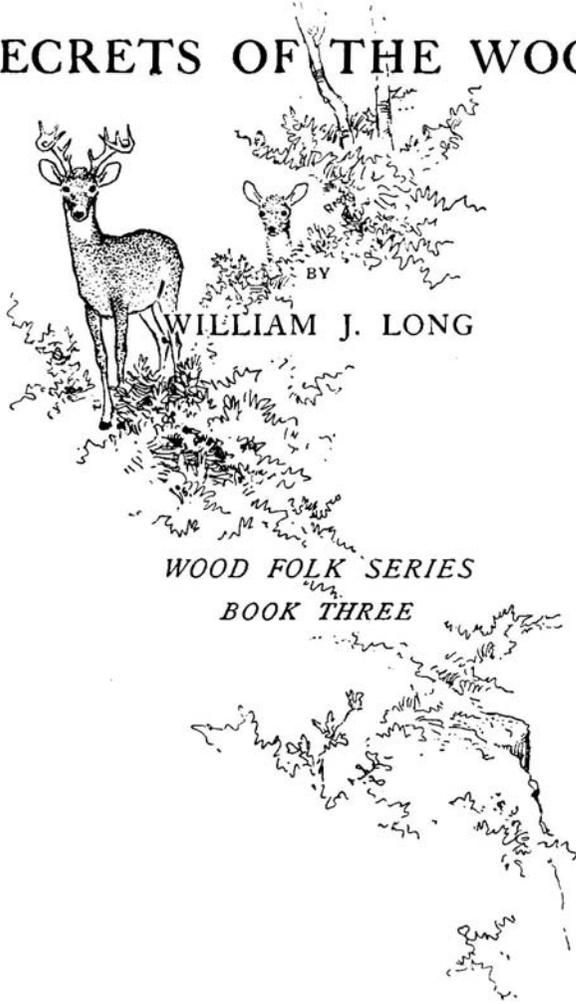


SECRETS OF THE WOODS



There was Tookhees sitting on the rim of my drinking cup

SECRETS OF THE WOODS



BY
WILLIAM J. LONG

WOOD FOLK SERIES

BOOK THREE

YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS

CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA

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TO

**CH'GEEGEE-LOKH-SIS, 'Little Friend Ch'geegee,'
whose coming makes the winter glad**

PREFACE

THIS little book is but another chapter in the shy, wild life of the fields and woods, of which “Ways of Wood Folk” and “Wilderness Ways” were the beginning. It is given gladly in answer to the call for more from those who have read the previous volumes, and whose letters are full of the spirit of kindness and appreciation.

Many questions have come of late with these same letters; chief of which is this: How shall one discover such things for himself? how shall we, too, read the secrets of the Wood Folk?

There is no space here to answer, to describe the long training, even if one could explain perfectly what is more or less unconscious. I would only suggest that perhaps the real reason why we see so little in the woods is the way we go through them—talking, laughing, rustling, smashing twigs, disturbing the peace of the solitudes by what must seem strange and uncouth noises to the little wild creatures. They, on the other hand, slip with noiseless feet through their native coverts, shy, silent, listening, more concerned to hear than to be heard, loving the silence, hating noise and fearing it, as they fear and hate their natural enemies.

We would not feel comfortable if a big barbarian came into our quiet home, broke the door

down, whacked his war-club on the furniture, and whooped his battle yell. We could hardly be natural under the circumstances. Our true dispositions would hide themselves. We might even vacate the house bodily. Just so Wood Folk. Only as you copy their ways can you expect to share their life and their secrets. And it is astonishing how little the shyest of them fears you, if you but keep silence and avoid all excitement, even of feeling; for they understand your feeling quite as much as your action.

A dog knows when you are afraid of him; when you are hostile; when friendly. So does a bear. Lose your nerve, and the horse you are riding goes to pieces instantly. Bubble over with suppressed excitement, and the deer yonder, stepping daintily down the bank to your canoe in the water grasses, will stamp and snort and bound away without ever knowing what startled him. But be quiet, friendly, peace-possessed in the same place, and the deer, even after discovering you, will draw near and show his curiosity in twenty pretty ways ere he trots away, looking back over his shoulder for your last message. Then be generous—show him the flash of a looking-glass, the flutter of a bright handkerchief, a tin whistle, or any other little kickshaw that the remembrance of a boy's pocket may suggest—and the chances are that he will come back again, finding curiosity so richly rewarded.

That is another point to remember: all the Wood Folk are more curious about you than you are about them. Sit down quietly in the woods anywhere, and your coming will occasion the same stir that a

stranger makes in a New England hill town. Control your curiosity, and soon their curiosity gets beyond control; they must come to find out who you are and what you are doing. Then you have the advantage; for, while their curiosity is being satisfied, they forget fear and show you many curious bits of their life that you will never discover otherwise.

As to the source of these sketches, it is the same as that of the others—years of quiet observation in the woods and fields, and some old notebooks which hold the records of summer and winter camps in the great wilderness.

My kind publishers announced, some time ago, a table of contents, which included chapters on jay and fish-hawk, panther, and musquash, and a certain savage old bull moose that once took up his abode too near my camp for comfort. My only excuse for their non-appearance is that my little book was full before their turn came. They will find their place, I trust, in another volume presently.

WM. J. LONG.

STAMFORD, CONN., June, 1901.

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TOOKHEES THE 'FRAID ONE



LITTLE Tookhees the wood mouse, the 'Fraid One, as Simmo calls him, always makes two appearances when you squeak to bring him out. First, after much peeking, he runs out of his tunnel; sits up once on his hind legs; rubs his eyes with his paws; looks up for the owl, and behind him for the fox, and straight ahead at the tent where the man lives; then he dives back headlong into his tunnel with a rustle of leaves and a frightened whistle, as if Kupkawis the little owl had seen him. That is to reassure himself. In a moment he comes back softly to see what kind of crumbs you have given him.

No wonder Tookhees is so timid, for there is no place in earth or air or water, outside his own little doorway under the mossy stone, where he is safe. Above him the owls watch by night and the

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hawks by day; around him not a prowler of the wilderness, from Mooween the bear down through a score of gradations, to Kagax the bloodthirsty little weasel, but will sniff under every old log in the hope of finding a wood mouse; and if he takes a swim, as he is fond of doing, not a big trout in the river but leaves his eddy to rush at the tiny ripple holding bravely across the current. So, with all these enemies waiting to catch him the moment he ventures out, Tookhees must needs make one or two false starts in order to find out where the coast is clear.

That is why he always dodges back after his first appearance; why he gives you two or three swift glimpses of himself, now here, now there, before coming out into the light. He knows his enemies are so hungry, so afraid he will get away or that somebody else will catch him, that they jump for him the moment he shows a whisker. So eager are they for his flesh, and so sure, after missing him, that the swoop of wings or the snap of red jaws has scared him into permanent hiding, that they pass on to other trails. And when a prowler, watching from behind a stump, sees Tookhees flash out of sight and hears his startled squeak, he thinks naturally that the keen little eyes have seen the tail, which he forgot to curl close enough, and so sneaks away as if ashamed of himself. Not even the fox, whose patience is without end, has learned the wisdom of waiting for Tookhees' second appearance. And that is the salvation of the little 'Fraid One.

