

**CHARLES
ROBERTS**

SOME ANIMAL
STORIES

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Some Animal Stories

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Charles G. D. Roberts

Some Animal Stories

DO SEEK THEIR MEAT FROM GOD

One side of the ravine was in darkness. The darkness was soft and rich, suggesting thick foliage. Along the crest of the slope tree-tops came into view – great pines and hemlocks of the ancient unviolated forest – revealed against the orange disc of a full moon just rising. The low rays slanting through the moveless tops lit strangely the upper portion of the opposite steep, – the western wall of the ravine, barren, unlike its fellow, bossed with great rocky projections, and harsh with stunted junipers. Out of the sluggish dark that lay along the ravine as in a trough, rose the brawl of a swollen, obstructed stream.

Out of a shadowy hollow behind a long white rock, on the lower edge of that part of the steep which lay in the moonlight, came softly a great panther. In common daylight his coat would have shown a warm fulvous hue, but in the elvish decolourising rays of that half hidden moon he seemed to wear a sort of spectral grey. He lifted his smooth round head to gaze on the increasing flame, which presently he greeted with a shrill cry. That terrible

cry, at once plaintive and menacing, with an undertone like the fierce protestations of a saw beneath the file, was a summons to his mate, telling her that the hour had come when they should seek their prey. From the lair behind the rock, where the cubs were being suckled by their dam, came no immediate answer. Only a pair of crows, that had their nest in a giant fir-tree across the gulf, woke up and croaked harshly their indignation. These three summers past they had built in the same spot, and had been nightly awakened to vent the same rasping complaints.

The panther walked restlessly up and down, half a score of paces each way, along the edge of the shadow, keeping his wide-open green eyes upon the rising light. His short, muscular tail twitched impatiently, but he made no sound. Soon the breadth of confused brightness had spread itself further down the steep, disclosing the foot of the white rock, and the bones and antlers of a deer which had been dragged thither and devoured.

By this time the cubs had made their meal, and their dam was ready for such enterprise as must be accomplished ere her own hunger, now grown savage, could hope to be assuaged. She glided supplely forth into the glimmer, raised her head, and screamed at the moon in a voice as terrible as her mate's. Again the crows stirred, croaking harshly; and the two beasts, noiselessly mounting the steep, stole into the shadows of the forest that clothed the high plateau.

The panthers were fierce with hunger. These two days past their hunting had been wellnigh fruitless. What scant prey they

had slain had for the most part been devoured by the female; for had she not those small blind cubs at home to nourish, who soon must suffer at any lack of hers? The settlements of late had been making great inroads on the world of ancient forest, driving before them the deer and smaller game. Hence the sharp hunger of the panther parents, and hence it came that on this night they hunted together. They purposed to steal upon the settlements in their sleep, and take tribute of the enemies' flocks.

Through the dark of the thick woods, here and there pierced by the moonlight, they moved swiftly and silently. Now and again a dry twig would snap beneath the discreet and padded footfalls. Now and again, as they rustled some low tree, a pewee or a nuthatch would give a startled chirp. For an hour the noiseless journeying continued, and ever and anon the two grey, sinuous shapes would come for a moment into the view of the now well-risen moon. Suddenly there fell upon their ears, far off and faint, but clearly defined against the vast stillness of the Northern forest, a sound which made those stealthy hunters pause and lift their heads. It was the voice of a child crying, – crying long and loud, hopelessly, as if there were no one by to comfort it. The panthers turned aside from their former course and glided toward the sound. They were not yet come to the outskirts of the settlement, but they knew of a solitary cabin lying in the thick of the woods a mile and more from the nearest neighbour. Thither they bent their way, fired with fierce hope. Soon would they break their bitter fast.

Up to noon of the previous day the lonely cabin had been occupied. Then its owner, a shiftless fellow, who spent his days for the most part at the corner tavern three miles distant, had suddenly grown disgusted with a land wherein one must work to live, and had betaken himself with his seven-year-old boy to seek some more indolent clime. During the long lonely days when his father was away at the tavern the little boy had been wont to visit the house of the next neighbour, to play with a child of some five summers, who had no other playmate. The next neighbour was a prosperous pioneer, being master of a substantial frame house in the midst of a large and well-tilled clearing. At times, though rarely, because it was forbidden, the younger child would make his way by a rough wood road to visit his poor little disreputable playmate. At length it had appeared that the five-year-old was learning unsavoury language from the elder boy, who rarely had an opportunity of hearing speech more desirable. To the bitter grief of both children, the companionship had at length been stopped by unalterable decree of the master of the frame house.

Hence it had come to pass that the little boy was unaware of his comrade's departure. Yielding at last to an eager longing for that comrade, he had stolen away late in the afternoon, traversed with endless misgivings the lonely stretch of wood road, and reached the cabin only to find it empty. The door, on its leathern hinges, swung idly open. The one room had been stripped of its few poor furnishings. After looking in the rickety shed, whence darted two wild and hawklike chickens, the child had seated himself on

the hacked threshold, and sobbed passionately with a grief that he did not fully comprehend. Then seeing the shadows lengthen across the tiny clearing, he had grown afraid to start for home. As the dusk gathered, he had crept trembling into the cabin, whose door would not stay shut. When it grew quite dark, he crouched in the inmost corner of the room, desperate with fear and loneliness, and lifted up his voice piteously. From time to time his lamentations would be choked by sobs, or he would grow breathless, and in the terrifying silence would listen hard to hear if any one or anything were coming. Then again would the shrill childish wailings arise, startling the unexpectant night, and piercing the forest depths, even to the ears of those great beasts which had set forth to seek their meat from God.

The lonely cabin stood some distance, perhaps a quarter of a mile, back from the highway connecting the settlements. Along this main road a man was plodding wearily. All day he had been walking, and now as he neared home his steps began to quicken with anticipation of rest. Over his shoulder projected a double-barrelled fowling-piece, from which was slung a bundle of such necessities as he had purchased in town that morning. It was the prosperous settler, the master of the frame house. His mare being with foal, he had chosen to make the tedious journey on foot.

The settler passed the mouth of the wood road leading to the cabin. He had gone perhaps a furlong beyond, when his ears were startled by the sound of a child crying in the woods. He stopped, lowered his burden to the road, and stood straining ears and eyes

in the direction of the sound. It was just at this time that the two panthers also stopped, and lifted their heads to listen. Their ears were keener than those of the man, and the sound had reached them at a greater distance.

Presently the settler realised whence the cries were coming. He called to mind the cabin; but he did not know the cabin's owner had departed. He cherished a hearty contempt for the drunken squatter; and on the drunken squatter's child he looked with small favour, especially as a playmate for his own boy. Nevertheless he hesitated before resuming his journey.

"Poor little devil!" he muttered, half in wrath. "I reckon his precious father's drunk down at 'the Corners,' and him crying for loneliness!" Then he reshouldered his burden and strode on doggedly.

But louder, shriller, more hopeless and more appealing, arose the childish voice, and the settler paused again, irresolute, and with deepening indignation. In his fancy, he saw the steaming supper his wife would have awaiting him. He loathed the thought of retracing his steps, and then stumbling a quarter of a mile through the stumps and bog of the wood road. He was foot-sore as well as hungry, and he cursed the vagabond squatter with serious emphasis; but in that wailing was a terror which would not let him go on. He thought of his own little one left in such a position, and straightway his heart melted. He turned, dropped his bundle behind some bushes, grasped his gun, and made speed back for the cabin.

"Who knows," he said to himself, "but that drunken idiot has left his youngster without a bite to eat in the whole miserable shanty? Or maybe he's locked out, and the poor little beggar's half scared to death. *Sounds* as if he was scared"; and at this thought the settler quickened his pace.

As the hungry panthers drew near the cabin, and the cries of the lonely child grew clearer, they hastened their steps, and their eyes opened to a wider circle, flaming with a greener fire. It would be thoughtless superstition to say the beasts were cruel. They were simply keen with hunger, and alive with the eager passion of the chase. They were not ferocious with any anticipation of battle, for they knew the voice was the voice of a child, and something in the voice told them the child was solitary. There was no hideous or unnatural rage, as it is the custom to describe it. They were but seeking with the strength, the cunning, the deadly swiftness given them to that end, the food convenient for them. On their success in accomplishing that for which nature had so exquisitely designed them depended not only their own, but the lives of their blind and helpless young, now whimpering in the cave on the slope of the moon-lit ravine. They crept through a wet alder thicket, bounded lightly over the ragged brush fence, and paused to reconnoitre on the edge of the clearing, in the full glare of the moon. At the same moment the settler emerged from the darkness of the wood-road on the opposite side of the clearing. He saw the two great beasts, heads down and snouts thrust forward, gliding toward the open cabin door.

For a few moments the child had been silent. Now his voice rose again in pitiful appeal, a very ecstasy of loneliness and terror. There was a note in the cry that shook the settler's soul. He had a vision of his own boy, at home with his mother, safe-guarded from even the thought of peril. And here was this little one left to the wild beasts! "Thank God! Thank God I came!" murmured the settler, as he dropped on one knee to take a surer aim. There was a loud report (not like the sharp crack of a rifle), and the female panther, shot through the loins, fell in a heap, snarling furiously and striking with her fore-paws.

The male walked around her in fierce and anxious amazement. Presently, as the smoke lifted, he discerned the settler kneeling for a second shot. With a high screech of fury, the lithe brute sprang upon his enemy, taking a bullet full in his chest without seeming to know he was hit. Ere the man could slip in another cartridge the beast was upon him, bearing him to the ground and fixing keen fangs in his shoulder. Without a word, the man set his strong fingers desperately into the brute's throat, wrenched himself partly free, and was struggling to rise, when the panther's body collapsed upon him all at once, a dead weight which he easily flung aside. The bullet had done its work just in time.

Quivering from the swift and dreadful contest, bleeding profusely from his mangled shoulder, the settler stepped up to the cabin door and peered in. He heard sobs in the darkness.

"Don't be scared, sonny," he said, in a reassuring voice. "I'm

going to take you home along with me. Poor little lad, *I'll* look after you if folks that ought to don't."

Out of the dark corner came a shout of delight, in a voice which made the settler's heart stand still. "*Daddy*, daddy," it said, "*I knew* you'd come. I was so frightened when it got dark!" And a little figure launched itself into the settler's arms, and clung to him trembling. The man sat down on the threshold and strained the child to his breast. He remembered how near he had been to disregarding the far-off cries, and great beads of sweat broke out upon his forehead.

Not many weeks afterwards the settler was following the fresh trail of a bear which had killed his sheep. The trail led him at last along the slope of a deep ravine, from whose bottom came the brawl of a swollen and obstructed stream. In the ravine he found a shallow cave, behind a great white rock. The cave was plainly a wild beast's lair, and he entered circumspectly. There were bones scattered about, and on some dry herbage in the deepest corner of the den, he found the dead bodies, now rapidly decaying, of two small panther cubs.

"THE YOUNG RAVENS THAT CALL UPON HIM"

It was just before dawn, and a greyness was beginning to trouble the dark about the top of the mountain.

Even at that cold height there was no wind. The veil of cloud that hid the stars hung but a hand-breadth above the naked summit. To eastward the peak broke away sheer, beetling in a perpetual menace to the valleys and the lower hills. Just under the brow, on a splintered and creviced ledge, was the nest of the eagles.

As the thick dark shrank down the steep like a receding tide, and the greyness reached the ragged heap of branches forming the nest, the young eagles stirred uneasily under the loose droop of the mother's wings. She raised her head and peered about her, slightly lifting her wings as she did so; and the nestlings, complaining at the chill air that came in upon their unfledged bodies, thrust themselves up amid the warm feathers of her thighs. The male bird, perched on a jutting fragment beside the nest, did not move. But he was awake. His white, narrow, flat-crowned head was turned to one side, and his yellow eye, under its straight, fierce lid, watched the pale streak that was growing along the distant eastern sea-line.

The great birds were racked with hunger. Even the nestlings,

to meet the petitions of whose gaping beaks they stinted themselves without mercy, felt meagre and uncomforted. Day after day the parent birds had fished almost in vain; day after day their wide and tireless hunting had brought them scant reward. The schools of alewives, mackerel, and herring seemed to shun their shores that spring. The rabbits seemed to have fled from all the coverts about their mountain.

The mother eagle, larger and of mightier wing than her mate, looked as if she had met with misadventure. Her plumage was disordered. Her eyes, fiercely and restlessly anxious, at moments grew dull as if with exhaustion. On the day before, while circling at her viewless height above a lake far inland, she had marked a huge lake-trout, basking near the surface of the water. Dropping upon it with half-closed, hissing wings, she had fixed her talons in its back. But the fish had proved too powerful for her. Again and again it had dragged her under water, and she had been almost drowned before she could unloose the terrible grip of her claws. Hardly, and late, had she beaten her way back to the mountain-top.

And now the pale streak in the east grew ruddy. Rust-red stains and purple, crawling fissures began to show on the rocky face of the peak. A piece of scarlet cloth, woven among the faggots of the nest, glowed like new blood in the increasing light. And presently a wave of rose appeared to break and wash down over the summit, as the rim of the sun came above the horizon.

The male eagle stretched his head far out over the depth, lifted

his wings and screamed harshly, as if in greeting of the day. He paused a moment in that position, rolling his eye upon the nest. Then his head went lower, his wings spread wider, and he launched himself smoothly and swiftly into the abyss of air as a swimmer glides into the sea. The female watched him, a faint wraith of a bird darting through the gloom, till presently, completing his mighty arc, he rose again into the full light of the morning. Then on level, all but moveless wing, he sailed away toward the horizon.

As the sun rose higher and higher, the darkness began to melt on the tops of the lower hills and to diminish on the slopes of the upland pastures, lingering in the valleys as the snow delays there in spring. As point by point the landscape uncovered itself to his view, the eagle shaped his flight into a vast circle, or rather into a series of stupendous loops. His neck was stretched toward the earth, in the intensity of his search for something to ease the bitter hunger of his nestlings and his mate.

Not far from the sea, and still in darkness, stood a low, round hill, or swelling upland. Bleak and shelterless, whipped by every wind that the heavens could let loose, it bore no bush but an occasional juniper scrub. It was covered with mossy hillocks, and with a short grass, meagre but sweet. There in the chilly gloom, straining her ears to catch the lightest footfall of approaching peril, but hearing only the hushed thunder of the surf, stood a lonely ewe over the lamb to which she had given birth in the night.

Having lost the flock when the pangs of travail came upon

her, the unwonted solitude filled her with apprehension. But as soon as the first feeble bleating of the lamb fell upon her ear, everything was changed. Her terrors all at once increased tenfold, – but they were for her young, not for herself; and with them came a strange boldness such as her heart had never known before. As the little weakling shivered against her side, she uttered low, short bleats and murmurs of tenderness. When an owl hooted in the woods across the valley, she raised her head angrily and faced the sound, suspecting a menace to her young. When a mouse scurried past her, with a small, rustling noise amid the withered mosses of the hillock, she stamped fiercely, and would have charged had the intruder been a lion.

When the first grey of dawn descended over the pasture, the ewe feasted her eyes with the sight of the trembling little creature, as it lay on the wet grass. With gentle nose she coaxed it and caressed it, till presently it struggled to its feet, and, with its pathetically awkward legs spread wide apart to preserve its balance, it began to nurse. Turning her head as far around as she could, the ewe watched its every motion with soft murmurings of delight.

And now that wave of rose, which had long ago washed the mountain and waked the eagles, spread tenderly across the open pasture. The lamb stopped nursing; and the ewe, moving forward two or three steps, tried to persuade it to follow her. She was anxious that it should as soon as possible learn to walk freely, so they might together rejoin the flock. She felt that the open

pasture was full of dangers.

The lamb seemed afraid to take so many steps. It shook its ears and bleated piteously. The mother returned to its side, caressed it anew, pushed it with her nose, and again moved away a few feet, urging it to go with her. Again the feeble little creature refused, bleating loudly. At this moment there came a terrible hissing rush out of the sky, and a great form fell upon the lamb. The ewe wheeled and charged madly, but at the same instant the eagle, with two mighty buffetings of his wings, rose beyond her reach and soared away toward the mountain. The lamb hung limp from his talons; and with piteous cries the ewe ran beneath, gazing upward, and stumbling over the hillocks and juniper bushes.

In the nest of the eagles there was content. The pain of their hunger appeased, the nestlings lay dozing in the sun, the neck of one resting across the back of the other. The triumphant male sat erect upon his perch, staring out over the splendid world that displayed itself beneath him. Now and again he half-lifted his wings and screamed joyously at the sun. The mother bird, perched upon a limb on the edge of the nest, busily rearranged her plumage. At times she stooped her head into the nest to utter over her sleeping eaglets a soft chuckling noise, which seemed to come from the bottom of her throat.

But hither and thither over the round bleak hill wandered the ewe, calling for her lamb, unmindful of the flock, which had been moved to other pastures.

STRAYED

In the Cabineau Camp, of unlucky reputation, there was a young ox of splendid build, but of a wild and restless nature.

He was one of a yoke, of part Devon blood, large, dark-red, all muscle and nerve, and with wide magnificent horns. His yoke-fellow was a docile steady worker, the pride of his owner's heart; but he himself seemed never to have been more than half broken in. The woods appeared to draw him by some spell. He wanted to get back to the pastures where he had roamed untrammelled of old with his fellow-steers. The remembrance was in his heart of the dewy mornings when the herd used to feed together on the sweet grassy hillocks, and of the clover-smelling heats of June when they would gather hock-deep in the pools under the green willow-shadows. He hated the yoke, he hated the winter; and he imagined that in the wild pastures he remembered it would be for ever summer. If only he could get back to those pastures!

One day there came the longed-for opportunity; and he seized it. He was standing unyoked beside his mate, and none of the teamsters were near. His head went up in the air, and with a snort of triumph he dashed away through the forest.

For a little while there was a vain pursuit. At last the lumbermen gave it up. "Let him be!" said his owner, "an' I rayther guess he'll turn up agin when he gits peckish. He kaint browse on spruce buds an' lung-wort."

Plunging on with long gallop through the snow he was soon miles from camp. Growing weary he slackened his pace. He came down to a walk. As the lonely red of the winter sunset began to stream through the openings of the forest, flushing the snows of the tiny glades and swales, he grew hungry, and began to swallow unsatisfying mouthfuls of the long moss which roughened the tree-trunks. Ere the moon got up he had filled himself with this fodder, and then he lay down in a little thicket for the night.

But some miles back from his retreat a bear had chanced upon his foot-prints. A strayed steer! That would be an easy prey. The bear started straightway in pursuit. The moon was high in heaven when the crouched ox heard his pursuer's approach. He had no idea what was coming, but he rose to his feet and waited.

