

Roberts Charles G. D. Sir

The House in the Water: A Book of Animal Stories



Charles Roberts
The House in the Water:
A Book of Animal Stories

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23171419

The House in the Water: A Book of Animal Stories:

Содержание

The House in the Water	4
CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	19
CHAPTER IV	27
CHAPTER V	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	49

Roberts Charles G. D.

The House in the Water:

A Book of Animal Stories

The House in the Water

CHAPTER I

The Sound in the Night

UPON the moonlit stillness came suddenly a far-off, muffled, crashing sound. Just once it came, then once again the stillness of the wilderness night, the stillness of vast, untraversed solitude. The Boy lifted his eyes and glanced across the thin reek of the camp-fire at Jabe Smith, who sat smoking contemplatively. Answering the glance, the woodsman muttered "old tree fallin'," and resumed his passive contemplation of the sticks glowing keenly in the fire. The Boy, upon whom, as soon as he entered the wilderness, the taciturnity of the woodsfolk descended as a garment, said nothing, but scanned his companion's gaunt face with a gravely incredulous smile.

So wide-spread and supreme was the silence that five seconds

after that single strange sound had died out it seemed, somehow, impossible to believe it had ever been. The light gurgle of the shallow and shrunken brook which ran past the open front of the travellers' "lean-to" served only to measure the stillness. Both Jabe and the Boy, since eating their dinner, had gradually forgotten to talk. As the moon rose over the low, fir-crested hills they had sunk into reverie, watching the camp-fire die down.

At last, with a sort of crisp whisper a stick, burnt through the middle, fell apart, and a flicker of red flame leaped up. The woodsman knocked out his pipe, rose slowly to his feet, stretched his gaunt length, and murmured, "Reckon we might as well turn in."

"That's all right for you, Jabe," answered the Boy, rising also, tightening his belt, and reaching for his rifle, "but I'm going off to see what I can see. Night's the time to see things in the woods."

Jabe grunted non-committally, and began spreading his blanket in the lean-to. "Don't forgit to come back for breakfast, that's all," he muttered. He regarded the Boy as a phenomenally brilliant hunter and trapper spoiled by sentimental notions.

To the Boy, whose interest in all pertaining to woodcraft was much broader and more sympathetic than that of his companion, Jabe's interpretation of the sound of the falling tree had seemed hasty and shallow. He knew that there was no better all-round woodsman in these countries than Jabe Smith; but he knew also that Jabe's interest in the craft was limited pretty strictly to his activities as hunter, trapper and lumberman. Just now he was all

lumberman. He was acting as what is called a "timber-cruiser," roaming the remoter and less-known regions of the wilderness to locate the best growths of spruce and pine for the winter's lumbering operations, and for the present his keen faculties were set on the noting of tree growths, and water-courses, and the lay of the land for the getting out of a winter's cutting. On this particular cruise the Boy—who, for all the disparity in their years and the divergence in their views, was his most valued comrade—had accompanied him with a special object in view. The region they were cruising was one which had never been adequately explored, and it was said to be full of little unnamed, unmapped lakes and streams, where, in former days, the Indians had had great beaver hunting.

When the sound of the falling tree came to his ears across the night-silence, the Boy at once said to himself, "Beavers, at work!" He said it to himself, not aloud, because he knew that Jabe also, as a trapper, would be interested in beavers; and he had it in his mind to score a point on Jabe. Noiseless as a lynx in his soft-soled "larrigans," he ascended the half-empty channel of the brook, which here strained its shrunken current through rocks and slate-slabs, between steep banks. The channel curved steadily, rounding the shoulder of a low ridge. When he felt that he had travelled somewhat less than half a mile, he came out upon a bit of swampy marsh, beyond which, over the crest of a low dam, spread the waters of a tranquil pond shining like a mirror in the moonlight.

The Boy stopped short, his heart thumping with excitement and anticipation. Here before him was what he had come so far to find. From his books and from his innumerable talks with hunter and trapper, he knew that the dam and the shining, lonely pond were the work of beavers. Presently he distinguished amid the sheen of the water a tiny, grassy islet, with a low, dome-shaped, stick-covered mound at one end of it. This, plainly, was a beaver house, the first he had ever seen. His delighted eyes, observing it at this distance, at once pronounced it immeasurably superior to the finest and most pretentious muskrat-house he had ever seen—a very palace, indeed, by comparison. Then, a little further up the pond, and apparently adjoining the shore, he made out another dome-shaped structure, broader and less conspicuous than the first, and more like a mere pile of sticks. The pond, which was several acres in extent, seemed to him an extremely spacious domain for the dwellers in these two houses.

Presently he marked a black trail, as it were, moving down in the middle of the radiance from the upper end of the pond. It was obviously the trail of some swimmer, but much too broad, it seemed, to be made by anything so small as a beaver. It puzzled him greatly. In his eagerness he pushed noiselessly forward, seeking a better view, till he was within some thirty feet of the dam. Then he made out a small dark spot in the front of the trail,—evidently a beaver's head; and at last he detected that the little swimmer was carrying a bushy branch, one end held in his mouth while the rest was slung back diagonally across his shoulders.

The Boy crept forward like a cat, his gray eyes shining with expectancy. His purpose was to gain a point where he could crouch in ambush behind the dam, and perhaps get a view of the lake-dwellers actually at work. He was within six or eight feet of the dam, crouching low (for the dam was not more than three feet in height), when his trained and cunning ear caught a soft swirling sound in the water on the other side of the barrier. Instantly he stiffened to a statue, just as he was, his mouth open so that not a part of his quickened breath might be audible. The next moment the head of a beaver appeared over the edge of the dam, not ten feet away, and stared him straight in the face.

The beaver had a stick of alder in its mouth, to be used, no doubt, in some repairing of the dam. The Boy, all in gray as he was, and absolutely motionless, trusted to be mistaken for one of the gnarled, gray stumps with which the open space below the dam was studded. He had read that the beaver was very near-sighted, and on that he based his hopes, though he was so near, and the moonlight so clear, that he could see the bright eyes of the newcomer staring straight into his with insistent question. Evidently, the story of that near-sightedness had not been exaggerated. He saw the doubt in the beaver's eye fade gradually into confidence, as the little animal became convinced that the strange gray figure was in reality just one of the stumps. Then, the industrious dam-builder began to climb out upon the crest of the dam, dragging his huge and hairless tail, and glancing along as if to determine where the stick which he carried would

do most good. At this critical moment, when the eager watcher felt that he was just about to learn the exact methods of these wonderful architects of the wild, a stick in the slowly settling mud beneath his feet broke with a soft, thick-muffled snap.

