

Roberts Charles G. D. Sir

The Kindred of the Wild: A Book of Animal Life



Charles Roberts

**The Kindred of the Wild:
A Book of Animal Life**

«Public Domain»

Roberts C.

The Kindred of the Wild: A Book of Animal Life / C. Roberts —
«Public Domain»,

Содержание

Introductory	5
The Moonlight Trails	8
I	8
II	10
III	13
The Lord of the Air	15
I	15
II	18
III	21
Wild Motherhood	24
I	24
II	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Kindred of the Wild: A Book of Animal Life

Introductory The Animal Story

Alike in matter and in method, the animal story, as we have it to-day, may be regarded as a culmination. The animal story, of course, in one form or another, is as old as the beginnings of literature. Perhaps the most engrossing part in the life-drama of primitive man was that played by the beasts which he hunted, and by those which hunted him. They pressed incessantly upon his perceptions. They furnished both material and impulse for his first gropings toward pictorial art. When he acquired the kindred art of telling a story, they supplied his earliest themes; and they suggested the hieroglyphs by means of which, on carved bone or painted rock, he first gave his narrative a form to outlast the spoken breath. We may not unreasonably infer that the first animal story – the remote but authentic ancestor of “Mowgli” and “Lobo” and “Krag” – was a story of some successful hunt, when success meant life to the starving family; or of some desperate escape, when the truth of the narrative was attested, to the hearers squatted trembling about their fire, by the sniffings of the baffled bear or tiger at the rock-barred mouth of the cave. Such first animal stories had at least one merit of prime literary importance. They were convincing. The first critic, however supercilious, would be little likely to cavil at their verisimilitude.

Somewhat later, when men had begun to harass their souls, and their neighbours, with problems of life and conduct, then these same animals, hourly and in every aspect thrust beneath the eyes of their observation, served to point the moral of their tales. The beasts, not being in a position to resent the ignoble office thrust upon them, were compelled to do duty as concrete types of those obvious virtues and vices of which alone the unsophisticated ethical sense was ready to take cognisance. In this way, as soon as composition became a *métier*, was born the fable; and in this way the ingenuity of the first author enabled him to avoid a perilous unpopularity among those whose weaknesses and defects his art held up to the scorn of all the caves.

These earliest observers of animal life were compelled by the necessities of the case to observe truly, if not deeply. Pitting their wits against those of their four-foot rivals, they had to know their antagonists, and respect them, in order to overcome them. But it was only the most salient characteristics of each species that concerned the practical observer. It was simple to remember that the tiger was cruel, the fox cunning, the wolf rapacious. And so, as advancing civilisation drew an ever widening line between man and the animals, and men became more and more engrossed in the interests of their own kind, the personalities of the wild creatures which they had once known so well became obscured to them, and the creatures themselves came to be regarded, for the purposes of literature, as types or symbols merely, – except in those cases, equally obstructive to exact observation, where they were revered as temporary tenements of the spirits of departed kinsfolk. The characters in that great beast-epic of the middle ages, “Reynard the Fox,” though far more elaborately limned than those which play their succinct rôles in the fables of Æsop, are at the same time in their elaboration far more alien to the truths of wild nature. Reynard, Isegrim, Bruin, and Greybeard have little resemblance to the fox, the wolf, the bear, and the badger, as patience, sympathy, and the camera reveal them to us to-day.

The advent of Christianity, strange as it may seem at first glance, did not make for a closer understanding between man and the lower animals. While it was militant, fighting for its life against

the forces of paganism, its effort was to set man at odds with the natural world, and fill his eyes with the wonders of the spiritual. Man was the only thing of consequence on earth, and of man, not his body, but his soul. Nature was the ally of the enemy. The way of nature was the way of death. In man alone was the seed of the divine. Of what concern could be the joy or pain of creatures of no soul, to-morrow returning to the dust? To strenuous spirits, their eyes fixed upon the fear of hell for themselves, and the certainty of it for their neighbours, it smacked of sin to take thought of the feelings of such evanescent products of corruption. Hence it came that, in spite of the gentle understanding of such sweet saints as Francis of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, and Colomb of the Bees, the inarticulate kindred for a long time reaped small comfort from the Dispensation of Love.

With the spread of freedom and the broadening out of all intellectual interests which characterise these modern days, the lower kindreds began to regain their old place in the concern of man. The revival of interest in the animals found literary expression (to classify roughly) in two forms, which necessarily overlap each other now and then, viz., the story of adventure and the anecdote of observation. Hunting as a recreation, pursued with zest from pole to tropics by restless seekers after the new, supplied a species of narrative singularly akin to what the first animal stories must have been, – narratives of desperate encounter, strange peril, and hairbreadth escape. Such hunters' stories and travellers' tales are rarely conspicuous for the exactitude of their observation; but that was not the quality at first demanded of them by fireside readers. The attention of the writer was focussed, not upon the peculiarities or the emotions of the beast protagonist in each fierce, brief drama, but upon the thrill of the action, the final triumph of the human actor. The inevitable tendency of these stories of adventure with beasts was to awaken interest in animals, and to excite a desire for exact knowledge of their traits and habits. The interest and the desire evoked the natural historian, the inheritor of the half-forgotten mantle of Pliny. Precise and patient scientists made the animals their care, observing with microscope and measure, comparing bones, assorting families, subdividing subdivisions, till at length all the beasts of significance to man were ticketed neatly, and laid bare, as far as the inmost fibre of their material substance was concerned, to the eye of popular information.

Altogether admirable and necessary as was this development at large, another, of richer or at least more spiritual significance, was going on at home. Folk who loved their animal comrades – their dogs, horses, cats, parrots, elephants – were observing, with the wonder and interest of discoverers, the astonishing fashion in which the mere instincts of these so-called irrational creatures were able to simulate the operations of reason. The results of this observation were written down, till "anecdotes of animals" came to form a not inconsiderable body of literature. The drift of all these data was overwhelmingly toward one conclusion. The mental processes of the animals observed were seen to be far more complex than the observers had supposed. Where instinct was called in to account for the elaborate ingenuity with which a dog would plan and accomplish the outwitting of a rival, or the nice judgment with which an elephant, with no nest-building ancestors behind him to instruct his brain, would choose and adjust the teak-logs which he was set to pile, it began to seem as if that faithful faculty was being overworked. To explain yet other cases, which no accepted theory seemed to fit, coincidence was invoked, till that rare and elusive phenomenon threatened to become as customary as buttercups. But when instinct and coincidence had done all that could be asked of them, there remained a great unaccounted-for body of facts; and men were forced at last to accept the proposition that, within their varying limitations, animals can and do reason. As far, at least, as the mental intelligence is concerned, the gulf dividing the lowest of the human species from the highest of the animals has in these latter days been reduced to a very narrow psychological fissure.

Whether avowedly or not, it is with the psychology of animal life that the representative animal stories of to-day are first of all concerned. Looking deep into the eyes of certain of the four-footed kindred, we have been startled to see therein a something, before unrecognised, that answered to our inner and intellectual, if not spiritual selves. We have suddenly attained a new and clearer vision. We have come face to face with personality, where we were blindly wont to predicate mere instinct and

automatism. It is as if one should step carelessly out of one's back door, and marvel to see unrolling before his new-awakened eyes the peaks and seas and misty valleys of an unknown world. Our chief writers of animal stories at the present day may be regarded as explorers of this unknown world, absorbed in charting its topography. They work, indeed, upon a substantial foundation of known facts. They are minutely scrupulous as to their natural history, and assiduous contributors to that science. But above all are they diligent in their search for the motive beneath the action. Their care is to catch the varying, elusive personalities which dwell back of the luminous brain windows of the dog, the horse, the deer, or wrap themselves in reserve behind the inscrutable eyes of all the cats, or sit aloof in the gaze of the hawk and the eagle. The animal story at its highest point of development is a psychological romance constructed on a framework of natural science.