The bear plunged boldly into the thicket, never dreaming of resistance. With a muffled roar the ox charged upon him and bore him to the ground. Then he wheeled, and charged again, and the astonished bear was beaten at once. Gored by those keen horns he had no stomach for further encounter, and would fain have made his escape; but as he retreated the ox charged him again, dashing him against a huge trunk. The bear dragged himself up with difficulty, beyond his opponent's reach; and the ox turned scornfully back to his lair.

At the first yellow of dawn the restless creature was again upon the march. He pulled more mosses by the way, but he disliked them the more intensely now because he thought he

must be nearing his ancient pastures with their tender grass and their streams. The snow was deeper about him, and his hatred of the winter grew apace. He came out upon a hill-side, partly open, whence the pine had years before been stripped, and where now grew young birches thick together. Here he browsed on the aromatic twigs, but for him it was harsh fare.

As his hunger increased he thought a little longingly of the camp he had deserted, but he dreamed not of turning back. He would keep on till he reached his pastures, and the glad herd of his comrades licking salt out of the trough beside the accustomed pool. He had some blind instinct as to his direction, and kept his course to the south very strictly, the desire in his heart continually leading him aright.

That afternoon he was attacked by a panther, which dropped out of a tree and tore his throat. He dashed under a low branch and scraped his assailant off, then, wheeling about savagely, put the brute to flight with his first mad charge. The panther sprang back into his tree, and the ox continued his quest.

Soon his steps grew weaker, for the panther's cruel claws had gone deep into his neck, and his path was marked with blood. Yet the dream in his great wild eyes was not dimmed as his strength ebbed away. His weakness he never noticed or heeded. The desire that was urging him absorbed all other thoughts, – even, almost, his sense of hunger. This, however, it was easy for him to assuage, after a fashion, for the long, grey, unnourishing mosses were abundant.

By and by his path led him into the bed of a stream, whose waters could be heard faintly tinkling on thin pebbles beneath their coverlet of ice and snow. His slow steps conducted him far along this open course. Soon after he had disappeared, around the curve in the distance there came the panther, following stealthily upon his crimsoned trail. The crafty beast was waiting till the bleeding and the hunger should do its work, and the object of its inexorable pursuit should have no more heart left for resistance.

This was late in the afternoon. The ox was now possessed with his desire, and would not lie down for any rest. All night long, through the gleaming silver of the open spaces, through the weird and chequered gloom of the deep forest, heedless even of his hunger, or perhaps driven the more by it as he thought of the wild clover bunches and tender timothy awaiting him, the solitary ox strove on. And all night, lagging far behind in his unabating caution, the panther followed him.

At sunrise the worn and stumbling animal came out upon the borders of the great lake, stretching its leagues of unshadowed snow away to the south before him. There was his path, and without hesitation he followed it. The wide and frost-bound water here and there had been swept clear of its snows by the wind, but for the most part its covering lay unruffled; and the pale dove-colours, and saffrons, and rose-lilacs of the dawn were sweetly reflected on its surface.

The doomed ox was now journeying very slowly, and with

the greatest labour. He staggered at every step, and his beautiful head drooped almost to the snow. When he had got a great way out upon the lake, at the forest's edge appeared the pursuing panther, emerging cautiously from the coverts. The round face and malignant green eyes were raised to peer out across the expanse. The labouring progress of the ox was promptly marked. Dropping its nose again to the ensanguined snow, the beast resumed his pursuit, first at a slow trot, and then at a long, elastic gallop. By this time the ox's quest was nearly done. He plunged forward upon his knees, rose again with difficulty, stood still, and looked around him. His eyes were clouding over, but he saw, dimly, the tawny brute that was now hard upon his steps. Back came a flash of the old courage, and he turned, horns lowered, to face the attack. With the last of his strength he charged, and the panther paused irresolutely; but the wanderer's knees gave way beneath his own impetus, and his horns ploughed the snow. With a deep bellowing groan he rolled over on his side, and the longing, and the dream of the pleasant pastures, faded from his eyes. With a great spring the panther was upon him, and the eager teeth were at his throat, – but he knew nought of it. No wild beast, but his own desire, had conquered him.

When the panther had slaked his thirst for blood, he raised his head, and stood with his fore-paws resting on the dead ox's side, and gazed all about him.

To one watching from the lake shore, had there been any one to watch in that solitude, the wild beast and his prey would have

seemed but a speck of black on the gleaming waste. At the same hour, league upon league back in the depth of the ancient forest, a lonely ox was lowing in his stanchions, restless, refusing to eat, grieving for the absence of his yoke-fellow.

THE WATCHERS IN THE SWAMP

Under the first pale lilac wash of evening, just where the slow stream of the Lost-Water slipped placidly from the open meadows into the osier-and-bulrush tangles of the swamp, a hermit thrush, perched in the topmost spray of a young elm tree, was fluting out his lonely and tranquil ecstasy to the last of the sunset. *Spheral, spheral, oh, holy, holy, clear*, he sang; and stopped abruptly, as if to let the brief, unfinished, but matchlessly pure and poignant cadence sink unjarred into the heart of the evening stillness. One minute – two minutes – went by; and the spaces of windless air were like a crystal tinged with faint violet. And then this most reticent of singers loosed again his few links of flawless sound – a strain which, more than any other bird-song on this earth, leaves the listener's heart aching exquisitely for its completion. *Spheral, spheral, oh, holy, holy* – but this time, as if seeking by further condensation to make his attar of song still more rare and precious, he cut off the final note, that haunting, ethereal — *clear*.

Again the tranced stillness. But now, as if too far above reality to be permitted to endure, after a few seconds it was rudely broken. From somewhere in the mysterious and misty depth of the swamp came a great booming and yet strangulated voice, so dominant that the ineffable colours of the evening seemed to fade and the twilight to deepen suddenly under its sombre vibrations.

Three times it sounded: —*Klunk-er-glungk... Klunk-er-glungk... Klunk-er-glungk*, an uncouth, mysterious sound, sonorous, and at the same time half muffled, as if pumped with effort through obstructing waters. It was the late cry of the bittern, proclaiming that the day was done.

The hermit-thrush, on his tree-top against the pale sky, sang no more, but dropped noiselessly to his mate on her nest in the thickets. Two bats flickered and zigzagged hither and thither above the glimmering stream. And the leaf-scented dusk gathered down broodingly, with the dew, over the wide solitudes of Lost-Water Swamp.

It was high morning in the heart of the swamp. From a sky of purest cobalt flecked sparsely with silver-white wisps of cloud, the sun glowed down with tempered, fruitful warmth upon the tender green of the half-grown rushes and already rank water-grasses – the young leafage of the alder and willow thickets – the wide pools and narrow, linking lanes of unruffled water already mantling in spots with lily-pad and arrow-weed. A few big red-and-black butterflies wavered aimlessly above the reed-tops. Here and there, with a faint elfin clashing of transparent wings, a dragon-fly, a gleam of emerald and amethyst fire, flashed low over the water. From every thicket came a soft chatter of the nesting red-shouldered blackbirds.

And just in the watery fringe of the reeds, as brown and erect and motionless as a mooring stake, stood the bittern.

Not far short of three feet in length, from the tip of his long and powerful dagger-pointed bill to the end of his short rounded tail, with his fierce, unblinking eyes round, bright and hard, with his snaky head and long, muscular neck, he looked, as he was, the formidable master of the swamp. In colouring he was a streaked and freckled mixture of slaty greys and browns and ochres above, with a freckled whitish throat, and dull buff breast and belly – a mixture which would have made him conspicuous amid the cool light green of the sedges, but that it harmonised so perfectly with the earth and the roots. Indeed, moveless as he stood, to the indiscriminating eye he might easily have passed for a decaying stump by the water side. His long legs were of dull olive which melted into the shadowy tones of the water.

For perhaps ten minutes the great bird stood there without the movement of so much as a feather, apparently unconcerned while the small inhabitants of the swamp made merry in the streaming sunshine. But his full round eyes took in, without stirring in their sockets, all that went on about him, in air, or sedge, or water. Suddenly, and so swiftly that it seemed one motion, his neck uncoiled and his snaky head darted downward into the water near his feet, to rise again with an eight-inch chub partly transfixed and partly gripped between the twin daggers of his half-opened bill. Squirming, and shining silverly, it was held aloft, while its captor stalked solemnly in through the sedges to a bit of higher

and drier turf. Here he proceeded to hammer his prize into stillness upon an old half-buried log. Then, tossing it into the air, he caught it adroitly by the head, and swallowed it, his fierce eyes blinking with the effort as he slowly forced it down his capacious gullet. It was a satisfying meal, even for such a healthy appetite as his, and he felt no immediate impulse to continue his fishing. Remaining where he was beside the old log, thigh deep in the young grasses and luxuriously soaking in the sunshine, he fell once more into a position of rigid movelessness. But his attitude was now quite different from that which he had affected when his mind was set on fish. His neck was coiled backwards till the back of his head rested on his shoulders, and his bill pointed skyward, as if the only peril he had to consider seriously during his time of repose might come, if at all, from that direction. And though he rested, and every nerve and muscle seemed to sleep, his gem-like eyes were sleeplessly vigilant. Only at long intervals a thin, whitish membrane flickered down across them for a fraction of an instant, to cleanse and lubricate them and keep their piercing brightness undimmed.

Once a brown marsh-hawk, questing for water-rats, winnowed past, only ten or a dozen feet above his head. But he never stirred a muscle. He knew it would be a much more formidable and daring marauder than the marsh-hawk that would risk conclusions with the uplifted dagger of his bill.

In about half-an-hour – so swift is the digestion of these masters of the swamp – the bittern began to think about a return

to his easy and pleasant hunting. But, always deliberate except when there was need for instant action, at first he did no more than uncoil his long neck, lower his bill to a level, and stand motionlessly staring over the sedge-tops. One of the big red-and-black butterflies came wavering near, perhaps under the fatal delusion that that rigid yellow bill would be a good perch for him to alight on. A lightning swift dart of the snaky head; and those gay wings, after curiously adorning for a moment the tip of the yellow bill, were deftly gathered in and swallowed – an unsubstantial morsel, but not to be ignored when one is blest with a bittern's appetite.

After a few minutes more of statuesque deliberation, having detected nothing in the landscape particularly demanding his attention, the bittern lazily lifted his broad wings and flapped in slow flight, his long legs almost brushing the sedge-tops, back to the post of vantage where he had captured the chub. As soon as he alighted he stiffened himself erect, and stared about as if to see whether his flight had been noticed. Then, presently, he seemed to remember something of importance. This was the season of mating joys and cares. It was time he signalled his brown mate. First he began snapping his bill sharply, and then he went through a number of contortions with his throat and neck, as if he were trying to gulp down vast quantities of air, and finding the effort most difficult. At length, however, the painful-looking struggle was crowned with achievement. Once more, as on the preceding evening, that great call boomed forth across

the swamp, sonorous yet strangulated, uncouth yet thrilling and haunting, the very voice of solitude and mystery: — *Klunk-er-glungk – Klunk-er-glungk – Klunk-er-glungk*.

Almost immediately came an acknowledgement of this untuneful love-song – a single hoarse *quaw-awk*; and another snaky brown head and yellow dagger bill were raised above the tops of the sedges. The hen bittern, in response to her mate's cry, had just come off her nest.

For some tranquil moments the two eyed each other without stirring, and it almost seemed as if their very immobility was a mode of expression, a secret code for communication between them. The result, if so, appeared to be satisfactory. The hen came stalking solemnly through the grass and sedges towards the water's edge, only pausing on the way to transfix and gulp down a luckless frog. And the stately male, once more spreading his spacious vans, flapped slowly over and dropped again into the grass some ten or a dozen feet from the nest.

The nest was a rather casual structure of dry grass and weeds, in a hollow of the turf, and more or less concealed by leaning tufts of swamp-grass. It contained three large eggs of a dull greenish buff, clouded with darker tones, and blending elusively with the soft colourings of the nest. These precious eggs the male bittern had no intention of brooding. His object was merely to stand guard over them, with jealous vigilance, while his mate was away foraging. The sun was softly warm upon them, through the thin shadows of the grass blades, and he knew they would not chill

during her brief absence. He took his post just near enough to keep his eye upon the nest, without unduly drawing attention to its hiding-place.

This patch of water-meadow, perhaps a half-acre in extent, on which the bitterns had their nest, was one of many such tiny islands scattered amid the interlacing channels of Lost-Water Swamp. It formed a congenial refuge for all that small life of the wilderness which loves to be near water without being in it. It was particularly beloved of the meadow-mice, because the surrounding watercourses and morasses were an effectual barrier to some of their worst enemies, such as foxes, skunks, and weasels; and they thrive here amazingly. To be sure the bittern would take toll of them when they came his way, but he did not deliberately hunt them, rather preferring a diet of frogs and fish; and moreover, his depredations upon the mice were more than counterbalanced by his eager hostility to their dreaded foes, the snakes. So, on the whole, he might have been regarded by the mouse community as a benefactor, though a rather costly one.

Even now, as he stood there apparently thinking of nothing but his guardianship of the nest, he gave a telling example of his beneficence in this regard. There was a tiny, frightened squeak, a desperate small rustling in the grass-stems, and a terrified mouse scurried by, with a two-foot black snake at its tail. The bittern's head flashed down, unerringly, and rose again, more slowly, with the snake gripped by the middle. Held high in air, as if on exhibition, between the knife-edge tips of that deadly yellow bill,

the victim writhed and twisted, coiling itself convulsively around its captor's head and neck. But with two or three sharp jerks it was drawn further back, towards the base of the mandibles, and then, with an inexorable pressure, bitten clean in two, the halves uncoiled and fell to the ground, still wriggling spasmodically. With grave deliberation the bittern planted one foot upon the head half, and demolished the vicious head with a tap of his bill. This done, he swallowed it, with determined and strenuous gulplings. Then he eyed the other half doubtfully, and decided that he was not yet ready for it. So, placing one foot upon it with a precise air, as if in assertion of ownership, he lifted his head again and resumed his motionless guarding of the nest. If any mice were watching – and their beady bright eyes are *always* watching – they may well have congratulated themselves that the pair of bitterns had chosen this particular island for their nesting-place.

A little later in the morning – perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes after the incident of the snake – the mice found yet another potent reason for congratulating themselves on the presence of their expensive champion. The hen bittern, apparently, had not been very successful in her foraging. She had shown as yet no sign of returning to the nest. The male was just beginning to get impatient. He even went so far as to move his head, though ever so slightly. Indeed, he was on the very point of beginning those grotesque snappings of the bill and gulplings of air, which would be followed by his booming triple call, when he caught sight of a dark form moving through the grass, beyond the

nest. Instantly he stiffened again into rigidity. Only, very slowly, the long slender feathers which crowned his head and lay along his neck began to rise.

The dark form, gliding stealthily among the grasses, was that of an animal about two feet in length, low on the legs, slender, sinuous, quick-darting. The bittern had never chanced to observe a mink before, but he needed no one to tell him that this creature was dangerous. Ferocity and efficiency were written all over the savage, triangular head, and lithe, swift body. But the intruder had evidently not yet discovered the precious nest. He was half a dozen paces away from it, and not moving directly towards it. He seemed quite otherwise occupied. Indeed, in the very next moment he pounced upon a mouse, which he tore and devoured with an eagerness which showed him to be hungry. The bittern, being blest with prudence and self-control, made no move to meet trouble half-way. He waited, and hoped anxiously that the treasure of the nest might escape discovery.

The mink, to do that sanguinary marauder justice, was not at the moment thinking of any such luxury as eggs. A restless and far-ranging slayer, and almost as much at home in the water as on dry land, he had entered the swamp in the hope of finding just such a happy hunting ground as this bit of mouse-thronged meadow. He had just arrived, after much swimming of sluggish channels, scrambling over slimy roots, and picking a fastidious way about dark pools of treacherous ooze, and he was now full of blood-thirsty excitement over the success of his adventure.

His acute ears and supersensitive nostrils had already assured him that the meadow was simply swarming with mice. His nose sniffed greedily the subtle, warm mousy smells. His ears detected the innumerable, elusive mousy squeaks and rustlings. His eyes, lit now with the red spark of the blood-lust, were less fortunate than his ears and nose, because word of a new and dreadful foe had gone abroad among the mouse-folk, and concealment was the order of the day. But already, he had made one kill – and that so easily that he knew the quarry here was not much hunted. He felt that, at last, he could afford to take life easily and do his hunting at leisure.

He licked his lips, gave his long whiskers a brush with his fore-paws, to cleanse them after his rather hasty and untidy meal, and was just preparing to follow a very distinct mouse trail which lay alluringly before his nose, when a chance puff of air, drawing softly across the grass, bore him a scent which instantly caught his attention. The scent of bittern was new to him, as it chanced. He knew it for the scent of a bird, a water-bird of some kind, – probably, from its abundance, a large bird, and certainly, therefore, a bird worth his hunting. That the hunting might have any possible perils for himself was far from occurring to his savage and audacious spirit.

Curious and inquiring, he rose straight up on his hind-quarters in order to get a good view, and peered searchingly over the grass-tops. He saw nothing but the green and sun-steeped meadow with the red-and-black butterflies wavering over it, the

gleam of the unruffled water, and the osier-thickets beyond, their leafage astir with blackbirds and swamp-sparrows. He looked directly at, and *past*, the guardian bittern, not discovering him for a bird at all, but probably mistaking that rigid, vigilant shape for an old brown stump. For the mink's eyes, like those of many other animals, were less unerring than his ears and nostrils, and much quicker to discern motion than fixed form. Had the bittern stirred by so much as a hair's breadth, the mink would have detected him at once for what he was. But there in the full glare of the open, his immobility concealed him like a magic cloak. The mink looked at him and saw him not; nor saw another similar form, unstirring, tensely watchful, over by the water-side. The hen bittern, warned perhaps by some subtle telepathic signal from her mate, had stopped her fishing and stood on guard.

Having failed to detect the source of that strange, intriguing smell, the mink concluded, from past experiences with partridge, grouse, and duck, that it must come from a brooding mother, hiding on a nest in the grass. Nothing could be more satisfactory. His eyes blazed blood-red at the prospect of slaughter. Dropping down again upon all fours, he darted forward, up the trail of the scent, soundless as a shadow and swift as a shifting beam of light, – and came full upon the nest with its three unsheltered eggs. Instantly seizing the nearest one between his agile forepaws, he crunched the shell and began greedily sucking up the contents.

But the savour of the feast had hardly thrilled his palate when it seemed as if the skies had fallen upon him. A scalding anguish

stabbed his hunched-up shoulders, a smother of buffeting wings enveloped him, and he was borne backward from the nest in an ignominious bundle, the broken egg-shell still clinging to his nose.

