

Roberts Charles G. D. Sir

Neighbors Unknown



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Charles G. D. Roberts

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ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

It seemed to be the very roof of the world, all naked to the outer cold, this flat vast of solitude, dimly outspread beneath the Arctic night. A line of little hills, mere knobs and hummocks, insignificant under the bitter starlight, served to emphasize the immeasurable and shelterless flatness of the surrounding expanse. Somewhere beneath the unfeatured levels the sea ended and the land began, but over all lay the monotony of ridged ice and icy, wind-scourged snow. The wind, which for weeks without a pause had torn screaming across the nakedness, had now dropped into calm; and with the calm there seemed to come in the unspeakable cold of space.

Suddenly a sharp noise, beginning in the dimness far to the left of the Little Hills, ran snapping past them and died off abruptly in the distance to the right. It was the ice, thickened under that terrific cold, breaking in order to readjust itself to the new pressure. There was a moment of strange muttering and grinding. Then, again, the stillness.

Yet, even here on the roof of the world, which seemed as if all the winds of eternity had swept it bare, there was life, life that clutched and clung savagely. Away to the right of the Little Hills, something moved, prowling slowly among the long ridges of the ice. It was a gaunt, white, slouching, startling shape, some seven or eight feet in length, and nearly four in height, with heavy shoulders, and a narrow, flat-browed head that hung low and swayed menacingly from side to side as it went. Had the light been anything more than the wide glimmer of stars, it would have shown that this lonely, prowling shape of white had a black-tipped muzzle, black edges to the long slit of its jaws, and little, cruel eyes with lids outlined in black. From time to time the prowler raised his head, sniffed with dilating nostrils, and questioned with strained ears the deathly silence. It was a polar bear, an old male, too restless and morose to content himself with sleeping away the terrible polar winter in a snow-blanketed hole.

From somewhere far off to seaward came across the stillness a light sound, the breaking of thin ice, the tinkle of splashings frozen as they fell. The great white bear understood that sound. He had been waiting for it. The seals were breaking their way up into their air-holes to breathe – those curious holes which form here and there in the ice-fields over moving water, as if the ocean itself had need of keeping in touch with upper air for its immeasurable breathing. At a great pace, but noiselessly as a drifting wraith of snow, the bear went towards the sound. Then suddenly he dropped flat and seemed to vanish. In reality he was crawling, crawling steadily towards the place of the air-holes. But so smooth was his movement, so furtive, and so fitted to every irregularity of the icy surface, that if the eye once lost him it might strive in vain to pick him up again.

Nearer, nearer he crept, till at last, lying motionless with his lean muzzle just over the crest of the ice-ridge, he could make out the dark shapes of the seals, vague as shadows, emerging for a few moments to sprawl upon the edge of the ice. Every few seconds one would slip into the water again, while another would awkwardly scramble forth. In that phenomenal cold it was necessary for them to take heed to the air-holes, lest these should get sealed up and leave them to drown helplessly under the leagues of solid ice-field. These breathing-spells in the upper air, out here on the world's roof, were their moments of greatest peril. Close to the edge of the hole they sprawled; and always one or another kept anxious watch, scanning with mild, bright eyes the menacing solitude, wherein they seemed the only things alive.

About this time, from one of a group of tiny, snow-covered mounds huddled along the base of the Little Hills, emerged a man. He crawled forth on all fours from the tunnel of his doorway, and

stood up and peered about him. His squat figure was clothed and hooded in furs. His little, twinkling eyes, after clearing themselves from the smoke and smart of the thick air within the igloo, could see further through the gloom than even the eyes of the bear. He noted the fall of the wind, the savage intensity of the cold, and his eyes brightened with hope. He had no fear of the cold, but he feared the hunger which was threatening the lonely village. During the long rage of the wind, the supply of food in his igloo had run low. He welcomed a cold which would close up most of the seals' breathing-holes, and force more numerous visitors to the few holes that they could keep open. For some moments he stood motionless, peering and listening as the bear had done. Suddenly he too caught that far-off light crashing of brittle ice. On the instant he turned and crawled hastily back into the hut.

A moment later he reappeared, carrying two weapons, besides the long knife stuck in his girdle. One of these was an old Hudson Bay Company's musket. The other was a spear of spliced bone, with a steel head securely lashed to it. Powder and ball for the musket were much too precious to be expended, except in some emergency wherein the spear might fail. Without waiting for a repetition of the sounds, he started off at once unerringly in the direction whence they had come. He knew that air-hole; he could find it in the delusive gloom without the aid of landmark. For some way he went erect and in haste, though as soundlessly as the bear. Then, throwing himself flat, he followed exactly the bear's tactics, till, at last, peering cautiously over a jagged ice-ridge, he, too, could make out the quarry watchfully coming and going about the brink of the air-hole.

From this point onward the man's movements were so slow as to be almost imperceptible. But for his thick covering of furs, his skin tough as leather and reeking with oil, he would have been frozen in the midst of his journey. But the still excitement of the hunt was pumping the blood hotly through his veins. He was now within gunshot, but in that dim light his shooting would be uncertain. He preferred to worm his way nearer, and then trust to his more accustomed weapon, the spear, which he could drive half-way through the tough bulk of a walrus.

At last there remained between him and the seals but one low ridge and then a space of level floe. This was the critical point. If he could writhe his body over the crest and down the other side, he would be within safe spear-shot. He would spring to his feet and throw before the nimblest seal could gain the water. He lay absolutely still, summoning wits, nerves, and muscles alike to serve his will with their best. His eyes burned deep in his head, like smouldering coals.

Just at this moment a ghostly light waved broadly across the solitude. It paled, withdrew, wavered back and forth as shaken from a curtain in the heavens, then steadied ephemerally into an arch of glowing silver, which threw the light of a dozen moons. There were three seals out upon the ice at that moment, and they all lifted their eyes simultaneously to greet the illumination. The man irresistibly looked up; but in the same instant, remembering the hunger in the igloo, he cowered back again out of sight, trembling lest some of the seals might have caught a glimpse of his head above the ridge. Some dozen rods away, at the other side of the air-hole, the great white bear also raised his eyes towards that mysterious light, troubled at heart because he knew it was going to hamper his hunting.

For perhaps two minutes the seals were motionless, profiting by the sudden brightness to scrutinize the expanse of ice and snow in every direction. Then, quite satisfied that no danger was near, they resumed their sportive plungings while the instantly frozen waters crackled crisply about them. For all their vigilance, they had failed to detect, on the one side, a narrow, black-tipped muzzle lying flat in a cleft of the ice-ridge, or, on the other side, a bunch of grayish fur, nearly the color of the grayish-mottled ice, which covered the head of the man from the igloo beside the Little Hills.