So soft was the sound that it barely reached the Boy's ears. To the marvellously sensitive ears of the beaver, however, it was a warning more than sufficient. It was a noisy proclamation of peril. Swift as a wink of light, the beaver dropped his stick and dived head first into the pond. The Boy straightened up just in time to see him vanish. As he vanished, his broad, flat, naked tail hit the water with a cracking slap which resounded over the pond like a pistol-shot. It was reëchoed by four or five more splashes from the upper portion of the pond. Then all was silence again, and the Boy realized that there would be no more chance that night for him to watch the little people of the House in the Water. Mounting the firm-woven face of the dam and casting his eyes all over the pond, he satisfied himself that two houses which he had first seen were all that it contained. Then, resisting the impulse of his excitement, which was to explore all around the pond's borders at once, he resolutely turned his face back to camp, full of thrilling plans for the morrow.

CHAPTER II

The Battle in the Pond

AT breakfast, in the crisp of the morning, while yet the faint mists clung over the brook and the warmth of the camp-fire was attractive, the Boy proclaimed his find. Jabe had asked no questions, inquisitiveness being contrary to the backwoodsman's code of etiquette; but his silence had been full of interrogation. With his mouth half-full of fried trout and cornbread, the Boy remarked:

"That was no windfall, Jabe, that noise we heard last night!"

"So?" muttered the woodsman, rather indifferently.

Without a greater show of interest than that the Boy would not divulge his secret. He helped himself to another flaky pink section of trout, and became seemingly engrossed in it. Presently the woodsman spoke again. He had been thinking, and had realized that his prestige had suffered some kind of blow.

"Of course," drawled the woodsman sarcastically, "it wa'n't no windfall. I jest said that to git quit of bein' asked questions when I was sleepy. I knowed all the time it was beaver!"

"Yes, Jabe," admitted the Boy, "it was beavers. I've found a big beaver-pond just up the brook a ways—a pond with two big beaver-houses in it. I've found it—so I claim it as mine, and there ain't to be any trapping on that pond. Those are my beavers, Jabe, every one of them, and they sha'n't be shot or trapped!"

“I don’t know how fur yer injunction’d hold in law,” said Jabe dryly, as he speared a thick slab of bacon from the frying-pan to his tin plate. “But fur as I’m concerned, it’ll hold. An’ I reckon the boys of the camp this winter’ll respect it, too, when I tell ’em as how it’s your own partic’lar beaver pond.”

“Bless your old heart, Jabe!” said the Boy. “That’s just what I was hoping. And I imagine anyway there’s lots more beaver round this region to be food for the jaws of your beastly old traps!”

“Yes,” acknowledged Jabe, rising to clear up, “I struck three likely ponds yesterday, as I was cruisin over to west’ard of the camp. I reckon we kin spare you the sixteen or twenty beaver in ‘Boy’s Pond!’”

The Boy grinned appreciation of the notable honour done him in the naming of the pond, and a little flush of pleasure deepened the red of his cheeks. He knew that the name would stick, and eventually go upon the maps, the lumbermen being a people tenacious of tradition and not to be swerved from their own way.

“Thank you, Jabe!” he said simply. “But how do you know there are sixteen or twenty beaver in my pond?”

“You said there was two houses,” answered the woodsman. “Well, we reckon always from eight to ten beaver to each house, bein’ the old couple, and then three or four yearlin’s not yet kicked out to set up housekeeping fer themselves, and three or four youngsters of the spring’s whelping. Beavers’ good parents, an’ the family holds together long’s the youngsters needs it. Now

"I'm off. See you here at noon, fer grub!" and picking up his axe he strode off to southwestward of the camp to investigate a valley which he had located the day before.

Left alone, the Boy hurriedly set the camp in order, rolled up the blankets, washed the dishes, and put out the last of the fire. Then, picking up his little Winchester, which he always carried,—though he never used it on anything more sensitive than a bottle or a tin can,—he retraced his steps of the night before, up-stream to the beaver pond.

Knowing that the beavers do most of their work, or, at least, most of their above-water work, at night, he had little hope of catching any of them abroad by daylight. He approached the dam, nevertheless, with that noiseless caution which had become a habit with him in the woods, a habit which rendered the woods populous for him and teeming with interest, while to more noisy travellers they seemed quite empty of life. One thing his study of the wilderness had well taught him, which was that the wild kindreds do not by any means always do just what is expected of them, but rather seem to delight in contradicting the naturalists.

When he reached the edge of the open, however, and peered out across the dam, there was absolutely nothing to break the shining morning stillness. In the clear sunlight the dam, and the two beaver-houses beyond, looked larger and more impressive than they had looked the night before. There was no sign of life anywhere about the pond, except a foraging fish-hawk winging above it, with fierce head stretched low in the search for some

basking trout or chub.

Following the usual custom of the wild kindreds themselves, the Boy stood motionless for some minutes behind his thin screen of bushes before revealing himself frankly in the open. His patient watch being unrewarded, he was on the very verge of stepping forth, when from the tail of his eye he caught a motion in the shallow bed of the brook, and ducked himself. He was too wary to turn his head; but a moment later a little brown sinuous shape came into his field of view. It was an otter, making his way up-stream.

The otter moved with unusual caution, glancing this way and that and seeming to take minute note of all he saw. At the foot of the dam he stopped, and investigated the structure with the air of one who had never seen it before. So marked was this air that the Boy concluded he was a stranger to that region,—perhaps a wanderer from the head of the Ottanoosis, some fifteen miles southward, driven away by the operations of a crew of lumbermen who were building a big lumber-camp there. However that might be, it was evident that the brown traveller was a newcomer, an outsider. He had none of the confident, businesslike manner which a wild animal wears in moving about his own range.

When he had stolen softly along the whole base of the dam, and back again, nosing each little rivulet of overflow, the otter seemed satisfied that this was much like all other beaver dams. Then he mounted to the crest and took a prolonged survey of the

stretch of water beyond. Nothing unusual appearing, he dived cleanly into the pond, about the point where, as the Boy guessed, there would be the greatest depth of water against the dam. He was apparently heading straight up for the inlet of the pond, on a path which would take him within about twenty-five or thirty yards of the main beaver-house on the island. As soon as he had vanished under the water the Boy ran forward, mounted the crest of the dam, and peered with shaded eyes to see if he could mark the swimmer's progress.

For a couple of minutes, perhaps, the surface of the pond gave no indication of the otter's whereabouts. Then, just opposite the main beaver-house, there was a commotion in the water, the surface curled and eddied, and the otter appeared in great excitement. He dived again immediately; and just as he did so the head of a huge beaver poked up and snatched a breath. Where the two had gone under, the surface of the pond now fairly boiled; and the Boy, in his excitement over this novel and mysterious contest, nearly lost his balance on the frail crest of the dam. A few moments more and both adversaries again came to the surface, now at close grips and fighting furiously. They were followed almost at once by a second beaver, smaller than the first, who fell upon the otter with insane fury. It was plain that the beavers were the aggressors. The Boy's sympathies were all with the otter, who from time to time tried vainly to escape from the battle; and once he raised his rifle. But he bethought him that the otter, after all, whatever his intentions, was a trespasser; and that the beavers

had surely a right to police their own pond. He remembered an old Indian's having told him that there was always a blood feud between the beaver and the otter; and how was he to know how just the cause of offence, or the stake at issue? Lowering his gun he stared in breathless eagerness.

