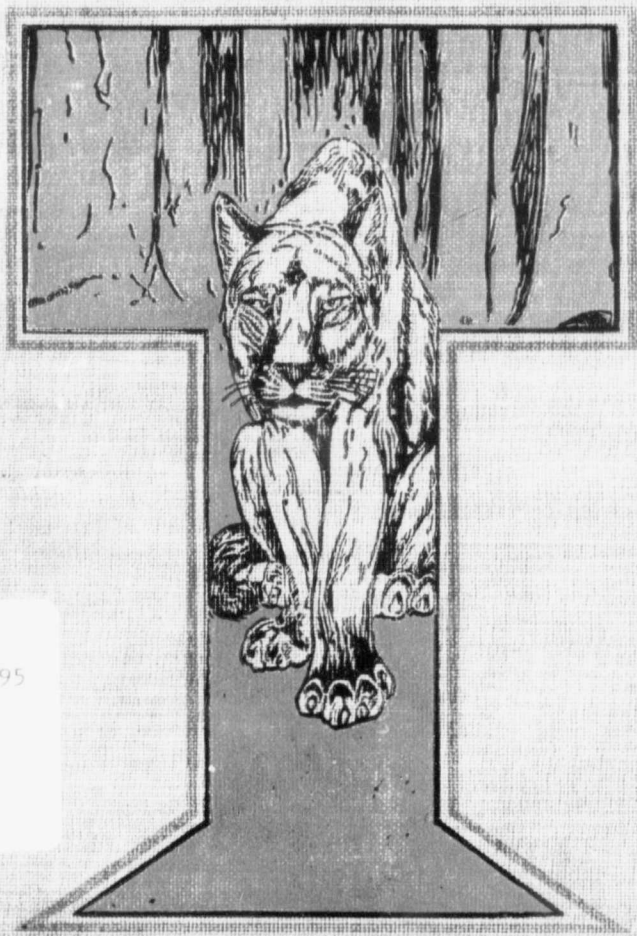


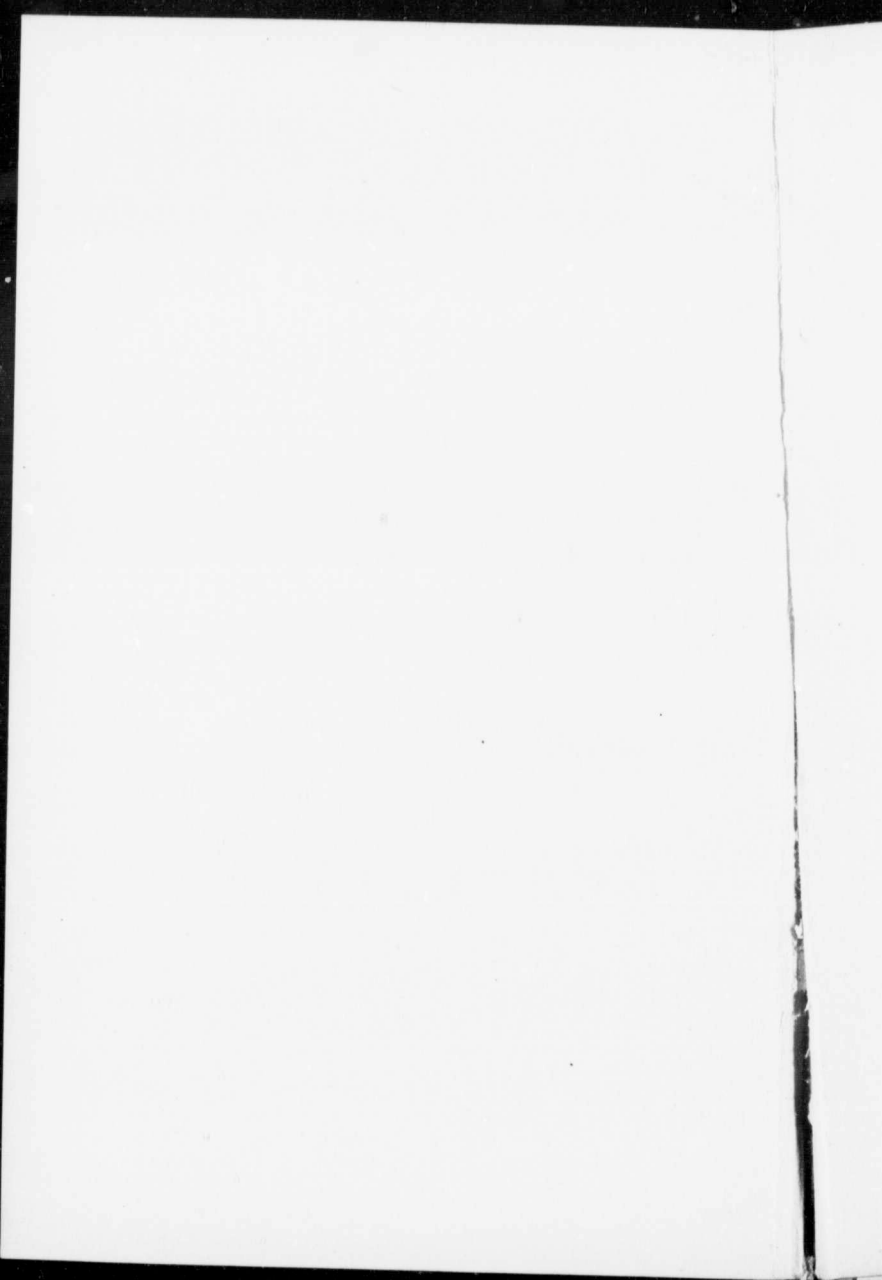
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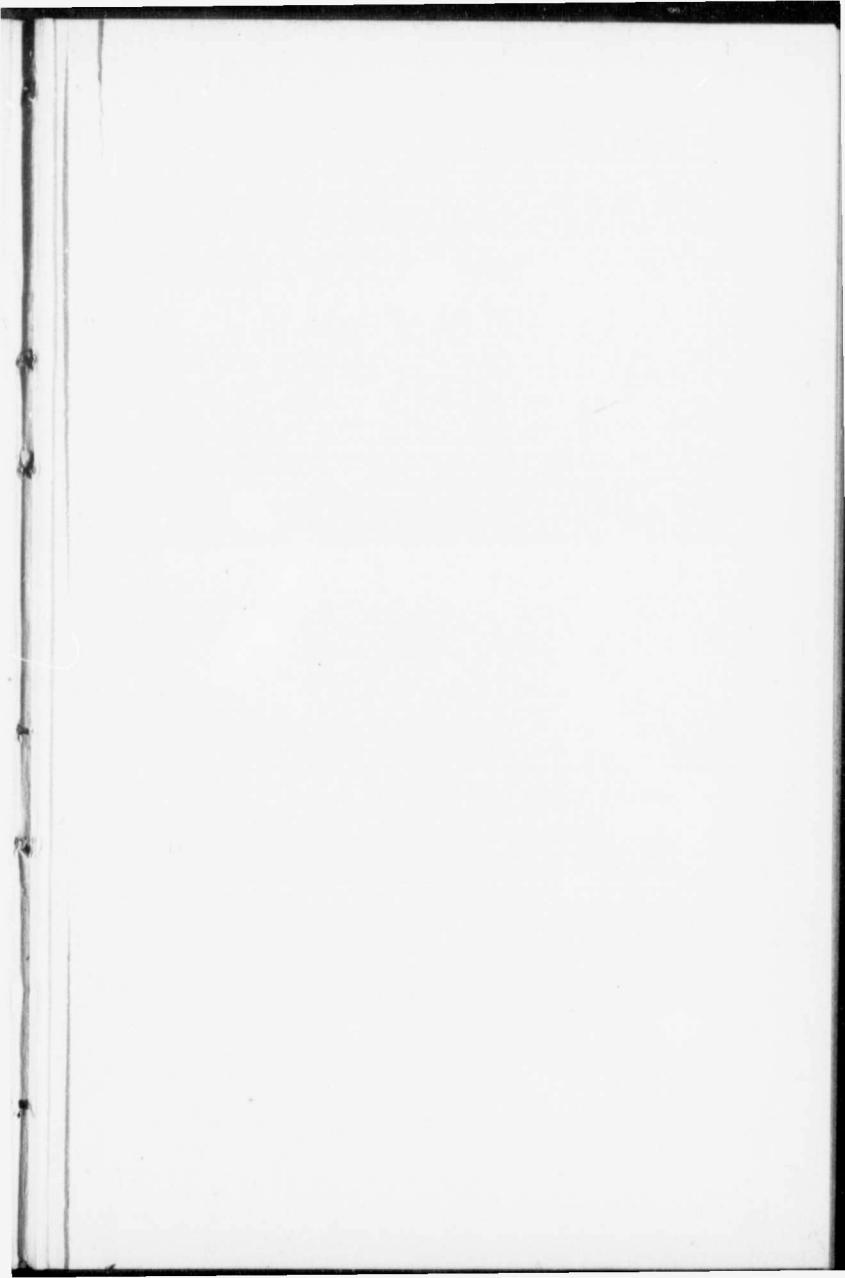
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THE
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OF THE
CAMP FIRE



