

Roberts Charles G. D. Sir

Hoof and Claw



Charles Roberts

Hoof and Claw

«Public Domain»

Roberts C.

Hoof and Claw / C. Roberts — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

| | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| The Bear that thought he was a Dog | 5 |
| The Trail of the Vanishing Herds | 12 |
| A Master of Supply | 18 |
| The White Wolf | 23 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 25 |

Roberts Charles G. D., Sir Hoof and Claw

The Bear that thought he was a Dog

The gaunt, black mother lifted her head from nuzzling happily at the velvet fur of her little one. The cub was but twenty-four hours old, and engrossed every emotion of her savage heart; but her ear had caught the sound of heavy footsteps coming up the mountain. They were confident, fearless footsteps, taking no care whatever to disguise themselves, so she knew at once that they were the steps of the only creature that presumed to go so noisily through the great silences. Her heart pounded with anxious suspicion. She gave the cub a reassuring lick, deftly set it aside with her great paws, and thrust her head forth cautiously from the door of the den.

She saw a man – a woodsman in brownish-grey homespuns and heavy leg-boots, and with a gun over his shoulder – slouching up along the faintly marked trail which led close past her doorway. Her own great tracks on the trail had been obliterated that morning by a soft and thawing fall of belated spring snow – "the robin snow," as it is called in New Brunswick – and the man, absorbed in picking his way by this unfamiliar route over the mountain, had no suspicion that he was in danger of trespassing. But the bear, with that tiny black form at the bottom of the den filling her whole horizon, could not conceive that the man's approach had any other purpose than to rob her of her treasure. She ran back to the little one, nosed it gently into a corner, and anxiously pawed some dry leaves half over it. Then, her eyes aflame with rage and fear, she betook herself once more to the entrance, and crouched there motionless to await the coming of the enemy.

The man swung up the hill noisily, grunting now and again as his foothold slipped on the slushy, moss-covered stones. He fetched a huge breath of satisfaction as he gained a little strip of level ledge, perhaps a dozen feet in length, with a scrubby spruce bush growing at the other end of it. Behind the bush he made out what looked as if it might be the entrance to a little cave. Interested at once, he strode forward to examine it. At the first stride a towering black form, jaws agape and claws outstretched, crashed past the fir bush and hurled itself upon him.

A man brought up in the backwoods learns to think quickly, or, rather, to think and act in the same instant. Even as the great beast sprang, the man's gun leaped to its place and he fired. His charge was nothing more than heavy duck-shot, intended for some low-flying flock of migrant geese or brant. But at this close range, some seven or eight feet only, it tore through its target like a heavy mushroom bullet, and with a stopping force that halted the animal's charge in mid-air like the blow of a steam hammer. She fell in her tracks, a heap of huddled fur and grinning teeth:

"Gee," remarked the man, "that was a close call!" He ejected the empty shell and slipped in a fresh cartridge. Then he examined critically the warm heap of fur and teeth.

Perceiving that his victim was a mother, and also that her fur was rusty and ragged after, the winter's sleep, sentiment and the sound utilitarianism of the backwoods stirred within him in a fine blend.

"Poor old beggar!" he muttered. "She must hev' a baby in yonder hole. That accounts fer her kind of hasty ways. 'Most a pity I had to shoot her jest now, when she's out o' season an' her pelt not worth the job of strippin' it!"

Entering the half darkness of the cave, he quickly discovered the cub in its ineffectual hiding-place. Young as it was, when he picked it up, it whimpered with terror and struck out with its baby paws, recognizing the smell of an enemy. The man grinned indulgently at this display of spirit.

"Gee, but ye're chock-full o' ginger!" said he. And then, being of an understanding heart and an experimental turn of mind, he laid the cub down and returned to the body of the mother. With his

knife he cut off several big handfuls of the shaggy fur and stuffed it into his pockets. Then he rubbed his hands, his sleeves, and the breast of his coat on the warm body.

"There, now," said he, returning to the cave and once more picking up the little one, "I've made ye an orphan, to be sure, but I'm goin' to soothe yer feelin's all I kin. Ye must make believe as how I'm yer mammy till I kin find ye a better one."

Pillowed in the crook of his captor's arm, and with his nose snuggled into a bunch of his mother's fur, the cub ceased to wonder at a problem too hard for him, and dozed off into an uneasy sleep. And the man, pleased with his new plaything, went gently that he might not disturb the slumber.

Now, it chanced that at Jabe Smith's farm, on the other side of the mountain, there had just been a humble tragedy. Jabe Smith's dog, a long-haired brown retriever, had been bereaved of her newborn puppies. Six of them she had borne, but five had been straightway taken from her and drowned; for Jabe, though compassionate of heart, had wisely decided that compassion would be too costly at the price of having his little clearing quite overrun with dogs. For two days, in her box in a corner of the dusky stable, the brown mother had wistfully poured out her tenderness upon the one remaining puppy; and then, when she had run into the house for a moment to snatch a bite of breakfast, one of Smith's big red oxen had strolled into the stable and blundered a great splay hoof into the box. That had happened in the morning; and all day the brown mother had moped, whimpering and whining, about the stable, casting long distraught glances at the box in the corner, which she was unwilling either to approach or to quite forsake.

When her master returned, and came and looked in hesitatingly at the stable door, the brown mother saw the small furry shape in the crook of his arm. Her heart yearned to it at once. She fawned upon the man coaxingly, lifted herself with her forepaws upon his coat, and reached up till she could lick the sleeping cub. Somewhat puzzled, Jabe Smith went and looked into the box. Then he understood.

"If you want the cub, Jinny, he's your'n all right. An' it saves me a heap o' bother."

II

Driven by his hunger, and reassured by the smell of the handful of fur which the woodsman left with him, the cub promptly accepted his adoption. She seemed very small, this new mother, and she had a disquieting odor; but the supreme thing, in the cub's eyes, was the fact she had something that assuaged his appetite. The flavor, to be sure, was something new, and novelty is a poor recommendation to babes of whatever kindred; but all the cub really asked of milk was that it should be warm and abundant. And soon, being assiduously licked and fondled, and nursed till his little belly was round as a melon, he forgot the cave on the mountainside and accepted Jabe Smith's barn as a quite normal abode for small bears.

Jinny was natively a good mother. Had her own pups been left to her, she would have lavished every care and tenderness upon them during the allotted span of weeks, and then, with inexorable decision, she would have weaned and put them away for their souls' good. But somewhere in her sturdy doggish make-up there was a touch of temperament, of something almost approaching imagination, to which this strange foster-child of hers appealed as no ordinary puppy could ever have done. She loved the cub with a certain extravagance, and gave herself up to it utterly. Even her beloved master fell into a secondary place, and his household, of which she had hitherto held herself the guardian, now seemed to her to exist merely for the benefit of this black prodigy which she imagined herself to have produced. The little one's astounding growth – for the cubs of the bear are born very small, and so must lose no time in making up arrears of stature – was an affair for which she took all credit to herself; and she never thought of weaning him till he himself decided the matter by preferring the solid dainties of the kitchen. When she could no longer nurse him, however, she remained his devoted comrade, playmate, satellite; and the cub, who was a roguish but amiable soul, repaid her

devotion by imitating her in all ways possible. The bear being by nature a very silent animal, her noisy barking seemed always to stir his curiosity and admiration; but his attempts to imitate it resulted in nothing more than an occasional grunting *woof*. This throaty syllable, his only utterance besides the whimper which signalled the frequent demands of his appetite, came to be accepted as his name; and he speedily learned to respond to it.