And now, while neither the man nor the bear, each utterly unconscious of the other, dared to stir, in a flash the still silver radiance of the aurora broke up and flamed into a riot of dancing color. Parallel rays like the pipes of a Titanic organ, reaching almost from the horizon to the zenith, hurtled madly from side to side, now elongating, now shortening abruptly, now seeming to clash against one another, but always in an ordered madness of right lines. Unearthly green, palpitating into rose, and thinnest sapphire, and flame-color, and ineffably tender violet, the dance of these cohorts

of the magnetic rays went on, across the stupendous arc of sky, till the man, afraid of freezing in his unnatural stillness, shrank back down the ridge, and began twisting his body, noiselessly but violently, to set his blood in motion; and the bear, trusting to the confusion of shifting lights, slipped himself over the ridge and into a convenient crevice. Under the full but bewildering glare of that celestial illumination, he had gained a good ten feet upon his human rival. The man's eyes reappeared just then at the crest of his ridge. Their piercing glance lingered, as if with suspicion, upon the crevice wherein the bear had flattened himself. Was there something unduly solid in that purple shadow in the crevice? No, a trick of the witch lights, surely. The piercing eyes returned to their eager watching of the seals.

Precious as was his ammunition, and indifferent as was his shooting with the old, big bore, Hudson Bay musket, the man was beginning to think he would have to stake his chances on the gun. But, suddenly, as if at a handsweep of the Infinite, the great lights vanished.

For a few seconds, by the violence of the contrast, it seemed as if thick darkness had fallen upon the world.

In those few seconds, noiseless and swift as a panther, the man had run over the ridge to within a dozen paces of the seals, and paused with spear uplifted, waiting till his eyes should once more be able to see in the starlight glimmer. As he stood thus waiting, every sense, nerve, and muscle on the last strain of expectancy and readiness, he heard, or seemed to feel as much as to hear, the rush of some great bulk through the gloom. Then came a scramble, a heavy splash, a second splash, a terrible scuffling noise, and a hoarse, barking scream. The man remembered that before the light went out there had been three seals on the ice. Two he had heard escape. What had befallen the third? Fiercely, like a beast being robbed of its prey, he sprang forward a couple of paces. Then he stopped, for he could not yet see clearly enough to distinguish what was before him. His blood pounded through his veins. The cold of Eternity was flowing in upon him, here on the naked roof of the world, but he had no feeling or fear of it. All he felt was the presence of his foe, there before him, close before him, in the dark.

Then, once more, the light flooded back, – the wide-flung silver radiance, – as suddenly and mysteriously as it had vanished.

Close beside the air-hole, half crouching upon the body of the slain seal, with one great paw uplifted, and bloody jaws open in defiance, stood the bear, glaring at the man.

Without an instant's hesitation the man hurled his spear. It flew true. But in that same second the bear lifted his paw to ward off the blow. He was not quite quick enough, but almost. The blade struck, but not where it was aimed. It bit deep, but not to the life. With a growl of rage, the bear tore it loose and charged upon the man.

The antagonists were not more than twenty paces apart, and now a glory of colored lights, green, red, and golden, went dancing madly over them, with a whispering, rustling sound as of stiff silk crumpled in vast folds. The man's eyes were keen and steady. In a flash both hands were out of his great fur mittens, which were tied by thongs to his sleeves. The heavy musket leaped to his shoulder, and his eye ran coolly along the barrel. There was a thunderous roar as of a little cannon. A dense cloud of smoke sprang into the air just before the muzzle of the gun.

Through the smoke a towering shape, with wide jaws and battering paws, hurled itself. The man leaped to one side, but not quite far enough. One great paw, striking blindly, smote him down; and, as he fell, the huge bulk fell half upon him, only to roll over the next instant and lie huddled and motionless upon the ice.

The man picked himself up, shook himself; and a look of half-dazed triumph went across his swarthy face as he pulled on his mittens. Then he smiled broadly, patted approvingly the old Hudson Bay musket, turned on his heels, and sent a long, summoning cry across the ice towards the igloos at the foot of the Little Hills.

BLACK SWAMP

The brook, which had rattled down so gayly, with many a laughing rapid and clattering white cascade, from the sunlit granite terraces of Lost Mountain, fell silent and hung back as it drew near the swamp. Wheeling in slow, deep, purple-dark eddies, it loitered for some hundred yards or so between dim overhanging ranks of alder, then sank reluctantly beneath an arch of mossed cedar-roots, and was lost in the heavy gloom.

Within the swamp the huge and ancient trunks of cedar and tamarack crowded in a sort of desperate confusion. Of great girth at the base, some towered straight up, seeking to get their tops out into the sunlight, under those sparse patches of far-off, indifferent sky. Others slanted ponderously, and laid upon their neighbors the responsibility of supporting their burden of massive branches. Yet others, undermined in youth by some treachery of the slough, lay prone above the water-holes for a portion of their length, and then turned skyward, ineffectually, as if too late awakened from their sluggish dreams. The roots of the trees were half uncovered – immense, coiled, uncouth, dull-colored shapes, like monsters struggling up from the teeming primeval slime.

In truth, there was a suggestion of something monstrous in all that the eye could see in Black Swamp. The heavy, indeterminate masses of dark mud, or patches of black water, lying deep between and under the contortions of the roots; the thick, gray rags of dead cedar-bark; the rotting stumps, some uprooted and half engulfed in the inert morass; the overpowering windless shadow, which lay thick as if no sound had ever jarred it; above all, the gigantic tangle of trunks and roots, stagnantly motionless, with the strained stillness that is not of peace, but of a nightmare. From a branch of one of the sullen trunks hung a globe of lightest-gray papery substance, with a round hole in the bottom of it. In and out of this hole moved two venomous streams of black-and-white hornets.

Suddenly it seemed as if the spirit of the monstrous solitude had taken substance, and was moving among the inert shapes of root and trunk. A massive fur-clad beast, dull black in color, with high, humped haunches and heavy, shapeless limbs, its hind feet grotesquely semi-human in outline, its head swinging low on a long, clumsy neck, came picking its way with a loose-jointed gait over the jumble of roots. With little, twinkling, deep-set eyes it peered beneath each root, investigated each crevice in the ancient bark, looking for grubs and beetles, which its great paws captured with amazing though awkward-looking dexterity. For so huge a beast as the great black bear, which could pull down an ox, to busy himself in the hunting of grubs and beetles, seemed one of the whimsicalities of Nature, who pursues her ends indifferently through mammoth or microbe.

Near the tree of the hornets the bear found a half-rotten stump. Sniffing at it with instructed nose, he decided that it held grubs. Clutching at it with his long, hooked claws, he tore away one side of it, revealing a mellow-brown, crumbly interior channelled by wood-grubs in every direction. Those which were in view on the erect portion of the stump he first picked out delicately and devoured with satisfaction. Then he turned his attention to the big slab which he had ripped away, and which lay on a hummock of firm ground at his feet.

But the bear was not the only connoisseur of grubs in Black Swamp. Some dozen inches before his nose a particularly fat maggot was squirming in the shallow remnant of its chamber, dismayed at its sudden exposure to the air. The bear was just on the point of picking it up, when it was pounced upon by one of the great black-and-white hornets, as a hawk might pounce on a rabbit. Pricked with the tip of the hornet's sting, the fat grub lashed itself out in one convulsive squirm, and then lay still. Straddling over it, the hornet rolled it together cleverly, then, plunging her mandibles into its soft body, proceeded to drain its juices.