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The Watchers of the Camp-Fire

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CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

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THE
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OF THE
LOW TIDE



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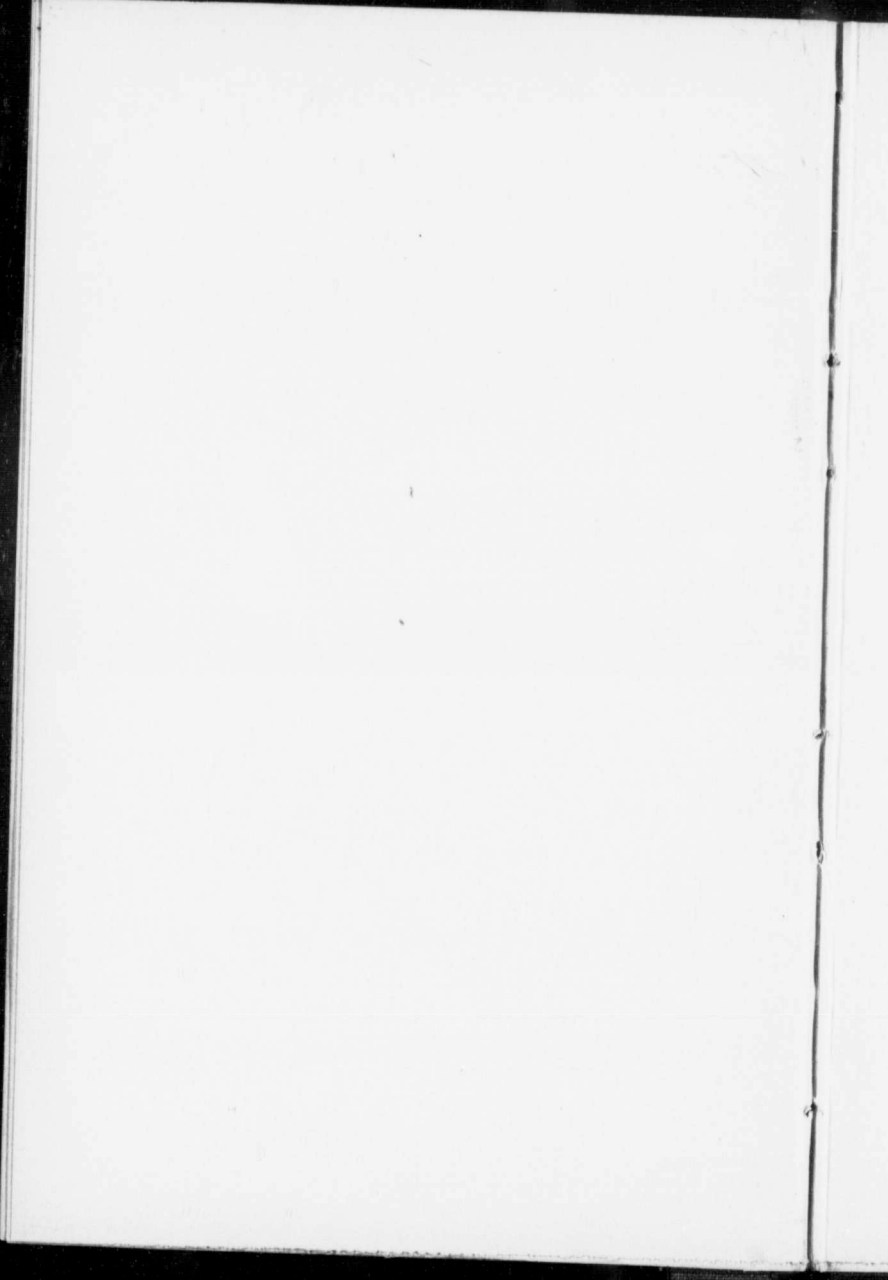
The Watchers of the Camp-Fire

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THE WATCHERS OF THE CAMP-FIRE



I.

FOR five years the big panther, who ruled the ragged plateau around the head waters of the Upsalquitch, had been well content with his hunting-ground. This winter, however, it had failed him. His tawny sides were lank with hunger. Rabbits — and none too many of them — were but thin and spiritless meat for such fiery blood as his. His mighty and restless muscles consumed too swiftly the unsatisfying food; and he was compelled to hunt continually, foregoing the long, recuperative sleeps which the tense

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springs of his organism required. Every fibre in his body was hungering for a full meal of red-blooded meat, the sustaining flesh of deer or caribou. The deer, of course, he did not expect on these high plains and rough hills of the Upsalquitch. They loved the well-wooded ridges of the sheltered, low-lying lands. But the caribou,—for five years their wandering herds had thronged these plains, where the mosses they loved grew luxuriantly,—without warning or excuse, had vanished.

