WHISHAW FREDERICK

THE ROMANCE OF THE WOODS

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CHAPTER I
ON A RUSSIAN MOOR

I once had a strange dream. I dreamed that I was dead, and that dying I suddenly discovered all my preconceived ideas as to the future state to have been entirely erroneous, at any rate in so far as concerned such persons as myself—the respectable middle class, so to call it, of mundane sinners. Had I belonged to the aristocracy of piety and goodness, which, alas! I did not, or had I occupied a position at the lower end of the list, other things might have befallen me, better or worse, as the case deserved; but being, as I say, one of the decently respectable middle-class sinners, I was shown, in this foolish dream of mine, into a committee-room marked No. 2, and there informed that since I was neither very good nor very bad, my present destiny was to continue to inhabit this planet for a number of years—I forget how many—not, indeed, in my present corporeal form, but as a spiritual essence; and that I might select any place this side of the dark river, the Styx, as my temporary abode, there to live in Nature's bosom and to assimilate and be assimilated until the simplicity and beauty

of Nature, uncontaminated by man, should have purified me of all the harmful taints which I had acquired during my terrestrial existence among fellow-mortals.

And I remember that, in my dream-foolishness, I clasped my hands and fell on my knees, and with streaming eyes assured the committee of Mahatmas (for such, in the dream, they appeared to be) that I wished for no more beautiful heaven than this that they had offered me; and that I implored them to allow me to stay on for ever in the paradise they had prepared for me, and never to pass me onward and upward to attain further joys, however blessed!

And then, in my dream, those Mahatmas flashed their shining eyes at me (there was very little *but* eye and flowing cloak about them, I remember), and said "Silence!" and frightened me thereby out of my dream-dead wits.

That, they added, was not my affair nor theirs. All I had to do at present was to make my choice of a place from among those I had best loved during life, and to do so as quickly as I conveniently could, because their hands were somewhat full of business this morning, and they could not spare me more than, at most, five minutes.

I remember that I looked over my shoulder at this and perceived an innumerable host of persons, all, presumably, in a similar position to my own, and all ready to take their turns, in strict rotation, before the committee of Mahatmas in room No. 2; and I could not help reflecting that the middle-class sinner

must indeed be a very large class, and that I should do wisely to select some rather unfrequented spot for my future home, lest my domain should be trespassed upon by other spiritual essences, and my peace marred by—to use a mundane expression—unseemly rows.

And then I became conscious of a great difficulty in the matter of this choosing of a place to live in. Picture after picture came up before my mind's eye, each more fascinatingly beautiful than the other. There was a lovely little bit of Devonshire coast, and another shore in Pembrokeshire; there were delicious spots in half the counties of England—woods, and hedgerows, and rivers, and waving fields wherein my spiritual being might disport itself in the contemplation of the teeming secret life of Nature; there were Kensington Gardens, a certain central glade of which I had loved well enough, and which my spiritual essence might find a handy spot in case the longing for human fellowship were to assail me—when I could so easily perch myself unseen amid the branches of a tree overlooking Bayswater Road, and drink in, to my heart's content, the familiar sights and sounds of London, or even take a ride on the top of an Acton 'bus; but at this point of my reflections one of the Mahatmas wagged his head at me and said:

"Oh no! You can't do that, you know. No 'bus-driving. Twenty miles from any town, if *you* please!"

It did not strike me as curious that this Mahatma should have read my thoughts, neither did it occur to me to wonder how he

knew that I was animadverting upon the delights of the twopenny 'bus. However, his remark narrowed my field of selection, and I thought on as intensely as I could. I crossed the seas and flew, in spirit, to Finland, to a lovely island in the midst of a beautiful river—the Voksa—teeming with trout, great and small, and with silver grayling; and then I thought of Ostramanch, the home of the capercailzie, of the blackcock; the scene of a hundred and one superb days with the gun, and of as many nights spent in the perfect happiness of solitude and observation beneath the tall pines and the bright stars of the northern sky, in the hush and the solemn majesty of the darkness and silence. And I had almost cried, "Give me Ostramanch!" when I remembered that this dearly loved spot would not, after all, do. It had passed from English into Russian hands, and my spiritual self could never be really happy there under such circumstances. What if my essence were suddenly to happen upon a Russian sportsman taking a family shot at a young covey of blackgame or willow-grouse, huddled together upon a sand-dune, or hiding behind a tuft of purple-fruited bilberry? Could my spiritual voice cry out upon such a deed, or my spiritual fingers close upon the throat of the delinquent, or my phantasmal toe perform a corporeal function? Could I even spread bony arms before his eyes and play the common vulgar ghost upon him, to punish him withal? Alas! I thought, no. Ostramanch will not do. And then, at last, the picture of Erinofka rose before my eyes, and I knew that I had found my Fate. I pictured myself strolling year-long over

the purple moors, through the dark belts of forest, by bog and morass and snipe-haunted waste. I remembered many trudges—days of delight—in those same woods, gun-laden, full of ardour, unwearied by day-long tramping, oblivious of hunger, impatient of oncoming darkness; and I imagined myself repeating such delightful experiences *ad infinitum*, and laughed aloud in the joy of my foolish dream-heart. The Mahatmas immediately interfered; they flashed their great eyes and fluttered their long black mantles at me, and cried:

"No guns, no guns!"

"And no fishing-rods!" added one of them.

"What! no guns and no rod?" I said, growing grave very suddenly. To be at Erinofka and never to hear the popping of another cartridge seemed a dreadful prospect.

"Oh, you can carry a gun if you please," said the presiding Mahatma, who was growing strangely like a London police magistrate, "but you must use smokeless and noiseless powder, and no shot."

"And a rod without a reel," said another Mahatma.

"And a line without a hook," added a third.

"And see that you have a license," put in a fourth.

"But, sirs," I began, "what am I to do with myself, if I may not–"

"Take life?" interrupted the Chairman. "Silence, prisoner at the bar, and learn to be happy without killing! To Erinofka with him, gaoler!"

"How long, your worship?" said that functionary.

Four thousand five hundred years was, I think, the figure, but it may have been four hundred thousand. I was still puzzling over the matter when I awoke. Afterwards, when I thought upon this dream of mine, it struck me that my sentence was, after all, a most enviable one. Thousands of years at Erinofka, with no terrestrial cares to weigh me down; face to face and heart to heart with Nature, learning her secrets day long; a life-atom among myriads of others; a little part of an infinite whole; harmless, free, careless, contented, in fellowship with bird and beast and insect, and with every form of life that has a vested interest in wood and moor and wet morass. For such an existence I had chosen, I thought, the right place. At any rate my spiritual essence, if weary of wandering about armed with a gun that would not work, could amuse itself by recalling those dear, unregenerate days when guns, unprohibited by stern Mahatmas, popped freely, and reels craked, and when the glad voice of the sportsman was heard upon these moors, and among them my own, together with the popping of many terrestrial cartridges. One day, especially, and that the day of my first acquaintance with the place, lingers more fondly than others in the memory, and would afford material for much spiritual contemplation, perhaps even unto forty-five thousand years, if there were nothing better to do! And it is of that particular day that I propose to tell, now that this somewhat extended preface has been got through.

It was Jemmie, of course, who introduced me to Erinofka. Any one in St. Petersburg will tell you who Jemmie is, for he is a popular character there, and is known and loved by all. Well, it was Jemmie who proposed a day at Erinofka, a day among the juveniles; the younglings of the blackcock and of the willow-grouse, and perhaps a peep at the princelings of his majesty king capercailzie. It was early in the summer, perhaps too early; but shooting in the Tsar's domains begins considerably earlier in the year than we, in this country, are accustomed to take gun in hand, and the sportsman may there sally forth on July 27, if it please him, and shoot young game without breaking any laws. It was not quite so early as this when Jemmie carried me—a willing captive—to Erinofka, but August was still very young, and so were some of the coveys; though, thanks to a fine warm season, many or most of these were marvellously well-grown; but of this anon. Erinofka is blessed, or cursed, with a most marvellous little railway of its very own, a kind of toy track from town, laid down for the convenience of a peat-cutting establishment not very far from the shooting-box which was our objective point. The railway is very narrow, and the omnibus-like carriages, which the public are allowed to occupy for a consideration and at their own risk, are very top-heavy; and the driver of the little engine is generally very drunk, all of which circumstances combine to make this Erinofka heaven quite as difficult of attainment as the very highest of Mahomet's, and the journey a matter not to be undertaken without deep

thought, much repentance, and a visit from the family lawyer. The line looks something like the toy track at Chatham—that upon which youthful officers of the Royal Engineers are or were wont to disport themselves; a pastime devised, I believe, by the War Office, for the twin purposes of teaching the British officer how to drive a locomotive, and how best to fall off it with dignity when the engine runs off the rails.

