

The female, in the meantime, had accomplished wonders, and when, that evening, her husband sailed out on to the center of the water and called to her, she did not answer. The lake was stained blood-red by the sunset, and the forest on every side was dark as ebony, while the long "who-hoo-o" that the loon uttered, as he sailed far out on the glassy sheet, expressed more adequately than words could express the solitary loveliness of his surroundings. At last, receiving no answer from his mate, he went to look for her, and found her where he had seen her last, seated serenely upon her nest among the rushing. She forbade him to approach as usual, but she did so in such a mild, half-hearted way that he could hardly be expected to take heed.

Whether the male loon was surprised at what he saw in the nest I do not know, but thereafter his care of his wife and her treasures was unflinching. There were two eggs of a greenish brown color, blotched and speckled with red, and though they were really rather bilious looking eggs, to the loons they were the dearest things in all the wide world. Sometimes the male sat on them himself, and while thus employed he would try to improve the nest by tucking in loose ends, while the female made the best of her short-lived leisure not very far away.

One day it happened that old Ben's cow strayed further from the hut than usual. Ben and the boy could hear the tinkling of her bell away up the lake margin, and when milking time arrived, and she did not return, they decided to set out and look for her.

They found her in the grassy bay, screened by the cape of cedar—standing with her forelegs wide apart, while her hind legs dangled helplessly in mid air. She had tried to scramble over a wind-fall, and had succeeded so far as already described, but her hind legs stubbornly refused to follow. Wedged firmly amidship, by two stout branches, it was not until Ben and the boy had cut the tree in two that she regained her lost interest in life, and proceeded to drowse as though nothing had happened.

With the mild-eyed cow bringing up the rear, Ben and the boy turned their leisurely steps homewards along the lake margin, and thus they came upon the nest of the loons. As they approached the female scrambled off her eggs into the rushes, and disappeared miraculously.

"Seemed no end scar't," observed Ben, and the boy waded out into the water and looked into the nest. Never in later life did he feel the same thrills of discovery that he felt then. He took one of the eggs in his hands and examined it lovingly. He wanted to keep it for good, to have it always by him, so he said, "Bloodthirsty varmints them loons, aren't they, dad?"

Old Ben shook his head. "Don't know as they are," he answered. "In my opinion they're the nicest bird we run up against in these parts." Then Ben proceeded callously on his way, and the boy was bound by honor to leave the eggs alone.

Later on he was glad that he had not disturbed the loons, for he spent many an interesting half hour watching them. He learnt a great deal about them too. He learnt how carefully the female hid her eggs with leaves and rushes whenever she left the nest. He learnt that the two birds each had their separate hunting grounds, and that one little corner of the lake in particular, near to the nest, the male reserved carefully for his wife. He never fished there himself, and when the smaller fowl trespassed upon it he drove them unceremoniously away.

The female would sit for hours, her bright eyes looking around her, and occasionally make a dab at some aquatic insect that settled near; but when the great brown hawk flew overhead she would freeze—remain motionless, till he passed by. But quite different was it when the other brown hawk—the one with the red feathers in his tail—sailed above her. She did not seem to heed him in the least, and it was not till years after that the boy learnt what the loon already knew—that while the first hawk was a fierce and terrible killer, the second was merely a carrion eater, and only haunted the lake on the off chance of picking up a dead fish.

Just at about this time the male loon met with a blood curdling adventure. One evening he had dived under the water, and was swimming eight feet or so below the surface looking for fish, when a small drab colored creature darted across his line of vision. It was not a beaver or a muskrat—far too small for either of these, but it was lively enough, and just the right size to swallow, which was all that really mattered to the loon.

He darted forward—faster than any fish could dart—and in a trice had caught the curious creature in his bill. Then a dark shadow flashed through the water above him. Down came the mother muskrat—a sinister vision of chisel-edged teeth and flaming eyes, for it was her little one the loon had caught.

Among the beavers and the muskrats and the waterfowl there is an alliance—stronger than the alliances that bind nations together, for in the wild, the laws do not change. Whether it is the musquash who strikes the water with his tail, or the beaver sentry or the wildfowl that give the alarm, all the other kindred of the waterway take heed, for their foes are common foes. Thus, by a universal law, they are friends to one another, so no doubt the mother muskrat thought that her so-called friend, the loon, was guilty of an unpardonable breach of confidence. At any rate, she gave him no time to explain. With deadly aim she alighted upon the back of his neck, and sank her teeth deep in his flesh. The loon liberated the young rat, and shot upwards for the surface.

What the boy saw was a frantically struggling heap of fur and feathers, that darted this way and that, and lashed the water in foam. Suddenly it evolved itself into a musquash and a loon, swimming as though for dear life, in opposite directions—the loon lashing the air with his little wings, as though he really wanted to rise, but was in too great a hurry to do so.

The bird was not greatly hurt, though the beautiful white stripes of his summer collar were badly ruffled, and during the remainder of his stay at Night-hawk, he never again ventured into that portion of the lake which old "chisel teeth" regarded as her special domain.

A day or two after this dreadful occurrence the young loons made their appearance. They left the nest directly, and swam out on to the water with their mother, where they were presently joined by the male loon, who did not seem at all surprised at what had happened.

The boy watched the loons on this first journey of theirs out into the twilight, lead-colored world that surrounded their home. He lay flat in a blueberry clump near to the nest, and to-day the scent of crushed blueberries never fails to bring the whole vivid scene back before his mind. The lake was still as glass, save for the very edge, where the trout rose lazily at the myriads of mosquitoes dancing over the surface. Far ahead of him were the sweeping forest uplands, touched here and there with the lighter green of birch and poplar, and broken in places by a pine-capped ridge or a desolate row of tamarisks.

O, what glorious things the young loons were! A man may consider his own doughty, helpless offspring to be the most beautiful thing on earth, but in what standard of perfection can it compare with the merry, active little loons? Why, as soon as they were born they knew the fundamental laws of life. They knew that when the brown hawk flew overhead they must stick close to their mother, and that there was no need to fear the red-tailed carrion eater. They were not really very beautiful to look upon, except at a distance, for they were covered all over with dull black down; but they were lively and happy, and life was a great joy to them.

At this time the mother loon took to inhabiting the east side of the lake, where the water was not more than two feet deep for several yards from the shore.

"So as she can see what's coming," explained old Ben, for he stood steadfast in the faith that the lake contained land-locked salmon, which would not be above snapping up a young loon, though he had no reason for thinking so.

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