The big panther knew the caribou. He knew that, with no reason other than their own caprice, the restless gray herds would drift away, forsaking the most congenial pastures, journey swiftly and eagerly league upon inconsequent league, and at last rest seemingly content with more perilous ranges and scanter forage, in a region remote and new,

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He was an old beast, ripe in the craft of the hunt; and the caribou had done just what he knew in his heart they were likely to do. Nevertheless, because the head waters of the Upsalquitch were much to his liking,—the best hunting-ground, indeed, that he had ever found,—he had hoped for a miracle; he had grown to expect that these caribou would stay where they were well off. Their herds had thriven and increased during the five years of his guardianship. He had killed only for his needs, never for the lust of killing. He had kept all four-foot poachers far from his preserves; and no hunters cared to push their way to the inaccessible Upsalquitch while game was abundant on the Tobique and the Miramichi. He knew all these wilderness waters of northern New Brunswick, having been born not far from the sources of the Nashwaak, and

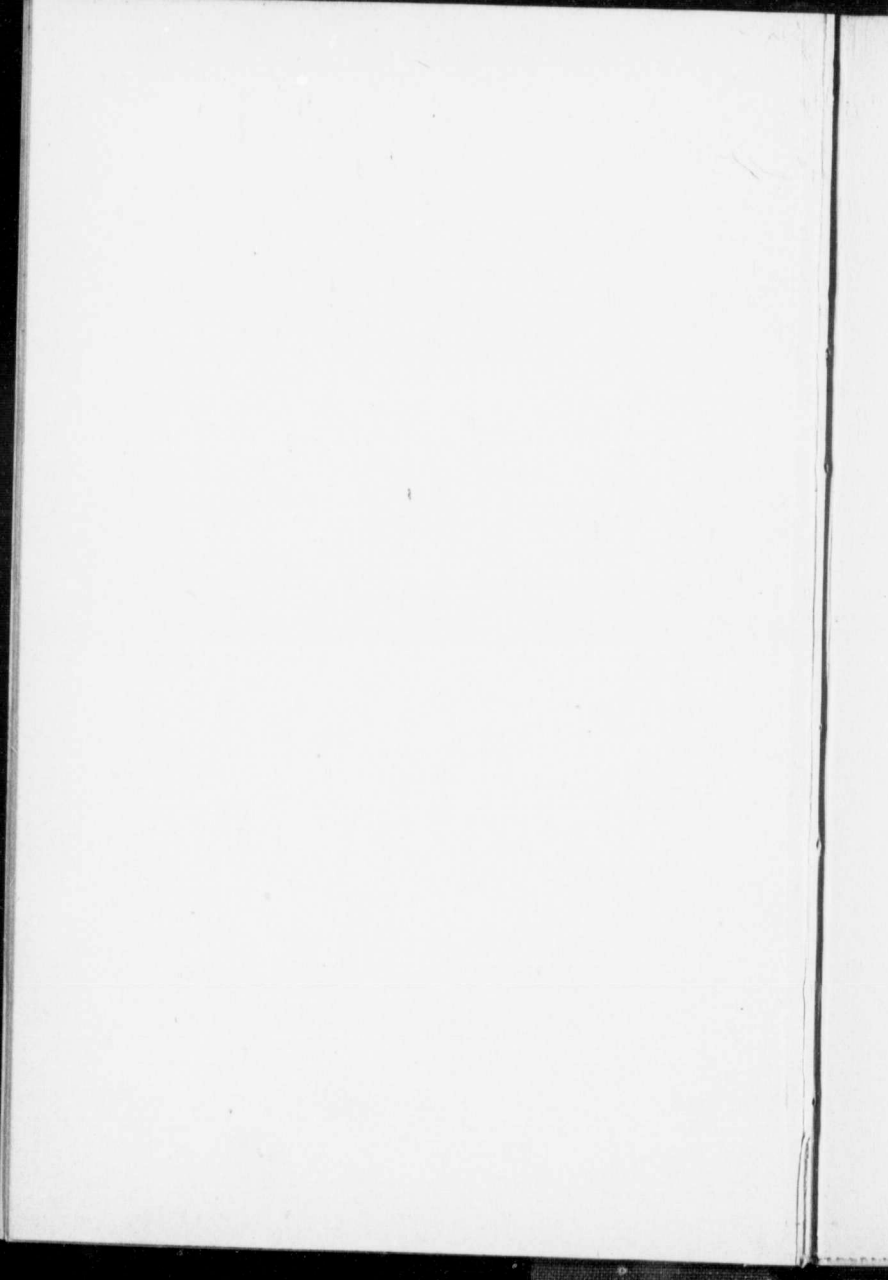
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worked his way northward as soon as he was full-grown, to escape the hated neighbourhood of the settlements. He knew that his vanished caribou would find no other pastures so rich and safe as these which they had left. Nevertheless, they had left them. And now, after a month of rabbit meat, he would forsake them, too. He would move down westward, and either come upon the trail of his lost herds, or push over nearer to the St. John valley and find a country of deer.

The big panther was no lover of long journeyings, and he did not travel with the air of one bent on going far. He lingered much to hunt rabbits on the way; and wherever he found a lair to his liking he settled himself as if for a long sojourn. Nevertheless he had no idea of halting until he should reach a land of deer or caribou, and his steady drift to westward carried him far in the



"HIS BIG, SPREADING PAWS CARRIED HIM OVER ITS SURFACE AS IF HE HAD BEEN SHOD WITH
SNOW-SHOES."



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course of a week. The snow, though deep, was well packed by a succession of driving winds, and his big spreading paws carried him over its surface as if he had been shod with snow-shoes.

By the end of a week, however, the continuous travelling on the unsubstantial diet of rabbit meat had begun to tell upon him. He was hungry and unsatisfied all the time, and his temper became abominable. Now and then in the night he was fortunate enough to surprise a red squirrel asleep in its nest, or a grouse rooting in its thicket; but these were mere atoms to his craving, and moreover their flesh belonged to the same pale order as that of his despised rabbits. When he came to a beaver village, the rounded domes of the houses dotting the snowy level of their pond, a faint steam of warmth and moisture arising from their ventilating holes like smoke,

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he sometimes so far forgot himself as to waste a few minutes in futile clawing at the roofs, though he knew well enough that several feet of mud, frozen to the solidity of rock, protected the savoury flat-tails from his appetite.

