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## The Loons

Written for The Western Home Monthly, by H. Mortimer Batten

SPRING was near, and the spirit of silence and sadness that had brooded upon Nighthawk Lake throughout the winter was slowly losing its potency. There was a suggestion of laughter in the very air—the laughter of a thousand little brooks that trickled through the woods under the snow. Far out on the centre of the lake the ice was already breaking up—piling itself into great, jagged packs and ridges, while along the margin the water welled and ebbed through the blow holes with multitudinous hissings and boomings.

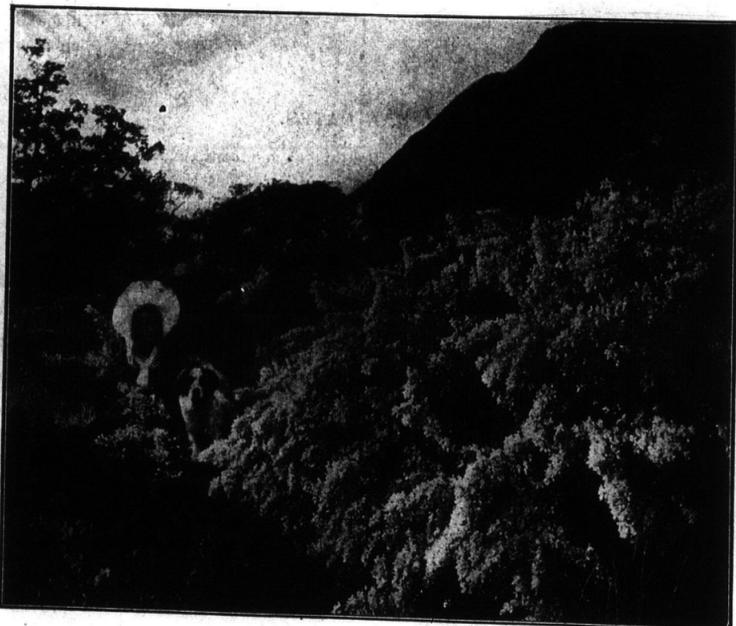
Spring was near, and the boy at Nighthawk Lake felt the change as keenly as any. He loved the stirring and awakening of the forest world around him after the long months of silence and inaction, and at night time he lay awake for hours together, listening to the cries of the feathered kindred making their way northwards overhead, and building up all manner of romantic pictures in his mind of "the dim and desolate places" which the path of the wild swans leads to. Sometimes he wondered how old Ben could sleep so soundly while all this was going on. To the boy his father's snoring seemed

ridge, spring might have come to Nighthawk Lake a fortnight earlier. For while thousands of birds had hastened northwards over their heads the loons had dawdled on the way, pausing once on Lake Ontario, to look with wonder at the throbbing streets of Toronto, and pausing again on the Georgian Bay, on Nipissing, Timiskaming, and a score of other waters that mark the northward trail of the loons.

But now that they had really arrived at their summer quarters, a new spirit seemed to possess them. The female wanted to build—so much was clear, and the male seemed to busy himself, for the most part, in seeking out a favorable building site for her. During the first three days he decided upon at least a dozen different sites, and to each of them, in turn, he led his wife triumphantly. And at each the female started to build, till her husband led her away to a more favorable situation.

"Don't seem to know their own minds," said the boy in perplexity, and old Ben said that he had never known a pair of loons that did, and his experience of loons was vast.

At length, however, a nesting site



Luxuriant Flower and Leaf in B.C. Hills.

a desecration, breaking in and overwhelming the spring time music of the heavens. He did not know that long ago Ben too had listened to those same, far off sounds at night time and built up his boyish fancies, like every other romantic child of the northern woods.

But spring had not yet come, for the loons had not arrived. In the north tradition says that spring comes with the loons, and in the north tradition is stronger than fact.

But one morning there was a sound of laughter—not the laughter of the springs this time but a wild, cackling laughter, that startled the whole woods into echo. Out of the heavens darted two black shapes—strangely elongated shapes, that twisted and turned in the air, then hit the water with a splash. Again the cackling laughter rang out, and the boy, who stood by the margin, his hands clasped behind him, was thrilled through and through by what he saw.

"Dad! Dad!" he cried, scrambling up the clearing. "The loons—the loons is come."

The old man laid down his axe, and hurried to the water's edge. Then he too rubbed his hands and grinned. "So they is!" he said simply; and thereafter the two lived happy in the knowledge that spring had come, and refused to believe the very obvious fact that it had come a week ago.

As for the loons—they had shown no undue haste in their journey northwards from the Gulf, and had it not been for excellent fishing near to Sand

was decided upon, and the loons began to build in real earnest. It was at the edge of a little grassy bay, screened from the view of old Ben's hut by a dense clump of cedar, while the nest itself was to be situated among the rushes.

The female loon was all hopefulness and diligence, but the male was somewhat erratic in his efforts. He would be quietly fishing on his own account, when suddenly the building fever would take hold of him. In twenty minutes he would collect enough material to complete an entire nest, whereupon his wife would discard the greater portion of it, and he himself would lose all interest in the proceedings. As a matter of fact he was a far greater hindrance to his wife than a help, and in the end, when the nest was nearly completed, she forbade him to go near it, opening her mouth and threatening whenever he approached. Had she not done so he would doubtless have buried her little home beneath a heap of the slimy rubbish he loved to fish from the lake bottom, and it would have taken her no end of time to put things straight after him.

Then it was that a bright idea seemed to occur to the loon. He decided to build a nest of his own—to construct it on his own lines, and be his own master. So he set to work with a will, and well, the less said about the nest he built the better. No doubt he himself thought it very beautiful, for he spent a whole day looking at it, then forgot about it for good.

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