At that moment when he had dropped upon all fours and darted forward through the grass toward the nest, all the immobility of the watching bittern had vanished. His long crest standing straight up in his fury, he had launched himself to the attack, covered the intervening distance with two tremendous thrusts of his powerful wings, and fallen like a cyclone upon the violator of his home. The dagger of his bill had struck deeply, though at random; his hard wing-elbows had landed their blows effectively; and the impetus of his charge had swept the battle clear of the nest, thus saving the two remaining eggs from destruction. The same impetus carried him clear of his foe and a couple of paces past, but he turned adroitly in the air and landed facing about, ready for the inevitable counter-attack.

Amazed and startled though he was, and handled with a roughness quite new to his experience, the mink was in no way daunted. Rather he was so boiling with rage that his wonted wariness forsook him completely. With a snarl that was almost a screech he sprang straight at the long, exposed, inviting throat of his adversary. Had those keen white fangs of his, still dripping with egg, reached their aim, the fight would have been over. His leap was swift, true, and deadly. But equally true, and more swift, was the counter-stroke. He was met, and stopped in mid-air, by

a thrust of the bittern's bill, which, had he not twisted his head just in time, would have split his skull. As it was, it laid open one side of his snarling face, destroyed one eye, and brought him heavily to the ground. Even under this punishment, however, he would not acknowledge defeat. Springing aside, with a lightning zigzag movement to confuse the aim of that terrific bill, he darted low and made a leap at his antagonist's long, vulnerable legs. He missed only by a hair's breadth, as the bittern, keenly alive to the risk of such a manoeuvre, leapt nimbly aside and baulked him with a stiff wing-stroke. He seized the baffling wing and strove to pull his tall adversary down. But two great pinion feathers came away in his jaws, and the next moment he got another terrible, driving stab from the dagger beak, well forward on the flank. It was a slanting thrust, or it would have pierced his lungs; but it nearly knocked the wind out of him, and ploughed a deep red gash in his glossy coat.

Screeching furiously, he doubled on himself like a snake to meet this attack. But at the same moment he cringed under another excruciating stab, this time in the haunch; and looking up, he saw himself enveloped in a cloud of blinding wings. The hen bittern had arrived to join in the defence of her nest.

Now, bloodthirsty and merciless marauder though he was, the mink's courage was a thing beyond dispute; and terribly though the fight had so far gone against him, with a single foe to confront he would probably have held on to the death. But for all his fury he was not quite mad; and this reinforcement

of the enemy was too much for him. Suddenly straightening himself out long and small like an eel, he slipped from under the terrifying storm of wings and stabs, and made off through the grass at the best speed that in all his swift career he had ever attained. He made for the water, which he felt would be his safest refuge. The angry bitterns were after him on the instant, flying as low as possible and stabbing down at him through the grass-stems. But his cunning and slippery zigzags enabled him to dodge most of their thrusts; and in their eagerness they got in each other's way – which probably saved him his bare life. At length, streaming with blood, and leaving behind him a red trail to proclaim his discomfiture to the mice, he reached the water, and dived in. Without daring to come to the surface he swam across the channel – here about two score paces in width – and cautiously raised his head behind a screen of overhanging weeds. He saw his two pursuers standing, motionless and erect, on the opposite bank, watching with fierce eyes for him to reappear. He decided not to reappear. Submerging himself again, he swam on down stream till he had rounded a sharp bend of the channel. When he thought it prudent to show himself once more, he was sheltered from those avenging eyes by a dense screen of alder and willows. These bushes were full of nesting red-wings, who chattered at him angrily. He paid no heed to their scolding, but hurried through the thicket, and on down the bank till he found an ancient musk-rat hole. Into this he crept eagerly, and lay down in the grateful dark to nurse his wounds and his

humiliation.

After the disappearance of the mink the hen bittern soon returned to her nest. But the male stayed where he was. From time to time he would snap up a butterfly or beetle, or spear a passing frog or chub or sucker. But always his indignant heart was hoping that the mink would return. After an hour or two, however, his wrath died down and he began to forget.

Then he would occasionally vary his still-hunting, by walking with slow, meditative steps up and down the strip of bare ooze between the grass and the water, feeling out with his sensitive claws the little freshwater clams which lay hidden in the mud. The clams were scarce, however, so along about the middle of the afternoon he flapped lazily back to his old fishing station on the other side of the meadow.

Later in the day, when the osiers were beginning to throw long shadows across the water, and the red-and-black butterflies had grown too indolent to dance, and the blue-and-amethyst dragon-flies had ceased their hawking of mosquitoes over the lily-pads and arrow-weed, the great bittern, full fed and at ease with life, flapped languidly up from the water-side and dropped close beside the nest. His brooding mate lifted her head, as if in greeting, and laid it back at once between her shoulders, with her yellow bill pointing skyward as was her vigilant custom.

Soon the first warm tints of sunset began to stain the edges of the clouds above the far fringes of the swamp. Motionless and erect beside his mate, the bittern watched the oncoming of

the enchantment as his day drew to its quiet close. Suddenly the coloured quiet of the air was disturbed by the beating of hurried wings. He glanced upward, without moving. A mallard drake, in frantic flight, whirred past, fifteen or twenty feet above his head, making for the water. Close after the fugitive, and swiftly overhauling him with long, tremendous thrusts of his mighty wings, came that most dreaded cut-throat of the air, a great blue goshawk. Swift and bullet-like was the flight of the desperate fugitive; but that of the hawk was far swifter. Had the water been two feet further away the fate of the glossy drake would have been sealed. He would have been overtaken, his throat torn out in mid-air, his body carried off to the nearest tree-top to be plucked and devoured. But this time the inscrutable Fates of the wilderness, too seldom so lenient to the weak, decided to favour him. With a heavy-sounding splash he shot down into the blessed water, and disappeared into safety beneath the lily-pads, just in time.

The destroying talons of the great hawk clutched convulsively at the dandy curled tips of his tail as he vanished.

With his arrowy speed, his precision of stroke, his audacity and fiery spirit, the blue goshawk was little accustomed to the experience of being baulked of his prey. He knew well enough that his quarry would not show itself again, but would swim away under water and only come up to breathe in the safe shelter of some dense thicket of rushes. With a sharp yelp of wrath, he swept up from the water on a long, graceful curve, wheeled sharply above the osiers, and sailed back low above the bittern's

island, seeking other prey. And his piercing gaze fell upon the bittern, standing rigid beside the nest.

His swoop was instantaneous, straight and swift as a bolt from a cross-bow. But that coiled steel spring of the bittern's neck was even swifter; and as his talons struck downward, the bittern's dagger thrust caught him in the very centre of the impending claw, splitting the foot fairly and disabling it. Nevertheless, by the shock of the attack the bittern was borne downward, and would have been caught in the breast or throat by the other talon; but at the same instant his watchful mate, who had half risen on the nest that her eggs might not be crushed in the mêlée, delivered her thrust. It went true. And it had not only the drive of her sinewy neck behind it, but also the full force of her powerful thighs, as well as the assailant's descending weight to drive it home. It caught the goshawk full in the base of the neck, pierced clean through, and severed the spine. And in a wild confusion of sprawled legs and pounding wings the three great birds fell in a heap in the grass, just beyond the nest.

The two bitterns nimbly extricated themselves, and with wings pounding, stabbed savagely, again and again, at the unresisting body of the hawk. Presently, as if by one impulse, they both stood up, erect and still as images, their yellow bills dripping with blood. The male had a bleeding gash along the side of his head, and had lost several of his haughty crest feathers. But this concerned him little. His heart swelled with triumph. He was forced to give it utterance. He snapped his bill sharply,

gulped a few mouthfuls of air, and then sent forth his booming challenge across the swamp: —*Klunk-er-glungk... Klunk-er-glungk... Klunk-er-glungk.*

His mate spread her broad wings, shook herself till her ruffled plumage fell into place, wiped her conquering bill on the grass, stepped delicately back into the nest, and softly settled herself down upon her two eggs, so miraculously preserved.

Silence fell on Lost-Water Swamp. The air became gradually transfused with amethyst and pale rose. And then, far and faint, tranquil and poignant, came the entrancing cadence — *Oh, spheral, spheral, oh, holy, holy, spheral* — the silver vesper ecstasy of the hermit-thrush, in his tree-top against the pellucid sky.

QUILLS THE INDIFFERENT

Quills was born in a capacious hole in the heart of a huge and ancient red maple, near the banks of the Tobique River, in New Brunswick.

The hole had to be capacious, for Quills's mother was a fine porcupine, in her prime, fully two and a half feet in length, massive in build, and a good twenty pounds in weight; and, moreover, her armament of long, bristling spines made it essential that she should not be unduly crowded in her nest. But the entrance was only large enough for her to squeeze through it without discomfort, so the dusky interior was sheltered, warm and dry. It was also safe; for in all the wilderness there was no savage marauder reckless enough to invade a porcupine's nest while the owner was at home.

In proportion to the size of his mother, Quills, like all young porcupines, was an amazingly big baby – hardly smaller, indeed, than the new-born cub of the black bear. His length was about eleven inches, his weight a shade over two pounds – and this when he was not yet twenty-four hours old. He was richly clothed with long, dark fur, almost black, under which lay hidden his sprouting armament of spines, already formidable, though only about half an inch in length. Born with the insatiable appetite of his tribe, he lay stretched out between his mother's stumpy fore-legs, nursing greedily, with an incessant accompaniment of tiny

squeaks and squeals of satisfaction. The sounds were loud enough to attract the notice of two little black-and-white woodpeckers who had just alighted on the trunk near the hole. With sleek heads cocked alertly, and bright eyes keen with interrogation, they listened to the curious noises inside the tree. Then they clambered on up the trunk to a safer height, wondering, no doubt, that any youngling should be guilty of such an indiscretion as thus to betray the secret of its hiding-place. They could not know that the porcupine baby, almost alone among the babes of the wild, was exempted, through the reputation of his spines, from the law of silence as the price of life. Young or old, the porcupine will make a noise whenever it pleases him to do so, and with a lofty indifference as to who his hearers may be.

It was spring, and spring comes late to the high valley of the Tobique stream. The ancient red maple, still full of vigorous life in the sap-wood of its outer shell, in spite of the great hollow at its decaying heart, was mantled over every branch and twig with a glowing veil of tiny rose-bud blooms, though the green of its leaf-buds was hardly yet showing through the brown sheaths. The ice had been broken up and been swept away in tumbling masses, and the current of the swift river, swollen with the spring freshet, filled the air about the porcupine's nest with a pleasant, softly thunderous roar. From all the open glades the

snow was gone, though masses of it, shrunken and greyish and sprinkled with dead leaves and twigs, still lingered in the fir thickets and the deeper hollows. On the drier hillocks and about the rotting stumps a carpet of round, flat, yellowish-green and bronzy leaves shielded the lurking pink-and-white blossoms and haunting perfumes of the Mayflower, or trailing arbutus, the shy darling of the Northern spring. The fairy fragrance came and went elusively across the pervading scent of moist earth and spicy balsam-tips, as the mild breeze pulsed vaguely through the forest.

It was mid-afternoon of the second day of Quills's life. Pleasantly fatigued from his double duty of nursing and growing, he fell into a sound sleep. Then his mother, spurred by the now insistent demands of her own appetite, gently disentangled herself from the clutch of his baby claws in her fur, crawled from the hole, and descended the trunk to seek a hasty meal.

But what was haste for a porcupine would have been regarded at the extreme of lazy loitering in any other creature of the wild. At the foot of the old maple she stood for some moments loudly sniffing the air with her blunt nostrils. Then, as if making up her mind that it was hemlock she wanted, she ambled off with heavy deliberation to the nearest hemlock tree, climbed it with a noisy rattling of claws, settled herself comfortably in the first crotch, and fell to gnawing the rough bark. When she had taken the edge off her appetite with this fare – which no stomach but a porcupine's could ever digest – she crawled out along a branch, as far as it would bear her weight, and, gathering a lot of the slender

twigs between her fore-paws, made a hearty dessert of the dark-green, glossy frondage. Other hemlocks, standing at a greater distance from her nest, already bore the conspicuous marks of her foraging; but this one she had hitherto left untouched against the day when she would be wanting to take her meals near home.

While his mother was away feeding, Quills had slept, soundly and silently, for perhaps an hour or more. Then he woke up – hungry, of course, as befitted a healthy young porcupine. Finding no warm mother to snuggle him and feed him, he at once set up his small but earnest complaint of whines and squeals and grumbles, all unconcerned as to who or what might overhear him.

As it chanced at this moment, a hungry weasel – the most insatiably bloodthirsty of all the wilderness prowlers – was just approaching the foot of the old maple, nosing out the somewhat stale trail of a rabbit. As his keen ear caught these tell-tale sounds from within the tree, he stopped short, and his malignant little eyes began to blaze. Then he glided around the great trunk, halted just below the hole, and sniffed discriminately at the strong fresh scent upon the bark. But at this point he hesitated – and it is not usual for a hungry weasel to hesitate. The scent was porcupine, and a grown-up porcupine was a proposition which not even his audacity was prepared to tackle. The sounds from within that tempting hole, to be sure, were the voice of a baby porcupine. But was the baby alone, or was the mother with it? In the latter case, he would as soon have jumped into the jaws of a lynx as enter that hole. The fresh scent on the bark offered no solution to

the problem. Was it made in coming out or going in? He sniffed at it again, growing fiercer and more hungry every moment.

Suddenly he heard behind him a dry rattling of quills and a confused noise of squeals and chattering grunts. The mother porcupine was hurrying across the moist turf, gnashing her jaws, and looking twice her natural size with every quill on end. In her rage and anxiety she was making remarkable speed for a porcupine. The weasel, his long white fangs bared and his eyes red with disappointed fury, whipped about and stood facing her till she was within three or four feet of him. But for all his rage he was no fool. For her gnashing yellow teeth he had no respect whatever. But those deadly, poisonous, needle-sharp spines of hers! He had no wish to interview them too closely. With eleventh-hour discretion he slipped aside to make way for her, and glided off to pick up again the trail of the rabbit.

The mother porcupine never even turned her head to see where the enemy had gone to. Wild with anxiety, she scabbled up the trunk and into her nest. Her experienced nose, however, at once assured her that the weasel had not been inside. Instantly appeased, she stretched herself on her side, drew the complaining youngster to her breast, licked and nosed him for a few moments, and settled into a comfortable doze.

Having this hearty mother's attention all to himself – an exceptional advantage, as a porcupine baby has generally one brother or sister, if not more, to share the maternal supply – young Quills grew and throve amazingly. And his armoury of

spines throve with him. In a few weeks he was out of the hole and following his mother up into the hemlock trees, where he speedily learned to feed on the glossy green tips of the frondage. From this diet he passed quickly to the stronger fare of the harsh and bitter bark, the gnawing of which was a delight to his powerful, chisel-like teeth. By the time the full flush of the Tobique summer, ardent and swift, had crowded the rich-soiled valley with greenery and bloom, Quills's mother had grown altogether indifferent to him. She had long ago refused him her breasts, of which, indeed, he had no further need. But she still permitted him to follow her about, if he wanted companionship, so long as he did not trouble her. And in this way he learned the few things – astonishingly few, it would seem – that a porcupine needs to know in order to hold his own in the struggle for existence. He learned, among other things, that nearly all the green stuff that the forest produced was more or less fit for his food, that there were other trees besides the hemlock whose bark was tasty and nourishing and pleasantly resistant to his teeth, and that in a broad, sunny backwater of the river there grew a profusion of great round flat leaves, the pads of the water-lily, which were peculiarly thrilling to his palate. In fact, most of his learning had to do with food, which was what he appeared to live for. His enemies were few, and seldom enthusiastic. And he never troubled his head about avoiding them. With an indifference nothing less than colossal, he left it to them to avoid him, if they wished; and they did so wish, ninety-nine times out of the

hundred.

Along towards the latter part of August, Quills found that his mother was no longer indifferent. She had grown actively unfriendly. Whenever he came near her she grunted and chattered to him in such an irritable fashion that it was obvious, even to a not over-sensitive spirit like his, that his companionship was distasteful to her. This attitude neither grieved nor angered him, however. She was no longer of any importance to him. He simply quit following her, went his own way, and forgot her. Striking off on his own, and impelled by instinct to seek a fresh range for himself, he plunged into the still, warm tide of the sunny backwater and swam, with much splashing and little speed, to the opposite bank. Swimming was no task to him, for his coat of hollow quills made it impossible for him to sink. The backwater was not more than thirty or forty yards in width, but when he had crossed it, and crawled forth upon the opposite bank, he felt that he had found a new world, and owned it. He ambled joyously along the bank to a point where he had marked a bed of bright-green arrow-weed, and gorged himself to his great content on the shapely, pointed leaves and stout succulent stalks. Then he climbed a big poplar and curled up to sleep, self-sufficient and pleased to be alone.

Quills was by this time more than half grown up, and, moreover, thanks to his happily selected parentage and his ample nourishment when a baby, he was as big and strong as many a less favoured porcupine achieves to be at maturity. In colour he

was of a very dark brown, verging on black, and peppered with a dingy yellowish white, his long fur being dark with light tips, and his spines cream-coloured with black tips. The spines on his body ranged from two to four inches in length, and when he was not angry, they were partly concealed by the fur, which was considerably longer. The quills on his head and the sides of his face were about an inch in length. His short, blunt muzzle was free from spines, but closely furred to the lips, and conspicuously adorned by his large and prominent front teeth, his gnawing teeth, which were of a vivid dark yellow colour. His legs and all the under parts of his body were clothed in dense, soft fur, entirely without spines. His tail, about five inches in length, was very thick and powerful, and heavily armed with spines to the tip. The spines on his body were for his protection, but this armed tail was his one weapon of offence – a weapon with which at a single stroke he could fill an enemy's mouth or paws with a hundred barbed and poisonous needles; and the peculiar deadliness of these needles, large and small alike, lay in their power of swift and inexorable burrowing. Once their subtle points penetrated the skin, their innumerable, microscopic, scale-like barbs would begin working them inwards through the muscles, setting up violent inflammations as they went, till they would reach some vital part and put their wretched victim out of his misery.

So far in his career young Quills had had no occasion to test the efficiency of that formidable tail of his as a weapon, though from time to time he would stretch himself elaborately, leg after

leg and claw after claw, ruffle up all his spines as if to see that they were in working order, and lash out alarmingly with the aforesaid tail by way of keeping it efficient and ready for action. And now, as luck would have it, the first enemy he was to encounter was the very one against whom his best defences were of least avail – namely, Man himself. But fortunately for young Quills, and for this his brief biography, the man in question was neither needing meat – least of all, such harsh meat as porcupine – nor of a destructive disposition. He was magnanimous, and Quills never knew that he held on to his little lease of life by favour.