Once, in a deep, sheltered river-valley, where a strong rapid and a narrow deep cascade kept open a black pool of water all through the winter frost, his luck and his wits working together gained him a luncheon of fat porcupine. Tempted from its den by the unwonted warmth of noonday, the porcupine had crawled out upon a limb to observe how the winter was passing, and to sniff for signs of spring in the air. At the sight of the panther, who had climbed the tree and cut off its retreat, it bristled its black and white quills, whirled about on its branch, and eyed its foe with more anger than terror, confident in its pointed spines.

WATCHERS OF CAMP-FIRE 17

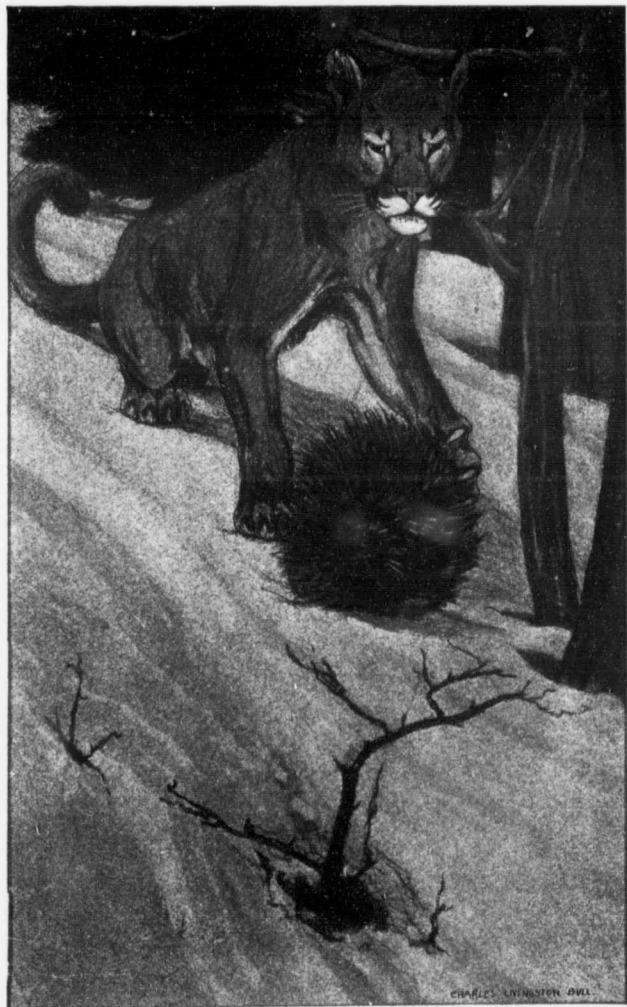
The panther understood and respected that fine array of needle-points, and ordinarily would have gone his way hungry rather than risk the peril of getting his paws and nose stuck full of those barbed weapons. But just now his cunning was very keenly on edge. He crawled within striking distance of the porcupine, and reached out his great paw, gingerly enough, to clutch the latter's unprotected face. Instantly the porcupine rolled itself into a bristling ball of needle-points and dropped to the ground below.

The panther followed at a single bound; but there was no need whatever of hurry. The porcupine lay on the snow, safely coiled up within its citadel of quills; and the panther lay down beside it, waiting for it to unroll. But after half an hour of this vain waiting, patience gave out and he began experimenting. Extending his claws to the

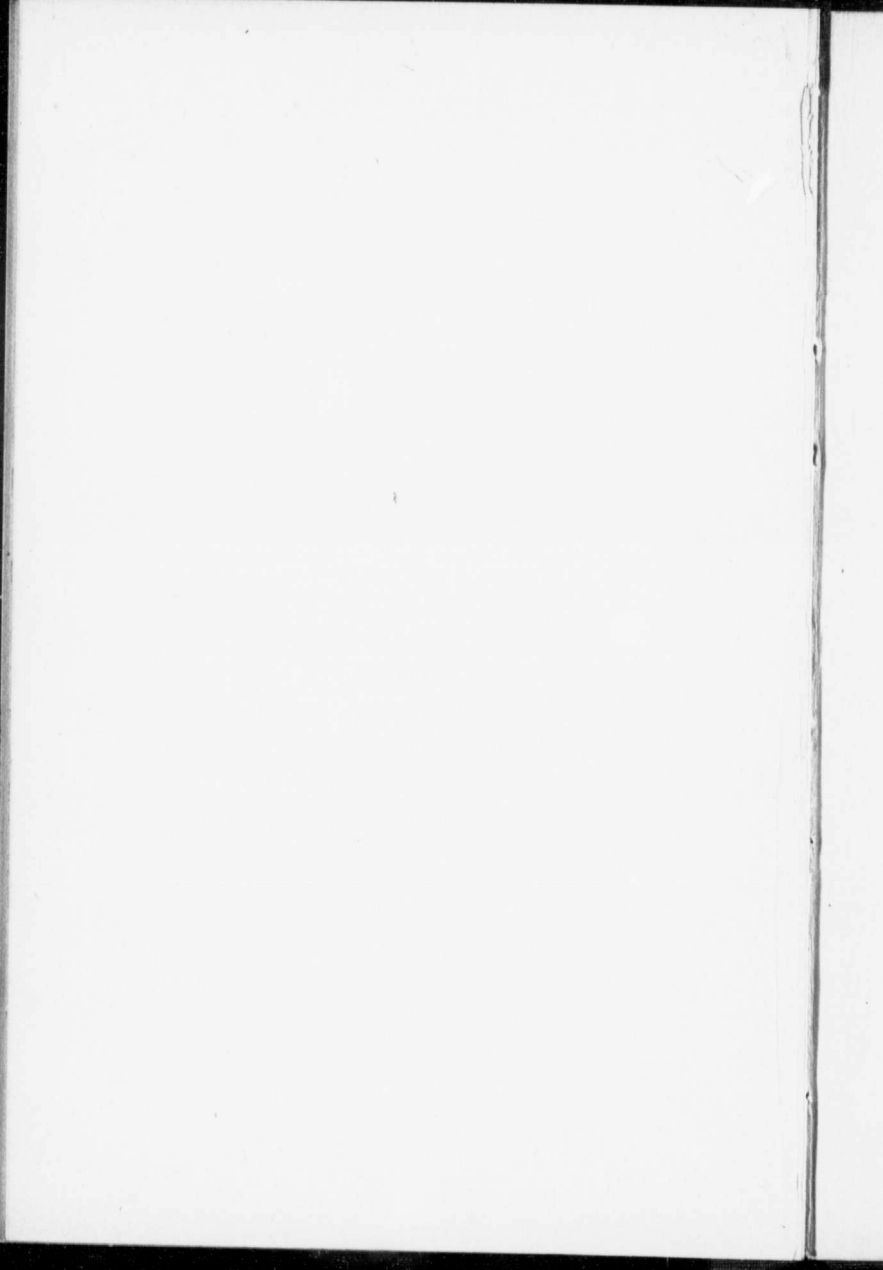
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utmost, so that the quill-points should not come in contact with the fleshy pads of his foot, he softly turned the porcupine over. Now it chanced that the hard, glassy snow whereon it lay sloped toward the open pool, and the bristling ball moved several feet down the slope. The panther's pale eyes gleamed with a sudden thought. He pushed the ball again, very, very delicately. Again, and yet again; till, suddenly, reaching a spot where the slope was steeper, it rolled of its own accord, and dropped with a splash into the icy current.

