

The Invaders: By CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

A Tale of Two Dramatic Conflicts Among Dwellers in the Wild

THE lake was set in the high barrens. Its wide surface, as smooth as glass under the unobstructed sunset, was of an intense yet faintly smoky orange, shading into green in the deep, reflected zenith. Its far-off western shore-line, fringed with a low growth of firs, was toothed and black against the sky. The eastern shore, but vaguely to be marked in the lone, pervasive glow, was flat and naked except for a thicket of willow and poplar about the mouth of an inflowing stream. The flooding, tranquil colour, the low remoteness of the encircling horizon rim, the apparent convexity of the lake surface—which seemed to bosom upwards toward the impending dome of air—agreed together in an unutterable beauty of desolation.

Presently a black speck—no, two black specks—appeared upon the sheen of the perfect mirror, detaching themselves from the dark edge of the western shore. Pushing out swiftly across the radiance, side by side, they broke it with long, smooth, diverging ripples, which gleamed changefully behind them as they drew their trail straight out toward the centre of the lake. Under the lonely glow the black specks revealed themselves as the heads of two swimming moose, a cow and a bull.

They swam completely submerged except for their dark, uncouth but splendid heads, their long, prehensile muzzles outstretched and cleaving the surface. The huge antlers of the bull, massive, and broadly palmated, lay back flat on the surface behind him, above the turmoil of his unseen, powerfully labouring shoulders. In the eyes of the pair there was a questioning fear, a certain wildness as of panic. It was a strange look for these tall lords of the wilderness to be wearing at this time of year, the height of the mating season—when the sullen eyes of the cows are wont to smoulder with desire, and the gigantic bulls front all creation arrogantly in their lust of love and battle. But the one terror that could daunt them had come upon them suddenly—the terror of the unknown.

The pair had been on the open strip of beach, between the fir-forest wherein they roamed and the water-side where they were accustomed to wallow and pull lily-roots, when the terror came upon them in full force, and drove them out across the orange mirror of the lake to seek refuge in the barrens of the farther shore. And neither knew what it was that they were fleeing from. For several days the cow had been uneasy, the bull angry and suspicious. The sense of some vague, uncomprehended peril, approaching but still impalpable, was in the air. From the wonder and fear and amazement of other and feebler kindreds of the wild, it had come by some obscure telepathy to trouble the nerves of the great, imperturbable moose.

But in the chill glory of this October sunset the mystery had come nearer, had grown more tangible without becoming any the less a mystery. As the cow stood alone by the water-side, calling her mate, she had felt oppressed with a dim apprehension that something other than her mate might come in response to the uncouth passion of her appeal. And her mate had come suddenly, watchfully, noiselessly, as if in half expectation of being intercepted or ambushed. His tall, black shape was at her side, like a shadow, while her first calls were yet hoarsely thrilling the stillness.

EVEN as they stood conferring with sensitive, intimate muzzles, a red buck had gone leaping by, manifestly terrified, yet with an air of irresolution curiously unlike the usual wholeheartedness of his flight. Their ardor was chilled for a moment by the impression of his inexplicable fear, and they stared after him apprehensively, as if the familiar sight of a running buck had suddenly become a portent.

The strange terror of the buck was hardly more than well forgotten when a fox emerged hastily from the bushes. Seeing the pair of moose absorbed in each other, and standing there black and conspicuous by the water-side, careless of what

eyes might mark them, he came stepping delicately down the beach and seated himself on his haunches not a dozen feet away. His shrewd eyes scanned them with intense inquiry, as if wondering if their careless confidence represented a strength under which he might shelter himself. At other times the lordly pair of lovers would have resented his intrusion and driven him off. But to-day they simply stared at him with anxious inquiry. The look in their eyes seemed to satisfy the fox that there was no help here to be relied upon. He looked uneasily over his shoulder toward the dark fringes of fir whence he had come, rose slowly to his feet, stepped past them superciliously, and went trotting on down the edge of the lake. Their keen eyes, following him closely, saw him lengthen out into the gallop of desperate flight the moment he reached the cover of an osier thicket. The sight of that sudden

of pale fire, which might be eyes. At last a breath of air, an exhalation of the forest so light as not even to stir the long fringes of hair pendant from the bull's throat, came to their distended nostrils. It was a scent unknown to them, but indescribably sinister. . . . Its menace daunted them. Indignant and appalled they backed down slowly, side by side, into the water, still keeping their eyes fixed upon the forest. Then, wheeling suddenly, they swam out into the orange radiance, straining toward the refuge of the far-off opposite shore.