From all these enemies Tookhees has one refuge, the little arched nest beyond the pretty

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doorway under the mossy stone. Most of his enemies can dig, to be sure, but his tunnel winds about in such a way that they never can tell from the looks of his doorway where it leads to; and there are no snakes in the wilderness to follow and find out. Occasionally I have seen where Mooween the bear has turned the stone over and clawed the earth beneath; but there is generally a tough root in the way, and Mooween concludes that he is taking too much trouble for so small a mouthful, and shuffles off to the log where the red ants live.

On his journeys through the woods Tookhees never forgets the dangerous possibilities. His progress is a series of jerks, and whisks, and jumps, and hidings. He leaves his doorway, after much watching, and shoots like a minnow across the moss to an upturned root. There he sits up and listens, rubbing his whiskers nervously. Then he glides along the root for a couple of feet, drops to the ground and disappears. He is hiding there under a dead leaf. A moment of stillness and he jumps like a jack-in-a-box. Now he is sitting on the leaf that covered him, rubbing his whiskers again, looking back over his trail as if he heard footsteps behind him. Then another nervous dash, a squeak which proclaims at once his escape and his arrival, and he vanishes under the old moss-grown log where his fellows live, a whole colony of them.

All these things, and many more, I discovered the first season that I began to study the wild things that lived within sight of my tent. I had been making long excursions after bear and beaver, following on

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wild-goose chases after Old Whitehead the eagle and Kakagos the wild woods raven that always escaped me, only to find that within the warm circle of my camp-fire little wild folk were hiding whose lives were more unknown and quite as interesting as the greater creatures I had been following.

One day, as I returned quietly to camp, I saw Simmo quite lost in watching something near my tent. He stood beside a great birch tree, one hand resting against the bark that he would claim next winter for his new canoe; the other hand still grasped his axe, which he had picked up a moment before to quicken the *tempo* of the bean kettle's song. His dark face peered behind the tree with a kind of childlike intensity written all over it.

I stole nearer without his hearing me; but I could see nothing. The woods were all still. Killoolet was dozing by his nest; the chickadees had vanished, knowing that it was not meal time; and Meeko the red squirrel had been made to jump from the fir top to the ground so often that now he kept sullenly to his own hemlock across the island, nursing his sore feet and scolding like a fury whenever I approached. Still Simmo watched, as if a bear were approaching his bait, till I whispered, "*Quiee, Simmo, what is it?*"

"*Nodwar k'chee Toquis*, I see little 'Fraid One," he said, unconsciously dropping into his own dialect, which is the softest speech in the world, so soft that wild things are not disturbed when they hear it, thinking it only a louder sough of the pines or a

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softer tunking of ripples on the rocks.—“O bah cosh, see! He wash-um face in yo lil cup.” And when I tiptoed to his side, there was Tookhees sitting on the rim of my drinking cup, in which I had left a new leader to soak for the evening’s fishing, scrubbing his face diligently, like a boy who is watched from behind to see that he slights not his ears or his neck.

Remembering my own boyhood on cold mornings, I looked behind him to see if he also were under compulsion, but there was no other mouse in sight. He would scoop up a double handful of water in his paws, rub it rapidly up over nose and eyes, and then behind his ears, on the spots that wake you up quickest when you are sleepy. Then another scoop of water, and another vigorous rub, ending behind his ears as before.

Simmo was full of wonder, for an Indian notices few things in the woods beside those that pertain to his trapping and hunting; and to see a mouse wash his face was as incomprehensible to him as to see me read a book. But all wood mice are very cleanly; they have none of the strong odors of our house mice. Afterwards, while getting acquainted, I saw him wash many times in the plate of water that I kept filled near his den; but he never washed more than his face and the sensitive spot behind his ears. Sometimes, however, when I have seen him swimming in the lake or river, I have wondered whether he were going on a journey, or just bathing for the love of it, as he washed his face in my cup.

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I left the cup where it was and spread a feast for the little guest, cracker crumbs and a bit of candle end. In the morning they were gone, the signs of several mice telling plainly who had been called in from the wilderness byways. That was the introduction of man to beast. Soon they came regularly. I had only to scatter crumbs and squeak a few times like a mouse, when little streaks and flashes would appear on the moss or among the faded gold tapestries of old birch leaves, and the little wild things would come to my table, their eyes shining like jet, their tiny paws lifted to rub their whiskers or to shield themselves from the fear under which they lived continually.

They were not all alike—quite the contrary. One, the same who had washed in my cup, was gray and old, and wise from much dodging of enemies. His left ear was split from a fight, or an owl's claw, probably, that just missed him as he dodged under a root. He was at once the shyest and boldest of the lot. For a day or two he came with marvelous stealth, making use of every dead leaf and root tangle to hide his approach, and shooting across the open spaces so quickly that one knew not what had happened—just a dun streak which ended in nothing. And the brown leaf gave no sign of what it sheltered. But once assured of his ground, he came boldly. This great man-creature, with his face close to the table, perfectly still but for his eyes, with a hand that moved gently if it moved at all, was not to be feared—that Tookhees felt instinctively. And this strange fire with hungry odors, and the white tent,

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and the comings and goings of men who were masters of the woods kept fox and lynx and owl far away—that he learned after a day or two. Only the mink, who crept in at night to steal the man's fish, was to be feared. So Tookhees presently gave up his nocturnal habits and came out boldly into the sunlight. Ordinarily the little creatures come out in the dusk, when their quick movements are hidden among the shadows that creep and quiver. But with fear gone, they are only too glad to run about in the daylight, especially when good things to eat are calling them.

Besides the veteran there was a little mother-mouse, whose tiny gray jacket was still big enough to cover a wonderful mother love, as I afterwards found out. She never ate at my table, but carried her fare away into hiding, not to feed her little ones—they were too small as yet—but thinking in some dumb way, behind the bright little eyes, that they needed her and that her life must be spared with greater precaution for their sakes. She would steal timidly to my table, always appearing from under a gray shred of bark on a fallen birch log, following the same path, first to a mossy stone, then to a dark hole under a root, then to a low brake, and along the underside of a billet of wood to the mouse table. There she would stuff both cheeks hurriedly, till they bulged as if she had toothache, and steal away by the same path, disappearing at last under the shred of gray bark.

For a long time it puzzled me to find her nest, which I knew could not be far away. It was not in

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the birch log where she disappeared—that was hollow the whole length—nor was it anywhere beneath it. Some distance away was a large stone, half covered by the green moss which reached up from every side. The most careful search here had failed to discover any trace of Tookhees' doorway; so one day when the wind blew half a gale and I was going out on the lake alone, I picked up this stone to put in the bow of my canoe. That was to steady the little craft by bringing her nose down to grip the water. Then the secret was out, and there it was in a little dome of dried grass among some spruce roots under the stone.

