



THE SENTRY OF THE SEDGE FLATS

By CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

PALE shimmering green, and soaked in sun, the miles of sedge flats lay outspread from the edge 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 sandspit towered, sentry-like, a long-legged, grey-blue bird, as motionless as if he had been transplanted thither from the panel of a Japanese screen.

The flat narrow head of the great heron, with its long, javelin-like yellow beak and two slender black crest feathers, was drawn far back by a curious undulation of the immense long neck, till it rested between the humped blue wing-shoulders. From the lower part of the neck hung a fine fringe of vaporous rusty grey plumes, which lightly veiled the chestnut coloured breast. The bird might have seemed asleep, like the drowsy expanse of green sedge, silver-blue water, and opalescent turquoise sky, but for its eyes. Those eyes, round, unwinking, of a hard, glassy gold, with intense black pupils, were unmistakably and savagely wide awake.

OVER the tops of the sedges, fluttering and zig-zagging waywardly, came a big butterfly, its gorgeous red-brown wings pencilled with strange hieroglyphics in black and purple. It danced out a little way over the water, and then, as if suddenly terrified by the shining peril beneath, came wavering back toward shore. A stone's throw up the channel of the little stream lay a patch of vivid green, the leaves of the arrow weed, with its delicate pallid blooms, dreaming in the still air above them.

The butterfly saw these blossoms, or perhaps smelt them, and fluttered in their direction to see if those pure chalices held honey. But on his way he noticed the moveless figure of the heron, conspicuous above the ranks of the sedge. Perhaps he took the curious shape for a post or a stump. In any case, it seemed to offer an alluring place of rest, where he might pause for a moment and flaunt his glowing wings in the sun before dancing onward to the honey blossoms. He flickered nearer. To him those unwinking jewels of eyes had no menace. He hovered an instant about two feet above them.

In that instant, like a flash of light, the long pale neck and straight yellow beak shot out, and the butterfly was impaled. Twisting his head shoreward, without shifting his feet, the heron struck the glowing velvet wings of the insect sharply on the sand. Then having swallowed the morsel leisurely, he drew his head down again between his shoulders and resumed his moveless waiting.

The next matter of interest to come within the vision of those inscrutable eyes was a dragon-fly chase. Hurling low over the sedge tops, and flashing in the sunlight like a lace-pin of rubies, came a small rose-coloured dragon-fly, fleeing for its life before a monster of its species, which blazed in emerald and amethyst. The chase could have but one ending; for the giant had the speed as well as the voracious hunger. The glistening films of his wings rustled crisply as he overtook the shining fugitive and caught its slender body in his jaws. The silver wings of the victim vibrated wildly. The chase came to a hovering pause just before the immobile shape on the point of the sandspit. Again the long yellow beak darted forth. And the radiant flies, captive and captor together, disappeared.

BUT such flimsy fare as even the biggest of butterflies and dragon-flies was not contenting to the sharp appetite of the heron. He took one stiff-legged stride forward, and stood in about six inches of water. Here he settled himself in a somewhat altered position, his back more awkwardly hunched, his head held lower, and his dagger of a bill pointing downward. His wicked golden eyes were not indifferent to the possibilities of the air above him; but they were now concerning themselves more particularly with the water that flowed about his feet.

Across this darted a shadow. The heron's beak

shot downward with an almost inaudible splash, transfixing the shadow, and emerged with a glittering green and silver perch, perhaps five inches in length. The quivering body of the fish had its knife-edged gills wide open, and every spine of its formidable armed fins threateningly erect. But the triumphant fisherman strode ashore with it and proceeded to hammer it into unconsciousness on the hard sand. Then, tossing it in the air, he caught it again, adroitly, by the head, and swallowed it head first, thus effectually disarming every weapon of fin and gill cover. The progress of this substantial mouthful could be traced clearly down the bird's slim length of gullet, accompanied as it was by several seconds of contortions so violent that they made the round yellow eyes wink gravely.

A LITTLE after, on the smooth surface of the smaller stream, some fifty feet up channel, a tiny ripple appeared. Swiftly it drew near. It was pointed, and with a long fine curve of oily ripple trailing back from it on each side, like the outline of a comet's tail. As it approached, in the apex of the parabola could be seen a minute black nose, with two bright dark little eyes just behind it. It was a small water rat, voyaging adventurously out from its narrow inland haunts among the lilies.

The great heron eyed its approach. To the swimmer, no doubt, the blue-grey immobile shape at the extremity of the sandspit looked like some weather-beaten post, placed there by man for his inexplicable convenience in regard to hitching boats; but presently something strange in the shape of the post seemed to strike the little voyager's attention. He stopped. Perhaps he saw the menacing glitter of that yellow unwinking stare. After a moment of wavering irresolution he changed his course, swam straight across channel, scrambled out upon the wet mud of the farther shore, and vanished among the pale rootstalks of the sedge.