Jabe Smith, as has been already pointed out, was a man of sympathetic discernment. In the course of no long time his discernment told him that Woof was growing up under the delusion that he was a dog. It was perhaps a convenience, in some ways, that he should not know he was a bear – he might be the more secure from troublesome ancestral suggestions. But as he appeared to claim all the privileges of his foster-mother, Jabe Smith's foreseeing eye considered the time, not far distant, when the sturdy and demonstrative little animal would grow to a giant of six or seven hundred pounds in weight, and still, no doubt, continue to think he was a dog. Jabe Smith began to discourage the demonstrativeness of Jinny, trusting her example would have the desired effect upon the cub. In particular, he set himself to remove from her mind any lingering notion that she would do for a lap-dog. He did not want any such notion as that to get itself established in Woof's young brain. Also, he broke poor Jinny at once of her affectionate habit of springing up and planting her forepaws upon his breast. That seemed to him a demonstration of ardor which, if practiced by a seven-hundred-pound bear, might be a little overwhelming.

Jabe Smith had no children to complicate the situation. His family consisted merely of Mrs. Smith, a small but varying number of cats and kittens, Jinny, and Woof. Upon Mrs. Smith and the cats Woof's delusion came to have such effect that they, too, regarded him as a dog. The cats scratched him when he was little, and with equal confidence they scratched him when he was big. Mrs. Smith, as long as she was in a good humor, allowed him the freedom of the house, coddled him with kitchen tit-bits, and laughed when his affectionate but awkward bulk got in the way of her outbursts of mopping or her paroxysms of sweeping. But when storm was in the air, she regarded him no more than a black poodle. At the heels of the more nimble Jinny, he would be chased in ignominy from the kitchen door, with Mrs. Jabe's angry broom thwacking at the spot where Nature had forgotten to give him a tail. At such time Jabe Smith was usually to be seen smoking contemplatively on the woodpile, and regarding the abashed fugitives with sympathy.

This matter of a tail was one of the obstacles which Woof had to encounter in playing the part of a dog. He was indefatigable in his efforts to wag his tail. Finding no tail to wag, he did the best he could with his whole massive hindquarters, to the discomfiture of all that got in the way. Yet, for all his clumsiness, his good-will was so unchanging that none of the farmyard kindreds had any dread of him, saving only the pig in his sty. The pig, being an incurable sceptic by nature, and, moreover, possessed of a keen and discriminating nose, persisted in believing him to be a bear and a lover of pork, and would squeal nervously at the sight of him. The rest of the farmyard folk accepted him at his own illusion, and appeared to regard him as a gigantic species of dog. And so, with nothing to mar his content but the occasional paroxysms of Mrs. Jabe's broom, Woof led the sheltered life and was glad to be a dog.

III

It was not until the autumn of his third year that Woof began to experience any discontent. Then, without knowing why, it seemed to him that there was something lacking in Jabe Smith's farmyard – even in Jabe Smith himself and in Jinny, his foster-mother. The smell of the deep woods beyond the pasture fields drew him strangely. He grew restless. Something called to him; something stirred in his blood and would not let him be still. And one morning, when Jabe Smith came out in the first pink and amber of daybreak to fodder the horses, he found that Woof had disappeared. He was sorry, but he was not surprised. He tried to explain to the dejected Jinny that they would probably

have the truant back again before long. But he was no adept in the language of dogs, and Jinny, failing for once to understand, remained disconsolate.

Once clear of the outermost stump pastures and burnt lands, Woof pushed on feverishly. The urge that drove him forward directed him toward the half-barren, rounded shoulders of old Sugar Loaf, where the blue-berries at this season were ripe and bursting with juice. Here in the gold-green, windy open, belly-deep in the low, blue-jeweled bushes, Woof feasted greedily; but he felt it was not berries that he had come for.

When, however, he came upon a glossy young she-bear, her fine black muzzle bedaubed with berry juice, his eyes were opened to the object of his quest. Perhaps he thought she, too, was a dog; but, if so, she was in his eyes a dog of incomparable charm, more dear to him, though a new acquaintance, than even little brown Jinny, his kind mother, had ever been. The stranger, though at first somewhat puzzled by Woof's violent efforts to wag a non-existent tail, apparently found her big wooer sympathetic. For the next few weeks, all through the golden, dreamy autumn of the New Brunswick woods, the two roamed together; and for the time Woof forgot the farm, his master, Jinny, and even Mrs. Jabe's impetuous broom.

But about the time of the first sharp frosts, when the ground was crisp with the new-fallen leaves, Woof and his mate began to lose interest in each other. She amiably forgot him and wandered off by herself, intent on nothing so much as satisfying her appetite, which had increased amazingly. It was necessary that she should load her ribs with fat to last her through her long winter's sleep in some cave or hollow tree. And as for Woof, once more he thought of Jabe Smith and Jinny, and the kind, familiar farmyard, and the delectable scraps from the kitchen, and the comforting smell of fried pancakes. What was the chill and lonely wilderness to him, a dog? He turned from grubbing up an ant stump and headed straight back for home.

When he got there, he found but a chimney standing naked and blackened over a tangle of charred ruins. A forest fire, some ten days back, had swept past that way, cutting a mile-wide swath through the woods and clean wiping out Jabe Smith's little homestead. It being too late in the year to begin rebuilding, the woodsman had betaken himself to the Settlements for the winter, trusting to begin, in the spring, the slow repair of his fortunes.

Woof could not understand it at all. For a day he wandered disconsolately over and about the ruins, whining and sniffing, and filled with a sense of injury at being thus deserted. How glad he would have been to hear even the squeal of his enemy, the pig, or to feel the impetuous broom of Mrs. Jabe harassing his haunches! But even such poor consolation seemed to have passed beyond his ken. On the second day, being very hungry, he gave up all hope of bacon scraps, and set off to the woods to forage once more for himself.

As long as the actual winter held off, there was no great difficulty in this foraging. There were roots to be grubbed up, grubs, worms, and beetles, already sluggish with the cold, to be found under stones and logs, and ant-hills to be ravished. There were also the nests of bees and wasps, pungent but savory. He was an expert in hunting the shy wood-mice, lying patiently in wait for them beside their holes and obliterating them, as they came out, with a lightning stroke of his great paw. But when the hard frosts came, sealing up the moist turf under a crust of steel, and the snows, burying the mouse-holes under three or four feet of white fluff, then he was hard put to it for a living. Every day or two, in his distress, he would revisit the clearing and wander sorrowfully among the snow-clad ruins, hoping against hope that his vanished friends would presently return.

It was in one of the earliest of these melancholy visits that Woof first encountered a male of his own species, and showed how far he was from any consciousness of kinship. A yearling heifer of Jabe Smith's, which had escaped from the fire and fled far into the wilderness, chanced to find her way back. For several weeks she had managed to keep alive on such dead grass as she could paw down to through the snow, and on such twigs of birch and poplar as she could manage to chew. Now, a mere ragged bag of bones, she stood in the snow behind the ruins, her eyes wild with hunger and despair.

Her piteous mooings caught the ear of a hungry old he-bear which was hunting in the woods near by. He came at once, hopefully. One stroke of his armed paw on the unhappy heifer's neck put a period to her pains, and the savage old prowler fell to his meal.

But, as it chanced, Woof also had heard, from a little further off, that lowing of the disconsolate heifer. To him it had come as a voice from the good old days of friendliness and plenty and impetuous brooms, and he had hastened toward the sound with new hope in his heart. He came just in time to see, from the edge of the clearing, the victim stricken down.

One lesson Woof had well learned from his foster-mother, and that was the obligation resting upon every honest dog to protect his master's property. The unfortunate heifer was undoubtedly the property of Jabe Smith. In fact, Woof knew her as a young beast who had often shaken her budding horns at him. Filled with righteous wrath, he rushed forward and hurled himself upon the slayer.