The man had come up to the Tobique in a canoe, partly for the fishing, partly to refresh his spirit with the clean airs of the wilderness. He left his guide frying bacon and trout for the midday meal, and strolled up the backwater to cast a fly and see if there were any big fish lurking in the shade of the lily-pads. He forgot about his fishing, however, when he caught sight of Quills, looking somewhat like a big dilapidated bird's nest, curled up asleep in the crotch of a young poplar. Being interested in all the kindred of the wild, the man reeled in his line, stood his rod carefully in a bush, and went and shook the tree as hard as he could, to see what Quills would do.

Quills woke up with a startled squeak, dug his claws into the bark to secure himself, and peered down to see what was the matter. At sight of this wanton disturber of his dreams he grew very angry. He chattered and grunted, and clashed his big yellow

teeth loudly, and ruffled up his deadly spines as a clear warning to the intruder to keep off.

The man laughed, as if pleased at this bold defiance. He looked about for a long pole, thinking to poke Quills from his perch, so as to study him a little nearer at hand. But poles for poking porcupines do not lie about the Tobique wilderness, as he presently realised. He decided to climb the poplar, for a closer – but not too close – investigation. But the moment he began to climb, Quills, boiling with indignation, started down to meet the danger half-way. He came down backwards, with his tail lashing savagely. And he came down so astonishingly fast that the man had barely time to drop to the ground and jump out of the way, chuckling at the speedy success of his experiment.

"Half a jiffy, and the beggar would have made my face look like a pin-cushion," he muttered approvingly.

Reaching the ground, Quills stopped and stood chattering his defiance. The man, some paces distant, eyed him humorously for a few seconds, then went and got his fishing-rod out of the bush. With a bit of string from his jacket pocket he tied his cloth cap over the butt of the rod, and then, like a fencer with a button on his foil, with this weapon of courtesy he came and made a gentle thrust at Quills's blunt nose. Quick as a flash Quills whisked around and lashed at the impertinent weapon with his tail. The man at once withdrew it and examined his cap. It was stuck full, at that one slashing blow, with beautiful, polished, black-tipped white quills.

"Thanks awfully, old chap," said he. "They are lovely specimens, so I won't tease you any more." And, carrying his prize carefully before him, he turned back to the canoe. Quills glared after him, till his long form had vanished through the trees. Then his anger cooled, and exultation at this easy and signal triumph took its place. His spines went down till they were hidden beneath the dark fur and he seemed to have shrunk to half his size. The stress of his emotions having made him hungry – *anything* will do to make a porcupine hungry – he crawled down to the edge of the water and fell to feasting in a patch of arrowweed.

Autumn on the Tobique passed swiftly in a blaze of colour. A few sudden touches of frost in the night, and then the maples stood glorious in scarlet and crimson, the birches and poplars shimmered in pale gold, the ash trees smouldered in dull purple, and the rowans flaunted their great bunches of waxy orange-vermilion berries against the solid dark-green background of hemlock and spruce. The partridge-coveys whirred on strong wing across the glowing corridors of the forest, under a sky of sharp cobalt. For a day or two every tree-top was elusively vocal with the thin-drawn single notes of the migrating cedar waxwings – notes which were mere tiny beads of sound. The ice which formed each night along the edges of the shallow pools

flitted away each morning before the unclouded sun was two hours high. And the air, stirred with light breezes, sparkling, and rich with earth-scents, was like wine in the veins of every creature alive. One night came a light sifting of snow, in gossamer flakes which vanished at the first touch of the sun. Then the breezes died away; the air, losing its crisp tang, grew balmy and languorous, the sharp blue of the sky veiled itself in a tender opaline haze; the wilderness seemed to fall asleep, its silence broken only by the whispers of the falling leaves and, once in a while, the startling *chirr-rr-rr* of a red squirrel exulting over his hoard of beech-nuts. Life for the moment had taken on the tissue of a dream. It was the magic "Indian Summer." And folk in the scattered settlements, drinking in the beauty and the wonder of it, were sad because they knew how swiftly it must pass.

It passed, as it had come, in a night. Day broke steel-grey and menacing, with a bitter wind cutting down out of the North, and in a few hours everything was rigid with frost. Quills, though cold in reality had small terror for his hardy and well-clad frame, had been disturbed and annoyed by the sudden change. He didn't like the wind. It occurred to him that a warm and sheltered retreat, like his dimly-remembered nest in the heart of the old maple, would be a better sleeping-place than the draughty branches of a hemlock or a spruce. In this frame of mind he thought of a tempting-looking hole which he had noticed under a big boulder some fifty yards or so up the backwater. He knew, to be sure, that the hole belonged to an old dog-fox, but that fact did not

trouble him. His brain had only room for one idea at a time. He set out straightway for that hole.

At the entrance to the den the strong smell of fox seemed to him like a challenge, and his spines rose angrily. He had no idea whether the owner was at home or not, and he made no attempt to find out. By way of precaution, however, he turned round before entering and backed in, slashing vigorously with his armed tail as he did so. The fox was not at home. He found the retreat dry and warm – in fact, just what he wanted. So, having well breakfasted before leaving his tree, he settled himself down with his hind-quarters to the entrance, pretty well blocking it, and unconcernedly went to sleep.

Presently the fox came trotting home, intent on getting out of the wind and having a nap in his snug den. But just before the threshold he stopped short, the fur on his neck stood up, and his eyes went green. He had scented the trail of Quills, and it led straight into his lair. Stealthily he tiptoed forward, peered in, and saw confronting him that spiny tail and rump, just inside the doorway.

His blood boiled at the intruder's insolence. But he was a wise old beast, and in his rash youth he had once been lame for a month, with a steely quill burning and festering under his knee-joint, through having tried to interfere with a most insignificant-looking porcupine. Curbing his righteous wrath – as there was nothing else to do – he turned about and with his scratching hind paws insultingly sent a shower of soiled earth

upon the slumbering Quills. Then he trotted off to seek another retreat. Quills, thus rudely awakened, crawled forth, chattering indignantly, and shook out the defilement from his long coat. But, as the fox was nowhere in sight, he promptly forgot his wrath and turned into the den again to resume his nap.

Gradually, but inexorably, winter now closed down upon the valley of the Tobique. And it was a hard winter – for all the hunting beasts and birds, a desperate winter. The rabbits that autumn had been smitten with one of their periodical epidemics, and died off like flies. This did not trouble Quills directly – a strict vegetarian, he was assured of plenty so long as the forest stood. But indirectly it made a vital difference to him. All the prowling and pouncing kindred – the great horned owls and the eagles, the lynxes, foxes, martens, and minks, and even certain surly old he-bears who were too restless to "hole-up" for the winter – soon found themselves goaded by such a hunger as might at any moment drive them to take unwonted risks. Quills little guessed how often, as he was gnawing complacently at his meal of hemlock bark, he would be watched longingly by savage and hungry eyes. But, had he guessed it, his indifference would have remained quite unruffled. He had all he could eat, and a warm hole to sleep in, and why should he borrow trouble?

But one biting December afternoon, when the straight shadows of the fir trees were stretching long and blue across the snow, Quills's complacency got something of a shock. Just as he was crawling luxuriously into his den, one of those great horned

owls which are the feathered Apaches of the wilderness came winnowing low overhead on wings as silent as sleep. His round staring eyes caught sight of Quills's hind-quarters just vanishing into the hole. There was no time to note exactly what it was, and hunger had made the great bird rash even beyond his wont. He swooped instantly and struck his terrible talons into the tail and haunch.

With a loud hiss, like that of an angry cat, he let go precipitately and fairly bounced up into the air again, both murderous talons stuck deep with spines which seemed to burn into his sinews. He flew in haste to the nearest branch, steadied himself with difficulty on the perch, and set himself to the painful task of plucking out the torments with his beak, holding up first one claw and then the other. With some of the spines he was successful, but others he merely managed to nip off close to the skin. His feet began to swell immediately. For several weeks he could do no hunting, for the fiery anguish in them, but could only sit moping in his hollow tree, where he would soon have starved but for the food brought to him by his faithful mate.

As for Quills, this was his first experience of physical pain, and it was his first taste of fear. Whining and squealing and grunting all at once, he shrank into his den, and, carefully parting the spines and fur with his nose, strove to lick the wounds made by those steel-sharp talons. For a day or two he had no appetite, and stayed sulking in the den. But the healthy flesh, being unpoisoned, soon healed, and Quills was himself again,

except for a certain unaccustomed watchfulness. He did not know what creature it was which had dared to attack him, so at sight of any strange beast whatsoever, up would go his spines and he would put himself on guard. Even a malevolent – but to him harmless – little weasel, or a scouting mink, he would honour with his suspicions; and one day, when a gigantic bull moose came and stood beneath the tree in which he was feeding, he chattered down at him furiously and arrayed all his defences as if expecting immediate attack. But as the huge black beast did not even trouble to look at him, his fears were soon allayed.

A porcupine's memory, however, seems to be extraordinarily short, and Quills's was no exception to the rule. In the course of three or four weeks, when his wounds no longer pricked him to remembrance, he forgot all about the affair and recovered his old indifference. One day when he was returning to his den for a doze – and only a score of yards away from the entrance – right into his pathway, with a noiseless pounce, dropped a great, grey, furry beast with tufted ears, and long, white snarling teeth, and huge pads of paws. It crouched before him, its stub of a tail twitching, and glared upon him with pale, cruel, moon-like eyes. Up went Quills's spines at once, and he ducked his nose between his fore-paws; but he was determined to get to his den, so he came right on. Seeing, however, that the intruder showed no sign of getting out of the way, Quills suddenly turned round and came on backwards, lashing out fiercely with his tail. The lynx was wild with hunger, but not to the pitch of suicidal recklessness.

He ached intolerably for the well-nourished flesh that he knew lay hidden beneath those bristling spines, but he knew the price that he would have to pay for it. With a screech of disappointed rage, he restrained himself and slipped from the path; and Quills, chattering noisily, disappeared into his hole.

As the long and bitter winter drew on, burying the wilderness under five or six feet of snow and scourging it with storm and iron frost, Quills had many more or less similar encounters with the lynxes, and twice with a surly old black-bear. Paradoxical as the statement may appear, he usually faced the foe with his tail. And the result was always the same. No prowler was prepared to pay the price which Quills would have exacted for his carcase. But along in March, when the snow had begun to settle heavily under a week of thaw, Quills was confronted by a new enemy before whom his indifference melted more swiftly than the snow.

Very early one morning, when the first ghost-grey light of dawn was beginning to glimmer through the windless forest, Quills had just come down out of an old hemlock, when he caught sight of a strange beast gliding over the snow some thirty or forty yards away. The stranger, dark brown in colour, with a bushy tail, long and low-set body, weasel-shaped head, and grizzly-grey face with black snout, was somewhat under three feet in length. It was distinctly smaller, and at first glance less dangerous-looking, than a lynx. But some inherited instinct told Quills at once that this was an enemy far more to be dreaded than the fiercest of lynxes. He had never seen a fisher before.

Fortunately for the porcupine tribe, fishers were very scarce in the valley of the Tobique. But a chill of ancestral fear struck to Quills's heart.

The fisher, catching sight of him, whirled in his tracks and darted at him with a light swiftness and deadly intensity of purpose very different from the hesitating attitude of Quills's other foes. And Quills's tactics were now different. Jutting from the snow, near the trunk of the hemlock, was a heavy windfall, its top supported by the lower branches of a neighbouring beech tree. Under this protection Quills thrust his nose and head, clear to the shoulders, leaving only his armed back and fiercely-slashing tail exposed to the assault. He was no more than in position ere the enemy was upon him.

Now, in nine cases out of ten – perhaps even in ninety-nine out of a hundred – the fight between a porcupine and a fisher has but one result. The fisher eats the porcupine. He is incomparably the stronger. He is, taking it all in all, the most savage, swift, and crafty of all the marauders of the wilderness, and, above all else, for some reason as yet unexplained by the naturalists, the porcupine's quills, so deadly to others, have for him comparatively few terrors. They do not poison or inflame his flesh, which seems to possess the faculty of soon rejecting them and casting them forth again through the skin. All he has to do is to flip the victim over on its back – annexing as few spines as possible in the act – and he has the unprotected throat and belly at the mercy of his fangs.

In the present case, however, the too-confident fisher had an exceptional porcupine to deal with. Quills was not only unusually large and vigorous, but, *for a porcupine*, sagacious. He had settled himself down solidly into the snow, and when the fisher, dodging a blow of his tail, and accepting a sharp dose of spines in the shoulder, tried to turn him over with a twist of the paw, Quills resisted successfully, and, with a timely swing of his haunches, stabbed his assailant's whole flank full of spines.

The fisher had expected some resistance, some more or less futile defence, but this was attack. Always short in temper, he flew into a blind rage at the pain and the surprise of it. He drew back a few inches to gain impetus for the next effort, and this was his mistake – this, and underrating his opponent. At that very instant he got a full, flailing stroke across his face from Quills's tail. It filled his nose and mouth with spines – that was to be expected; but – for the blow had surely been guided by the patron spirit of all the porcupines – it also filled both his eyes.

With a screech of anguish he flung himself full on Quills's back and strove to bite down through the armour of spines. But he was now totally blind, and his jaws were stuck so full of spines as to be practically powerless. Meanwhile his mad struggles were simply driving deeper and deeper into all his tender underparts those terrible four-inch spikes which clothed the back of his intended victim. All at once the agony grew too appalling for even his indomitable spirit. He lurched off and dragged himself away, stumbling and staggering, and bumping into tree trunk and

bush, till he reached a thicket which he felt to be dense enough to hide his defeat. And here death came to him, not too soon.

For some minutes after his defeated foe had gone, Quills remained with his head thrust under the branch, chattering fierce defiance and lashing wildly with his tail. Then very cautiously he backed off and looked about him. He had been roughly mauled. His spines and fur were dishevelled, and he was bleeding from some deep scratches where his assailant's claws had got home. But he was not seriously the worse from his terrible encounter, and he had beaten, fairly and overwhelmingly, the terrible killer of porcupines. His sombre and solitary spirit glowed with triumph. Rather hurriedly he crawled on to his lair, and there set himself to a much-needed toilet. And outside his retreat the first long, level rays of the sunrise crept across the snow, touching the trunks of the birches and the poplars to a mystical rose-pink and saffron.

STRIPES THE UNCONCERNED

On the edge of evening, when the last of the light was gathered in the pale-green upper sky, and all the world of the quiet backwoods clearings was sunken in a soft violet dusk, a leisurely and self-possessed little animal came strolling among the ancient stumps and mossy hillocks of the open upland sheep-pasture. He was about the size of an average cat, but shorter of leg, with a long, sharp-muzzled head, and he carried his broad feathery tail very high in a graceful arch, like a squirrel in good humour. Unlike most other creatures of the wild, his colouring was such as to make him conspicuous rather than to conceal him. He was black, with a white stripe down his face, a white patch on the back of his neck, and a white stripe all the way along each side of his body. And, also unlike the rest of the furtive folk, he seemed quite unconcerned to hide his movements from observation. Neither was he for ever glancing this way and that, as if on the watch for enemies. Rather he had the air of being content that his enemies should do the watching – and avoid him.

The skunk – for such was the undignified appellation of this very dignified personality of the wilderness – was pleasantly engrossed in his own business. That business, at the moment, consisted in catching the big, fat, juicy, copper-brown "June-bugs" as they emerged from their holes in the sod, crawled up the bending grass-stems, and spread their wings for their heavy

evening flight. It was easy hunting, and he had no need of haste. To snap up these great slow and clumsy beetles as they clung upon the grass-stems was as easy as picking strawberries, and, indeed, not altogether dissimilar, as he would nip off the hard, glossy wing-cases of the big beetles as one nips off the hull of the berry before munching the succulent morsel.

Having slept the day through in his snug burrow, in the underbrush which fringed the forest edge of the clearing, he had come forth into the dewy twilight equipped with a fine appetite. He had come with the definite purpose of hunting "June-bugs," this being the season, all too brief, for that highly-favoured delicacy. At first he had thought of nothing else; but when he had taken the edge off his hunger, he began to consider the chances of varying his diet. As he seized an unlucky beetle, close to the edge of a flat, spreading juniper bush, a brooding ground-sparrow flew up, with a startled *cheep*, from under his very nose. He dropped the beetle and made a lightning pounce at the bird. But her wing had flicked him across the eyes, confusingly, and he missed her. He knew well enough, however, what her presence there among the warm grass-tussocks meant. He went nosing eagerly under the juniper bush, and soon found a nest with four little brown-mottled eggs in it. Tiny though they were, they made a tit-bit very much to his taste, all the more so that they were very near hatching. Having licked his jaws and fastidiously polished the fur of his shrewd, keen face, he sauntered off to see what other delicacies the evening might have in store for him.

A little further on, toward the centre of the pasture, he came upon a flat slab of rock, its surface sloping toward the south, its southward edge slightly overhanging and fringed with soft grass. He knew the rock well – knew how its bare surface drank in the summer sun all day long, and held the warmth throughout the dew-chill nights. He knew, too, that other creatures besides himself might very well appreciate this genial warmth. Stealthily, and without the smallest disturbance of the grassy fringe, he sniffed along the overhanging edge of the rock. Suddenly he stiffened, and his sharp snout darted in under the rock. Then he jerked back, with the writhing tail of a snake between his jaws.

The prize was a big black-and-yellow garter snake, not far from three feet long – not venomous, but full of energy and fight. It tried to cling to its hiding-place; but the shrewd skunk, instead of attempting to pull it out straight, like a cork from a bottle-neck, ran forward a pace or two and, as it were, "peeled" it forth. It doubled out, struck him smartly in the face with its harmless fangs, and then coiled itself about his neck and fore-legs. There was a moment of confused rough-and-tumble, but the skunk knew just how to handle this kind of antagonist. Having bitten the reptile's tail clean through, he presently, with the help of his practised little jaws, succeeded in getting hold of it by the back, an inch or two behind the head. This ended the affair, as a struggle, and the victor proceeded to round off his supper on snake. He managed to put away almost all but the head and tail, and then, after a meticulous toilet to fur and paws – for he was

as fastidiously cleanly as a cat – he sauntered back toward his burrow in the underbrush, to refresh himself with a nap before seeking further adventures.

Directly in his path stood three or four young seedling firs, about two feet high, in a dense cluster. Half a dozen paces beyond this tiny thicket a big red fox, belly to earth, was soundlessly stalking some quarry, perhaps a mouse, which could be heard ever so faintly rustling the grass-stems at the edge of the thicket. To the skunk, with his well-filled belly, the sound had no interest. He rounded the thicket and came face to face with the fox.

