

Roberts Charles G. D. Sir

The Ledge on Bald Face



Charles Roberts

The Ledge on Bald Face

«Public Domain»

Roberts C.

The Ledge on Bald Face / C. Roberts — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	11
III	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Ledge on Bald Face

I

THE LEDGE ON BALD FACE

The Ledge on Bald Face

That one stark naked side of the mountain which gave it its name of Old Bald Face fronted full south. Scorched by sun and scourged by storm throughout the centuries, it was bleached to an ashen pallor that gleamed startlingly across the leagues of sombre, green-purple wilderness outspread below. From the base of the tremendous bald steep stretched off the interminable leagues of cedar swamp, only to be traversed in dry weather or in frost. All the region behind the mountain face was an impenetrable jumble of gorges, pinnacles, and chasms, with black woods clinging in crevice and ravine and struggling up desperately towards the light.

In the time of spring and autumn floods, when the cedar swamps were impenetrable to all save mink, otter, and musk-rat, the only way from the western plateau to the group of lakes that formed the source of the Ottanoosis, on the east, was by a high, nerve-testing trail across the wind-swept brow of Old Bald Face. The trail followed a curious ledge, sometimes wide enough to have accommodated an ox-wagon, at other times so narrow and so perilous that even the sure-eyed caribou went warily in traversing it.

The only inhabitants of Bald Face were the eagles, three pairs of them, who had their nests, widely separated from each other in haughty isolation, on jutting shoulders and pinnacles accessible to no one without wings. Though the ledge-path at its highest point was far above the nests, and commanded a clear view of one of them, the eagles had learned to know that those who traversed the pass were not troubling themselves about eagles' nests. They had also observed another thing – of interest to them only because their keen eyes and suspicious brains were wont to note and consider everything that came within their purview – and that was that the scanty traffic by the pass had its more or less regular times and seasons. In seasons of drought or hard frost it vanished altogether. In seasons of flood it increased the longer the floods lasted. And whenever there was any passing at all, the movement was from east to west in the morning, from west to east in the afternoon. This fact may have been due to some sort of dimly recognized convention among the wild kindreds, arrived at in some subtle way to avoid unnecessary – and necessarily deadly – misunderstanding and struggle. For the creatures of the wild seldom fight for fighting's sake. They fight for food, or, in the mating season, they fight in order that the best and strongest may carry off the prizes. But mere purposeless risk and slaughter they instinctively strive to avoid. The airy ledge across Bald Face was not a place where the boldest of the wild kindred – the bear or the bull-moose, to say nothing of lesser champions – would wilfully invite the doubtful combat. If, therefore, it had been somehow arrived at that there should be no disastrous meetings, no face-to-face struggles for the right of way, at a spot where dreadful death was inevitable for one or both of the combatants, that would have been in no way inconsistent with the accepted laws and customs of the wilderness. On the other hand, it is possible that this alternate easterly and westerly drift of the wild creatures – a scanty affair enough at best of times – across the front of Bald Face was determined in the first place, on clear days, by their desire not to have the sun in their eyes in making the difficult passage, and afterwards hardened into custom. It was certainly better to have the sun behind one in treading the knife-edge pass above the eagles. Joe Peddler found

it troublesome enough, that strong, searching glare from the unclouded sun of early morning full in his eyes, as he worked over toward the Ottanoonsis lakes. He had never attempted the crossing of Old Bald Face before, and he had always regarded with some scorn the stories told by Indians of the perils of that passage. But already, though he had accomplished but a small portion of his journey and was still far from the worst of the pass, he had been forced to the conclusion that report had not exaggerated the difficulties of his venture. However, he was steady of head and sure of foot, and the higher he went in that exquisitely clear, crisp air, the more pleased he felt with himself. His great lungs drank deep of the tonic wind which surged against him rhythmically, and seemed to him to come unbroken from the outermost edges of the world. His eyes widened and filled themselves, even as his lungs, with the ample panorama that unfolded before them. He imagined – for the woodsman, dwelling so much alone, is apt to indulge some strange imaginings – that he could feel his very spirit enlarging, as if to take full measure of these splendid breadths of sunlit, wind-washed space.

Presently, with a pleasant thrill, he observed that just ahead of him the ledge went round an abrupt shoulder of the rockface at a point where there was a practically sheer drop of many hundreds of feet into what appeared a feather-soft carpet of treetops. He looked shrewdly to the security of his footing as he approached, and also to the roughnesses of the rock above the ledge, in case a sudden violent gust should chance to assail him just at the turn. He felt that at such a spot it would be so easy – indeed, quite natural – to be whisked off by the sportive wind, whirled out into space, and dropped into that green carpet so far below. In his flexible oil-tanned "larrigans" of thick cow-hide, Peddler moved noiselessly as a wild-cat, even over the bare stone of the ledge. He was like a grey shadow drifting slowly across the bleached face of the precipice. As he drew near the bend of the trail, of which not more than eight or ten paces were now visible to him, he felt every nerve grow tense with exhilarating expectation. Yet, even so, what happened was the utterly unexpected.

Around the bend before him, stepping daintily on her fine hooves, came a young doe. She completely blocked the trail just on that dizzy edge.

Peddler stopped short, tried to squeeze himself to the rock like a limpet, and clutched with fingers of iron at a tiny projection.

The doe, for one second, seemed petrified with amazement. It was contrary to all tradition that she should be confronted on that trail. Then, her amazement instantly dissolving into sheer madness of panic, she wheeled about violently to flee. But there was no room for even her lithe body to make the turn. The inexorable rock-face bounced her off, and with an agonized bleat, legs sprawling and great eyes starting from their sockets, she went sailing down into the abyss.

With a heart thumping in sympathy, Peddler leaned outward and followed that dreadful flight, till she reached that treacherously soft-looking carpet of treetops and was engulfed by it. A muffled crash came up to Peddler's ears.

"Poor leetle beggar!" he muttered. "I wish't I hadn't scared her so. But I'd a sight rather it was her than me!"

