

Scoville Samuel

Wild Folk



Samuel Scoville
Wild Folk

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23161459

Wild Folk:

Содержание

I	4
II	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	47

Samuel Scoville

Wild Folk

I

THE CLEANLYS

All winter long the Barrens had slept still and white. Rows and regiments of low pitch-pine trees, whose blue-green needles grow in threes instead of the fives of the white or the twos of the Virginia pines, marched for miles and miles across the drifted snow. Through their tops forever sounded the far-away roar of the surf of the upper air, like the rushing of mighty wings, while overhead hung a sky whose cold blue seemed flecked with frost. The air tingled with the spicery of myriads of pine trees. Grim black buzzards, on fringed, motionless wings, wheeled and veered over this land of silence.

Then, with the suddenness of the South, spring came. The woods became a shimmering pool of changing greens. The down-folded leaves of the little lambskill stood erect again, like rabbits' ears, over claret-colored flowers, and the soft warm air was sweet with the heavy perfume of cream-white magnolia blossoms. On jade-green pools gleamed the buds of yellow pond-lilies, like lumps of floating gold, and the paler golden-club,

whose blossoms look like the tongues of calla lilies. Everywhere, as if [Pg 1][Pg 2] set in snow, gleamed the green-and-gold of the Barrens' heather above the white sand, which had been the bed of some sea, forgotten a million years ago. In the distance, at the edges of the Barrens, were glimpses of far-away meadows, all hazy with blue toad-flax and rimmed with the pale gold of narrow-leaved sundrops with their deep orange centres.

Through the woods wound a deep creek, whose water was stained brown and steeped sweet with a million cedar roots. Unlike the singing streams of the North, this brook ran stilly, cutting its deep way through gold-and-white sand, and meeting never rock nor stone to make it murmur. On its bank in the deepest part of the woods grew a vast sweet-gum tree, covered with star-shaped leaves. Tangles of barbed greenbrier set with fierce curved thorns, and stretches of sphagnum bogs guarded the tree from the land side. In the enormous hollow trunk, some fifty feet above the ground, a black hole showed.

There, one May afternoon, as the sun was westering far down the sky, a small face appeared suddenly, framed in the dark opening. It was a funny little face, surmounted by broad, pricked-up, pointed ears, and masked by a black band, which stretched from above a pair of twinkling golden eyes clear down to a small pointed muzzle. As the owner of the face came out of the hollow and began to creep slowly and cautiously down the side of the great tree, his fur showed in the sunlight a dull brownish-gray, with black-tipped hairs on the back, while those on the round

little belly had white ends. Last of all appeared the black-ringed, cylindrical tail which is the hall-mark of the aracoun, raccoon, or coon, as red, white, and black men have variously named the owner of said tail.

This particular little coon was the youngest of four fuzzy, cuddly, blind babies, which had appeared in the old den-tree early in March. His father was a wary, battle-scarred giant among his kind, who weighed thirty pounds, measured three feet from the tip of his pointed nose to the end of his ringed tail, and was afraid of nothing that crawled, ran, swam, or flew.

As the little coon walked carefully, head-first, down the tree, he showed his kinship to the bears by setting the naked black soles of his little hind feet flat, instead of walking on his toes as most of the flesh-eaters do. His forepaws were like tiny black hands, with a very short little finger and the thumb the same length as the other three long, supple fingers.

It was the first time that this particular youngster had ever ventured out of the home-nest. A great bump in the middle of the trunk was his undoing. He crept over the edge, but in reaching down for a safe grip beyond, lost his hold and, with a wail of terror, fell headlong. Fortunately for him, the gum was surrounded on three sides by shallow pools of standing water. Into one of these the young climber fell with a splash, and a second later was swimming for dear life back to his family tree.

At the very first sound of that little SOS the head of Mother Coon appeared in the opening, with three other small heads

peering out from behind her. Seeing the little coon struggling in the water, she hurried down the tree, followed in procession by the rest of the family, who had evidently resolved not to miss anything. By the time she came to the bump, however, the small adventurer had reached the trunk from which he had fallen. Fixing his sharp claws into the bark, he climbed up the tree, bedraggled, wet, and much shocked at the manifold dangers of life.

Seeing him safe, Mrs. Coon at once turned back. The three little coons turned with her, and the reversed procession started up to the hole. The littlest of the family climbed slowly and painfully as far as the bump, whimpering all the time. There his feelings overcame him. He was positive that never had any little coon suffered so before. He was wet and shaken and miserable and – his mother had deserted him.

“Err, err, err,” he began to cry, softly, but exceeding sorrowfully.

It was too much even for Mother Coon's stern ideals of child-training. Once again she crept down the tree and, stopping on the bump, fixed her claws firmly into the bark. Stretching far over the edge, she reached down and gripped the little coon firmly but gently by the loose skin of his neck and, turning around, swung him safely up in front of her between her forepaws. Then, urging him on with little pokes from her pointed nose, she convoyed him up the tree toward the den, from which three little heads looked down. At times the memory of his grief would be too bitter to

be borne, and he would stop and whimper and make little soft, sobbing noises. Then Mother Coon would pat him comfortingly with her slim, graceful paws and urge him on until at last he was safely home again. So ended well, after all, the first journey into the world of any of this little family.

By this time the sun was set, and the old coon climbed down the tree to the nearest pool, for a bit of supper. As she approached, there were squeaks and splashes, and several cricket frogs dived into the water ahead of her. Wading in, she looked around at the woods and the tree-tops in the darkening light, in a vacant way, as if frogs were the very last thing she had in mind; but under the water her slim fingers were exploring every inch of the oozy bottom with such lightning-like speed, that in less than a minute three frogs had been caught, killed by a skillful nip, and thrown up on the dry bank. Convinced that there were no more left in the pool, she approached her supper-table; but before she would eat came the ceremony and ritual of her tribe and blood.

No raccoon, in winter or summer, by night or by day, at home or in captivity, will willingly eat any unwashed food except green corn. One by one the dead frogs were plunged under the water from which they had just been taken, and were washed and re-washed and rubbed and scrubbed, until they were clean enough to suit Mrs. Coon. Then, and not until then, were they daintily eaten. Thereafter soft little chirring calls from the tree-top said that her babies were ready for their supper, too; and she climbed back to the nest, where they snuggled against her and nuzzled and

cuddled and drank of the warm milk which would not flow much longer for them, since mother raccoons wean their children early.

While they were still at supper, there sounded from the black depths of the pine forest a long whickering “Whoo-oo-oo-oo,” much like the wailing call of the screech-owl. It was Father Coon on his way home from where he had been spending the night in one of his outlying hunting-lodges, of which he had several within a radius of a few miles; and a little later he joined the family. He brought Mother Coon a little tidbit in the shape of a fresh-water mussel, which, although the shell was still dripping, she climbed down and washed before she cracked and ate it like a nut.