The real psychology of the animals, so far as we are able to grope our way toward it by deduction and induction combined, is a very different thing from the psychology of certain stories of animals which paved the way for the present vogue. Of these, such books as "Beautiful Joe" and "Black Beauty" are deservedly conspicuous examples. It is no detracting from the merit of these books, which have done great service in awakening a sympathetic understanding of the animals and sharpening our sense of kinship with all that breathe, to say that their psychology is human. Their animal characters think and feel as human beings would think and feel under like conditions. This marks the stage which these works occupy in the development of the animal story.

The next stage must be regarded as, in literature, a climax indeed, but not the climax in this genre. I refer to the "Mowgli" stories of Mr. Kipling. In these tales the animals are frankly humanised. Their individualisation is distinctly human, as are also their mental and emotional processes, and their highly elaborate powers of expression. Their notions are complex; whereas the motives of real animals, so far as we have hitherto been able to judge them, seem to be essentially simple, in the sense that the motive dominant at a given moment quite obliterates, for the time, all secondary motives. Their reasoning powers and their constructive imagination are far beyond anything which present knowledge justifies us in ascribing to the inarticulate kindreds. To say this is in no way to depreciate such work, but merely to classify it. There are stories being written now which, for interest and artistic value, are not to be mentioned in the same breath with the "Mowgli" tales, but which nevertheless occupy a more advanced stage in the evolution of this genre.

It seems to me fairly safe to say that this evolution is not likely to go beyond the point to which it has been carried to-day. In such a story, for instance, as that of "Krag, the Kootenay Ram," by Mr. Ernest Seton, the interest centres about the personality, individuality, mentality, of an animal, as well as its purely physical characteristics. The field of animal psychology so admirably opened is an inexhaustible world of wonder. Sympathetic exploration may advance its boundaries to a degree of which we hardly dare to dream; but such expansion cannot be called evolution. There would seem to be no further evolution possible, unless based upon a hypothesis that animals have souls. As souls are apt to elude exact observation, to forecast any such development would seem to be at best merely fanciful.

The animal story, as we now have it, is a potent emancipator. It frees us for a little from the world of shop-worn utilities, and from the mean tenement of self of which we do well to grow weary. It helps us to return to nature, without requiring that we at the same time return to barbarism. It leads us back to the old kinship of earth, without asking us to relinquish by way of toll any part of the wisdom of the ages, any fine essential of the "large result of time." The clear and candid life to which it re-initiates us, far behind though it lies in the long upward march of being, holds for us this quality. It has ever the more significance, it has ever the richer gift of refreshment and renewal, the more humane the heart and spiritual the understanding which we bring to the intimacy of it.

The Moonlight Trails

I

There was no wind. The young fir-trees stood up straight and tall and stiffly pointed from the noiseless white levels of the snow. The blue-white moon of midwinter, sharply glittering like an icicle, hung high in a heaven clear as tempered steel.

The young fir-trees were a second growth, on lands once well cleared, but afterward reclaimed by the forest. They rose in serried phalanxes, with here and there a solitary sentinel of spruce, and here and there a little huddling group of yellow birches. The snow-spaces between formed sparkling alleys, and long, mysterious vistas, expanding frequently into amphitheatres of breathless stillness and flooding radiance. There was no trace of that most ghostly and elusive winter haze which represents the fine breathing of the forest. Rather the air seemed like diamonds held in solution, fluent as by miracle, and not without strange peril to be jarred by sound or motion.

Yet presently the exaggerated tension of the stillness was broken, and no disaster followed. Two small, white, furry shapes came leaping, one behind the other, down a corridor of radiance, as lightly as if a wind were lifting and drifting them. It was as if some of the gentler spirits of the winter and the wild had seized the magic hour for an incarnation. Leaping at gay leisure, their little bodies would lengthen out to a span of nearly three feet, then round themselves together so that the soft pads of their hinder paws would touch the snow within a couple of inches of the prints from which their fore paws were even then starting to rise. The trail thus drawn down the white aisle consisted of an orderly succession of close triplicate bunches of footprints, like no other trail of the wild folk. From time to time the two harmonious shapes would halt, sit up on their hindquarters, erect their long, attentive ears, glance about warily with their bulging eyes which, in this position, could see behind as well as in front of their narrow heads, wrinkle those cleft nostrils which were cunning to differentiate every scent upon the sharp air, and then browse hastily but with a cheerful relish at the spicy shoots of the young yellow birch. Feeding, however, was plainly not their chief purpose. Always within a few moments they would resume their leaping progress through the white glitter and the hard, black shadows.

Very soon their path led them out into a wide glade, fenced all about with the serried and formal ranks of the young firs. It seemed as if the blue-white moon stared down into this space with a glassiness of brilliance even more deluding and magical than elsewhere. The snow here was crossed by a tangle of the fine triplicate tracks. Doubling upon themselves in all directions and with obvious irresponsibility, they were evidently the trails of play rather than of business or of flight. Their pattern was the pattern of mirth; and some half dozen wild white rabbits were gaily weaving at it when the two newcomers joined them. Long ears twinkling, round eyes softly shining, they leaped lightly hither and thither, pausing every now and then to touch each other with their sensitive noses, or to pound on the snow with their strong hind legs in mock challenge. It seemed to be the play of care-free children, almost a kind of confused dance, a spontaneous expression of the joy of life. Nevertheless, for all the mirth of it, there was never a moment when two or more of the company were not to be seen sitting erect, with watchful ears and eyes, close in the shadow of the young fir-trees. For the night that was so favourable to the wild rabbits was favourable also to the fox, the wildcat, and the weasel. And death stalks joy forever among the kindred of the wild.

From time to time one or another of the leaping players would take himself off through the fir-trees, while others continued to arrive along the moonlight trails. This went on till the moon had swung perhaps an hour's distance on her shining course; then, suddenly it stopped; and just for a fleeting fraction of a breath all the players were motionless, with ears one way. From one or another of the watchers there had come some signal, swift, but to the rabbits instantly clear. No onlooker

not of the cleft-nose, long-ear clan could have told in what the signal consisted, or what was its full significance. But whatever it was, in a moment the players were gone, vanishing to the east and west and south, all at once, as if blown off by a mighty breath. Only toward the north side of the open there went not one.

Nevertheless, the moon, peering down with sharp scrutiny into the unshadowed northern fringes of the open, failed to spy out any lurking shape of fox, wildcat, or weasel. Whatever the form in which fate had approached, it chose not to unmask its menace. Thereafter, for an hour or more, the sparkling glade with its woven devices was empty. Then, throughout the rest of the night, an occasional rabbit would go bounding across it hastily, on affairs intent, and paying no heed to its significant hieroglyphs. And once, just before moon-set, came a large red fox and sniffed about the tangled trails with an interest not untinged with scorn.

II

The young fir wood covered a tract of poor land some miles in width, between the outskirts of the ancient forest and a small settlement known as Far Bazziley. In the best house of Far Bazziley – that of the parish clergyman – there lived a boy whom chance, and the capricious destiny of the wild folk, led to take a sudden lively interest in the moonlight trails. Belonging to a different class from the other children of the settlement, he was kept from the district school and tutored at home, with more or less regularity, by his father. His lesson hours, as a rule, fell when the other boys were busy at their chores – and it was the tradition of Far Bazziley that boys were born to work, not play. Thus it happened that the boy had little of the companionship of his fellows.

