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The Secret Trails



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Charles G. D. Roberts

The Secret Trails

The Black Boar of Lonesome Water

I

The population of Lonesome Water – some fourscore families in all – acknowledged one sole fly in the ointment of its self-satisfaction. Slowly, reluctantly, it had been brought to confess that the breed of its pigs was not the best on earth. They were small, wiry pigs, over-leisurely of growth, great feeders, yet hard to fatten; and in the end they brought but an inferior price in the far-off market town by the sea, to which their frozen, stiff-legged carcasses were hauled on sleds over the winter's snow. It was decided by the village council that the breed must be severely improved.

They were a peculiar people, the dwellers about the remote and lovely shores of Lonesome Water. They were the descendants of a company of Welsh sectarians who, having invented a little creed of their own which was the sole repository of truth and righteousness, had emigrated to escape the contamination of their neighbours. They had come to Canada because Canada was not crowded; and they had chosen the lovely valley of Lonesome Water, not for its loveliness, but for its lonesomeness and its fertility, and for the fact that it was surrounded by tracts of barren land which might keep off the defilements of the world. Here they devoted themselves to farming and to the contemplation of their own superiority; and having a national appreciation of the value of a half-penny, they prospered.

As may easily be understood, it was no small thing for the people of Lonesome Water to be forced, by the unanswerable logic of the market price, to acknowledge that their pigs were inferior to the pigs of the ungodly. Of course, there were many in the Settlement who refused flatly to believe that this could be so. Providence could not be so short-sighted as to permit it. But the majority faced the truth with solemn resolution. And Morgan Fluellyn, the hog reeve of Lonesome Water, was sent to K-ville, to interview the secretary of the provincial agricultural society, and to purchase – if it could be done at a bargain – some pigs of a pedigree worthy the end in view.

In the eyes of Morgan Fluellyn – small, deep-set, choleric eyes – the town of K-ville, with its almost two thousand inhabitants, its busy picture show, its three pubs, its cheerful, friendly girls, who adorned their hats with lavish flowers and feathers, was a place upon which the fires of an outraged heaven might some day fall. He had no mind to be caught in K-ville at the moment of this merited catastrophe. He lost no time in putting through his business.

When he found the secretary, and learned the price of pedigree pigs, his indignation nearly choked him. With righteous sternness he denounced the secretary, the society, and the Government, and stalked from the office. But an hour in the air brought him to a clearer understanding, and his ambitions on behalf of his community revived. Lonesome Water had the truth. She had a monopoly of the virtues. She should also have pigs that would command these outrageous prices. Why should the ungodly triumph?

And they did not – at least, not altogether. Morgan Fluellyn was allowed to achieve a bargain. The mollified secretary consented to sell him, at a reduced figure, a big black Berkshire boar, of unimpeachable breeding, but small success in the show-pen, and in temper not to be relied on. The great boar had a steel ring through his snout, and Fluellyn set out with him proudly. Fluellyn was delighted with his prize, but it appeared that his prize was not equally delighted with Fluellyn. In fact, the great grunting beast was surly and cantankerous from the first. He would look at his purchaser

with a malign cunning in his eyes, and sometimes make a slash at his leg with gnashing jaws. But Fluellyn was by no means lacking in the valour and pugnacity of his race, and his patience was of the shortest. By means of that rope through his captive's snout, he had an advantage which he knew how to make the most of. The fringe of fiery whisker, which haloed his red, clean-shaven cheeks and chin like a ruff, fairly curled with wrath at the beast's presumption, and he administered such discipline with his cudgel as he felt sure would not soon be forgotten.

After this, for mile upon mile of the lonely backwoods trail, there was peace, and even an apparent unanimity of purpose, between Fluellyn and his sullenly grunting charge. But the great black boar was not really subdued. He was merely biding his time. And because he bided it cunningly, his time came.

The trail was bad, the going hard, for there was no unnecessary travel either way between Lonesome Water and her neighbour settlements. Fluellyn was tired. It was getting along in the afternoon. He sat down on a log which lay invitingly by the side of the trail. From the bag of feed which he carried on his back, he poured out a goodly allowance for the black boar, being not unwilling to keep the brute amiable. Then he seated himself on the log, in the caressing spring sunshine, and pulled out his pipe. For Fluellyn smoked. It was his one concession to human weakness, and it had almost lost him his election as hog-reeve. Nevertheless, he smoked. The air was bland, and he, too, became almost bland. His choleric eyes grew visionary. He forgot to distrust the black boar.

The perfidious beast devoured its feed with noisy enthusiasm, at the same time watching Fluellyn out of the corner of its wicked little eye. When the feed was finished, it flashed about without a ghost of a warning and charged full upon Fluellyn.

Behind the log on which Fluellyn sat the ground fell away almost perpendicularly, perhaps, twelve or fifteen feet, to the edge of a foaming brown trout-brook fringed with alders. As the boar charged, Fluellyn sprang to his feet. At the same time he tried to spring backwards. His heels failed to clear the log; and in this his luck was with him, for the boar this time meant murder. He plunged headlong, with a yell of indignation, over the steep. And the animal, checking itself at the brink, glared down upon him savagely, gnashing its tusks.

