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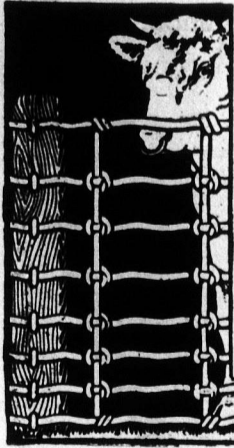
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derstood the peculiarities of porcupines. Just in time she noted his danger, and rudely butted him aside. He turned upon her in a fume of amazed indignation; but in some way she made him understand that the porcupine was above all law, and not to be trifled with even by the lords of the wilderness. Very sulkily he lay down again, and the porcupine went on chiseling hemlock bark, serenely unconscious of the anger in the inscrutable yellow eyes that watched him from the ram's black face.



"Everything took on a palpitating aerial strain."

When the shadows grew long and luminous, toward evening, the ram, following some unexplained instinct, again mounted the topmost point of Ringwaak, and stood like a statue gazing over the vast, warm-colored solitude of his new domain. His yellow eyes were placid with a great content. A little below him, the white lamb wobbling on weak legs at her side, the ewe pastured confidently, secure in the proved prowess of her protector. As the sun dropped below the far-off western rim of the forest, it seemed as if one wide wave of lucent rose-violet on a sudden flooded the world. Everything on Ringwaak—the ram's white fleece, the gray, bleached stumps, the brown hillocks, the green hollows and juniper clumps and poplar saplings,—took on a palpitating aerial strain. Here and there in the distance the coils of the river gleamed clear gold; and overhead, in the hollow amber-and-lilac arch of sky, the high-wandering night-hawks swooped with the sweet twang of smitten strings.

Down at the foot of the northern slope of Ringwaak lay a dense cedar swamp. Presently, out from the green fringe of the cedars, a bear thrust his head and cast a crafty glance about the open. Seeing the ram on the hilltop and the ewe with her lamb feeding near by, he sank back noiselessly into the cover of the cedars, and stole around toward the darkening eastern slope, where a succession of shrubby cepses ran nearly to the top of the hill.

The bear was lank, rusty-coated, old, and hungry, and he loved sheep. He

was an adept in stalking this sweet-fleshed, timorous quarry, and breaking its neck with a well-directed blow as it dashed past him in a panic. Emerging from the swamp he crept up the hill, taking cunning advantage of every bush, stump, and bowlder. For all his awkward-looking bulk he moved as lightly as a cat, making himself small, and twisting and flattening and effacing himself; and never a twig was allowed to snap, or a stone to clatter, under his broad, unerring feet.

About this time it chanced that the backwoods man, who had been out all day hunting for his lost prize, approached the edge of the forest at the other side of Ringwaak,—and saw the figure of the ram against the sky. Then, seeing also the ewe with the lamb beside her, he knew that the game was his.

Below the top of the hill there was not a scrap of cover for a distance, perhaps, twenty paces. The bear crept to the very last bush, the ram being occupied with the world at a distance and the ewe busy at her pasturing. Behind the bush—the a thick spreading juniper—bear crouched motionless, for some seconds, his little red eyes aglow, and his jaws beginning to savor with eagerness. Then, selecting the unconscious ewe because he knew she was not likely to desert the lamb, he rushed upon his intended victim.

The ewe, as it chanced, was about thirty-five or forty feet distant from the enemy, as he lunged out, black and appalling, from behind the juniper. At the same time the ram was not more than twenty or twenty-five feet distant, straight above the lamb, in a direction at right angles to the path of the bear. The ewe looked up with a startled bleat, wheeled, sprang nimbly before the lamb, and faced her doom dauntlessly, with lowered head.

The ram's mild gaze changed in a flash to one of cold, yellow savagery at the sight of the great black beast invading his kingdom. Down went his conquering head. For just a fraction of a second his sturdy body sagged back, as if he were about to sit down. This, so to speak was the bending of the bow. Then he launched himself straight down the slope, all his strength, his weight, and the force of gravity combining to drive home that mighty stroke.

The bear had never, in all his experience with sheep, encountered one whose resistance was worth taking into account. The defiance of the ewe was less than nothing to him. But as he saw, from the corner of his eye, the huge bulk plunging down upon him, he hesitated, and half turned, with a great paw upraised for a finishing blow.

He turned not quite in time, however,—and his defence was not quite strenuous enough for the emergency. He struck like lightning, as a bear always can, but just before the stroke could find its mark, the ram's armed forehead crashed into his ribs.

The blow, catching him as it did, was irresistible. His claws tore off a patch of wool and skin, and ploughed red furrows across the ram's shoulder,—but the next instant he was sprawling, his breath jarred from his lungs, against a stump some ten feet down the slope.

As the bear struggled to his feet, furious but half daunted with amazement, the ram danced backward a pace or two on his dainty feet, as if showing off, and then delivered his second charge. The bewildered bear was again



"In a few moments the little procession disappeared in the woods."

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