Neither in size, strength, nor agility was he any match for the savage red beast which stood in his path, and was quite capable, indeed, of dispatching him in two snaps of his long, lean jaws. But he was not in the least put out. Watchful, but cool, he kept straight on, neither delaying nor hastening his leisurely and nonchalant progress. The fox, on the other hand, stopped short. He was hungry. His hunting was interfered with, for that rustling under the fir-branches had stopped. His fine red brush twitched angrily. Nevertheless, he had no stomach to tackle this easy-going little gentleman in the black-and-white stripes. Showing his long white teeth in a vindictive but noiseless snarl, he stepped aside. And the skunk, glancing back with bright eyes of vigilance and understanding, passed on as if the twilight world belonged to him. He knew – and he knew his enemy knew as well – that he carried with him a concealed weapon of such potency that no fox, unless afflicted with madness, would ever willingly run up

against it.

Reaching his burrow in the underbrush without further adventure, he found it empty. His mate and her young ones – now three-quarters grown – were scattered away foraging for themselves over the wide, forest-scented clearings. It was a spacious burrow, dug by a sturdy, surly old wood-chuck, who, though usually as pugnacious as a badger and an obstinate stickier for his rights, had in this case yielded without a fight to the mild-mannered little usurper, and humped off in disgust to hollow a new abode much deeper in the forest, where such a mischance would not be likely to happen to him again. Under the tenancy of the skunk family the burrow was sweet and dry and daintily kept. With a little grumble of content deep in his throat he curled himself up and went to sleep.

When he woke and set forth again to renew his foraging, although he had only slept an hour, his vigorous digestion had quite restored his appetite. He had no more thought for June-bugs. He wanted bigger game, more red-blooded and with some excitement in it. He thought of the farmyard, half a mile away across the clearings, down over the round of the upland. It was weeks now since he had visited it. There might be something worth picking up. There might be a mother-hen with chickens, in a pen which he could find a way into. There might be a hen sitting on her clutch of eggs in a stolen nest under the barn. He had discovered in previous seasons that most sitting hens had their nests provided for them in secure places which he could in no

way manage to come at. But he had also found that sometimes a foolish and secretive – and very young – hen will *hide* her nest in some such out-of-the-way place as under the barn floor, where the troublesome human creatures who preside over the destinies of hens cannot get at it. Here she keeps her precious eggs all to herself till she has enough to cover comfortably, and then she proceeds to the pleasant task of brooding them, and has things all her own way till some night-prowler comes along and convicts her, finally and fatally, of her folly.

A full moon, large and ruddy like a ripe pumpkin, was just rising behind the jagged black tops of the spruce forest. It threw long, fantastic, confusing shadows across the dewy hillocks of the pasture. Hither and thither, in and out and across the barred streaks of light, darted the wild rabbits, gambolling as if half beside themselves, as if smitten with a mid-summer madness by the capricious magic of the night. But if mad, they retained enough sound sense to keep ever at a prudent distance from the leisurely striped wayfarer who appeared so little interested in their sport. Though they were bigger than he, they knew that, if they should venture within reach of his pounce, his indifference would vanish and his inexorable fangs would be in their throats.

Knowing his utter inability to compete with the speed of the rabbits, now they were wide awake, the skunk hardly noticed their antics, but kept on his direct path toward the farmyard. Presently, however, his attention was caught by the rabbits scattering off in every direction. On the instant he was all alert

for the cause. Mounting a hillock, he caught sight of a biggish shaggy-haired dog some distance down the pasture. The dog was racing this way and that as crazily, it seemed, as the rabbits, with faint little yelps of excitement and whines of disappointment. He was chasing the rabbits with all his energy; and it was evident that he was a stranger, a new-comer to the wilderness world, for he seemed to think he might hope to catch the fleet-foot creatures by merely running after them. As a matter of fact, he had just arrived the same day at the backwoods farm from the city down the river. His experience had been confined to streets and gardens and the chasing of cats, and he was daft with delight over the spacious freedom of the clearings. The skunk eyed him scornfully, and continued his journey with the unconcern of an elephant.

A moment later the dog was aware of a little, insignificant black-and-white creature coming slowly towards him as if unconscious of his presence. Another rabbit! But as this one did not seem alarmed, he stopped and eyed it with surprise, his head cocked to one side in inquiry. The skunk half turned and moved off slowly, deliberately, at right angles to the path he had been following.

With a yelp of delight the dog dashed at this easy victim, which seemed so stupid that it made no effort to escape. He was almost upon it. Another leap and he would have had it in his jaws. But the amazing little animal turned its back on him, stuck its tail straight in the air, and jerked up its hindquarters

with a derisive gesture. In that instant something hot and soft struck the inexperienced hunter full in the face – something soft, indeed, but overwhelming, paralysing. It stopped him dead in his tracks. Suffocating, intolerably pungent, it both blinded him and choked him. His lungs refused to work, shutting up spasmodically. Gasping and gagging, he grovelled on his belly and strove frantically to paw his mouth and nostrils clear of the dense, viscous fluid which was clogging them. Failing in this, he fell to rooting violently in the short grass, biting and tearing at it and rolling in it, till some measure of breath and eyesight returned to him. Thereupon, his matted head all stuck with grass and moss and dirt, he set off racing madly for the farmhouse, where he expected to get relief from the strange torment which afflicted him. But when he pawed and whined at the kitchen door for admittance, he was driven off with contumely and broomsticks. There was nothing for him to do but slink away with his shame to a secluded corner between the wagon-shed and the pig-pen, where he could soothe his burning muzzle in the cool winds and fresh earth. On the following day one of the farm hands, with rude hands and unsympathetic comment, scrubbed him violently with liquid soap and then clipped close his splendid shaggy coat. But it was a week before he was readmitted to the comfortable fellowship of the farmhouse kitchen.

For a moment or two, with a glance of triumph in his bright eyes, the skunk had watched the paroxysms of his discomfited foe. Then, dropping the tip of his tail into its customary

disdainful arch, he had turned back towards his burrow. This was a redoubtable foe whom he had just put to rout, and he had expended most of his armoury upon him. He had no wish to risk another encounter until the potent secretion which he carried in a sac between the powerful muscles of his thighs should have had time to accumulate again. He dropped, for that night, all notion of the distinctly adventurous expedition to the farmyard, contenting himself with snapping up a few beetles and crickets as he went. He was lucky enough to pounce upon an indiscreet field-mouse just as she emerged from her burrow, and then a few minutes' digging with his powerful and expert fore-paws had served to unearth the mouse's nest with her half-dozen blind sucklings. So he went home well satisfied with himself. Before re-entering he again made a careful toilet; and as the opening of the sac from which he had projected the potent fluid into his enemy's face had immediately closed up tight and fast, he carried no trace of the virulent odour with him. Indeed, that fluid was a thing which he never by any chance allowed to get on to his own fur. Always, at the moment of ejecting it, the fur on his thighs parted and lay back flat to either side of the naked vent of the sac, and the long tail cocked itself up rigidly, well out of the way. It was a stuff he kept strictly for his foes, and never allowed to offend either himself or his friends.

On entering his burrow he found there his mate and all the youngsters, curled up together in the sleep of good digestion and easy conscience. He curled himself up with them, that the

supply of his high-explosive might accumulate during another forty winks.

About an hour before the dawn he awoke again, feeling hungry. The rest of the family were still sleeping, having gorged themselves, as he might have done had it not been for that encounter with the misguided dog. He left them whimpering contentedly in their cosy slumber, and crept forth into the dewy chill alone, his heart set on mice and such-like warm-blooded game.

The moon was now high overhead, sailing honey-coloured through a faintly violet sky. The rough pasture, with its stumps and hillocks, was touched into a land of dream.

Now, it chanced that an old bear, who was accustomed to foraging in the valley beyond the cedar swamp, had on this night decided to bring her cub on an expedition toward the more dangerous neighbourhood of the clearings. She wanted to begin his education in all the wariness which is so necessary for the creatures of the wild in approaching the works and haunts of man. On reaching the leafy fringe of bushes which fringed the rude rail-fence dividing the forest from the pasture, she cautiously poked her head through the leafage, and for perhaps a minute, motionless as a stone, she interrogated the bright open spaces with eyes and ears and nostrils. The cub, taking the cue from his mother, stiffened to the like movelessness at her side, his bright little eyes full of interest and curiosity. There was no sign of danger in the pasture. In fact, there were the merry rabbits

hopping about in the moonlight undisturbed. This was a sign of security quite good enough for the wise old bear. With crafty and experienced paws she forced a hole in the fence – leaving the top rail, above the binder, in its place – and led the eager cub forth into the moonlight.

The special notion of the bear in coming to the pasture was to teach her cub the art of finding, unearthing, and catching the toothsome wild mice. Keeping along near the fence, she sniffed the tussocky, uneven grass with practised nose. But the first thing she came upon was a bumble-bees' nest. This was far more to her taste than any mice. She gave a low call to the cub; but the cub was preoccupied now, sniffing at the rabbit tracks, and lifting himself on his hindquarters to stare longingly at the rabbits, who were hopping off to discreeter distance. The mother did not insist on his coming to watch her tackle the bees' nest. After all, he was perhaps a bit young to face the stings of the angry bees, and she might as well have the little hoard of honey and larvæ and bee-bread for herself. The cub wandered off a little way, with some vague notion of chasing the elusive rabbits.

Just then through the edge of the underbrush appeared the skunk, stretching himself luxuriously before he started off across the pasture. He saw the bear, but he knew that sagacious beast would pay him no attention whatever. He trotted out into the moonlight and pounced upon a fat black cricket as an appetiser.

The cub caught sight of the pretty little striped creature, and came darting clumsily and gaily to the attack. He would show his

mother that he could do some hunting on his own account. The striped creature turned its back on him and moved off slowly. The cub was delighted. He was just going to reach out a rude little paw and grab the easy prize. Then the inevitable happened. The pretty striped creature gave its stern a contemptuous jerk, and the deluded cub fell in a heap, squealing, gasping, choking, and pawing convulsively at the horrible sticky stuff which filled his mouth and eyes.

Just before the catastrophe occurred, the old bear had looked up from her business with the bees, and had uttered a loud *woof* of warning. But too late. The last thing in the world she wanted to do was to try any fooling with a skunk. But now her rage at the suffering and discomfiture of her little one swept away all prudence. With a grunt of fury she charged at the offender. One glance at the approaching vengeance convinced the skunk that this time he had made a mistake. He turned and raced for the underbrush as fast as his little legs would carry him. But that was not fast enough. Just as he was about to dart under the fence, a huge black paw, shod with claws like steel, crashed down upon him, and his leisurely career came to an end.

The bear, in deep disgust, scraped her reeking paw long and earnestly in the fresh earth beneath the grass, then turned her attention to the unhappy cub. She relieved her feelings by giving him a sharp cuff which sent him sprawling a dozen feet. Then, relenting, she showed him how to clean himself by rooting in the earth. At length, when he could see and breathe once more with

some degree of comfort, she indignantly led him away back into the depths of the consoling forest.

THE BLACK MULE OF AVELUY

The mule lines at Aveluy were restless and unsteady under the tormented dark. All day long a six-inch high-velocity gun, firing at irregular intervals from somewhere on the low ridge beyond the Ancre, had been feeling for them. Those terrible swift shells, which travel so fast, on their flat trajectory, that their bedlam shriek of warning and the rending crash of their explosion seem to come in the same breathless instant, had tested the nerves of man and beast sufficiently during the daylight; but now, in the shifting obscurity of a young moon harrowed by driving cloud-rack, their effect was yet more daunting. So far they had been doing little damage, having been occupied, for the most part, in blowing new craters in the old lines, a couple of hundred yards further east, which had been vacated only two days before on account of their deep-trodden and intolerable mud. All day our 'planes, patrolling the sky over Tara Hill and the lines of Regina, had kept the Boches' airmen at such a distance that they could not observe and register for their batteries; and this terrible gun was, therefore, firing blind. But there came a time, during the long night, when it seemed to reach the conclusion that its target must be pretty well obliterated. Squatting in its veiled lair behind the heights of Ancre, it lifted its raking muzzle, ever so slightly, and put another two hundred yards on to its range.

The next shell screamed down straight upon the lines. The

crash tore earth and air. A massive column of black smoke vomited upwards, pierced with straight flame and streaked with flying fragments of mules and ropes and tether-pegs. Deadly splinters of shell hissed forth from it on all sides. The top of the column spread outwards; the base thinned and lifted; a raw and ghastly crater, like some Dantesque dream of the mouth of Hell, came into view; and there followed a faint, hideous sound of nameless things pattering down upon the mud.

Near the edge of the crater stood a big, raw-boned black mule. His team mate and the three other mules tethered nearest to him had vanished. Several others lay about on either side of him, dead or screaming in their death agonies. But he was untouched. At the appalling shock he had sprung back upon his haunches, snorting madly; but the tethering-rope had held, and he had almost thrown himself. Then he had lashed out with his iron-shod heels. But he was tough of nerve and stout of heart far beyond the fashion of his kind, and almost at once he pulled himself together and stood trembling, straining on the halter, his long ears laid back upon his head. Then his eyes, rolling white, with a green gleam of horror at the centre, took note of the familiar form of his driver, standing by his head and feeling himself curiously, as if puzzled at being still alive.

This sight reassured the black mule amazingly. His expressive ears wagged forward again, and he thrust his frothing muzzle hard against the man's shoulder, as if to ask him what it all meant. The man flung an arm over the beast's quivering neck and leaned

against him for a moment or two, dazed from the tremendous shock which had lifted him from his feet and slammed him down viciously upon the ground. He coughed once or twice, and tried to wipe the reek of the explosion from his eyes. Then, coming fully to himself, he hurriedly untethered his charge, patted him reassuringly on the nose, loosed the next mule behind him on the lines, and led the two away in haste toward safer quarters. As he did so, another shell came in, some fifty yards to the left, and the lines became a bedlam of kicking and snorting beasts, with their drivers, cursing and coaxing, according to their several methods, clawing at the ropes and hurrying to get their charges away to safety.

At any other time the big black mule – an unregenerate product of the Argentine, with a temper which took delight in giving trouble to all in authority over him – might have baulked energetically as a protest against being moved from his place at this irregular hour. But he was endowed with a perception of his own interests, which came rather from the humbler than the more aristocratic side of his ancestry. He was no victim of that childish panic which is so liable, in a moment of desperation, to pervert the high-strung intelligence of the horse. He felt that the man knew just what to do in this dreadful and demoralising situation. So he obeyed and followed like a lamb; and in that moment he conceived an affection for his driver which made him nothing less than a changed mule. His amazing docility had its effect upon the second mule, and the driver got them both

away without any difficulty. When all the rest of the survivors had been successfully shifted to new ground, far off to the right, the terrible gun continued for another hour to blow craters up and down the deserted lines. Then it lengthened its range once more, and spent the rest of the night shattering to powder the ruins of an already ruined and quite deserted street, under the impression that it was smashing up some of our crowded billets. A little before daylight, however, a shell from one of our forward batteries, up behind Regina Trench, found its way into the lair where the monster squatted, and rest descended upon Aveluy in the bleak autumnal dawn.

This was in the rain-scourged autumn of 1916, when the unspeakable desolation of the Somme battlefield was a sea of mud. The ruins of the villages – Owillers, La Boisselle, Pozières, Courcellette, Martinpuich, and all the others which had once made fair with flowers and orchards this rolling plateau of Picardy – had been pounded flat by the inexorable guns, and were now mere islands of firmer ground in the shell-pitted wastes of red mire. Men went encased in mud from boots to shrapnel helmet. And it was a special mud of exasperating tenacity, a cement of beaten chalk and clay. The few spidery tram-lines ran precariously along the edges of the shell-holes, out over the naked, fire-swept undulations beyond Mouquet Farm and Courcellette, where they were continually being knocked to pieces by the "whizz-bangs," and tirelessly rebuilt by our dauntless pioneers and railway troops. Scattered all about this

dreadful naked waste behind our front trenches lurked our forward batteries, their shallow gun-pits cunningly camouflaged behind every little swell of tumbled mud.

And this foul mud, hiding in the deep slime of its shell-holes every kind of trap and putrid horror, was the appropriate ally of the Germans. Stinkingly and tenaciously and treacherously, as befitted, it opposed the feeding of the guns. Two by two or four by four, according to their size, the shells for the guns had to be carried up from the forward dumps in little wicker panniers slung across the backs of horses and mules. It was a slow process, precarious and costly, but it beat the mud, and the insatiable guns were fed.

After the night when the mule-lines at Aveluy were shelled, the big black mule and his driver were put on this job of carrying up shells to the forward batteries. The driver, a gaunt, green-eyed, ginger-haired teamster from the lumber camps of Northern New Brunswick, received the order with a crooked grin.

"Say your prayers now, Sonny," he muttered in the mule's big, waving ear, which came to "attention" promptly to receive his communication. "You'll be wishing you was back in them old lines at Aveluy afore we're through with this job. Fritzy over yonder ain't goin' to like you an' me one little bit when he gits on to what we're up to. It ain't like haulin' fodder, I tell you that. But I guess we've got the nerve all right."

Instead of rolling the whites of his eyes at him, in surly protest against this familiarity, the black mule responded by nibbling

gently at the sleeve of his muddy tunic.

"Geezely Christmas," murmured the driver, astonished at this evidence of goodwill, "but it's queer, how a taste o' shell-fire'll sometimes work a change o' heart, even in an Argentine mule. I only hope it'll last, Sonny. If it does, we're goin' to git along fine, you an' me." And the next time he visited the canteen he brought back a biscuit or two and a slab of sweet chocolate, to confirm the capricious beast in its mended manners.

Early that same afternoon the black mule found himself in new surroundings. He was at the big ammunition dump which lay concealed in an obscure hollow near the ruins of Courcellette. He looked with suspicion on the wicker panniers which were slung across his sturdy back. Saddles he knew, and harness he knew, but this was a contraption which roused misgivings in his conservative soul. When the shells were slipped into the panniers, and he felt the sudden weight, so out of all proportion to the size of the burden, he laid back his long ears with a grunt, and gathered his muscles for a protesting kick. But his driver, standing at his head, stroked his muzzle soothingly and murmured: "There, there, steady, Son! Keep your hair on! It ain't goin' to bite you."

Thus adjured, he composed himself with an effort, and the lashing kick was not delivered.

"What a persuasive cuss you must be, Jimmy Wright!" said the man who was handling the shells. "I wouldn't trust you round with my best girl, If you can get a bucking mule locoed that way

with your soft sawder."