For some moments the bear had watched this performance with curious interest, his little eyes twinkling wickedly. Now he had had enough of the show. Stretching out one mighty paw, he laid it down deliberately on the hornet and her prey. For a moment he left it there, as if his act had been one

of considered punishment. Then, withdrawing the paw, he eyed the flattened insect, and proceeded to swallow her and her victim together.

But the hornet was not quite dead, for the rotten wood was soft and full of unevenness; and this insect, with its burnished black body barred with creamy white, was no mere peppery little “yellow-jacket” wasp, but the great hornet of the woods, whose sting can pierce the hide of the moose. No sooner had the bear picked up the dangerous morsel than he spat it out again with a *woof* of surprise, and ground it into nothingness with an angry sweep of his paw. Then he fell to shaking his head, clawing awkwardly at his mouth, and whining a fretful protest at the sting. Lumbering down to a swamp-hole close by, he plunged his muzzle again and again into the chill black mud. After a brief period of this treatment, he returned to the stump and went on with his banquet of grubs, stopping every now and then to shake his head and grumble deep in his throat. When another big hornet, catching sight of the feast, pounced upon a grub, he smashed her and ground her up instantly, without caring how many tasty morsels were annihilated in the process.

When the stump had been quite torn to pieces, and every maggot extracted from it, the bear moved on to the tree of the hornets. He did not notice the nest, for he did not take the trouble to look up. If he had done so, being in a rage against the venomous tribe, he might, perhaps, have had the rashness to climb the tree and declare a doubtful war. As it was, he noted only that between two great roots, which sprang out like buttresses from the base of the trunk, there was a space of dry earth, covered with the minute elastic needles of the tamarack. Here he threw himself down with a grunt, and fell to rubbing his face with his thick forepaws.

But he was restless, the old bear – either because the grubs had not satisfied his hunger, or because the sting of the hornet still rankled in his jaw. Almost immediately he got up upon his haunches, and stared all about, sniffing, with his nose in the air. The monstrous confusion of roots and trunks, monotonously repeating itself as far as he could see through the shadow, appeared to offer him nothing worth his attention. But presently he lurched forward, as if he had made up his mind what to do. Shambling grotesquely, but picking his way above the slime as delicately as a cat, he kept on for perhaps a hundred yards. Perhaps his nostrils had caught, across the stagnant air, the tang of running water. It was running water that he came to, for the brook, though often foiled, often diverted, often turned back upon itself, and almost lost, had succeeded in saving for itself a clean channel through the water-holes and chaos of the swamp.

Just at this point the brook ran through a dark but living pool, brown but transparent, with here and there a gleam of elusive light, as in the eyes of some dark-eyed women. To this pool, and others like it strung here and there through the swamp, had gathered many fish, – trout, suckers, and chub, – fleeing the too direct rays of the high midsummer sun.

Lumbering down the sticky bank, the bear squatted himself on his haunches close to the edge of the water, and stared at it fixedly. After a time his eyes began to discern the fish which thronged in its deep centre. Having assured himself that the fish were there, he lay down on his stomach, in a hunched, shapeless position, with his face close to the water and one paw uplifted. It looked like a difficult position to hold, but the bear held it, motionless as one of the great roots, and quite as inert-looking, till by and by some of the fish, which had been frightened away by his coming, swam slowly back to the weedy edges to feed. These fish were suckers, weed-eaters, thick-bodied and sluggish in movement, very different from the swift, ravening trout. A spark flashed into the deep of the bear’s eyes as he saw them coming, but not so much as the edge of a nostril quivered. A big sucker with a snout that overhung, and opened and shut greedily, came nosing the mud close up under his face. With a lightning scoop the waiting paw descended, and the fish, amid a noisy splashing, was hurled out upon the bank, half stunned. Before it could recover itself enough to flop, the bear was upon it. Picking it up between his jaws, he carried it lazily back to that dry couch he had found beneath the tree of the hornets, there to be eaten at his leisure.

While the bear, ponderous and sullen, was mumbling over his meal in that uncouth solitude, there came, moving briskly down the brook's margin, a gay little figure that seemed an embodied protest against all the dark and enormous formlessness of the swamp. It was as if the world of sunlight, and swift motion, and bright vitality, and completed form, had sent in its herald to challenge the inertness of the gloom.

The tripping little figure was about the size of a fox, and with the long, pointed, inquisitive muzzle of a fox. Its abundant fur was of a cloudy, irregular yellowish-gray, darkening at the tips, and shading to almost black along the back. Its tail was long, light, and vividly barred with black. Its dainty, fine-clawed, hand-like feet were bright black. But the most striking thing about it was its face, which was very light gray, with a large black patch around each eye like an exaggerated pair of spectacles. The eyes themselves were extraordinarily large, dark, and lustrous, and glowed with a startling, almost impish intelligence.

The raccoon was not given, as a rule, to daytime prowlings, his preference being for moonlight rather than sunlight. Nor, usually, was he given to haunting the sinister recesses of Black Swamp. But he was a wanderer, and capricious as all vagabonds; and he had somehow discovered that there were crawfish in the brook where it flowed through the swamp. He was an ardent fisherman, deft and unerring with his hand-like claws. But to-day his fishing was unsuccessful, for never a crawfish was so considerate as to come his way. He saw the suckers and trout gathered at the mid-deeps of the pools, but he was too impatient, or not really hungry enough, to wait for them to come near shore. While he was watching beside the big pool wherein the bear had recently fished with such success, a wood-mouse unwarily came out of its hole, just at his feet, and was captured before it had time to see its peril. This prize contented the raccoon. Having killed his victim instantly with a cheerful nip behind the ears, he sat by the pool's edge and proceeded to souse the morsel vigorously up and down in the water before eating it. Not until it was washed almost to a rag did he seem to think it clean enough to eat, and then, after all his trouble, he nibbled hardly the half of it, flinging the remnant into the water with the air of a wasteful child who has never known what it feels like to go hungry.

From the edge of the brook the raccoon ran up the bank. After a pause he turned aimlessly into the still turmoil of the trunks and roots. Every fallen trunk, every long tentacle of a root that he came to, he would mount it and run along it to the end in whatever direction it led. As the luck of the wild would have it, this erratic progress brought him presently to one of the great buttressing roots of the tree of the hornets. He mounted it, of course, followed it nearly to the base of the trunk, and stopped abruptly at the sight of the bear.

The bear, who had but recently finished his meal of fish, was lying half asleep on the dry tamarack needles between the roots. He had well eaten, but the sting in his mouth still fretted him, and his mood was ugly. His great head was moving sullenly, ponderously, from side to side. Ominous and dark and ill-shapen, he looked strangely like a portion of the swamp come alive. The raccoon scrutinized him with eyes of bright, mischievous disdain. The bear, looking up, caught sight of him, and aimed a treacherous blow at him with his tremendous, armed forepaw. Light as a feather, the raccoon avoided him. It was as if the very wind of the blow had swept him from the place of danger. The bear grunted at his failure, and fell to licking his paw. The raccoon, who had slipped around the tree, mounted another root, and gazed at his rude assailant impishly. Then, glancing upwards, his liquid eyes detected the pendent gray globe of the hornets' nest, pale in the gloom.