The heron was savage with disappointment; but no slightest movement betrayed his anger, save that the pinkish film of the lower lid blinked up once, as it were with a snap, over each implacable eye. His time would come—which faith is that which supports all those who know how to wait. He peered up stream for the coming of another and less wary water rat.

INSTEAD of the expected ripple, however, he now caught sight of a shadow, which flickered across the surface of the water and in an instant had vanished over the pale sea of grass-tops. He looked up. In the blue above hung poised, his journeying flight just at that moment arrested, a wide winged duck hawk, boldest marauder of the air. The heron threw his head far back, till his beak pointed straight skyward. At the same time he half lifted his strong wings, poising himself to deliver a thrust with all the strength that was in him.

On the instant the hawk dropped like a wedge of steel out of the sky, his rigid half closed pinions hissing with the speed of his descent. The heron never flinched. But within ten feet of him the hawk, having no mind to impale himself on that waiting spearpoint, opened his wings, swerved upward, and went past with a harsh hum of wing feathers. Wheeling again, almost instantly, he swooped back to the attack, buffeting the air just above the heron's head, but taking care not to come within range of the deadly beak. The heron refused to be drawn from his position of effective defense and made no movement except to keep the point of his lance ever toward the foe.

And presently the hawk, seeing the futility of his assaults, winged off sullenly to hunt for some unwary duck or gosling.

AS he went the heron stretched himself to his full gaunt height and stared after him in triumph. Then, turning his head slowly, he scanned the whole expanse of windless grass and sunlit water. One sight fixed his attention. Far up the windings of the lesser stream he marked a man in a boat. The man was not rowing, but sitting in the stern and propelling the boat noiselessly with an Indian paddle. From time to time he halted and examined

the shore minutely. Once in a while, after such examination, he would get out, kneel down, and be occupied for several minutes among the weeds of the shallows along the stream's edge. He was looking at the muskrat holes in the bank, and setting traps before those which showed signs of present occupancy.

The heron watched the process, unstirring as a dead stump, till he thought the man was coming too near. Then, spreading a vast dark pair of wings, he rose indignantly and flapped heavily away up river, trailing his length of black legs just over the sedge tops.

Not far above the mouth of the stream the man set the last of his muskrat traps. Then he paddled back leisurely by the way he had come, his dingy yellow straw hat appearing to sail close over the grass as the boat followed the windings of the stream. When the yellow hat had at length been swallowed up in the violet haze along the base of the uplands, the great blue heron reappeared, winging low along the river shore. Arriving at the sandspit, he dropped his feet to the shallow water, closed his wings and settled abruptly into a rigid pose of watching, with his neck outstretched and his head held high in the air.

THE most searching scrutiny revealed nothing in all the tranquil summer landscape to disturb him. Nevertheless, he seemed to have become dissatisfied with his sentry post on the tip of the sandspit. Instead of settling down to watch for what might come to him, he decided to go and look for what he wanted. With long, ungainly, precise, but absolutely noiseless strides, he took his slow way up along the shore of the little river, walking on the narrow margin of mud between the grass roots and the water. As he went, his long neck undulated sinuously at each stride, his head was held low, and his eyes glared under every drooping leaf. The river margin, both in the water and out of it, was populous with insect life, and the darting bill took toll of it at every step.

But the most important game was frogs. There were plenty of them, small, greenish ochre fellows, who sat on the lily leaves and stared with foolish goggle eyes till that stalking blue doom was almost upon them. Then they would dive head foremost into the water, quick almost as the fleeting of a shadow. But quicker still was the stroke of the yellow beak—and the captive, tossed cleverly in the air, would vanish down his captor's insatiable throat.

This was better hunting than he had had on the sandspit, and he followed it up with great satisfaction. He even had the triumph of spearing a small water rat which had darted out of the grass roots just as he came by. The little beast was tenacious of life, and had to be well hammered on the mud before it would consent to lie still enough to be swallowed comfortably. This pleasant task, however, was presently accomplished, and the great bird, as he stretched his head upward to give his neck that final hitch which drove the big mouthful home, took a careless step backward into the shallow water.

THERE was a small sinister sound, and something closed relentlessly on his leg. He had stepped into a steel trap!

Stung by the sharp pain, astounded by the strangeness of the attack, and panic stricken, as all wild creatures are by the sudden forfeit of their freedom, the great bird lost all his dignified self-possession. First he nearly broke his beak with mad jabs at the inexplicable horror that had clutched him. Then with a hoarse squawk of terror, he went quite wild. His huge wings flapped frantically, beating down the sedges and the blossoms of the arrow weed, as he struggled to wrench himself free. He did succeed in lifting the trap above water; but it was securely anchored, and, after a minute or two of insane convulsive effort, it dragged him down again. Again and again he lifted it; again and yet again it dragged him down inexorably.

And so the blind battle went on, with splashing of water and heavy buffeting of wings, till at last the bird fell back utterly beaten. In the last bout