After supper, the two started off on a hunting-trip, while the babies curled up in a round ball, to sleep until they came back. The gray hour just before dawn found the hunters crouched in the long marshy grass at the very tip of a point of land that ran into a little pond, which was ringed around with the stunted pines of the Barrens. Just as the first light showed in the sky, a flock of mallards, headed by a magnificent drake with a bright green head, swung in to feed. Never a sign nor sound betrayed the presence of the ambushers until the drake reached the edge of the shore. The startled bird had not even time for one quack before there was a splash, and old Father Coon had twisted that gay and gallant neck and was back on the shore again, with the quivering body thrown over his shoulder.

Part of the duck was washed and eaten then and there, and the

rest was carried back to the den-tree, where the four little coons were taught to tear off little strips of the rich, dark meat, and to wash them repeatedly before eating. That first taste of flesh and blood forever barred them from the warm milky fountain which had been theirs before. From this time on, they had to hunt for themselves.

The very next night their education began. In the warm fragrant dusk, the whole family trotted in a long, leisurely procession through the underbrush, until they came to a broad bank of warm, white sand that overhung the deep waters of the stream which wound its silent way like a brown snake through the Barrens. Here, in a half-circle, the whole family crouched and dozed comfortably, with their pointed, striped noses on their forepaws, while the dusk deepened into the soft-scented, velvet blackness of a summer night. For long they stayed there, in the still patience which only the wild folk possess.

At last, over the tips of the pointed cedars the moon rose, and turned the white beach to silver. All at once, from where a sand spit sloped gradually into the water, sounded a tiny splash, and out into the moonlight crawled a monstrous, misshapen object. From under a vast black shell ridged with dull yellow a snaky neck stretched this way and that, surmounted by a fierce head, with a keen, edged beak and gleaming, cruel eyes which stared up and down the whole beach. It was a snapper, one of the largest of its kind, which weighed perhaps half-a-hundred pounds and would have filled a small washtub.

As the great turtle crawled slowly up the bank, the little coons crouched tensely, and turned their heads to see how the veteran hunters of the family proposed to attack this demon of the stream. As if asleep, both of them crouched motionless; for long ago they had learned that watchful waiting is the best policy when Mrs. Snapper comes out of the water of a spring night. Back and forth the monster crawled heavily, stopping to look and listen for minutes at a time. Satisfied at last that no danger threatened her on that lonely beach, she chose a little ridge of loose sand not ten feet from the raccoon family, and scrabbling with her hind legs and thrusting with her thick, strong tail in the warm sand, dug herself in. There she stayed all the night through, until she had laid a couple of hundred parchment-covered, cylindrical eggs, the greatest delicacy on the whole bill of fare of the hunting folk.

Just before dawn, she pulled herself heavily out of the hole she had dug, and the loose sand poured in after her, filling the cavity and covering the eggs that were hidden there. Not until the turtle had smoothed over the displaced sand and waddled back into the stream did the head of the raccoon family make a movement. He was no coward, but he knew too much to trust his slim paws or his pointed nose anywhere near Mrs. Snapper's shearing jaws. When the brown water at last closed over her monstrous body, Father Coon led his waiting family to the bank and deftly uncovered the newly laid eggs, on which they feasted until sunrise sent them back to bed.

As the freshness of spring melted into the hot, green sweetness

of summer, the education of the little Cleanlys went on rapidly. They soon became experts in breakfast-botany, and learned to dig for the nutty tubers of the wild bean, with its brown purple blossoms, the spicy roots of the wild sarsaparilla, with its five ashlike leaves and fuzzy ball of white blossoms, the wild ginger, the spatterdock, and a score or so of other pleasant-tasting wild vegetables. They learned, too, how to hunt frogs, and to grub up mussels, and to catch those little fresh-water lobsters, the crawfish, without getting their fingers nipped.

The Cleanly children made few mistakes, and hardly ever disobeyed their parents. There was a reason. Disobedience among the wild folk means death, and he who makes one mistake often never gets a chance to make another. The sister of the littlest coon was a sad example of this fact. She decided to become a reformer. It seemed to her that it would be pleasanter to hunt by daylight than after dark, so she tried it – once. On her first (and last) trip she met old Sam Carpenter, a Piny, who always carried a shotgun with him.

Of course, accidents will happen in wild-folk families just as among us humans, only in a wild-folk family, an accident is more apt to be fatal. It was the oldest of the three little Cleanlys, after the reformer had gone, who suffered first. He had been hunting in the wildest part of the five-mile circle, which the family used, and it was after sunrise when he scrambled out of the shallow pool where he had been frogging.

Suddenly from a dry dense thicket near by, there was a fierce

hiss like escaping steam, and from a tangle of fern darted the mottled brown-and-white length of a great pine snake. Its curious pointed head, with its golden, unwinking eyes, shot forward, and the next second a set of sharp teeth closed on the soft nose of the small coon. Unlike the poison people, the pine snake has no fangs, and its teeth are used only to hold its prey for the grip of its choking, crushing coils. This particular snake was nearly eight feet long, and as thick around as a big man's wrist. Luckily for the little coon, the thick bushes guarded him for an instant against the smothering coils.

Dragging back from the dreadful glare of the fixed, lidless eyes, he tried to tear loose, and squalled with all his might for his mother. Fortunately for him, she was not far away. Anyone who had ever watched Mrs. Coon climb carefully down a tree-trunk, or move deliberately through the thickets, would never have identified her with the furious figure which flashed through the bushes at the very first cry of the little coon. Before the great snake had time to draw its coils clear of the branches, or even to disengage its head to meet the attack, the raccoon was upon it, and sank her sharp teeth through the reptile's spine just back of its head. At once the shut jaws gaped, and the little coon sprang back from the heavy body, which writhed and twisted and beat the bushes horribly in its death agony.

Mother Coon was always practical, with an open mind in regard to matters of diet, and while her cub whimperingly licked, with a long, pink tongue, a much-abused little nose, she began to

strip off the speckled skin of her late opponent, and to convert it into lengths of firm, white meat on which the whole raccoon family fed full that night.

It was the youngest of the family who was the next victim. Again it was Mother Coon whose love and wisdom and courage outweighed chance on the scales of life and death. He had been exploring the shallows of the stream near a deserted cranberry bog. All the raccoon people like to follow the shallows of a stream, on the chance of picking up frogs, mussels, crawfish, and other water-food. A solitary rock off a tiny island, in shallow water close to the bank, is always a favorite spot for a hunting coon. Old Sam Carpenter knew all about raccoon habits, and also about one of their weaknesses.