The raccoon knew that inside every hornets' nest or wasps' nest at this time of the year was a mass of peculiarly succulent larvæ and immature insects. If this gray globe had been a wasps' nest, he might, perhaps, have attacked it at once, his long hair, thick skin, and skill in protecting his eyes, enabling him to brave, without too great cost, the stings of the ordinary "yellow-jacket." But he noted well the formidable insects which hummed about this nest; he knew the powers of the black-and-white hornet. Having stared at the nest for several minutes, he seemed to come to some decision. Thereupon he tripped off delicately over the tree-roots to the brook, to resume his hunt for crawfish.

It was by this time getting far along in the afternoon. As the gloom deepened at the approach of twilight, the bear went to sleep. The darkness fell thicker and thicker, till his breathing bulk could no longer be distinguished from the trunk beside it. Then, from narrow openings in the far-off tree-tops, fell here and there a ray of white moonlight, glassy clear, but delusive. Under the touch of these scant rays, every shrouded mystery of the swamp took on a sort of malignant life.

About this time the raccoon came back. In that phantom illumination, more treacherous than the dark, his wide eyes, nearly all pupil, saw as clearly as in the daylight. They gleamed elvishly as they took note of the sleeping bear. Then they glanced upward toward the hornets' nest, where it hung just crossed by one chill white pencil of a moon ray. Softly their owner ran up the tree, his delicate claws almost inaudible as they clutched the roughness of the bark.

At the base of the slim branch – hardly more than a twig, but alive and tough – which held the nest of the hornets, the raccoon stopped. He wanted the contents of that nest. But he did not want to test the prowess of its guardians, which were now, as he well knew, all within, too heavy with sleep to fly, but as competent as ever to sting. After some moments of deliberation, he bit the twig through and let the nest fall. Then he scrambled hastily down the tree, as if eager to see what would happen.

His purpose, perhaps, in dropping the nest was simply a wanton impulse to destroy what he desired but could not have. Perhaps he thought the nest would roll into a shallow pool at the other side of the tree, and so drown its occupants, after which he might rifle it at his own convenience. Or, possibly, he calculated that that would happen which presently did. The nest fell, not into the water, but between the upcurled forepaws, and very close to the nose, of the slumbering bear.

The bear, awakened and startled by its light fall, growled and bit angrily at the intruding nest. At the same time, with an instinctive clutch, he ripped it open, not realizing just what it was. The next instant he knew. With a *woof* of rage, he tried to crush it and all its envenomed populace within it. But he was too late. The great hornets were already swarming over him, crawling, burrowing deep into the fur about his face and neck and belly. Furiously they plunged and replunged their long, flame-like stings. His eyes and muzzle crawled with the fiery torment. Clawing, striking, snapping, grunting, whimpering, he rolled over and over in desperate effort to rid himself of the all-pervasive attack. But the foes he crushed had already left behind their poison in his veins. For a few moments his monstrous contortions went on, while in a glassy patch of white light, on the trunk above, clung the raccoon, gazing down upon him with liquid, elvish eyes. At length, quite beside himself with the torment, he reared upon his hind-quarters, battling in the air. Then he lunged forward, and went scrambling headlong over the slippery black jumble of roots.

The great beast's first impulse, one may guess, was simply that of flight, of mad effort to escape from foes whom he could not cope with. Having no heed of his direction, the blind guidance of trunk and root led him around in a rough circle, till he came almost back to the tree of his fate. Between him and the tree, however, lay a spacious patch of morass, fairly firm on the surface, but underneath, a slough of viscous mud. His eyes almost closed by the stings, the bear plunged straight forward into this morass. His first instinct was to struggle frantically back, but as he fell, his nose had dipped into the mud. The chill of it was like a balm to his tortured nostrils and lips. This, indeed, was what he wanted. He wallowed straight ahead, plunging his face deep into the icy slime. The drench of it soothed the scorching of his stung belly. The anguish of his eyelids was assuaged. Again and again, buried now to his shoulders, he thrust his face into the ooze. Then, with the salving of his torment, his senses seemed to return. He tried to wallow back to firm ground.

The swamp, as we have seen, was in all things monstrous. It was monstrous now to its offspring and victim, in warning him too late. The patch of morass was of great depth, and the bear was sucked under so swiftly that, even as he turned to escape, he sank to the neck. His huge forepaws beat and clawed at the stiffer surface, breaking it down into the liquid ooze beneath. Presently they also were engulfed. Only his head remained above the mud. His gaping muzzle, strained straight upward, emitted hideous gasps and groans. A beam of moonlight lay across the scene, still and malignant,

and the raccoon watched from the tree with an untriumphant curiosity. When at last that terrible and despairing head had vanished, and nothing remained but a long convulsion of the mud, the raccoon came daintily down from his post of observation, and examined the remains of the hornets' nest. It was crushed and pounded quite too flat to be of any further interest to him, so, after a disdainful wrinkling of his fine black nose, he tripped away to seek again the world to which he belonged – the world of free airs, and dancing leaves, and clamoring waters, and bright, swift, various life, and yellow moonlight over the fields of corn.

THE ISLE OF BIRDS

Far out of the track of ships, in the most desolate stretch of the North Atlantic, walled round with ceaseless thunder of the surf and wailed about continually by innumerable sea-birds, the islet thrust up its bleak rocks beneath a pale, unfriendly sky.

It was almost all rock, this little island – gray pinnacles of rock, ledges upon ledges of rock, and one high, sunrise-facing cliff of rock, seamed with transverse crevices and shelves. Only on the gentler southward slope was the rock-frame of the island a little hidden. Here had gathered a few acres of mean, sandy soil, dotted sparsely with tufts of harsh grass which struggled into greenness at the bidding of a bitter and fog-blighted June.

But this remote, sterile isle, shunned even by the whalers because of the treachery of its environing reefs and tides, was by no means lifeless. Indeed, it was thronged, packed, clamorous, screaming with life. It was a very paradise of the nesting sea-birds. Every meagre foot of it, rock and sand, was preempted and occupied by the myriad battalions of puffin, skua, auk, and saddle-back. The incessant clamor of their voices, harsh and shrill, overrode even the trampling of the surf.

Within the crowded little domain each tribe had its territory. The puffins – or “sea-parrots,” as some of the sailor folk call them, because of their huge hooked beaks – occupied the sandy slope, where they had their nests in deep burrows for protection against the robber skuas and saddle-backs. The auks had a corner of the cliff-face, where along every ledge they sat straight up in prim, close array like so many dwarf penguins, each couple occupied with its precious solitary egg. The rest of the cliff-face was monopolized by the screaming hosts of the saddle-backs, those great, marauding, black-backed gulls, whose yelps and wild *ka-ka-ka-kaings* made most of the deafening tumult in which the rocks were wrapt. As for the skuas, or “men-o’-war,” less numerous than the other inhabitants of the island, they occupied the lower ledges and the rock-crevices around the base of the puffins’ field. These were the situations which they preferred. If they had preferred the territory of the puffins or the auks, or even of the big bullying saddle-backs which were nearly twice their size, they would have taken it. But they neither desired nor knew how to dig burrows like the droll little puffins; and they valued their precious eggs too highly to want to risk them on the narrow, exposed shelves of the cliff-face, where there was no room to make a proper nest. They took the places they wanted, but as these were not the places which the other tribes wanted, there was no one to feel aggrieved. Saddle-back, auk, and puffin – each tribe thought it had the pick of the island territory, and felt altogether satisfied with itself.