As it came to the surface the porcupine straightened itself out to swim for the opposite shore. But like a flash the panther's paw scooped under it, and the long keen claws caught it in the unshielded belly. Unavailing now were those myriad bristling spear-points; and when the panther continued his journey



"HE PUSHED THE BALL AGAIN, VERY, VERY DELICATELY."



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he left behind him but a skin of quills and some blood-stains on the snow, to tell the envious lucifees that one had passed that way who knew how to out-wit the porcupine.

On the following day, about noon, he came across an astonishing and incomprehensible trail, at the first sight and scent of which the hair rose along his backbone.

The scent of the strange trail he knew, — and hated it, and feared it. It was the man-scent. But the shape and size of the tracks at first appalled him. He had seen men, and the footprints of men; but never men with feet so vast as these. The trail was perhaps an hour old. He sniffed at it and puzzled over it for a time; and then, perceiving that the man-scent clung only in a little depression about the centre of each track, concluded that the man who had made the track

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was no bigger than such men as he had seen. The rest of the trail was a puzzle, indeed, but it presently ceased to appal. Thereupon he changed his direction, and followed the man's trail at a rapid pace. His courage was not strung up to the pitch of resolving to attack this most dangerous and most dreaded of all creatures; but his hunger urged him insistently, and he hoped for some lucky chance of catching the man at a disadvantage. Moreover, it would soon be night, and he knew that with darkness his courage would increase, while that of the man — a creature who could not see well in the dark — should by all the laws of the wilderness diminish. He licked his lean chops at the thought of what would happen to the man unawares.

For some time he followed the trail at a shambling lope, every now and then dropping into an easy trot for the ease-

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ment of the change. Occasionally he would stop and lie down for a few minutes at full length, to rest his overdriven lungs, being short-winded after the fashion of his kind. But toward sundown, when the shadows began to lengthen and turn blue upon the snow, and the western sky, through the spruce-tops, took upon a bitter wintry orange dye, he noticed that the trail was growing fresher. So strong did the man-scent become that he expected every moment to catch a glimpse of the man through the thicket. Thereupon he grew very cautious. No longer would he either lope or trot; but he crept forward, belly to the ground, setting down each paw with delicacy and precaution. He kept turning the yellow flame of his eyes from side to side continually, searching the undergrowth on every hand, and often looking back

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along his own track. He knew that men were sometimes inconceivably stupid, but at other times cunning beyond all the craft of the wood folk. He was not going to let himself become the hunted instead of the hunter, caught in the old device of the doubled trail.

At last, as twilight was gathering headway among the thickets, he was startled by a succession of sharp sounds just ahead of him. He stopped, and crouched motionless in his tracks. But presently he recognised and understood the sharp sounds, especially when they were followed by a crackling and snapping of dry branches. They were axe-strokes. He had heard them in the neighbourhood of the lumber camps, before his five years' retirement on the head waters of the Upsalquitch. With comprehension came new courage,—for the wild folk put human wisdom to shame in

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their judicious fear of what they do not understand. He crept a little nearer, and from safe hiding watched the man at his task of gathering dry firewood for the night. From time to time the man looked about him alertly, half suspiciously, as if he felt himself watched; but he could not discover the pale, cruel eyes that followed him unwinking from the depths of the hemlock thicket.

In a few minutes the panther was surprised to see the man take one of his heavy snow-shoes and begin digging vigorously at the snow. In a little while there was a circular hole dug so deep that when the man stood up in it little more than his head and shoulders appeared over the edge. Then he carried in a portion of the wood which he had cut, together with a big armful of spruce boughs; and he busied himself for awhile at the bottom of the hole, his

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head appearing now and then, but only for a moment. The panther was filled with curiosity, but restrained himself from drawing nearer to investigate. Then, when it had grown so dark that he was about to steal from his hiding and creep closer, suddenly there was a flash of light, and smoke and flame arose from the hole, throwing a red, revealing glare on every covert; and the panther, his lips twitching and his hair rising, shrank closer into his retreat.

The smoke, and the scent of the burning sticks, killed the scent of the man in the panther's nostrils. But presently there was a new scent, warm, rich, and appetising. The panther did not know it, but he liked it. It was the smell of frying bacon. Seeing that the man was much occupied over the fire, the hungry beast made a partial circuit of the camp-fire, and noiselessly climbed a tree

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whence he could look down into the mysterious hole.

From this post of vantage he watched the man make his meal, smoke his pipe, replenish the fire, and finally, rolling himself in his heavy blanket, compose himself to sleep. Then, little by little, the panther crept nearer. He feared the fire; but the fire soon began to die down, and he despised it as he saw it fading. He crept out upon a massive hemlock limb, almost overlooking the hole, but screened by a veil of fine green branches. From this post he could spring upon the sleeper at one bound, — as soon as he could make up his mind to the audacious enterprise. He feared the man, even asleep; in fact, he stood in strange awe of the helpless, slumbering form. But little by little he began to realise that he feared his own hunger more. Lower and lower sank

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the fainting fire; and he resolved that as soon as the sleeper should stir in his sleep, beginning to awake, he would spring. But the sleeper slept unstirring; and so the panther, equally unstirring, watched.

II.

A LITTLE beyond the camp-fire where the man lay sleeping under those sinister eyes, rose the slopes of a wooded ridge. The ridge was covered with a luxuriant second growth of birch, maple, Canada fir, moose-wood, and white spruce, the ancient forest having fallen years before under the axes of the lumbermen. Here on the ridge, where the food they loved was abundant, a buck, with his herd of does and fawns, had established his winter "yard." With their sharp, slim hoofs which cut deep into the snow, if the deer were compelled to seek their food at large they would find themselves at the mercy of every foe as soon as the snow lay deep enough to impede their

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running. It is their custom, therefore, at the beginning of winter, to select a locality where the food supply will not fail them, and intersect the surface of the snow in every direction with an inextricable labyrinth of paths. These paths are kept well trodden, whatever snow may fall. If straightened out they would reach for many a league. To unravel their intricacies is a task to which only the memories of their makers are equal, and along them the deer flee like wraiths at any alarm. If close pressed by an enemy they will leap, light as birds, from one deep path to another, leaving no mark on the intervening barrier of snow, and breaking the trail effectually. Thus when the snow lies deep, the yard becomes their spacious citadel, and the despair of pursuing lynx or panther. A herd of deer well yarded, under the leadership of an

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old and crafty buck, will come safe and sleek through the fiercest wilderness winter.