Fluellyn was quite seriously damaged by his fall. His head and forehead were badly cut, so that his face was bathed in blood and dirt, through which his eyes glared upward no less fiercely than those of his adversary. His left arm was broken and stabbing at him with keen anguish, but he was too enraged to notice his hurts, and if it had been suggested to him that his fall had saved his life, he would have blown up with fury. He flew at the face of the steep like a wild-cat, struggling to scramble up it and get at the foe. But in this purpose, luckily for him, he was foiled by his broken arm. The boar, too, though eager to follow up his triumph, durst not venture the descent.

For some minutes, therefore, the antagonists faced each other, the boar leaning over as far as he could, with vicious squeals and grunts and slaverings and gnashings, while the indomitable Fluellyn, with language which he had never guessed himself capable of, and which would have caused his instant expulsion from Lonesome Water, defied and reviled him, and strove to claw up to him. At last the boar, who, being the victor, could best afford it, grew tired of the game. Tossing his armed snout in the air, he drew back from the brink and trotted off into the fir-woods on the other side of the trail. Delighted with his first taste of freedom, he kept on for some miles without a halt, till at last he came to a pond full of lily leaves, with soft black mud about its edges. Here he lay down and wallowed till his wrath cooled. Then he stretched himself in the grass and went to sleep.

As for Fluellyn, his wrath had no excuse for cooling, for the anguish of his hurts at last diverted his attention from it, more or less. He stumbled on down the stream till he reached a spot where he could get up the bank. By this time he was feeling faint, and his angry eyes were half blinded with the blood which he kept wiping from them with his sleeve. Nevertheless, he returned to the scene of his overthrow, and from that point, without a thought of prudence, took up the trail of the boar through the fir thickets. But he was no expert in woodcraft at the best of times, and the trail soon eluded him.

Forced at last to confess himself worsted for the moment, he made his way back to the log, snatched up the bag of feed, that his enemy might not return and enjoy it, and with dogged resolution set his face once more toward Lonesome Water.

When he arrived there, he was babbling in a fever. His appearance was a scandal, and his language cleared the village street. There were many who held that he had gone astray under the wicked influence of K-ville – which was no more than they had always said would happen to a man who smoked tobacco. But the majority were for not condemning him when he was unable to defend himself. For three weeks he lay helpless. And by the time he was well enough to tell his story, which was convincing to all but the sternest of his censors, the black boar had wandered so far into the wilderness that he was safe from pursuit. There were no woodsmen in Lonesome Water cunning enough to follow up his obscure and devious trail.

II

In spite of the allurements of the lily pool, the black boar forsook it after a couple of blissful days' wallowing. The *wanderlust*, choked back for generations, had awakened in his veins. He pushed on, not caring in what direction, for perhaps a fortnight. Though food was everywhere abundant, he had always to work for it, so he grew lean and hard and swift. The memory of a thousand years of servitude slipped from him, as it were, in a night, and at the touch of the wilderness many of the instincts and aptitudes of a wild thing sprang up in him. Only the instinct of concealment, of stealth, was lacking to this new equipment of his. He feared nothing, and he hunted nothing more elusive than lily-roots; so he took no care to disguise his movements.

At first, because of the noise he made, the forest seemed to him to be empty of all living things but birds. Then one day, as he lay basking in the sun, he saw a wild-cat pounce upon a rabbit. At first he stared curiously. But when he saw the wild-cat feasting on her prey, he decided that he wanted the banquet for himself. As he burst through the bushes, the great cat stared for an instant in utter amazement, never having seen or dreamed of such an apparition. Then, her eyes like moons, her six-inch bob-tail fluffed to a bottle-brush, and every hair stiffly on end, she bounced into the nearest tree. There in a crotch she crouched, spitting and yowling, while her enemy tranquilly devoured the rabbit. The tit-bit was not altogether to his taste, but he chose to eat it rather than let the great cat have it. And, after all, it was something of a change from roots and fungi.

Having thus discovered that rabbits were more or less edible, the black boar thenceforward chased them whenever they crossed his path. He never came anywhere near the catching of them, but, in spite of that, he was not discouraged. Some day, perhaps, he would meet a rabbit that could not run so fast as the others.

Fond as the boar was of wallowing in the cool mud of the lily ponds, he was, in reality, a stickler for personal cleanliness. When the mud was dry, he would roll in the moss, and scratch himself till it was all rubbed off, leaving his black bristles in perfect condition. His habits were as dainty as a cat's, and his bed of dead leaves, in the heart of some dense thicket, was always kept dry and fastidiously clean.

One day, as he lay asleep in one of these shadowy lairs, a bear came by, moving noiselessly in the hope of surprising a rabbit or a brooding partridge. A breath of air brought to the great prowler's nostrils a scent which seemed to him strongly out of place there in the depths of the forest. He stopped, lifted his muzzle, and sniffed critically. Yes, that smell was unquestionably pig. Once he had captured a fat young pig on the outskirts of a settler's farm, and his jaws watered at the delicious remembrance.

Crouching low, he crept up toward the thicket, led by his discriminating nose. His huge paws made no more sound than the gliding of a shadow. Peering in through the tangle of twigs and leafage, he was able to make out some black creature asleep. He paused suspiciously. The pig of his remembrance was white and much smaller than the animal he saw before him. Still, his nose assured

him that this was pig all right. His appetite hushed his prudence, and, crashing into the thicket, he hurled himself upon the slumbering form.