The latter was one of those morose old males, who, having forgotten or outgrown the comfortable custom of hibernation, are doomed to range the wilderness all winter. His temper, therefore, was raw enough in any case. At this flagrant interference with his own lawful kill, it flared to fury. His assailant was bigger than he, better nourished, and far stronger; but for some minutes he put up a fight which, for swift ferocity, almost daunted the hitherto unawakened spirit of Woof. A glancing blow of the stranger's, however, on the side of Woof's snout – only the remnant of a spent stroke, but enough to produce an effect on that most sensitive center of a bear's dignity – and there was a sudden change in the conditions of the duel. Woof, for the first time in his life, saw red. It was a veritable berserk rage, this virgin outburst of his. His adversary simply went down like a rag baby before it, and was mauled to abject submission, in the smother of the snow, inside of half a minute. Feigning death, which, indeed, was no great feigning for him at that moment, he succeeded in deceiving the unsophisticated Woof, who drew back upon his haunches to consider his triumph. In that second the vanquished one writhed nimbly to his feet and slipped off apologetically through the snow. And Woof, placated by his victory, made no attempt to follow. The ignominies of Mrs. Jabe's broom were wiped out.

When Woof's elation had somewhat subsided, he laid himself down beside the carcass of the dead heifer. As the wind blew on that day, this corner of the ruins was a nook of shelter. Moreover, the body of the red heifer, dead and dilapidated though it was, formed in his mind a link with the happy past. It was Jabe Smith's property, and he got a certain comfort from lying beside it and guarding it for his master. As the day wore on, and his appetite grew more and more insistent, in an absent-minded way he began to gnaw at the good red meat beside him. At first, to be sure, this gave him a guilty conscience, and from time to time he would glance up nervously, as if apprehending the broom. But soon immunity brought confidence, his conscience ceased to trouble him, and the comfort derived from the nearness of the red heifer was increased exceedingly.

As long as the heifer lasted, Woof stuck faithfully to his post as guardian, and longer, indeed. For nearly two days after the remains had quite disappeared – save for horns and hoofs and such bones as his jaws could not crush – he lingered. Then at last, urged by a ruthless hunger, and sorrowfully convinced that there was nothing more he could do for Jabe or Jabe for him, he set off again on his wanderings.

About three weeks later, forlorn of heart and exigent of belly, Woof found himself in a part of the forest where he had never been before. But some one else had been there; before him was a broad trail, just such as Jabe Smith and his wood sled used to make. Here were the prints of horses' hooves. Woof's heart bounded hopefully. He hurried along down the trail. Then a faint, delectable savor, drawn across the sharp, still air, met his nostrils. Pork and beans – oh, assuredly! He paused for a second to sniff the fragrance again, and then lurched onwards at a rolling gallop. He rounded a turn of the trail, and there before him stood a logging camp.

To Woof a human habitation stood for friendliness and food and shelter. He approached, therefore, without hesitation.

There was no sign of life about the place, except for the smoke rising liberally from the stove-pipe chimney. The door was shut, but Woof knew that doors frequently opened if one scratched at them and whined persuasively. He tried it, then stopped to listen for an answer. The answer came – a heavy, comfortable snore from within the cabin. It was mid-morning, and the camp cook, having got his work done up, was sleeping in his bunk the while the dinner was boiling.

Woof scratched and whined again. Then, growing impatient, he reared himself on his haunches in order to scratch with both paws at once. His luck favored him, for he happened to scratch on the latch. It lifted, the door swung open suddenly, and he half fell across the threshold. He had not intended so abrupt an entrance, and he paused, peering with diffidence and hope into the homely gloom.

The snoring had stopped suddenly. At the rear of the cabin Woof made out a large, round, startled face, fringed with scanty red whiskers and a mop of red hair, staring at him from over the edge of an upper bunk. Woof had hoped to find Jabe Smith there. But this was a stranger, so he suppressed his impulse to rush in and wallow delightedly before the bunk. Instead of that, he came only half-way over the threshold, and stood there making those violent contortions which he believed to be wagging his tail.

To a cool observer of even the most limited intelligence it would have been clear that these contortions were intended to be conciliatory. But the cook of Conroy's Camp was taken by surprise, and he was not a cool observer – in fact, he was frightened. A gun was leaning against the wall below the bunk. A large, hairy hand stole forth, reached down and clutched the gun.

Woof wagged his haunches more coaxingly than ever, and took another hopeful step forward. Up went the gun. There was a blue-white spurt, and the report clashed deafeningly within the narrow quarters.

The cook was a poor shot at any time, and at this moment he was at a special disadvantage. The bullet went close over the top of Woof's head and sang waspishly across the clearing. Woof turned and looked over his shoulder to see what the man had fired at. If anything was hit, he wanted to go and get it and fetch it for the man, as Jabe and Jinny had taught him to do. But he could see no result of the shot. He whined deprecatingly and ventured all the way into the cabin.

The cook felt desperately for another cartridge. There was none to be found. He remembered that they were all in the chest by the door. He crouched back in the bunk, making himself as small as possible, and hoping that a certain hunk of bacon on the bench by the stove might divert the terrible stranger's attention and give him a chance to make a bolt for the door.

But Woof had not forgotten either the good example of Jinny or the discipline of Mrs. Jabe's broom. Far be it from him to help himself without leave. But he was very hungry. Something must be done to win the favor of the strangely unresponsive round-faced man in the bunk. Looking about him anxiously, he espied a pair of greasy cowhide "larrigans" lying on the floor near the door. Picking one up in his mouth, after the manner of his retriever foster-mother, he carried it over and laid it down, as a humble offering, beside the bunk.

Now, the cook, though he had been undeniably frightened, was by no means a fool. This touching gift of one of his own larrigans opened his eyes and his heart. Such a bear, he was assured, could harbor no evil intentions. He sat up in his bunk.

"Hullo!" said he. "What ye doin' here, sonny? What d'ye want o' me, anyhow?"

The huge black beast wagged his hindquarters frantically and wallowed on the floor in his fawning delight at the sound of a human voice.

"Seems to think he's a kind of a dawg," muttered the cook thoughtfully. And then the light of certain remembered rumors broke upon his memory.

"I'll be jiggered," said he, "ef 'tain't that there tame b'ar Jabe Smith, over to East Fork, used to have afore he was burnt out!"

Climbing confidently from the bunk, he proceeded to pour a generous portion of molasses over the contents of the scrap pail, because he knew that bears had a sweet tooth. When the choppers and drivers came trooping in for dinner, they were somewhat taken aback to find a huge bear sleeping beside the stove. As the dangerous-looking slumberer seemed to be in the way – none of the men caring to sit too close to him – to their amazement the cook smacked the mighty hindquarters with the flat of his hand, and bundled him unceremoniously into a corner. "'Pears to think he's some kind of a dawg," explained the cook, "so I let him come along in for company. He'll fetch yer larrigans an' socks an' things fer ye. An' it makes the camp a sight homier, havin' somethin' like a cat or a dawg about."

"Right you are!" agreed the boss. "But what was that noise we heard, along about an hour back? Did you shoot anything?"

"Oh, that was jest a little misunderstandin', before him an' me got acquainted," explained the cook, with a trace of embarrassment. "We made it up all right."