Being of too eager and adventurous a spirit to spend much of his leisure in reading, he was thrown upon his own resources, and often found himself hungry for new interests. Animals he loved, and of all cruelty toward them he was fiercely intolerant. Great or small, it hurt him to see them hurt; and he was not slow to resent and resist that kind of discomfort.

On more than one occasion he had thrashed other boys of the settlement for torturing, with boyish playfulness and ingenuity, superfluous kittens which thrifty housewives had confided to them to drown. These rough interferences with custom did him no harm, for the boys were forced to respect his prowess, and they knew well enough that kittens had some kind of claim upon civilisation. But when it came to his overbearing championship of snakes, that was another matter, and he made himself unpopular. It was rank tyranny, and disgustingly unnatural, if they could not crush a snake's back with stones and then lay it out in the sun to die gradually, without the risk of getting a black eye and bloodied nose for it.

It was in vain the boy explained, on the incontrovertible authority of his father, that the brilliant garter-snake, the dainty little green snake, and indeed all the snakes of the neighbourhood without exception, were as harmless as lady-bugs. A snake was a snake; and in the eyes of Far Bazziley to kill one, with such additions of painfulness in the process as could be devised on the moment, was to obey Biblical injunction. The boy, not unnaturally, was thrust more and more into the lonely eminence of his isolation.

But one unfailing resource he had always with him, and that was the hired man. His mother might be, as she usually was, too absorbed in household cares to give adequate heed to his searching interrogations. His father might spend huge blanks of his time in interminable drives to outlying parts of his parish. But the hired man was always at hand. It was not always the same hired man. But whether his name were Bill or Tom, Henry or Mart or Chris, the boy found that he could safely look for some uniformity of characteristics, and that he could depend upon each in turn for some teaching that seemed to him more practical and timely than equations or the conjugation of *nolo, nolle, nolui*.

At this particular time of the frequenting of the moonlight trails, the boy was unusually fortunate in his hired man. The latter was a boyish, enthusiastic fellow, by the name of Andy, who had an interest in the kind of things which the boy held important. One morning as he was helping Andy with the barn work, the man said:

“It's about full moon now, and right handy weather for rabbit-snarin'. What say if we git off to the woods this afternoon, if your father'll let us, an' set some snares fer to-night, afore a new snow comes and spiles the tracks?”

The silent and mysterious winter woods, the shining spaces of the snow marked here and there with strange footprints leading to unknown lairs, the clear glooms, the awe and the sense of unseen presences – these were what came thronging into the boy's mind at Andy's suggestion. All the wonderful possibilities of it! The wild spirit of adventure, the hunting zest of elemental man, stirred in his veins at the idea. Had he seen a rabbit being hurt he would have rushed with indignant pity to the rescue. But the idea of rabbit-snarng, as presented by Andy's exciting words, fired a side of his

imagination so remote from pity as to have no communication with it whatever along the nerves of sympathy or association. He was a vigorous and normal boy, and the jewel of consistency (which is usually paste) was therefore of as little consequence to him as to the most enlightened of his elders. He threw himself with fervour into Andy's scheme, plied him with exhaustive questions as to the methods of making and setting snares, and spent the rest of the morning, under direction, in whittling with his pocket-knife the required uprights and cross-pieces, and twisting the deadly nooses of fine copper wire. In the prime of the afternoon the two, on their snowshoes, set off gaily for the wood of the young fir-trees.

Up the long slope of the snowy pasture lots, where the drifted hillocks sparkled crisply, and the black stumps here and there broke through in suggestive, fantastic shapes, and the gray rampikes towered bleakly to the upper air, the two climbed with brisk steps, the dry cold a tonic to nerve and vein. As they entered the fir woods a fine, balsamy tang breathed up to greet them, and the boy's nostrils took eager note of it.

The first tracks to meet their eyes were the delicate footprints of the red squirrel, ending abruptly at the foot of a tree somewhat larger than its fellows. Then the boy's sharp eyes marked a trail very slender and precise – small, clear dots one after the other; and he had a feeling of protective tenderness to the maker of that innocent little trail, till Andy told him that he of the dainty footprints was the bloodthirsty and indomitable weasel, the scourge of all the lesser forest kin.

The weasel's trail led them presently to another track, consisting of those triplicate clusters of prints, dropped lightly and far apart; and Andy said, "Rabbits! and the weasel's after them!" The words made a swift picture in the boy's imagination; and he never forgot the trail of the wild rabbit or the trail of the weasel.

Crossing these tracks, they soon came to one more beaten, along which it was plain that many rabbits had fared. This they followed, one going on either side of it that it might not be obliterated by the broad trail of their snowshoes; and in a little time it led them out upon the sheltered glade whereon the merry-makers of the night before had held their revels.

In the unclouded downpour of the sunlight the tracks stood forth with emphasised distinctness, a melting, vapourous violet against the gold-white of the snowy surface; and to the boy's eyes, though not to the man's, was revealed a formal and intricate pattern in the tangled markings. To Andy it was incomprehensible; but he saw at once that in the ways leading to the open it would be well to plant the snares. The boy, on the other hand, had a keener insight, and exclaimed at once, "What fun they must have been having!" But his sympathy was asleep. Nothing, at that moment, could wake it up so far as to make him realise the part he was about to play toward those childlike revellers of the moonlight trails.

Skirting the glade, and stepping carefully over the trails, they proceeded to set their snares at the openings of three of the main alleys; and for a little while the strokes of their hatchets rang out frostily on the still air as they chopped down fragrant armfuls of the young fir branches.

Each of the three snares was set in this fashion: First they stuck the fir branches into the snow to form a thick green fence on both sides of the trail, with a passage only wide enough for one rabbit at a time to pass through. On each side of this passageway they drove securely a slender stake, notched on the inner face. Over the opening they bent down a springy sapling, securing its top, by a strong cord, to a small wooden cross-piece which was caught and held in the notches of the two uprights. From the under side of this cross-piece was suspended the easy-running noose of copper wire, just ample enough for a rabbit's head, with the ears lying back, to enter readily.

By the time the snares were set it was near sundown, and the young fir-trees were casting long, pointed, purple shadows. With the drawing on of evening the boy felt stirrings of a wild, predatory instinct. His skin tingled with a still excitement which he did not understand, and he went with a fierce yet furtive wariness, peering into the shadows as if for prey. As he and Andy emerged from the woods, and strode silently down the desolate slopes of the pasture lots, he could think of nothing

but his return on the morrow to see what prizes had fallen to his snares. His tenderness of heart, his enlightened sympathy with the four-footed kindred, much of his civilisation, in fact, had vanished for the moment, burnt out in the flame of an instinct handed down to him from his primeval ancestors.

III

That night the moon rose over the young fir woods, blue-white and glittering as on the night before. The air was of the same biting stillness and vitreous transparency. The magic of it stirred up the same merry madness in the veins of the wild rabbits, and set them to aimless gambolling instead of their usual cautious browsing in the thickets of yellow birch. One by one and two by two the white shapes came drifting down the shadowed alleys and moonlight trails of the fir wood toward the bright glade which they seemed to have adopted, for the time, as their playground. The lanes and ways were many that gave entrance to the glade; and presently some half dozen rabbits came bounding, from different directions, across the radiant open. But on the instant they stopped and sat straight up on their haunches, ears erect, struck with consternation.