Jemmie tells me that before the peat-people built this line it had been necessary to bump along to Erinofka as best one could, over the most awful roads that human bones ever creaked upon, a distance of forty or fifty miles; but that now, if only you can secure the sober, the *comparatively* sober driver, the journey is a sweet boon. It appears that there are three drivers on this line—Matvey, who is always very drunk indeed; Ivan, who is always rather drunk and sometimes highly intoxicated; and Yegor, who has been known to be sober. I have not seen the man who saw Yegor sober; but it is confidently asserted that he has been observed in this unusual condition, and that he is rarely more than half drunk.

Well, I seldom have much luck, and when I went with Jemmie to Erinofka upon that little narrow railway, in a wide long carriage that might have served as a portion of the G.W.R. rolling stock in its unregenerate broad-gauge days, we had Matvey to drive our engine. Matvey had, to put it mildly, been drinking, and he desired to drink again. Now, Matvey knew very well that he could get no more vodka until he reached Erinofka, and this

is why we travelled at a pace which was bound to end, and did shortly end, in disaster. In a word, we ran off the line three miles or so from the start, and that we did not also run down a steep embankment into a river was certainly not Matvey's fault; we could not have gone much nearer the edge than we did.

However, Erinofka was reached in safety at last, and—since our accident had delayed us at least two hours—right ravenously did we fall upon the good cheer set out for us by the head-keeper, Hermann, and his wife. One item of this repast, at least, I remember vividly: an enormous dish piled to the height of nearly a foot with luscious wild strawberries. It would be unfair to give my friend away in the matter of those strawberries; but I will say that Jemmie partook with freedom of the fruit, and that I myself tasted, well, a few berries. The armchairs in the Erinofka sitting-room were remarkably comfortable, I remember, after that repast, and the conversation languished. But we were to be up and away at half-past three a.m.; for we must drive a matter of seven miles to the moor we intended to work on the morrow, and the courteous Hermann—who had cleared away the large empty dish which had contained so many strawberries with but one convulsive movement of the facial muscles and a quick glance of polite consternation in the direction of the reposing James—this courteous Hermann very gently reminded us that it was now eleven, and that between that hour and three was embraced the entire period devotable by us to sleeping off the effects of railway accidents and arctic strawberries, all of which was so very true

that we sighed, and rose from those blest armchairs and went to bed.

The baying and barking of four excited dogs (who knew as well as we did that the first shoot of the season was to come off on this day) rendered unnecessary Hermann's polite knockings at the bedroom doors, and his gentlemanly intimation that the day was all that could be expected of it, and the hour—three. When Shammie, and Carlow, and Kaplya, and Bruce are performing a quartette at 3 a.m., even Jemmie cannot sleep, and we were both wide-awake and discussing matters when Hermann came to hound us to breakfast. Breakfast was somewhat of a failure, I remember. Did I mention that we had taken a few strawberries at 10.30 p.m.? Well, we had; and it was found that the circumstance militated against a hearty British appetite at 3 a.m. However, this being so, the less time was wasted before starting for the moor. There is something, to me, peculiarly fascinating and exhilarating about this starting out on the first day of shooting; but oh! that seven mile drive to the moor. The roads were so absolutely and utterly vile, and the cart so unspeakably uncomfortable, that no reader would believe me were I to attempt to describe the misery of driving under such conditions. But Jemmie, bless him! smiled on and smiled ever; and I—not to be outdone in exuberance of spirits this superb morning—pretended that I enjoyed being bumped about like a hailstone on a hard lawn. All four dogs were with us. They lay, at the start, quiescent enough at the bottom of the vehicle;

but alas! not for long. In the first fifty yards Shammie was on my lap, and Bruce with his arms round Jemmie's neck; in the second I found, to my surprise, that a cartridge-box had usurped Shammie's place on my knee, and that Shammie's head and my shin were exchanging civilities at the bottom of the cart. Occasionally the driver was sprawling on the back of the shaft horse, and now and again he was shot violently upon the top of Jemmie or me, or suddenly appeared, wrong way up, between us. Occasionally also we found that the dogs and we had changed places, and that we lay struggling on the floor of the cart while they stood on their heads, or sat with surprised and pained expressions upon the seat. Nothing mattered. Jemmie smiled, and I tried to. What though our shins were black and blue with the misplaced attentions of cartridge cases and gun stocks? What though the dogs whined and grew absurdly angry with one another, showing signs of an imminent general engagement? What though Jemmie bounded into air—bird-like—and nested upon the top of my head, or I on his? Nothing matters on the first day of shooting; disasters are a joke, and battered heads and limbs are contributions to the hilarity of the proceedings. Ah, well! the dogs limped ostentatiously when we arrived, and Jemmie and I were very, very stiff, but oh! so happy, and I, at all events, grateful and amazed to find myself all in one piece, and we paced slowly through the first belt of thick, gameless pine-wood, thinking unutterable things, and with a decided tendency to quote poetry when the tongue would wag.

Half a mile of barren trudging and then the forest begins to lighten; the young day sends golden smiles to greet us through the trees; wherever there is room for a ray or two of his glory to pass, he stretches a hand to us. "Come," he seems to say, "come out upon the moor and bathe yourselves in my full favour; my good, gigantic smile is over all this morning!" And here is the moor itself, a sight to set the heart a-beating on this first day of the season; stretching wide and rich before us; miles across; limitless, apparently, from end to end; and, as we believe and hope, teeming with game if only we can hit upon the coveys.

What a lot of trouble it would save, I suggest foolishly, if one had a divining-rod that showed the whereabouts of the birds! "*Proh pudor!*" says James, and rightly, "the dogs are our divining-rods." As to these dogs, Shammie and Carlow are setters—Shammie a red Irish, Carlow a blue Belton, and wild at that. The other two are Russian-bred pointers of English parentage—good animals both, and well trained, according to his lights, by Hermann. The setters both hail from a Scottish moor, and are to-day on their trial in this unfamiliar country. Their journey has lost them none of their keenness—look at them now! Shammie, cool and collected, businesslike, making no false move, but ardent and determined; Carlow, half a mile off, but back again in no time and hundreds of yards away on the opposite tack, the quickest and wildest dog, surely, that ever ranged. Kaplya and Bruce hunt close to their trainer—we are giving all four of them a breather just to settle their nerves; but presently two will be taken in while

two do the work.

Suddenly Shammie stops dead; so do, for an instant, my heart and pulses. Kaplya and Bruce back instantly, stiff as marble. Carlow is coming in at racing speed, but sees the others when fifty yards away, and lies down automatically. Shammie's tail wags slightly, and we feel that there may be a disappointment before us; but he turns and looks at us; and observing that we are taking him seriously, stiffens into a dead point. It must be business.

"You take first shot," says generous Jemmie; "if it's a covey, your birds are on the right and mine on the left."

The first shot of the season! how absurdly my heart is beating. I wonder the birds do not hear it and get up wild.

Suddenly, twenty yards from us, there is a rustle and a flutter of strong wings, and a grey hen rises without clucking, and lifting herself gracefully over the young birch saplings, floats away over the moor.

"*Matka!*" (Hen!) shouts Hermann, and to the surprise and disgust of the dogs, no cartridge explodes. Shammie smiles and pants, and looks round at us in a pained though kindly manner; he hopes it is all right, but reflects that they generally get their guns off in Scotland when he shows them the game. Jemmie declares that, if it were lawful, he would spare none of these old barren hens; he is convinced, he says, that they do great damage by bullying the younger hens and chasing them from the moor, in order themselves to monopolise the attentions of the gentlemen

of the family.

Oh! the jealousy of the female sex. Jemmie may be perfectly right; and I fancy that he is; but what do the old blackcock, or (for the matter of that) the young blackcock, think of such proceedings? What would the marrying men of our branch of life think or do, if the old maids should succeed in banishing all that was young and beautiful in order to promote their own chances of mating?

But it is very hot, and Jemmie suggests that the birds will be lying at the edge of the moor beneath the shade of the pines, and thither we trudge through the heavy moss and heather. The going is always terribly heavy until the first bird is grassed: after which event, I have observed, the tramping loses much of its weariness and the shooting-boots their weight, and when a dozen brace or so have been secured, the feet that bear the delighted trudger are winged feet.