Peddler's exhilaration was now considerably damped. He crept cautiously to the dizzy turn of the ledge and peered around. The thought upon which his brain dwelt with unpleasant insistence was that if it had been a surly old bull-moose or a bear which had confronted him so unexpectedly, instead of that nervous little doe, he might now be lying beneath that deceitful green carpet in a state of dilapidation which he did not care to contemplate.

Beyond the turn the trail was clear to his view for perhaps a couple of hundred yards. It climbed steeply through a deep re-entrant, a mighty perpendicular corrugation of the rock-face, and then disappeared again around another jutting bastion. He hurried on rather feverishly, not liking that second interruption to his view, and regretting, for the first time, that he had no weapon with him but his long hunting-knife. He had left his rifle behind him as a useless burden to his climbing. No game was now in season, no skins in condition to be worth the shooting, and he had food enough for the journey in his light pack. He had not contemplated the possibility of any beast, even bear or bull-

moose, daring to face him, because he knew that, except in mating-time, the boldest of them would give a man wide berth. But, as he now reflected, here on this narrow ledge even a buck or a lynx would become dangerous, finding itself suddenly at bay.

The steepness of the rise in the trail at this point almost drove Peddler to helping himself with his hands. As he neared the next turn, he was surprised to note, far out to his right, a soaring eagle, perhaps a hundred feet below him. He was surprised, too, by the fact that the eagle was paying no attention to him whatever, in spite of his invasion of the great bird's aerial domain. Instinctively he inferred that the eagle's nest must be in some quite inaccessible spot at safe distance from the ledge. He paused to observe from above, and thus fairly near at hand, the slow flapping of those wide wings, as they employed the wind to serve the majesty of their flight. While he was studying this, another deduction from the bird's indifference to his presence flashed upon his mind. There must be a fairly abundant traffic of the wild creatures across this pass, or the eagle would not be so indifferent to his presence. At this thought he lost his interest in problems of flight, and hurried forward again, anxious to see what might be beyond the next turn of the trail.

His curiosity was gratified all too abruptly for his satisfaction. He reached the turn, craned his head around it, and came face to face with an immense black bear.

The bear was not a dozen feet away. At sight of Peddler's gaunt dark face and sharp blue eyes appearing thus abruptly and without visible support around the rock, he shrank back upon his haunches with a startled "Woof!"

As for Peddler, he was equally startled, but he had too much discretion and self-control to show it. Never moving a muscle, and keeping his body out of sight so that his face seemed to be suspended in mid-air, he held the great beast's eyes with a calm, unwinking gaze.

The bear was plainly disconcerted. After a few seconds he glanced back over his shoulder, and seemed to contemplate a strategic movement to the rear. As the ledge at this point was sufficiently wide for him to turn with due care, Peddler expected now to see him do so. But what Peddler did not know was that dim but cogent "law of the ledge," which forbade all those who travelled by it to turn and retrace their steps, or to pass in the wrong direction at the wrong time. He did not know what the bear knew – namely, that if that perturbed beast should turn, he was sure to be met and opposed by other wayfarers, and thus to find himself caught between two fires.

Watching steadily, Peddler was unpleasantly surprised to see the perturbation in the bear's eyes slowly change into a savage resentment – resentment at being balked in his inalienable right to an unopposed passage over the ledge. To the bear's mind that grim, confronting face was a violation of the law which he himself obeyed loyally and without question. To be sure, it was the face of man, and therefore to be dreaded. It was also mysterious, and therefore still more to be dreaded. But the sense of bitter injustice, with the realization that he was at bay and taken at a disadvantage, filled him with a frightened rage which swamped all other emotion. Then he came on.

His advance was slow and cautious by reason of the difficulty of the path and his dread lest that staring, motionless face should pounce upon him just at the perilous turn and hurl him over the brink. But Peddler knew that his bluff was called, and that his only chance was to avoid the encounter. He might have fled by the way he had come, knowing that he would have every advantage in speed on that narrow trail. But before venturing up to the turn he had noted a number of little projections and crevices in the perpendicular wall above him. Clutching at them with fingers of steel and unerring toes, he swarmed upwards as nimbly as a climbing cat. He was a dozen feet up before the bear came crawling and peering around the turn.

Elated at having so well extricated himself from so dubious a situation, Peddler gazed down upon his opponent and laughed mockingly. The sound of that confident laughter from straight above his head seemed to daunt the bear and thoroughly damp his rage. He crouched low, and scurried past growling. As he hurried along the trail at a rash pace, he kept casting anxious glances over his shoulder, as if he feared the man were going to chase him. Peddler lowered himself from his friendly

perch and continued his journey, cursing himself more than ever for having been such a fool as not to bring his rifle.

In the course of the next half-hour he gained the highest point of the ledge, which here was so broken and precarious that he had little attention to spare for the unparalleled sweep and splendour of the view. He was conscious, however, all the time, of the whirling eagles, now far below him, and his veins thrilled with intense exhilaration. His apprehensions had all vanished under the stimulus of that tonic atmosphere. He was on the constant watch, however, scanning not only the trail ahead – which was now never visible for more than a hundred yards or so at a time – and also the face of the rock above him, to see if it could be scaled in an emergency.

He had no expectation of an emergency, because he knew nothing of the law of the ledge. Having already met a doe and a bear, he naturally inferred that he would not be likely to meet any other of the elusive kindreds of the wild, even in a whole week of forest faring. The shy and wary beasts are not given to thrusting themselves upon man's dangerous notice, and it was hard enough to find them, with all his woodcraft, even when he was out to look for them. He was, therefore, so surprised that he could hardly believe his eyes when, on rounding another corrugation of the rock-face, he saw another bear coming to meet him.

"Gee!" muttered Peddler to himself. "Who's been lettin' loose the menagerie? Or hev I got the nightmare, mebbe?"

The bear was about fifty yards distant – a smaller one than its predecessor, and much younger also, as was obvious to Peddler's initiated eye by the trim glossiness of its coat. It halted the instant it caught sight of Peddler. But Peddler, for his part, kept right on, without showing the least sign of hesitation or surprise. This bear, surely, would give way before him. The beast hesitated, however. It was manifestly afraid of the man. It backed a few paces, whimpering in a worried fashion, then stopped, staring up the rock-wall above it, as if seeking escape in that impossible direction.