And then a strange thing – a most disconcerting thing – happened to him. That slumbering form heaved up beneath him, grunting, and shot out between his hind legs with a violence which pitched him forward on his nose. Before he could recover himself, it wheeled about, looking many times larger than he had imagined it to be, and charged upon him with an ear-splitting squeal of rage. The shock bowled him clean over, so that he rolled out of the thicket, and at the same time he got a tearing slash down his flank. Startled quite out of his customary pugnacious courage, he bawled like a yearling cub, scrambled to his feet, and took to flight ignominiously. But the unknown fury behind him could run as fast as he, and it clung to his heels, squealing horribly and rooting at his rump with murderous tusks. In a panic he clawed his way up the nearest tree.

Finding himself no longer pursued, he turned and stared down from among the branches. He saw that his victorious adversary was indeed a pig, but such a pig! He felt himself most treacherously ill-used – betrayed, in fact. It was out of all fitness that a pig should be so big, so black, and so abrupt in manners. Had he dared to put the matter again to the test, he might have avenged his defeat, for he was much the heavier of the two, and immeasurably the better armed for battle. But he had no stomach to face that squealing fury again. He crawled on up to a convenient crotch, and lay there licking his scars and whimpering softly to himself, his appetite for pork entirely spoiled.

The boar, after ramping about beneath the tree for a matter of perhaps a half hour, at last trotted off in disgust, confirmed in his arrogance. This easy victory over so large and formidable a foe convinced him, had he needed any convincing, that he was lord of the wilderness. Had he chanced, about that time, to meet another bear, of sturdier resolution than the first, he would have had a rude disillusionment.

As it was, however, no later than the following day he had an adventure which jarred his complacency. It taught him not exactly prudence, but, at least, a certain measure of circumspection, which was afterwards to profit him. It was just on the edge of evening, when the wilderness world was growing vague with violet shadows, and new, delicate scents were breathing from leaf and bush at the touch of the dew, that the confident wanderer caught sight of a little black-and-white striped animal. It was hardly as large as a rabbit. It was not the colour of a rabbit. It had by no means the watchful, timorous air of a rabbit. As a matter of fact, it was a skunk; but his far-off ancestors had neglected to hand down to him any informatory instinct about skunks. He jumped to the conclusion that it was a rabbit, all the same – perhaps the fat, slow rabbit which he had been hoping to come across. He hurled himself upon it with his utmost dash, determined that this time the elusive little beast should not escape him.

And it didn't. In fact, it hardly tried to. When he was within a few feet of it, it jerked its long tail into the air, and at the same time something dreadful and incomprehensible struck him in the face. It struck him in the eyes, the nose, the mouth, all at the same time. It scalded him, it blinded him, it suffocated him, it sickened him. He tried to stop himself, but he was too late. His impetus carried him on so that he trod down and killed the little animal without being aware of it.

In fact, he paid no attention whatever to his victory. All he cared about, for the moment, was breath. His outraged lungs had shut up tight to keep out the intolerable invader. At last they opened, with a hoarse gasp of protest at being forced to. Having regained his breath, such as it was, he wanted to see. But his eyes were closed with a burning, clinging, oily stuff, which also clung foully in his nostrils and in his mouth. He strove clumsily to rub them clear with his fore-hooves, and, failing in this, he flung himself on his back with head outstretched and rolled frantically in the moss. Achieving thus a measure of vision out of one inflamed and blurred eye, he caught sight of a marshy pool gleaming through the trees. Gasping, coughing, blundering into tree and bush as he went, he rushed to the water's edge and plunged his outraged features as deep as he could into the cool slime. There

he rooted and champed and wallowed till the torment grew less intolerable to all his senses, and his lungs once more performed their office without a spasm.

But still that deadly taint clung nauseatingly to his nostrils and his palate; and at last, quite beside himself with the torment, he emerged from the water and started on a mad gallop through the woods, trying to run away from it. He ran till he sank exhausted and fell into a heavy sleep. When he woke up, there was the smell still with him, and for days he could scarcely eat for the loathing of it.

Gradually, however, the clean air and the deodorizing forest scents made him once more tolerable to himself. But the lesson was not forgotten. When, one bright and wind-swept morning, he came face to face with a young porcupine, he stopped politely. The porcupine also stopped and slowly erected its quills till its size was almost doubled. The boar was much surprised. This sudden enlargement, indeed, was so incomprehensible that it angered him. The strange absence of fear in the nonchalant little creature also angered him. He was inclined to rush upon it at once and chew it up. But the fact that its colour was more or less black-and-white gave him a painful reminder of his late experience. Perhaps this was another of those slow rabbits! He checked himself and sniffed suspiciously. The stranger, with a little grumbling squeak, came straight at him – not swiftly, or, indeed, angrily, but with a confident deliberation that was most upsetting. The boar was big enough to have stamped the porcupine's life out with one stroke of his hoof. But instead of standing up to his tiny challenger, he turned tail and bolted off squealing through the undergrowth as if nothing less than a troop of lions were after him.