Nevertheless, we walk for a full hour and are still—as to our game-bags—as empty as when we started. We see no beauty in the lovely moor, at this period. The dogs, we feel, are failures, all four of them. Hermann, too, is a fraud, for did he not declare that there were eight fine coveys within a radius of a mile upon this very moor. Where are those coveys, Hermann? Did we submit to be shuttlecocked over your ghastly parody of a road in order to be humbugged by you at the end of it? Where are these coveys? I say. Such, or to this effect, were the remarks of Jemmie. I think during those first two hours of unremunerative trudging,

he vowed to shoot all four of his dogs, sell his guns and his cartridges, give up shooting, and devote his entire energies to gardening and lawn tennis, with a little fishing and a trifle of archery; I rather think Hermann and the other keepers were to share the fate of the dogs; I forget whether I was to die, I think I was; but at the end of two hours the luck changed and Jemmie smiled, and dogs and keepers and I all breathed again.

It was Kaplya that stumbled upon the first covey. Carlow was being led just then and so was Bruce, and good Shammie had by this time formed unflattering opinions as to the Russian moors in comparison with those of Scotland; consequently he was cantering about scientifically enough, but half-heartedly, ranging in an unconvinced and unconvincing manner, ready to oblige by doing his share of this foolish work, but feeling that in his case it was time and talent wasted. Probably he was wondering when the next train started for Scotland, and deciding to take it and go hence to places where the moors were not dummy moors, but the bonâ fide habitations of grouse and blackgame, when he suddenly caught sight of old Kaplya at a dead point in front of his very nose, while perhaps that organ was at the same instant assailed by the unexpected evidence of the proximity of something better than heather and bilberry plants. At any rate, down went Shammie as if shot, in as correct a pose as a "backing" setter can assume.

Instantly, also, Carlow and Bruce sat down, the former so suddenly that Ivan, the under-keeper, who held him, tripped over

him and measured his length, letting Carlow go, chain and all, to join the party of stiffened doghood at our knees.

This time there was no disappointment. After a moment or two of that intense waiting which every sportsman knows and loves—while the birds, hidden somewhere in the heather or greenery, are eyeing their human and canine disturbers, and wondering what is best to be done, whether to run or fly, or remain crouching—there came the usual pulse-fluttering rustle, and up and away went three superb young blackcock, nearly full grown, two to Jemmie's side, one to my own.

For all I know to the contrary, my blackcock may still be alive and entertaining his friends with the narrative of how a foolish and excitable Englishman once drew a bead upon him in his youth, and drew it awry. In a word, my too agitated pulses blinded my eye and unnerved my hand, and I missed that lordly youngling handsomely and entirely. Not so James and his brace of beauties. Jemmie is a deadly shot, and I would as soon sit on a fizzing bomb as play the blackcock to his unerring barrel; he grassed both his birds; and I knew that the dogs and keepers were now safe, and that the guns of my friend would not, yet awhile, be put up for sale.

But trusty Kaplya and Shammie still stood on; there were more of this interesting family to come. Recaptured Carlow pulled and strained at his leash; Bruce softly whined and trembled spasmodically, sitting on Stepan's foot.

Up started a fourth blackcock, accompanied by his mother;

with bewildering suddenness they rose and hurtled away, the old lady dropping a last word of advice to the youngsters still remaining vacillating behind. I imagined her clucks to mean, "Oh, you foolish little creatures! why do you not fly when your mamma gives the lead? Fly always after a shot, when the guns are empty."

This time black death darted from my right barrel, calling to his last account a very beautiful young blackcock, nearly as large as his mother, who of course escaped scot free, triumphing—as she supposed—by reason of her wisdom. But the dogs still stood on.

This is the best, as it is the pitiful foolishness of the blackcock younglings. Their fathers are birds of great wisdom and cunning; their mothers are sagacious and experienced; but the little ones are headstrong and foolish, and love to act independently of their elders. Instead of flying altogether as grouse and partridges do, and thus enjoying each a chance of escape as well as participating in the common danger, they rise by ones and twos, and each bird becomes the sole objective for the charge of the sportsman, thereby immensely lessening his chance of flying between the pellets.

The first covey of the season was a grand one indeed, thirteen birds, including the mother, and of these we slew, without leaving the original spot, no less than nine. Jemmie beamed. He said sweet things to Hermann, the lately abused and condemned; he patted the dogs and "praised them to their face;" he declared that

I had slain a full half of the dead birds, whereas I knew well that three only had fallen to my fire and six to his; he discovered that the walking was easy enough when one grew used to it; he liked the sunshine; in a word, my friend James had donned those spectacles whose glasses are of the colour of the rose.

It was now seven o'clock; the heather and bilberry plants were still "dew-pearled," and there were diamonds on every gossamer thread that ran from leaf to leaf and from plant to plant; but the sun was hot enough, by this, to dry up an ocean, and I knew these morn-gems would not last much longer. I was glad when Jemmie proposed a short rest (nominally for the dogs' sake), for there was all the beauty of the morning to take in, and that is best done in a sitting or lying posture. The panting of the dogs is almost the only sound—that and the indescribable evidence of teeming life which you may hear in the dead of the silence. Who makes that sound? What is it? Where is it? I think it is Nature in travail; it is growth and development, the never-resting activity of the spirit of life that moves upon the face of the land.

Our nine little victims lie upon the heather before us, and Jemmie weighs each in his hand and tries, very unnecessarily, their beaks in order to be assured of their youth, and admires their growth, and beams upon men and dogs in high good humour. I, too, criticise the birds and am conscious of a stifling feeling of regret. Here are nine beautiful little lives taken in as many minutes, taken so easily—alas! but who could ever give back to these feathered ruins the thing we have bereft them of? I

know it is foolish to sentimentalise thus over the dead creatures I came to destroy, and will destroy again the very next time that I have an opportunity; but the triumph of the sportsman is always a little marred, I think, by this feeling of guilt—the guilt of having robbed mother Nature of some of her beautiful children. She does very well without them, I dare say, and if we had not secured them doubtless the kites and hawks and foxes would have taken their share—probably as large a share as this of ours; nevertheless, here they were an hour ago upon this moor, alive and busy and beautiful; and now they are not, and *we* did it.

Nevertheless, again, we are up and about and ready to "do it" once more after a quarter of an hour's repose; and the next thing we chance upon is a covey of chirping and twittering little willow-grouse, scarcely free of the egg-shells, a tiny, confiding flock that flit chattering and scolding after their brown and white mother, annoyed to be disturbed and made to use their lovely little mottled wings in flight, and anxious to settle again before twenty yards have been covered. We send a laugh after the little family, instead of a hailstorm of No. 7, and leave them to grow and fatten; they shall enjoy the delights of life on this moor for three good weeks, if not four, ere the leaden death shall make Erinofka the poorer by their perfectly marked little persons. Then an old blackcock, unaware that Jemmie and his choked left barrel are about, foolishly lets us approach within fifty yards of his sanctuary, and rising with a crow of defiance, subsides instantly at the bidding of the unerring James, with a groan and

a gasp—dead.

Presently a superb covey of willow-grouse (who are the parents of our own red variety of the family) rise with a whirr and a loud laugh from the old cock, leave their tribute of four upon the heather—and vanish. We see them flit like a white cloud over the open moorland, rise like one being to top the bushes, flash their wings in the sun as they wheel round in the traditional manner of their tribe before settling, and then we suddenly lose sight of them and see them no more.

"They are down among the aspens," said Jemmie. Hermann dissented.

"They wheeled right round the spinney," he says, "and settled well beyond it."

Ivan takes the side of Jemmie, and Stepan sides with his chief. I am neutral. I saw them up to a point but not beyond it; I saw the sun tip their white feathers with fire as they wheeled and then lost them; but I know how many there were—there were nineteen, no less, that journeyed over the heather and into the spinney—a gigantic covey indeed!

"Two coveys," says Jemmie; "the willow-grouse have a passion for massing even in the chicken stage," which is perfectly true, while in the autumn you may find a community of a hundred of them living together.

Now were these birds little white ghosts, or real flesh and blood and feathers? If not spectres, then where are they? This was the question we asked of one another as, for a full hour, we

paced and repaced, as we believed, every inch of a square half mile of ground within which the little wizards must inevitably be somewhere hidden. Hermann explained the matter by declaring that they had settled altogether in a huddled mass, and had not moved a muscle since; knowing, perhaps instinctively, that by preserving absolute immobility they would give no scent. We may, and so may the dogs, have passed within a yard of the hole or tuft in which the beady-eyed little creatures lay crouched, watching us, scarcely breathing for terror, their poor hearts and pulses going very fast as we come near and pass by and see no sign of them.