"If ye're so skeered o' me as ye look," demanded Peddler, in a crisp voice, "why don't ye turn an' vamoose, 'stead o' backin' an' fillin' that way? Ye can't git up that there rock, 'less ye're a fly!"

The ledge at that point was a comparatively wide and easy path, and the bear at length, as if decided by the easy confidence of Peddler's tones, turned and retreated. But it went off with such reluctance, whimpering anxiously the while, that Peddler was forced to the conclusion there must be something coming up the trail which it was dreading to meet. At this idea Peddler was delighted, and hurried on as closely as possible at the retreating animal's heels. The bear, he reflected, would serve him as an excellent advance guard, protecting him perfectly from surprise, and perhaps, if necessary, clearing the way for him. He chuckled to himself as he realized the situation, and the bear, catching the incomprehensible sound, glanced nervously over its shoulder and hastened its retreat as well as the difficulties of the path would allow.

The trail was now descending rapidly, though irregularly, towards the eastern plateau. The descent was broken by here and there a stretch of comparatively level going, here and there a sharp though brief rise, and at one point the ledge was cut across by a crevice some four feet in width. As a jump, of course, it was nothing to Peddler; but in spite of himself he took it with some trepidation, for the chasm looked infinitely deep, and the footing on the other side narrow and precarious. The bear, however, had seemed to take it quite carelessly, almost in its stride, and Peddler, not to be outdone, assumed a similar indifference.

It was not long, however, before the enigma of the bear's reluctance to retrace its steps was solved. The bear, with Peddler some forty or fifty paces behind, was approaching one of those short steep rises which broke the general descent. From the other side of the rise came a series of heavy breathings and windy grunts.

"Moose, by gum!" exclaimed Peddler. "Now, I'd like to know if all the critters hev took it into their heads to cross Old Bald Face to-day!"

The bear heard the gruntings also, and halted unhappily, glancing back at Peddler.

"Git on with it!" ordered Peddler sharply. And the bear, dreading man more than moose, got on.

The next moment a long, dark, ominous head, with massive, overhanging lip and small angry eyes, appeared over the rise. Behind this formidable head laboured up the mighty humped shoulders and then the whole towering form of a moose-bull. Close behind him followed two young cows and a yearling calf.

"Huh! I guess there's goin' to be some row!" muttered Peddler, and cast his eyes up the rock-face, to look for a point of refuge in case his champion should get the worst of it.

At sight of the bear the two cows and the yearling halted, and stood staring, with big ears thrust forward anxiously, at the foe that barred their path. But the arrogant old bull kept straight on, though slowly, and with the wariness of the practised duellist. At this season of the year his forehead wore no antlers, indeed, but in his great knife-edged fore-hooves he possessed terrible weapons which he could wield with deadly dexterity. Marking the confidence of his advance, Peddler grew solicitous for his own champion, and stood motionless, dreading to distract the bear's attention.

But the bear, though frankly afraid to face man, whom he did not understand, had no such misgivings in regard to moose. He knew how to fight moose, and he had made more than one good meal, in his day, on moose calf. He was game for the encounter. Reassured to see that the man was not coming any nearer, and possibly even sensing instinctively that the man was on his side in this matter, he crouched close against the rock and waited, with one huge paw upraised, like a boxer on guard, for the advancing bull to attack.

He had not long to wait.

The bull drew near very slowly, and with his head held high as if intending to ignore his opponent. Peddler, watching intently, felt some surprise at this attitude, even though he knew that the deadliest weapon of a moose was its fore-hooves. He was wondering, indeed, if the majestic beast expected to press past the bear without a battle, and if the bear, on his part, would consent to this highly reasonable arrangement. Then like a flash, without the slightest warning, the bull whipped up one great hoof to the height of his shoulder and struck at his crouching adversary.

The blow was lightning swift, and with such power behind it that, had it reached its mark, it would have settled the whole matter then and there. But the bear's parry was equally swift. His mighty forearm fended the stroke so that it hissed down harmlessly past his head and clattered on the stone floor of the trail. At the same instant, before the bull could recover himself for another such pile-driving blow, the bear, who had been gathered up like a coiled spring, elongated his body with all the force of his gigantic hindquarters, thrusting himself irresistibly between his adversary and the face of the rock, and heaving outwards.

These were tactics for which the great bull had no precedent in all his previous battles. He was thrown off his balance and shouldered clean over the brink. By a terrific effort he turned, captured a footing upon the edge with his fore-hooves, and struggled frantically to drag himself up again upon the ledge. But the bear's paw struck him a crashing buffet straight between the wildly staring eyes. He fell backwards, turning clean over, and went bouncing, in tremendous sprawling curves, down into the abyss.

Upon the defeat of their leader the two cows and the calf turned instantly – which the ledge at their point was wide enough to permit – and fled back down the trail at a pace which seemed to threaten their own destruction. The bear followed more prudently, with no apparent thought of trying to overtake them. And Pedler kept on behind him, taking care, however, after this exhibition of his champion's prowess, not to press him too closely.

The fleeing herd soon disappeared from view. It seemed to have effectually cleared the trail before it, for the curious procession of the bear and Peddler encountered no further obstacles.

After about an hour the lower slopes of the mountain were reached. The ledge widened and presently broke up, with trails leading off here and there among the foothills. At the first of these that appeared to offer concealment the bear turned aside and vanished into a dense grove of spruce

with a haste which seemed to Peddler highly amusing in a beast of such capacity and courage. He was well content, however, to be so easily quit of his dangerous advance guard.

"A durn good thing for me," he mused, "that that there b'ar never got up the nerve to call my bluff, or I might 'a' been layin' now where that onlucky old bull-moose is layin', with a lot o' flies crawlin' over me!"

And as he trudged along the now easy and ordinary trail, he registered two discreet resolutions – first, that never again would he cross Old Bald Face without his gun and his axe; and, second, that never again would he cross Old Bald Face at all, unless he jolly well had to.

II THE EAGLE

The Eagle

He sat upon the very topmost perch under the open-work dome of his spacious and lofty cage. This perch was one of three or four lopped limbs jutting from a dead tree-trunk erected in the centre of the cage – a perch far other than that great branch of thunder-blasted pine, out-thrust from the seaward-facing cliff, whereon he had been wont to sit in his own land across the ocean.