On this night the latest-born of the family came splashing down the warm shallows, and half waded and half swam out to a tiny sandbar some six feet from the bank. There he crouched and scanned the water in the moonlight, on the chance that he might catch a sluggish, red-finned sucker as it winnowed the water through its long wrinkled tube of a mouth. Suddenly, against the yellow sand, he saw three or four gleaming, silver disks, brighter even than the silver-scaled shiners which he had often tried vainly to catch. Old Sam had begged from a traveling tinker a few scraps of bright tin and strewn them near the little islet.

No raccoon can help investigating anything that glistens in the water, and this one felt that he must have his hands on that treasure-trove. Wading carefully out into the shallows, he

dabbled in the sand with his slim forepaws, trying to draw some of the shining pieces in to shore. Suddenly there was a snap that sent the water flying, a horrible grinding pain, and the slender fingers of his right forepaw were caught between the wicked jaws of a hidden steel trap.

“Oo-oo-oo-oo!” he cried, with the sorrowful wail of a hurt baby coon.

But this time Mother Coon was far away, around two bends of the crooked stream, investigating a newly found mussel bed. The little coon tried in vain to pull away from the cruel jaws, but they held him unrelentingly. Then he attempted to gnaw his way loose, but only broke his keen little teeth on the stubborn iron.

At first, he was easily able to keep himself above the water; yet, as the minutes went by, the unremitting weight of the trap forced him under more and more often, to rest from the weary, sagging pain. Each time that he went down, it seemed easier and easier to stay there, and to slip into oblivion under the glimmering water and forget the torture that racked every nerve in his struggling little body. Yet, in spite of his funny face and quiet ways, the little coon came of a battling breed which never gives up. Once more he struggled up from the soothing coolness of the water, and for the last time his cry for help shuddered faintly across the Barrens. At last and at last, far away down the stream, he heard the snap of a broken branch, and a minute later the rapid pad-pad of flying feet along the sand, as he fought weakly to stay above the surface, sure that the coming of his

mother meant rescue from all the treacheries that beset him.

In another minute she had reached the bank, and with a bound, her fur bristling, was beside her cub, ready to fight for him to the last drop of blood in her lithe, powerful body. Fortunately for her cub, the years had brought to Mother Coon wisdom as well as courage. Once certain as to what had happened, she decided instantly upon the stern and only answer which the wild folk have for the snares of their cruel human brethren. She waded out so that her back was under the exhausted little body of her cub, and, ducking under, gripped the trap with one of her flexible hands, strained the little paw away from it with the other and with a few quick slashes of her sharp teeth severed the three black, slim little fingers that the bitter jaws held fast.

As she cut off one after the other, she could feel the warm furry body that rested upon hers thrill and quiver with the pain; but never a sound nor a struggle came from the littlest of the coons. Another minute, and slowly and limpingly he was creeping back to the den-tree. Better, alas, for any child of the wild folk to go maimed and halt through life than to fall alive into the hands of us humans!

The weeks went by. Summer waxed, until the Barrens were green waves, starred and spangled with flowers, and echoing with bird-songs. All through the long, warm, flower-scented nights the raccoon family feasted and frolicked, and the little ones grew apace. One velvety warm night, when the crescent moon had sunk in the west, Father Coon led his family toward the farm

lands, which year by year crept farther into the Barrens. Beyond the woods they came to a field of towering stalks, whose rustling leaves overshadowed plump ears of creamy corn, swathed in green husks and wound with soft silk. At the sight the leaders for once seemed to forget all their caution.

Into the field they rushed, like mad things, and, pulling down stalk after stalk, they stripped off the husks from an ear, and took a bite or so of the angel-food beneath, only to cast it aside and grasp another. The little coons followed their parents' example, and pulled and hauled and tore and chanked among the standing corn, until it looked as if a herd of hungry cows had been there. The feasting kept on until every coon, big and little, was brimming full of melting, creamy corn.

As they ambled contentedly back toward the dense woods, there came a sound which made Father Coon hurry them forward. Scarcely had they reached the edge of the first thicket, when across the field dashed three mongrel hounds, which belonged to Sam Carpenter, and were out hunting to-night on their own account. There was no time to gain the shelter of the trees. Just ahead of them one edge of the stream touched the cleared country, while its farther bank was deep in the Barrens. Following their leader, the whole family took to the water. They had hardly reached the middle of the wide stream when, with a splash, the dogs plunged in, only a few yards behind. Immediately Father Coon dropped back, for when it comes to matters of life and death it is always Father Coon who fights first. To-night, in

spite of numbers, the odds were all in his favor; for the raccoon is the second cousin of those great water-weasels, the mink and the otter, and it is as dangerous to attack him in the water as to fight a porcupine in his tree or a bear in his den.

The first of the pack was a yellow hound, who looked big and fierce enough to tackle anything. With a gasping bay, he ploughed forward, open-mouthed, to grip that silent, black-masked figure which floated so lightly in front of him – only to find it gone. At his plunge the raccoon had dived deep, a trick which no dog has yet learned. A second later, from behind, a slim sinewy hand closed like a clamp on the dog's foreleg, too far forward to be reached by his snapping jaws. As the hound lowered his head, vainly trying to bite, the raccoon reached across with his other paw, and gripped his opponent smotheringly by the muzzle.

Slowly, inexorably, he threw his weight against the dog's head, until it sank below the surface. As the other dogs approached, the coon manœuvred so that the struggling body was always between himself and his attackers. Never for an instant did he allow his prisoner's head to come to the surface. Suddenly he released it, and flashed back into the shadows. The body of the great hound floated on the surface, with gaping jaws and unseeing eyes.

Once more the coon dived and dragged down, with the same deadly grip, the smaller of his remaining opponents. This time he went under water with him. The dog struggled desperately, but paws have no chance against hands. Moreover, a raccoon can

stay under water nearly five minutes, which is over a minute too long for any dog. When the coon at last appeared on the surface, he came up alone.

At that moment old Sam, aroused by the barking and baying of his dogs, hurried to the bank and called off his remaining hound, who was only too glad to swim away from the death in the dark, which had overtaken his pack mates. A moment later the victor was on his way back to the den-tree. The next morning, in a little inlet, where an eddy of the stream had cast them, Sam found the bodies of the dogs who had dared to give a raccoon the odds of the stream; and he swore to himself to kill that coon before snow flew.

Many and many a time he tried. Everywhere the old Piny saw the tracks of the family, the front paws showing claw-marks, while the hind paws, set flat like those of a bear, made a print like a baby's bare foot. One track always showed three claws missing. Yet, hunt as he would, he could never surprise any of them again by day or night, while the many traps he sowed everywhere caught nothing.