But Carlow has the luck to stumble upon them. I am watching the dog, and I see him stop suddenly in his mad career (Carlow's career is always mad!), and bend over in an extraordinary position. There is the covey, under his very nose. Alarmed, indeed, they are now, and their necks are held straight and high; they attempt no further concealment; their only anxiety is how to take wing without falling into the jaws of this ogre—fox or whatever he may be. Carlow would sooner perish than touch one of them; but they do not know this, poor things, and peer helplessly and timidly this way and that in the extremity of terror and uncertainty. I can examine them now at leisure for a moment or two, and oh! what beautiful creatures they are. Where was ever so soft a brown as this of theirs, or so pure a white? What bird ever matched the graceful poise of their heads? What—there! they are off, and I have missed them with both barrels; this comes

of moralising. Jemmie did not moralise, and he has dropped two of the beauties; but there is a chance for me yet, for the covey has settled in the open, no doubt about the exact spot this time, and not more than one hundred and fifty yards away.

So we take in all the dogs excepting old Kaplya, who is as safe and steady as the Rock of Gibraltar, and head straight for the place in which we believe the birds to be lying. Old Kaplya raises her nose, half turns towards us, smiles and winks (she positively does both), as though she would say, "All right, keep your eye upon Kaplya; I'm *on* these birds already—follow me!" and away she goes straight as a line, first cantering easily, then trotting a few yards, then cautiously walking as many more, then slowly stopping, stiffening, turning her nose now slightly to this side, now to that, then finally fixing herself into the very perfect picture of a sure point.

Up they go, and off go my two barrels, rather too rapidly and excitedly; off go Jemmie's also, but with more deliberation. To my first shot a bird falls in tatters; to my second two succumb. I have shot three of them, and Jemmie his usual brace. But, alas! my first bird is but a mangled mass of feathers and broken bones, and there must be a burial. Hide him deep beneath the moss and heather, Hermann, and for pity's sake say no more about the circumstance; for in truth my heart is like wax within me by reason of this wasted life. It is pardonable and right, though perhaps regrettable, to take these lives when we intend to use the shot-riddled carcases for our food, but to blow a

beautiful creature to pieces and to be obliged to bury its remains is unpardonable.

We decide to leave the rest of this covey; we have levied sufficient tribute upon it. And now the day is growing into middle age, and Jemmie says that we will find one more family of willow-grouse or blackgame and then take our mid-day meal and our siesta. We will diverge into the thick belt of forest on the right, he says, and see if we can find a covey of capercailzies.

I long to see another capercailzie before I die. For many a year I have been absent from those moors whereon the great king of game-birds holds his high court. Oh! if I could but come face to face—but once—with the royal family, I could return to far-off England content.

But, alas! the king was not to be found. Deep in the sanctuary of mid-forest, somewhere beyond those tall, dark pines —perhaps miles away—he had listened in proud disdain to the popping of our cartridges upon the moor, and had laughed at our impotent endeavours to outwit himself and his family of princelings. To-morrow, likely enough, he would stalk about the moor from end to end, he and the long-legged princes and princesses, his sons and daughters, and the haughty lady his queen; but to-day, no, thank you! Not while James and his deadly Holland were about!

We stumbled, however, upon a covey of blackgame, and levied full tribute upon them in default of their big cousins; but now the splendid August sun had

"Clomb up to heaven and kissed the golden feet of noon,"

and Jemmie declared that if we did not instantly settle down to our legitimate lunch, he would not answer for it if he suddenly fell upon me, or Hermann, or Shammie, or even perspiring Stepan and devoured him. Accordingly, therefore, we selected our camp in a shady spot by a moss-pool—for this bog-water was all that we should get to-day, and we must use it or none for tea-making—and Hermann was instructed to unpack the luncheon basket. Out came the good things, a profuse and welcome procession of luxury—spring chickens, tongue, well-iced butter, two bottles of claret, *Alexander Kuchen* (oh! blessed Alexander, whoever you may have been, to have invented so delicious a dainty; may the sweet maidens of Valhalla feed you for ever with your own Kuchen, oh Alexander! and may you eat heartily of it without suffering or surfeiting), and arctic strawberries. For half an hour we toyed, did James and I, with the viands, after which for two hours we slept or rested; for during this time of high noon the birds mysteriously disappear, and nor man nor dog may find them; and I lay and dreamed dreams, a few sleeping and many waking ones; and the peace and silence and restfulness of that mid-day in the forest entered into my soul and abode there in a sense of infinite and lasting content, which may be recalled—as through a phonograph—and reproduced at will to this hour.

And then again, after a cup of tea concocted of bog-water, but delicious notwithstanding, and after counting and recounting our twelve or thirteen brace of victims, we pulled ourselves together and trudged for four more hours, during which time we doubled our tale of slaughter, or nearly so, and when the moment came that we must head for the carts and return home to dine and catch the night train for town, it was with sadness that we wended our way homewards. We had spent twelve hours upon this pleasant moor indeed; but who would be content with twelve? Twelve thousand were all too little of such delight. On mature reflection I am quite determined that if my friends the Mahatmas give me another dream-chance I shall jump at the offer of Erinofka as a place of abode, however long the sentence be. What if the spirit-gun will not go off? So long as I may tramp the heather and see the game and carry over my shoulder the semblance of a gun to point at it, even a dummy gun; so long as I may see the dew-pearled gossamer, and feel the broad smile of the August sun, and hear the hum and buzz and crackle and cluck of teeming life around me, I really do not think I care so very much about the killing. And this is why I declare that if the Mahatmas again offer me the Erinofka heaven I shall accept it, ay, even unto forty-five thousand years! Nevertheless, if they allow me a breechloader and cartridges instead of that foolish spirit-gun of theirs, I shall certainly shoot.

CHAPTER II
IN AMBUSH AT THE LAKE-SIDE

It is spring—such spring as is vouchsafed to the high latitudes, and I am in my night ambush, prepared to welcome any living thing that is good enough to come forth from its sanctuary within reeds or forest, and to parade itself in the open for my inspection. My ambush is a pine-branch tent, or *shalashka*, the little edifice which has been my refuge and centre of observation for many a cold northern night—spring-time nights, indeed, but nights of more degrees of frost than the sportsman or naturalist of temperate Britain has dreamed of in his coldest excursions into the realms of imagination. My tent on this occasion is not pitched upon one of those open spaces in mid-forest, whereon the blackcock love to hold their nocturnal or early-matutinal tournaments, where the laughing willow-grouse—that faithful lover—sports with his pretty white mate, and the dark forest trees form a romantic background to the proceedings of both. To-night I am placed in the midst of the marshy approach to a wide sheet of water—an annex, in fact, to the great Lake Ladoga. Fifty yards or more in front of me the waters, but lately released from their entire subjection to the yoke of winter, may be heard softly lapping the shore in a series of gentle kisses, stolen in the darkness; for it is but three in the morning—if that, and I can see

nothing but the broad wing of Night still stretched over land and lake. On either side of the *shalashka* there extends, I believe, a spur of moorland; behind is the forest: never far away in a Russian landscape.

I am still in the dreamy, semi-conscious condition superinduced by the long ride through gloom and silence which has intervened between supper last evening, twenty miles away, and my arrival here. The little ponies to whom we are indebted for our conveyance in perfect safety, through darkness which even the marvellous eyes of a Finn pony could hardly have penetrated, are some little way off behind us, hidden among the pine trees, waiting with the philosophic content of their tribe until it shall have pleased us to accomplish the object of our nightly pilgrimage and return to them.

The Finn pony, good, faithful soul, accepts everything at his master's hands with unquestioning docility and good temper; he is never surprised or annoyed; never taken aback by an obstacle in his way, but rather sets himself to seek out the best means to circumvent such obstacle. If his master happens to be drunk or asleep, this is a matter of supreme indifference to the little animal between the shafts of the inebriate's cart or beneath his saddle, for he is perfectly able and ready to manage the whole business of getting himself and his master safely home, without the slightest interference from the latter. One of the canniest and best of animals, one of the handiest of the servants of mankind and the most faithful and reliable of his friends, is the Finn pony;

and I am glad indeed to be able to put this fact forward, and thus do a good turn for a little-known hero among those who are not personally acquainted with his claims to that title.