The otter, however, as it proved, was well able to take care of himself. Suddenly rearing his sleek, snaky body half out of the water, he flashed down upon the smaller beaver and caught it firmly behind the ear with his long, deadly teeth—teeth designed to hold the convulsive and slippery writhings of the largest salmon. With mad contortions the beaver struggled to break that fatal grip. But the otter held inexorably, shaking its victim as a terrier does a rat, and paid no heed whatever to the slashing assaults of the other beaver. The water was lashed to such a turmoil that the waves spread all over the pond, washing up to the Boy's feet on the crest of the dam, and swaying the bronze-green grasses about the house on the little island. Though, without a doubt, all the other citizens of the pond were watching the battle even more intently than himself, the Boy could not catch sight of so much as nose or ear. The rest of the spectators kept close to the covert of grass tuft and lily pad.

All at once the small beaver stiffened itself out convulsively on top of the water, turned belly up, and began to sink. At the same time the otter let go, tore free of his second and more dangerous adversary, and swam desperately for the nearest point of shore. The surviving beaver, evidently hurt, made no effort to follow up

his victory, but paddled slowly to the house on the island, where he disappeared. Presently the otter gained the shore and dragged himself up. His glossy brown skin was gashed and streaming with blood, but the Boy gathered that his wounds were not mortal. He turned, stared fixedly at the beaver-house for several seconds as if unwilling to give in, then stole off through the trees to seek some more hospitable water. As he vanished, repulsed and maltreated, the Boy realized for the first time how hostile even the unsophisticated wilderness is to a stranger. Among the wild kindreds, even as among men, most things worth having are preempted.

When the Boy's excitement over this strange fight had calmed down, he set himself with keen interest to examining the dam. He knew that by this time every beaver in the pond was aware of his presence, and would take good care to keep out of sight; so there was no longer anything to be gained by concealment. Pacing the crest, he made it to be about one hundred feet in length. At the centre, and through a great part of its length, it was a little over three feet high, its ends diminishing gradually into the natural rise of the shores. The base of the dam, as far as he could judge, seemed to be about twelve feet in thickness, its upper face constructed with a much more gradual slope than the lower. The whole structure, which was built of poles, brush, stones, and earth, appeared to be very substantial, a most sound and enduring piece of workmanship. But along the crest, which was not more than a foot and a half in width, it was built with

a certain looseness and elasticity for which he was at a loss to account. Presently he observed, however, that this dam had no place of overflow for letting off the water. The water stood in the pond at a height that brought it within three or four inches of the crest. At this level he saw that it was escaping, without violence, by percolating through the toughly but loosely woven tissue of sticks and twigs. The force of the overflow was thus spread out so thin that its destructive effect on the dam was almost nothing. It went filtering, with little trickling noises, down over and through the whole lower face of the structure, there to gather again into a brook and resume its sparkling journey toward the sea.

The long upper slope of the dam was smoothly and thoroughly faced with clay, so that none of its framework showed through, save here and there the butt of a sapling perhaps three or four inches in diameter, which proclaimed the solidity of the foundations. The lower face, on the other hand, was all an inexplicable interlacing of sticks and poles which seemed at first glance heaped together at haphazard. On examination, however, the Boy found that every piece was woven in so firmly among its fellows that it took some effort to remove it. The more he studied the structure, the more his admiration grew, and his appreciation of the reasoning intelligence of its builders; and he smiled to himself a little controversial smile, as he thought how inadequate what men call instinct would be to such a piece of work as this.

But what impressed him most, as a mark of engineering skill and sound calculation on the part of the pond-people, was the

direction in which the dam was laid. At either end, where the water was shoal, and comparatively dead even in time of freshet, the dam ran straight, taking the shortest way. But where it crossed the main channel of the brook, and required the greatest strength, it had a pronounced upward curve to help it resist the thrust of the current. He contemplated this strong curve for some time; then, a glance at the sun reminding him that it was near noon, he took off his cap to the low-domed house in the water and made haste back to camp for dinner.

CHAPTER III

In the Under-water World

MEANWHILE, in the dark chamber and the long, dim corridors of the House in the Water there was great perturbation. The battle with the otter had been a tremendous episode in their industrious, well-ordered lives, and they were wildly excited over it. But much more important to them—to all but the big beaver who was now nursing his triumphant wounds—was the presence of Man in their solitude. Man had hitherto been but a tradition among them, a vague but alarming tradition. And now his appearance, yesterday and to-day, filled them with terror. That vision of the Boy, standing tall and ominous on the dam, and afterwards going forward and backward over it, pulling at it, apparently seeking to destroy it, seemed to portend mysterious disasters. After he was gone, and well gone, almost every beaver in the pond, not only from the main house but also from the lodge over on the bank, swam down and made a flurried inspection of the dam, without showing his head above water, to see if the structure on which they all depended had been tampered with. One by one, each on his own responsibility, they swam down and inspected the water-face; and one by one they swam back, more or less relieved in their minds.

All, of course, except the big beaver who had been in the fight. If it had not been for that vision of the Boy, he would

have crept out upon the dry grass of the little island and there licked and comforted his wounds in the comforting sunlight. Now, however, he dared not allow himself that luxury. His strong love of cleanliness made him reluctant to take his bleeding gashes into the house; but there was nothing else to be done. He was the head of the household, however, so there was none to gainsay him. He dived into the mouth of the shorter of the two entrances, mounted the crooked and somewhat steep passage, and curled himself upon the dry grass in one corner of the dark, secluded chamber. His hurts were painful, and ugly, but none of them deadly, and he knew he would soon be all right again. There was none of that foreknowledge of death upon him which sometimes drives a sick animal to abdicate his rights and crawl away by himself for the last great contest.

The room wherein the big beaver lay down to recover himself was not spacious nor particularly well ventilated, but in every other respect it was very admirably adapted to the needs of its occupants. Through the somewhat porous ceiling, a three-foot thickness of turf and sticks, came a little air, but no light. This, however, did not matter to the beavers, whose ears and noses were of more significance to them than their eyes. In floor area the chamber was something like five feet by six and a half, but in height not much more than eighteen inches. The floor of this snug retreat was not five inches above the level of the water in the passages leading in to it; but so excellently was it constructed as to be altogether free from damp. It was daintily clean, moreover;

and the beds of dry grass around the edges of the chamber were clean and fresh.