One September night summer passed on, and the next morning there was the tang of frost in the air. The leaves of the sour-gum, the first tree to turn, showed blood-red. Day by day the woods gleamed, as the frost-fire leaped from tree to tree. The blueberry bushes ran in waves of wine along the ground, the sassafras was all sunshine-yellow, the white oaks old-gold, while the poison-ivy flaunted the regal red and yellow of Spain.

Before long, the Hunter's Moon of October was in the sky; and the night it was full, assembled the first coon-hunt of the season. Sam Carpenter was there, and Mose Butler came with his Grip, while Charlie Rogers brought Pet – famous coon dogs, which had never been known to run on a false scent. Came also old Hen Pine, with his famous gun. It had a barrel only about a foot long, for once, while hunting, the old man had slipped into a bog, plugging the muzzle of his gun with mud. The result was that the next time Hen fired it off, half the barrel disappeared. He claimed, however, that, barrel or no barrel, it was the best gun in the country, bar none. Anyway, a gun was only needed to frighten a treed coon into coming down, since the etiquette of a coon-hunt is the same as that of a fox-hunt – only the dogs must do the killing.

It was just before midnight when the party reached the dense woods where Sam Carpenter had so often seen the tracks of the Cleanlys. Early in the evening the little family had found a persimmon tree loaded down with sweet, puckery, orange-red fruit, and were ambling peacefully toward one of their father's hunting-lodges in an old crow's nest. They happened to pass the neck of woods nearest Sam's cabin just as the whole party entered it. Lanterns waved, men shouted, and dogs yipped and bayed among the trees, as they ran sniffing here and there, trying to locate a fresh trail.

The fierce chorus came to the hunted ones like a message of death and doom. If they scattered, some of the little coons would

inevitably be overtaken by this pack of trained dogs, directed by veteran hunters. If they kept together, sooner or later they would be treed, and perhaps all perish. Once again the leader faced the last desperate duty of the father of a raccoon family. He dropped back to meet and hold the ranging pack until Mother Coon could hurry the little ones home by the tree-top route.

In another minute Nip, the last remaining dog of Sam's pack, caught the scent, and with a bay that echoed through the tangled thickets and across the dark pools of the marshland woods, dashed along the fresh trail. Then happened something which had never before befallen the luckless Nip in all his days and nights of hunting. From out of the thickets toward which the trail led rushed a black-masked figure, hardly to be seen in the gloom. Nip's triumphant bay changed to a dismayed yelp, as a set of sharp claws dug bloody furrows down his face and ripped his long silky ears to ribbons.

Before he could come to close grips his opponent had disappeared into the depths of a thicket, and Nip decided to wait for the rest of the pack. In a moment they joined him, with Grip and Pet leading. As they approached the thicket they, too, had the surprise of their lives. Contrary to all precedent a hunted coon, instead of running away, attacked them furiously. It was very irregular and disconcerting. Even as they were disentangling themselves from the clinging greenbrier and matted branches, they were gashed and slashed by an enemy who flashed in and out from the bit of open ground where he had waited for them.

The leaders of the pack yelped and howled, and stopped, until reinforced and pressed forward by the slower dogs as they came up.

Little by little the old raccoon was forced back and compelled to make desperate dashes here and there, to avoid being surrounded. At last, he found himself driven beyond the area of the tangled thickets and into a stretch of open ground. Spreading out, the dogs hemmed him in on every side except one. Guarded on his flank by a long swale of the spiked greenbrier, he rushed along the one line left open to him, only to find himself in the open again. Just beyond him the cranberry growers had left a great sweet-gum tree which, with the lapse of years, had grown to an enormous size. As the pack closed around him, the coon made a dash for his refuge and scuttled up the trunk, while the dogs leaped high in the air, snapping at his very heels.

By the time the hunters came up, the whole clamoring pack, in a circle, was pawing at the tree. When the men saw that Pet and Grip and Nip, whose noses had never yet betrayed them, had their paws against the trunk with the rest, they decided that the coon had been treed, and was still treed, which did not always follow. The vast tree was too large around either to climb or to cut. Raising the lighted lantern which he carried, old Hen held it back of his head and stared straight up into the heart of the great gum. At last, sixty feet above the ground, against the blackness of the trunk showed two dots of flaming gold. They were the eyes of the raccoon, as it leaned out to stare down at the yellow

blotch of light below.

Posting the dogs in a wide circle around the tree, the men built up a roaring fire and sat down to wait for the coming dawn. For long they talked and smoked and dozed over the fire, until at last a ghostly whiteness seemed to rise from the ground. Little by little the shadows paled, and the spectral tree-trunks showed more distinctly against the brightening sky, while crimson bars gleamed across the gateway of the east.

At the shouts of the men and the yelps and barks of the dogs below, the old coon stiffened and stared down at them unflinchingly. Hen Pine produced his cherished weapon. Aiming carefully above the treed animal he fired, and the heavy load splashed and crashed through the upper branches of the tree. Grimly the great raccoon faced his fate, as the scattering shot warned him that his only chance for life was on the ground. Slowly but unhesitatingly he moved down the side of the tree, while the dogs below bayed and howled and leaped high in the air. Beyond the dogs stood the men. In their faces showed no pity for the trapped animal, who must fight for his life against such fearful odds.

For a moment the coon looked down impassively at his foes. Then, just as the golden rim of the rising sun showed above the tree-tops, he turned like lightning and sprang out into mid-air, sideways, so that he would land close to the trunk of the tree. As he came through the air, spread out like a huge flying squirrel, his keen claws slashed back and forth as if he were limbering up

for action. He struck the ground lightly and was met by a wave of dogs which swept him against the tree. There with his back guarded by the trunk he made his last stand.

At first, it seemed as if he would be overwhelmed as the howling pack dashed at him, but it was science against numbers. Perfectly balanced, he ducked and sidestepped like a lightweight champion in a street-fight, slashing with his long, keen claws so swiftly that not one of the worrying, crowded pack escaped. With flashing, tiny, imperceptible movements he avoided time and again the snaps and rushes of the best hounds there. Occasionally he would be slashed by their sharp teeth, and his grizzled coat was flecked here and there with blood; but it was difficult to secure a firm grip on his tough loose hide, and none of the hounds were able to secure the fatal throat-hold, or to clamp their jaws on one of those slender flashing paws.

For the most part, the old champion depended upon his long claws, which ripped bloody furrows every time they got home. Only in the clinches, when held for a moment by one or more of his opponents, did he use the forty fighting teeth with which he was equipped. When this happened, the dog who exchanged bites with him invariably got the worst of the bargain. The fighting was as fast as it was furious. In less than a minute two or three of the pack limped out of the circle with dreadful gashed throats or crunched and shattered paws. Then nothing could be seen but a many-colored mass, with the gray and black always on top. Suddenly it broke, and the great raccoon, torn and bleeding, but

with an air of grim confidence, was alone with his back against the tree, while around him in an ever-widening circle the hounds backed away, yelping with pain.