III

The course of the black boar's wanderings brought him out at last upon the desolate northern shores of Lonesome Water. At night he could sometimes see, miles away across the lake, a gleam of the discreet lights of the Settlement – perhaps, indeed, from the windows of Morgan Fluellyn himself, whose cottage was close down on the waterside. This northern shore, being mostly swamp and barren, was entirely ignored by the dwellers in Lonesome Water Settlement, who were satisfied with their own fertile fields, and not of an inquiring temperament. But it offered the black boar just the retreat he was now in search of. Tired of wandering, he found himself a lair in a dense and well-drained thicket near the bank of a lilled stream which here wound slowly through reeds and willows to the lake.

Here, with food abundant, and never skunk or smell of skunk to challenge his content, he wallowed and rooted the gold-and-green summer away and found life good. He was not troubled by forebodings of the winter, because he had never known anything of winter beyond the warmth of a well-provided pen.

One dreamy and windless afternoon in late September, when a delicate bluish haze lay over the yellowing landscape, a birch canoe was pushed in among the reeds, and a woodsman in grey homespun stepped ashore. He was gaunt and rugged of feature, with quiet, keen, humorous eyes, and he moved in his soft hide "larrigans" as lightly as a cat. He knew of a little ice-cold spring in this neighbourhood not far from the river bank, and he never passed the spot without stopping to drink deep at its preternaturally crystal flow.

He had not gone more than fifty yards up the shore when his eye was caught by a most unusual trail. He stopped to examine it. As he did so, a sudden crash in the bushes made him turn his head sharply. A massive black shape, unlike anything he had ever seen before, was charging down upon him. Whatever it was – and he remembered a picture he had once seen of a wild boar charging a party of hunters – he knew it meant mischief of the worst kind. And he had left his gun in the canoe. Under the circumstances, he was not too proud to run. He ran well, which was lucky for him. As he swung up his long legs into the branches, the black boar reared himself against the trunk, gnashing

his tusks and squealing furiously. The man, from his safe perch, looked down upon him thoughtfully for perhaps a whole minute.

"Well, I'll be durned!" he ejaculated at last, getting out his pipe and slowly filling it. "Ef 'tain't Fluellyn's pig! To think Jo Peddler 'ld ever have to run from a pig!"

For perhaps a half hour Peddler sat there and smoked contentedly enough, with the patience which the wilderness teaches to all its children. He expected his gaoler to go away and let him make a dash for the canoe. But presently he concluded that the boar had no intention of going away. If so, it was time to do something if he wanted to get across the lake before dark.

He cleaned the ashes out of his pipe and saved them carefully. Then he refilled the pipe very loosely and smoked it violently half through, which yielded him another collection of pungent ash. He repeated the process several times, till he judged he had enough of the mixture – ash and dry, powdered tobacco. Then, grinning, he let himself down till he was barely out of reach, and began to tease and taunt his gaoler till the surly beast was beside itself with rage, snorting and squealing and rearing itself against the trunk in its efforts to get at him. At length, with infinite pains and precision, he sifted the biting mixture into his adversary's eyes and wide, snorting nostrils. By great good luck he managed to hit the mark exactly. How he wished the stuff had been pepper!

At the result he nearly fell out of the tree with ecstasy. The boar's squeal was cut short by a paroxysm of choking and coughing. The great animal nearly fell over backwards. Then, remembering his ancient experience with the skunk, he rushed blindly for the water, his eyes, for the most part, screwed up tight, so that he crashed straight through everything that stood in his path. Peddler dropped from his refuge and ran for his canoe, laughing delightedly as he ran. What little grudge he owed the animal for his temporary imprisonment, he felt to have been amply repaid, and he was glad he had not yielded to his first impulse and emptied the hot coals from his pipe into its nostrils.

"I'll be givin' yer compliments to Fluellyn," he shouted, as he paddled away, "an' likely he'll be over to call on ye afore long!"

IV

Jo Peddler had small love for the peculiar community of Lonesome Water. He never visited it except under the necessity of buying supplies for his camp. He used to swear that its very molasses was sour, that its tea was so self-righteous that it puckered his mouth. He never slept under one of its roofs, choosing, rather, to pitch his tent in the patch of dishevelled common on the outskirts of the village.

On the morning after his interview with the black boar, he was making his purchases at the village grocery – a "general" shop which sold also hardware, dry goods, and patent medicines, and gave a sort of disapproving harbourage to the worldly postoffice – when Morgan Fluellyn dropped in, nodded non-committally, and sat down on a keg of nails. To Peddler the bad-tempered little Welshman was less obnoxious than most of his fellow-villagers, both because he was so far human as to smoke tobacco, and because his reputation and self-satisfaction had been damaged by the episode of the pedigree boar. There was little tenderness toward damaged goods, or anything else, in Lonesome Water, so the woodsman felt almost friendly toward Fluellyn.

"What'll ye be givin' me," he inquired, proffering his plug of choice tobacco, "ef I git yer pig back fer ye?"

Fluellyn so far forgot himself as to spring eagerly to his feet. His fringe of red whisker fairly curled forward to meet Peddler's suggestion. If he could restore the precious animal to the community, his prestige would be re-established. Moreover, his own sore shaken self-esteem would lift its head and flourish once again.

"I'd pay ye right well, Jo Peddler," he declared, forgetting his native prudence in a bargain. "Can ye do it, man?"

"I can that," replied Peddler. And the storekeeper, with a half-filled kerosene tin in his hand, came forward to listen.