The mother was away foraging, but a faint sibilant squeaking within the dome told me that the little ones were there, and hungry as usual. As I watched there was a swift movement in a tunnel among the roots, and the mother-mouse came rushing back. She paused a moment, lifting her forepaws against a root to sniff what danger threatened. Then she saw my face bending over the opening—*Et tu Brute!* and she darted into the nest. In a moment she was out again and disappeared into her tunnel, running swiftly with her little ones hanging to her sides by a grip that could not be shaken,—all but one, a delicate pink creature that one could hide in a thimble, and that snuggled down in the darkest corner of my hand confidently.

It was ten minutes before the little mother came back, looking anxiously for the lost baby. When she found him safe in his own nest, with the man's face still watching, she was half reassured; but

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when she threw herself down and the little one began to drink, she grew fearful again and ran away into the tunnel, the little one clinging to her side, this time securely.

I put the stone back and gathered the moss carefully about it. In a few days Mother Mouse was again at my table. I stole away to the stone, put my ear close to it, and heard with immense satisfaction tiny squeaks, which told me that the house was again occupied. Then I watched to find the path by which Mother Mouse came to her own. When her cheeks were full, she disappeared under the shred of bark by her usual route. That led into the hollow center of the birch log, which she followed to the end, where she paused a moment, eyes, ears, and nostrils busy; then she jumped to a tangle of roots and dead leaves, beneath which was a tunnel that led, deep down under the moss, straight to her nest beneath the stone.

Besides these older mice, there were five or six smaller ones, all shy save one, who from the first showed not the slightest fear but came straight to my hand, ate his crumbs, and went up my sleeve, and proceeded to make himself a warm nest there by nibbling wool from my flannel shirt.

In strong contrast to this little fellow was another who knew too well what fear meant. He belonged to another tribe that had not yet grown accustomed to man's ways. I learned too late how careful one must be in handling the little creatures that live continually in the land where fear reigns.

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A little way behind my tent was a great fallen log, mouldy and moss-grown, with twin-flowers shaking their bells along its length, under which lived a whole colony of wood mice. They ate the crumbs that I placed by the log; but they could never be tolled to my table, whether because they had no split-eared old veteran to spy out the man's ways, or because my own colony drove them away, I could never find out. One day I saw Tookhees dive under the big log as I approached, and having nothing more important to do, I placed one big crumb near his entrance, stretched out in the moss, hid my hand in a dead brake near the tempting morsel, and squeaked the call. In a moment Tookhees' nose and eyes appeared in his doorway, his whiskers twitching nervously as he smelled the candle grease. But he was suspicious of the big object, or perhaps he smelled the man too and was afraid, for after much dodging in and out he disappeared altogether.

I was wondering how long his hunger would battle with his caution, when I saw the moss near my bait stir from beneath. A little waving of the moss blossoms, and Tookhees' nose and eyes appeared out of the ground for an instant, sniffing in all directions. His little scheme was evident enough now; he was tunneling for the morsel that he dared not take openly. I watched with breathless interest as a faint quiver nearer my bait showed where he was pushing his works. Then the moss stirred cautiously close beside his objective; a hole opened; the morsel tumbled in, and Tookhees was gone with his prize.

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I placed more crumbs from my pocket in the same place, and presently three or four mice were nibbling them. One sat up close by the dead brake, holding a bit of bread in his forepaws like a squirrel. The brake stirred suddenly; before he could jump my hand closed over him, and slipping the other hand beneath him I held him up to my face to watch him between my fingers. He made no movement to escape, but only trembled violently. His legs seemed too weak to support his weight now; he lay down; his eyes closed. One convulsive twitch and he was dead—dead of fright in a hand which had not harmed him.

It was at this colony, whose members were all strangers to me, that I learned in a peculiar way of the visiting habits of wood mice, and at the same time another lesson that I shall not soon forget. For several days I had been trying every legitimate way in vain to catch a big trout, a monster of his kind, that lived in an eddy behind a rock up at the inlet. Trout were scarce in that lake, and in summer the big fish are always lazy and hard to catch. I was trout hungry most of the time, for the fish that I caught were small, and few and far between. Several times, however, when casting from the shore at the inlet for small fish, I had seen swirls in a great eddy near the farther shore, which told me plainly of big fish beneath; and one day, when a huge trout rolled half his length out of water behind my fly, small fry lost all their interest and I promised myself the joy of feeling my rod bend and tingle beneath the rush of that big trout if it took all summer.

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Flies were no use. I offered him a bookful, every variety of shape and color, at dawn and dusk, without tempting him. I tried grubs, which bass like, and a frog's leg, which no pickerel can resist, and little frogs, such as big trout hunt among the lily pads in the twilight,—all without pleasing him. And then water-beetles, and a red squirrel's tail-tip, which makes the best hackle in the world, and kicking grasshoppers, and a silver spoon with a wicked "gang" of hooks, which I detest and which, I am thankful to remember, the trout detested also. They lay there in their big cool eddy, lazily taking what food the stream brought down to them, giving no heed to frauds of any kind.

Then I caught a red-fin in the stream above, hooked it securely, laid it on a big chip, coiled my line upon it, and set it floating down stream, the line uncoiling gently behind it as it went. When it reached the eddy I raised my rod tip; the line straightened; the red-fin plunged overboard, and a two-pound trout, thinking, no doubt, that the little fellow had been hiding under the chip, rose for him and took him in. That was the only one I caught. His struggle disturbed the pool, and the other trout gave no heed to more red-fins.

Then, one morning at daybreak, as I sat on a big rock pondering new baits and devices, a stir on an alder bush across the stream caught my eye. Tookhees the wood mouse was there, running over the bush, evidently for the black catkins which still clung to the tips. As I watched him he fell, or jumped from his branch into the quiet water below

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and, after circling about for a moment, headed bravely across the current. I could just see his nose as he swam, a rippling wedge against the black water with a widening letter V trailing out behind him. The current swept him downward; he touched the edge of the big eddy; there was a swirl, a mighty plunge beneath, and Tookhees was gone, leaving no trace but a swift circle of ripples that were swallowed up in the rings and dimples behind the rock.—I had found what bait the big trout wanted.

Hurrying back to camp, I loaded a cartridge lightly with a pinch of dust shot, spread some crumbs near the big log behind my tent, squeaked the call a few times, and sat down to wait. “These mice are strangers to me,” I told Conscience, who was protesting a little, “and the woods are full of them, and I want that trout.”

In a moment there was a rustle in the mossy doorway and Tookhees appeared. He darted across the open, seized a crumb in his mouth, sat up on his hind legs, took the crumb in his paws, and began to eat. I had raised the gun, thinking he would dodge back a few times before giving me a shot; his boldness surprised me, but I did not recognize him. Still my eye followed along the barrels and over the sight to where Tookhees sat eating his crumb. My finger was pressing the trigger—“O you big butcher,” said Conscience, “think how little he is, and what a big roar your gun will make! Aren’t you ashamed?”

“But I want the trout,” I protested.

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“Catch him then, without killing this little harmless thing,” said Conscience sternly.

