

**CHARLES
ROBERTS**

SOME ANIMAL
STORIES

Charles Roberts
Some Animal Stories

«Public Domain»

Roberts C.

Some Animal Stories / C. Roberts — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

DO SEEK THEIR MEAT FROM GOD	5
"THE YOUNG RAVENS THAT CALL UPON HIM"	9
STRAYED	11
THE WATCHERS IN THE SWAMP	13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	17

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 reshoouldered 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. Theirs 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, un nourishing 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. Squirring, 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 thrived 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*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.