"I'm a poor man," went on Fluellyn, recollecting himself with a jerk and sitting down again on the nail keg. "I'm a poor man, as Mr. Perley here'll tell ye, an' I've already had to pay for the pig out o' my own pocket. An' it's cost me a fearful sum for the doctor. But I've said I want the pig back, and I'd pay ye well. An' I won't go back on my word. What'll ye take now?"

"I know ye've been playing in hard luck, Fluellyn," said the woodsman genially, "an' I ain't a-drivin' no bargain. I know what that there pig cost ye down to K-ville. But he ain't no manner o' use to me. He ain't what ye'd call a household pet, as ye'll agree. I'll find him and ketch him an' deliver him to ye, sound in wind an' limb, down here at the landin', if ye'll promise to pay me four pound for my trouble when the job's rightly done. An' Mr. Perley here's my witness."

Fluellyn drew a sigh of relief. He thought the woodsman a fool to be so moderate, but he was not without an inkling of the truth that this moderation was due to generosity and kindness rather than to folly. To his amazement, he felt a prompting to be generous himself.

"Tell ye what I'll do," said he, springing up again and grasping Peddler's hand. "If ye'll take me along an' let me help ye fix him, I'll make it five pound instead o' four. He done me bad, an' I'd like to git square."

"All right," said Peddler, with an understanding grin.

On the following morning Peddler and Fluellyn set out for the north shore of the lake. They went in a roomy row-boat, and they carried with them an assortment of ropes and straps. They started very early, just on the edge of dawn; for even here, in Lonesome Water, were to be found certain spirits so imperfectly regenerate as to be not above curiosity, not above a worldly itching to see the outcome of the venture; and Peddler would have no marplots about to risk the upsetting of his plans.

When they set out, the unruffled surface of the lake lay gleaming in vast, irregular breadths and patches of polished steel-grey and ethereal ice-blue and miraculous violet-silver, so beautiful that Peddler almost shrank from breaking the charmed stillness with his oars, and even Fluellyn felt strange stirrings within him of a long-atrophied sense of beauty. The village of Lonesome Water slumbered heavily, with windows and hearts alike close shut.

The sun was high in the hot blue when the boat, with stealthy oars, crept in among the reeds and made a noiseless landing.

"If ye stir a foot outside the boat till I call to ye, Fluellyn, the bargain's off, an' ye kin ketch the pig yerself," admonished Peddler in a whisper, as he stole up the shore with a coil of ropes over his left arm and a steel-shod canoe-pole in his right hand.

He kept a wary eye on the thicket which he judged to be the black boar's lair, until he was close to the foot of the tree in which he had previously taken refuge. Then he coughed loudly, announcing his presence. But there was no response from the thicket.

"Come out o' that, ye black divil, an' I'll truss ye up like a bale o' hay!" he shouted.

As if this inducement was something quite irresistible, came a sudden crashing, not in the thicket he was watching, but in the bushes directly behind him, not a dozen paces away. Without stopping to look round, he dropped his pole and jumped for the tree.

"Bad luck to ye," he growled, as he gained his perch just in time, "taking a feller by surprise that way!"

As the beast squealed and ramped below, Peddler leaned down from his perch and flicked it smartly with one of his lengths of rope, till it was jumping up and down and almost bursting with rage. Then, securing the rope to a stout branch, he made a slip-knot in the end of it and tried to throw it over the boar's fore-leg. After half a dozen failures, he made a lucky cast and instantly drew the noose tight.

Instead of being daunted at this, the boar again rushed furiously at the tree, rearing himself against it in a repetition of his former tactics. This gave Peddler just the chance he wanted.

"That's where ye've made the mistake, now," said he sympathetically, and dropped another noose well over the beast's snout, beyond the tusks. As he drew it tight, he took up the slack of both ropes in a deft hitch over the branch; and the boar found itself strung up against the trunk, dancing frantically on its hind legs, and no longer able even to squeal effectively.

"Maybe ye'll be a mite more civil now," mocked Peddler, and dropped lightly from his branch to the ground.

In half a minute he had whipped the frantic boar's two front legs together, also its two hind legs, run a sliding rope from the one pair to the other, and muzzled the formidable jaws more securely with a leather skate-strap. Then he freed the ropes from above and lowered his prisoner carefully to the ground, where it struggled madly till he drew its fore legs and hind legs close together by means of the sliding rope. Thus trussed up, it seemed at last to realize its defeat, and lay still upon its side, breathing heavily, which, indeed, was about the only form of activity left to it. Peddler stood off and surveyed his captive benignantly as he filled his pipe. "Fluellyn," he called, "ye kin come now an' have a talk with yer pig!"

With a bound, Fluellyn came up the bank, burning to avenge his humiliations, his cheeks glowing in their halo of crisp red whisker. But at sight of the great boar lying trussed up so ignobly his face fell.

"Why didn't ye let me have a hand in the job?" he demanded resentfully.

"Sorry," said Peddler, "but it couldn't be done nohow. Ye'd hev spiled the whole game, an' like as not got yer gizzard ripped. Now ye've got him, I allow ye hain't got nawthin' to grumble at." And he waited curiously to see what the little Welshman would do to relieve his feelings.