“But he is a stranger to me; I never”—

“He is eating your bread and salt,” said Conscience. That settled it; but even as I looked at him over the gun sight, Tookhees finished his crumb, came to my foot, ran along my leg into my lap, and looked into my face expectantly. The grizzled coat and the split ear showed the welcome guest at my table for a week past. He was visiting the stranger colony, as wood mice are fond of doing, and persuading them by his example that they might trust me, as he did. More ashamed than if I had been caught potting quail, I threw away the hateful shell that had almost slain my friend and went back to camp.

There I made a mouse of a bit of muskrat fur, with a piece of my leather shoestring sewed on for a tail. It served the purpose perfectly, for within the hour I was gloating over the size and beauty of the big trout as he stretched his length on the rock beside me. But I lost the fraud at the next cast, leaving it, with a foot of my leader, in the mouth of a second trout that rolled up at it the instant it touched his eddy behind the rock.

After that the wood mice were safe so far as I was concerned. Not a trout, though he were big as a salmon, would ever taste them, unless they chose to go swimming of their own accord; and I kept their table better supplied than before. I saw much of their visiting back and forth, and have understood

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better what those tunnels mean that one finds in the spring when the last snows are melting. In a corner of the woods, where the drifts lay, you will often find a score of tunnels coming in from all directions to a central chamber. They speak of Tookhees' sociable nature, of his long visits with his fellows, undisturbed by swoop or snap, when the packed snow above has swept the summer fear away and made him safe from hawk and owl and fox and wildcat, and when no open water tempts him to go swimming where Skooktum the big trout lies waiting, mouse hungry, under his eddy.

The weeks passed all too quickly, as wilderness weeks do, and the sad task of breaking camp lay just before us. But one thing troubled me—the little Tookhees, who knew no fear, but tried to make a nest in the sleeve of my flannel shirt. His simple confidence touched me more than the curious ways of all the other mice. Every day he came and took his crumbs, not from the common table, but from my hand, evidently enjoying its warmth while he ate, and always getting the choicest morsels. But I knew that he would be the first one caught by the owl after I left; for it is fear only that saves the wild things. Occasionally one finds animals of various kinds in which the instinct of fear is lacking—a frog, a young partridge, a moose calf—and wonders what golden age that knew no fear, or what glorious vision of Isaiah in which lion and lamb lie down together, is here set forth. I have even seen a young black duck, whose natural disposition is wild

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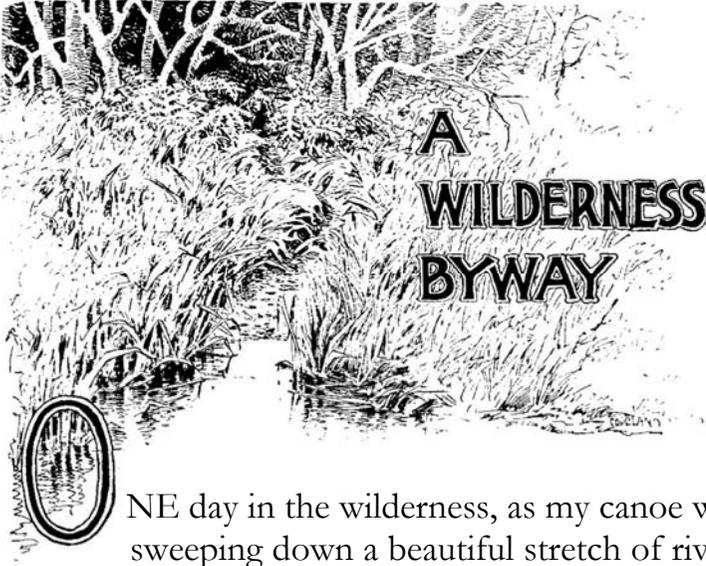
as the wilderness itself, that had profited nothing by his mother's alarms and her constant lessons in hiding, but came bobbing up to my canoe among the sedges of a wilderness lake, while his brethren crouched invisible in their coverts of bending rushes, and his mother flapped wildly off, splashing and quacking and trailing a wing to draw me away from the little ones.

Such an one is generally abandoned by its mother, or else is the first to fall in the battle with the strong before she gives him up as hopeless. Little Tookhees evidently belonged to this class, so before leaving I undertook the task of teaching him fear, which had evidently been too much for Nature and his own mother. I pinched him a few times, hooting like an owl as I did so,—a startling process, which sent the other mice diving like brown streaks to cover. Then I waved a branch over him, like a hawk's wing, at the same time flipping him end over end, shaking him up terribly. Then again, when he appeared with a new light dawning in his eyes, the light of fear, I would set a stick to wiggling like a creeping fox among the ferns and switch him sharply with a hemlock tip. It was a hard lesson, but he learned it after a few days. And before I finished the teaching, not a mouse would come to my table, no matter how persuasively I squeaked. They would dart about in the twilight as of yore, but the first whish of my stick sent them all back to cover on the instant.

That was their stern yet practical preparation for the robber horde that would soon be prowling

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over my camping ground. Then a stealthy movement among the ferns or the sweep of a shadow among the twilight shadows would mean a very different thing from wriggling stick and waving hemlock tip. Snap and swoop, and teeth and claws,—jump for your life and find out afterwards. That is the rule for a wise wood mouse. So I said good-by, and left them to take care of themselves in the wilderness.



ONE day in the wilderness, as my canoe was sweeping down a beautiful stretch of river, I noticed a little path leading through the water grass, at right angles to the stream's course. Swinging my canoe up to it, I found what seemed to be a landing place for the wood folk on their river journeyings. The sedges, which stood thickly all about, were here bent inward, making a shiny green channel from the river.

On the muddy shore were many tracks of mink and muskrat and otter. Here a big moose had stood drinking; and there a beaver had cut the grass and made a little mud pie, in the middle of which was a bit of musk scenting the whole neighborhood. It was done last night, for the marks of his fore paws still showed plainly where he had patted his pie smooth ere he went away.

A WILDERNESS BYWAY

But the spot was more than a landing place; a path went up the bank into the woods, as faint as the green waterway among the sedges. Tall ferns bent over to hide it; rank grasses that had been softly brushed aside tried their best to look natural; the alders waved their branches thickly, saying: There is no way here. But there it was, a path for the wood folk. And when I followed it into the shade and silence of the woods, the first mossy log that lay across it was worn smooth by the passage of many little feet.

As I came back, Simmo's canoe glided into sight and I waved him to shore. The light birch swung up beside mine, a deep water-dimple just under the curl of its bow, and a musical ripple like the gurgle of water by a mossy stone—that was the only sound.

“What means this path, Simmo?”

His keen eyes took in everything at a glance, the wavy waterway, the tracks, the faint path to the alders. There was a look of surprise in his face that I had blundered onto a discovery which he had looked for many times in vain, his traps on his back.

“Das a portash,” he said simply.