"It ain't me," replied the New Brunswicker. "It's shell-shock, I guess, kind of helped along with chocolate an' biscuits. He got a bit of a shaking up when they shelled the lines at Aveluy night afore last, an' he's been a lamb ever since. Seems to think I saved his hide for him. He was the very devil to handle afore that."

For some way from the dump the journey was uneventful. The path to the guns led along a sunken road, completely hidden from the enemy's observation posts. The dull, persistent rain had ceased for a little, and the broad patches of blue overhead were dotted with our droning aeroplanes, which every now and then would dive into a low-drifting rack of grey cloud to shake off the shrapnel of the German "Archies." Of German 'planes none were to be seen, for they had all sped home to their hangars when our fighting squadrons rose to the encounter. The earth rocked to the explosions of our 9.2 howitzers ranged about Pozières and Martinpuich, and the air clamoured under the passage of their giant shells as they went roaring over toward the German lines. Now and again a vicious whining sound would swell suddenly to a nerve-racking shriek, and an enemy shell would land with a massive cr-r-ump, and a furious blast of smoke and mud would belch upwards to one side or other of the sunken road. But none of these unwelcome visitors came into the road itself, and neither the black mule nor Jimmy Wright paid them any more attention than the merest roll of an eye to mark their billet.

"Change o' heart hain't spoiled old Sonny's nerve, anyhow,"

thought the driver to himself, with deep approval.

A little further on and the trail up to "X's Group," quitting the shelter of the sunken road, led out across the red desolation, in the very eye, as it seemed to the New Brunswicker, of the enemy's positions. It was a narrow, undulating track, slippery as oil, yet tenacious as glue, corkscrewing its laborious way between the old slime-filled shell-pits. From the surface of one of these wells of foul-coloured ooze the legs of a dead horse stuck up stiffly into the air, like four posts on which to lay a foot-bridge. A few yards beyond, the track was cut by a fresh shell-hole, too new to have collected any water. Its raw sides were streaked red and white and black, and just at its rim lay the mangled fragments of something that might recently have been a mule. The long ears of Wright's mule waved backwards and forwards at the sight, and he snorted apprehensively.

"This don't appear to be a health resort for us, Sonny," commented the New Brunswicker, "so we won't linger, if it's all the same to you." And he led the way around the other side of the new shell-hole, the big mule crowding close behind with quivering muzzle at his shoulder.

However urgent Wright's desire for speed, speed was ridiculously impossible. The obstinate pro-German mud was not lightly to be overcome. Even on the firmer ridges it clung far above the fetlocks of the black mule, and struggled to suck off Wright's hob-nailed boots at every labouring step. Though a marrow-piercing north-easter swept the waste, both

man and mule were lathered in sweat. Half their energy had to be expended in recovering themselves from continual slithering slides which threatened to land them in the engulfing horrors of the shell-holes. For all that he had so little breath to spare, Jimmy Wright kept muttering through his teeth strange expletives and objurgations from the vocabulary of the lumber camps, eloquent but unprintable, to which the black mule lent ear admiringly. He seemed to feel that his driver's remarks, though he could not understand them, were doubtless such as would command his fullest accord. For his own part he had no means of expressing such sentiments except through his heels, and these were now all too fully occupied in their battle with the mud.

By this time the black mule had become absolutely convinced that his fate was in the hands of his ginger-haired driver. Jimmy Wright, as it seemed to him, was his sole protection against this violent horror which kept bursting and crashing on every hand about him. It was clear to him that Jimmy Wright, though apparently much annoyed, was not afraid. Therefore, with Jimmy Wright as his protector he was safe. He wagged his ears, snorted contemptuously at a 5.9 which spurted up a column of mud and smoke some hundred yards to the left, and plodded on gamely through the mud. He didn't know where he was going, but Jimmy Wright was there, and just ahead of his nose, where he could sniff at him; and he felt sure there would be fodder and a rub down at the end of the weary road.

In the midst of these consoling reflections something startling

and inexplicable happened. He was enveloped and swept away by a deafening roar. Thick blackness, streaked with star-showers, blinded him. Though half stupefied, he kicked and struggled with all his strength, for it was not in him to yield himself, like a stricken horse, to any stroke of Fate.

When he once more saw daylight, he was recovering his feet just below the rim of an old shell-hole. He gained the top, braced his legs, and shook himself vigorously. The loaded panniers thumping heavily upon his ribs restored him fully to his senses. Snorting through wide red nostrils, he stared about him wildly. Some ten paces distant he saw a great new crater in the mud, reeking with black and orange fumes.

But where was Jimmy Wright? The mule swept anxious eyes across the waste of shell-holes, in every direction. In vain. His master had vanished. He felt himself deserted. Panic began to clutch at his heart, and he gathered his muscles for frantic flight. And then he recovered himself and stood steady. He had caught sight of a ginger-haired head, bare of its shrapnel helmet, lying on the mud at the other side of the shell-hole from which he had just struggled out.

His panic passed at once, but it gave place to anxious wonder. There, indeed, was Jimmy Wright, but what was he doing there? His body was buried almost to the shoulders in the discoloured slime that half filled the shell-hole. He was lying on his face. His arms were outstretched, and his hands were clutching at the slippery walls of the hole as if he were striving to pull himself

up from the water. This effort, however, seemed anything but successful. The mule saw, indeed, that his protector was slowly slipping deeper into the slime. This filled him with fresh alarm. If Jimmy Wright should disappear under that foul surface, that would be desertion complete and final. It was not to be endured.

Quickly but cautiously the mule picked his way around the hole, and then, with sagacious bracing of his hoofs, down to his master's side. But what was to be done next? Jimmy Wright's face was turned so that he could not see his would-be rescuer. His hands were still clutching at the mud, but feebly and without effect.

The mule saw that his master was on the point of vanishing under the mud, of deserting him in his extremity. This was intolerable. The emergency quickened his wits. Instinct suggested to him that to keep a thing one should take hold of it and hold on to it. He reached down with his big yellow teeth, took hold of the shoulder of Jimmy Wright's tunic, and held on. Unfamiliar with anatomy, he at the same time took hold of a substantial portion of Jimmy Wright's own shoulder inside the tunic, and held on to that. He braced himself, and with a loud, involuntary snort began to pull.

Jimmy Wright, up to this point, had been no more than half conscious. The mule's teeth in his shoulder revived him effectually. He came to himself with a yell. He remembered the shell-burst. He saw and understood where he was. He was afraid to move for a moment, lest he should find that his shoulder was

blown off. But no, he had two arms, and he could move them. He had his shoulder all right, for something was pulling at it with quite sickening energy. He reached up his right arm – it was the left shoulder that was being tugged at – and encountered the furry head and ears of his rescuer.

"Sonny!" he shouted. "Well, I'll be d – d!" And he gripped fervently at the mule's neck.

Reassured at the sound of his master's voice, the big mule took his teeth out of Wright's shoulder and began nuzzling solicitously at his sandy head.

"It's all right, old man," said the New Brunswicker, thinking quickly, while with his left hand he secured a grip on the mule's head-stall. Then he strove to raise himself from the slime. The effort produced no result, except to send a wave of blackness across his brain. Wondering sickly if he carried some terrible injury concealed under the mud, he made haste to pass the halter rope under his arms and knot it beneath his chest. Then he shouted for help, twice and again, till his voice trailed off into a whimper and he relapsed into unconsciousness. The mule shifted his feet to gain a more secure foothold on the treacherous slope, and then stood wagging his ears and gazing down on Jimmy in benevolent content. So long as Jimmy was with him, he felt that things were bound to come all right. Jimmy would presently get up and lead him out of the shell-hole, and take him home.

Shell after shell, whining or thundering according to their breed, soared high over the hole, but the black mule only wagged

his ears at them. His eyes were anchored upon the unconscious sandy head of Jimmy Wright. Suddenly, however, a sharp voice made him look up. He saw a couple of stretcher-bearers standing on the edge of the shell-hole, looking down sympathetically upon him and his charge. In a second or two they were beside him, skilfully and tenderly extricating Jimmy's body from the mud.

"He ain't gone west this time," pronounced one, who had thrust an understanding hand into the breast of the tunic.

Jimmy Wright opened his eyes wide suddenly.

"Not by a d – d sight I ain't, Bill!" he muttered, rather thickly. Then, his wits and his voice coming clearer, he added: "But if I ain't, it's thanks to this here old – of an Argentine mule, that come down into this hole and yanked me out o' the mud, and saved me. Eh, Sonny?"

The big mule was crowding up so close to him as to somewhat incommode the two men in their task on that treacherous incline. But they warded off his inconvenient attentions very gently.

"He's some mule, all right," grunted one of the bearers, as they got Jimmy on to the stretcher and laboriously climbed from the shell-hole.

STAR-NOSE OF THE UNDER WAYS

He was in a darkness that was dense, absolute, palpable. And his eyes were shut tight, – though it made no difference, under the circumstances, whether they were shut or open. But if his sense of sight was for the moment off duty, its absence was more than compensated for by the extreme alertness of his other senses. To his supersensitive nostrils the black, peaty soil surrounding him was full of distinct and varying scents. His ears could detect and locate the wriggling of a fat grub, the unctuous withdrawal of a startled earth-worm. Above all, his sense of touch was so extraordinarily developed that it might have served him for eyes, ears and nostrils all in one. And so it came about that, there in the blackness of his close and narrow tunnel, deep in the black soil of the swamp, he was not imprisoned, but free and at large as the swift hares gambolling overhead, – far freer, indeed, because secure from the menace of prowling and swooping foes.

Star-nose was a mole. But he was not an ordinary mole of the dry uplands and well drained meadows, by any means, or he would not have been running his deep tunnel here in the cool, almost swampy soil within a few yards of the meandering channel of the Lost-Water. In shape and colour he was not unlike the common mole, – with his thick, powerful neck of about the same size as his body, his great, long-clawed, immensely strong, hand-like fore-feet, and his mellow, velvety, shadowy,

grey-brown fur. But his tail was much longer, and thicker at the base, than that of his plebeian cousin of the lawns. And his nose, – that was something of a distinction which no other beast in the world, great or small, could boast of. From all around its tip radiated a fringe of feelers, no less than twenty-two in number, naked, flexible, miraculously sensitive, each one a little nailless, interrogating finger. It entitled him, beyond question, to the unique title of Star-Nose.

This tireless worker in the dark was driving a new tunnel, – partly, no doubt, for the sake of worms, grubs, and pupæ which he might find on the way, and partly for purposes known only to himself. At the level where he was digging, a scant foot below the surface, the mould, though damp, was fairly light and workable, owing to the abundance of fine roots and decayed leafage mixed through it; and his progress was astonishingly rapid.

His method of driving his tunnel was practical and effective. With back arched so as to throw the full force of it into his fore-shoulders, with his hind feet wide apart and drawn well up beneath him, he dug mightily into the damp soil straight before his nose with the long, penetrating claws of his exaggerated and powerful fore-paws. In great swift handfuls (for his fore-paws were more like hands than feet), the loosened earth was thrown behind him, passing under his body and out between his roomily straddling hind legs. And as he dug he worked in a circle, enlarging the tunnel head to a diameter of about two-and-a-half inches, at the same time pressing the walls firm and hard with his

body, so that they should not cave in upon him. This compacting process further enlarged the tunnel to about three inches, which was the space he felt he needed for quick and free movement. When he had accumulated behind him as much loose earth as he could comfortably handle, he turned around, and with his head and chest and forearms pushed the mass before him along the tunnel to the foot of his last dump-hole, – an abrupt shaft leading to the upper air. Up this shaft he would thrust his burden, and heave it forth among the grass and weeds, a conspicuous and contemptuous challenge to would-be pursuers. He did not care how many of his enemies might thus be notified of his address, for he knew he could always change it with baffling celerity, blocking up his tunnels behind him as he went.

And now, finding that at his present depth the meadow soil, at this point, was not well-stocked with such game – grubs and worms – as he chose to hunt, he slanted his tunnel slightly upward to get among the grass-roots near the surface. Almost immediately he was rewarded. He cut into the pipe-like canal of a large earth-worm, just in time to intercept its desperate retreat. It was one of those stout, dark-purplish lob-worms that feed in rich soil, and to him the most toothsome of morsels. In spite of the eagerness of his appetite he drew it forth most delicately and gradually from its canal, lest it should break in two and the half of it escape him. Dragging it back into his tunnel he held it with his big, inexorable "hands," and felt it over gleefully with that restless star of fingers which adorned the tip of his nose.

Then he tore it into short pieces, bolted it hurriedly, and fell to work again upon his tunnelling. But now, having come among the grass-roots, he was in a good hunting-ground, and his work was continually interrupted by feasting. At one moment it would be a huge, fat, white grub as thick as a man's little finger, with a hard, light-copper-coloured head; at the next a heavy, liver-coloured lob-worm. His appetite seemed insatiable; but at last he felt he had had enough, for the moment. He stopped tunnelling, turned back a few inches, drove a short shaft to the surface as a new exit, and heaved forth a mighty load of débris.

In the outer world it was high morning, and the strong sunlight glowed softly down through the tangled grasses of the water-meadow. The eyes of Star-Nose were but two tiny black beads almost hidden in fur, but after he had blinked them for a second or two in the sudden light he could see quite effectively, – much better, indeed, than his cousin, the common mole of the uplands. Though by far the greater part of his strenuous life was spent in the palpable darkness of his tunnels in the under world, daylight, none the less, was by no means distasteful to him, and he was not averse to a few minutes of basking in the tempered sun. As he sat stroking his fine fur with those restless fingers of his nose, and scratching himself luxuriously with his capable claws, a big grasshopper, dropping from one of its aimless leaps, fell close beside him, bearing down with it a long blade of grass which it had clutched at in its descent. Star-Nose seized the unlucky hopper in a flash, tore off its hard inedible legs,

and started to eat it. At that instant, however, a faint swish of wings caught his ear and a swift shadow passed over him. At the touch of that shadow, – as if it had been solid and released an oiled spring within his mechanism, – he dived back into his hole; and the swooping marsh-hawk, after a savage but futile clutch at the vanishing tip of his tail, wheeled off with a yelp of disappointment.

It was certainly a narrow shave; and for perhaps a whole half-minute Star-Nose, with his heart thumping, crouched in his refuge. Then, remembering the toothsome prize which he had been forced to abandon, he put forth his head warily to reconnoitre. The hawk was gone; but the dead grasshopper was still there, green and glistening in the sun, and a burly blue-bottle had just alighted upon it. Star-Nose crept forth cautiously to retrieve his prey.

Now at this same moment, as luck would have it, gliding along one of the tiny run-ways of the meadow-mice, came a foraging mole-shrew, a pugnacious cousin of the Star-Nose tribe. The mole-shrew was distinctly smaller than Star-Nose, and handicapped with such defective vision that he had to do all his hunting by scent and sound and touch. He smelt the dead grasshopper at once, and came straight for it, heedless of whatever might stand in the way.

Under the circumstances Star-Nose might have carelessly stood aside, not through lack of courage, but because he had no special love of fighting for its own sake. And he knew that

his cousin, though so much smaller and lighter than himself, was much to be respected as an opponent by reason of his blind ferocity and dauntless tenacity. But he was no weakling, to let himself be robbed of his lawful prey. He whipped out of his hole, flung himself upon the prize, and lifted his head just in time to receive the furious spring of his assailant.

Between two such fighters there was no fencing. The mole-shrew secured a grip upon the side of the immensely thick and muscular neck of his antagonist, and immediately began to worry and tear like a terrier. But Star-Nose, flexible as an eel, set his deadly teeth into the side of his assailant's head, a little behind the ear, and worked in deeper and deeper, after the manner of a bulldog. For a few seconds, in that death-grapple, the two rolled over and over, thrashing the grass-stems. Then the long teeth of Star-Nose bit into the brain; and the mole-shrew's body, after a convulsive stiffening, went suddenly limp.

But the disturbance in the grass – there being no wind that golden morning – had not escaped the eyes of the foraging marsh-hawk. She came winnowing back to learn the cause of it. The sun being behind her, however, her ominous shadow swept over the grass before her, – and Star-Nose, unfailingly vigilant even in the moment of victory, caught sight of it coming. He loosed his hold on his dead adversary and plunged for the hole. At least he tried to plunge for it. But the plunge was little more than a crawl; for the teeth of the mole-shrew, set deep in his neck, had locked themselves fast in death, and all that Star-Nose could

do was to drag the body with him. This, however, he succeeded in doing, so effectively that he was in time to back down into the hole, out of reach, just as the hawk swooped and struck.

The clutching talons of the great bird fixed themselves firmly in the protruding hind-quarters of the mole-shrew, and she attempted to rise with her capture. But to her amazed indignation the prize resisted. Star-Nose was holding on to the walls of his tunnel with all the strength of his powerful claws, while at the same time struggling desperately to tear himself loose from the grip of those dead teeth in his neck. The contest, however, was but momentary. The strength of Star-Nose was a small thing against the furious beating of those great wings; and in two or three seconds, unable either to hold on or to free himself from the fatal incubus of his victim, he was dragged forth ignominiously and swept into the air, squirming and dangling at the tip of the dead mole-shrew's snout.

Star-Nose was vaguely conscious of a chill rush of air, of a sudden dazzling glare of gold and blue, as the victorious hawk flapped off towards the nearest tree-top with her prize. Then, suddenly, the grip of the dead jaws relaxed and he felt himself falling. Fortunately for him the hawk had not risen to any great height, – for the marsh-hawk, hunter of meadow-mice, and such secretive quarry, does not, as a rule, fly high. He felt himself turn over and over in the air, dizzily, and then he landed, with a stupefying swish, in a dense bed of wild parsnips. He crashed right through, of course, but the strong stems broke his fall and

he was little the worse for the stupendous adventure. For a few moments he lay half stunned. Then, pulling himself together, he fell to digging with all his might, caring only to escape from a glaring outer world which seemed so full of tumultuous and altogether bewildering perils. He made the earth fly in a shower, and in an unbelievably brief space of time he had buried himself till even the tip of his tail was out of sight. But even then he was not content. He dug on frantically, till he was a good foot beneath the surface and perhaps a couple of feet more from the entrance. Then, leaving the passage safely blocked behind him, he enlarged the tunnel to a large chamber, and curled himself up to lick his wounds and recover from his fright.

It was perhaps half an hour before Star-Nose completely regained his composure and his appetite. His appetite – that was the first consideration. And second to that, a poor second, was his need of tunnelling back into his familiar maze of underground passages. Resuming his digging with full vigour, he first ran a new shaft to the surface, gathering in several fat grubs in his progress through the grass-roots. Then, at about six inches below the surface – a depth at which he could count upon the best foraging – he began to drive his tunnel. His sense of direction was unerring; which was the more inexplicable as there in the thick dark he could have no landmarks to guide him. He headed straight for the point which would, by the shortest distance, join him up with his own under-ways.