But Fluellyn, with all his faults, was not the man to kick a fallen foe. For some moments he eyed the helpless black monster with so sinister a gaze that Peddler thought he was devising some cruel vengeance, and made ready to interfere, if necessary. But all Fluellyn did, in the end, was to go over and seat himself comfortably on the great beast's panting flank and proceed to fill his pipe.

"It's goin' to be a hefty job a-gettin' him into the boat," said he at length, sternly repressing the note of exultation that *would* creep into his voice.

The Dog that saved the Bridge

I

The old canal lay dreaming under the autumn sun, tranquil between its green banks and its two rows of stiffly-rimmed bordering poplars. Once a busy highway for barges, it was now little more than a great drainage ditch, with swallow and dragon-flies darting and flashing over its seldom ruffled surface. Scattered here and there over the fat, green meadows beyond its containing dykes, fat cows lay lazily chewing the cud.

It was a scene of unmarred peace. To the cows nothing could have seemed more impregnable than their security. Off south-westward and southward, to be sure, the horizon was columned, decoratively but ominously, by pillars of dense smoke, sharp against the turquoise sky. But such phenomena, however novel, failed to stir the cows to even the mildest curiosity. The spacious summer air, however, was entertaining a strange riot of noises. It thumped and throbbed and thundered. It seemed to be ripped across from time to time with a dry, leisurely sound of tearing. Again, it would be suddenly shattered with enormous earth-shaking crashes. But all this foolish tumult was in the distance, and it gave the cows not the slightest concern. It had not interfered with the excellent quality of the pasturage; it had not disturbed the regularity of milking-time.

Strategically considered, the lazy old canal led from nowhere to nowhere, and the low levels through which it ran were aside from the track of the fighting. The peasant folk on their little farms still went about their business, but very quietly and with lowered voices, as if hoping thus to avoid the eye of Fate.

Along the grass-grown towpath, marching in half-sections, came a tiny detachment of long-coated Belgian riflemen with a machine-gun. The deadly little weapon, on its two-wheeled toy carriage, was drawn by a pair of sturdy, brindled dogs – mongrels, evidently, showing a dash of bull and a dash of retriever in their make-up. They were not as large as the dogs usually employed by the Belgians in this kind of service, but they were strong, and keen on their job. Digging their strong toes into the turf, they threw their weight valiantly into the straps, and pressed on, with tongues hanging out and what looked like a cordial grin on their panting jaws. They seemed desperately afraid of being left behind by their quick-marching comrades.

The little band kept well under the trees as they went, lest some far-scouting aeroplane should catch sight of them. In the south-eastern sky, presently, an aeroplane – a Taube – did appear; but it was so distant that the young lieutenant in command of the detachment, after examining it carefully with his field-glasses, concluded that it was little likely to detect his dark line moving under the trees. The Taube, that execrated dove of death, was spying over the Belgian trenches, and doubtless daring a hot fire from the Belgian rifles. Once it made a wide sweep north-westward, rapidly growing larger, and the little band under the trees lay down, hiding themselves and the gun behind the dyke. Then its flight swerved back over the Belgian lines, and the commander, lowering his glasses with a deep breath of relief, gave the order to march. Two minutes later, around the questing aeroplane appeared a succession of sudden fleecy puffs of smoke, looking soft and harmless as cotton-wool. One of these came just before the nose of the aeroplane. Next moment the machine gave a great swooping dive, righted itself, dived again, and dropped like a stone.

"Thank God for that!" muttered the young lieutenant, and his men cheered grimly under their breath.

Three minutes later the detachment came to an old stone bridge. Here it halted. The men began hastily entrenching themselves where they could best command the approaches on the other side. The

machine-gun, lifted from its little carriage, was placed cunningly behind a screen of reeds. The two dogs, panting, lay down in their harness under a thick bush. In an amazingly brief time the whole party was so hidden that no one approaching from the other side of the canal could have guessed there was anything more formidable in the neighbourhood than the ruminating cows.

The neglected, almost forgotten, old bridge had suddenly leapt into importance. Reinforcements for the sore-pressed division to the south-east were being sent around by the north of the canal, and were to cross by the bridge. The detachment had been sent to guard the bridge at all costs from any wide-roving patrols of Uhlans who might take it into their heads to blow it up. In war it is a pretty safe principle to blow up any bridge if you are quite sure you won't be wanting it yourself. The fact that the other side has spared it is enough to damn it off-hand.

The tumult of the far-off gunfire was so unrelenting that the ears of the bridge-guard gradually came to accept it as a mere background, against which small, insignificant sounds, if sudden and unexpected, became strangely conspicuous. The crowing of a cock in the farmyard a few fields off, the sharp cry of a moorhen, the spasmodic gabbling of a flock of fat ducks in the canal – these small noises were almost as clearly differentiated as if heard in a stark silence.

For perhaps an hour the detachment had lain concealed, when those ominous pillars of smoke against the sky were joined suddenly by swarms of the little white puffs of cotton-wool, and the confused noises redoubled in violence. The battle was swaying nearer and spreading around a swiftly widening arc of the low horizon. Then another aeroplane – another bird-like Taube – came in view, darting up from a little south of west. The young lieutenant, in his hiding-place beside the bridge-head clapped his glasses anxiously to his eyes. Yes, the deadly flier was heading straight for this position. Evidently the Germans knew of that out-of-the-way bridge, and in their eyes also, for some reason, it had suddenly acquired importance. The Taube was coming to see in what force it was held.