There at the mouth of one of the alleys a white form jerked high into the air. It hung, silently struggling, whirling round and round, and at the same time swaying up and down with the bending of the sapling-top from which it swung. The startled spectators had no comprehension of the sight, no signal-code to express the kind of peril it portended, and how to flee from it. They sat gazing in terror. Then, at the next entrance, there shot up into the brilliant air another like horror; and at the next, in the same breath, another. The three hung kicking in a hideous silence.

The spell was broken. The spectators, trembling under the imminence of a doom which they could not understand, vanished with long bounds by the opposite side of the glade. All was still again under the blue-white, wizard scrutiny of the moon but those three kicking shapes. And these, too, in a few minutes hung motionless as the fir-trees and the snow. As the glassy cold took hold upon them they slowly stiffened.

About an hour later a big red fox came trotting into the glade. The hanging shapes caught his eye at once. He knew all about snares, being an old fox, for years at odds with the settlement of Far Bazziley. Casting a sharp glance about, he trotted over to the nearest snare and sniffed up desirously toward the white rabbit dangling above him. It was beyond his reach, and one unavailing spring convinced him of the fact. The second hung equally remote. But with the third he was more fortunate. The sapling was slender, and drooped its burden closer to the snow. With an easy leap the fox seized the dangling body, dragged it down, gnawed off its head to release the noose, and bore away the spoils in triumph, conscious of having scored against his human rivals in the hunt.

Late in the morning, when the sun was pale in a sky that threatened snowfall, the boy and Andy came, thrilling with anticipation, to see what the snares had captured. At the sight of the first victim, the stiff, furry body hanging in the air from the bowed top of the sapling, the boy's nerves tingled with a novel and fierce sense of triumph. His heart leapt, his eyes flamed, and he sprang forward, with a little cry, as a young beast might in sighting its first quarry. His companion, long used to the hunter's enthusiasm, was less excited. He went to the next snare, removed the victim, reset the catch and noose; while the boy, slinging his trophy over his shoulder with the air of a veteran (as he had seen it done in pictures), hastened on to the third to see why it had failed him. To his untrained eye the trampled snow, the torn head, and the blood spots told the story in part; and as he looked a sense of the tragedy of it began to stir aching at the roots of his heart. "A fox," remarked Andy, in a matter-of-fact voice, coming up at the moment, with his prize hanging rigidly, by the pathetically babyish hind legs, from the grasp of his mittened fist.

The boy felt a spasm of indignation against the fox. Then, turning his gaze upon Andy's capture, he was struck by the cruel marks of the noose under its jaws and behind its ears. He saw, for the first time, the half-open mouth, the small, jutting tongue, the expression of the dead eyes; and his face changed. He removed his own trophy from his shoulder and stared at it for some moments. Then two big tears rolled over his ruddy cheeks. With an angry exclamation he flung the dead rabbit down on the snow and ran to break up the snares.

“We won’t snare any more rabbits, Andy,” he cried, averting his face, and starting homeward with a dogged set to his shoulders. Andy, picking up the rejected spoils with a grin that was half bewilderment, half indulgent comprehension, philosophically followed the penitent.

The Lord of the Air

I

The chill glitter of the northern summer sunrise was washing down over the rounded top of old Sugar Loaf. The sombre and solitary peak, bald save for a ragged veil of blueberry and juniper scrub, seemed to topple over the deep enshadowed valley at its foot. The valley was brimmed with crawling vapours, and around its rim emerged spectrally the jagged crests of the fir wood. On either side of the shrouded valley, to east and west, stretched a chain of similar basins, but more ample, and less deeply wrapped in mist. From these, where the vapours had begun to lift, came radiances of unruffled water.

Where the peak leaned to the valley, the trunk of a giant pine jutted forth slantingly from a roothold a little below the summit. Its top had long ago been shattered by lightning and hurled away into the depths; but from a point some ten or twelve feet below the fracture, one gaunt limb still waved green with persistent, indomitable life. This bleached stub, thrust out over the vast basin, hummed about by the untrammelled winds, was the watch-tower of the great bald eagle who ruled supreme over all the aerial vicinage of the Squatooks.

When the earliest of the morning light fell palely on the crest of Sugar Loaf, the great eagle came to his watch-tower, leaving the nest on the other side of the peak, where the two nestlings had begun to stir hungrily at the first premonition of dawn. Launching majestically from the edge of the nest, he had swooped down into the cold shadow, then, rising into the light by a splendid spiral, with muffled resonance of wing-stroke, he had taken a survey of the empty, glimmering world. It was still quite too dark for hunting, down there on earth, hungry though the nestlings were. He soared, and soared, till presently he saw his wide-winged mate, too, leave the nest, and beat swiftly off toward the Tuladi Lakes, her own special hunting-grounds. Then he dropped quietly to his blanched pine-top on the leaning side of the summit.

Erect and moveless he sat in the growing light, his snowy, flat-crowned head thrust a little forward, consciously lord of the air. His powerful beak, long and scythe-edged, curved over sharply at the end in a rending hook. His eyes, clear, direct, unacquainted with fear, had a certain hardness in their vitreous brilliancy, perhaps by reason of the sharp contrast between the bright gold iris and the unfathomable pupil, and the straight line of the low overhanging brow gave them a savage intensity of penetration. His neck and tail were of the same snowy whiteness as his snake-like head, while the rest of his body was a deep, shadowy brown, close kin to black.

Suddenly, far, far down, winging swiftly in a straight line through the topmost fold of the mist drift, he saw a duck flying from one lake to another. The errand of the duck was probably an unwonted one, of some special urgency, or he would not have flown so high and taken the straight route over the forest; for at this season the duck of inland waters is apt to fly low and follow the watercourse. However that may be, he had forgotten the piercing eyes that kept watch from the peak of old Sugar Loaf.

The eagle lifted and spread the sombre amplitude of his wings, and glided from his perch in a long curve, till he balanced above the unconscious voyager. Then down went his head; his wings shut close, his feathers hardened till he was like a wedge of steel, and down he shot with breathless, appalling speed. But the duck was travelling fast, and the great eagle saw that the mere speed of dropping like a thunderbolt was insufficient for his purpose. Two or three quick, short, fierce thrusts of his pinions, and the speed of his descent was more than doubled. The duck heard an awful hissing in the air above him. But before he could swerve to look up he was struck, whirled away, blotted out of life.

Carried downward with his quarry by the rush of his descent, the eagle spread his pinions and rose sharply just before he reached the nearest tree-tops. High he mounted on still wings with that tremendous impulse. Then, as the impulse failed, his wings began to flap strongly, and he flew off with business-like directness toward the eyrie on the other slope of Sugar Loaf. The head and legs of the duck hung limply from the clutch of his talons.

The nest was a seemingly haphazard collection of sticks, like a hay-cart load of rubbish, deposited on a ledge of the mountainside. In reality, every stick in the structure had been selected with care, and so adeptly fitted that the nest stood unshaken beneath the wildest storms that swept old Sugar Loaf. The ground below the ledge was strewn with the faggots and branches which the careful builders had rejected. The nest had the appearance of being merely laid upon the ledge, but in reality its foundations were firmly locked into a ragged crevice which cleft the ledge at that point.

As the eagle drew near with his prey, he saw his mate winging heavily from the Tuladis, a large fish hanging from her talons. They met at the nest's edge, and two heavy-bodied, soot-coloured, half-fledged nestlings, with wings half spread in eagerness, thrust up hungry, gaping beaks to greet them. The fish, as being the choicer morsel, was first torn to fragments and fed to these greedy beaks; and the duck followed in a few moments, the young ones gulping their meal with grotesque contortions and ecstatic liftings of their wings. Being already much more than half the size of their parents, and growing almost visibly, and expending vast vitality in the production of their first feathers, their appetites were prodigious. Not until these appetites seemed to be, for the moment, stayed, and the eaglets sank back contentedly upon the nest, did the old birds fly off to forage for themselves, leaving a bloody garniture of bones and feathers upon the threshold of their home.