The Trail of the Vanishing Herds

Once again, but sluggishly, as if oppressed by apprehensions which they could not understand, the humped and lion-fronted herds of the bison began to gather for the immemorial southward drift. Harassed of late years by new and terrible enemies, their herds had been so thinned and scattered that even to the heavy brains of the fiercer old bulls a vague idea of caution was beginning to penetrate. Hitherto it had been the wont of the colossal hordes to deal with their adversaries in a very direct and simple fashion – to charge and thunder down upon them, to roll over them in an irresistible flood of angry hooves, and trample them out of existence. Against the ancient enemies this straightforward method of warfare had been efficacious enough, and the herds had multiplied till the plains were black with their marching myriads. But against the new foe – the white man, with his guns and his cunning, his cool courage and his insatiable greed – it had been a destructive failure. The mightier their myriads, the more irresistible the invitation to this relentless slaughterer; and they had melted before him. At last a new instinct had begun to stir in their crude intelligences, an instinct to scatter, to shun the old, well-worn trails of migration, to seek pasturage in the remoter valleys and by small streams where the white man's foot had not yet trespassed. But as yet it was no more than the suggestion of an instinct, too feeble and fumbling to sway the obstinate hordes. It had come to birth too late. Here and there a little troop – perhaps half a dozen cows under the lordship of some shaggy bull more alert and supple-witted than his fellows – resisted the summons to assemble, and slipped off among the wooded glades. But the rest, uneasy, yet uncomprehending, obeyed the ancestral impulse and gathered till the northern plains were black with them.

Then the great march began, the fateful southward drift.

The horde of the giant migrants was not a homogeneous mass, as it would have seemed to one viewing it from a distance and a height. It was made up of innumerable small herds, from a dozen to thirty or forty bison in each. Each of these little groups hung together tenaciously, under the dominance of two or three old bulls, and kept at a certain distance, narrow but appreciable, from the herds immediately neighboring it. But all the herds drifted southward together in full accord, now journeying, now halting, now moving again, as if organized and ordered by some one central and inflexible control. Rival bulls roared their challenges, pawed the earth, fought savage duels with their battering fronts and short, ripping horns, as they went; but always onward they pressed, the south with its sun-steeped pastures drawing them, the north with its menace of storm driving them before it. And the sound of their bellowings and their tramlings rose in a heavy thunder above their march, till the wide plain seemed to rock with it.

Countless as was their array, however, they seemed dimly conscious, with a sort of vague, communal, unindividual sort of perception, that their numbers and their power were as nothing in comparison with the migrations of preceding autumns. The arrogance of irresistible might had passed from them. They went sullenly, as if under a cloud of dark expectation. And the separate herds hung closer to their neighbors than had hitherto been the custom in the horde, as if seeking reassurance against an unknown threat.

All around the far-flung outskirts of the host ran, skulking and dodging, its accustomed, hereditary foes – the little slim, yellow-gray coyotes and the gaunt timber wolves. The coyotes, dangerous only to the dying or to very young calves separated from their mothers, were practically ignored, save for an occasional angry rush on the part of some nervous cow; and, trusting to their amazing speed, they frequently ran far in among the herds, in the hope of spotting some sick animal and keeping it in view till the host should pass on and leave it to its fate. The great gray timber wolves, however, were honored with more attention. Powerful enough alone to pull down a yearling calf, they were always watched with savage and apprehensive eyes by the cows, and forced to keep their distance. The stragglers, old and young, were their prey, or sometimes a wounded bull, worsted in

battle and driven from his herd, and weak from loss of blood. In twos and threes they prowled, silent and grimly watchful, hanging on the flanks of the host or picking their way in its vast, betrampled, desolated trail.

On the outermost edge of the right or western wing of the bellowing host went a compact little herd, which hung together with marked obstinacy. It consisted of a dozen cows with their calves and yearlings, and two adult bulls, one of which, the younger and less heavily maned, kept diffidently at the rear and seemed to occupy the busy but subordinate post of a sort of staff-sergeant. The other was an immense bull, with splendid leonine front and with a watchful, suspicious look in his eyes which contrasted sharply with the sullen stare of his fellows. He had the wisdom learned in many eventful migrations, and he captained his herd imperiously, being sure, in the main, as to what was best for them. But of just one thing he seemed somewhat unsure. He appeared irresolute as to the southward march or else as to the companionship of the host. By hanging upon the skirts of it, he held himself ready to detach his little herd from its company and make off among the foothills in case of need. At the same time, by thus keeping on the outskirts of the host he secured for his little knot of satellites the freshest and sweetest pasturage.

However disquieting the brown bull's apprehensions, they were too vague to let him know what it was he feared. For the accustomed perils of the march he entertained just so much dread as befitted a sagacious leader – no more. The skulking coyotes he disdained to notice. They might skulk or dart about like lean shadows, as near the herd as the jealous cows would permit, and he would never trouble to shake the polished scimitars of his horns at them. The great gray wolves he scorned; but, with perhaps a dim prevision of the day when he should be old and feeble, and driven out from the herd, he could not ignore them. He chased them off angrily if they ventured within the range of his attention. But against an enemy whom he had learned to respect, the Indian hunters, he kept an untiring watch, and the few white hunters, who had already so thinned the bison host, he remembered with a fear which was mingled with vengeful resentment. Nevertheless, even his well-grounded fear of those human foes was not enough to account for his almost panicky forebodings. These enemies, as he had known them, struck always on the flanks of the host; and he had tactics to elude even the dreadful thunder and spurted lightning of their guns. His fear was of he knew not what and therefore it ground remorselessly upon his nerves.

For the present, however, there were none of these human enemies near, and the host rolled on southward, with its bellowings and its trappings, unmolested. Neither Indians nor white men approached this stage of the migration. The autumn days were sunny, beneath a sky bathed in dream. The autumn nights were crisp with tonic frost, and in the pink freshness of the dawn a wide-flung mist arose from the countless puffing nostrils and the frost-rimed, streaming manes. Pasturage was abundant, the tempers of the great bulls were bold and pugnacious, and nothing seemed less likely than that any disaster could menace so mighty and invincible a host. Yet Brown Bull was uneasy. From time to time he would lift his red-rimmed nostrils, sniff the air in every direction, and scan the summits of the foothills far on the right, as if the unknown peril which he apprehended was likely to come from that direction.

As day by day passed on without event, the diffused anxiety of the host quite died away. But Brown Bull, with his wider sagacity or more sensitive intuition, seemed to grow only the more apprehensive and the more vigilant. His temper did not improve under the strain, and his little troop of followers was herded with a severity which must have taxed, for the moment, their faith in its beneficence.

The host lived, fought, fed, as it went, halting only for sleep and the hours of rest. In this inexorable southward drift the right flank passed one morning over a steep little knoll, the crest of which chanced to be occupied by Brown Bull and his herd just at the moment when the moving ranks came to a halt for the forenoon siesta. It was such a post of vantage as Brown Bull loved. He stood there sniffing with wide, wet nostrils, and searching the horizon for danger. The search was vain, as

ever; but just behind him, and closer in toward the main body of the host, he saw something that made his stretched nerves thrill with anger. An old bull had just been driven out from a neighboring herd, deposed from his lordship and hideously gored by a younger and stronger rival. Staggering from his wounds, and overwhelmed with a sudden terror of isolation, he tried to edge his way into the herd next behind him. He was ejected mercilessly. From herd to herd he staggered, met always by a circle of lowered horns and angry eyes, and so went stumbling back to that lonely doom which, without concern, he had seen meted out to so many of his fellows, but had never thought of as possible to himself. This pitiful sight, of course, was nothing to Brown Bull. It hardly even caught his eye, still less his interest. Had he been capable of formulating his indifferent thoughts upon the matter, they would have taken some such form as: "Serve him right for being licked!" But when at last the wounded outcast was set upon by four big timber wolves and pulled, bellowing, to his knees, that was another affair. Brown Bull could not tolerate the sight of the gray wolves triumphing. With a roar of rage he charged down the knoll. His herd, astonished but obedient, lowered their massive heads and charged at his heels. The wolves snarled venomously, forsook their prize, and vanished. Brown Bull led the charge straight on and over the body of the dying outcast, trampling it into dreadful shapelessness. Then, halting abruptly, he looked about him in surprise. The wolves were gone. His rage passed from him. He led his followers tranquilly back to their place on the knoll, to the accompaniment of puzzled snortings from the neighbor herds.