He sat with his snowy, gleaming, flat-crowned head drawn back between the dark shoulders of his slightly uplifted wings. His black and yellow eyes, unwinking, bright and hard like glass, stared out from under his overhanging brows with a kind of darting and defiant inquiry quite unlike their customary expression of tameless despair. That dull world outside the bars of his cage, that hated, gaping, inquisitive world which he had ever tried to ignore by staring at the sun or gazing into the deeps of sky overhead, how it had changed since yesterday! The curious crowds, the gabbling voices were gone. Even the high buildings of red brick or whitish-grey stone, beyond the iron palings of the park, were going, toppling down with a slow, dizzy lurch, or leaping suddenly into the air with a roar and a huge belch of brown and orange smoke and scarlet flame. Here and there he saw men running wildly. Here and there he saw other men lying quite still – sprawling, inert shapes on the close-cropped grass, or the white asphalted walks, or the tossed pavement of the street. He knew that these inert, sprawling shapes were men, and that the men were dead; and the sight filled his exile heart with triumph. Men were his enemies, his gaolers, his opponents, and now at last – he knew not how – he was tasting vengeance. The once smooth green turf around his cage was becoming pitted with strange yellow-brown holes. These holes, he had noticed, always appeared after a burst of terrific noise, and livid flame, and coloured smoke, followed by a shower of clods and pebbles, and hard fragments which sometimes flew right through his cage with a vicious hum. There was a deadly force in these humming fragments. He knew it, for his partner in captivity, a golden eagle of the Alps, had been hit by one of them, and now lay dead on the littered floor below him, a mere heap of bloody feathers. Certain of the iron bars of the cage, too, had been struck and cut through, as neatly as his own hooked beak would sever the paw of a rabbit.

The air was full of tremendous crashing, buffeting sounds and sudden fierce gusts, which forced him to tighten the iron grip of his talons upon the perch. In the centre of the little park pond, some fifty feet from his cage, clustered a panic-stricken knot of eight or ten fancy ducks and two pairs of red-billed coot, all that remained of the flock of water-birds which had formerly screamed and gabbled over the pool. This little cluster was in a state of perpetual ferment, those on the outside struggling to get into the centre, those on the inside striving to keep their places. From time to time one or two on the outer ring would dive under and force their way up in the middle of the press, where they imagined themselves more secure. But presently they would find themselves on the outside again, whereupon, in frantic haste, they would repeat the manoeuvre. The piercing glance of the eagle took in and dismissed this futile panic with immeasurable scorn. With like scorn, too, he noted the three gaunt cranes which had been wont to stalk so arrogantly among the lesser fowl and drive them from their meals. These once domineering birds were now standing huddled, their drooped heads close together, beneath a dense laurel thicket just behind the cage, their long legs quaking at every explosion.

Amid all this destroying tumult and flying death the eagle had no fear. He was merely excited by it. If a fragment of shell sang past his head, he never flinched, his level stare never even filmed

or wavered. The roar and crash, indeed, and the monstrous buffetings of tormented air, seemed to assuage the long ache of his home-sickness. They reminded him of the hurricane racing past his ancient pine, of the giant waves shattering themselves with thunderous jar upon the cliff below. From time to time, as if his nerves were straining with irresistible exultation, he would lift himself to his full height, half spread his wings, stretch forward his gleaming white neck, and give utterance to a short, strident, yelping cry. Then he would settle back upon his perch again, and resume his fierce contemplation of the ruin that was falling on the city.

Suddenly an eleven-inch shell dropped straight in the centre of the pool and exploded on the concrete bottom which underlay the mud. Half the pool went up in the colossal eruption of blown flame and steam and smoke. Even here on his perch the eagle found himself splattered and drenched. When the shrunken surface of the pool had closed again over the awful vortex, and the smoke had drifted off to join itself to the dark cloud which hung over the city, the little flock of ducks and coot was nowhere to be seen. It simply was not. But a bleeding fragment of flesh, with some purple-and-chestnut feathers clinging to it, lay upon the bottom of the cage. This morsel caught the eagle's eye. He had been forgotten for the past two days – the old one-legged keeper of the cages having vanished – and he was ravenous with hunger. He hopped down briskly to the floor, grabbed the morsel, and gulped it. Then he looked around hopefully for more. There were no more such opportune tit-bits within the cage, but just outside he saw the half of a big carp, which had been torn in twain by a caprice of the explosion and tossed up here upon the grass. This was just such a morsel as he was craving. He thrust one great talon out between the bars and clutched at the prize. But it was beyond his reach. Disappointed, he tried the other claw, balancing himself on one leg with widespread wings. Stretch and struggle as he would, it was all in vain. The fish lay too far off. Then he tried reaching through the bars with his head. He elongated his neck till he almost thought he was a heron, and till his great beak was snapping hungrily within an inch or two of the prize. But not a hair's-breadth closer could he get. At last, in a cold fury, he gave it up, and drew back, and shook himself to rearrange the much dishevelled feathers of his neck.

Just at this moment, while he was still on the floor of the cage, a high-velocity shell came by. With its flat trajectory it passed just overhead, swept the dome of the cage clean out of existence, and whizzed onwards to explode, with a curious grunting crash, some hundreds of yards beyond. The eagle looked up and gazed for some seconds before realizing that his prison was no longer a prison. The path was clear above him to the free spaces of the air. But he was in no unseemly haste. His eye measured accurately the width of the exit, and saw that it was awkwardly narrow for his great spread of wing. He could not essay it directly from the ground, his quarters being too straitened for free flight. Hopping upwards from limb to limb of the roosting-tree, he regained the topmost perch, and found that, though split by a stray splinter of the cage, it was still able to bear his weight. From this point he sprang straight upwards, with one beat of his wings. But the wing-tips struck violently against each side of the opening, and he was thrown back with such force that only by a furious flopping and struggle could he regain his footing on the perch.