The king – who, though smaller than his mate, was her lord by virtue of superior initiative and more assured, equable daring – returned at once to his watch-tower on the lake side of the summit. It had become his habit to initiate every enterprise from that starting-point. Perching motionless for a few minutes, he surveyed the whole wide landscape of the Squatook Lakes, with the great waters of Lake Temiscouata gleaming to the northwest, and the peak of Bald Mountain, old Sugar Loaf's rival, lifting a defiant front from the shores of Nictau Lake, far to the south.

The last wisp of vapour had vanished, drunk up by the rising sun, and the eagle's eye had clear command of every district of his realm. It was upon the little lake far below him that his interest presently centred itself. There, at no great height above the unruffled waters, he saw a fish-hawk sailing, now tilted to one side or the other on moveless wing, now flapping hurriedly to another course, as if he were scrupulously quartering the whole lake surface.

The king recognised with satisfaction the diligence of this, the most serviceable, though most unwilling, of his subjects. In leisurely fashion he swung off from his perch, and presently was whirling in slow spirals directly over the centre of the lake. Up, up he mounted, till he was a mere speck in the blue, and seemingly oblivious of all that went on below; but, as he wheeled, there in his supreme altitude, his grim white head was stretched ever earthward, and his eyes lost no detail of the fish-hawk's diligence.

All at once, the fish-hawk was seen to poise on steady wing. Then his wings closed, and he shot downward like a javelin. The still waters of the lake were broken with a violent splash, and the fish-hawk's body for a moment almost disappeared. Then, with a struggle and a heavy flapping of wings, the daring fisher arose, grasping in his victorious claws a large "togue" or gray lake trout. He rose till he was well above the tree-tops of the near-by shore, and then headed for his nest in the cedar swamp.

This was the moment for which the eagle had been waiting, up in the blue. Again his vast wings folded themselves. Again his plumage hardened to a wedge of steel. Again he dropped like a plummet. But this time he had no slaughterous intent. He was merely descending out of the heavens to take tribute. Before he reached the hurrying fish-hawk he swerved upward, steadied himself, and flapped a menacing wing in the fish-hawk's face, heading it out again toward the centre of the lake.

Frightened, angry, and obstinate, the big hawk clutched his prize the closer, and made futile efforts to reach the tree-tops. But, fleet though he was, he was no match for the fleetness of his master. The great eagle was over him, under him, around him, all at once, yet never striking him. The king was simply indicating, quite unmistakably, his pleasure, which was that the fish should be delivered up.

Suddenly, however, seeing that the fish-hawk was obstinate, the eagle lost patience. It was time, he concluded, to end the folly. He had no wish to harm the fish-hawk, – a most useful creature, and none too abundant for his kingly needs. In fact, he was always careful not to exact too heavy a tribute from the industrious fisherman, lest the latter should grow discouraged and remove to freer waters. Of the spoils of his fishing the big hawk was always allowed to keep enough to satisfy the requirements of himself and his nestlings. But it was necessary that there should be no foolish misunderstanding on the subject.

The eagle swung away, wheeled sharply with an ominous, harsh rustling of stiffened feathers, and then came at the hawk with a yelp and a sudden tremendous rush. His beak was half open. His great talons were drawn forward and extended for a deadly stroke. His wings darkened broadly over the fugitive. His sound, his shadow, – they were doom itself, annihilation to the frightened hawk.

But that deadly stroke was not delivered. The threat was enough. Shrinking aside with a scream the fish-hawk opened his claws, and the trout fell, a gleaming bar of silver in the morning light. On the instant the eagle half closed his wings, tilted sideways, and swooped. He did not drop, as he had descended upon the voyaging duck, but with a peculiar shortened wing-stroke, he flew straight downward for perhaps a hundred feet. Then, with this tremendous impulse driving him, he shot down like lightning, caught the fish some twenty feet above the water, turned, and rose in a long, magnificent slant, with the tribute borne in his talons. He sailed away majestically to his watch-tower on old Sugar Loaf, to make his meal at leisure, while the ruffled hawk beat away rapidly down the river to try his luck in the lower lake.

Holding the fish firmly in the clutch of one great talon, the eagle tore it to pieces and swallowed it with savage haste. Then he straightened himself, twisted and stretched his neck once or twice, settled back into erect and tranquil dignity, and swept a kingly glance over all his domain, from the far head of Big Squatook, to the alder-crowded outlet of Fourth Lake. He saw unmoved the fish-hawk capture another prize, and fly off with it in triumph to his hidden nest in the swamp. He saw two more ducks winging their way from a sheltered cove to a wide, green reed-bed at the head of the thoroughfare. Being a right kingly monarch, he had no desire to trouble them. Untainted by the lust of killing, he killed only when the need was upon him.

Having preened himself with some care, polished his great beak on the dry wood of the stub, and stretched each wing, deliberately and slowly, the one after the other, with crisp rustling noises, till each strong-shanked plume tingled pleasantly in its socket and fitted with the utmost nicety to its overlapping fellows, he bethought him once more of the appetites of his nestlings. There were no more industrious fish-hawks in sight. Neither hare nor grouse was stirring in the brushy opens. No living creatures were visible save a pair of loons chasing each other off the point of Sugar Loaf Island, and an Indian in his canoe just paddling down to the outlet to spear suckers.

The eagle knew that the loons were no concern of his. They were never to be caught napping. They could dive quicker than he could swoop and strike. The Indian also he knew, and from long experience had learned to regard him as inoffensive. He had often watched, with feelings as near akin to jealousy as his arrogant heart could entertain, the spearing of suckers and whitefish. And now the sight determined him to go fishing on his own account. He remembered a point of shoals on Big Squatook where large fish were wont to lie basking in the sun, and where sick or disabled fish were frequently washed ashore. Here he might gather some spoil of the shallows, pending the time when he could again take tribute of the fish-hawk. Once more he launched himself from his watch-tower under the peak of Sugar Loaf, and sailed away over the serried green tops of the forest.

II

Now it chanced that the old Indian, who was the most cunning trapper in all the wilderness of Northern New Brunswick, though he seemed so intent upon his fishing, was in reality watching the great eagle. He had anticipated, and indeed prepared for the regal bird's expedition to those shoals of the Big Squatook; and now, as he marked the direction of his flight, he clucked grimly to himself with satisfaction, and deftly landed a large sucker in the canoe.

That very morning, before the first pallor of dawn had spread over Squatook, the Indian had scattered some fish, trout and suckers, on the shore adjoining the shoal water. The point he chose was where a dense growth of huckleberry and withe-wood ran out to within a few feet of the water's edge, and where the sand of the beach was dotted thickly with tufts of grass. The fish, partly hidden among these tufts of grass, were all distributed over a circular area of a diameter not greater than six or seven feet; and just at the centre of the baited circle the Indian had placed a stone about a foot high, such as any reasonable eagle would like to perch upon when making a hasty meal. He was crafty with all the cunning of the woods, was this old trapper, and he knew that a wise and experienced bird like the king of Sugar Loaf was not to be snared by any ordinary methods. But to snare him he was resolved, though it should take all the rest of the summer to accomplish it; for a rich American, visiting Edmundston on the Madawaska in the spring, had promised him fifty dollars for a fine specimen of the great white headed and white tailed eagle of the New Brunswick lakes, if delivered at Edmundston alive and unhurt.