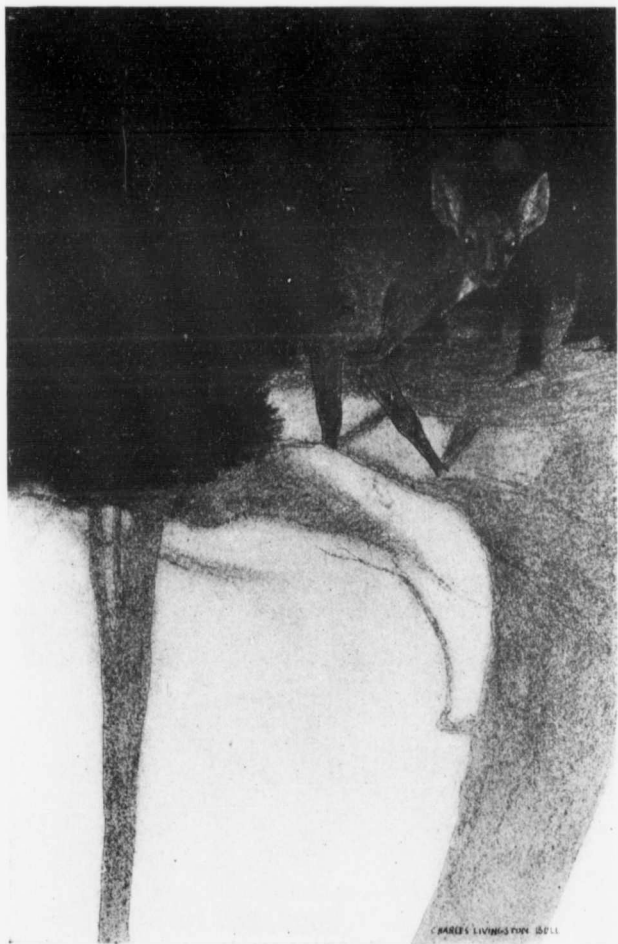
The little herd which occupied this particular yard chanced to be feeding, in the glimmer of the winter twilight, very near the foot of the ridge, when suddenly a faint red glow, stealing through the branches, caught the old buck's eye. There was a quick stamp of warning, and on the instant the herd turned to statues, their faces all one way, their sensitive ears, vibrating nostrils, and wide attentive eyes all striving to interpret the prodigy. They were a herd of the deep woods. Not one of them had ever been near the settlements. Not even the wise old leader had ever seen a fire. This light, when the sun had set and no moon held the sky, was inexplicable.

But to the deer a mystery means

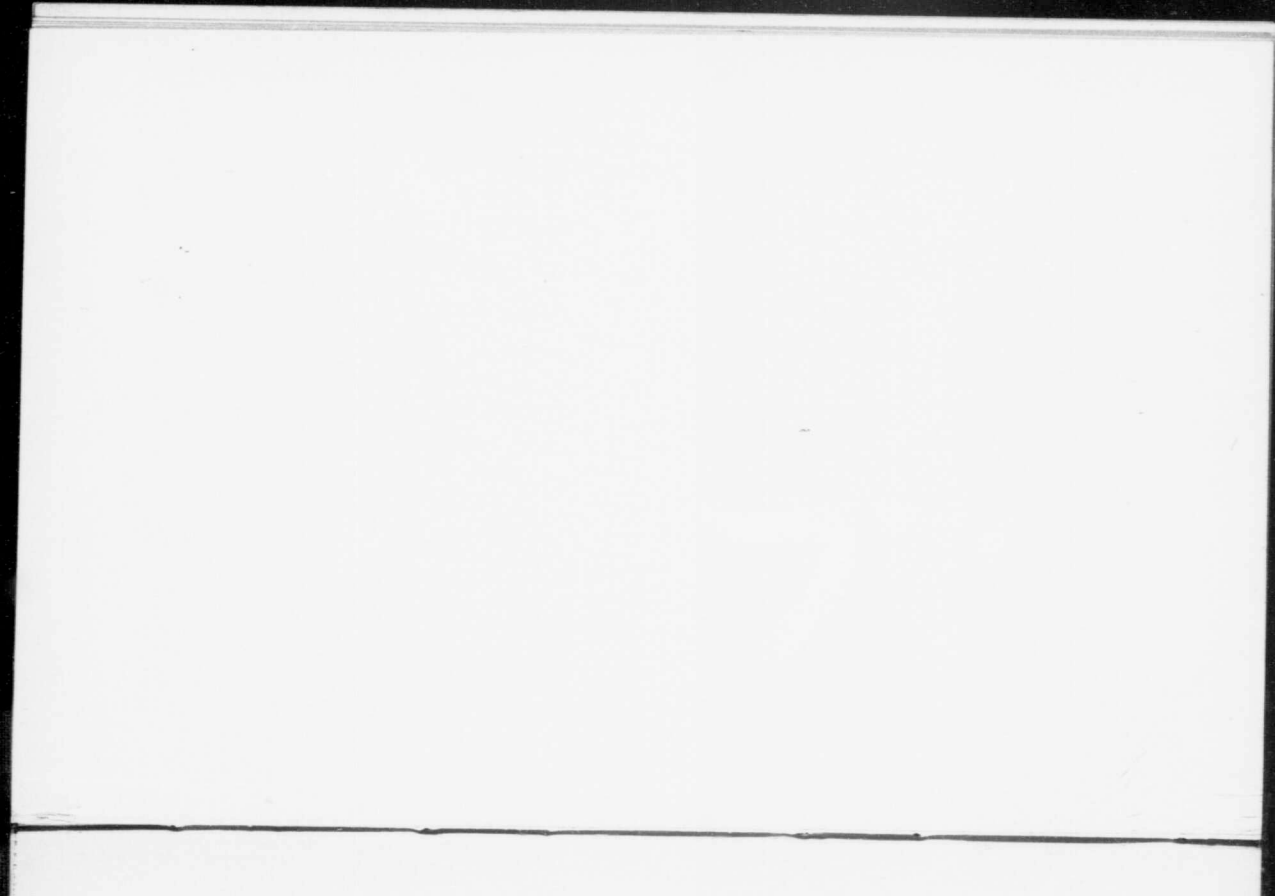
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something to be solved. He has the perilous gift of curiosity. After a few minutes of moveless watching, the whole herd, in single file, began noiselessly threading the lower windings of the maze, drawing nearer and nearer to the strange light. When the first smell of the burning came to their nostrils they stopped again, but not for long. That smell was just another mystery to be looked into. At the smell of the frying pork they stopped again, this time for a longer period and with symptoms of uneasiness. To their delicate nerves there was something of a menace in that forbidding odour. But even so, it was to be investigated; and very soon they resumed their wary advance.