After this unexpected rebuff he sat quiet for perhaps half a minute, staring fixedly at the exit. He was not going to fail again through misjudgment. The straight top of the roosting-tree extended for about three feet above his perch, but this extension being of no use to him, he had never paid any heed to it hitherto. Now, however, he marked it with new interest. It was close below the hole in the roof. He flopped up to it, balanced himself for a second, and once more sprang for the opening, but this time with a short, convulsive beat of wings only half spread. The leap carried him almost through, but not far enough for him to get another stroke of his wings. Clutching out wildly with stretched talons, he succeeded in catching the end of a broken bar. Desperately he clung to it, resisting the natural impulse to help himself by flapping his wings. Reaching out with his beak, he gripped another bar, and so steadied himself till he could gain a foothold with both talons. Then slowly, like

a dog getting over a wall, he dragged himself forth, and stood at last free on the outer side of the bars which had been so long his prison.

But the first thing he thought of was not freedom. It was fish. For perhaps a dozen seconds he gazed about him majestically, and scanned with calm the toppling and crashing world. Then spreading his splendid wings to their fullest extent, with no longer any fear of them striking against iron bars, he dropped down to the grass beside the cage and clutched the body of the slain carp. He was no more than just in time, for a second later a pair of mink, released from their captivity in perhaps the same way as he had been, came gliding furtively around the base of the cage, intent upon the same booty. He turned his head over his shoulder and gave them one look, then fell to tearing and gulping his meal as unconcernedly as if the two savage little beasts had been field mice. The mink stopped short, flashed white fangs at him in a soundless snarl of hate, and whipped about to forage in some more auspicious direction.

When the eagle had finished his meal – which took him, indeed, scarcely more time than takes to tell of it – he wiped his great beak meticulously on the turf. While he was doing so, a shell burst so near him that he was half smothered in dry earth. Indignantly he shook himself, hopped a pace or two aside, ruffled up his feathers, and proceeded to make his toilet as scrupulously as if no shells or sudden death were within a thousand miles of him.

The toilet completed to his satisfaction, he took a little flapping run and rose into the air. He flew straight for the highest point within his view, which chanced to be the slender, soaring spire of a church somewhere about the centre of the city. As he mounted on a long slant, he came into the level where most of the shells were travelling, for their objective was not the little park with its "Zoo," but a line of fortifications some distance beyond. Above, below, around him streamed the terrible projectiles, whinnying or whistling, shrieking or roaring, each according to its calibre and its type. It seemed a miracle that he should come through that zone unscathed; but his vision was so powerful and all-embracing, his judgment of speed and distance so instantaneous and unerring, that he was able to avoid, without apparent effort, all but the smallest and least visible shells, and these latter, by the favour of Fate, did not come his way. He was more annoyed, indeed, by certain volleys of debris which occasionally spouted up at him with a disagreeable noise, and by the evil-smelling smoke clouds, which came volleying about him without any reason that he could discern. He flapped up to a higher level to escape these annoyances, and so found himself above the track of the shells. Then he made for the church spire, and perched himself upon the tip of the great weather-vane. It was exactly what he wanted – a lofty observation post from which to view the country round about before deciding in which direction he would journey.

From this high post he noticed that, while he was well above one zone of shells, there was still another zone of them screaming far overhead. These projectiles of the upper strata of air were travelling in the opposite direction. He marked that they came from a crowded line of smoke-bursts and blinding flashes just beyond the boundary of the city. He decided that, upon resuming his journey, he would fly at the present level, and so avoid traversing again either of the zones of death.

Much to his disappointment, he found that his present observation post did not give him as wide a view as he had hoped for. The city of his captivity, he now saw, was set upon the loop of a silver stream in the centre of a saucer-like valley. In every direction his view was limited by low, encircling hills. Along one sector of this circuit – that from which the shells of the lower stratum seemed to him to be issuing – the hill-rim and the slopes below it were fringed with vomiting smoke-clouds and biting spurts of fire. This did not, however, influence in the least his choice of the direction in which to journey. Instinct, little by little, as he sat there on the slowly veering vane, was deciding that point for him. His gaze was fixing itself more and more towards the north, or, rather, the north-west; for something seemed to whisper in his heart that there was where he would find the wild solitudes which he longed for. The rugged and mist-wreathed peaks of Scotland or North Wales, though he knew them not, were calling to him in his new-found freedom.

The call, however, was not yet strong enough to be determining, so, having well fed and being beyond measure content with his liberty, he lingered on his skyey perch and watched the crash of the opposing bombardments. The quarter of the town immediately beneath him had so far suffered little from the shells, and the church showed no signs of damage except for one gaping hole in the roof. But along the line of the fortifications there seemed to be but one gigantic boiling of smoke and flames, with continual spouting fountains of debris. This inexplicable turmoil held his interest for a few moments. Then, while he was wondering what it all meant, an eleven-inch shell struck the church spire squarely about thirty feet below him.

The explosion almost stunned him. The tip of the spire – with the weather-cock, and the eagle still clinging to it – went rocketing straight up into the air amid a stifling cloud of black smoke, while the rest of the structure, down to a dozen feet below the point of impact, was blown to the four winds. Half stunned though he was, the amazed bird kept his wits about him, and clutched firmly to his flying perch till it reached the end of its flight and turned to fall. Then he spread his wings wide and let go. The erratic mass of wood and metal dropped away, and left him floating, half-blinded, in the heart of the smoke-cloud. A couple of violent wing-beats, however, carried him clear of the cloud; and at once he shaped his course upwards, as steeply as he could mount, smitten with a sudden desire for the calm and the solitude which were associated in his memory with the uppermost deeps of air.

The fire from the city batteries had just now slackened for a little, and the great bird's progress carried him through the higher shell zone without mishap. In a minute or two he was far above those strange flocks which flew so straight and swift, and made such incomprehensible noises in their flight. Presently, too, he was above the smoke, the very last wisps of it having thinned off into the clear, dry air. He now began to find that he had come once more into his own peculiar realm, the realm of the upper sky, so high that, as he thought, no other living creature could approach him. He arrested his ascent, and began to circle slowly on still wings, surveying the earth.

