empty space, then began to sink—down, down.

[216]

Gaupa lay on his face, his left arm bent under him, but the right hand which held the knife was stretched out to one side. Then his fingers loosened slowly from the curly maple shaft, straightened out, and the knife lay loose on the snow crust.

Rauten lifted his leg for another blow, but half-way up it became so heavy that he could lift it no further, could not even hold it up. It was as if Rauten thought better of it, as if he believed that the man had had enough. He remained standing, his eyes, soft as dusk, staring sadly at Gaupa. Then he grew sleepy and tired, strangely tired. His great head nodded, nodded lower still, rose and nodded again. Then it stiffened. There lay Rauten, the wizard elk.

The morning sun reached the tree-tops and crept slowly down the trunks. Then reaching the earth it stole forwards as if nosing the man and the elk curiously.

[217]

The day was not different from many other days.

It was a day in May, when spring dwells below in the great valleys, early flowers bloom, and clouds sail across the blue sky.

On the Ré Valley slopes dusk turned to evening.

For a little space there was silence.

The jay said no more. A marten sat well hidden in a spruce tree close by, his eyes shining like raindrops among the needles. Dawn lit copper-red fires on all the mountain peaks.

Then the snow crust crashed noisily below that rocky wall on Gipsy Lake slope. Rauten fell on his side. He did not move, but inside him something bubbled with the sound of hidden brooklets under the peat in a bog.

Suddenly the great body curled up and straightened out again just as suddenly.

Gaupa and Rauten slept side by side, Rauten's head touching Gaupa's chest as if the animal wished to rest with him.

In the snow beside them red flowers seemed to bloom.

Summer must have come to Ré Valley very early that year.

[218]



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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TRAIL OF THE ELK ***

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