The herd fell to feeding at once, as if nothing in the least unusual had happened. But Brown Bull, after cropping the sweet, tufted grass for a few minutes, was seized with one of his pangs of apprehension, and raised his head for a fresh survey of the distance. This time he did not resume his feeding, but stood for several minutes shifting his feet uneasily until he had quite satisfied himself that the ponies which he saw emerging from a cleft in the foothills were not a harmless wild troop, but carried each a red rider. He had reached the Indian country, and his place on the flank of the host, as his craft and experience told him, was no longer a safe one.

For a little, Brown Bull stood irresolute, half inclined to lead his followers away from the host and slip back into the wooded foothills whence they had come. Then, either moved by a remembrance of the harsh winter of the north, or drawn by the pull of the host upon his gregarious heart, he lost the impulse. Instead of forsaking the host, he led his herd down the knoll and insinuated it into a gap in the ranks.

Here Brown Bull was undoubtedly a trespasser. But instead of forcing a combat or, rather, a succession of combats, he contented himself with holding his straitened ground firmly rather than provocatively. His towering bulk and savage, resolute bearing made the nearest bulls unwilling to challenge his intrusion. Little by little the herds yielded way, half unconsciously, seeking merely their own convenience. Little by little, also, Brown Bull continued his crafty encroachments, till at length, after perhaps a couple of hours of maneuvering, he had his charges some four or five hundred yards in from the exposed flank and well placed near the front of the march, where the pasturage was still sweet and untrampled.

The Indians, sweeping up on their mad ponies, rode close to the flank of the host and chose their victims at leisure. Killing for meat and not for sport, they selected only young cows in good condition, and were too sparing of their powder to shoot more than they needed. They clung to the host for some hours, throwing the outer fringe of it into confusion, but attracting little attention from the herds beyond their reach. Once in a while some bull, more fiery than his fellows, would charge with blind, uncalculating valor upon these nimble assailants, only to be at once shot down for his hide. But for the most part, none but those herds actually assailed paid much attention to what was going on. They instinctively crowded away from the flying horsemen, the flames and thunder of the guns. But their numbers and the nearness of their companions seemed to give them a stolid sense of security even when the swift death was almost upon them. As for Brown Bull, all this was just

what he had expected and made provision against. The assault came nowhere near his own charges, so he treated it as none of his affair.

The Indians withdrew long before nightfall; but the following day brought others, and for a week or more there was never a day without this harassing attack upon one flank or another of the host, or sometimes upon both flanks at once. Again and again, as the outer ranks dwindled, Brown Bull found himself nearing the danger zone, and discreetly on each occasion he worked his herd in a few hundred yards nearer the center.

Then, for a space of some days, the attacks of the Indians ceased, and the wolves and coyotes came back to dog the trail of the diminished host. But Brown Bull was not unduly elated by this respite. He held his followers to their place near the center of the march, and maintained his firm and apprehensive vigilance untiringly. The days were now hot and cloudless, and so dry that the host seemed literally to drink up every brook or pond it passed, and an irritating dust-cloud overhung the rear of the trampling hoofs.

But these few days of peace were but prelude to harsher trial. From somewhere far to the left came now a band of white hunters, who rode around the host and attacked it on both flanks at once. They killed more heedlessly and brutally than the Indians, for the sake of the hides rather than for meat, each man hurriedly marking his own kill and then dashing on to seek more victims. Each night they camped, and in the cool of the morning overtook the slow-moving host on their tireless mustangs. The trail of stripped red carcasses which they left behind them glutted all the wolves, coyotes, and carrion crows for leagues about, and affronted the wholesome daylight of the plains. This visitation lasted for five or six days, and the terror it created spread inwards to the very heart of the host. Gradually the host quickened its march, leaving itself little time for feeding and only enough rest for the vitally essential process of rumination. At last the white marauders, satiated with slaughter, dropped behind, and immediately the host, now shrunken by nearly a third, slackened its pace and seemed to forget its punishment. Phlegmatic and short of memory, the herds were restored to content by a day of heavy rain, which laid the dust, and freshened their hides, and instilled new sweetness into the coarse plains grasses. But Brown Bull's apprehensions redoubled, and he grew lean with watching.

The path of migration – the old path, known to the ancestors of this host for many generations – now led for many days along the right bank of a wide and turbulent but usually shallow river. The flat roar of the yellow flood upon its reefs and sand banks, mixed with the bellowings and tramlings of the host to form a thunder which could be heard in the far-off foothills, transmuted there to a murmur like the sea.

There came now a day of intense and heavy heat, with something in the air which made the whole host uneasy. They stopped pasturing, and the older bulls and cows sniffed the dead air as if they detected some strange menace upon it. Toward the middle of the afternoon a mysterious haze, of a lovely rosy saffron hue, appeared in the southeast beyond the river. It spread up the hot, turquoise-blue sky with a terrifying rapidity, blotting out the empty plain as it approached. Soon all the eyes of the host were turned upon it. Suddenly, at the heart of the rosy haze, a gigantic yellow-black column took shape, broad at the base and spreading wide at the summit, till it lost itself in a swooping canopy of blackish cloud. It drew near at frightful speed, spinning as it came, and licking up the surface of the plain beneath.

Brown Bull, whose herd was just now in the front rank of the host, stood motionless for some seconds, till he had judged the exact direction of the spinning column. Then, with a wild bellow, he lunged forward at a gallop, apparently to meet the oncoming doom. His herd charged close at his heels, none questioning his leadership, and the whole host followed, heads down, blind with panic.

Two or three minutes more, and the sky overhead was darkened. An appalling hum, as of giant wires, drowned the thunder of the galloping host. The hum shrilled to a monstrous and rending screech, and the spinning column swept across the river, wiping it up to the bottom of the channel as it passed. Brown Bull's herd felt a sickening emptiness in their lungs, and then a wind which almost

lifted them from their feet; and their knees failed them in their terror. But their leader had calculated cunningly, and they were well past the track of doom. The cyclone caught the hinder section of the host diagonally, whirled it into the air like so many brown leaves, and bore it onward to be strewn in hideous fragments over the plain behind. Immediately the sky cleared. There was no more wind, but a chilly, throbbing breath. The yelling of the cyclone sank away, and the river could be heard once more brawling over its reefs and bars. A full third of the host had been blotted from existence. The survivors, still trembling, remembered that they were hungry, and fell to cropping the gritty and littered grass.

On the following day the shrunken host forded the river, which at this point turned sharply westward across the path of the migration. The river had risen suddenly owing to a cloudburst further up its course, and many of the weaklings and youngsters of the host were swept away in the passage. But Brown Bull's herd, well guarded and disciplined, got over without loss; and for the next few days, there being no peril in sight, its wary captain suffered it to lead the march.

And now they came into a green and fertile and well-watered land, where it would have been comforting to linger and recover their strength. But here, once more, the white man came against them.