But now he received, for the first time, a shock. Hitherto the most astounding happenings had failed to startle him, but now a pang of something very like fear shot through his stout heart. A little to southward of the city he saw a vast pale-yellow elongated form rising swiftly, without any visible effort, straight into the sky. Had he ever seen a sausage, he would have thought that this yellow monster was shaped like one. Certain fine cords descended from it, reaching all the way to the earth, and below its middle hung a basket, with a man in it. It rose to a height some hundreds of feet beyond the level on which the eagle had been feeling himself supreme. Then it came to rest, and hung there, swaying slowly in the mild wind.

His apprehension speedily giving way to injured pride, the eagle flew upwards, in short, steep spirals, as fast as his wings could drive him. Not till he could once more look down upon the fat back of the glistening yellow monster did he regain his mood of unruffled calm. But he regained it only to have it stripped from him, a minute later, with tenfold lack of ceremony. For far above him – so high that even his undaunted wings would never venture thither – he heard a fierce and terrible humming sound. He saw something like a colossal bird – or rather, it was more suggestive of a dragonfly than a bird – speeding towards him with never a single beat of its vast, pale wings. Its speed was appalling. The eagle was afraid, but not with any foolish panic. He knew that even as a sparrow would be to him, so would he be to this unheard-of sovereign of the skies. Therefore it was possible the sovereign of the skies would ignore him and seek a more worthy opponent. Yes, it was heading towards the giant sausage. And the sausage, plainly, had no stomach for the encounter. It seemed to shrink suddenly; and with sickening lurches it began to descend, as if strong hands were tugging upon the cords which anchored it to earth. The eagle winged off modestly to one side, but not far enough to miss anything of the stupendous encounter which he felt was coming. Here, at last, were events of a strangeness and a terror to move even his cool spirit out of its indifference.

Now the giant insect was near enough for the eagle to mark that it had eyes on the under-sides of its wings – immense, round, coloured eyes of red and white and blue. Its shattering hum shook the

eagle's nerves, steady and seasoned though they were. Slanting slightly downwards, it darted straight toward the sausage, which was now wallowing fatly in its convulsive efforts to descend. At the same time the eagle caught sight of another of the giant birds, or insects, somewhat different in shape and colour from the first, darting up from the opposite direction. Was it, too, he wondered, coming to attack the terrified sausage, or to defend it?

Before he could find an answer to this exciting question, the first monster had arrived directly above the sausage and was circling over it at some height, glaring down upon it with those great staring eyes of its wings. Something struck the sausage fairly in the back. Instantly, with a tremendous windy roar, the sausage vanished in a sheet of flame. The monster far above it rocked and plunged in the uprush of tormented air, the waves of which reached even to where the eagle hung poised, and forced him to flap violently in order to keep his balance against them.

A few moments later the second monster arrived. The eagle saw at once that the two were enemies. The first dived headlong at the second, spitting fire, with a loud and dreadful rap-rap-rapping noise, from its strange blunt muzzle. The two circled around each other, and over and under each other, at a speed which made even the eagle dizzy with amazement; and he saw that it was something more deadly than fire which spurted from their blunt snouts; for every now and then small things, which travelled too fast for him to see, twanged past him with a vicious note which he knew for the voice of death. He edged discreetly farther away. Evidently this battle of the giants was dangerous to spectators. His curiosity was beginning to get sated. He was on the point of leaving the danger area altogether, when the dreadful duel came suddenly to an end. He saw the second monster plunge drunkenly, in wild, ungoverned lurches, and then drop head first, down, down, down, straight as a stone, till it crashed into the earth and instantly burst into flame. He saw the great still eyes of the victor staring down inscrutably upon the wreck of its foe. Then he saw it whirl sharply – tilting its rigid wings at so steep an angle that it almost seemed about to overturn – and dart away again in the direction from which it had come. He saw the reason for this swift departure. A flock of six more monsters, of the breed of the one just slain, came sweeping up from the south to take vengeance for their comrade's defeat.

The eagle had no mind to await them. He had had enough of wonders, and the call in his heart had suddenly grown clear and intelligible. Mounting still upward till he felt the air growing thin beneath his wing-beats, he headed northwards as fast as he could fly. He had no more interest now in the amazing panorama which unrolled beneath him, in the thundering and screaming flights of shell which sped past in the lower strata of the air. He was intent only upon gaining the wild solitudes of which he dreamed. He marked others of the monsters which he so dreaded, journeying sometimes alone, sometimes in flocks, but always with the same implacable directness of flight, always with that angry and menacing hum which, of all the sounds he had ever heard, alone had power to shake his bold heart. He noticed that sometimes the sky all about these monsters would be filled with sudden bursts of fleecy cloud, looking soft as wool; and once he saw one of these apparently harmless clouds burst full on the nose of one of the monsters, which instantly flew apart and went hurtling down to earth in revolving fragments. But he was no longer curious. He gave them all as wide a berth as possible, and sped on, without delaying to note their triumphs or their defeats.

At last the earth grew green again below him. The monsters, the smoke, the shells, the flames, the thunders, were gradually left behind, and far ahead at last he saw the sea, flashing gold and sapphire beneath the summer sun. Soon – for he flew swiftly – it was almost beneath him. His heart exulted at the sight. Then across that stretch of gleaming tide he saw a dim line of cliffs – white cliffs, such cliffs as he desired.

But at this point, when he was so near his goal, that Fate which had always loved to juggle with him decided to show him a new one of her tricks. Two more monsters appeared, diving steeply from the blue above him. One was pursuing the other. Quite near him the pursuer overtook its quarry, and the two spat fire at each other with that strident rap-rap-rapping sound which he so disliked. He

swerved as wide as possible from the path of their terrible combat, and paid no heed to its outcome. But, as he fled, something struck him near the tip of his left wing.

The shock went through him like a needle of ice or fire, and he dropped, leaving a little cloud of feathers in the air above to settle slowly after him. He turned once completely over as he fell. But presently; with terrific effort, he succeeded in regaining a partial balance. He could no longer fully support himself, still less continue his direct flight; but he managed to keep on an even keel and to delay his fall. He knew that to drop into the sea below him was certain death. But he had marked that the sea was dotted with peculiar-looking ships – long, narrow, dark ships – which travelled furiously, vomiting black smoke and carrying a white mass of foam in their teeth, Supporting himself, with the last ounce of his strength, till one of these rushing ships was just about to pass below him, he let himself drop, and landed sprawling on the deck.