From this room the living, sleeping, and dining room of the beaver family, ran two passageways communicating with the outside world. Both of these were roofed over to a point well outside the walls of the house, and had their opening in the bottom of the pond, where the water was considerably more than three feet in depth. One of these passages was perfectly straight, about two feet in width, and built on a long, gradual slope. It was by this entrance that the house-dwellers were wont to bring in their food supplies, in the shape of sticks of green willow, birch and poplar. When these sticks were stripped clean of their bark, which was the beavers' chief nourishment, they were then dragged out again, and floated down to be used in the repair of the dam. The other passage, especially adapted to quick exit in case of danger from the way of the roof, was about as spacious as the first, but much shorter and steeper. It was crooked, moreover,—for a reason doubtless adequate to the architects, but obscure to mere human observers. The exits of both passages were always in open water, no matter how fierce the frosts of the winter, how thick the armour of ice over the surface of the pond. In the neighbourhood of the house were springs bubbling up through the bottom, and keeping the temperature of the pond fairly uniform throughout the coldest weather, so that the ice, at worst, never attained a thickness of more than a foot and a half, even though in the bigger lakes of

that region it might make to a depth of three feet and over.

While the wounded beaver lay in the chamber licking his honourable gashes, two other members of the family entered and approached him. In some simple but adequate speech it was conveyed to them that their presence was not required, and they retreated precipitately, taking different exits. One swam to the grassy edge of the islet, poked his head above water under the covert of some drooping weeds, listened motionless for some minutes, then wormed himself out among the long grasses and lay basking, hidden from all the world but the whirling hawk overhead. The other, of a more industrious mould, swam off toward the upper end of the pond where, as he knew, there was work to be done.

Still as was the surface of the pond, below the surface there was life and movement. Every little while the surface would be softly broken, and a tiny ripple would set out in widening circles toward the shore, starting from a small dark nose thrust up for a second. The casual observer would have said that these were fish rising for flies; but in fact it was the apprehensive beavers coming up to breathe, afraid to show themselves on account of the Boy. They were all sure that he had not really gone, but was in hiding somewhere, waiting to pounce upon them.

It was the inhabitants of the House in the Water who were moving about the pond, this retreat being occupied by their wounded and ill-humoured champion. The inhabitants of the other house, over on the shore, who had been interested but

remote spectators through all the strange events of the morning, were now in comfortable seclusion, resting till it should be counted a safe time to go about their affairs. Some were sleeping, or gnawing on sappy willow sticks, in the spacious chamber of their house, while others were in the deeper and more secret retreats of their two burrows high up in the bank, connecting with the main house by roomy tunnels partly filled with water. The two families were quite independent of each other, except for their common interest in keeping the great dam in repair. In work upon the dam they acted not exactly in harmony but in amicable rivalry, all being watchful and all industrious.

In the under-water world of the beaver pond the light from the cloudless autumn sun was tawny gold, now still as crystal, now quivering over the bottom in sudden dancing meshes of fine shadow as some faint puff of air wrinkled the surface. When the dam was first built the pond had been of proper depth—from three to four feet—only in the channel of the stream; while all the rest was shallow, the old, marshy levels of the shore submerged to a depth of perhaps not more than twelve or fifteen inches. Gradually, however, the industrious dam-builders had dug away these shallows, using the material—grass, roots, clay, and stones—for the broadening and solidifying of the dam. The tough fibred masses of grass-roots, full of clay and almost indestructible, were just such material as they loved to work with, the ancient difficulty of making bricks without straw being well known to them. Over a large portion of the pond the bottom was now

clean sand and mud, offering no obstacle to the transportation of cuttings to the houses or the dam.

The beavers, moving hither and thither through this glimmering golden underworld, swam with their powerful hind feet only, which drove them through the water like wedges. Their little forefeet, with flexible, almost handlike paws, were carried tucked up snugly under their chins, while their huge, broad, flat, hairless tails stuck straight out behind, ready to be used as a powerful screw in case of any sudden need. Presently two of the swimmers, apparently by chance, came upon the body of the beaver which the journeying otter had slain. They knew that it was contrary to the laws of the clan that any dead thing should be left in the pond to poison the waters in its decay. Without ceremony or sentiment they proceeded to drag their late comrade toward shore,—or rather to shove it ahead of them, only dragging when it got stuck against some stone or root. At the very edge of the pond, where the water was not more than eight or ten inches deep, they left it, to be thrust out and far up the bank after nightfall. They knew that some hungry night prowler would then take care of it for them.

Meanwhile an industriously inclined beaver had made his way to the very head of the pond. Here he entered a little ditch or canal which led off through a wild meadow in a perfectly straight line, toward a wooded slope some fifty yards or so from the pond. This ditch, which was perhaps two feet and a half deep and about the same in width, looked as if it had been dug by the

hand of man. The materials taken from it had been thrown up along the brink, but not on one side only, as the human ditch-digger does it. The beavers had thrown it out on both sides. The ditch was of some age, however, so the wild grasses and weeds had completely covered the two parallel ridges and now leaned low over the water, partly hiding it. Under this screen the beaver came to the surface, and swam noiselessly with his head well up.

At the edge of the slope the canal turned sharply to the left, and ran in a gradual curve, skirting the upland. Here it was a piece of new work, raw and muddy, and the little ridges of fresh earth and roots along its brink were conspicuous. The beaver now went very cautiously, sniffing the air for any hint of peril. After winding along for some twenty or thirty yards, the new canal shoaled out to nothingness behind a screen of alder; and here, in a mess of mud and water, the beaver found one of his comrades hard at work. There was much of the new canal yet to do, and winter coming on.

The object of this new ditch was to tap a new food supply. The food trees near enough to the pond to be felled into it or rolled down to it had long ago been used. Then the straight canal across the meadow to the foot of the upland had opened up a new area, an area rich in birch and poplar. But trees can be rolled easily down-hill that cannot be dragged along an uneven side-hill; so, at last, it had become necessary to extend the canal parallel with the bottom of the slope. Working in this direction, every foot of new ditch brought a lot of new supplies within reach.

The extremity of the canal was dug on a slant, for greater ease in removing the material. Here the two beavers toiled side by side, working independently. With their teeth they cut the tough sod as cleanly as a digger's spade could do it. With their fore paws they scraped up the soil—which was soft and easily worked—into sticky lumps, which they could hug under their chins and carry up the slope to be dumped upon the grass at the side. Every minute one or the other would stop, lift his brown head over the edge, peer about, and sniff, and listen, then fall to work again furiously, as if the whole future and fortune of the pond were hanging upon his toil. After a half-hour's labour the canal was lengthened very perceptibly—fully six or eight inches—and as if by common consent the two brown excavators stopped to refresh themselves by nibbling at some succulent roots. While they were thus occupied, and apparently absorbed, from somewhere up the slope among the birch-trees came the faint sound of a snapping twig. In half a second the beavers had vanished noiselessly under water, down the canal, leaving but a swirl of muddy foam to mark their going.