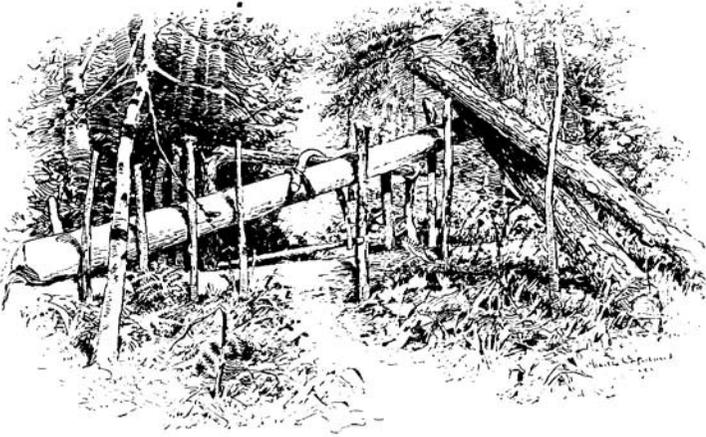
“A portage! But who made a portage here?”

“Well, Musquash he prob'ly make-um first. Den beaver, den h'otter, den everybody in hurry he make-um. You see, river make big bend here. Portash go 'cross; save time, jus' same Indian portash.”

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That was the first of a dozen such paths that I have since found cutting across the bends of wilderness rivers,—the wood folk's way of saving time on a journey. I left Simmo to go on down the river, while I followed the little byway curiously. There is nothing more fascinating in the woods than to go on the track of the wild things and see what they have been doing.

But alas! mine were not the first human feet that had taken the journey. Halfway across, at a point where the path ran over a little brook, I found a deadfall set squarely in the way of unwary feet. It was different from any I had ever seen, and was made like this:



That tiny stick (trigger, the trappers call it) with its end resting in air three inches above the bed log, just the right height so that a beaver or an otter would naturally put his foot on it in crossing, looks innocent enough. But if you look sharply you will see that if it were pressed down ever so little it would

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instantly release the bent stick that holds the fall-log, and bring the deadly thing down with crushing force across the back of any animal beneath.

Such are the pitfalls that lie athwart the way of Keeonekh the otter, when he goes a-courting and uses Musquash's portage to shorten his journey.

At the other end of the portage I waited for Simmo to come round the bend, and took him back to see the work, denouncing the heartless carelessness of the trapper who had gone away in the spring and left an unsprung deadfall as a menace to the wild things. At the first glance he pronounced it an otter trap. Then the fear and wonder swept into his face, and the questions into mine.

"Das Noel Waby's trap. Nobody else make-um tukpeel stick like dat," he said at last.

Then I understood. Noel Waby had gone up river trapping in the spring, and had never come back; nor any word to tell how death met him.

I stooped down to examine the trap with greater interest. On the underside of the fall-log I found some long hairs still clinging in the crevices of the rough bark. They belonged to the outer waterproof coat with which Keeonekh keeps his fur dry. One otter at least had been caught here, and the trap reset. But some sense of danger, some old scent of blood or subtle warning clung to the spot, and no other creature had crossed the bed log, though hundreds must have passed that way since the old Indian reset his trap, and strode away with the dead otter across his shoulders.

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What was it in the air? What sense of fear brooded here and whispered in the alder leaves and tinkled in the brook? Simmo grew uneasy and hurried away. He was like the wood folk. But I sat down on a great log that the spring floods had driven in through the alders to feel the meaning of the place, if possible, and to have the vast sweet solitude all to myself for a little while.

A faint stir on my left, and another! Then up the path, twisting and gliding, came Keeonekh, the first otter that I had ever seen in the wilderness. Where the sun flickered in through the alder leaves it glinted brightly on the shiny outer hairs of his rough coat. As he went his nose worked constantly, going far ahead of his bright little eyes to tell him what was in the path.

I was sitting very still, some distance to one side, and he did not see me. Near old Noel's deadfall he paused an instant with raised head, in the curious snake-like attitude that all the weasels take when watching. Then he glided round the end of the trap, and disappeared down the portage.

When he was gone I stole out to examine his tracks. Then I noticed for the first time that the old path near the deadfall was getting moss-grown; a faint new path began to show among the alders. Some warning was there in the trap, and with cunning instinct all the wood dwellers turned aside, giving a wide berth to what they felt was dangerous but could not understand. The new path joined the

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old again, beyond the brook, and followed it straight to the river.

Again I examined the deadfall carefully, but of course I found nothing. That is a matter of instinct, not of eyes and ears, and it is past finding out. Then I went away for good, after driving a ring of stout stakes all about the trap to keep heedless little feet out of it. But I left it unsprung, just as it was, a rude tribute of remembrance to Keeonekh and the lost Indian.

KEEONEKH THE FISHERMAN



WHEREVER you find Keeonekh the otter you find three other things: wildness, beauty, and running water that no winter can freeze. There is also good fishing, but that will profit you little; for after Keeonekh has harried a pool it is useless to cast your fly or minnow there. The largest fish has disappeared—you will find his bones and a fin or two on the ice or the nearest bank—and the little fish are still in hiding after their fright.

Conversely, wherever you find the three elements mentioned you will also find Keeonekh, if your eyes know how to read the signs aright. Even in places near the towns, where no otter has been seen for generations, they are still to be found leading their shy wild life, so familiar with every sight and sound of danger that no eye of the many that pass by ever sees them. No animal has been more

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persistently trapped and hunted for the valuable fur that he bears; but Keeonekh is hard to catch and quick to learn. When a family have all been caught or driven away from a favorite stream, another otter speedily finds the spot in some of his winter wanderings after better fishing, and, knowing well from the signs that others of his race have paid the sad penalty for heedlessness, he settles down there with greater watchfulness, and enjoys his fisherman's luck.

In the spring he brings a mate to share his rich living. Soon a family of young otters go a-fishing in the best pools and explore the stream for miles up and down. But so shy and wild and quick to hide are they that the trout fishermen who follow the river, and the ice fishermen who set their tilt-ups in the pond below, and the children who gather cowslips in the spring have no suspicion that the original proprietors of the stream are still on the spot, jealously watching and resenting every intrusion.

Occasionally the wood choppers cross an unknown trail in the snow, a heavy trail, with long, sliding, down-hill plunges which look as if a log had been dragged along. But they too go their way, wondering a bit at the queer things that live in the woods, but not understanding the plain records that the queer things leave behind them. Did they but follow far enough they would find the end of the trail in open water, and on the ice beyond the signs of Keeonekh's fishing.

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I remember one otter family whose den I found, when a boy, on a stream between two ponds within three miles of the town house. Yet the oldest hunter could barely remember the time when the last otter had been caught or seen in the county.

I was sitting very still in the bushes on the bank, one day in spring, watching for a wood duck. Wood duck lived there, but the cover was so thick that I could never surprise them. They always heard me coming and were off, giving me only vanishing glimpses among the trees, or else quietly hiding until I went by. So the only way to see them—a beautiful sight they were—was to sit still in hiding, for hours if need be, until they came gliding by, all unconscious of the watcher.

As I waited a large animal came swiftly up stream, just his head visible, with a long tail trailing behind. He was swimming powerfully, steadily, straight as a string; but, as I noted with wonder, he made no ripple whatever, sliding through the water as if greased from nose to tail. Just above me he dived, and I did not see him again, though I watched up and down stream breathlessly for him to reappear.