Asleep at my side is Ivan, and Ivan is—I am delighted to say—too tired or too considerate to snore; I do not care which it is so long as he does not play his usual nocturnal tunes and spoil this dreamy unreality in which I am steeped. I am here to take notes; but what notes can a man take when, not only is there nothing to be seen, and nothing to be heard—save the gentle plash of the lake, but when he is not even convinced of the fact that he is himself, or at all events that he is awake and not dreaming? Such is my condition at present. Everything seems far, far away. My old self, my own history, even the point of time, three hours ago by the things we used to call watches, when I left the lodge and started upon my long, dark, silent ride—seems to be separated from me by an eternity of space and tranquil, incidentless existence. What shall I do to pass away the next hour or two? Sleep? Heaven forbid—the stillness is too good for that! Review my past? Heaven forbid again—nothing half so unpleasant! Whatever I do must be done in consciousness and must be connected with the immediate present or the future; no ghostly past shall be admitted into the sanctity of these hours. I shall recline and watch the dark plumage of night, and listen to her soft sounds of peace, and satisfaction, and maternity, as she broods over her nest and her little ones, until the hunter Day shall come and chase her from it, and drive her far away over the sea

to her sanctuary beyond the eastern gates of the world.

And, first, what a marvellous thing is this darkness! Far away at home, in bed in one's own room, the darkness is nothing; because the bearings of each object in the chamber are known to you whether in light or darkness. You can, if you please, sit up in bed and point with the hand and say: "There is the window, and there the door, and there the wardrobe," and so on. But here, where I lie and stare out into the blackness, I can determine nothing of the million animate or inanimate objects around me; I may people the darkness with what beings I please until the light arrives; it is an area in which imagination may disport itself freely and there is none can contradict its tales, for who knows what bantlings may not be concealed here beneath the shelter of Mother Night's extended wings? How do I know that a company of elves are not disporting themselves within a yard or two of my tent—as ignorant of my proximity as I am of theirs? How can I tell that some dreadful wild beast is not, at this instant, feeling his way down to the waters of the lake, in order to allay his thirst after having feasted upon our poor ponies, behind there in the wood? I can imagine an interview between a ferocious bear or two gaunt wolves and our faithful little quadrupeds, whose one idea in life is to do their duty and eat the breakfast, each day, that the gods provide. I can see the wolves arrive and find the ponies, and say:

"Good evening, my friends; we regret to say you are required for our supper."

"That's impossible," the ponies reply; "we are needed to carry our masters home to Dubrofka."

"Oh, *that's* all right," say those wolves, to whom a lie is an unconsidered trifle; "your masters sent us on to tell you it was all arranged!" Whereupon the ponies believe the tale and are ready to be eaten, because it is part of the day's work as ordained by their master, which is another way of spelling God in their language.

I think I know pretty well, however, what I should see, or some of the things I should see, if an electric light were suddenly switched on and illuminated the ground around my tent. Close at hand, here, on the shingly sand at the edge of the lake, there are seven or eight or more little grey and white sandpipers, fast asleep—perhaps standing on one leg apiece—among the stones, which are so like them in tint that it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other, even by daylight. Then, somewhere within eye-shot, though maybe half a mile off, there is a flock of cranes standing, like a body of sentinels met to compare notes, or relieve guard, also probably employing but one leg each to balance themselves upon during the hours of repose. I wonder whether they use a different leg on alternate nights, or whether the same one is told off for night duty each time? If so, it is very hard indeed for the one limb thus employed to receive no share of the repose enjoyed by the rest of the body, but to be obliged to toil on night after night, and day after day, while its lazy fellow-limb gets all the rest and only half the work. But such is life.

I am sure there are cranes near, for I heard their outposts give the alarm when we splashed through the marshy approach to this spot on our arrival here. Luckily Ivan knew the password, which was the grunt of an elk, as which animals—in search of a drink—we were permitted to come within the precincts of craneland without alarming the big grey birds to the departure point. In a very short time we shall hear them going through the business of waking up, and complaining of the hardship involved in keeping early hours. Then again, there are ducks, numbers of them, I feel sure of it, though not one of them has yet uttered a sound, because this place is a paradise for ducks, and Mother Night covers many a fond couple of them—paired by this time, and tasting the sweets of love and the lovely anticipations of nest-time and prospective flappers. Perhaps there is a pretty pair of tiny painted teal within a biscuit toss, little lovers nestling in a ridge of the coarse moorland, or amid the yellow grass which waves all around me, though I cannot see a blade. Perhaps they woke up when we came tramping by, and peered with long glossy neck outstretched, and beady eyes straining to pierce the gloom, on the very point of rising and disappearing together into the sanctuary of the darkness, but quieted down when we entered our *shalashka*, and ceased to approach their nestling place. Or a pair of snipe, or a ruff and a reeve, the former, at this season, a thing of exquisite beauty by reason of the Elizabethan ruff which gives him his name. Each male member of his family is furnished with one of these, and not one is like another in

hue, though all are beautiful. They are of every conceivable tint and variety, and certainly metamorphose the bird completely, giving him the handsomest possible appearance so long as they last; but alas! when the courting days are over, and the fair one has capitulated to the beautiful besieging party,—presto!—his principal beauty exists no more, and he becomes without his noble collar, the dullest and least interesting of birds. Hard on the hen bird, I call it, and savouring of unfairness. How would Angelina like it were Edwin—the luxuriance or rakishness of whose moustaches or beard had been instrumental in captivating her affections—were Edwin, I say, to shave off those appendages so soon as her fond heart was fairly his own? If Angelina threw him over, under the circumstances, I am sure no one could blame her. But if the darkness is mysterious and wonderful, and full of subtle, hidden potentialities, what shall we say of the marvellous silence? The repose of it is almost *too* great. I feel at every instant as though something or somebody *must* suddenly break out into sound. Either the heavens themselves must—this moment or the next—burst forth into a great, grand chorus of divine music, or a bird must sing, or a beast roar. There is something in the air which *must* out; any sound would do, but a loud hymn would be the most satisfying at this instant. What a silence it is! The tension is oppressive when you come to listen to it, yet, if you were in the humour, how you could lean your very soul against it, and rest—and rest! But to-night I must have sound soon—my nerves demand it—I cannot bear this hush much longer; if no

wolf howls within the next few minutes or no crane gives tongue, if no sandpiper whistles or duck quacks, I must wake Ivan and bid him talk. I am outside the beat of the willow-grouse, else he would have broken the oppressive spell an hour ago. Oh, for a chord of music! Oh, to hear on organ swell out, but for a moment, and then die away again; or to listen, close at hand, to the soul-deep song of the nightingale! Something is going to sound forth in a moment; I feel it—now—now! there!... I knew it must come just then, I had a presentiment of it. It is a snipe high up in the air, tracing his embroidery upon the sky-line overhead, and swooping at intervals with a sound as of a sheep's "baa;" this is the male snipe's curious way of wooing his mate; the "baa" comes dropping upon the ear at intervals of a few seconds. If that snipe had not come to save my reason I believe I should have shouted like a lunatic the next minute, which would assuredly have given Ivan a fit.

There goes a night-hawk, flitting by in the darkness like a ghost. Oh, what a voice! When he gives tongue I wish the silence back again. Go hence, noisy spirit of night, and hunt your moths elsewhere. No wonder you can scream loudly with a mouth like that, for when you open it your head seems to split in two pieces. There will be no more silence now; the night-jar has murdered sleep. Listen to the sentinel crane—or is it the boots or the chambermaid of the community awakening the family? He screams loudly to them, but they answer drowsily. "Have you not made a mistake in the time?" they are saying. "It cannot, surely,

be time to get up yet?" It is though, Madame Crane, and you must quickly let down that other leg and see about the breakfast. In a minute or two there will be such a clamour of conversation among the crane community that any person within a radius of five miles will be aware of their presence. I should say that the cry of the crane is a better traveller than any other sound I have heard. These birds require a good voice for communicating with one another during flight, for a large flock will often separate into many little bands of two or three while on the "march," and the straggling units must be picked up by nightfall. They must have strayed far away indeed if they cannot hear when their friends hail them at the full pitch of the crane-voice!

Now comes another sound. Far away at first, but nearing at each repetition. A sad, melancholy note, falling at intervals of a second or two. I have heard it often before, and wondered what it could be. I have heard it as they who produced it—whoever they might be—passed at night far above the sleeping city, and have felt a great pity for the sad wandering spirits flying and wailing through the darkness—whither? Perhaps they were the souls of the unbaptized, I have thought, which must wander, according to a Slavonic tradition, over land and sea for seven years, seeking and entreating to be baptized.

But Ivan does not allow my thoughts to wander into folk-lore this night. The cranes have awakened him, and he has heard this last mysterious sound also. It has excited him. His finger is at his lip, and he is listening. "What is it, Ivan? Speak!"

"Hush!" says Ivan. "This is what we came for!" (There *was* a *raison d'être* for our presence here; I forgot to mention this circumstance before.) "It is the geese!"