Now, the weakest of these tribes was the tribe of the puffins. But one great strength they had, which fully made up for their deficiency in size and power. They knew how to burrow deep holes for their nests, wherein their eggs and nestlings were safe from the skuas and the saddle-backs. Every available inch of soil on the island was tunnelled with these burrows, like a rabbit-warren. At the bottom of each burrow was either one big, solitary egg, or a strange-looking youngster with enormous head and beak and an insatiable appetite for fish. At this season, late June, most of the puffins had hatched out their eggs. At the doorway of almost every burrow, therefore, was to be seen one of the parents on guard, while the other was away fishing to supply the insatiable demands of the chick. In dense ranks, sitting erect like auks or penguins, the seriously grotesque little birds sentinelled their homes, maintaining a business-like quiet in strange contrast to the ear-splitting volubility of their neighbors.

At the extreme left of the territory of the puffins, where the rocks broke abruptly, a tiny cleft-full of earth made room for just one nest. The pair of puffins who had their burrow here were comparatively isolated, being some eight or ten feet apart from the crowded ranks of their kin. Their one big egg had been safely hatched. The ridiculous chick, all gaping beak and naked belly, the one object of their passionate solicitude, was thriving and hungry according to the finest traditions of

infant puffinhood. The father, at this moment, was on guard at the mouth of the burrow, sitting solemnly erect on his webbed feet, the backs of his legs, and his stiff, short tail; while the mother was away fishing beyond the white turmoil of the surf.

Surely the most curious figure of all the sea-birds was his. For the body, it was not so far out of the ordinary, – about the size of a big and sturdy cockatoo, – white below and blackish-brown above, sides of the face white, and a dingy white collar on the neck; the webbed feet of a duck; the stiff, short tail of a penguin; very short, strong wings; and a round head. But the beak was like a gaudy caricature. Curved from base to tip like a parrot's, it was as long and high as the head which it seemed to overweigh, and adorned apparently aimlessly with exaggerated horny ridges. Over each eye was a little wart-like horn, and at each corner of the beak, where it joined the skin of the face, a vivid red, wrinkled excrescence, in shape a sort of rosette, of skinny flesh. Serviceable, to be sure, this beak was obviously, whether for burrowing, fighting, or catching fish; but it could be imagined as performing all these offices equally well without its monstrous eccentricities of adornment.

Everywhere in front of the cliff-face, over the ledges, above the white shuddering of the surf, and far out over the smooth leaden-gray rollers, the air was full of whirling and beating wings. These were the wings of the giant gulls and the skuas. The puffins did no more flying than was necessary – swift and straight from their nests out to the fishing-grounds, and back with their prey to the nests. Above their little domain, therefore, the honeycombed south-sloping field, there were no soaring or whirling wings, save for three or four pirate skuas, on the watch for a chance of robbery.

It was these marauders that the waiting puffin by his nest door, on the outskirts of the colony, had most dread of. He was a wise old bird, of several seasons' experience and many a successful battle; and he knew that the light-darting skua, though not much more than half the size of that bully of the cliffs, the saddle-back, was much more dangerous than the latter because so much more courageous. An impatient croak from the hungry nestling in the burrow made him poke his big beak inside and utter a low, chuckling admonition. When he withdrew his head and looked up, he fluttered the feathers on his neck and opened his beak angrily. A large skua, of a rusty, mottled black all over, with long tail and long, hawk-like wings, was circling above him, staring down at him with savage eyes.

Just a moment or two before this the hen puffin, fishing out at sea, had marked a plump herring about a foot below the surface of a transparent, glassy roller. Diving into the water with a violent splash, she had pursued the fish in his own element, swimming at an altogether miraculous speed. To gain this speed she used not only her strong, webbed feet, but also her short, sturdy wings. Darting through the water in this fashion, just below the surface, she was an amazing figure, some fantastic link, as it were, between bird and fish. The herring was overtaken, and clutched securely in the vice of the great parrot beak. Then, with much desperate flapping and splashing, she burst forth and rose into the air, heading homeward, straight as a bullet, with her prize.

Flying close to the surface of the sea, she passed through the high-flung spray of the surf. At this moment some premonition of her coming drew her mate's eyes, and he caught sight of her, just mounting above the ledges. Following his look, the skua, whirling above his head, caught sight of her also, and marked the prey she carried in her beak. With one magnificent effortless thrust of his long pinions, he swooped to intercept her.

The puffin, her great beak and the prize it clutched looking much too big for her swiftly beating wings to upbear, was coming up over the ledges at a humming pace, when she saw the dark robber descending upon her. She swerved, and so escaped the full force of the blow; but she felt herself enveloped in a whirlwind of wings and beaten down almost to the ground. At the same time a long, straight, powerful beak, with the tip hooked like a vulture's, snapped loudly at the side of her head, grasping at the fish she carried. Bewildered and terrified as she was, she was at the same time full of fighting obstinacy. Hanging doggedly to her prize, she recovered her wing balance, and rocketed on toward her burrow.

Her mate, meanwhile, had seen the attack. One grotesque little bob of indecision, then he had launched himself down the slope to her succor. He was not in time to interfere in the first encounter, but as he came slanting down like a well-aimed missile, the robber was just about to swoop again. The indignant puffin volleyed into him from the rear, turning him almost end over end. For an instant his wings flopped frantically, and he almost came down upon the rocks. By the time he had recovered himself his assailant had struck the water and was swimming comfortably on a great gray swell beyond the surf; while the female, with the herring gripped still in her absurd beak, was just diving triumphantly into her burrow to feed the ravenous and complaining chick.

The skua was disgusted. Had he been what he in some ways so much resembled, namely, a goshawk or falcon, with a hawk's deadly talons, the encounter would have had a very different result. But his handsome black feet were armed with nothing more formidable than webs for swimming. His only weapons were his hook-tipped beak and his long, powerful, buffeting wings. Backed, however, by his pluck and his audacity, which were worthy of a better occupation, these weapons were usually sufficient, and he was not used to being balked as these two serious little householders had balked him. With a vicious yelp, he went swooping low along the sentinel ranks of the puffins, followed by a snapping of indignant beaks which crackled along the lines as he went – a curious, dry sound, audible through the deep roar of the surf and the high-pitched clamor of bird-cries. Here and there a buffet of his wing, as it dipped suddenly, would knock over one of the grotesque but dauntless doorkeepers, who would pick himself up, ruffle his feathers, and waddle back to his post with outraged solemnity.

But revenge for his recent discomfiture was not the only or the chief reason for this raid of the pirate skua over the domain of the citizen puffins. What he wanted above all was food – whether fish, or eggs, or nestlings, it was all the same to him. A fairly competent fisherman himself – though not, of course, in the same class with the puffins, because of their power of swimming under water – he nevertheless preferred to make others do his fishing for him, and to take toll of their honest gains by force. A hardy and fearless highwayman, there was satisfaction for him in the robbery itself. As he flew thus close, and with the air of set purpose, above the puffin burrows, a few desultory saddle-backs who were circling just above dipped lower to see what was going to happen. In case of a scrimmage of any sort, there was always the possibility of a chance to snatch something.