The raccoon recovered his wind and, wily fighter that he was, changed his tactics. Without giving the dogs time to get back their lost courage, he suddenly dashed forward with a grating, terrifying snarl, the first sound that had come from him throughout the battle. As he rushed at them, his hair bristled until he seemed to swell to double his size.

For a second the ring held. Then with a yelp the nearest dog dived out of the way and scuttled off. His example was too much for the others. A second more, and the ring was broken and the dogs scattered. In vain the men tried to rally them again. They had resolved to have no further part or lot with that coon, who, without a backward look, moved stiffly and limpingly toward the nearest thicket.

Not until he had plunged into a tangle of greenbrier, where no dog could follow, did that pack recover its morale. Then indeed, safe outside the fierce thorns, they growled and barked and raved and told of the terrible things they would do to that coon – when they caught him.

Half an hour later, and half a league farther, from a great gum tree on the edge of a black silent stream, came the sound of soft, welcoming love-notes.

Father Coon was home again.

II

BLACKBEAR

It was the high-water slack of summer. Up on Seven Mountains the woods were waves of deep lush green; and in the hot September sunshine the birds sang again, now that the moulting-moon of August had set. Yet there was an expectancy in the soft air. Shrill, sweet insect-notes, unheard before, multiplied. When the trees and the grass were all dappled with patches of dark and moonshine, the still air throbbed with the pulsing notes of the white tree-crickets; while above their range the high lilt of their black brethren thrilled without a pause, the unnoticed background of all other night-notes. From the bushes, which dripped moonlight in the clearings, a harsh voice occasionally said, solemnly, "Katy *did!*" A week later, all the open spaces on the fringe of the woods would be strident with the clicking choruses of the main host of the filmy green, long-winged insects, of which these stragglers were but the advance-guard.

One morning, from the emerald-green of a swamp maple, a single branch flamed out a crimson-red. The ebb of the year had begun. As the days shortened, imperceptibly the air became golden, and tasted of frost. Then through the lengthening nights the frost-fires began to blaze. The swamp maples deepened to a

copper-red and ended a yolk-yellow. On the uplands, the sugar maples were all peach-red and yellow-ochre, and the antlers of the staghorn sumac were badged with old-gold and dragon's-blood red. The towering white ashes were vinous-purple, with an overlying bloom of slaty-violet, shading to a bronze-yellow. The scented trefoil leaves of the sassafras were all buttercup-yellow and peach-red, and the sturdy oaks were burnt-umber.

Richest of all were the robes of the red oaks. They were dyed a dull carmine-lake, while the narrow leaves of the beeches drifted down in sheaves of gamboge-yellow arrow-heads. Closer to the ground was the arrow-wood, whose straight branches the Indians used for arrow-shafts before the days of gunpowder. Its serrated leaves were a dull garnet. Lower still, the fleshy leaves of the pokeberry were all carmine-purple above and Tyrian rose beneath. Everywhere were the fragrant Indian-yellow leaves of the spice-bush, sweeter than any incense of man's making; while its berries, which cure fevers, were a dark, glossy red, quite different from the coral-red and orange berries of the bittersweet, with its straw-yellow leaves. The fierce barbed cat-brier showed leaves varying from a morocco-red to the lightest shade of yolk-yellow, at times attaining to pure scarlet, the only leaf of the forest so honored.

Through this riot of color, and along a web of dim trails, a great animal passed swiftly and soundlessly, dull black in color, save for a brownish muzzle and a white diamond-shaped patch in the centre of its vast chest. This color, the humped hind quarters,

and the head swinging low on a long neck could belong to none other than the blackbear, the last survivor of the three great carnivora of our Eastern forests. It moved with a misleading loose-jointed gait, which seemed slow. Yet no man can keep ahead of a bear, as many a hunter has found to his cost.

Not so wise as the wolf, nor so fierce as the panther, the blackbear has outlived them both. "When in doubt, *run!*" is his motto; and, like Descartes, the wise blackbear founds his life on the doctrine of doubt. As for the unwise – they are dead. To be sure, even this saving rule of conduct would not keep him alive in these days of repeating rifles, were it not for his natural abilities. A bear can hear a hunter a quarter of a mile away, and scent one for over a mile if the wind be right. He may weigh three hundred pounds and be over two feet wide, yet he will slip like a shadow through tangled underbush, and feed all day safely in a berry-patch, with half a dozen hunters peering and hiding and lurking and looking for him.

To-day, as this particular bear faced the wind, it was evident from her smaller size and more pointed head that she was of the attractive sex. Her face was neither concave, like the grizzly bear, nor convex, like the polar bear, but showed almost straight lines; and as she stood there, black against the glowing background of the changing leaves, her legs, with their flat-set feet, seemed comically like the booted legs of some short fat man. The only part of the naming color-scheme which appealed to her was that which she could eat. Purple plums of the sweet-viburnum,

wild black bitter cherries, thick-skinned fox-grapes, shriveled rasping frost-grapes, huckleberries with their six crackling seeds, blueberries whose seeds are too small to be noticed – Mrs. Bear raked off quarts and gallons and barrels of them all with her great claws, yet never swallowed a green or imperfect one among the number. The fact that the bear is one of the Seven Sleepers accounted for the appetite of this one. Although the blackbear wears a fur coat four inches thick, and a waistcoat of fat of the same thickness, it has found that rent is cheaper than board, and spends the winter underground, living on the fat which it has stored up during the fall. Some of the Sleepers, like the chipmunk, take a light lunch to bed with them, in case they may be hungry during the long night, and fill a little storehouse before they turn in for their long winter nap. The bear and the woodchuck, however, prefer to act the part of the storehouse personally; all of which accounted for the appetite of this bear through the crisp fall days. Ordinarily a creature of the twilight and the early dawn, yet now she hunted through the broad daylight and far into the night, and devoured with the utmost enthusiasm food of all kinds by the hundredweight. Some of the selections on her menu-card would have been impossible to any other animal than the leather-lined blackbear, the champion animal sword-swallower.

One warm September morning, she began her day with a gallon of berries which about exhausted the blueberry-patch where she had been feeding. Thereupon she started to wander

along her fifteen-mile range, in search for stronger food. She found it. In a damp part of the woods she dug up, and swallowed without flinching, many of the wrinkled flat bulbs of the wild arum or Jack-in-the-pulpit. The juice of these roots contains a multitude of keen microscopic crystals, which affect a human tongue like a mixture of sulphuric acid and powdered glass; nor does water assuage the pain in the least. Beyond the Jacks-in-the-pulpits grew clumps of the broad juicy, ill-smelling leaves of the skunk-cabbage, which bears the first flower of the year. Mrs. Bear ate these greedily, although the tiniest drop of their corroding juice will blister the mouth of any human.