THERE were eight gigantic wolves in the pack, and one much smaller and slenderer who seemed, none the less, to wield a certain influence over her fellows. The eight were such portentous figures as one would never expect to see in the eastern wilderness, being of the most formidable breed of Alaskan timber-wolf, long of jaw and flank, broad of skull, massive of shoulder, deep of chest, and each powerful enough to slash the throat of a caribou cow at one snap and to pull her down in her run. Yet, with one exception, they had never seen Alaska, or a running caribou, or the wild rivers rolling north, or the peaks of endless snow. They had been born south of the St. Lawrence, in the limited and half-tamed forests of northern Vermont; and they had come sweeping northeastward in the search for more spacious solitudes.

The establishing of so great and fierce a company in the ordered East had come about in this way. Some years earlier, at a village in northern Vermont, a splendid timber-wolf had made his escape from the caravan of a travelling menagerie. He had been hunted, with abundant hue and cry, for several days. But he was sagacious. He did not halt in his long, untiring gallop till he had put safe leagues between himself and his pursuers, and found a forest wild enough to hide in. He had hunted with wise discretion, deer and hare and other wild creatures only, and had strictly withheld himself from all quarry that he thought to be under the protection of man. Thanks to this prudence no man suspected his existence. After a while, meeting in the neighbourhood of a village a long-jawed, wolfish-looking bitch, a mongrel with husky and deer hound in her veins, he had easily seduced her away from her master and back to the wild life for which she had always had a dim craving. She had hunted beside him faithfully, and given him two litters—big-boned whelps which grew up as huge and savage as their sire, but far less sagacious than he, and of more evil temper, as is apt to be the case in such a cross. They obeyed their sire and leader, because they feared him and felt his dominance. And they had a respect for the virulent and sudden flame of their slim mother's wrath. But as time went on and wild game grew scarce, they could not be withheld from foraging near the villages, and so they presently drew to themselves the notice of men. When a few stray heifers had been done away with, and many sheep devoured, and several innocent dogs shot on suspicion, then the wise old leader pulled the pack sternly together and led it eastward.

THE eastward march was long and surrounded with many perils. Sometimes there was little game and the pack went long hungry. Sometimes it was hard to find wooded country to conceal their journeying; and sometimes forced to take toll of the flocks of some village, the settlers swarmed out after them with a tumult of dogs and guns and curses which by and by taught caution to the most turbulent of the whelps. Several carried shot-pellets under their hides to teach them that their leader's prudence had reason in it. And by the time they reached those wild regions of spruce forest, lakes, and tangled water-courses where the boundaries of Maine impinge on those of New Brunswick and Quebec, they had acquired discipline and caution. It was an invasion formidable beyond anything the native wild had conceived in its worst dreams, that now swept on through the high soli-



"Unprepared for this novel defence, the leader caught the pile-driver blow full in the face."

desperation, in a beast so wise as the fox, unnerved them in spite of themselves. They had seen many foxes, but never before a fox who acted so peculiarly. What had he wanted of them? Why had he so searchingly looked them over? And then why had he fled? They shivered, drew closer together, wheeled their dark bulks about till their sterns were toward the shining water, and stared intensely into the dense mass of the forest where the fox had gazed so curiously. Those somber masses of spruce and fir were their home, their secure and familiar covert—but now they questioned them, distrusted them. What treachery could the silent shades be preparing?

The eyes of the moose, though keen, discovered nothing. But presently their big ears, thrust forward and rigid with interrogation, caught the ghost of a sound across the immense silence. It might almost be the padding of many feet. Then here and there, from the depths of certain spots of blacker shadow, flashed a greenish gleam—points