At the first signs of these most dreaded foes, Brown Bull had discreetly edged his herd back a little way into the host, so that it no longer formed the vanguard. The white men killed savagely and insatiably all along both flanks, as if not the need of hides and meat, but the sheer lust of killing possessed them. One hunter, whose pony had stepped into a badger-hole and fallen with him, was gored and trampled by a wounded bull. This fired his comrades to a more implacable savagery. They noticed that the host was a scanty one compared with the countless myriads of preceding years. "Them redskins up north have been robbing us!" they shouted, with fine logic. Then they remembered that the migrating herds were anxiously awaited by other tribes of Indians further south, who largely depended upon the bison for their living. An inspiration seized them. "Let's fix the red varmints! If we jest wipe these 'ere buffalo clean out, right now, the redskins'll starve, an' this country'll be well quit o' them!"

But strive as they might to carry out this humane intention, for all their slaughter on the flanks, the solid nucleus of the host remained unshaken, and kept drifting steadily southward. It began to look as if, in spite of Fate, a mighty remnant would yet make good its way into the broken country, dangerous with hostile Indians, whither the white hunters would hesitate to pursue. It was decided, therefore, to check the southward march of the host by splitting it up into sections and scattering it to this side and that, thus depriving it of the united migrant impulse, and leaving its destruction to be completed at more leisure.

These men knew the bison and his deep-rooted habits. In knots of three and four they stationed themselves, on their ponies, directly in the path of the advancing host.

On the flanks they attracted small attention. But directly in front, the sight of them aroused the leaders of the march to fury. They pawed the ground, snorted noisily, and then charged with their massive heads low down. And the whole host, with sudden rising rage, charged with them. It looked as if those little knots of waiting men and ponies must be annihilated.

But when that dark, awful torrent of rolling manes, wild eyes, keen horns, and shattering hoofs drew close upon the waiting groups of men, these lifted their guns and fired, one after the other, straight in the faces of the nearest bulls.

The result was instantaneous, as usual. Whether, as in most cases, the leaders fell, or, as in other instances, they escaped, the rolling torrent split and parted at once to either side as if the flame and roar from the muzzles of the guns had been so many shoulders of rock. Once divided, and panic-stricken by finding their foes at the heart of their array, the herds went to pieces hopelessly, and were easily driven off toward all points of the compass.

But in one instance – just one – the plan of the slaughterers did not work out quite as anticipated.

Three of the hunters had taken station exactly opposite the center of the host. Brown Bull and his herd were immediately behind the front rank at this point. When the great charge was met by the roar and the spiriting flames, the leading bull went down, and the front rank split, as a matter of course, to pass on either side of this terrifying obstacle. But Brown Bull seemed to feel that here and now, straight before him, was the unknown peril which had been shaking his heart throughout the whole long march. In this moment his heart was no more shaken, and the tradition of his ancestors, which bade him follow his leaders like a sheep, was torn up by the roots. He did not swerve, but swept down straight upon the astonished knot of horsemen; his trusting herd came with him; and all behind, as usual, followed blindly.

The three white men turned to flee before the torrent of death. But Brown Bull caught the leader's pony in the flank, ripped it and bore it down, passing straight on over the bodies, which, in a dozen seconds, were hardly to be distinguished from the earth to which they had so suddenly and so awfully been rendered back. Of the other two, one made good his escape, because his pony had taken alarm more quickly than its master and turned in time. The third was overtaken because a cow which he had wounded stumbled in his way, and he and his pony went out along with her beneath the hoofs of Brown Bull's herd.

Brown Bull gave no heed to his triumph, if, indeed, he realized it at all.

What he realized was that the apprehended doom had fallen upon the host, and the host was no more. He kept on with his long, lumbering gallop, till he had his herd well clear of all the struggling remnants of the host, which he saw running aimlessly this way and that, the slaughterers hanging to them like wolves. The sight did not interest him, but, as it covered the whole plain behind him, he could not escape it if he looked back. Forward the way was clear. Far forward and to the right, he saw woods and ridgy uplands, and purple-blue beyond the uplands a range of ragged hills. Thither he led his herd, allowing them not a moment to rest or pasture so long as the shambles of the plain remained in view. But that night, the tiny, lonely remnant of the vanished myriads of their kin, they fed and slept securely in a well-grassed glade among the hills.

A Master of Supply

Unlike his reserved and supercilious red cousin of kindlier latitudes, Blue Fox was no lover of solitude; and seeing that the only solitude he knew was the immeasurable desolation of the Arctic barrens, this was not strange. The loneliness of these unending and unbroken plains, rolled out flat beneath the low-hung sky to a horizon of white haze, might have weighed down even so dauntless a spirit as his had he not taken care to fortify himself against it. This he did, very sagaciously, by cultivating the companionship of his kind. His snug burrow beneath the stunted bush-growth of the plains was surrounded by the burrows of perhaps a score of his race.

During the brief but brilliant Arctic summer, which flared across the lonely wastes with a fervor which strove to compensate for the weary duration of its absence, the life of Blue Fox was not arduous. But during the long, sunless winters, with their wild snows, their yelling gales, their interminable night, and their sudden descents of still, intense frost, so bitter that it seemed as if the incalculable cold of outer space were invading this undefended outpost of the world, then Blue Fox and his fellows would have had a sorry time of it but for two considerations. They had their cheer of association in the snug burrows deep beneath the covering of the snows; and they had their food supplies, laid by with wise forethought in the season when food was abundant.

Therefore, when the old bear, grown too restless and savage to hibernate, had often to roam the darkness hungry, and when the wolf-pack was forced to range the frozen leagues for hardly meat enough to keep their gaunt flanks from falling in, the provident foxes had little to fear from either cold or famine.

The burrow of Blue Fox was dug in a patch of dry, sandy soil that formed a sort of island half a dozen acres broad in the vast surrounding sea of the swampy tundra. The island was not high enough or defined enough to be called a knoll. To the eye it was nothing more than an almost imperceptible bulge in the enormous monotony of the levels. But its elevation was enough to secure it good drainage and a growth of more varied herb and bush than that of the moss-covered tundra, with here and there a little open space of turf and real grass which afforded its tenants room to bask deliciously in the glow of the precipitate summer.

Hot and melting as the Arctic summer might be, it could never reach with its ardent fingers the foundations of eternal frost which underlay all that land at a depth of a very few feet. So Blue Fox dug his burrow not too deep, but rather on a gentle slant, and formed his chamber at a depth of not much more than two feet below the roots of the bushes. Abundantly lined with fine, dry grasses, which he and his family kept scrupulously clean, it was always warm and dry and sweet.

It was an afternoon in the first of the summer, one of those long, unclouded, glowing, warm afternoons of the Arctic, when the young shoots of herb and bush seem to lengthen visibly under the eye of the watcher, and the flower-buds open impetuously as if in haste for the caresses of the eager moths and flies. For the moment the vast expanses of the barren were not lonely. The nesting juncos and snow-buntings twittered cheerfully among the busy growths. The mating ducks clamored harshly along the bright coils of the sluggish stream which wound its way through the marshes. On an islet in the middle of a reedy mere, some half-mile to the east, a pair of great white trumpeter swans had their nest, scornful of concealment. A mile or more off to the west a herd of caribou browsed the young green shoots of the tundra growth, moving slowly northward. The windless air was faintly musical with the hum of insects and with the occasional squeaks and scurrings of unseen lemming mice in their secret roadways under the dense green sphagnum. Blue Fox sat up, not far from the entrance to his tunnel, blinking lazily in the glow and watching the play of his fuzzy cubs and their slim, young, blue-gray mother in and out their doorway. Scattered here and there over their naked little domain he saw the families of his kindred, similarly care-free and content with life.

But care-free as he was, Blue Fox never forgot that the price of freedom from care was eternal vigilance. Between his eyes and the pallid horizon he detected a wide-winged bird swinging low over the marshes. He knew at once what it was that with slow-moving, deliberate wings came up, nevertheless, so swiftly. It was no goose, or brant, or fish-loving merganser, or inland wandering saddleback gull that flew in such a fashion. He gave a shrill yelp of warning, answered at once from all over the colony; and at once the playing cubs whisked into their burrows or drew close to their mothers, and sat up to stare with bright, suspicious eyes at the strong-winged flier.