As the skua skimmed along, just ahead of him came a puffin, volleying upward from the sea with a particularly fine fish in his beak. The lucky fisherman shot straight to his hole. But, by the finest hairbreadth, the robber got there before him. There was a wild mix-up of wings. The puffin was knocked clean over on his back, losing the fish, which fell just before the next burrow. Like a flash the proprietor of that next burrow bobbed his head forward and snatched at the unexpected windfall. He caught it by the tail, and turned to plunge into the burrow with it. But in that same instant the long beak of the skua caught it by the head. For a second or so the two tugged savagely at the prize, with a vast flapping and squawking. Then the outraged owner, recovering himself, floundered up, fixed his beak in the exposed belly of the fish, and began to pull and jerk like an angry terrier.

Feathers and sand flew into the air as the triangular tug-of-war went on. But frantic as was the turmoil of scuffling and flapping, the near-by ranks of puffins paid no attention to it whatever, except to turn their great beaks, all at the same angle, and stare solemnly, like so many fantastic maskers. The gulls overhead, however, gathered down with excited cries, seeking a chance to take part in the scuffle.

But before they could get their greedy beaks into it, it had come to an end. The fish was torn apart. The puffin who had grabbed the tail fell backwards with it, ruffled but triumphant, into his burrow; the original owner was left with just so much as his beak could hold – fortunately no mean mouthful; while the too-successful marauder, bearing by far the largest share of the prize, beat vigorously aloft through the screaming gulls, who would have tried to rob him had they dared. Rising strongly above them, he headed for the flat ledge, a little inland, where he and his dusky mate had made their nest.

Meanwhile, on the neighboring cliff-face, had just occurred one of those incidents which were forever stirring up excitement among the colonies of the auks and the saddle-backs. It began in the usual way. Each pair of auks, it must be remembered, has but one egg, which is laid, with no pretence of a nest, on the bare narrow ledge. As these eggs lie side by side along the rock, just far enough apart for the parents to brood them, and as they all look amazingly alike, sometimes the owners themselves get mixed up as to the identity of their speckled property. In this instance, two mothers, on a crowded shelf some forty feet above the sea, claimed the same egg, and both insisted on brooding it at the same time. With curious, strident grumblings, deep in their throats, they struggled over it. Their mates, chancing both to return from their fishing at this moment, joined vigorously in the discussion. The egg was promptly rolled off the ledge and smashed on the rocks below. But in the excitement its absence was not noticed. Meanwhile the combatants were making things most uncomfortable for their nearest neighbors, so these presently were dragged into the fight. The unfortunate eggs began dropping over the ledge. Instantly the great saddle-backs, from the noisy colony higher up the cliff, swept down to gather in the juicy harvest. They loved eggs, whether fresh or half brooded. Screaming joyously, they thronged the air just below the scene of the quarrel, which still went on with zest. Some of the tumbling eggs were stabbed cleverly and sucked in mid-air as they fell, while others were devoured or sucked up, according to the stage of development of their contents, on the rocks below. So long did the foolish auks continue their quarrel, so unusual was the rain of eggs, so wild was the screaming of the delighted banqueters below the ledge, that presently a number of the brooding saddle-backs – those who should have stayed by their charges to guard them, whatever their consorts might be doing – were seduced from their too tame responsibilities. Standing up in their dizzy nests, – most of which held either two or three muddy-colored eggs, scrawled with markings of dull maroon, – they stretched their fierce yellow beaks over the brink and peered down with predacious eyes. For many of them the temptation was not to be resisted. With hoarse cries they launched themselves downward, and joined deliriously in the scramble.

About level with the crest of the cliff, some half dozen of the dusky skuas were sailing leisurely. They saw their chance. There was nothing in the world more to their taste than eggs – and particularly the big, rich eggs of the great saddle-back gulls. Down they swooped upon the unguarded nests; and in a moment, plunging their long beaks through the shells, they were feasting greedily. All around them sat the other gulls, by the hundred – faithful ones who had resisted temptation and stuck to their nests. These screamed angrily, but made no attempt to interfere. “Let each look out for his own” was frankly their policy. Before any of the delinquent brooders came back, the skuas had cleared out every unguarded nest, and sailed off with derisive cries.

And so it came about that an unwonted number of saddle-backs, freed from domestic ties until they should be ready to lay new clutches of eggs, but very savage and vindictive for all their release, now came flapping inland over the island on the lookout for any possible chance to avenge themselves.

At this moment the great skua who had robbed the puffin of its fish came in sight of his nest. At his approach the female, who had grown impatient, arose from her handsome, greenish-brown, mottled eggs, sprang into the air, and sailed off toward the sea. For just about ten or a dozen seconds the precious eggs were left exposed, while the male swept down to them on a long, swift glide. But in those brief seconds fate struck. With an exultant yelp a huge saddle-back dropped out of the sky, directly upon the nest, and plunged his beak into one of the eggs. The egg was not far from hatching. He dragged forth the naked chick and swallowed it ravenously. Before he could turn to another egg, the skua had fallen upon him, hurling him clear of the nest, and tearing at him with desperate beak.

Now, the great gull, fully two feet and a half in length from the tip of his punishing yellow beak to the tip of his tail, was not far from twice the size of his fearless and furious assailant. Moreover, having just had his own nest destroyed, he was in a fighting mood. Ordinarily, being a thorough bully, he would have cowered and fled before the skua’s swift rage, but now he turned and struck back

savagely. More nimble than he, the skua evaded the blow, and caught him by the neck. And promptly the two became entangled into a flapping, tearing jumble of beaks and feathers.

It was close beside the nest that the struggle went on; but meanwhile the two remaining eggs were lying uncovered to the eyes of prowlers. They did not lie there long. Two more big saddle-backs straightway pounced upon them, crushing them flat in the scuffle. Engrossed though he was, the skua saw them. He was only a shameless robber, but his mettle was of a temper of the finest, and he knew not fear. Tearing himself free from his heavy foe, he pounced frantically upon these new assailants of his home. Startled, they hesitated whether to fight or flee. Then, seeing the odds so far in their favor, they turned to fight. The first saddle-back joining them, they presently succeeded in pulling the skua down. Then against their great weight and overpowering wings, his courage availed him little. Smothered, beaten, trodden upon, he disappeared from sight beneath the yelping turmoil. The odds had been too great for him. In half a minute the battle was over and his dark body, with the throat completely torn out, lay unresisting beneath the broad, pink, heavy-webbed feet of his conquerors.