I had never seen such an animal before, but I knew somehow that it was an otter, and I drew back into better hiding with the hope of seeing the rare creature again. Presently another otter appeared, coming up stream and disappearing in exactly the same way as the first. But though I stayed all the afternoon I saw nothing more.

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After that I haunted the spot every time I could get away, creeping down to the river bank and lying in hiding hours long at a stretch; for I knew now that the otters lived there, and they gave me many glimpses of a life I had never seen before.

Soon I found their den. It was in a bank opposite my hiding place, and the entrance was among the roots of a great tree, under water, where no one could have possibly found it if the otters had not themselves shown the way. In their approach they always dived while yet well out in the stream, and so entered their door unseen. When they came out they were quite as careful, always swimming some distance under water before coming to the surface. It was several days before my eye could trace surely the faint undulation of the water above them, and so follow their course to their doorway. Had not the water been shallow I should never have found it; for they are the most wonderful of swimmers, making no ripple on the surface, and not half the disturbance below it that a fish of the same weight makes.

Those were among the happiest watching hours that I have ever spent in the woods. The game was so large, so utterly unexpected; and I had the wonderful discovery all to myself. Not one of the half dozen boys and men who occasionally, when the fever seized them, trapped muskrat in the big meadow, a mile below, or the rare mink that hunted frogs in the brook, had any suspicion that such splendid fur was to be had for the hunting.

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Sometimes a whole afternoon would go slowly by, filled with the sounds and sweet smells of the woods, and not a ripple would break the dimples of the stream before me. But when, one late afternoon, just as the pines across the stream began to darken against the western light, a string of silver bubbles shot across the stream and a big otter rose to the surface with a pickerel in his mouth, all the watching that had not well repaid itself was swept out of the reckoning. He came swiftly towards me, put his fore paws against the bank, gave a wriggling jump,—and there he was, not twenty feet away, holding the pickerel down with his fore paws, his back arched like a frightened cat, and a tiny stream of water trickling down from the tip of his heavy pointed tail, as he ate his fish with immense relish.

Years afterward, hundreds of miles away on the Dungarvon, in the heart of the wilderness, every detail of the scene came back to me again. I was standing on snowshoes, looking out over the frozen river, when Keonekh appeared in an open pool with a trout in his mouth. He broke his way, with a clattering tinkle of winter bells, through the thin edge of ice, put his paws against the heavy snow ice, threw himself out with the same wriggling jump, and ate with his back arched—just as I had seen him years before.

This curious way of eating is, I think, characteristic of all otters; certainly of those that I have been fortunate enough to see. Why they do it is more than I know; but it must be uncomfortable for every mouthful—full of fish bones, too—to slide

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uphill to one's stomach. Perhaps it is mere habit, which shows in the arched backs of all the weasel family. Perhaps it is to frighten any enemy that may approach unawares while Keeonekh is eating, just as an owl, when feeding on the ground, bristles up all his feathers so as to look as big as possible.

But my first otter was too keen-scented to remain long so near a concealed enemy. Suddenly he stopped eating and turned his head in my direction. I could see his nostrils twitching as the wind gave him its message. Then he left his fish, glided into the stream as noiselessly as the brook entered it below him, and disappeared without leaving a single wavelet to show where he had gone down.

When the young otters appeared, there was one of the most interesting lessons to be seen in the woods. Though Keeonekh loves the water and lives in it more than half the time, his little ones are afraid of it as so many kittens. If left to themselves they would undoubtedly go off for a hunting life, following the old family instinct; for fishing is an acquired habit of the otters, and so the fishing instinct cannot yet be transmitted to the little ones. That will take many generations. Meanwhile the little Keeonekhs must be taught to swim.

One day the mother-otter appeared on the bank among the roots of the great tree under which was their secret doorway. That was surprising, for up to this time both otters had always approached it from the river, and were never seen on the bank near their den. She appeared to be digging, but was

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immensely cautious about it, looking, listening, sniffing continually. I had never gone near the place for fear of frightening them away; and it was months afterward, when the den was deserted, before I examined it to understand just what she was doing. Then I found that she had made another doorway from her den leading out to the bank. She had selected the spot with wonderful cunning,—a hollow under a great root that would never be noticed,—and she dug from inside, carrying the earth down to the river bottom, so that there should be nothing about the tree to indicate the haunt of an animal.

Long afterwards, when I had grown better acquainted with Keeonekh's ways from much watching, I understood the meaning of all this. She was simply making a safe way out and in for the little ones, who were afraid of the water. Had she taken or driven them out of her own entrance under the river, they might easily have drowned ere they reached the surface.

When the entrance was all ready she disappeared, but I have no doubt she was just inside, watching to be sure the coast was clear. Slowly her head and neck appeared till they showed clear of the black roots. She turned her nose up stream—nothing in the wind. Eyes and ears searched below—nothing harmful there. Then she came out, and after her toddled two little otters, full of wonder at the big bright world, full of fear at the river.

There was no play at first, only wonder and investigation. Caution was born in them; they put

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their little feet down as if treading on eggs, and they sniffed every bush before going behind it. And the old mother noted their cunning with satisfaction while her own nose and ears watched far away.

The outing was all too short; some uneasiness was in the air down stream. Suddenly she rose from where she was lying, and the little ones, as if commanded, tumbled back into the den. In a moment she had glided after them, and the bank was deserted. It was fully ten minutes before my untrained ears caught faint sounds, which were not of the woods, coming up stream; and longer than that before two men with fish poles appeared, making their slow way to the pond above. They passed almost over the den and disappeared, all unconscious of beast or man that wished them elsewhere, resenting their noisy passage through the solitudes. But the otters did not come out again, though I watched till nearly dark.

It was a week before I saw them again, and some good teaching had evidently been done in the meantime; for all fear of the river was gone. They toddled out as before, at the same hour in the afternoon, and went straight to the bank. There the mother lay down, and the little ones, as if enjoying the frolic, clambered up to her back. Whereupon she slid into the stream and swam slowly about with the little Keeonekhs clinging to her desperately, as if humpty-dumpty had been played on them before, and might be repeated any moment.

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I understood their air of anxious expectation a moment later, when Mother Otter dived like a flash from under them, leaving them to make their own way in the water. They began to swim naturally enough, but the fear of the new element was still upon them. The moment old Mother Otter appeared they made for her whimpering, but she dived again and again, or moved slowly away, and so kept them swimming. After a little they seemed to tire and lose courage. Her eyes saw it quicker than mine, and she glided between them. Both little ones turned in at the same instant and found a resting place on her back. So she brought them carefully to land again, and in a few moments they were all rolling about in the dry leaves like so many puppies.

I must confess here that, besides the boy's wonder in watching the wild things, another interest brought me to the river bank and kept me studying Keeonekh's ways. Father Otter was a big fellow,—enormous he seemed to me, thinking of my mink skins,—and occasionally, when his rich coat glinted in the sunshine, I was thinking what a famous cap it would make for the winter woods, or for coasting on moonshiny nights. More often I was thinking what famous things a boy could buy for the fourteen dollars, at least, which his pelt would bring in the open market.