Half stunned though he was, he recovered himself almost instantly, clawed up to his feet, steadied himself with one outstretched wing against the pitching of the deck, and defied, with hard, undaunted eye and threatening beak, a tall figure in blue, white-capped and gold-braided, which stood smiling down upon him.

"By Jove," exclaimed Sub-Lieutenant James Smith, "here's luck: Uncle Sam's own chicken, which he's sent us as a mascot till his ships can get over and take a hand in the game with us: Delighted to see you, old bird: You've come to the right spot, you have, and we'll do the best we can to make you comfortable."

III

COCK-CROW

Cock-Crow

He was a splendid bird, a thoroughbred "Black-breasted Red" game-cock, his gorgeous plumage hard as mail, silken with perfect condition, and glowing like a flame against the darkness of the spruce forest. His snaky head – the comb and wattles had been trimmed close, after the mode laid down for his aristocratic kind – was sharp and keen, like a living spearpoint. His eyes were fierce and piercing, ready ever to meet the gaze of bird, or beast, or man himself with the unwinking challenge of their full, arrogant stare. Perched upon a stump a few yards from the railway line, he turned that bold stare now, with an air of unperturbed superciliousness, upon the wreck of the big freight-car from which he had just escaped. He had escaped by a miracle, but little effect had that upon his bold and confident spirit. The ramshackle, overladen freight train, labouring up the too-steep gradient, had broken in two, thanks to a defective coupler, near the top of the incline a mile and a half away. The rear cars – heavy box-cars – had, of course, run back, gathering a terrific momentum as they went. The rear brakeman, his brakes failing to hold, had discreetly jumped before the speed became too great. At the foot of the incline a sharp curve had proved too much for the runaways to negotiate. With a screech of tortured metal they had jumped the track and gone crashing down the high embankment. One car, landing on a granite boulder, had split apart like a cleft melon. The light crate in which our game-cock, a pedigree bird, was being carried to a fancier in the nearest town, some three score miles away, had survived by its very lightness. But its door had been snapped open. The cock walked out deliberately, uttered a long, low *krr-rr-ee* of ironic comment upon the disturbance, hopped delicately over the tangle of boxes and crates and agricultural implements, and flew to the top of the nearest stump. There he shook himself, his plumage being disarrayed, though his spirit was not. He flapped his wings. Then, eyeing the wreckage keenly, he gave a shrill, triumphant crow, which rang through the early morning stillness of the forest like a challenge. He felt that the smashed car, so lately his prison, was a foe which he had vanquished by his own unaided prowess. His pride was not altogether unnatural.

The place where he stood, preening the red glory of his plumage, was in the very heart of the wilderness. The only human habitation within a dozen miles in either direction was a section-man's shanty, guarding a siding and a rusty water tank. The woods – mostly spruce in that region, with patches of birch and poplar – had been gone over by the lumbermen some five years before, and still showed the ravages of the insatiable axe. Their narrow "tote-roads," now deeply mossed and partly overgrown by small scrub, traversed the lonely spaces in every direction. One of these roads led straight back into the wilderness from the railway – almost from the stump whereon the red cock had his perch.

The cock had no particular liking for the neighbourhood of the accident, and when his fierce, inquiring eye fell upon this road, he decided to investigate, hoping it might lead him to some flock of his own kind, over whom he would, as a matter of course, promptly establish his domination. That there would be other cocks there, already in charge, only added to his zest for the adventure. He was raising his wings to hop down from his perch, when a wide-winged shadow passed over him, and he checked himself, glancing upwards sharply.

A foraging hawk had just flown overhead. The hawk had never before seen a bird like the bright figure standing on the stump, and he paused in his flight, hanging for a moment on motionless wing to scrutinize the strange apparition. But he was hungry, and he considered himself more than a

match for anything in feathers except the eagle, the goshawk, and the great horned owl. His hesitation was but for a second, and, with a sudden mighty thrust of his wide wings, he swooped down upon this novel victim.

The big hawk was accustomed to seeing every quarry he stooped at cower paralysed with terror or scurry for shelter in wild panic. But, to his surprise, this infatuated bird on the stump stood awaiting him, with wings half lifted, neck feathers raised in defiant ruff, and one eye cocked upwards warily. He was so surprised, in fact, that at a distance of some dozen or fifteen feet he wavered and paused in his downward rush. But it was surprise only, fear having small place in his wild, marauding heart. In the next second he swooped again and struck downwards at his quarry with savage, steel-hard talons.

He struck but empty air. At exactly the right fraction of the instant the cock had leapt upwards on his powerful wings, lightly as a thistle-seed, but swift as if shot from a catapult. He passed straight over his terrible assailant's back. In passing he struck downwards with his spurs, which were nearly three inches long, straight, and tapered almost to a needle-point. One of these deadly weapons found its mark, as luck would have it, fair in the joint of the hawk's shoulder, putting the wing clean out of action.

The marauder turned completely over and fell in a wild flutter to the ground, the cock, at the same time, alighting gracefully six or eight feet away and wheeling like a flash to meet a second attack. The hawk, recovering with splendid nerve from the amazing shock of his overthrow, braced himself upright on his tail by the aid of the one sound wing – the other wing trailing helplessly – and faced his strange adversary with open beak and one clutching talon uplifted.

The cock, fighting after the manner of his kind, rushed in to within a couple of feet of his foe and there paused, balanced for the next stroke or parry, legs slightly apart, wings lightly raised, neck feathers ruffed straight out, beak lowered and presented like a rapier point. Seeing that his opponent made no demonstration, but simply waited, watching him with eyes as hard and bright and dauntless as his own, he tried to provoke him to a second attack. With scornful insolence he dropped his guard and pecked at a twig or a grass blade, jerking the unconsidered morsel aside and presenting his point again with lightning swiftness.

The insult, however, was lost upon the hawk, who had no knowledge of the cock's duelling code. He simply waited, motionless as the stump beside him.