Beyond the skunk-cabbage patch, on a limb of a shadbush, she discovered a gray cone somewhat larger than a Rugby football, made of many layers of pulpy wood-fibre paper. In and out of an opening in the smaller end buzzed sullenly a procession of great, flat-faced, black-and-white hornets. No insect is treated with more respect by the wild folk than the hornet. Horses, dogs, and even men, have been killed by enraged swarms. Unlike the single-action bee, whose barbed sting can be used but once, the hornet is a repeater. It can and will sting as early and as often as circumstances demand, and is most liberal in its estimate. Moreover, every sting is as painful as a bullet from a small-calibre revolver. Yet the bear approached the nest without any hesitation and, rearing up on her hind quarters, with one scoop of her paw brought the oval to the ground and was instantly enshrouded in a furious, buzzing, stinging cloud. Unmoved by their attacks,

the imperturbable animal proceeded to gobble down both the nest and its contents, licking up grubs, half-grown hornets, and full-armed fighters alike, with her long flexible tongue, and swallowing great masses of the gray soft paper. When at last only a few scattered survivors were left, she lumbered off and followed a path which, like all bear-trails, led at last to one of the dry, pleasant, wind-swept hillsides that the bear-people love so well. There she spent a happy hour before a vast ant-hill erected by fierce red-and-black soldier ants. Sinking first one forepaw and then the other deep into the loose earth, she would draw them out covered with swarming, biting ants, which she carefully licked off, evidently relishing their stinging, sour taste.

Thereafter, filled full of berries, bulbs, skunk-cabbage, hornets, and ants, Mrs. Bear decided to call it a day, and curled herself up to sleep under the roots of a fallen pine.

Another day she discovered groves of oak trees loaded down with acorns. Better than any botanist she knew which were sweetest; and for a week she ate acorns from the white oaks, the tips of whose leaves are rounded, and the chestnut-oaks, whose leaves are serrated like those of the chestnut tree. Then came a morning when, from a far-away valley, floated a sound which sent her hurrying down from her tree, although it was only the bell-like note of the flappy-eared hound which belonged to Rashe Weeden, the trapper, who lived in the Hollow. Yet the bear knew that a hound meant a hunter, and that a hunter meant death. Only a straightaway run for miles and hours could save

her, if the hound were on her trail. Weeks of feasting had left her in no condition for any such Marathon work.

Yet somewhere, during the hard-earned years of her long life, she had learned another answer to this attack of the trailing hound. Down the mountainside, straight toward the approaching dog she hurried, following a deeply marked path. It led directly under the overhanging branch of a great red oak. She followed it beyond the tree, and then doubled and, directly under the limb, circled and confused the trail. Then, still following her back track, she passed the tree and, returning to it by a long detour, climbed it from the farther side, and in a moment was hidden among the leaves. Nearer and nearer came the tuneful note of the hunting dog who had betrayed so many and many of the wood-folk to their death. Suddenly, as he caught the fresh scent, his voice went up half an octave, and he rushed along the faint path until he reached the red-oak tree. There he paused to puzzle out the tangled trail. As he sniffed back and forth under the overhanging limb, there was a tiny rustle in the leaves above him, hardly as loud as a squirrel would make. Then a black mass shot down like a pile-driver, a sheer twenty feet. The hound never knew what struck him, and it was not until an hour later that Rashe Weeden found his flattened carcass.

“Looked as if he’d been stepped on by one of them circus elephants,” he confided afterwards to old Fred Dean, who lived over on the Barrack, near him.

“Elephants be mighty scurce on Seven Mountains,” objected

the old man; and the passing of that hound remains a mystery on the Barrack to this day.

One bitter gray afternoon, when the flaming leaves had died down to dull browns and ochres, word came to the wild folk that winter was on its way to Seven Mountains. Little flurries of stinging snow whirled through the air, and the wind shrieked across the marshland where the bear was still hunting for food. As the long grass of the tussocks streamed out like tow-colored hair, she shambled deep into the nearest wood, until behind the massed tree-trunks she was safe from the fierce fingers of the north wind, which howled like a wolf overhead. From that day she stopped the search for food and started house-hunting. Back and forth, up and down the mountains, in and out of the swamps, across the uplands and along the edges of the hills, she hurried for days at a time.

At last, on a dry slope, she found what she wanted. Deep in the withered grass showed a vast chestnut stump. Starting above this on the slope, in the very centre of a tangled thicket she dug a slanting tunnel. The entrance was narrow, like the neck of a jug, and was so small that it did not seem possible that the bear could ever push her huge shoulders through. When it reached the stump, however, it widened out into an oval chamber partly walled in by buttressed roots. Against the slope she dug a wide flat shelf, which she covered deep with dry leaves and soft grass, and sank beside the stump a small air-hole, which led into the lower end of the burrow. With the same skill with which she

had picked and sorted berries, with her huge paws she removed every trace of the fresh earth displaced by her digging. Then she piled loose brush neatly around the entrance to the burrow, and crawled in. Turning around at the foot of the tunnel, she crept back head-first and, reaching out her paw, carefully corked the jug with the brush which she dragged deep over the opening. Then, six feet underground, on her dry warm bed, she curled up for a four months' nap.

As the winter days set in, the driving snow drifted deep against the stump, until even the thicket above it was hidden. Then came the bitter cold. There were long days and nights when there was not a breath of wind, and the mercury went down below all readings in the settlements. In the forests and on the mountains great boulders burst apart, and in places the frozen ground split open in narrow cracks a hundred feet long. Life was a bitter, losing fight against cold and hunger for many of the wood-dwellers; but, six feet underground, the bear slept safe, at truce with both of these ancient foes of the wild folk, while the warm vapor of her breath, freezing, sealed the sides of her cell with solid ice. Not until spring unlocked the door, would she leave that little room again.

Yet, in January, although the door was still locked by the snow and barred by the ice, two tiny bearlings found their way in. They were blind and bare, and both of them could have been held at once on the palm of a man's hand. Yet Mrs. Bear was convinced that there had never been such a beautiful and talented pair. She

licked their pink little bodies and nursed them and cuddled them, and the long freezing months were all too short to show the full measure of her mother-love. As the weeks went by, they became bigger and bigger. When they were hungry, which was most of the time, they whimpered and nuzzled like little puppies, and pushed and hurried and crowded, lest they might starve to death before they could reach those fountains of warm milk which flowed so unfailingly for them. When they were both full-fed, Mother Bear would arch her vast bulk over them, and they would sleep through the long dreamy, happy hours, wrapped up warm in her soft fur.