The first Saturday after I saw him I prepared a board, ten times bigger than a mink-stretcher, and tapered one end to a round point, and split it, and made a wedge, and smoothed it all down, and hid it

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away—to stretch the big otter’s skin upon when I should catch him.

When November came, and fur was prime, I carried down a half-bushel basket of heads and stuff from the fish market, and piled them up temptingly on the bank, above a little water path, in a lonely spot by the river. At the lower end of the path, where it came out of the water, I set a trap, my biggest one, with a famous grip for skunks and woodchucks. But the fish rotted away, as did also another basketful in another place. Whatever was eaten went to the crows and mink. Keeonekh disdained it.

Then I set the trap in some water (to kill the smell of it) on a game path among some swamp alders, at a bend of the river where nobody ever came and where I had found Keeonekh’s tracks. The next night he walked into it. But the trap that was sure grip for woodchucks was a plaything for Keeonekh’s strength. He wrenched his foot out of it, leaving me only a few glistening hairs—which was all I ever caught of him.

Years afterward, when I found old Noel’s trap on Keeonekh’s portage, I asked Simmo why no bait had been used.

“No good use-um bait,” he said, “Keeonekh like-um fresh fish, an’ catch-um self all he want.” And that is true. Except in starvation times, when even the pools are frozen, or the fish die from one of their mysterious epidemics, Keeonekh turns up his nose at any bait. If a bit of castor is put in a split

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stick, he will turn aside, like all the fur-bearers, to see what this strange smell is. But if you would toll him with a bait, you must fasten a fish in the water in such a way that it seems alive as the current wiggles it, else Keeonekh will never think it worthy of his catching.

The den in the river bank was never disturbed, and the following year another litter was raised there. With characteristic cunning—a cunning which grows keener and keener in the neighborhood of civilization—the mother-otter filled up the land entrance among the roots with earth and driftweed, using only the doorway under water until it was time for the cubs to come out into the world again.

Of all the creatures of the wilderness Keeonekh is the most richly gifted, and his ways, could we but search them out, would furnish a most interesting chapter. Every journey he takes, whether by land or water, is full of unknown traits and tricks; but unfortunately no one ever sees him doing things, and most of his ways are yet to be found out. You see a head holding swiftly across a wilderness lake, or coming to meet your canoe on the streams; then, as you follow eagerly, a swirl and he is gone. When he comes up again he will watch you so much more keenly than you can possibly watch him that you learn little about him, except how shy he is. Even the trappers who make a business of catching him, and with whom I have often talked, know almost nothing of Keeonekh, except where to set their traps for him living and how to care for his skin when he is dead.

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Once I saw him fishing in a curious way. It was winter, on a wilderness stream flowing into the Dugarvon. There had been a fall of dry snow that still lay deep and powdery over all the woods, too light to settle or crust. At every step one had to lift a shovelful of the stuff on the point of his snowshoe; and I was tired out, following some caribou that wandered like plover in the rain.



Just below me was a deep open pool surrounded by double fringes of ice. Early in the winter, while the stream was higher, the white ice had formed thickly on the river wherever the current was not too swift for freezing. Then the stream fell, and a shelf of new black ice formed at the water's level, eighteen inches or more below the first ice, some of which still clung to the banks, reaching out in places two or three feet and forming dark caverns with the ice below. Both shelves dipped towards the water, forming a gentle incline all about the edges of the open places.

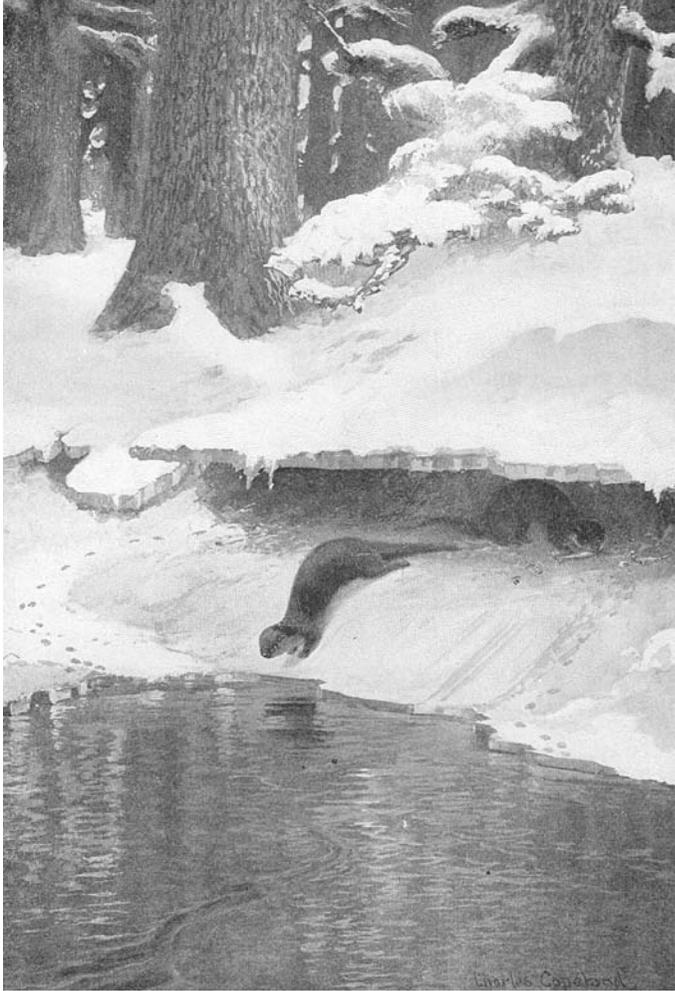
SECRETS OF THE WOODS

A string of silver bubbles shooting across the black pool at my feet roused me out of a drowsy weariness. There it was again, a rippling wave across the pool, which rose to the surface a moment later in a hundred bubbles, tinkling like tiny bells as they broke in the keen air. Two or three times I saw it with growing wonder. Then something stirred under the shelf of ice across the pool. An otter slid into the water; the rippling wave shot across again; the bubbles broke at the surface; and I knew that he was sitting under the white ice below me, not twenty feet away.

A whole family of otters, three or four of them, were fishing there at my feet in utter unconsciousness. The discovery took my breath away. Every little while the bubbles would shoot across from my side, and watching sharply I would see Keeonekh slide out upon the lower shelf of ice on the other side and crouch there in the gloom, with back humped against the ice above him, eating his catch. The fish they caught were all small evidently, for after a few minutes he would throw himself flat on the ice, slide down the incline into the water, making no splash or disturbance as he entered, and the string of bubbles would shoot across to my side again.

For a full hour I watched them breathlessly, marveling at their skill. A small fish is nimble game to follow and catch in his own element. But at every slide Keeonekh did it. Sometimes the rippling wave would shoot all over the pool, and the bubbles break in a wild tangle as the fish darted and doubled below,

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With back humped against the ice above him, eating his catch

with the otter after him. But it always ended the same way. Keeonekh would slide out upon the ice shelf, and hump his back, and begin to eat almost before the last bubble had tinkled behind him.