The cock, perceiving that taunt and insolence were wasted, now began to circle warily toward the left, as if to take his opponent in the flank. The hawk at once shifted front to face him. But this was the side of his disabled wing. The sprawling member would not move, would not get out of the way. In the effort to manage it, he partly lost his precarious balance. The cock saw his advantage instantly. He dashed in like a feathered and flaming thunderbolt, leaping upwards and striking downwards with his destroying heels. The hawk was hurled over backwards, with one spur through his throat, the other through his lungs. As he fell he dragged his conqueror down with him, and one convulsive but blindly-clutching talon ripped away a strip of flesh and feathers from the victor's thigh. There was a moment's flapping, a few delicate red feathers floated off upon the morning air, then the hawk lay quite still, and the red cock, stepping haughtily off the body of his foe, crowed long and shrill, three times, as if challenging any other champions of the wilderness to come and dare a like fate.

For a few minutes he stood waiting and listening for an answer to his challenge. As no answer came, he turned, without deigning to glance at his slain foe, and stalked off, stepping daintily, up the old wood-road and into the depths of the forest. To the raw, red gash in his thigh he paid no heed whatever.

Having no inkling of the fact that the wilderness, silent and deserted though it seemed, was full of hostile eyes and unknown perils, he took no care at all for the secrecy of his going. Indeed, had he striven for concealment, his brilliant colouring, so out of key with the forest gloom, would have made it almost impossible. Nevertheless, his keenness of sight and hearing, his practised and unsleeping vigilance as protector of his flock, stood him in good stead, and made up for his lack of wilderness

lore. It was with an intense interest and curiosity, rather than with any apprehension, that his bold eyes questioned everything on either side of his path through the dark spruce woods. Sometimes he would stop to peck the bright vermilion bunches of the pigeon-berry, which here and there starred the hillocks beside the road. But no matter how interesting he found the novel and delicious fare, his vigilance never relaxed. It was, indeed, almost automatic. The idea lurking in his subconscious processes was probably that he might at any moment be seen by some doughty rival of his own kind, and challenged to the great game of mortal combat. But whatever the object of his watchfulness, it served him as well against the unknown as it could have done against expected foes.

Presently he came to a spot where an old, half-rotted stump had been torn apart by a bear hunting for wood-ants. The raw earth about the up-torn roots tempted the wanderer to scratch for grubs. Finding a fat white morsel, much too dainty to be devoured alone, he stood over it and began to call *kt-kt-kt*, *kt-kt-kt*, *kt-kt-kt*, in his most alluring tones, hoping that some coy young hen would come stealing out of the underbrush in response to his gallant invitation. There was no such response; but as he peered about hopefully, he caught sight of a sinister, reddish-yellow shape creeping towards him behind the shelter of a withe-wood bush. He gulped down the fat grub, and stood warily eyeing the approach of this new foe.

It looked to him like a sharp-nosed, bushy-tailed yellow dog – a very savage and active one. He was not afraid, but he knew himself no match for a thoroughly ferocious dog of that size. This one, it was clear, had evil designs upon him. He half crouched, with wings loosed and every muscle tense for the spring.

The next instant the fox pounced at him, darting through the green edges of the withe-wood bush with most disconcerting suddenness. The cock sprang into the air, but only just in time, for the fox, leaping up nimbly at him with snapping jaws, captured a mouthful of glossy fail feathers. The cock alighted on a branch overhead, some seven or eight feet from the ground, whipped around, stretched his neck downwards, and eyed his assailant with a glassy stare. "*Kr-rr-rr-eee?*" he murmured softly, as if in sarcastic interrogation. The fox, exasperated at his failure, and hating, above all beasts, to be made a fool of, glanced around to see if there were any spectators. Then, with an air of elaborate indifference, he pawed a feather from the corner of his mouth and trotted away as if he had just remembered something.

He had not gone above thirty yards or so, when the cock flew down again to the exact spot where he had been scratching. He pretended to pick up another grub, all the time keeping an eye on the retiring foe. He crowed with studied insolence; but the fox, although that long and shrill defiance must have seemed a startling novelty, gave no sign of having heard it. The cock crowed again, with the same lack of result. He kept on crowing until the fox was out of sight. Then he returned coolly to his scratching. When he had satisfied his appetite for fat white grubs, he flew up again to his safe perch and fell to preening his feathers. Five minutes later the fox reappeared, creeping up with infinite stealth from quite another direction. The cock, however, detected his approach at once, and proclaimed the fact with another mocking crow. Disgusted and abashed, the fox turned in his tracks and crept away to stalk some less sophisticated quarry.

The wanderer, for all his fearlessness, was wise. He suspected that the vicious yellow dog with the bushy tail might return yet again to the charge. For a time, therefore, he sat on his perch, digesting his meal and studying with keen, inquisitive eyes his strange surroundings. After ten minutes or so of stillness and emptiness, the forest began to come alive. He saw a pair of black-and-white woodpeckers running up and down the trunk of a half-dead tree, and listened with tense interest to their loud *rat-tat-tattings*. He watched the shy wood-mice come out from their snug holes under the tree-roots, and play about with timorous gaiety and light rustlings among the dead leaves. He scrutinized with appraising care a big brown rabbit which came bounding in a leisurely fashion down the tote-road and sat up on its hindquarters near the stump, staring about with its mild, bulging eyes, and waving its long ears this way and that, to question every minutest wilderness sound; and he decided that the

rabbit, for all its bulk and apparent vigour of limb, would not be a dangerous opponent. In fact, he thought of hopping down from his perch and putting the big innocent to flight, just to compensate himself for having had to flee from the fox.

But while he was meditating this venture, the rabbit went suddenly leaping off at a tremendous pace, evidently in great alarm. A few seconds later a slim little light-brownish creature, with short legs, long, sinuous body, short, triangular head, and cruel eyes that glowed like fire, came into view, following hard upon the rabbit's trail. It was nothing like half the rabbit's size, but the interested watcher on the branch overhead understood at once the rabbit's terror. He had never seen a weasel before, but he knew that the sinuous little beast with the eyes of death would be as dangerous almost as the fox. He noted that here was another enemy to look out for – to be avoided, if possible, to be fought with the utmost wariness if fighting should be forced upon him.

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.