A few moments more and they came to a spot where, peering through a cover of spruce boughs, their keen eyes could see the hole in the snow, the camp-fire,



"STOLE NOISELESSLY TOWARD THE SHINING LOVELY THING."



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and the man seated beside it smoking his pipe. It was all very wonderful; but instinct told them it was perilous, and the old buck decided that the information they had acquired was sufficient for all practical purposes of a deer's daily life. He would go no nearer. The whole herd stood there for a long time, forgetting to eat, absorbed in the novelty and wonder of the scene.

The whole herd, did I say? There was one exception. To a certain young doe that fire was the most fascinating thing in life. It drew her. It hypnotised her. After a few minutes of stillness she could resist no longer. She pushed past the leader of the herd and stole noiselessly toward the shining lovely thing. The old buck signalled her back,—first gently, then angrily; but she had grown forgetful of the laws of the herd. She had but one thought,

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to get nearer to the camp-fire, and drench her vision in the entrancing glow.

Nevertheless, for all her infatuation, she forgot not her ancestral gift of prudence. She went noiselessly as a shadow, drifting, pausing, listening, sniffing the air, concealing herself behind every cover. The rest of the herd gazed after her with great eyes of resignation, then left her to her wayward will and resumed their watching of the camp-fire. When one member of a herd persists in disobeying orders, the rest endure with equanimity whatever fate may befall her.

Step by step, as if treading on eggshells, the fascinated doe threaded the path till she came to the lowest limit of the yard. From that point the path swerved back up the ridge, forsaking the ruddy glow. The doe paused, hesitating. She was still too far from the object of

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her admiration and wonder; but she feared the deep snow. Her irresolution soon passed, however. Getting behind a thick hemlock, she cautiously raised herself over the barrier and made straight for the camp-fire.

Packed as the snow was, her light weight enabled her to traverse it without actually floundering. She sank deep at every step, but had perfect control of her motions, and made no more sound than if she had been a bunch of fur blown softly over the surface. Her absorption and curiosity, moreover, did not lead her to omit any proper precaution of woodcraft. As she approached the fire she kept always in the dense, confusing, shifting shadows which a camp-fire casts in the forest. These fitful shadows were a very effectual concealment.

At last she found herself so close to the fire that only a thicket of young

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spruce divided her from the edge of the hole.

Planting herself rigidly, her gray form an indeterminate shadow among the blotches and streaks of shadow, her wide mild eyes watched the man with intensest interest, as he knocked out his pipe, mended the fire, and rolled himself into his blanket on the spruce boughs. When she saw that he was asleep, she presently forgot about him. Her eyes returned to the fire and fixed themselves upon it. The veering, diminishing flames held her as by sorcery. All else was forgotten, — food, foes, and the herd alike, — as she stared with childlike eagerness at the bed of red coals. The pupils of her eyes kept alternately expanding and contracting, as the glow in the coals waxed and waned under the fluctuating breath of passing airs.

III.

VERY early that same morning, a brown and grizzled chopper in Nicholson's camp, having obtained a brief leave of absence from the Boss, had started out on his snow-shoes for a two days' tramp to the settlements. He had been seized the night before with a sudden and irresistible homesickness. Shrewd, whimsical, humourous, kind, ever ready to stand by a comrade, fearless in all the daunting emergencies which so often confront the lumbermen in their strenuous calling, these sudden attacks of homesickness were his one and well-known failing in the eyes of his fellows. At least once in every winter he was sure to be so seized; and equally sure to

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be so favoured by the Boss. On account of his popularity in the camp, moreover, this favour excited no jealousy. It had come to be taken as a matter of course that Mac would go home for a few days if one of his "spells" came upon him. He was always "docked," to be sure, for the time of his absence, but as he never stayed away more than a week, his little holiday made no very serious breach in his roll when pay-day came.

Though not a hunter, the man was a thorough woodsman. He knew the woods, and the furtive inhabitants of them; and he loved to study their ways. Trails, in particular, were a passion with him, and he could read the varying purposes of the wild things by the changes in their footprints on the snow. He was learned, too, in the occult ways of the otter, whom few indeed are cunning

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enough to observe; and he had even a rudimentary knowledge of the complex vocabulary of the crow. He had no care to kill the wild things, great or small; yet he was a famous marksman, with his keen gray eye and steady hand. And he always carried a rifle on his long, solitary tramps.

He had two good reasons for carrying the rifle. The first of these was the fact that he had never seen a panther, and went always in the hope of meeting one. The stories which he had heard of them, current in all the lumber camps of northern New Brunswick, were so conflicting that he could not but feel uncertain as to the terms on which the encounter was likely to take place. The only point on which he felt assured was that he and the panther would some day meet, in spite of the fact that the great cat had grown so scarce in New Brunswick that

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some hunters declared it was extinct. The second reason was that he had a quarrel with all lucifees or lynxes, — “Injun devils,” he called them. Once when he was a baby, just big enough to sit up when strapped into his chair, a lucifee had come and glared at him with fierce eyes through the doorway of his lonely backwoods cabin. His mother had come rushing from the cow-shed, just in time; and the lucifee, slinking off to the woods, had vented his disappointment in a series of soul-curdling screeches. The memory of this terror was a scar in his heart, which time failed to efface. He grew up to hate all lucifees; and from the day when he learned to handle a gun he was always ready to hunt them.

On this particular day of his life he had travelled all the morning without adventure, his face set eagerly toward

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the west. Along in the afternoon he was once or twice surprised by a creeping sensation along his backbone and in the roots of the hair on his neck. He stopped and peered about him searchingly, with a feeling that he was followed. But he had implicit faith in his eyesight; and when that revealed no menace he went onward reassured.

But when the diversion of gathering firewood and digging the hole that served him for a camp came to an end, and he stooped to build his camp-fire, that sensation of being watched came over him again. It was so strong that he straightened up sharply, and scrutinised every thicket within eyeshot. Thereafter, though he could see nothing to justify his curious uneasiness, the sensation kept recurring insistently all the time that he was occupied in cooking and eating his meal. When at last

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he was ready to turn in for his brief night's sleep, — he planned to be afoot again before dawn, — he heaped his frugal camp-fire a little higher than usual, and took the quite unwonted precaution of laying his rifle within instant grasp of his hand.

In spite of these vague warnings, wherein his instinct showed itself so much more sagacious than his reason, he fell asleep at once. His wholesome drowsiness, in that clear and vital air, was not to be denied. But once deep asleep, beyond the vacillation of ordered thought and the obstinacies of will, his sensitive intuitions reasserted themselves. They insisted sharply on his giving heed to their warnings; and all at once he found himself wide awake with not a vestige of sleep's heaviness left in his brain.