When the eagle came to the point of shoals he noticed a slight change. That big stone was something new, and therefore to be suspected. He flew over it without stopping, and alighted on the top of a dead birch-tree near by. A piercing scrutiny convinced him that the presence of the stone at a point where he was accustomed to hop awkwardly on the level sand, was in no way portentous, but rather a provision of destiny for his convenience. He sailed down and alighted upon the stone.

When he saw a dead sucker lying under a grass tuft he considered again. Had the fish lain at the water's edge he would have understood; but up among the grasses, that was a singular situation for a dead fish to get itself into. He now peered suspiciously into the neighbouring bushes, scanned every tuft of grass, and cast a sweeping survey up and down the shores. Everything was as it should be. He hopped down, captured the fish, and was about to fly away with it to his nestlings, when he caught sight of another, and yet another. Further search revealed two more. Plainly the wilderness, in one of those caprices which even his old wisdom had not yet learned to comprehend, was caring very lavishly for the king. He hastily tore and swallowed two of the fish, and then flew away with the biggest of the lot to the nest behind the top of old Sugar Loaf. That same day he came twice again to the point of shoals, till there was not another fish left among the grass tufts. But on the following day, when he came again, with hope rather than expectation in his heart, he found that the supply had been miraculously renewed. His labours thus were greatly lightened. He had more time to sit upon his wind-swept watch-tower under the peak, viewing widely his domain, and leaving the diligent fish-hawks to toil in peace. He fell at once into the custom of perching on the stone at every visit, and then devouring at least one fish before carrying a meal to the nest. His surprise and curiosity as to the source of the supply had died out on the second day. The wild creatures quickly learn to accept a simple obvious good, however extraordinary, as one of those beneficences which the unseen powers bestow without explanation.

By the time the eagle had come to this frame of mind, the old Indian was ready for the next move in his crafty game. He made a strong hoop of plaited withe-wood, about seven feet in diameter. To this he fastened an ample bag of strong salmon-netting, which he had brought with him from Edmundston for this purpose. To the hoop he fixed securely a stiff birch sapling for a handle, so that the affair when completed was a monster scoop-net, stout and durable in every part. On a moonlight

night when he knew that the eagle was safely out of sight, on his eyrie around at the back of Sugar Loaf, the Indian stuck this gigantic scoop into the bow of his canoe, and paddled over to the point of shoals. He had never heard of any one trying to catch an eagle in a net; but, on the other hand, he had never heard of any one wanting an eagle alive, and being willing to emphasise his wants with fifty dollars. The case was plainly one that called for new ideas, and the Indian, who had freed himself from the conservatism of his race, was keenly interested in the plan which he had devised.

The handle of the great scoop-net was about eight feet in length. Its butt the trapper drove slantingly into the sand where the water was an inch or two deep, bracing it securely with stones. He fixed it at an angle so acute that the rim of the net lay almost flat at a height of about four feet above the stone whereon the eagle was wont to perch. Under the uppermost edge of the hoop the trapper fixed a firm prop, making the structure steady and secure. The drooping slack of the net he then caught up and held lightly in place on three or four willow twigs, so that it all lay flat within the rim. This accomplished to his satisfaction, he scattered fish upon the ground as usual, most of them close about the stone and within the area overshadowed by the net, but two or three well outside. Then he paddled noiselessly away across the moon-silvered mirror of the lake, and disappeared into the blackness about the outlet.

On the following morning, the king sat upon his watch-tower while the first light gilded the leaning summit of Sugar Loaf. His gaze swept the vast and shadowy basin of the landscape with its pointed tree-tops dimly emerging above the vapour-drift, and its blank, pallid spaces whereunder the lakes lay veiled in dream. His golden eye flamed fiercely under the straight and fierce white brow; nevertheless, when he saw, far down, two ducks winging their way across the lake, now for a second visible, now vanishing in the mist, he suffered them to go unstricken. The clear light gilded the white feathers of his head and tail, but sank and was absorbed in the cloudy gloom of his wings. For fully half an hour he sat in regal immobility. But when at last the waters of Big Squatook were revealed, stripped and gleaming, he dropped from his perch in a tremendous, leisurely curve, and flew over to the point of shoals.

As he drew near, he was puzzled and annoyed to see the queer structure that had been erected during the night above his rock. It was inexplicable. He at once checked his flight and began whirling in great circles, higher and higher, over the spot, trying in vain to make out what it was. He could see that the dead fish were there as usual. And at length he satisfied himself that no hidden peril lurked in the near-by huckleberry thicket. Then he descended to the nearest tree-top and spent a good half-hour in moveless watching of the net. He little guessed that a dusky figure, equally moveless and far more patient, was watching him in turn from a thicket across the lake.

At the end of this long scrutiny, the eagle decided that a closer investigation was desirable. He flew down and alighted on the level sand well away from the net. There he found a fish which he devoured. Then he found another; and this he carried away to the eyrie. He had not solved the mystery of the strange structure overhanging the rock, but he had proved that it was not actively inimical. It had not interfered with his morning meal, or attempted to hinder him from carrying off his customary spoils. When he returned an hour later to the point of shoals the net looked less strange to him. He even perched on the sloping handle, balancing himself with outspread wings till the swaying ceased. The thing was manifestly harmless. He hopped down, looked with keen interested eyes at the fish beside the rock, hopped in and clutched one out with beak and claw, hopped back again in a great hurry, and flew away with the prize to his watch-tower on Sugar Loaf. This caution he repeated at every visit throughout that day. But when he came again on the morrow, he had grown once more utterly confident. He went under the net without haste or apprehension, and perched unconcernedly on the stone in the midst of his banquet. And the stony face of the old Indian, in his thicket across the lake, flashed for one instant with a furtive grin. He grunted, melted back into the woods, and slipped away to resume his fishing at the outlet.

The next morning, about an hour before dawn, a ghostly birch canoe slipped up to the point of shoals, and came to land about a hundred yards from the net. The Indian stepped out, lifted it from the water, and hid it in the bushes. Then he proceeded to make some important changes in the arrangement of the net.

To the topmost rim of the hoop he tied a strong cord, brought the free end to the ground, led it under a willow root, and carried it some ten paces back into the thicket. Next he removed the supporting prop. Going back into the thicket, he pulled the cord. It ran freely under the willow root, and the net swayed down till it covered the rock, to rebound to its former position the moment he released the cord. Then he restored the prop to its place; but this time, instead of planting its butt firmly in the sand, he balanced it on a small flat stone, so that the least pull would instantaneously dislodge it. To the base of the prop he fixed another cord; and this also he ran under the willow root and carried back into the thicket. To the free end of this second cord he tied a scrap of red flannel, that there might be no mistake at a critical moment. The butt of the handle he loosened, so that if the prop were removed the net would almost fall of its own weight; and on the upper side of the butt, to give steadiness and speed of action, he leaned two heavy stones. Finally, he baited his trap with the usual dead fish, bunching them now under the centre of the net. Then, satisfying himself that all was in working order, he wormed his way into the heart of the thicket. A few leafy branches, cunningly disposed around and above his hiding-place, made his concealment perfect, while his keen black beads of eyes commanded a clear view of the stone beneath the net. The ends of the two cords were between his lean fingers. No waiting fox or hiding grouse could have lain more immovable, could have held his muscles in more patient perfect stillness, than did the wary old trapper through the chill hour of growing dawn.