So this is the wild geese arriving! Then beat, heart, and strain, eyes, through the darkness, for this is an exciting moment. Not that there is the remotest chance of a shot at them at present; but it is enough if they alight close at hand and tarry, breakfasting, until daylight doth appear. How close the sound seems in the still air, and yet the birds may be a mile away! I can hear the slow, measured beat of their great wings as they approach, a solid phalanx, conversing quietly at short intervals. Surely they are very close indeed? They are all talking at once now. Perhaps they have seen the water and are excited, knowing that their journey is at an end. The beating of their wings seems almost to brush now the topmost boughs of the *shalashka*. I fancy I can feel a movement in the air, fanned by their big pinions. Thud! There goes the leader; he has alighted. Thud again—and yet again! It is true—they are here; they have come!

To judge from the noises which they are making, there must be a considerable number arrived—thirty or forty. They are chattering to one another happily and sociably, and uttering very different tones from those weird, melancholy cries of theirs while on the wing. They are no longer the lost spirits, the poor wandering unbaptized souls, but a party of merry travellers just arrived, so to speak, at the tavern where a comfortable breakfast is spread all ready for them. They are sure to do justice to it,

for this is their favourite feeding-ground—all over this marsh, so Ivan says. It is growing lighter. The conglomeration of sounds of life seems to have startled the Night, and reminded her that she must hurry away and attend to her duties in another hemisphere. She is gradually withdrawing her soft wings—those dark and motherly wings which have guarded so well her little ones for many a long silent hour. Go in peace, Mother Night, for the broad Sun will take good care of your bantlings during your absence. He will open upon them his "good gigantic smile," and they shall laugh and sing and be merry. Already I can catch a pale, sickly gleam of light, where the Waters look up to the grey sky and cry, "How long, Sun, how long the gloom and the cold?"

Be silent, lake, for soon the bridegroom will arrive, and you shall bedeck your waters with gems, and sparkle and glitter in leagues of dancing delight.

The sandpipers are merry and active, and dart from place to place in pairs and companies, whistling and rejoicing; they pass, now and again, so close to me that I can see them, and their whistling seems to come from the very air within the *shalashka*. And the snipe overhead, he never tires of his lightning-flight and his wheeling; and his "baa" is one of the sounds which continues without ceasing. There is yet another voice—a croak and then a whistle, and the same repeated farther away, and yet again in the distance: a woodcock, I believe, but I cannot see him. He is taking his spring-flight, followed or preceded by his spouse. They will flit across a given space, then alight and dally awhile

in pretty courtship, then return the way they came; and so again, *da capo*.

What are those tall posts yonder, outlining themselves against the paling sky? They are motionless, apparently—no, they move, as I stare through the uncertain light; they shorten, and lengthen, and bend, and dip, and glide slowly forward and bend again: it is the cranes, I am sure of it, for the clamour seems to come from that very spot. But where are the geese? I can hear them but they are still invisible, for they are feeding head down, and show no outline against the sky. Listen! another band of melancholy air-wanderers is approaching—how weird, how pathetic is the sound of their coming! Do they then so hate the trouble of travelling? or is it merely that they have discovered which tone and note of the gamut carries furthest through the ether, and that this happens to be the most doleful of all notes? They are very close now—stay! What is this? are they not going to alight and join the happy breakfast-party below there? Apparently not: they are overhead, they have passed, they have gone on—I can see them; they are travelling in wedge-like formation, a big triangle of beating wings that flog the air with measured sound and slow. How deliberate and yet how swift and powerful is their flight! Why did they not stop here? Their cry was answered from below, and yet they did not pause but continued on their course. Why was the invitation to breakfast not accepted? Who can say what is the etiquette of the wild goose? Perhaps it was not an invitation, but rather an intimation that this place—this tavern—was already occupied by

a rival community.

One or two of my former friends take wing and join the other party; no doubt they have some reason for this step, but what that reason is no man may conjecture. Perhaps they are scouts sent forward to find out who these new arrivals are; perhaps they have been badly treated here and have gone over to the enemy in order to "better themselves." Luckily the bulk of the party remain behind, however; and now, in the strengthening light, I can plainly see a body of stout grey fellows waddling about among the yellow grasses and the soaked moss, and feeding in the well-known manner of geese in any field in far-off England. Forty yards, I reckon, separates my *shalashka* from the nearest goose: one of them may wander nearer—it is worth while to be patient and to allow the light to intensify before hazarding a shot which will disperse every living creature within hearing, and end the delight with which this spring morning is stored.

Slowly the sky, due east, yellows and then reddens; it seems to be shooting up pink cloudlets, and letting them fly over heaven in order to herald the uprising of the King of Morning; for the Sun is coming—there can be no doubt of it! Redder and redder are the clouds that precede him; now the mists that veil his bed are growing golden and radiant, and fly right and left as he pushes his head through them and looks out upon the earth, and smiles in a broad pathway across the lake. As though by magic a thousand song birds instantly fill the air with hymns of praise; even the tall cranes cease their gabbling and gobbling, and look for a moment

at the apparition ere they resume the business of the hour. They are splashing about in shallow water, and each step they make throws a shower of bright gems around them. The geese—hungry no doubt after a long journey, and being naturally rather of a practical than of a romantic turn of mind, take but little notice of the Sun-god; he's all right, they think, and is sure to turn up at daybreak every morning, surely one need not interrupt one's breakfast to look up at him? The pace is too good! Look at the ducks—here a pair and there a pair—swimming out into the shining water, dipping their heads as they go and sending diamond-baths over the sheen of their necks and shoulders. They pursue one another, and quack and court, and bathe, and are perfectly and entirely happy and content, as who would not be in their place? A curlew sails by, calling to its mate, who is circling over the lake further to the left. And all the while the busy little company of sandpipers flit and whistle, and alight and run, and are off again on the wing—life is all movement and 'go' for them; they cannot be still.

There is an osprey! He is floating motionless in air, high over the lake. He, too, is thinking of breakfast. Soon he will drop like a bolt from heaven, disappear entirely or partially in the wave, and in a moment reappear with his meal safely held in those business-like talons of his. There he goes—splash! he has missed his mark. A cry of rage, and a circle or two over the water, and he is aloft again—hanging like an impending doom over the bright lake. He will not miss again! But Ivan is touching my arm: I know what

he means: he means that I must blot out this picture of peace and life by sending a message of grim death and noisy ruin into the very midst of it. Let me wait awhile, Ivan, and watch. It is so little for you who live amid all this and can see it at any time; but it is so much to me—a dweller in towns, where there is no free, happy nature-life to watch and feast upon, and no daybreak save that of the London cat and the strident, brazen cock. Give me another hour of it, Ivan? No? Well, half an hour? But Ivan says "No;" the geese may depart at any moment, he whispers; shoot while you can! I have no doubt Ivan made a mental addition, "and don't be a sentimental English idiot;" but the former words were all I was permitted to hear. So there is nothing for it: I must shoot; I must, with my own hand, blot out all this beauty, and smudge the picture which Morning has painted for my delight—and all to see a grey goose flutter and die who is now so busy and happy! The game is not worth the candle; but it must be done! One shot as they stand, says pitiless Ivan, and another as they rise—unless I prefer to hazard a cartridge after one of yonder cranes. Crane me no cranes: it is goose or nothing; give me the gun, Ivan!

There! the deed is done, for good or for evil. The goose who stood to receive my shot lived on, and I trust still lives; his feathers are thick and tough, and I hope in mercy that if he is hit at all his plumage has turned aside or suffocated the shot, and that he is not much hurt. He is gone, anyhow, flying strongly. The goose which rose to receive fire will rise no more. He is dead; he will utter never more his sad pilgrim-notes; he will feed no more in

these pleasant pastures. Go and pick him up, Ivan, and he shall be cooked and tentatively eaten, and perhaps pronounced very nice, and perhaps condemned as very nasty.

Now turn and see what we have done. The last crane has taken wing—running a few yards and jumping clumsily into the air, rather like a cyclist mounting his machine. He will fly a hundred yards before those long legs of his are comfortably stowed away! What a slow flight it seems, yet it carries him wonderfully far away from us in a short time!

And the ducks? Gone also; circling high in air, taking stock of us. When they have made up their minds that we are bad characters and not to be trusted, they will head for a distant point and disappear. The curlew is far away, so is the osprey; the sandpipers are still in the neighbourhood, they are too inquisitive to go far from us; they must needs watch us and find out all about us first. And away there in the bright distance floats, receding, the triangle of geese—one less than it came, and one, perhaps, in pain and suffering, though Heaven forbid that this should be so.