With his trained woodcraft, however,

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he knew that it was some peril that had thus awakened him, and he gave no sign of his waking. Without a movement, without a change in his slow, deep breathing, he half opened his eyes and scanned the surrounding trees through narrowed lids.

Presently he caught a glimmer of big, soft, round eyes gazing at him through a tangle of spruce boughs. *Were* they gazing at him? No, it was the fire that held their harmless attention. He guessed the owner of those soft eyes; and in a moment or two he was able to discern dimly the lines of the deer's head and neck.

His first impulse was to laugh impatiently at his own folly. Had he been enduring all these creepy apprehensions because an inquisitive doe had followed him? Had his nerves grown so sensitive that the staring of a chipmunk or a

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rabbit had power to break his sleep? But while these thoughts rushed through his brain his body lay still as before, obedient to the subtle dictates of his instinct. His long study of the wild things had taught him much of their special wisdom. He swept his glance around the dim-lit aisle as far as he could without perceptibly turning his head—and met the lambent blue-green gaze of the watching panther!

Through the thin veil of the hemlock twigs, he saw the body of the animal, gathered for the spring, and realised with a pang that the long expected had not arrived in just the form he would have chosen. He knew better than to reach for his rifle,—because he knew that the least movement of head or hand would be the signal for the launching of that fatal leap. There was nothing to do but wait, and keep motionless, and think.

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The strain of that waiting was unspeakable, and under it the minutes seemed hours. But just as he was beginning to think he could stand it no longer, a brand in the fire burned through and broke smartly. Flames leapt up, with a shower of sparks, — and the panther, somewhat startled, drew back and shifted his gaze. It was but for an instant, but in that instant the man had laid hold of his rifle, drawn it to him, and got it into a position where one more swift movement would enable him to shoot.

But not the panther only had been startled by the breaking brand, the leaping flame. The young doe had leapt backward, so that a great birch trunk cut off her view of the fire. The first alarm gone by, she moved to recover her post of vantage. Very stealthily and silently she moved, — but the motion caught the panther's eye.

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The man noted a change in the direction of the beast's gaze, a change in the light of his eyeballs. There was no more hate in them, no more doubt and dread; only hunger, and eager triumph. As softly as an owl's wings move through the coverts, the great beast drew back, and started to descend from the tree. He would go stalk deer, drink warm deer's blood, and leave the dangerous sleeper to his dreams.

But the man considered. Panthers were indeed very few in New Brunswick, and undeniably interesting. But he loved the deer; and to this particular doe he felt that he perhaps owed his life. The debt should be paid in full.

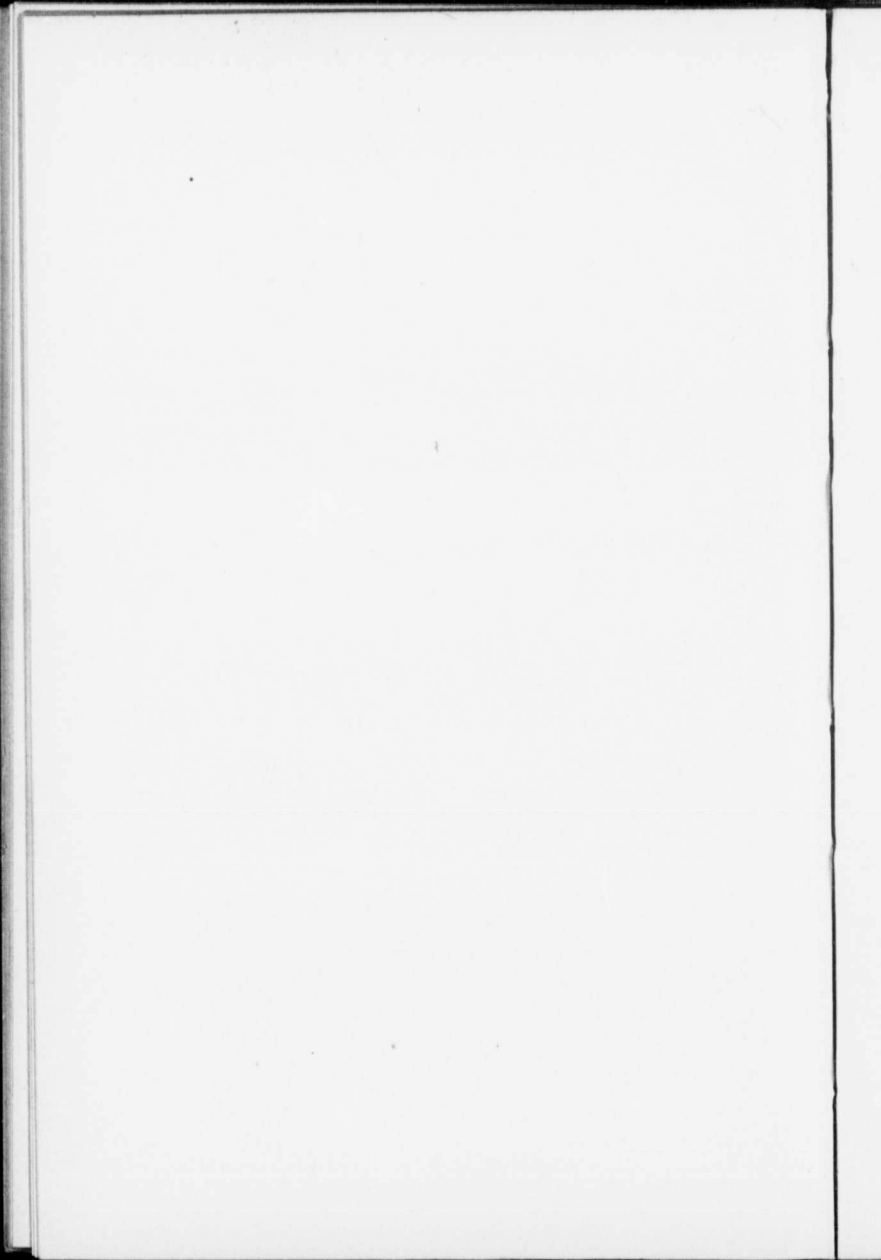
As the panther turned to slip down the trunk of the tree, the man sat up straight. He took careful but almost instantaneous aim, at a point just behind the beast's fore-shoulder. At the report

WATCHERS OF CAMP-FIRE 49

the great body fell limp, a huddled heap of fur and long bared fangs. The man sprang to his feet and stirred the camp-fire to a blaze. And the doe, her heart pounding with panic, her curiosity all devoured in consuming terror, went crashing off through the bushes.

THE END.





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