CHAPTER IV

Night Watchers

WHEN the Boy came creeping down the hillside, and found the water in the canal still muddy and foaming, he realized that he had just missed a chance to see the beavers actually at work on their ditch-digging. He was disappointed. But he found ample compensation in the fact that here was one of the much-discussed and sometimes doubted canals, actually in process of construction. He knew he could outdo the beavers in their own game of wariness and watchfulness. He made up his mind he would lie out that very night, on the hillside close by—and so patiently, so unobtrusively, that the beavers would never suspect the eager eyes that were upon them.

All around him, on the nearer slopes, were evidences of the purpose for which the canal was designed, as well as of the diligence with which the little people of the pond were labouring to get in their winter stores. From this diligence, so early in the season, the Boy argued an early and severe winter. He found trees of every size up to two feet in diameter cleanly felled, and stripped of their branches. With two or three exceptions—probably the work of young beavers unskilled in their art—the trees were felled unerringly in the direction of the water, so as to minimize the labour of dragging down the cuttings. Close to the new part of the canal, he found the tree whose falling he and Jabe

had heard the night before. It was a tall yellow birch, fully twenty inches through at the place where it was cut, some fifteen inches from the ground. The cutting was still fresh and sappy. About half the branches had been gnawed off and trimmed, showing that the beavers, after being disturbed by the Boy's visit to the dam, had returned to work later in the night. Much of the smaller brush, from the top, had been cleared away and dragged down to the edge of the canal. As the Boy knew, from what trappers and woodsmen had told him, this brush, and a lot more like it, would all be anchored in a huge pile in mid-channel, a little above the dam, where it would serve the double purpose of breaking the force of the floods and of supplying food through the winter.

Very near the newly felled birch the Boy found another large tree about half cut through; and he vowed to himself that he would see the finish of that job that very night. He found the cutting done pretty evenly all around the tree, but somewhat lower and deeper on the side next to the water. In width the cut was less than that which a good axeman would make—because the teeth of a beaver are a more frugal cutting instrument than the woodsman's axe, making possible a straighter and less wasteful cut. At the foot of this tree he picked up chips fully eight inches in length, and was puzzled to imagine how the beavers imitated the effect of the axe in making the chips fly off.

For a couple of hours the Boy busied himself joyously, observing the work of these cunning woodsmen's teeth, noting the trails by which the remoter cuttings had been dragged down

to the water, and studying the excavations on the canal. Then, fearing to make the little citizens of the pond so nervous that they might not come out to business that night, he withdrew over the slope and made his way back to camp. He would sleep out the rest of the afternoon to be fresh and keen for the night's watching.

At supper that evening, beside the camp-fire, when the woods looked magical under the still, white moon, Jabe Smith gradually got fired with the Boy's enthusiasm. The Boy's descriptions of the canal digging, of the structure of the dam, and, above all, of the battle between the otter and the beavers, filled him with a new eagerness to observe these wonderful little engineers with other eyes than those of the mere hunter and trapper. In the face of all the Boy's exact details he grew almost deferential, quite laying aside his usual backwoods pose of indifference and half derision. He made no move to go to bed, but refilled his pipe and watched his young comrade's face with shrewd, bright eyes grown suddenly boyish.

At last the Boy rose and picked up his rifle.

"I must hurry up and get myself hidden," said he, "or I'll see nothing to-night. Good night, Jabe. I'll not be back, likely, till along toward morning."

The backwoodsman's usual response was not forthcoming. For some seconds he fingered his rugged chin in silence. Then, straightening himself up, he spoke with an air of mingled embarrassment and carelessness.

"Them beaver of yourn's certainly an interestin' kind of

varmint. D'ye know, blam'd if I ain't got a notion to go along with you to-night, an' watch 'em myself!"

The Boy, though secretly delighted at this evidence of something like conversion, eyed Jabe doubtfully. He was not sure of the latter's capacity for the tireless patience and long self-effacement necessary for such an adventure as this.

"Well, Jabe," he answered hesitatingly, "you know well how more than glad I'd be of your company. It would just about double my fun, having you along, if you were really interested, as I am, you know. And are you sure you could keep still long enough to see anything?"

Jabe would have resented this halting acceptance of his companionship had he not known in his heart that it was nothing more than he well deserved. But the doubt cast upon his woodcraft piqued him.

"Hain't I never set for hours in the wet ma'sh, never movin' a finger, waitin' for the geese?" he asked with injury in his voice. "Hain't I never sneaked up on a watchin' buck, or laid so still I've fooled a bear?"

The Boy chuckled softly at this outbreak, so unexpected in the taciturn and altogether superior Jabe.

"You're all right, Jabe!" said he. "I reckon you can keep still. But you must let me be captain, for to-night! This is my trick."

"Sartain," responded the woodsman with alacrity. "I'll eat mud if you say so! But I'll take along a hunk of cold bacon if you hain't got no objection."

On the trail through the ghostly, moonlit woods, Jabe followed obediently at the Boy's heels. Silently as shadows they moved, silently as the lynx or the moose or the weasel goes through the softly parting undergrowth. The Boy led far away from the brook, and over the crest of the ridge, to avoid alarming the vigilant sentries. As they approached the head of the canal, their caution redoubled, and they went very slowly, bending low and avoiding every patch of moonlight. The light breeze, so light as to be almost imperceptible, drew upward toward them from the meadow, bringing now and then a scent of the fresh-dug soil. At last the Boy lay down on his belly; and Jabe religiously imitated him. For perhaps fifty yards they crept forward inch by inch, till at length they found themselves in the heart of a young fir thicket, through whose branches they could look out upon the head of the canal and the trees where the beavers had most recently been cutting.

Among the trees and in the water, all was still, with the mystic, crystalline stillness of the autumn moonlight. In that light everything seemed fragile and unreal, as if a movement or a breath might dissolve it. After a waiting of some ten minutes Jabe had it on the tip of his tongue to whisper, derisively, "Nothin' doin'!" But he remembered the Boy's injunction, as well as his doubts, and checked himself. A moment later a faint, swirling gurgle of water caught his ear, and he was glad he had kept silence. An instant more, and the form of a beaver, spectral-gray in the moonlight, took shape all at once on the brink of the canal.

For several minutes it stood there motionless, erect upon its hind quarters, questioning the stillness with eyes and ear and nose. Then, satisfied that there was no danger near, it dropped on all fours and crept up toward the tree that was partly cut through.