All this we have done, friend Ivan, with our banging and bloodshed! See what a transformation scene the act of man works, in an instant, upon a lovely landscape? Of life he makes death; of busy, happy places, full of colours and of sounds, and of song and of joy, he makes a barren waste, with himself the sole living creature remaining to look upon the face of it! Let us go home, Ivan, we shall see no more of bird-life this morning; take up your poor grey victim and come along—the place will be

the better and the happier for our departure, and perhaps, after a while, all its evicted tenants, save one, may return again to their own.

But Ivan only remarks that I ought to have shot that first goose in the head, and then we should have had two instead of one. Then he scratches his own head, gazes long and intently over the sparkling waters of the lake in the direction where the departed geese are now but a dark smudge in the distant sky, spits on the ground in contempt of muff-shots and lost opportunities, and strides away towards the ponies. As we disappear in the forest I look back and see some ducks returning, and hear the sandpipers whistle us a taunting farewell! Amen! No one wants us here: they are all happier without us.

CHAPTER III
A DAY AFTER CRAWFISH

There are certain days of one's boyhood which have made so deep an impression that they seem to stand out like mountain peaks in the misty plains of the memory, clear and distinct against the sky-line, when all else is dim and hazy and distorted by distance. One of these landmarks in the early life of the writer is a certain day, long years ago—though the recollection of every detail of it is as green as though it all happened but yesterday—when, in company with two or three kindred spirits, he made his first grand expedition after crawfish. It was summer—the summer holidays: holidays long looked forward to as to be among the most delightful that ever boy spent; for they were to be passed in Mourino, the paradise of our youthful imaginations, where the long Russian days were not half long enough for the multitude of delights to be crammed into each, there being "more to do" at Mourino, as we always thought, than anywhere in England, seaside or otherwise. As a matter of fact, the northern haven of our schoolboy desires was the very place for boys home from an English public school, and fond of healthy outdoor pursuits and recreations. There was a river at the bottom of the garden in which fish of many kinds might be lured to their doom; there was shooting, in a mild way; there was riding *ad lib.*, if galloping

about the country on the spiky backs of the little Finn ponies of the place can be dignified by that name; there was boating, of course, and canoeing, at our very doors, as well as the usual English games which the true Briton takes with him however far afield he may roam. No wonder then that Mourino was the place in which we preferred, *par excellence*, to pass our summer holidays; for, as I say, the days were not long enough to contain all the joys to be crammed into them.

There were crawfish to be had at the bottom of the garden, but these were neither sufficiently large nor sufficiently numerous to tempt us to engage very frequently in their capture. When we wanted crawfish of a size to do their captors credit, we knew well enough where to go for them, just as well as the giant crawfish themselves knew which part of the river suited them best as their headquarters. It was, however, some little distance to the favourite haunt of the monsters, a matter of ten miles or so; a journey not to be undertaken lightly over the unspeakable roads of the neighbourhood, so that we did not very often disturb the scaly warriors in the cool depths of their chosen pleasure-grounds; when we did organise an excursion, therefore, in their honour we fully intended to "do the thing in style," and to create some considerable gaps among the ranks of their best and mightiest. When a day was to be devoted to the capture of big crawfish at Sairki, preparations were made over-night in order that no time should be wasted on the morrow; the usual miscalculation was made as to the number of sandwiches

required—food sufficient for an entire regiment was invariably provided for us, yet I cannot recall that we ever brought any back. The stock-in-trade of the complete crawfisher, a strong hand-net and a pound or two of slightly high meat, was in readiness for each of us; our pike rods and tackle were seen to; the most particular instructions were issued as to our awakening as soon as daylight should appear; the vehicles, or rather their peasant owners, were hunted up for the hundredth and last time and warned, with all solemnity, as to the awful consequences that unpunctuality would bring down upon their heads, and then we all four went to bed and wished for day.

When morning came—the particular morning I am now recalling—things were propitious. Two *telyegi* stood awaiting our pleasure at the door, each with its pair of small Finn ponies ready harnessed and impatiently whisking away the horseflies with their long tails. The *telyegi*, I may explain, are springless carts upon four wheels. They are provided with so-called "cushions," which consist of a square bag of sacking with a certain amount of hay inside it. The sensations of the traveller who has once been bumped about in a *telyega* over Russian roads are memorable—indeed, I have spent the rest of my days since my boyhood in wondering how in the world I managed to remain "all in one piece" throughout the awful joltings to which my body was submitted during those *telyega* days. Has the reader ever seen a Russian country road? It is not a road at all, as we are accustomed to understand the term, but a mere succession of deep and

wide holes worn in the natural sandy soil. The Finn ponies think nothing of such trifling drawbacks, however, and pursue their headlong course without regard to the feelings of the evil-entreated passengers behind them. Perhaps the good-natured creatures experience a mischievous delight in thus "taking it out" of those who weary their flesh by causing them to drag a heavy load at breakneck speed through all the heat and dust and breathlessness of a Russian summer day. The pair are harnessed in an original manner; one, the better trotter of the two, is between shafts, while his companion canters alongside, attached, in a happy-go-lucky way, to the vehicle by means of a couple of loose ropes, but otherwise free to do pretty much as he pleases, consequently he is sometimes close enough to his comrade to make that animal, if irritably inclined, put back his ears and snap at him as a gentle reminder that he is taking liberties, and sometimes a yard or two away, frisking over puddles or shying all over the road on his own account. When a pit of more than the average depth is encountered, both horses will jump it in preference to running down to the bottom and up again, and at such a moment the fate of the passenger in the cart behind is melancholy. He is tossed up into the air for all the world like a spun coin, sharing also the uncertain destiny of that coin as to the manner of his descent—whether "heads or tails." It must not be for one moment supposed that we, in the exuberance of our happiness, and in the all-accepting, unquestioning, all-enjoying spirit of the British schoolboy, cared a farthing for the depth

or width of the very vilest hole that time and horseshoes ever wore in a Russian road; on the contrary, we loved the sensation of being sent flying up into the air every other minute, and if we came down upon the top of one another or of the luckless driver on his hard box-seat, or even into the six-inch dust of the road in the rear of the *telyega*, why, I believe we liked it all the better. As every one knows, a special Providence watches over drunken men and school-boys, and I have often reflected that we must have caused our particular bodyguard a terrible amount of anxiety, and kept it very hard at work during these wild *telyega* drives of ours at Mourino, for we were racing, most of the time, with the wheels of the two carts interlaced, the horses—all four of them—galloping *ventre à terre*, and the demented Russian drivers—quite as far gone in lunacy as our British selves—shouting at the top of their voices and bumping about half in air and half in cart, like a couple of demon Jehus let loose for the occasion, and for our especial and particularly complete destruction; and yet I cannot remember that any one was ever hurt! Truly that special Providence of ours was well up to its arduous duties, and performed them admirably.

Sairki was reached at last, and the horses put up at the village. As for us, we unpacked the carts before a group of admiring Finnish children; for Sairki, like many a score of other villages within twenty miles of the Tsar's capital, is inhabited exclusively by Finns, who cannot speak a word of Russian. Hand-nets and rods were got out; the crawfish meat was produced (extremely

unsavoury by this time, owing to the intense heat of the day, but all the better for that from the point of view of the crawfish, who likes his dinner to be attractive to his olfactory senses); huge fishing-baskets were strapped upon our shoulders, containing our food at present, but to be used for another purpose soon, and away we headed for the riverside. The Ochta is a tributary of the Neva, into which it flows close to St. Petersburg—a pretty little river as one would wish to see, if he cares for the sort of scenery that Ruysdael loved to depict. Down by the river there grew countless clusters of leafy young birches and aspens, and to these our attention was first directed, for from them we must draw one of the essential items of our stock-in-trade. Provided with large knives as we were, we soon possessed ourselves of the necessary number of long sticks, about a dozen each, and stripped the leaves off to the end. In order to explain the exact object of these sticks, I will now, with the reader's permission, make him acquainted with the *modus operandi* of the scientific crawfisher. I have said already that a lump of meat is required. This is cut into small sections of about an inch and a half square, one of which is firmly tied to the end of each stick with a piece of string or "machalka," the birch-bark ribbon known to gardeners. This is the nastiest part of the proceedings, and it is better to get a friend to do it for you if you can. The preliminaries being thus completed, the next thing is to take the twelve baited sticks one by one and place them in the water, the meat downwards and resting on the bottom, while the top end of the stick is allowed