It happened, however, that in that terrible journey of his

through the upper air the swift flight of the hawk had carried him some distance, and across the course of a sluggish meadow brook, a tributary of the Lost-Water. Suddenly and unexpectedly his vigorous tunnelling brought him to this obstacle. The darkness before him gave way to a glimmer of light. He hesitated, and then burrowed on more cautiously. A screen of matted grass-roots confronted him, stabbed through with needles of sharp gold which quivered dazzlingly. Warily he dug through the screen, thrust forth his nose, and found himself looking down upon a shimmering glare of quiet water, about a foot below him.

Glancing upwards to see if there were any terrible wings in the air above, Star-Nose perceived, to his deep satisfaction, that the steep bank was overhung by a mat of pink-blossomed wild roses, humming drowsily with bees. The concealment, from directly overhead, was perfect. Reassured upon this point, he crawled forth, intending to swim the bright channel and continue his tunnel upon the other side. The water itself was no obstacle to him, for he could swim and dive like a musk-rat. He was just about to plunge in, when under his very nose popped up a black, triangular, furry head with fiercely bright, hard eyes and lips curled back hungrily from long and keen white fangs. With amazing dexterity he doubled back upon himself straight up the slope, and dived into his burrow; and the mink, springing after him, was just in time to snap vainly at the vanishing tip of his tail.

The mink was both hungry and bad-tempered, having just missed a fish which he was hunting amid the tangle of water-

weeds along the muddy bottom of the stream. Angrily he jammed his sharp snout into the mouth of the tunnel, but the passage was much too small for him, and Star-Nose was well out of reach. He himself could dig a burrow when put to it, but he knew that in this art he was no match for the expert little fugitive. Moreover, keen though his appetite was, he was not over-anxious to allay it with the rank and stringy flesh of the Underground One. He shook his head with a sniff and a snarl, brushed the earth from his muzzle, and slipped off swiftly and soundlessly to seek more succulent prey.

It was ten or fifteen minutes before Star-Nose again ventured forth into the perilous daylight. His last adventure had not in the least upset him, – for to his way of thinking a miss was as good as a mile. But he was hungry, as usual, and he had found good hunting in the warm, light soil just under the roots of the wild rose bushes along the bank. At length his desires once more turned towards the home tunnels. He poked his starry nose out through the hole in the bank, made sure that there were no enemies in sight, slipped down to the water's edge, and glided in as noiselessly as if he had been oiled. He had no mind to make a splash, lest he should advertise his movements to some voracious pike which might be lurking beneath that green patch of water-lily leaves a little further up stream.

Deep below the shining surface he swam, straight and strong through a world of shimmering and pellucid gold, roofed by a close, flat, white sky of diaphanous silver, upon which

every fallen rose-petal or drowning fly or moth was shown with amazing clearness. As he reached the opposite shore and clambered nimbly up through that flat silver sky, he glanced back and saw a long grey shadow, with terrible jaws and staring round eyes, dart past the spot from which he had just emerged. The great pike beneath the lily-pads had caught sight of him, after all, – but too late! Star-Nose shook himself, and sat basking for a few moments in the comfortable warmth, complacently combing his face with his nimble fore-paws. He had an easy contempt for the pike, because it could not leave the water to pursue him.

Some fifty yards away, on the side of the brook from which Star-Nose had just come, beside a tiny pool in the deeps of the grass stood an immense bird of a pale bluish-grey colour, motionless as a stone, on the watch for unwary frogs. The rich grasses were about two feet in height, and the blue heron towered another clear two feet above them. He was all length, – long, stilt-like legs, long, snake-like neck, long, dagger-like bill, and a firm, arrogant crest of long, slim, delicate plumes. All about him spread the warm and sun-steeped sea of the meadow-grass, – starred thick with blooms of purple vetch and crimson clover, and sultry orange lilies, – droning sleepily with bees and flies, – steaming with summer scents, and liquidly musical with the songs of the fluttering, black-and-white bobolinks, like tangled

peals of tiny silver bells. But nothing of this intoxicating beauty did the great heron heed. Rigid and decorative as if he had just stepped down from a Japanese screen, his fierce, unwinking, jewel-bright eyes were intent upon the pool at his feet. His whole statuesque being was concentrated upon the subject of frogs.

But the frogs in that particular pool had taken warning. Not one would show himself, so long as that inexorable blue shape of death remained in sight. Nor did a single meadow-mouse stir amid the grass-roots for yards about the pool, for word of the watching doom had gone abroad. And presently the great heron, grown tired of such poor hunting, lifted his broad wings, sprang lazily into the air, and went flapping away slowly over the grass-tops, trailing his long legs stiffly behind him. He headed for the other side of the brook, and fresh hunting-grounds.

At the first lift of those great pale wings Star-Nose had detected this new and appalling peril. By good luck he was sitting on a patch of bare earth, where the overhanging turf had given way some days before. Frantically he began to dig himself in. The soft earth flew from under his desperate paws. The piercing eyes of the heron detected the curious disturbance, and he winged swiftly to the spot.

But Star-Nose, in his vigilance, had gained a good start. In about as much time as it takes to tell it, he was already buried to his own length. And then, to his terror, he came plump upon an impenetrable obstacle – an old mooring stake driven deep into the soil. In a sweat of panic he swerved off to the left and

tunnelled madly almost at right angles to the entrance.

And just this it was – a part of his wonderful luck on this eventful day – that turned to his salvation. Dropping swiftly to the entrance of the all-too-shallow tunnel, the great heron, his head bent sideways, peered into the hole with one implacable eye. Then drawing back his neck till it was like a coiled spring, he darted his murderous bill deep into the hole.

Had it not been for the old mooring stake, which compelled him to change direction, Star-Nose would have been neatly impaled, plucked forth, hammered to death, and devoured. As it was, the dreadful weapon merely grazed the top of his rump – scoring, indeed, a crimson gash – and struck with a terrifying thud upon the hard wood of the stake. The impact gave the heron a nasty jar. He drew his head back abruptly, and shook it hard in his indignant surprise. Then, trying to look as if nothing unusual had happened, he stepped down into the water with lofty deliberation and composed himself to watch for fish. At this moment the big pike came swimming past again, hoping for another chance at the elusive Star-Nose. He was much too heavy a fish for the heron to manage, of course; but the heron, in his wrath, stabbed down upon him vindictively. There was a moment's struggle which made the quiet water boil. Then the frightened fish tore himself free and darted off, with a great red wound in his silver-grey side, to hide and sulk under the lily pads.

In the meantime Star-Nose, though smarting from that raw but superficial gash upon his hind-quarters, was burrowing away

with concentrated zeal. He had once more changed direction, and was heading, as true as if by compass, for the nearest point of the home-galleries. He was not even taking time to drive dumpshafts at the customary intervals, but was letting the tunnel fill up behind him, as if sure that he was going to have no further use for it. He just wanted to get home. Of course he might have travelled much faster above ground; but the too-exciting events of the past few hours had convinced him that, for this particular day at least, the upper world of sun and air was not exactly a health-resort for a dweller in the under-ways. Through all his excitement, however, and all his eagerness for the safe home burrows, his unquenchable appetite remained with him; and, running his tunnel as close to the surface as he could without actually emerging, he picked up plenty of worms and grubs and fat, helpless pupæ as he went.

It was past noon, and the strong sunshine, beating straight down through the grass and soaking through the matted roots, was making a close but sweet and earthy-scented warmth in the tunnel, when at last Star-Nose broke through into one of his familiar passages, well-trodden by the feet of his tribe. Not by sight, of course, – for the darkness was black as pitch, – but by the comfortable smell he knew exactly where he was. Without hesitation he turned to the left, and scurried along, as fast as he could, for the big central burrow, or lodge, where his tribe had their headquarters and their nests. The path forked and re-forked continually, but he was never for one instant at a loss. Here and there he passed little short side-galleries ending in shallow

pockets, which served for the sanitation of the tribe. Here and there a ray of green-and-gold light flashed down upon him, as he ran past one of the exit-shafts. And then, his heart beating with his haste and his joy, he came forth into a roomy, lightless chamber, thick with warmth and musky smells, and filled with the pleasant rustlings and small contented squealings of his own gregarious tribe.

KROOF, THE SHE-BEAR

[The next two stories are taken from *The Heart of the Ancient Wood*, which tells how Kirstie Craig and her little daughter Miranda left the Settlement to live by themselves in a cabin on the edge of an old wood.]

Spring came early to the clearing that year. Kirstie's autumn furrows, dark and steaming, began to show in patches through the diminished snow. The chips before the house and the litter about the barn, drawing the sun strongly, were first of all uncovered; and over them, as to the conquest of new worlds, the haughty cock led forth his dames to scratch. "Saunders," Miranda had called him, in remembrance of a strutting beau at the Settlement; and with the advent of April cheer, and an increasing abundance of eggs, and an ever resounding cackle from his complacent partlets, his conceit became insufferable. One morning, when something she did offended his dignity, he had the presumption to face her with beak advanced and wide-ruffled neck feathers. But Saunders did not know Miranda. Quick as a flash of light she seized him by the legs, whirled him around her head, and flung him headlong, squawking with fear and shame, upon his own dunghill. It took him a good hour to recover his self-esteem, but after that Miranda stood out in his eyes as the one creature in the world to be respected.

When the clearing was quite bare, except along the edges

of the forest, and Kirstie was again at work on her fencing, the black-and-white cow gave birth to a black-and-white calf, which Miranda at once claimed as her own property. It was a very wobbly knock-kneed little heifer; but Miranda admired it immensely, and with lofty disregard of its sex, christened it Michael.

About this time the snow shrank away from her hollow under the pine root, and Kroof came forth to sun herself. She had lived all winter on nothing but the fat stored up in the spaces of her capacious frame. Nevertheless she was not famished – she had still a reserve to come and go on, till food should be abundant. A few days after waking up she bore a cub. It was the custom of her kind to bear two cubs at a birth; but Kroof, besides being by long odds the biggest she-bear ever known in that region, had a pronounced individuality of her own, and was just as well satisfied with herself over one cub as over two.

The hollow under the pine root was warm and softly lined – a condition quite indispensable to the new-comer, which was about as unlike a bear as any baby creature of its size could well manage to be. It was blind, helpless, whimpering, more shapeless and clumsy-looking than the clumsiest conceivable pup, and almost naked. Its tender, hairless hide looked a poor thing to confront the world with; but its appetite was astounding, and Kroof's milk inexhaustible. In a few days a soft dark fur began to appear. As the mother sat, hour by hour, watching it and suckling it, half erect upon her haunches, her fore-legs braced wide apart, her

head stretched as far down as possible, her narrow red tongue hanging out to one side, her eyes half closed in rapture, it seemed to grow visibly beneath her absorbing gaze. Before four weeks had passed, the cub was covered with a jet-black coat, soft and glossy. This being the case, he thought it time to open his eyes and look about.

He was now about the size of a small cat, but of a much heavier build. His head, at this age, was shorter for its breadth than his mother's; the ears much larger, fan-like and conspicuous. His eyes, very softly vague at first, soon acquired a humorous, mischievous expression, which went aptly with the erect, inquisitive ears. Altogether he was a fine baby – a fair justification of Kroof's pride.

The spring being now fairly forward, and pale, whitish-green shoots upthrusting themselves numerous through the dead leaves, and the big crimson leaf-buds of the skunk-cabbage vividly punctuating the sombreness of the swamp, Kroof led her infant forth to view their world. He had no such severe and continued education to undergo as that which falls to the lot of other youngsters among the folk of the ancient wood. For those others the first lesson, the hardest and the most tremendous in its necessity, was how to avoid their enemies. With this lesson ill-learned, all other found brief term; for the noiseless drama, in which all the folk of the forest had their parts, moved ever, through few scenes or through many, to a tragic close. But the bear, being for the most part dominant, had his

immunities. Even the panther, swift and fierce and masterful, never deliberately sought quarrel with the bear, being mindful of his disastrous clutch and the lightning sweep of his paw. The bear-cub, therefore, going with its mother till almost full grown, gave no thought at all to enemies; and the cub with such a giantess as Kroof for its mother might safely make a mock even at panthers. Kroof's cub had thus but simple things to learn, following close at his mother's flank. During the first blind weeks of his cubhood he had, indeed, to acquire the prime virtue of silence, which was not easy, for he loved to whimper and grumble in a comfortable little fashion of his own. This was all right while Kroof was at home; but when she was out foraging, then silence was the thing. This he learned, partly from Kroof's admonitions, partly from a deep-seated instinct; and whenever he was left alone, he held his tongue. There was always the possibility, slight but unpleasant, of a fox or a brown cat noting Kroof's absence, and seizing the chance to savour a delicate morsel of sucking bear.

Wandering the silent woods with Kroof, the cub would sniff carefully at the moist earth and budding shoots wheresoever his mother stopped to dig. He thus learned where to find the starchy roots which form so large a part of the bear's food in spring. He found out the important difference between the sweet ground-nuts and the fiery bitter bulb of the arum, or Indian turnip; and he learned to go over the grassy meadows by the lake and dig unerringly for the wild bean's nourishing tubers. He discovered,

also, what old stumps to tear apart when he wanted a pleasantly acid tonic dose of the larvæ of the wood-ant. Among these serious occupations he would gambol between his mother's feet, or caper hilariously on his hind legs. Soon he would have been taught to detect a bee tree, and to rob it of its delectable stores without getting his eyes stung out; but just then the mysterious forest fates dropped the curtain on his merry little play, as a reminder that not even for the great black bear could the rule of doom be relaxed.

Kroof's wanderings with the cub were in the neighbourhood of the clearing, where both were sometimes seen by Miranda. The sight of the cub so overjoyed her that she departed from her usual reticence as to the forest-folk, and told her mother about the lovely, glossy little dog that the nice, great dog took about with her. The only result was that Kirstie gave her a sharp warning.

"Dog!" she exclaimed severely; "didn't I tell you Miranda, it was a bear? Bears are mostly harmless, if you leave them alone; but an old bear with a cub is mighty ugly. Mind what I say now, you keep by me and don't go too nigh the edge of the woods."

And so, for the next few weeks, Miranda was watched very strictly, lest her childish daring should involve her with the bears.

Along in the summer Kroof began to lead the cub wider afield. The longer journeys vexed the little animal at first, and tired him; so that sometimes he would throw himself down on his back, with pinky-white soles of protest in the air, and refuse to go a step farther. But in spite of the appeal of his quizzical little black

snout, big ears, and twinkling eyes, old Kroof would box him sternly till he was glad enough to jump up and renew the march. With the exercise he got a little leaner, but much harder, and soon came to delight in the widest wandering. Nothing could tire him, and at the end of the journey he would chase rabbits, or weasels, or other elusive creatures, till convicted of futility by his mother's sarcastic comments.

These wide wanderings were, indeed, the making of him, so that he promised to rival Kroof herself in prowess and stature; but alas! poor cub, they were also his undoing. Had he stayed at home – but even that might have little availed, for among the folk of the wood it is right at home that fate most surely strikes.

One day they two were exploring far over in the next valley – the valley of the Quah-Davic, a tract little familiar to Kroof herself. At the noon hour Kroof lay down in a little hollow of coolness beside a spring that *drip-drop, drip-drop, drip-dropped* from the face of a green rock. The cub, however, went untiringly exploring the thickets for fifty yards about, out of sight, indeed, but scrupulously never out of ear-shot.

Near one of these thickets his nostrils caught a new and enthralling savour. He had never, in his brief life, smelled anything at all like it, but an unerring instinct told him it was the smell of something very good to eat. Pushing through the leafage he came upon the source of the fragrance. Under a slanting structure of logs he found a piece of flesh, yellowish-white, streaked thickly with dark reddish-brown, – and, oh, so sweet

smelling! It was stuck temptingly on a forked point of wood. His ears stood up very wide and high in his eagerness. His sensitive nostrils wrinkled as he sniffed at the tempting find. He decided that he would just taste it, and then go fetch his mother. But it was a little high up for him. He rose, set his small white teeth into it, clutched at it with his soft forepaws, and flung his whole weight upon it to pull it down.

Kroof, dozing in her hollow of coolness, heard a small agonised screech, cut short horribly. On the instant her great body went tearing in a panic through the under-brush. She found the poor cub crushed flat under the huge timbers of "a dead-fall," his glossy head and one paw sticking out piteously, his little red tongue protruding from his distorted mouth.

Kroof needed no second look to know in her heart he was dead, stone dead; but in the rage of her grief she would not acknowledge it. She tore madly at the great timber, – so huge a thing to set to crush so small a life, – and so astonishing was the strength of her claws and her vast forearms that in the course of half an hour she had the trap fairly demolished. Softly she removed the crushed and shapeless body, licking the mouth, the nostrils, the pitifully staring eyes; snuggling it lightly as a breath, and moaning over it. She would lift the head a little with her paw, and redouble her caresses as it fell limply aside. Then it grew cold. This was testimony she could not pretend to ignore. She ceased the caresses which proved so vain to keep warmth in the little body she loved. With her snout held high in air she

turned around slowly twice, as if in an appeal to some power not clearly apprehended; then, without another glance at her dead, she rushed off madly through the forest.

All night she wandered aimlessly, hither and thither through the low Quah-Davic valley, over the lower slopes of the mountain, through tracts where she had never been, but of which she took no note; and toward noon of the following day she found herself once more in the ancient wood, not far from the clearing. She avoided widely the old den under the pine root, and at last threw herself down, worn out and with unsuckled teats fiercely aching, behind the trunk of a fallen hemlock.

She slept heavily for an hour or two. Then she was awakened by the crying of a child. She knew it at once for Miranda's voice; and being in some way stirred by it, in spite of the preoccupation of her pain, she got up and moved noiselessly toward the sound.

THE INITIATION OF MIRANDA

That same day, just after noon-meat, when Miranda had gone out with the scraps in a yellow bowl to feed the hens, Kirstie had been taken with what the people at the Settlement would have called "a turn." All the morning she had felt unusually oppressed by the heat, but had thought little of it. Now, as she was wiping the dishes, she quite unaccountably dropped one of them on the floor. The crash aroused her. She saw with a pang that it was Miranda's little plate of many colours. Then things turned black about her. She just managed to reel across to the bunk, and straightway fell upon it in a kind of faint. From this state she passed into a heavy sleep, which lasted for several hours, and probably saved her from some violent sickness.

When Miranda had fed the hens she did not go straight back to her mother. Instead, she wandered off toward the edge of the dark fir-wood, where it came down close behind the cabin. The broad light of the open fields, now green with buckwheat, threw a living illumination far in among the cool arcades.