This pioneer of the woodcutters was followed immediately by three others, who lost no time in getting down to work. One of them went to help the leader, while the other two devoted themselves to trimming and cutting up the branches of the big birch which they had felled the night before. The Boy wondered where the rest of the pond-people were, and would have liked to consult Jabe about it; but he remembered the keenness of the beaver's ears, and held his tongue securely. It seemed to him probably that they were still down in the pond, working on the houses, the brush pile, or the dam. Presently one more was accounted for. A renewed splashing in the canal turned the attention of the watchers from the tree-cutting, and they saw that a single wise excavator was at work, carrying forward the head of the ditch.

There was no impatience or desire to fidget left in Jabe Smith now. As he watched the beavers at work in the moonlight, looking very mysterious in their stealthy, busy, tireless diligence, and conducting their toil with an ordered intelligence which seemed to him almost human, he understood for the first time the Boy's enthusiasm for this kind of bloodless hunting. He had always known how clever the beavers were, and allowed them full credit; but till now he had never actually realized it. The two

beavers engaged in cutting down the tree sat erect upon their haunches, supported by their huge tails, chiseling indefatigably. Cutting two deep grooves, one about six or eight inches, perhaps, above the other, they would then wrench off the chips by main force with their teeth and forepaws, jerking their powerful necks with a kind of furious impatience. As he noted how they made the cut deeper and lower on one side than the other, that the tree might fall as they wished, he was so delighted that he came dangerously near vowing he would never trap a beaver again. He felt that it was almost like ensnaring a brother woodsman.

Equally exciting was the work on the other tree, which was being trimmed. The branches, according to their size, were cut into neat, manageable lengths, of from three to six or seven feet—the less the diameter the greater the length, each piece being calculated to be handled in the water by one beaver. These pieces were then rolled, shoved or dragged, as the case might require, down the smooth trails already made in hauling the brush, and dumped into the canal. Other beavers presently appeared, and began towing the sticks and brush down the canal to the pond. This part of the process was hidden from the eager watchers in the thicket; but the Boy guessed, from his own experience in pushing a log endwise before him while in swimming, that the beavers would handle the sticks in the same way. With the brush, however, it was different. In hauling it down the trail each beaver took a branch in his teeth, by the butt, twisted it across his shoulders, and let it drag behind him. It was obvious that in

the water, too, this would be the most convenient way to handle such material. The beavers were not the kind of people to waste their strength in misdirected effort.

While all this cutting and hauling was going on, the big beaver down at the head of the canal was attending strictly to his task, running his lines straight, digging the turf and clay, shoving his loads up the slope and out upon the edge of the ditch. The process was all in clear, easy view of the watchers, their place of hiding being not more than eight or ten paces distant.

They had grown altogether absorbed in watching the little canal-builder, when a cracking sound made them turn their eyes. The tree was toppling slowly. Every beaver now made a mad rush for the canal, not caring how much noise he made—and plunged into the water. Slowly, reluctantly, majestically, the tall birch swung forward straight down the slope, its top describing a great arc against the sky and gathering the air in its branches with a low but terrifying roar. The final crash was unexpectedly gentle,—or rather, would have seemed so to one unfamiliar with tree-felling. Some branches snapped, some sticks flew up and dropped, there was a shuddering confusion in the crystal air for a few seconds, then the stillness fell once more.

But now there was not a beaver to be seen. Jabe wondered if they had been scared by the results of their own work; or if one of their sentinels had come and peered into the thicket from the rear. As minute after minute dragged by, and nothing happened, he began to realize that his muscles were aching savagely from

their long restraint. He was on the point of moving, of whispering to ask the Boy what it meant, when the latter, divining his unrest, stealthily laid a restraining hand upon his arm. He guessed that the beavers were on the alert, hiding, and watching to see if any of their enemies should be attracted by the noise.

Not five seconds later, however, he forgot his aches. Appearing with uncanny and inexplicable suddenness, there was the big pioneer again, sitting up by the edge of the canal. As before, he sat absolutely motionless for a minute or two, sniffing and listening. Then, satisfied once more that all was well, he moved lazily up the slope to examine the tree; and in half a minute all were at work again, except that there was no more tree-felling. The great business of the hour was cutting brush.

For some time longer the watchers lay motionless, noting every detail of the work, till at last the Boy began to think it was time to release Jabe from his long and severe restraint and break up the beaver "chopping-bee." Before he had quite made up his mind, however, his eyes chanced to wander a little way up the slope, and to rest, without any conscious purpose, on a short gray bit of log. Presently he began to wonder what a piece of log so short and thick—not much more than three feet long—would be doing there. No beavers would waste time cutting up a twelve-inch log into lengths like that. And there had been no lumberman in the neighbourhood. Then, in a flash, his eyes cleared themselves of their illusion. The log had moved, ever so slightly. It was no longer a log, but a big gray lynx, creeping

slowly, inexorably, down upon the unsuspecting people of the pond.

For perhaps ten seconds the Boy stared in uncertainty. Then he saw the lynx gather his muscles for the final, fatal rush. Without a whisper or a warning to the astonished Jabe, he whipped up his rifle, and fired.

The sharp report seemed to shatter the whole scene. Its echoes were mixed with the scattering of the horrified beavers as they rushed for the water—with the short screech of the lynx, as it bounced into the air and fell back on its side, dead—with an exclamation of astonishment from Jabe—and with a crashing of branches just behind the thicket. The Boy looked around, triumphant—to see that Jabe's exclamation was not at all the result of his clever shot. The woodsman was on his hands and knees, his back turned, and staring at the form of a big black bear as it lumbered off in a panic through the bushes. Like the unfortunate lynx, the bear had been stalking the beavers on his own account, and had almost stepped upon the silent watchers in the thicket.

CHAPTER V

Dam Repairing and Dam Building

AS the Boy trudged triumphantly back toward camp, over the crest of the moon-bright ridge, he carried the limp, furry body of the lynx slung by its hind legs over his shoulder. He felt that his prestige had gone up incalculably in the woodsman's eyes. The woodsman was silent, however, as silent as the wilderness, till they descended the other slope and came in sight of the little solitary camp. Then he said: "That was a mighty slick shot of yourn, d'ye know it? Ye're quicker'n chain lightnin', an' dead on!"

"Just luck, Jabe!" replied the Boy carelessly, trying to seem properly modest.

This different suggestion Jabe did not take the trouble to controvert. He knew the Boy did not mean it.

"But I thought as how ye wouldn't kill anything?" he went on, teasingly.

"Had to!" retorted the Boy. "That was self-defence! Those beavers are my beavers. An' I've always wanted a real good excuse for getting a good lynx skin, anyway!"