Blue Fox himself, like most of his full-grown fellows, never stirred. But his eyes never swerved for a second from the approach of that ominous, winnowing shape. It was a great Arctic hawk-owl, white mottled with chocolate; and it seemed to be hunting in a leisurely fashion, as if well fed and seeking excitement rather than a meal. It came straight on toward the colony of the foxes, flying lower and lower, till Blue Fox began to gather his steel-like muscles to be ready for a spring at its throat if it should come within reach. It passed straight over his head, its terrible hooked beak half open, its wide, implacable eyes, jewel-bright and hard as glass, glaring downward with still menace. But, with all its courage, it did not dare attack any one of the calmly watchful foxes. It made a sweeping half-circuit of the colony, and then sailed on toward the mere of the white swans. Just at the edge of the mere it dropped suddenly into a patch of reeds, to flap up again, a second later, with a limp form trailing from its talons – the form of a luckless mother-duck surprised in brooding her eggs. A great hubbub of startled and screaming water-fowl pursued the marauder; but the swans from their islet, as the foxes from their colony, looked on with silent indifference.

Blue Fox, basking in the sun, was by and by seized with a restlessness, a sense of some duty left undone. He was not hungry, for the wastes were just now so alive with nesting birds and swarming lemmings, and their fat little cousins, the lemming mice, that his hunting was a swift and easy matter. He did not even have to help his mate, occupied though she was, in a leisurely way, with the care of her cubs. But across his mind came an insistent memory of the long and bitter Arctic night, when the world would seem to snap under the deadly intensity of the cold, and there would be no birds but a few ptarmigan in the snow, and the fat lemmings would be safe beneath the frozen roofs of their tunnels, and his cleverest hunting would hardly serve him to keep the keen edge off his hunger. In the first sweet indolence of spring he had put far from him the remembrance of the famine season. But now it was borne in upon him that he must make provision against it. Shaking off his nonchalance, he got up, stretched himself elaborately, and trotted down briskly into the tundra.

He picked his way daintily over the wide beds of moist sphagnum, making no more sound as he went than if his feet had been of thistledown. At some distance from the skirts of the colony the moss was full of scurrying and squeaking noises. Presently he crouched and crept forward like a cat. The next instant he pounced with an indescribable speed and lightness, his head and forepaws disappearing into the moss. He had penetrated into one of the screened runways of the little people of the sphagnum. The next moment he lifted his head with a fat lemming dangling from either side of his fine jaws. He laid down the prize and inspected it with satisfaction – a round-bodied creature some six inches long, of a gray color mottled with rusty red, with a mere apology for a tail, and with the toes of its forepaws exaggeratedly developed, for use, perhaps, in constructing its mossy tunnels. For a few seconds Blue Fox pawed his prey playfully, as one of his cubs would have done. Then, bethinking himself of the serious business which he had in hand, he picked it up and trotted off to a dry spot which he knew of, just on the fringe of the island.

Now, of one thing Blue Fox was well aware, it having been borne in upon him by experience – viz., that a kill not soon eaten would speedily spoil in this weather. But he knew something else, which he could only have arrived at by the strictly rational process of putting two and two together – he understood the efficacy of cold storage.

Burrowing down through the light soil, he dug himself a little cellar, the floor of which was the stratum of perpetual frost. Here, in this preservative temperature, he deposited the body of the

fat lemming, and covered the place from prying eyes with herbage and bush drawn lightly over it. Hunting easily and when the mood was upon him, he brought three more lemmings to the storehouse that same day. On the next day and the next an Arctic tempest swept over the plain, an icy rain drove level in whipping sheets, the low sky was crowded with hurrying ranks of torn black vapor, and the wise foxes kept to their holes. Then the sun came back to the waste places, and Blue Fox returned to his hunting.

Without in any way pushing himself, without stinting his own repasts or curtailing his hours of indolence or of play, Blue Fox attended to his problem of supply so efficiently that in the course of a couple of weeks he had perhaps two score plump carcasses, lemmings and mice, laid out in this cold storage cellar of his. Then he filled it in right to the top with grass roots, turf, and other dry stuff that would not freeze into armor-plate, covered it over with light soil and bushes, and left it to await the hour of need.

In the course of the summer, Blue Fox, like all his fellows, established a number of these lemming *caches*, till by the time when the southward bird-flight proclaimed the summer at an end, the question of supply was one to give him no further anxiety. When the days were shrunken to an hour or two of sunlight, and the tundra was frozen to stone, and the winds drove the fine snow before them in blinding drifts, then Blue Fox dismissed his stores from his mind and devoted himself merrily to the hunting of his daily rations. The Arctic hares were still abundant, and not yet overwild from ceaseless harrying; and though the chase of these long-legged and nimble leapers was no facile affair, it was by no means too arduous for the tastes of an enterprising and active forager like Blue Fox.

In the meantime the household of Blue Fox, like all the other households in the little colony, had been substantially reduced in numbers. All the cubs, by this time grown nearly to full stature, if not to full wisdom, had migrated. There was neither room nor supply for them now in the home burrows, and they had not yet arrived at the sense of responsibility and forethought that would lead them to dig burrows for themselves. Gently enough, perhaps, but with a firmness which left no room for argument, the youngsters had all been turned out of doors. There seemed but one thing for them to do – to follow the southward migration of the game; and lightly they had done it. They had a hard winter before them, but with good hunting, and fair luck in dodging the traps and other perils that were bound to dog their inexperienced feet, they would return next spring, ripe with wisdom and experience, dig burrows of their own, and settle down to the responsibilities of Arctic family life.

To Blue Fox, sleeping warm in his dry burrow when he would, and secure in the knowledge of his deep-stored supplies, the gathering menace of the cold brought no terrors. By the time the sun had disappeared altogether, and the often brilliant but always terrible and mysterious Arctic night had settled firmly upon the barrens, game had grown so scarce and shy that even so shrewd a hunter as Blue Fox might often range a whole day without the luck to capture a ptarmigan or a hare. The hare, of course, like the ptarmigan, was at this season snowy-white; and Blue Fox would have had small fortune, indeed, in the chase had he himself remained in summer livery. With the setting in of the snow, he had quickly changed his coat to a like color; and therefore, with his wariness, his unerring nose, and his marvelous lightness of tread, he was sometimes able to surprise the swift hare asleep. In this fashion, too, he would often capture a ptarmigan, pouncing upon it just as the startled bird was spreading its wings for flight. When he failed in either venture – which was often enough the case – he felt himself in no way cast down. He had the excitement of the chase, the satisfaction of stretching his strong, lithe muscles in the race across the hard snow. And then, when the storm clouds were down close upon the levels, and all the world was black, and the great winds from the Pole, bitterer than death, raved southward with their sheeted ghosts of fine drift – then Blue Fox, with his furry mate beside him, lay blinking contentedly in the deep of his burrow, with food and to spare close at hand.

But happy as he was in the main, Blue Fox was not without his cares. Two enemies he had, so strong and cunning that the menace of them was never very far from his consciousness. The wolf, his master in strength, though not in craft, was always ready to hunt him with a bitter combination

of hunger and of hate. And the wolverine, cunning beyond all the other kindreds of the wild, and of a sullen ferocity which few would dare to cross, was forever on the search for the stored supplies of the foxes.