Then, one day – the fortieth after their arrival – a great event occurred. Both the cubs opened their eyes. There was not much to see, but the old bear licked them ecstatically, much impressed by this new proof of their genius. From that time on, they grew apace, and every day waxed stronger and friskier. Sometimes they would stand up and box like flyweight champions, and clinch and wrestle and tumble around and over the old bear, until she would sweep them both off their feet with one turn of her great paw, and they would all cuddle down together for a long nap.

Then came the Call. Perhaps it was the contralto note of the bluebird from mid-sky, or the clanging cry of the wild geese going north; or it might have been the scent of the trailing arbutus that came through the solid walls of that little room. At any rate, deep underground, beneath snow and ice and frozen brush, the little family knew that spring had come. The cubs began to sniff

and claw at the ice-bound walls, and the old bear heaved her great bulk up and circled the little cell uneasily.

Then, all in an hour, came the thaw. The ice melted and the snow disappeared, until, one April day, with a slash of her paw the old bear opened the door, and the whole family stumbled out into the blue dawn of a spring day. Around then sounded the sweet minor notes of the white-throated sparrows, and the jingling songs of the snowbirds; while over on a sun-warmed slope a flock of tree-sparrows, on their way to the Arctic Circle, sang a chorus like the tinkling of icicles.

The old bear stood long in the bright sunlight, sniffing and staring with unseeing eyes – then lurched down to a little mountain stream a hundred yards away, followed in small procession by her cubs. Once arrived at the brook, she drank and drank and drank, until it seemed as if her legs would double under her. After she had filled herself to the bursting-point, the cubs had their first taste of water. It seemed to them thin, cold, unstable stuff compared with what they had been drinking. Their birthplace once abandoned, they never returned to it. Thereafter they slept wherever and whenever the old bear was sleepy, cuddled in her vast arms and against her warm fur.

That day, as they turned away from the brook, Mother Bear stopped and stared long at the larger of her two cubs. Unlike the dull black of his smaller sister, he was a rich cinnamon-brown in color. In years past there had been a red cub in her family, and once even a short-lived straw-yellow youngster; but this was

her first experience with a brownie, and the old bear grunted doubtfully as she led the way up the mountainside.

At last and at last came the golden month of the wild folk – honey-sweet May, when the birds come back, and the flowers come out, and the air is full of the sunrise scents and songs of the dawning year. The woods were white with the long snowy petals of the shad-blow, and purple with amethyst masses of rhodora, when the old bear began the education of her cubs. Safety, Food, More Food comprised the courses in her curriculum. Less and less often did she nurse them, as she taught them to find a variety of pleasant foods. Because Mother Bear knew that disobedience was death, she was a stern disciplinarian. On their very first walk, Blackie, the littlest of the family, found it difficult to keep up with the old bear's swinging gait. Little bears that fall behind often disappear. Accordingly, when Blackie finally caught up, she received a cuff which, although it made her bawl, taught her not to lag.

Brownie erred in the opposite direction. Big and strong and confident, he once pushed ahead of his mother, along a trail that led up a mountain-gorge where the soft deep mosses held the water like green sponges. Suddenly, just as he was about to put his small paw into a great bear-print in the moss, he received a left-hand swing which sent him spinning off the trail into a tree-trunk, with the breath knocked clear out of his small body. Then the old bear showed him what may happen to cubs who think they know more than their mothers. From deep under the

moss, she had caught a whiff of the death-scent of man. Reaching out beyond the trail, she raised without an effort, on a derrick-like forepaw, a section of a dead tree-trunk, a foot in diameter, and sent it squatting down full upon the paw-print. As the end of the log sank in the moss, there was a fierce snap, and a series of sharp and dreadful steel teeth clamped deep into the decayed wood. Rashe Weeden, the trapper, who trapped bears at all seasons of the year, had dug up a section of moss containing the bear-imprint, and underneath it had set a hellish double-spring bear-trap. Let man or beast step ever so lightly on the print which rested on the broad pan of the trap, and two stiff springs were released. Once locked in the living flesh, the teeth would cut through muscle and sinew, and crush the bones of anything living, while the double-spring held them locked. A vast clog chained to the trap kept the tortured animal from going far, and a week later the victim would welcome the coming of the trapper and the swift death he brought.

A few days later the little family saw an object lesson of what humans do to bears, and what such a trap meant to them. They were following one of the bear-paths which always lead sooner or later to hillsides where there are berries and a view and no flies. Suddenly the wind brought to the ears of the old bear the sound of sobbing. She stopped and winnowed the air carefully through her sensitive nose. There was the scent of bear, but no taint of man in the breeze, and she followed the trail toward where the strange noises came from, around a bend in the

path. More and more slowly, and with every caution, she moved forward, while her two cubs kept close behind like little shadows. As the path opened into a little natural clearing, all three of them saw a horrifying sight. There in front of them lay another smaller, younger mother-bear. The cruel fanged jaws of a trap were sunk deep into her shattered left fore-shoulder, while the clog was caught under a stump. The prisoned animal had tugged and dragged and pulled, evidently for long days and nights, as the ground was torn up for yards and yards around her. At last, worn out by exhaustion and the unceasing, fretting, festering pain of the gripping jaws, the captive had sunk down hopelessly to the ground, and from time to time cried out with a shuddering sobbing note. Her glazed, beseeching eyes had a bewildered look, as if she wondered why this horror had come to her. At her knees a little cub stood, and whimpered like a sorrowful baby and then raised his little paws trustingly against the huge bulk of his mother, who could help him no more. Another cub had climbed into a little tree overhead, and looked down in wonder at the sorrowful sight below.

The old bear took one long look while her cubs, terrified, crowded close up against her. Then she turned, and plunged into the depths of the nearest thicket. There was nothing to be done for the trapped one, and she knew that, soon or late, death would stalk along the trail which she had just left. Later that afternoon, when they were miles from the place, the old bear's keen ear heard two distant shots from far away across the mountain-ridges.

As the twilight deepened, she led her little family out in a search for food. All at once there came from below them a strange little distress-note, which made Mother Bear stop and look anxiously around to see if both of her cubs were safe. Again it sounded, much nearer, and then from among the trees a small dark animal hurried toward them. It was one of the cubs they had seen earlier in the afternoon, escaped from the death which had overtaken the others, running wailing and lonely through the darkening woods, looking for its lost mother. At the sight of Mother Bear, it gave a little whicker of relief and delight, and ran straight to her and nuzzled hungrily under her warm fur, quite as if it had a right to be there. Although the old bear growled a little at first, she was not proof against the entreating whines of the little newcomer. As for her own cubs, after carefully sniffing this new sister over and finding her blacker even than Blackie, with a funny white spot near the end of her small nose, they decided to recognize her as part of the family. In another minute Spotty was feeding beside Blackie, and from that day forward the old bear was trailed by three cubs instead of two.