Between the straight grey trunks Miranda's clear eyes saw something move.

She liked it very much indeed. It looked to her extremely like a cat, only larger than any cat she had seen at the Settlement, taller on its legs, and with a queer thick stump of a tail. In fact, it was a cat, the brown cat, or lesser lynx. Its coat was a red brown, finely

mottled with a paler shade. It had straight brushes of bristles on the tips of its ears, like its big cousin, the Canada lynx, only much less conspicuous than his; and the expression on the moonlike round of its face was both fierce and shy. But it was a cat, plainly enough; and Miranda's heart went out to it, as it sat up there in the shadows, watching her steadily with wide pale eyes.

"Oh, pretty pussy! pretty pussy!" called Miranda, stretching out her hands to it coaxingly, and running into the wood.

The brown cat waited unwinking till she was about ten paces off, then turned and darted deeper into the shadows. When it was all but out of sight it stopped, turned again, and sat up to watch the eager child. It seemed curious as to the bit of scarlet at her neck. Miranda was now absorbed in the pursuit, and sanguine of catching the beautiful pussy. This time she was suffered to come almost within grasping distance, before the animal again wheeled with an angry *pfuff* and darted away. Disappointed, but not discouraged, Miranda followed again; and the little play was repeated, with slight variation, till her great eyes were full of blinding tears, and she was ready to drop with weariness. Then the malicious cat, tired of the game and no longer curious about the ribbon, vanished altogether; and Miranda sat down to cry.

But she was not a child to make much fuss over a small disappointment. In a very few minutes she jumped up, dried her eyes with the backs of her tiny fists, and started, as she thought, for home. At first she ran, thinking her mother might be troubled at her absence. But not coming to the open as soon as

she expected, she stopped, looked about her very carefully, and then walked forward with continual circumspection. She walked on, and on, till she knew she had gone far enough to reach home five times over. Her feet faltered, and then she stood quite still, helplessly. She knew that she was lost. All at once the ancient wood, the wood she had longed for, the wood whose darkness she had never feared, became lonely, menacing, terrible. She broke into loud wailing.

This is what Kroof had heard and was coming to investigate. But other ears heard it, too.

A tawny form, many times larger than the perfidious brown cat, but not altogether unlike it in shape, crept stealthily toward the sound. Though his limbs looked heavy, his paws large in comparison with his lank body and small, flat, cruel head, his movements nevertheless were noiseless as light. At each low-stooping, sinuous step, his tail twitched nervously. When he caught sight of the crying child he stopped, and then crept up more stealthily than before, crouching so low that his belly almost touched the ground, his neck stretched out in line with his tail.

He made absolutely no sound, yet something within Miranda's sensitive brain heard him, before he was quite within springing distance. She stopped her crying, glanced suddenly around, and fixed a darkly clear look upon his glaring green eyes. Poor little frightened and lonely child though she was, there was yet something subtly disturbing to the beast in that steady gaze of hers. It was the empty gloom, the state of being lost, which had

made Miranda's fear. Of an animal, however fierce, she had no instinctive terror; and now, though she knew that the cruel-eyed beast before her was the panther, it was a sort of indignant curiosity that was uppermost in her mind.

The beast shifted his eyes uneasily under her unwavering look. He experienced a moment's indecision as to whether or not it was well, after all, to meddle with this unterrified, clear-gazing creature. Then an anger grew within him. He fixed his hypnotising stare more resolutely, and lashed his tail with angry jerks. He was working himself up to the final and fatal spring, while Miranda watched him.

Just then a strange thing happened. Out from behind a boulder, whence she had been eyeing the situation, shambled the huge black form of Kroof. She was at Miranda's side in an instant; and rising upon her hind quarters, a towering, indomitable bulk, she squealed defiance to the panther. As soon as Miranda saw her "great big dog," – which she knew quite well, however, to be a bear, – she seemed to realise how frightened she had been of the panther; and she recognised that strong defence had come. With a convulsive sob she sprang and hid her tear-stained little face in the bear's shaggy flank, clutching at the soft fur with both hands. To this impetuous embrace Kroof paid no attention, but continued to glower menacingly at the panther.

As for the panther, he was unaffectedly astonished. He lost his stealthy, crouching, concentrated attitude, and rose to his full height; lifted his head, dropped his tail, and stared at the

phenomenon. If this child was a protégée of Kroof's, he wanted none of her; for it would be a day of famine indeed when he would wish to force conclusions with the giant she-bear. Moreover, he recognised some sort of power and prerogative in Miranda herself, some right of sovereignty, as it were, which had made it distinctly hard for him to attack her even while she had no other defence than her disconcerting gaze. Now, however, he saw clearly that there was something very mysterious indeed about her. He decided that it would be well to have an understanding with his mate – who was more savage though less powerful than himself – that the child should not be meddled with, no matter what chance should arise. With this conclusion he wheeled about, and walked off indifferently, moving with head erect and a casual air. One would hardly have known him for the stealthy monster of five minutes before.

When he was gone Kroof lay down on her side and gently coaxed Miranda against her body. Her bereaved heart went out to the child. Her swollen teats, too, were hotly aching, and she had a kind of hope that Miranda would ease that hurt. But this, of course, never came within scope of the child's remotest idea. In every other respect, however, she showed herself most appreciative of Kroof's attentions, stroking her with light little hands, and murmuring to her much musical endearment, to which Kroof lent earnest ear. Then, laying her head on the fine fur of the bear's belly, she suddenly went fast asleep, being wearied by her wanderings and her emotions.

Late in the afternoon, toward milking-time, Kirstie aroused herself. She sat up with a startled air in her bunk in the corner of the cabin. Through the window came the rays of the westering sun. She felt troubled at having been so long asleep. And where could Miranda be? She arose, tottering for a moment, but soon found herself steady; and then she realised that she had slept off a sickness. She went to the door. The hens were diligently scratching in the dust, and Saunders eyed her with tolerance. At the fence beyond the barn the black-and-white cow lowed for the milking; and from her tether at the other side of the buckwheat field, Michael, the calf, bleated for her supper of milk and hay tea. But Miranda was nowhere to be seen.

"Miranda!" she called. And then louder, – and yet louder, – and at last with a piercing wail of anguish, as it burst upon her that Miranda was gone. The sunlit clearing, the grey cabin, the dark forest edges, all seemed to whirl and swim about her for an instant. It was only for an instant. Then she snatched up the axe from the chopping log, and with a sure instinct darted into that tongue of fir-woods just behind the house.

Straight ahead she plunged, as if following a plain trail; though in truth she was little learned in woodcraft, and by her mere eyes could scarce have tracked an elephant. But her heart was clutched by a grip of ice, and she went as one tranced. All at once, however, over the mossy crest of a rock, she saw a sight which brought her to a standstill. Her eyes and her mouth opened wide in sheer amazement. Then the terrible tension relaxed. A

strong shudder passed through her, and she was her steadfast self again. A smile broke up the sober lines of her face.

"Sure enough," she muttered; "the child was right. She knows a sight more about the beasts than I do."

And this is what she saw. Through the hoary arcades of the fir-wood walked a huge black bear, with none other than Miranda trotting by its side, and playfully stroking its rich coat. The great animal would pause from time to time, merely to nuzzle at the child with its snout or lick her hand with its narrow red tongue; but the course it was making was straight for the cabin. Kirstie stood motionless for some minutes, watching the strange scene; then, stepping out from her shelter, she hastened after them. So engrossed were they with each other that she came up undiscovered to within some twenty paces of them. Then she called out:

"Miranda, where *have* you been?"

The child stopped, looked around, but still clung to Kroof's fur.

"Oh, mother!" she cried, eager and breathless, and trying to tell everything at once, "I was all lost – and I was just going to be eaten up – and the dear, good, big bear came and frightened the panther away – and we were just going home – and do come and speak to the dear, lovely, big bear! Oh, don't let it go away! don't let it!"

But on this point Kroof had her own views. It was Miranda she had adopted, not Kirstie; and she felt a kind of jealousy of

Miranda's mother. Even while Miranda was speaking, the bear swung aside and briskly shambled off, leaving the child half in tears.

It was a thrilling story which Miranda had to tell her mother that evening, while the black-and-white cow was getting milked, and while Michael, the calf, was having its supper of milk and hay tea. It made a profound impression on Kirstie's quick and tolerant mind. She at once realised the value to Miranda of such an affection as Kroof's. Most mothers would have been crazed with foolish fear at the situation, but Kirstie Craig was of no such weak stuff. She saw in it only a strong shield for Miranda against the gravest perils of the wood.

A ROYAL MARAUDER¹

The new lair on the ridge, being little more than a cleft in the rock, had been accepted as a mere temporary affair. Near by, however, was a deep and well-drained pocket of dry earth, hard to come at, and surrounded by an expanse of rocky débris where scent would not lie. This was the place the foxes needed for security; and here, as soon as the frost was well out, and the mother fox ready to resume her full share of the hunting, the two dug out a new burrow, which ran far under an overhanging rock. Hither, with great satisfaction, they transferred the bright-eyed woolly whelps. So secure was the retreat that they were comparatively careless about hiding the entrance or removing the evidences of their occupancy. In a little while the ground about the hole was littered with the skins of rabbits, woodchucks, squirrels, with feathers, and with musk-rat tails; while about the old den in the bank below no such remnants had been allowed to collect.

In this difficult retreat Red Fox and his family had few neighbours to intrude upon their privacy. Over the naked ridge-crest the winds blew steadily, sometimes humming to a gale; but they never disturbed the quiet of that deep pocket in the rocks, with its little plot of bright, bare soil where the young foxes

¹ This is the eleventh chapter of "RED FOX: the Story of His Adventurous Career in the Ringwaak Wilds and of His Final Triumph over the Enemies of His Kind."

played and sunned themselves. No matter what the direction of the wind, no matter from what quarter the driven rain came slanting, the hollow was perfectly protected. On the top of the bare rock which partly overhung it from the north Red Fox would sometimes lie and watch, with eyes half-closed and mouth half-open, the world of green and brown and purple and blue outspread below and around him. Far down, on both sides of the ridge, he would note the farmers of both valleys getting in their crops, and the ceaseless, monotonous toiling of the patient teams. And far over to the eastward he would eye the bold heights of old Ringwaak, with the crow-hunted fir-groves on its flanks, and plan to go foraging over there some day, for sheer restlessness of curiosity.

But though neighbours were few up here, there was one pair on whom Red Fox and his mate looked with strong disapproval, not unmixed with anxiety. On an inaccessible ledge, in a ravine a little way down the other side of the ridge, toward Ringwaak, was the nest of a white-headed eagle. It was a great, untidy, shapeless mass, a cart-load of sticks, as it were, apparently dropped from the skies upon this bare ledge, but in reality so interwoven with each point of rock, and so braced in the crevices, that no tempest could avail to jar its strong foundations. In a hollow in the top of this mass, on a few wisps of dry grass mixed with feathers and fur, huddled two half-naked, fierce-eyed nestlings, their awkward, sprawling, reddish bodies beginning to be sprinkled with short black pin-feathers. All around the outer edges of this

huge nest, and on the rocks below it, were the bones of rabbits, and young lambs, and minks, and woodchucks, with claws, and little hoofs, and bills, and feathers, a hideous conglomeration that attested both the appetites of the nestlings and the hunting prowess of the wide-winged, savage-eyed parents.

Of the eagle pair, the larger, who was the female, had her aerial range over Ringwaak, and the chain of lonely lakes the other side of Ringwaak. But the male did all his hunting over the region of the settlements and on toward the Ottanoosis Valley. Every morning, just after sunrise, his great wings went winnowing mightily just over the crest of the ridge, just over the lofty hollow where Red Fox had his lair. And as the dread shadow, with its sinister rustling of stiff pinions, passed by, the little foxes would shrink back into their den, well taught by their father and mother.

When the weather was fine and dry, it was Red Fox's custom to betake himself, on his return from the night's hunting, to his safe "lookout" on the rocky summit above the den, and there, resting with his nose on his fore-paws, to watch the vast and austere dawn roll up upon the world. Sometimes he brought his prey – when it was something worth while, like a weasel or woodchuck or duck or rabbit – up to this lonely place to be devoured at leisure, beyond the solicitude of his mate and the irrepressible whimperings of the puppies. He would lie there in the mystic spreading of the grey transparencies of dawn till the first long fingers of gold light touched his face, and the

thin flood of amber and rose washed all over the bald top of the rock. He would watch, with ceaseless interest, the mother eagle swoop down with narrowed wings into the misty shadows of the valley, then mount slowly, questing, along the slopes of Ringwaak, and finally soar high above the peak, a slowly gyrating speck against the young blue. He would watch the male spring into the air resolutely, beat up the near steep, wing low over his rock, and sail majestically down over the valley farms. Later he would see them return to the nest, from any point of the compass as it might chance, sometimes with a big lake trout snatched from the industrious fish-hawks, sometimes with a luckless mallard from the reed-beds southward, sometimes with a long-legged, pathetic white lamb from the rough upland pastures. With keenest interest, and no small appreciation, he would watch the great birds balance themselves, wings half-uplifted, on the edge of the nest, and with terrible beak and claws rend the victim to bloody fragments. He marvelled at the insatiable appetites of those two ugly nestlings, and congratulated himself that his four playful whelps were more comely and less greedy.

One morning when, in the grey of earliest dawn, he climbed to his retreat with a plump woodchuck in his jaws, it chanced he was in no hurry for his meal. Dropping the limp body till he should feel more relish for it, he lay down to rest and contemplate the waking earth. As he lay, the sun rose. The female eagle sailed away toward Ringwaak. The male beat up, and up, high above

the ridge, and Red Fox paid no more attention to him, being engrossed in the antics of a porcupine which was swinging in a tree-top far below.

Suddenly he heard a sharp, hissing rush of great wings in the air just above him, and glanced upward astonished. The next instant he felt a buffeting wind, huge wings almost smote him in the face, – and the dead woodchuck, not three feet away, was snatched up in clutching talons, and borne off into the air. With a furious snarl he jumped to his feet; but the eagle, with the prize dangling from his claws, was already far out of reach, slanting down majestically toward his nest.

The insolence and daring of this robbery fixed in Red Fox's heart a fierce desire for vengeance. He stole down to the ravine that held the eyrie, and prowled about for hours, seeking a place where he could climb to the ledge. It was quite inaccessible, however; and the eagles, knowing this, looked down upon the prowlings with disdainful serenity. Then he mounted the near-by cliff and peered down directly into the nest. But finding himself still as far off as ever, and the eagles still undisturbed, he gave up the hope of an immediate settlement of his grudge, and lay in wait for the chances of the wilderness. He was frank enough, however, in his declaration of war; for whenever the eagle went winging low over his rocky lookout, he would rise and snarl up at him defiantly. The great bird would bend his flight lower, as if to accept this challenge; but having a wise respect for those long jaws and white fangs which the fox displayed so liberally,

he took care not to come within their reach.

A few days later, while Red Fox was away hunting down in the valley, the fox-puppies were playing just in the mouth of the den, when they saw their slim mother among the rocks. In a puppy-like frolic of welcome they rushed to meet her, feeling secure in her nearness. When they were half-way across the open in front of the den, there came a sudden shadow above them. Like a flash they scattered, – all but one, who crouched flat and stared irresolutely. There was a dreadful whistling sound in the air, a pounce of great flapping wings and wide-reaching talons, a strangled yelp of terror. And before the mother fox's leap could reach the spot, the red puppy was snatched up and carried away to the beaks of the eaglets.

When he learned about this, Red Fox felt such fury as his philosophic spirit had never known before. He paid another futile visit to the foot of the eagles' rock; and afterward, for days, wasted much time from his hunting in the effort to devise some means of getting at his foe. He followed the eagle's flight and foraging persistently, seeking to be on the spot when the robber made a kill. But the great bird had such a wide range that this effort seemed likely to be a vain one. In whatever region Red Fox lay in wait, in some other would the eagle make his kill. With its immeasurable superiority in power of sight, the royal marauder had no trouble in avoiding his enemy's path, so that Red Fox was under surveillance when he least suspected it.

It was one day when he was not thinking of eagles or of

vengeance that Red Fox's opportunity came. It was toward evening, and for a good half-hour he had been quite out of sight, watching for a wary old woodchuck to venture from its hole. As he lay there, patient and moveless, he caught sight of a huge black snake gliding slowly across the open glade. He hesitated, in doubt whether to attack the snake or keep on waiting for the woodchuck. Just then came that whistling sound in the air which he knew so well. The snake heard it, too, and darted toward the nearest tree, which chanced to be a bare young birch sapling. It had barely reached the foot of the tree when the feathered thunderbolt out of the sky fell upon it, clutching it securely with both talons about a foot behind the head.

Easily and effectively had the eagle made his capture; but, when he tried to rise with his prey, his broad wings beat the air in vain. At the instant of attack the snake had whipped a couple of coils of its tail around the young birch-tree, and that desperate grip the eagle could not break. Savagely he picked at the coils, and then at the reptile's head, preparing to take the prize off in sections if necessary.

Red Fox's moment, long looked for and planned for, had come. His rush from cover was straight and low, and swift as a dart; and his jaws caught the eagle a slashing cut on the upper leg. Fox-like, he bit and let go; and the great bird, with a yelp of pain and amazement, whirled about, striking at him furiously with beak and wings. He got one buffet from those wings which knocked him over; and the eagle, willing to shirk the conflict,

disengaged his talons from the snake and tried to rise. But in an instant Red Fox was upon him again, reaching up for his neck with a lightning-like ferocity that disconcerted the bird's defence. At such close quarters the bird's wings were ineffective, but his rending beak and steel-like talons found their mark in Red Fox's beautiful ruddy coat, which was dyed with crimson in a second.

For most foxes the king of the air would have proved more than a match; but the strength and cleverness of Red Fox put the chance of battle heavily in his favour. In a few seconds he would have had the eagle overborne and helpless, and would have reached his throat in spite of beak and claw. But at this critical moment the bird found an unexpected and undeserved ally. The snake which he had attacked, being desperately wounded, was thrashing about in the effort to get away to some hiding. Red Fox happened to step upon it in the struggle; and instantly, though blindly, it threw a convulsive coil about his hind legs. Angrily he turned, and bit at the constricting coil. And while he was tearing at it, seeking to free himself, the eagle recovered, raised himself with difficulty, and succeeded in flopping up into the air. Bedraggled, bloody, and abjectly humiliated, he went beating over the forest toward home; and Red Fox, fairly well satisfied in spite of the incompleteness of his victory, proceeded to refresh himself by a hearty meal of snake. He felt reasonably certain that the big eagle would give both himself and his family a wide berth in the future.