Suddenly, as if at a signal, all three saddle-backs lifted their heads and stared about them. They marked their victim's mate winging upward toward them from the sea, swiftly, as if a prescience of evil had summoned her. They saw two other skuas sailing down from the cliff-top, as if to demand their business in skua territory. They had no stomach to face that demand; they had no heart for a fight on anything approaching fair terms. Flapping heavily into the air, they flew off in haste to lose themselves in the myriads of their screaming fellows. The female skua, returning, hovered low; but she did not alight. In silence, her head thrust downwards, she circled and circled endlessly on dark wings above the scattered ruins of her nest, the bedraggled and tattered body of her slain mate. And the stiff ranks of the puffins, like fantastic toy birds carved in wood and painted, stared down upon her solemnly from the slopes near by.

THE ANTLERS OF THE CARIBOU

When the frost is on the barrens,
And the popple-leaves are thinned,
And the caribou are drifting
Down the wind, —

So writes one who knows all about how autumn comes to the Tobique barrens, and who claims to know as much as most men about the caribou. But the caribou do not always drift, by any means. They are rather an incalculable folk, these caribou, — and even in their name one notes their inclination to be contrary; for the herds which frequent the high, watery barrens of northern New Brunswick are not, as one might suppose, the “caribou of the barren grounds,” but the larger and warier “woodland caribou.” The faithful observer of the manners and customs of this tribe may spend much time one year in learning what he will be constrained to unlearn with humility the next.

The lonely lake, smooth as a mirror between its flat, desolate shores, spread pink, amber, and gold toward the cloudless pink and orange sky, where the sun had just sunk below the wooded horizon. All the way up the lake, on one side, the shore was an unbroken stretch of treeless barren. On the other side the low, dark, serried ranks of the fir forest advanced almost to the water’s edge, their tops like embattled spear-points against the colored sky. From this shore a spit of sand jutted straight out into the lake. On its extremity, his magnificent bulk and lofty head black against the pellucid orange glow, stood a giant bull-moose, motionless as if modelled in bronze. His huge muzzle was thrust straight out before him, as if he was about to roar a challenge. His wide, palmated antlers were laid back over his shoulders.

Far down the lake a solitary huntsman lay beside a dying camp-fire, and gazed at the splendid silhouette. A faint puff of the aromatic wood-smoke, breathing across his nostrils at that moment, bit the picture into his memory so ineffaceably, that never after could he sniff the smell of wood-smoke on evening air without the desolate splendor of that spacious and shining scene leaping into his brain. But he was a hunter, and the great bull was his quarry. Where he lay he was invisible against the dark background of tree and brush. Presently he reached for his rifle and for a trumpet-like roll of birch bark which lay close by. Noiselessly as a snake he crawled to the shelter of a thicket of young firs. Then he arose to his feet and slipped into the forest.

At the same instant the moose, as if some warning of his unseen foe had been flashed into his consciousness, turned and strode off, without a sound, into the woods.

Soon the tiny camp-fire had died to a few white ashes, and the half-dark of a cloudless night had fallen — still, and chill, and faintly sweet with damp, tonic scents of spruce, bayberry, and bracken. There was that in the air which spoke of frost before morning. It wanted nearly an hour of moonrise. The wide, vague world of the night, that seemed so empty, so unstimulating, grew populous with unseen, furtive life — life hunting and hunted; loving, fearing, trembling; enjoying or avenging. But there was no sound, except now and then the inexplicable rustle of a dead leaf, or an elvish gurgle of water from somewhere in the shadows along shore.

At last the hunter, threading his way through the forest as noiselessly as the craftiest of the prowling kindreds, arrived in the heart of a covert of young fir-trees, from beneath whose sweeping branches he could command a near and clear view of the sand-spit. Disappointed he was, but not surprised, to find that the great moose-bull had disappeared. Seating himself with his back to a small tree, his rifle and the birch-bark trumpet, or “moose call,” across his knees, he settled down to wait — to wait with that exhaustless patience, that alert yet immobile vigilance, which are, perhaps, hardest to acquire of all the essentials of woodcraft. In the stillness the wood-mice came out and resumed

their play, with fairy-thin squeaks and almost inaudible patterings and rustlings over the dry carpet of the fir needles.

At last, above the flat, black horizon beyond the lower end of the lake, came the first pale glow of moonrise. At sight of it the hunter lifted the birch-bark horn to his lips and breathed through it a deep, bleating call, grotesque and wild, yet carrying an indescribable appeal, as if it were the voice of all the longing of the wilderness. Twice he sounded the uncouth call. Then he waited, listening, thrilled with exquisite expectancy.

He knew that, when one called a moose, one never knew what might come. It might, of course, be the expected bull, his lofty, antlered head thrusting out over the dark screen of the bushes, while his burning eyes stared about in search of the mate to whose longing call he had hastened. In that case he might perhaps feel vaguely that he had been deceived, and fall back soundlessly into the darkness; or, taking it into his head that another bull had forestalled him, he might burst out into the open, shaking his antlers, thrashing the bushes, and roaring savage challenge. But, on the other hand, it might not be a bull at all that would come to the lying summons. It might be an ungainly moose-cow, mad with jealousy and frantically resolved to trample her rival beneath her knife-edged hoofs. Or it might be something dangerously different. It might be a bear, a powerful old male, who had learned to spring upon a cow-moose and break her neck with one stroke of his armed paw. In such a contingency there was apt to be excitement; for when a bear undertakes to stalk a cow-moose, he gives no notice of his intentions. The first warning, then, of his approach, would be his final savage rush upon the utterer of the lying call. For such a contingency the hunter held his rifle always ready.

But, on the other hand, there might well be nothing at all – no answer, all through the long, cold, moon-silvered night, summon the birch horn never so craftily.

And this was what the hunter thought had been so far the result of his calling. Had he chanced to look over his shoulder, he might have known better. He might have seen the shadows take substance, condensing into a gigantic and solid bulk just behind the little tree against which he leaned his back. He might have seen the spread of vast and shadowy antlers, the long, sullen head, and drooping muzzle, the little eyes, in which, as they detected him in his ambush, a sudden flame of rage was quenched by the timely wisdom of fear. But the giant shape dissolved back into shadow, and the hunter never knew that he himself had been stalked and considered.

After a long silence, the birch-bark horn again sent forth its appeal. Loud and long it called; then it murmured a series of caressingly desirous notes, impatient and importunate. When it stopped, from the thick dark just below the sand-spit came a light snapping of twigs and brushing of branches, which seemed to be moving toward the open point. The hunter was puzzled; for a moose-bull, coming in answer to the call, would either come with a defiant rush, and make a much louder noise, or he would come secretively and make no noise whatever. With pounding pulses he leaned forward to see what would emerge upon the sand-spit.

To his surprise, it was no moose, but a small gray caribou cow, looking almost white in the level rays of the now half-risen moon. She was followed by another cow, larger and darker than the first, and then by a fine caribou bull. Softly, alluringly, the hunter sounded his call again, but not one of the caribou paid any attention to it whatever. To the bull of the caribou it mattered not what lovelorn cow-moose should voice her hoarse appeals to the moon. He and his followers were on their own affairs intent.

He was a noble specimen of his kind, as to stature, with a very light grayish head, neck, and shoulders, showing white in contrast to the dull brown of the rest of his coat. But his antlers, though large, were unevenly developed, so obviously imperfect that the hunter, who wanted heads, not hides or meat, hesitated to shoot. He chose rather to bide his time, and hope for a more perfect specimen, the law of New Brunswick allowing him only one.