to project a foot or so above the surface and to rest against the bank. The sticks must not be placed too close to one another. The proper distance is about ten yards between each. It will be remarked by the intelligent reader that the crawfisher thus requires a considerable portion of the stream to himself, for no two sportsmen can find scope for their energies within a hundred and fifty yards or so; while a party of four or five will occupy the best part of half-a-mile of bank. When the sticks are all placed scientifically, according to the fisher's knowledge of the spots likely to be favoured of crawfish, the sportsman must possess his soul in patience for a quarter of an hour at least, in order to give time to the gentlemen of the claws to realise the good fortune that has come their way in the shape of a lump of meat dropped apparently from the skies. After the interval indicated, the hand-net is taken and the sticks are visited one by one. Now comes the moment when the skill and science of the performer is put to the test. The water is not very clear. It is not muddy, but the colour is dark—a brownish tint—caused, as we always believed, by the quantities of iron in it, so that we cannot see to the bottom or near it. Hence, the first part of the proceedings must be done in faith and hope, and with an extremity of caution and lightness of hand not attainable without considerable practice in the art of crawfishing. The stick is taken firmly in the left hand, while the right grasps the handle of the net. Then the stick is raised from the bottom, but so gradually and imperceptibly that the movement is, presumably, unnoticeable down below. The baited

stick is thus slowly and carefully lifted inch by inch, until the lump of meat at the end of it is visible. If a crawfish is clinging on to the meat the stick is raised no higher, for the hand-net now comes into play. This latter instrument is brought cautiously up against the current, placed deftly underneath the clinging feaster, the stick and the net are raised together, and as the crawfish reaches the surface of the water, and at length realises that he had better quit this perambulating breakfast, he lets go, only to discover that he is too late and has been outwitted, and that his place henceforth is in the fishing-basket, or a watering-pot half full of water, until such time as he is taken out and boiled for the use of man. It is very simple, and were the crawfish not the most criminally greedy and careless creature in the world, he would never allow himself to be captured in so ridiculously elementary a way. But it is his nature to, and no amount of experience will teach him the foolishness of his conduct, for you may, if you please, catch and return to his element the self-same crawfish a dozen times in an afternoon. In a good place, the fisher may find two or three, or even more, of these hungry fellows clinging to the same piece of meat, and, if clever enough, may easily capture the lot at one swoop.

Such, in brief, is the *modus operandi* of the crawfisher. We all knew the way to do it, we of the Sairki party; and the tying on of the bait and the placing of the sticks were finished as quickly as these operations could be performed with a due regard to efficiency, lots having decided the portion of bank to be worked

by each of us. Then came the quarter of an hour during which it is the etiquette of the crawfisher to allow his prey to discover and to enjoy undisturbed the refreshments provided for him. I do not know whether schoolboys possess souls—presumably they are provided with a special schoolboy quality—but in any case we, at least, were entirely unable to possess those souls in patience, and that little quarter of an hour was spent by each of us upon his own portion of bank under a carking sense of grievance. We felt that we were conceding too much to the crawfish. Personally I passed my fifteen minutes at full length in the long grass, within a yard or two of the water, and any one but a schoolboy would have been glad enough of the opportunity to lie thus beneath the brilliant northern August sky upon a bed of wild flowers, which, if one chose to sit still and pick one specimen of each, would have filled his hands with a hundred delicate stems without the necessity to stretch beyond an easy arm-reach. I have never seen any place that equalled the country about Mourino for the wealth and variety of its wild flowers, or the luxuriance of the ground-berries in the woods—Arctic strawberry, bilberry, cranberry, raspberry, and a berry which I remember as making the most delicious bitter-sweet jam, called brousnika. As for the flowers, the anemone is the only representative of our familiar spring visitors, but the summer months are gorgeous with every blossom that our own English fields can boast, with few exceptions, besides lilies of the valley, linnæa borealis, a lovely creeping plant with a tiny starry flower; "star of Bethlehem," and other varieties

not often seen in this country.

But the longest and most vexatious wait must come to an end in its season, and at last the crawling minutes had sped by and we were at liberty to commence the business of the day. Oh, the delightful excitement of the first visit to each stick! How my heart beat, I remember, as I grasped the first of them, and with somewhat trembling fingers raised it cautiously a few inches towards the surface, peering the while into the dark brown depths to catch the earliest possible glimpse of the desired visitor. The water seemed extra dark in colour to-day, to spite one, and the stick had to be slowly lifted to within a foot or so of the keen eyes watching above it before the meat could be distinguished at the end of it. There it is at last—now then! Is that the claw of a crawfish sticking on to it, or not? It may be, but if so it is a tiny one. Carefully the hand-net is drawn towards the bait, up the stream, for otherwise the current bulges the network inside out, and deftly the string-prison is placed underneath the end of the stick—there! If it is a crawfish I have got him safe. Up comes stick, and up comes net with it to the surface—alas, no! It was but the split end of a piece of "machalka," and not the claw of a crawfish. Down goes the stick again to its place at the bottom of the stream, and away go I to the next one. Here a strong waggling at the end of it when it is raised from the bottom tells me that undoubtedly a guest is availing himself of my hospitality; caution must be observed—yea, caution must be doubly cautious. It is a big fellow by the feel, and he is still tugging away as I raise

the stick with breathless care towards the surface. Now I can see the bait, or rather I can see the place where the meat may be supposed to be; for there is nothing visible but a dark mass which hides the bait from view. Now comes the tug of war. The current is rather strong, and the exertion of bringing the broom-handled net against it is considerable; but this is not a moment to think of difficulties. Down comes fate upon the thoughtless reveller; a turn of the wrist with the right, and a swift upward motion of the left arm, and anything there may chance to be busying itself at the baited end of the stick is my own. What do I see? A big crawfish? It is indeed a big crawfish, and with it a second and yet a third, true Sairki monsters, all three of them, seething and glistening in their dark brown armour at the bottom of the net, and laying hold angrily of each other wherever they can fasten a claw, as though each were chastising his companions for having brought him into this mess. They must be taken up carefully, one by one, and held by the back, else those cruel-looking claws will lay hold of one's fingers and inflict a pinch which will be a memorable circumstance for some little while. These three fellows, exactly like lobsters made in a smaller mould, so far as the unscientific eye can judge, are about six to seven inches in length from head to end of tail; one of them has one large claw and the other quite a miniature member, as though it had never emerged from its baby stage; the truth being that the warrior has lost one of his natural weapons, probably in a fight with a rival, and that a beneficent nature is providing him with a substitute

as quickly as can be managed. If I place one of these creatures upon the ground, instead of in the watering-pot prepared for his reception, he will instantly set off backwards in the direction of the river. I have tried this at all distances from the water, placing a crawfish as far as several hundred yards from his native element, and pointing him in the wrong direction; yet in defiance of all obstacles, the poor fellow invariably and without hesitation made straight for that point of the compass in which instinct told him lay the stream which was his home. And so was made the round of the sticks; one producing nothing, another a single tiny victim, a third four at once, and so on to the twelfth and last; the net results of the first round being seventeen crawfish of a fair average size. Then the proceedings began again, *da capo*. The sport generally improved up to about the fifth round, while the inhabitants of the stream were gradually becoming aware of the feast spread for them at easy distances all down the river. After the sixth round the numbers fell off again, until, eventually, a second portion of the bank had to be worked, the original lie having been exhausted. The largest haul that I ever made from one stick at one swoop was six crawfish, all good ones, and one of them a giant. We had agreed to put back the babies, the very tiniest, that is; though we invariably took a great number home with us which we did not intend to eat, in order to let them go at the bottom of the garden as stock for our own portion of the river, and to afford us sport when they should have grown to more respectable dimensions. They always accommodated themselves

to circumstances, and remained contentedly where they had been put in.

When we grew tired of capturing our crawfish in the orthodox manner we adopted another plan; this involved, first, the finding of a shallow place in which, when found, we waded about with a short stick in one hand and a net in the other. When we caught sight of a crawfish wandering along or trying to hide the too expansive volume of his tail beneath a stone designed to conceal a junior member of the family only, all we had to do was to suddenly place the stick in front of his nose, at the same instant holding the net immediately behind him, when the simple creature would promptly commit suicide by running backwards into prison.

Then there was trolling for pike in the quiet pools when we were weary of the crawfish. There were good pike to be had at Sairki, and their favourite food was spoons—so, at least, one would suppose from the voracity with which they endeavoured to devour those we offered for their destruction. Many an exciting half-hour was afforded us by the good-natured Sairki pike; they generally got away in the end, but always thoroughly entered into the fun of the thing and obliged us, while the game lasted, by pretending to be doing their best to escape our unscientific attempts to bring them to book. Probably they could have rid themselves of the bait and us at any moment if they had been so disposed, but they were too good-natured. Now and then we caught one, but very rarely.

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