The wolverine, solitary and morose, slow of movement, and defiant even toward the Polar storm, prowled in all weathers. One day chance led him upon one of Blue Fox's storage cellars. The snow had been recently pawed away, and the wolverine, quick to take the hint, began instantly to dig. It was astonishingly easy work. His short, powerful forepaws made the dry turf and light earth fly, and speedily he came to the store of frozen lemmings. But before he had quite glutted his great appetite, he was interrupted.

Though the storm was raging over the outer world, to Blue Fox in his burrow had come a monition of evil. He had whisked out to inspect his stores. He found the wolverine head downward in his choicest cellar.

Hot as was his rage, it did not burn up his discretion. This was a peril to be dealt with drastically. He knew that, if the robber was merely driven off, he would return and haunt the purlieus of the colony, and end by finding and rifling every storehouse in the neighborhood.

Blue Fox stole back and roused the occupants of the nearest burrows. In two minutes a dozen angry foxes were out and creeping through the storm. In vengeful silence they fell upon the thief as he feasted carelessly; and in spite of the savage fight he put up, they tore him literally to pieces.

The danger of the wolves was more terrible and more daunting. All through the first half of the winter there had been no sign of a wolf in the neighborhood, the trail of the wandering caribou having lured them far to the eastward. Then it chanced, when Blue Fox was chasing a hare over the snow, beneath the green, rose, and violet dancing flames of the aurora, that a thin, quavering howl came to his ears. He stopped short. He lost all interest in the hare. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a grayish patch moving swiftly under the shifting radiance. It was on his trail, that patch of death. He lengthened himself out, belly to earth, and sped for the burrows. And the dancing lights, shifting from color to color as they clustered and hurtled across the arch of sky, seemed to stoop in cold laughter over his lonely and desperate flight.

Blue Fox could run fast, but his best speed was slow in comparison with that of his gaunt and long-limbed foes. He knew that, had the race before him been a long one, it could have but one result. A glance over his shoulder, as he ran, showed him that the gray shapes were overhauling him; and, knowing that the distance to his burrow was not long, he felt that he had a chance. A sporting chance, however small, was enough for his courageous spirit, and he raced on with good heart at a pace which soon stretched his lungs near to bursting. But he spared breath for a sharp yelp of warning, which carried far in the stillness and signaled to his fellows the peril that approached.

As the wolves came up, the fugitive could hear the strong, relentless padding of their feet, and then, half a minute later, the measured hiss of their breathing, the occasional hard click of their fangs. But he did not look back. His ears gave him all the information he required, and he could not afford to risk the loss of the slenderest fraction of a second. As he reached the nearest burrow – it was not his own – it seemed as if the dreadful sounds were already overwhelming him. He dived into the burrow, and jaws of steel clashed at his tail as he vanished.

With a chorus of snarls, the disappointed pack brought up abruptly, checking themselves back upon their haunches. The leaders fell to digging at the burrow, while others scattered off to try the same experiment at the other burrows of the colony. But Blue Fox, breathless and triumphant, only showed his teeth derisively. He knew that no wolf-claws could make any impression on the hard-frozen earth surrounding the inner portals of the colony. The wolves discovered by chance one of the supply cellars, and quarreled for a moment over the dozen or so of tit-bits which it contained. And then, realizing that it was no use hanging about in the expectation that any fox would come out to be eaten, the wise old pack-leader swung the pack into ranks and swept them off to hunt other quarry.

When the thudding rhythm of their footsteps died into silence, the foxes all came out and sat under the dancing lights, and stared after the terrible receding shapes with a calm and supercilious scorn.

The White Wolf

On the night when he was born, in the smoke-smelling wigwam beside the lone Michikamaw, there had come a strange, long howling of the wind amid the cleft granite heights which overhung the water. At the sound the fainting girl on the pile of deerskins opened eyes which grew suddenly wild and dark. She listened intently for a moment, and then groped for the little form which had been laid at her breast.

"That is his name," she muttered. "He shall be called Wind-in-the-Night."

The old squaw, her husband's mother, who was attending upon her, shook her head.

"Hush, my daughter!" she said soothingly. "That is not the wind. That is the old white wolf howling on the mountain. Let us call him White Wolf, since he is of the totem of the wolf. And perhaps the old white wanderer, who disdains to hunt with the pack, will befriend him and bring him good fortune."

"His name is Wind in-the-Night," said the young mother, in a voice suddenly loud and piercing. Then she turned her head toward the wall of the wigwam wearily, and, with a sharp sigh, her spirit passed from her lips, hurrying out over the black spruce ridges and barren hills to seek the happy hunting grounds of her fathers.

The old woman snatched up the child, lest the mother's spirit in passing should lure it away with her.

"Yes," she cried hastily, hiding the little one in a fold of her blanket and glancing over her shoulder, "his name *is* Wind-in-the-Night."

It would never have done – as the father afterward agreed – to gainsay the child's mother at that moment of supreme authority, but the old woman had her misgivings; for she believed it was the white wolf, not the wind, who had spoken in that hour, and she trembled lest the child should come under his ban.

As the years passed, however, it began to appear that the old squaw's fears were groundless. Among the lodges beside the bleak Michikamaw the child grew up without misadventure; and when he was big enough to begin his boyish hunting and to follow the trails among the dark spruce forests, it began to be rumored that he was in some special favor with the wolf folk. It was said – and, though he could not be persuaded to talk of it, he was never known to deny it – that the old white wolf, whose howling was like the wind in the mountain clefts, had been seen again and again following the boy, not obtrusively, but at a little distance and with an air of watching over him. Certain it was that the boy was without fear to go alone in the forest, and went always as if with a sense of being safeguarded by some unseen influence. Moreover, whenever the wind howled in the night, or the voice of the solitary wolf came quavering down, like the wind, from the granite heights, the boy would be seized with a restlessness and a craving to go forth into the darkness. This impulse was quelled sternly by his father until the lad was old enough and wise enough to restrain it of his own accord; but it was not held, among the tribe, to be any unaccountable or dreadful thing that the boy should be thus compassed about with mystery, for this was the tribe of the Nasquapees, the "Wizards," who were all mystics and credited with secret powers.

As Wind-in-the-Night grew to manhood, the white wolf grew less and less conspicuous in his affairs, till he came to be little more than a tradition. But at any time of crisis there was sure to be some suggestion of him, some reminder, whether in a far-off windy howl that might be wolf or might be wind, or else in a gaunt, white shadow flitting half-seen across the youth's trail. Whether, as all the tribe took for granted, it was always the same wolf, a magic beast forever young and vigorous, or whether the grim warder who had presided over the child's birth had bequeathed his mysterious office to a descendant like himself, is a point that need not be decided. Suffice to say that when, at the age of eighteen, Wind-in-the-Night underwent his initiation into the status of full manhood,

a great white wolf played an unbidden but not unlooked-for part in it. When, during that long and solitary fasting on the hilltop, the young man's fainting eyes saw visions of awe and unknown portent, and strange, phantasmal shapes of beast and bird came floating up about him with eyes of menace, always at the last moment would come that pallid, prowling warder and drive the ghosts away.

* * * * *

It was a bad winter. In the gray fishing village at the mouth of the Natashquouan came word to Wind-in-the-Night that certain of the scattered bands of his tribe in the interior were near to starving. He had been now some six months absent from home, guiding a party of prospectors, and his heart was troubled with desire for the little, lonely cluster of lodges on the shore of the Michikamaw. He thought of his own spacious wigwam of birch bark, with the crossed poles projecting above the roof. With a pang of solicitude, he thought of the comely and kindly young squaw, his wife, and of that straight-limbed, copper-colored little five-year-old, his son, whose dark eyes danced like the sunlight on the ripples, and who would always run laughing to meet him and clutch him by the knees so sturdily.

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.