At last there came a sound that thrilled even such stoic nerves as his. Mighty wings hissed in the air above his head. The next moment he saw the eagle alight upon the level sand beside the net. This time there was no hesitation. The great bird, for all his wisdom, had been lured into accepting the structure as a part of the established order of things. He hopped with undignified alacrity right under the net, clutched a large whitefish, and perched himself on the stone to enjoy his meal.

At that instant he felt, rather than saw, the shadow of a movement in the thicket. Or rather, perhaps, some inward, unaccredited guardian signalled to him of danger. His muscles gathered themselves for that instantaneous spring wherewith he was wont to hurl himself into the air. But even that electric speed of his was too slow for this demand. Ere he could spring, the great net came down about him with a vicious swish; and in a moment beating wings, tearing beak, and clutching talons were helplessly intertangled in the meshes. Before he could rip himself free, a blanket was thrown over him. He was ignominiously rolled into a bundle, picked up, and carried off under the old Indian's arm.

III

When the king was gone, it seemed as if a hush had fallen over the country of the Squatooks. When the old pine beneath the toppling peak of Sugar Loaf had stood vacant all the long golden hours of the morning, two crows flew up from the fir-woods to investigate. They hopped up and down on the sacred seat, cawing impertinently and excitedly. Then in a sudden flurry of apprehension they darted away. News of the great eagle's mysterious absence spread quickly among the woodfolk, – not by direct communication, indeed, except in the case of the crows, but subtly and silently, as if by some telepathic code intelligible alike to mink and wood-mouse, kingfisher and lucifée.

When the noon had gone by, and the shadow of Sugar Loaf began to creep over the edge of the nest, the old mother eagle grew uneasy at the prolonged absence of her mate. Never before since the nestlings broke the shell had he been so long away. Never before had she been compelled to realise how insatiable were the appetites of her young. She flew around to the pine-tree on the other side of the peak, – and finding it vacant, something told her it had been long unoccupied. Then she flew hither and thither over all the lakes, a fierce loneliness growing in her heart. From the long grasses around the mouth of the thoroughfare between third and fourth lakes a heron arose, flapping wide bluish wings, and she dropped upon it savagely. However her wild heart ached, the nestlings must be fed. With the long limp neck and slender legs of the heron trailing from her talons, she flew away to the eyrie; and she came no more to the Squatooks.

The knowledge of all the woodfolk around the lakes had been flashed in upon her, and she knew some mysterious doom had fallen upon her mate. Thereafter, though the country of the Squatooks was closer at hand and equally well stocked with game, and though the responsibilities of her hunting had been doubled, she kept strictly to her old hunting-ground of the Tuladis. Everything on the north side of old Sugar Loaf had grown hateful to her; and unmolested within half a mile of the eyrie, the diligent fish-hawks plied their craft, screaming triumphantly over every capture. The male, indeed, growing audacious after the king had been a whole week absent, presumed so far as to adopt the old pine-tree under the peak for his perch, to the loud and disconcerting derision of the crows. They flocked blackly about with vituperative malice, driving him to forsake his seat of usurpation and soar indignantly to heights where they could not follow. But at last the game palled upon their whimsical fancies, and they left him in peace to his aping of the king.

Meanwhile, in the village of Edmundston, in the yard of a house that stood ever enfolded in the sleepless roar of the Falls of Madawaska, the king was eating out his sorrowful and tameless heart. Around one steely-scaled leg, just above the spread of the mighty claws, he wore the ragged ignominy of a bandage of soiled red flannel. This was to prevent the chafing of the clumsy and rusty dog-chain which secured him to his perch in an open shed that looked out upon the river. Across the river, across the cultivated valley with its roofs, and farther across the forest hills than any human eye could see, his eye could see a dim summit, as it were a faint blue cloud on the horizon, his own lost realm of Sugar Loaf. Hour after hour he would sit upon his rude perch, unstirring, unwinking, and gaze upon this faint blue cloud of his desire.

From his jailers he accepted scornfully his daily rations of fish, ignoring the food while any one was by, but tearing it and gorging it savagely when left alone. As week after week dragged on, his hatred of his captors gathered force, but he showed no sign. Fear he was hardly conscious of; or, at least, he had never felt that panic fear which unnerves even kings, except during the one appalling moment when he felt the falling net encumber his wings, and the trapper's smothering blanket shut out the sun from his eyes. Now, when any one of his jailers approached and sought to win his confidence, he would shrink within himself and harden his feathers with wild inward aversion, but his eye of piercing gold would neither dim nor waver, and a clear perception of the limits of his chain would prevent any futile and ignoble struggle to escape. Had he shown more fear, more wildness, his jailers

would have more hope of subduing him in some measure; but as it was, being back country men with some knowledge of the wilderness folk, they presently gave him up as tameless and left off troubling him with their attentions. They took good care of him, however, for they were to be well paid for their trouble when the rich American came for his prize.

At last he came; and when he saw the king he was glad. Trophies he had at home in abundance, – the skins of lions which he had shot on the Zambesi, of tigers from Himalayan foot-hills, of grizzlies from Alaskan cañons, and noble heads of moose and caribou from these very highlands of Squatook, whereon the king had been wont to look from his dizzy gyres of flight above old Sugar Loaf. But the great white-headed eagle, who year after year had baffled his woodcraft and eluded his rifle, he had come to love so that he coveted him alive. Now, having been apprised of the capture of so fine and well-known a bird as the king of old Sugar Loaf, he had brought with him an anklet of thick, soft leather for the illustrious captive's leg, and a chain of wrought steel links, slender, delicate, and strong. On the morning after his arrival the new chain was to be fitted.

The great eagle was sitting erect upon his perch, gazing at the faint blue cloud which he alone could see, when two men came to the shed beside the river. One he knew. It was his chief jailer, the man who usually brought fish. The other was a stranger, who carried in his hand a long, glittering thing that jangled and stirred a vague apprehension in his heart. The jailer approached, and with a quick movement wrapped him in a coat, till beak and wings and talons alike were helpless. There was one instinctive, convulsive spasm within the wrapping, and the bundle was still, the great bird being too proud as well as too wise to waste force in a vain struggle.

“Seems pretty tame already,” remarked the stranger, in a tone of satisfaction.

“Tame!” exclaimed the countryman. “Them's the kind as don't tame. I've give up trying to tame him. Ef you keep him, an' feed him, an' coax him for ten year, he'll be as wild as the day Gabe snared him up on Big Squatook.”

“We'll see,” said the stranger, who had confidence in his knowledge of the wild folk.

Seating himself on a broken-backed chair just outside the shadow of the shed, where the light was good, the countryman held the motionless bundle firmly across his knees, and proceeded cautiously to free the fettered leg. He held it in an inflexible grip, respecting those knife-edged claws. Having removed the rusty dog-chain and the ignominious red flannel bandage, he fitted dexterously the soft leather anklet, with its three tiny silver buckles, and its daintily engraved plate, bearing the king's name with the place and date of his capture. Then he reached out his hand for the new steel chain.

The eagle, meanwhile, had been slowly and imperceptibly working his head free; and now, behind the countryman's arm, he looked out from the imprisoning folds of the coat. Fierce, wild, but unaffrighted, his eye caught the glitter of the chain as the stranger held it out. That glitter moved him strangely. On a sudden impulse he opened his mighty beak, and tore savagely at the countryman's leg.

With a yell of pain and surprise the man attempted to jump away from this assault. But as the assailant was on his lap this was obviously impossible. The muscles of his leg stiffened out instinctively, – and the broken-backed chair gave way under the strain. Arms and legs flew wildly in the air as he sprawled backward, – and the coat fell apart, – and the eagle found himself free. The stranger sprang forward to clutch his treasured captive, but received a blinding buffet from the great wings undestined to captivity. The next moment the king bounded upward. The air whistled under his tremendous wing-strokes. Up, up he mounted, leaving the men to gape after him, flushed and foolish. Then he headed his flight for that faint blue cloud beyond the hills.