As summer approached, Mother Bear weaned her family and showed them how to get their living from the land, as she did. She taught them all about ants' nests and grubs, and showed them a score or so of sweet and succulent roots. Only the root of the water-hemlock, with its swollen, purple-streaked stem which tastes so sweet and is so deadly, she taught them to avoid, as well as those fierce and fatal sisters among the mushrooms, the death-

angel and the fly-mushroom, whose stems grow out of a socket, the danger-signal of their family.

Teaching the cubs to enjoy yellow-jackets' nests, one of the delicacies on bear-menus, was a more difficult affair. At first, Blackie and Spotty, after being stung on their soft little noses, would have no further traffic with any such red-hot dainties. Brownie was made of sterner stuff. After he had once learned how good yellow-jacket grubs were, he hunted everywhere for the nests. When he found one, he would dig it out, while the yellow-jackets stung his nose until the pain became unendurable. Then he would sit up and rub the end of it with both paws and bawl with all his might, only to start digging again when the smart became bearable. Sometimes he would have to stop and squeal frantically three or four times, to relieve his feelings – but he always finished the very last grub.

When the weather grew warmer, the old bear took all the cubs down to the edge of a hidden mountain-lake, and there taught them, one by one, to swim, hiding the others safely on the bank. At first, Mother Bear would allow each little swimmer to grip the end of her five-inch tail, and be towed through the water. As soon, however, as they learned the stroke, they had to paddle for themselves. One warm afternoon lazy Brownie swam with her to the middle of the lake, and then tried to get a tow back, only to receive a cuff that sent him two feet under water. When he came to the surface again, he swam beside his mother as bravely as if he had been born an otter and not a bear-cub.

When they were still a long distance from the shore, the old bear raised her big black head out of the water and stared over toward a little bay half a mile away. Her keen nostrils had caught the scent of man across the still waters. Then, to his surprise, Brownie was again given the privilege of a tow, and found himself whirling shoreward at a tremendous rate. From the far-away inlet a lean, lithe canoe flashed toward them as fast as Steve O'Donnell, the lumberjack, could paddle. Steve had come over to the lake to estimate on some lumber, and had seen the swimming bears. Hurriedly pitching into the canoe the long, light, almost straight-handled axe, which was the article of faith of all the woodcutters of that region, he started out to overtake the fugitives.

Steve was not learned in bear-ways, or he would never have started in a canoe after a swimming bear, without a rifle. As he came nearer and nearer, and it became evident to the old bear that she would be overtaken before she could reach shore, she turned and swam unhesitatingly toward the canoe, while Brownie made the best of his way ashore. Steve dropped his paddle and seized his axe, and when the great head was close beside his craft, struck at it with all his strength. He had yet to learn that the bear is an unsurpassed boxer, and that few men are able to land a blow on one, even when swimming. As his axe whizzed downward, it was suddenly deflected by a left turn, given with such force that the axe was torn from the man's hands and disappeared in the deep water. The next instant both the bear's paws clutched the gunwale

of the canoe, and a second later Steve was swimming for his life in the cold water. Mrs. Bear paid no further attention to him, but started again for the nearest shore. Overtaking Brownie, she gave him another tow, and by the time Steve, chilled to the bone, reached the farther shore, the whole bear family was miles away.

By midsummer the cubs were half-grown, although they looked mostly legs. One summer twilight a strange thing happened. The family had reached one of their safe and pleasant hillsides, when there loomed up before them a vast black figure among the trees, and out into the open strode a blackbear of a size that none of the three little cubs had ever seen before. In their wanderings they had met many other bears. Most of these the old bear passed unseeingly, in accordance with bear etiquette. Sometimes, if the stranger came too close, the hair on Mother Bear's back would begin to bristle, and a deep, threatening rumble, that seemed to come from underground, would warn against any nearer approach.

To-night, however, when this newcomer lumbered up to the cubs, who shrank behind their mother, Mother Bear made no protest. He sniffed at them thoughtfully, and then said loudly, "Koff – koff – koff – koff." Mother Bear seemed entirely satisfied with this sentiment, and from that time on the stranger led the little band, and the cubs came to know that he was none other than Father Bear. Bears mate only every other year; but often a couple will join forces in the odd year, and wander together as a family until winter.

Father Bear was a giant among his kind. He would tip the scales at perhaps five hundred pounds, and stood over three feet high at his foreshoulders, and was between six and seven feet long. In all the emergencies and crises of everyday life, he showed himself always a very present help in every time of trouble. Warier and wiser even than Mother Bear, he piloted his little family into the wildest and loneliest corners of all that wild and lonely land. Not for many years had the old giant met his match. Of panther, Canada lynx, porcupine, wolf, wolverine, and all the bears, black and brown, for a hundred miles around, he was the acknowledged overlord. This sense of power gave him a certain grim confidence, and he hunted and foraged for his family, with none to hinder save only man, the king of beasts. Crafty as he was powerful, the old bear fled into his most inaccessible fastnesses at the slightest taint or trace of that death-bringer.

One curious custom he had. Whenever he approached certain trees in his usual fifteen-mile range, he would examine them with great care for several minutes. These trees always stood in a prominent place, and were deeply scarred and furrowed with tooth-marks and claw-marks. Father Bear, after looking them all over carefully, would sniff every recent mark gravely. With his head on one side, he seemed to be receiving and considering messages from unseen senders. Occasionally the news that the tree brought seemed to enrage him profoundly. Thereupon he would claw and chew the unoffending tree frothingly, and then trot away growling deep in his throat. At other times, he would

raise his ears politely, as if recognizing a friend; or wrinkle his nose doubtfully but courteously, as a well-bred bear might do who met a stranger. Always, however, before leaving, he would stand up on his hind quarters and claw the tree as high as he could reach, at the same time drawing his teeth across it at right angles to the vertical claw-marks. The cubs soon learned that these lone, marked trees were bear-postoffices and that it was the duty of every he-bear of any real bearhood to leave a message there, with tooth and claw, for friend and foe to read.

When September came again, the family found themselves ranging far to the north, in a country which the cubs had never seen before. There they saw in the soft moss the deep marks of great splay hoofs; while here and there the bark of the striped maple was torn off in long strips seven or eight feet from the ground, and always on only one side, so that the half-peeled tree never died, as did the girdled trees attacked by the porcupine. One of the slow migrations of the moose-folk, which take place only at intervals of many years, had set in. Drifting down from the Far North, scattered herds had invaded the old bear's northernmost range. Like the witch-hazel, which blooms last of all the shrubs, the love-moon of the moose rises in the fall. The males of that folk take hardly the stress and strain of courtship. Bad-tempered at the best, a bull-moose is a devil unchained in September. As the hunter's moon waxes in the frosty sky, he neither rests, eats, or sleeps, but wanders night and day through the woods in search of a mate. Woe be to man or beast who

meets him then!

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.