"Spies again!" he grunted savagely, turning to explain to his men.

Flying at a height of only five or six hundred metres, the Taube flew straight over them. There was no longer any use in attempting concealment. The riflemen opened fire upon it furiously as soon as it came within range. It was hit several times; but the Taube is a steel machine, well protected from below, and neither the pilot nor any vital part of the mechanism was damaged. It made haste, however, to climb and swerve away from so hot a neighbourhood. But first, as a message of defiance, it dropped a bomb. The bomb fell sixty or seventy yards away from the bridge back in the meadow, among a group of cows. The explosion killed one cow and wounded several. The survivors, thus rudely shocked out of their indifference, stamped off down the field, tails in air and bellowing frantically.

"That cooks *our* goose," snapped one of the riflemen concisely.

"Their shells'll be dead on to us in ten minutes' time," growled another. And all cursed soberly.

"I don't think so," said the young lieutenant, after a moment's hesitation. "They want the bridge, so they won't shell it. But you'll see they'll be on to us shortly with their mitrailleuse and half a battalion or so, enough to eat us up. We've got to get word back *quick* to the General for reinforcements, or the game's up."

"I'll go, my lieutenant," said Jean Ferréol, an eager, dark Walloon, springing to his feet.

The lieutenant did not answer for some moments. He was examining through his glasses a number of mounted figures, scattering over the plains to the rear in groups of two and three. Yes, they were Uhlans unquestionably. The line of combat was shifting eastward.

"No," said he, "you can't go, Jean. You'd never get through. The Bosches are all over the place back there now. And you wouldn't be in time, even if you did get through. I'll send one of the dogs."

He tore a leaf out of his note-book and began scribbling.

"Better send both dogs, my lieutenant," said Jan Steen, the big, broad-built Fleming who had charge of the machine-gun, unharnessing the dogs as he spoke. "Leo's the cleverest, and he'll carry the message right; but he won't have his heart in the job unless you let Dirck go along with him. They're like twins. Moreover, the two together wouldn't excite suspicion like one alone. One alone

the Bosches would take for a messenger dog, sure, but two racing over the grass might seem to be just playing."

"*Bon!*" said the young lieutenant. "Two strings to our bow."

He hurriedly made a duplicate of his dispatch. The papers were folded small and tied under the dogs' collars. Big Jan spoke a few words crisply and decisively in Flemish to Leo, who watched his lips eagerly and wagged his tail as if to show he understood. Then he spoke similarly, but with more emphasis and reiteration, to Dirck, at the same time waving his arm toward the distant group of roofs from which the detachment had come. Dirck looked anxiously at him and whined, and then glanced inquiringly at Leo, to see if *he* understood what was required of them. He was almost furiously willing, but not so quick to catch an idea as his more lively yoke-fellow. Big Jan repeated his injunctions yet again, with unhurried patience, while his leader fumed behind him. Jan Steen knew well that with a dog, in such circumstances, one must be patient though the skies fall. At last Dirck's grin widened, his tail wagged violently, and his low whining gave way to a bark of elation.

"He's got it," said Jan, with slow satisfaction. He waved his arm, and the two dogs dashed off as if they had been shot out of a gun, keeping close along the inner base of the dyke.

"Dirck's got it," repeated Jan, with conviction, "and nothing will put it out of his head till he's done the job."

II

Side by side, racing wildly like children just let out from school, the two dogs dashed off through the grass along the base of the dyke. Leo, the lighter in build and in colour, and the more conspicuous by reason of a white fore-leg, was also the lighter in spirits. Glad to be clear of the harness and proud of his errand, he was so ebullient in his gaiety that he could spare time to spring into the air now and again and snap at a low-fluttering butterfly. The more phlegmatic Dirck, on the other hand, was too busy keeping his errand fixed in his mind to waste any interest on butterflies, though he was ready enough to gambol a bit whenever his volatile comrade frolicked into collision with him.

Soon – Leo leading, as usual – they quitted the dyke and started off across the open meadows toward the hottest of the firing. A couple of patrolling Uhlans, some distance off to the right, caught sight of them, and a bullet whined complainingly just over their heads. But the other Uhlan, the one who had not fired, rebuked his companion for wasting ammunition. "Can't you see they're just a couple of puppies larking round?" he asked scornfully. "Suppose you thought they were Red Cross."

"Thought they might be dispatch dogs, Herr Sergeant," answered the trooper deprecatingly.

"Well, they're not, blockhead," grunted the cocksure sergeant. And the two rode on, heading diagonally toward the canal.

The dogs, at the sound of the passing bullet, had crouched flat to the ground. When the sound was not repeated, however, they sprang up and continued their journey, Leo, excited but not terrified, more inclined to frolic than ever, while Dirck, who by some obscure instinct had realized that the shot was not a chance one, but a direct personal attack, kept looking back and growling at the pair of Uhlans.