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Curiously enough, the rule of the salmon fishermen prevailed here in the wilderness: no two rods shall whip the same pool at the same time. I would see an otter lying ready on the ice, evidently waiting for the chase to end. Then, as another otter slid out beside him with his fish, in he would go like a flash and take his turn. For a while the pool was a lively place; the bubbles had no rest. Then the plunges grew fewer and fewer, and the otters all disappeared into the ice caverns.

What became of them I could not make out; and I was too chilled to watch longer. Above and below the pool the stream was frozen for a distance; then there was more open water and more fishing. Whether they followed along the bank under cover of the ice to other pools, or simply slept where they were till hungry again, I never found out. Certainly they had taken up their abode in an ideal spot, and would not leave it willingly. The open pools gave excellent fishing, and the upper ice shelf protected them perfectly from all enemies.

Once, a week later, I left the caribou and came back to the spot to watch awhile; but the place was deserted. The black water gurgled and dimpled across the pool, and slipped away silently under the lower edge of ice undisturbed by strings of silver bubbles. The ice caverns were all dark and silent. The mink had stolen the fish heads, and there was no trace anywhere to show that it was Keeonekh's banquet hall.

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The swimming power of an otter, which was so evident there in the winter pool, is one of the most remarkable things in nature. All other animals and birds, and even the best modeled of modern boats, leave more or less wake behind them when moving through the water. But Keeonekh leaves no more trail than a fish. This is partly because he keeps his body well submerged when swimming, partly because of the strong, deep, even stroke that drives him forward. Sometimes I have wondered if the outer hairs of his coat—the waterproof covering that keeps his fur dry, no matter how long he swims—are not better oiled than in other animals, which might account for the lack of ripple. I have seen him go down suddenly and leave absolutely no break in the surface to show where he was. When sliding also, plunging down a twenty-foot clay bank, he enters the water with an astonishing lack of noise or disturbance of any kind.

In swimming at the surface he seems to use all four feet, like other animals. But below the surface, when chasing fish, he uses only the fore paws. The hind legs then stretch straight out behind and are used, with the heavy tail, for a great rudder. By this means he turns and doubles like a flash, following surely the swift dartings of frightened trout, and beating them by sheer speed and nimbleness.

When fishing a pool he always hunts outward from the center, driving the fish towards the bank, keeping himself within their circlings, and so having the immense advantage of the shorter line in heading off his game. The fish are seized as they crouch

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against the bank for protection, or try to dart out past him. Large fish are frequently caught from behind as they lie resting in their spring-holes. So swift and noiseless is his approach that they are seized before they become aware of danger.

This swimming power of Keeonekh is all the more astonishing when one remembers that he is distinctively a land animal, with none of the special endowments of the seal, who is his only rival as a fisherman. Nature undoubtedly intended him to get his living, as the other members of his large family do, by hunting in the woods, and endowed him accordingly. He is a strong runner, a good climber, a patient tireless hunter, and his nose is keen as a brier. With a little practice he could again get his living by hunting, as his ancestors did. If squirrels and rats and rabbits were too nimble at first, there are plenty of musquash to be caught, and he need not stop at a fawn or a sheep, for he is enormously strong, and the grip of his jaws is not to be loosened.

In severe winters, when fish are scarce or his pools frozen over, he takes to the woods boldly and shows himself a master at hunting craft. But he likes fish, and likes the water, and for many generations now has been simply a fisherman, with many of the quiet lovable traits that belong to fishermen in general.

That is one thing to give you instant sympathy for Keeonekh—he is so different, so far above all other members of his tribe. He is very gentle by nature, with no trace of the fisher's ferocity or the

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weasel's bloodthirstiness. He tames easily, and makes the most docile and affectionate pet of all the wood folk. He never kills for the sake of killing, but lives peaceably, so far as he can, with all creatures. And he stops fishing when he has caught his dinner. He is also most cleanly in his habits, with no suggestion whatever of the evil odors that cling to the mink and defile the whole neighborhood of a skunk. One cannot help wondering whether just going fishing has not wrought all this wonder in Keeonekh's disposition. If so, 't is a pity that all his tribe do not turn fishermen.

His one enemy among the wood folk, so far as I have observed, is the beaver. As the latter is also a peaceable animal, it is difficult to account for the hostility. I have heard or read somewhere that Keeonekh is fond of young beaver and hunts them occasionally to vary his diet of fish; but I have never found any evidence in the wilderness to show this. Instead, I think it is simply a matter of the beaver's dam and pond that causes the trouble.

When the dam is built the beavers often dig a channel around either end to carry off the surplus water, and so prevent their handiwork being washed away in a freshet. Then the beavers guard their preserve jealously, driving away the wood folk that dare to cross their dam or enter their ponds, especially the musquash, who is apt to burrow and cause them no end of trouble. But Keeonekh, secure in his strength, holds straight through the pond, minding his own business and even taking a fish or two in the deep places near the dam. He delights also

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in running water, especially in winter when lakes and streams are mostly frozen, and in his journeyings he makes use of the open channels that guard the beavers' work. But the moment the beavers hear a splashing there, or note a disturbance in the pond where Keeonekh is chasing fish, down they come full of wrath. And there is generally a desperate fight before the affair is settled.

Once, on a little pond, I saw a fierce battle going on out in the middle, and paddled hastily to find out about it. Two beavers and a big otter were locked in a death struggle, diving, plunging, throwing themselves out of water, and snapping at each other's throats.

As my canoe halted the otter gripped one of his antagonists and went under with him. There was a terrible commotion below the surface for a few moments. When it ended the beaver rolled up dead, and Keeonekh shot up under the second beaver to repeat the attack. They gripped on the instant, but the second beaver, an enormous fellow, refused to go under where he would be at a disadvantage. In my eagerness I let the canoe drift almost upon them, driving them wildly apart before the common danger. The otter held on his way up the lake; the beaver turned towards the shore, where I noticed for the first time a couple of beaver houses.

In this case there was no chance for intrusion on Keeonekh's part. He had probably been attacked when going peaceably about his business through the lake.

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It is barely possible, however, that there was an old grievance on the beavers' part, which they sought to square when they caught Keeonekh on the lake. When beavers build their houses on the lake shore, without the necessity for making a dam, they generally build a tunnel slanting up from the lake's bed to their den or house on the bank. Now Keeonekh fishes under the ice in winter more than is generally supposed. As he must breathe after every chase he must needs know all the air-holes and dens in the whole lake. No matter how much he turns and doubles in the chase after a trout, he never loses his sense of direction, never forgets where the breathing places are. When his fish is seized he makes a bee line under the ice for the nearest place where he can breathe and eat. Sometimes this lands him, out of breath, in the beaver's tunnel; and the beaver must sit upstairs in his own house, nursing his wrath, while Keeonekh eats fish in his hallway; for there is not room for both at once in the tunnel, and a fight there or under the ice is out of the question. As the beaver eats only bark—the white inner layer of “popple” bark is his chief dainty—he cannot understand and cannot tolerate this barbarian, who eats raw fish and leaves the bones and fins and the smell of slime in his doorway. The beaver is exemplary in his neatness, detesting all smells and filth; and this may possibly account for some of his enmity and his savage attacks upon Keeonekh when he catches him in a good place.