That afternoon there was a difference in the country of the Squatooks. The nestlings in the eyrie – bigger and blacker and more clamorous they were now than when he went away – found more abundant satisfaction to their growing appetites. Their wide-winged mother, hunting away on Tuladi, hunted with more joyous heart. The fish-hawks on the Squatook waters came no more near

the blasted pine; but they fished more diligently, and their hearts were big with indignation over the spoils which they had been forced to deliver up.

The crows far down in the fir-tops were garrulous about the king's return, and the news spread swiftly among the mallards, the muskrats, the hares, and the careful beavers. And the solitude about the toppling peak of old Sugar Loaf seemed to resume some lost sublimity, as the king resumed his throne among the winds.

Wild Motherhood

I

The deep snow in the moose-yard was trodden down to the moss, and darkly soiled with many days of occupancy. The young spruce and birch trees which lined the trodden paths were cropped of all but their toughest and coarsest branches; and the wall of loftier growth which fenced the yard was stripped of its tenderer twigs to the utmost height of the tall bull's neck. The available provender was all but gone, and the herd was in that restlessness which precedes a move to new pastures.

The herd of moose was a small one – three gaunt, rusty-brown, slouching cows, two ungainly calves of a lighter hue, and one huge, high-shouldered bull, whose sweep of palmated antlers bristled like a forest. Compared with the towering bulk of his forequarters, the massive depth of his rough-maned neck, the weight of the formidable antlers, the length and thickness of his clumsy, hooked muzzle with its prehensile upper lip, his lean and frayed hindquarters looked grotesquely diminutive. Surprised by three days of blinding snowfall, the great bull-moose had been forced to establish the yard for his herd in an unfavourable neighbourhood; and now he found himself confronted by the necessity of a long march through snow of such softness and depth as would make swift movement impossible and fetter him in the face of his enemies. In deep snow the moose can neither flee nor fight, at both of which he is adept under fair conditions; and deep snow, as he knew, is the opportunity of the wolf and the hunter. But in this case the herd had no choice. It was simply take the risk or starve.

That same night, when the moon was rising round and white behind the fir-tops, the tall bull breasted and trod down the snowy barriers, and led his herd off northward between the hemlock trunks and the jutting granite boulders. He moved slowly, his immense muzzle stretched straight out before him, the bony array of his antlers laid back level to avoid the hindrance of clinging boughs. Here and there a hollow under the level surface would set him plunging and wallowing for a moment, but in the main his giant strength enabled him to forge his way ahead with a steady majesty of might. Behind him, in dutiful line, came the three cows; and behind these, again, the calves followed at ease in a clear trail, their muzzles not outstretched like that of the leader, but drooping almost to the snow, their high shoulders working awkwardly at every stride. In utter silence, like dark, monstrous spectres, the line of strange shapes moved on; and down the bewildering, ever-rearranging forest corridors the ominous fingers of long moonlight felt curiously after them. When they had journeyed for some hours the herd came out upon a high and somewhat bare plateau, dotted sparsely with clumps of aspen, stunted yellow birch, and spruce. From this table-land the streaming northwest winds had swept the snow almost clean, carrying it off to fill the neighbouring valleys. The big bull, who knew where he was going and had no will to linger on the way, halted only for a few minutes' browsing, and then started forward on a long, swinging trot. At every stride his loose-hung, wide-cleft, spreading hoofs came sharply together with a flat, clacking noise. The rest of the line swept dutifully into place, and the herd was off.

But not all the herd. One of the calves, tempted a little aside by a thicket of special juiciness and savour, took alarm, and thought he was going to be left behind. He sprang forward, a powerful but clumsy stride, careless of his footing. A treacherous screen of snow-crusted scrub gave way, and he slid sprawling to the bottom of a little narrow gully or crevice, a natural pitfall. His mother, looking solicitously backward, saw him disappear. With a heave of her shoulders, a sweep of her long, hornless head, an anxious flick of her little naked tail, she swung out of the line and trotted swiftly to the rescue.

There was nothing she could do. The crevice was some ten or twelve feet long and five or six in width, with sides almost perpendicular. The calf could just reach its bushy edges with his upstretched

muzzle, but he could get no foothold by which to clamber out. On every side he essayed it, falling back with a hoarse bleat from each frightened effort; while the mother, with head down and piteous eyes staring upon him, ran round and round the rim of the trap. At last, when he stopped and stood with palpitating sides and wide nostrils of terror, she, too, halted. Dropping awkwardly upon her knees in the snowy bushes, with loud, blowing breaths, she reached down her head to nose and comfort him with her sensitive muzzle. The calf leaned up as close as possible to her caresses. Under their tenderness the tremblings of his gaunt, pathetic knees presently ceased. And in this position the two remained almost motionless for an hour, under the white, unfriendly moon. The herd had gone on without them.

II

In the wolf's cave in the great blue and white wall of plaster-rock, miles back beside the rushing of the river, there was famine. The she-wolf, heavy and near her time, lay agonising in the darkest corner of the cave, licking in grim silence the raw stump of her right foreleg. Caught in a steel trap, she had gnawed off her own paw as the price of freedom. She could not hunt; and the hunting was bad that winter in the forests by the blue and white wall. The wapiti deer had migrated to safer ranges, and her gray mate, hunting alone, was hard put to it to keep starvation from the cave.

The gray wolf trotted briskly down the broken face of the plaster-rock, in the full glare of the moon, and stood for a moment to sniff the air that came blowing lightly but keenly over the stiff tops of the forest. The wind was clean. It gave him no tidings of a quarry. Descending hurriedly the last fifty yards of the slope, he plunged into the darkness of the fir woods. Soft as was the snow in those quiet recesses, it was yet sufficiently packed to support him as he trotted, noiseless and alert, on the broad-spreading pads of his paws. Furtive and fierce, he slipped through the shadow like a ghost. Across the open glades he fleeted more swiftly, a bright and sinister shape, his head swinging a little from side to side, every sense upon the watch. His direction was pretty steadily to the west of north.

He had travelled long, till the direction of the moon-shadows had taken a different angle to his path, when suddenly there came a scent upon the wind. He stopped, one foot up, arrested in his stride. The gray, cloudy brush of his tail stiffened out. His nostrils, held high to catch every waft of the new scent, dilated; and the edges of his upper lip came down over the white fangs, from which they had been snarlingly withdrawn. His pause was but for a breath or two. Yes, there was no mistaking it. The scent was moose – very far off, but moose, without question. He darted forward at a gallop, but with his muzzle still held high, following that scent up the wind.

Presently he struck the trail of the herd. An instant's scrutiny told his trained sense that there were calves and young cows, one or another of which he might hope to stampede by his cunning. The same instant's scrutiny revealed to him that the herd had passed nearly an hour ahead of him. Up went the gray cloud of his tail and down went his nose; and then he straightened himself to his top speed, compared to which the pace wherewith he had followed the scent up the wind was a mere casual sauntering.

When he emerged upon the open plateau and reached the spot where the herd had scattered to browse, he slackened his pace and went warily, peering from side to side. The cow-moose, lying down in the bushes to fondle her imprisoned young, was hidden from his sight for the moment; and so it chanced that before he discovered her he came between her and the wind. That scent – it was the taint of death to her. It went through her frame like an electric shock. With a snort of fear and fury she heaved to her feet and stood, wide-eyed and with lowered brow, facing the menace.

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.