"I don't blame ye a mite fer standin' by them beaver!" continued Jabe. "They're jest all right! It was better'n any circus; an' I don't know when I've enjoyed myself more."

"Then the least you can do, Jabe, is promise not to trap any more beavers!" said the Boy quickly.

“Wa’al,” answered Jabe, as they entered camp and began spreading their blankets, “leastwise I’ll do my best to see that no harm comes to them beaver, nor to the pond.”

Next morning, as the woodsman was starting out for the day’s cruise, the Boy said to him:

“If you’re game for another night’s watching, Jabe, I’ll show you something altogether different up at the pond to-night.”

“Try me!” responded the woodsman.

“You’ll have to be back earlier than usual, then,” said the Boy. “We’ll have to get hidden earlier, and in a new place.”

“I’ll come back along a couple of hours afore sundown, then,” answered Jabe, swinging off on his long, mooselike stride. It was contrary to his backwoods etiquette to ask what was in store for him; but his curiosity was excited, and kept him company through the solitude all day.

When Jabe was gone, the Boy went straight up-stream to the dam, taking no special care to hide his coming. His plan was one in regard to which he felt some guilty qualms. But he consoled himself with the thought that whatever harm he might be doing to the little citizens of the pond would be more than compensated by the protection he was giving them. He was going to make a break in the dam, for the sake of seeing just how the beavers would mend it.

On reaching the dam, however, it occurred to him that if he made the break now the beavers might regard the matter as too urgent to be left till nightfall. They might steal a march on him

by mending the damage little by little, surreptitiously, through the day. He had no way of knowing just how they would take so serious a danger as a break in their dam. He decided, therefore, to postpone his purpose till the afternoon, so that the beavers would not come to the rescue too early. In the meantime, he would explore the stream above the pond, and see if there were other communities to study.

Skirting the hither side of the pond to near its head, he crossed the little meadow and the canal, and reached the brook again about fifty yards beyond. Here he found it flowing swift and narrow, over a rocky bottom, between high banks; and this was its character for nearly half a mile, as he judged. Then, emerging once more upon lower ground, he came upon a small dam. This structure was not much over eighteen inches in height, and the pond above it, small and shallow, showed no signs of being occupied. There was no beaver house to be seen, either in the water or on shore; and the water did not seem to be anywhere more than a foot and a half in depth. As he puzzled over this—for he did not think the beavers were likely to build a dam for nothing—he observed a second and much larger dam far away across the head of the pond.

Hastening to investigate this upper dam, he found it fully three feet high, and very massive. Above it was a narrow but deep pond, between comparatively steep shores; and along these shores he counted three low-roofed houses. Out in the middle of the pond there was not one dwelling; and he came presently

to the conclusion that here, between the narrow banks, the current would be heavy in time of freshet. The lower dam, pretty obviously, was intended to reinforce the upper, by backing a foot and a half of water against it and taking off just that much of the pressure. He decided that the reason for locating the three houses along the shore was that the steep bank afforded special facilities for shore burrows.

The explorer's fever being now hot upon him, the Boy could not stay to examine this pond minutely. He pressed on up-stream with breathless eagerness, thrilling with expectation of what the next turn might reveal. As a matter of fact, the next turn revealed nothing—nor the next, nor yet the next. But as the stream was full of turns in this portion of its course, that was not greatly discouraging.

About a quarter of a mile, however, above the head of the narrow pond, the ardent explorer came upon a level of sparse alder swamp. Here he found the stream just beginning to spread over its low banks. The cause of this spreading was a partial obstruction in mid-channel—what looked, at first glance, like an accidental accumulation of brush and stones and mud. A second look, however, and his heart jumped with excitement and delight. Here was the beginning of a new pond, here were the foundations of a new dam. He would be able to see what few indeed of the students of the wilderness had had the opportunity to watch—the actual process by which these wilderness engineers achieved their great work.

All about the place the straightest and brushiest alders had been cut down, those usually selected being at least ten or twelve feet in height. Many of them were still lying where they fell; but a number had been dragged to the stream and anchored securely, with stones and turfy clay, across the channel. The Boy noted, with keenest admiration, that these were all laid with the greatest regularity parallel with the flow of the current, butts up stream, brushy tops below. In this way, the current took least hold upon them, and was obstructed gradually and as it were insidiously, without being challenged to any violent test of strength. Already it was lingering in some confusion, backing up, and dividing its force, and stealing away at each side among the bushes. The Boy had heard that the beavers were accustomed to begin their dams by felling a tree across the channel and piling their materials upon that as a foundation. But the systematic and thorough piece of work before him was obviously superior in permanence to any such slovenly makeshift; and moreover, further to discredit such a theory, here was a tall black ash close to the stream and fairly leaning over it, as if begging to be put to some such use.

At this spot the Boy stayed his explorations for the day. Choosing a bit of dry thicket close by, to be a hiding-place for Jabe and himself that night, a bunch of spruce and fir where he knew the beavers would not come for supplies, he hurried back to the camp for a bite of dinner, giving wide berth to all the ponds on the way. Building a tiny camp-fire he fried himself a couple of slices of bacon and brewed a tin of tea for his solitary meal,

then lay down in the lean-to, with the sun streaming in upon him, for an hour's nap.

The night having been a tiring one for his youthful nerves and muscles, he slept heavily, and awoke with a start to find the sun a good two hours nearer the horizon. Sleep was still heavy upon him, so he went down to the edge of the brook and plunged his face into the chilly current. Then, picking up an axe instead of his rifle, he returned up-stream to the dam.

As he drew near, he caught sight of a beaver swimming down the pond, towing a big branch over its shoulder; and his conscience smote him at the thought of the trouble and anxiety he was going to inflict upon the diligent little inhabitants. His mind was made up, however. He wanted knowledge, and the beavers would have to furnish it, at whatever cost. A few minutes of vigorous work with the axe, a few minutes of relentless tugging and jerking upon the upper framework of the dam, and he had made a break through which the water rushed foaming in a muddy torrent. Soon, as he knew, the falling of the pond's level would alarm the house-dwellers, and bring them out to see what had happened. Then, as soon as darkness came, there would be a gathering of both households to repair the break.

Hiding in the bushes near by, he saw the water slowly go down, but for half an hour the beavers gave no sign. Then, close beside the break, a big fellow crawled out upon the slope of the dam and made a careful survey of the damage. He disappeared; and presently another came, took a briefer look, and vanished. A few

minutes later, far up the pond, several bushy branches came to the surface, as if they had been anchored on the bottom and released. They came, apparently floating, down toward the dam. As they reached the break, the heads of several beavers showed themselves above water, and the branches were guided across the opening, where they were secured in some way which the watcher could not see. They did not so very greatly diminish the waste, but they checked the destructive violence of it. It was evidently a temporary makeshift, this; for in the next hour nothing more was done. Then the Boy got tired, and went back to camp to wait for Jabe and nightfall.