For several minutes the bull stood staring across the lake, as though half minded to swim it, and his two cows – antlered like himself, though much less imposingly – watched him with dutiful

attention. Whatever his purpose, however, it was never declared; for suddenly there came a new and more impetuous crashing among the undergrowth, and the eyes of the little herd turned to see what was approaching. An instant later a second bull, about the size of the first, but very much darker in coloring, broke furiously through the bushes. He rushed about half-way down the sand-spit, then stopped, snorting and blowing defiance.

The new-comer had a magnificent set of antlers, but the hunter forgot to shoot.

The white bull, surprised by the unexpected challenge, stood for an instant staring stupidly, waving his great ears. Then all at once the hot blood of arrogant possession and jealous mastery seemed to rush to his head. Thrusting aside the two cows, who stood huddled in his path, with a furious boeing grunt, he lurched forward to meet the challenger.

With lowered heads, noses between their knees, and the branching spikes of their antlers presented straight to the front, they came together with a shock and a snort. The hard horn clashed with the dry resonance of seasoned wood. Being of about equal size, both withstood the shock. Both staggered; but, recovering themselves instantly, they stood pushing with all the strength of their straining, heaving bodies, their hoofs digging deep into the sand.

Then, on a sudden, as if the same idea had at the same instant flashed into both their seething brains, they disengaged and jumped backward, like wary fencers.

For several tense seconds they stood eying each other, antlers down, while the big-eyed cows, with ears slowly waving, looked on placidly, and the moon, now full risen, flooded the whole scene with lavish radiance. The only concern of the cows was that the best bull should win, with proved mastery compelling their allegiance.

Suddenly the new-comer, the dark bull, as if to get around his adversary's guard, feinted to the right, and then lunged straight forward. But the white bull was too experienced to be caught by such a well-worn ruse. He met the attack fairly. Again the antlers clashed. Again those monstrous pantings and savage gruntings arose on the stillness, as the matched antagonists heaved and pushed, their hind legs straddled awkwardly and their hoofs ploughing the sand.

At length the white bull put one of his hind feet in a hole. Giving way for a second, he was forced backwards almost to the water's edge. With a furious effort, however, he recovered himself, and even, by some special good fortune or momentary slackness of his adversary, regained his lost ground. Both paused for breath. The fight hung exactly in the balance.

To judge from his antlers, the white bull was the older, and therefore, one may suppose, the craftier duellist. It occurred to him now, perhaps, that against a foe so nearly his equal in strength he must seek some advantage in strategy. He made a sudden movement to disengage his antlers and jump aside. To the trained eyes of the hunter, watching from the thicket, the intention was obvious. But it failed curiously. At the very instant of the effort to disengage, the dark bull had surged forward with violence. Not meeting the resistance expected, he was taken by surprise and stumbled to his knees. The white bull, quick to feel his advantage, instantly changed his purpose and surged forward with all his force. For a moment the dark bull seemed to crumple up as his rival's heaving shoulders towered above him.

Now, this was the white bull's chance. It was for him to roll his enemy over, disengage, rip the dark bull's unfortunate flank, and tread him down into the sand. But he did nothing of the sort. He himself staggered forward with the fall of his adversary. Then he drew back again, but slowly. With the motion his adversary regained his feet. Once more the two stood, armed front to front, grunting, straining, sweating, heaving, but neither giving ground an inch.

"Locked!" said the hunter, under his breath.

That, indeed, was the fact. The two pairs of antlers were interlaced. But the sinister truth was not yet realized by the combatants themselves, because, when either tried to back free, so as to renew the attack more advantageously, it seemed to him quite natural that the other should furiously follow him up. In the confused struggle that now followed, they more than once pivoted completely around;

and the two cows, perceiving something unusual in the combat, drew off with a disapproving air to the extremity of the sand-spit. Little by little the white bull appeared to be getting a shade the better of the duel; for at length, regaining his first position, he began forcing his rival steadily, though slowly, back toward the woods. Then all at once, during a pause for breath, both at the same moment awoke to knowledge of the plight they had got themselves into. Both had sought to back away at the same instant. In the next they were tugging frantically to break apart.

But struggle as they might their efforts were utterly in vain. The tough, strong horn of their new antlers was ever so slightly elastic. It had yielded, under the impact of their last charge, just far enough for a perfect locking. But in the opposite direction there was no yielding. They were inextricably and inexorably fixed together, and in a horrid attitude, in which it was impossible to feed, or even to straighten up their bowed necks.

In the agonized pulling match which now began, the white bull had the best of it. He had slightly the advantage in weight. Little by little he dragged his grunting rival out along the sand-spit, till the two cows, almost crowded off, bounced past with indignant snorts and vanished down the shore. A moment more, and he had backed off the sand into a couple of feet of water.

The shock of the plunge seemed to startle the white bull into new rage. He laid the blame of it upon his foe. As if with all his strength renewed, he recovered himself, and thrust the dark bull backward with such tempestuous force that the latter had all he could do to keep his footing. Presently he felt himself at the edge of the woods, his hind feet in a tangle of bushes instead of on the sand. Then, exhausted and cowed, his legs gave way, and he sank back upon his haunches. Frantic with despair, he struggled to butt and strike with his fettered prongs, and in this futile struggle he fell over on his side. The white bull, his paroxysm of new vigor come suddenly to an end, was dragged down with him, and the two lay with heaving flanks, panting noisily.

The hunter had laid down his roll of birch bark. He was just about to step forth from his ambush and mercifully end the matter with his knife. But there came a brusque intervention. He had not been the only spectator of the strange combat.

Out from the thickets at the lower edge of the point came plunging an enormous black bear. With one huge paw uplifted, he fell upon the exhausted duellists. One blow smashed the neck of the white bull. Turning to the other, who glared up at him with rolling, hopeless eyes, he fell to biting at him with slow, luxurious cruelty.

In that instant the hunter's rifle blazed from the thicket. The bear, shot through the spine with an explosive bullet, dropped in a sprawling heap across the bent forelegs of his victim. Stepping forth into the moonlight, the hunter drew his knife with precision across the throat of the wounded bull.

Straightening himself up, he stared for a few moments at the three great lifeless carcasses on the sand. Then he let his glance sweep out over the glassy waters and level, desolate shores. How strange was the sudden silence, the still white peace of the moonlight, after all that madness and tumult and rage which had just been so abruptly stilled! A curious revulsion of feeling all at once blotted out his triumph, and there came over him a sense of repugnance to the bulk of so much death. Stepping around it, he sat down with his back to it all, on a stranded log, and proceeded to fill his pipe.

THE SENTRY OF THE SEDGE-FLATS

Pale, shimmering green, and soaked in sun, the miles of sedge-flats lay outspread from the edges of the slow bright water to the foot of the far, dark-wooded, purple hills. Winding through the quiet green levels came a tranquil little stream. Where its sleepy current joined the great parent river, a narrow tongue of bare sand jutted out into the golden-glowing water. At the extreme tip of the sand-spit towered, sentry-like, a long-legged gray-blue bird, as motionless as if he had been transplanted thither from the panel of a Japanese screen.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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