But though Leo, the exuberant, gambolled as he ran, he ran swiftly, none the less, so swiftly that plodding Dirck had some trouble to keep up with him. Ten minutes more, and they ran into the zone of fire. Bullets hummed waspishly over them, but, after a moment's hesitation, they raced on, flattening themselves belly to earth. The German infantry were in position, quite hidden from view, some six or seven hundred yards to the right. They were firing at an equally invisible line of Belgians, who were occupying a drainage ditch some three hundred yards to the left. The two dogs had no way of knowing that the force on their left was a friendly one, so they kept straight on beneath the crossfire. Had they only known, their errand might have been quickly accomplished.

A little farther on, the grass-land came to an end, and there was a naked, sun-baked stubble-field to cross. As the two raced out over this perilous open space, the battle deepened above them. The fire from the Belgian side went high over the dogs' heads, seeking the far-off target of the enemy's prostrate lines. But the German fire was sighted for too close a range, and the bullets were falling short. Here and there one struck with a vicious spat close to the runners' feet. Here and there a small stone would fly into the air with a sudden inexplicable impulse, or a bunch of stubble would hop up as if startled from its root-hold. A ball just nicked the extreme tip of Dirck's tail, making him think a hornet had stung him. With a surprised yelp, he turned and bit at his supposed assailant. Realizing his mistake in a second, he drooped the injured member sheepishly and tore on after Leo, who had by now got a score of paces ahead.

Next moment a shrapnel shell burst overhead with a shattering roar. Both dogs cowered flat, shivering. There was a smart patter all about them, and little spurts of dust, straw, and dry earth darted upwards. The shrapnel shell was doubtless a mere stray, an ill-calculated shot exploding far from its target. But to Leo it seemed a direct attack upon himself. And well he knew what was the proper thing to do under such circumstances. Partly by instruction, partly by natural sagacity, he had assimilated the vital precept: "When the firing gets too hot, dig yourself in." With his powerful forepaws he attacked the stubble, making the dry earth fly as if he were trying to dig out a badger. Dirck watched him wonderingly for a moment or two, till a venomous swarm of bullets just over his head seemed to let light in upon his understanding. He fell to copying Leo with vehement enthusiasm. In a brief space each dog had a burrow deep enough to shelter him. Dirck promptly curled himself up in his, and fell to licking his wounded tail. But Leo, burning to get on with his errand, kept bobbing up his head every other second to see how the bullets were striking.

Another shrapnel shell burst in the air, but farther away than the first, and Leo marked where the little spurts of dust arose. They were well behind him. The rifle bullets pinging overhead were higher now, as the Germans were getting the range of the Belgian line. The coast seemed clear enough. He scrambled from his hole and dashed onward down the field, yelping for Dirck to follow. And Dirck was at his heels in half a second.

The tiny canal-side village which was the goal of these two devoted messengers was by this time less than a mile away and straight ahead. When they left it with the machine-gun that morning, it had seemed a little haven of peace. Now the battle was raging all about it. The tall church spire, which had risen serenely above its embosoming trees, had vanished, blown off by a shell. A cottage was burning merrily. Those harmless-looking puffs of cotton-wool were opening out plenteously above the clustered roofs. But all these things made no difference to these two four-footed dispatch-bearers who carried the destiny of the bridge beneath their collars. They had been ordered to take their dispatches to the village, and to the village they would go, whether it had become an inferno or not.

But now the spectacle of the two dogs racing desperately toward the village under the storm of lead and shell had caught the attention of both sides. There was no mistaking them now for frolicsome puppies. There was no question, either, as to which side they belonged to. The German bullets began to lash the ground like hail all about them. Leo, true to his principles, stopped at a tiny depression and once more, with feverish eagerness, began to dig himself in. The earth flew from his desperate paws. In another minute he would have achieved something like cover. But a German sharpshooter got the range of him exactly. A bullet crashed through his sagacious brain, and he dropped, with his muzzle between his legs, into his half-dug burrow.

But Dirck, meanwhile, had for once refused to follow his leader's example. His goal was too near. He saw the familiar uniforms. Above the din he could detect the cries and calls of encouragement from his people. Every faculty in his valiant and faithful being bent itself to the accomplishment of his errand. The bullets raining about him concerned him not at all. The crash of a shrapnel shell just over him did not even make him cock an eye skyward. The shrapnel bullets raised jets of dust before

and behind him and on either side. But not one touched him. He knew nothing of them. He only knew his lines were close ahead, and he must reach them.

The Belgians cheered and yelled, and poured in a concentrated fire on that section of the enemy which was attacking the dog. For a few seconds that small, insignificant, desperate four-footed shape drew upon itself the undivided attention of several thousand men. It focussed the battle for the moment. It was only a brindled dog, yet upon its fate hung immense and unknown issues. Every one knew now that the devoted animal was carrying a message. The Germans suddenly came to feel that to prevent the delivery of that message would be like winning a battle. The Belgians turned a battery from harrying a far-off squadron of horse to shell the lines opposite, in defence of the little messenger. Men fell by the score on both sides to decide that unexpected contest.

And still Dirck raced on, heedless of it all.

Then, within fifty yards of the goal, he fell. A bullet had smashed one of his legs. He picked himself up again instantly and hobbled forward, trailing the mangled limb. But the moment he fell, a score of riflemen had leapt from their lines and dashed out to rescue him. Three dropped on the way out. Half a dozen more fell on the way back. But Dirck, whining and licking his rescuers' hands, was carried to shelter behind the massive stone wall of the inn yard, where the Brigadier and his officers were receiving and sending out dispatches.

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