That evening the backwoodsman, forgetting the fatigue of his day's cruising in the interest of the Boy's story, was no less eager than his companion; and the two, hurrying through an early supper, were off for the pond in the first purple of twilight. When they reached the Boy's hiding-place by the dam the first star was just showing itself in the pallid greenish sky, and the surface of the pond, with its vague, black reflections, was like a shadowed mirror of steel. There was not a sound on the air except the swishing rush of the divided water over the break in the dam.

The Boy had timed his coming none too early; for the pond had dropped nearly a foot, and the beavers were impatient to stop the break. No sooner had night fairly settled down than suddenly the water began to swirl into circles all about the lower end of the pond, and a dozen heads popped up. Then more brush appeared, above the island-house, and was hurriedly towed down to the

dam. The brush which had been thrust across the break was now removed and relaid longitudinally, branchy ends down stream. Here it was held in place by some of the beavers while others brought masses of clayey turf from the nearest shore to secure it. Meanwhile more branches were being laid in place, always parallel with the current; and in a little while the rushing noise of the overflow began to diminish very noticeably. Then a number of short, heavy billets were mixed with shorter lengths of brush; and all at once the sound of rushing ceased altogether. There was not even the usual musical trickling and tinkling, for the level of the pond was too low for the water to find its customary stealthy exits. At this stage the engineers began using smaller sticks, with more clay, and a great many small stones, making a very solid-looking piece of work. At last the old level of the dam crest was reached, and there was no longer any evidence of what had happened except the lowness of the water. Then, all at once, the toilers disappeared, except for one big beaver, who kept nosing over every square inch of the work for perhaps two minutes, to assure himself of its perfection. When he, at last, had slipped back into the water, both Jabe and the Boy got up, as if moved by one thought, and stretched their cramped legs.

“I swan!” exclaimed the woodsman with fervour. “If that ain’t the slickest bit o’ work I ever seen! Let’s go over and kind of inspect the job fer ’em!”

Inspection revealed that the spot which had just been mended was the solidest portion of the whole structure. Wherever else

the water might be allowed to escape, it was plain the beavers intended it should have no more outlet here.

From the mended dam the Boy now led Jabe away up-stream in haste, in the hope of catching some beavers at work on the new dam in the alders. Having skirted the long pond at a distance, to avoid giving alarm, the travellers went with the utmost caution till they reached the swampy level. Then, indifferent to the oozy, chilly mud, they crept forward like minks stealing on their prey; and at last, gaining the fir thicket without mishap, they lay prone on the dry needles to rest.

As they lay, a sound of busy splashing came to their ears, which promptly made them forget their fatigue. Shifting themselves very slowly and with utter silence, they found that the place of ambush had been most skilfully chosen. In perfect hiding themselves, they commanded a clear and near view of the new dam and all its approaches.

There were two beavers visible, paddling busily on the foundations of the dam, while the overflowing water streamed about them, covering their feet. At this stage, most of the water flowed through the still uncompacted structure, leaving work on the top unimpeded. The two beavers were dragging into place a long birch sapling, perhaps eleven feet in length, with a thick, bushy top. When laid to the satisfaction of the architects,—the butt, of course, pointing straight up-stream,—the trunk was jammed firmly down between those already placed. Then the more erect and unmanageable of the branches were gnawed off

and in some way—which the observers with all their watchfulness could not make out—wattled down among the other branches so as to make a woven and coherent mass. The earth and sod and small stones which were afterwards brought and laid upon the structure did not seem necessary to hold it in place, but rather for the stoppage of the interstices.

While this was going on at the dam, a rustling of branches and splashing of water turned the watchers' attention up-stream. Another beaver came in sight, and then another, each partly floating and partly dragging a straight sapling like the first. It seemed that the dam-builders were not content to depend altogether on the crooked, scraggly alder-growth all about them, but demanded in their foundations a certain proportion of the straighter timbers and denser branches of the birch. It was quite evident that they knew just what they were doing, and how best to do it.

While the building was going on, yet another pair of beavers appeared, and the work was pressed with a feverish energy that produced amazing results. The Boy remembered a story told him by an old Indian, but not confirmed by any natural history which he had come across, to the effect that when a pair of young beavers set out to establish a new pond, some of the old ones go along to lend a hand in the building of the dam. It was plain that these workers were all in a tremendous hurry; and the Boy could see no reason for haste unless it was that the majority of the workers had to get back to their own affairs. With

the water once fairly brought under control, and the pond deep enough to afford a refuge from enemies, the young pair could be trusted to complete it by themselves, get their house ready, and gather their supplies in for the winter. The Boy concluded to his own satisfaction that what he was now watching was the analogue, in beaver life, to one of those "house-raising" bees which sometimes took place in the Settlement, when the neighbours would come together to help a man get up the frame of a new house. Only, as it seemed to him, the beavers were a more serious and more sober folk than the men.

When this wilderness engineering had progressed for an hour under the watchers' eyes, Jabe began to grow very tired. The strain of physical immobility told upon him, and he lost interest. He began to feel that he knew all about dam-building; and as there was nothing more to learn he wanted to go back to camp. He glanced anxiously at the young face beside him—but there he could see no sign of weariness. The Boy was aglow with enthusiasm. He had forgotten everything but the wonderful little furry architects, their diligence, their skill, their coöperation, and the new pond there growing swiftly before his eyes. Already it was more than twice as wide as when they had arrived on the scene; the dam was a good eight inches higher; and the clamour of the flowing stream was stopped. No, Jabe could see no sympathy for himself in that eager face. He was ashamed to beg off. And moreover, he was loyal to his promise of obedience. The Boy, here, was Captain.

Suppressing a sigh, Jabe stealthily and very gradually shifted to an easier position, so stealthily that the Boy beside him did not know he had moved. Then, fixing his eyes once more upon the beavers, he tried to renew his interest in them. As he stared, he began to succeed amazingly. And no wonder! The beavers all at once began to do such amazing things. There were many more of them than he had thought; and he was sure he heard them giving orders in something that sounded to him like the Micmac tongue. He could not believe his ears. Then he saw that they were using larger stones, instead of mud and turf, in their operations—and floating them down the pond as if they were corks. He had never heard of such a thing before, in all his wilderness experience. He was just about to compliment the Boy on this unparalleled display of engineering skill, when one particularly large beaver, who was hoisting a stone as big as himself up the face of the dam, let his burden slip a little. Then began a terrible struggle between the beaver and the stone. In his agonizing effort—which his companions all stopped work to watch—the unhappy beaver made a loud, gurgling, gasping noise; then, without a hint of warning, dropped the stone with a splash, turned like lightning, and grabbed Jabe violently by the arm.

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.