

THE WOODS OF MAINE

BY DALLAS LORE SHARP

I LAY listening to the rain spattering against the fly of the tent and dripping through the roof of birch leaves upon the sputtering fire and soaking down into the deep, spongy bottom of the forest—softly, as soft as something breathing and asleep. The guide and the boy beside me were asleep, but I had been awakened by the rain. The rain always wakens me. And in my grave, I think, if I lie sleeping under a roof of forest leaves, I shall wake and listen when it rains. Before the stars sang together the primordial waters made music to the rising land; before the winds came murmuring through the trees the waves were fingering the sweet-tuned sands strung down the sounding shores; and before the birds found their tongues, or the crickets their little fiddles, or even the toad had blown his quavering conch, it had rained! And when it rained—and not until it rained—the whole earth woke into song. Mother of music is the water, and, for me, the sweetest of her daughters is the rain, and never sweeter, not even on the shingles, nor down the rolled, fevered blades of the standing corn, than in the deep woods at night upon the low roof of your tent.

But suddenly the singing stopped, and the myriad rain-notes were turned to feet, tiny, stirring feet, creeping down the tent, skipping across the leaves, galloping over the forest floor, and jumping in and out of the fire. Then a twig snapped. Was that what had awakened me? I rose up on my elbow slowly. The tent flap was open; the woods were very dark, the dim light from above the roof of leaves and rain showing only shadows, and an ashen spot where the camp-fire still spluttered, and beyond

the ashen spot a shadow—different from the other shadows; a shape—a doe with big ears forward toward the fire! A bit of birch bark flared in the darkness, and the shape was gone. I could hear her moving through the ferns; hear her jump a fallen log and step out among the grating pebbles on the shore. Then all was still, except for the scampering rain, and the little red-backed wood-mouse among the camp tins, and the teeth of a porcupine chilled and chattering in the darkness at the big wood-mouse among the tins, and the rain running everywhere.

I dropped back upon my pillow and left off listening. How good the duffle-bag felt beneath my head! And the thick, springy bows of the fir beneath the bag, how good they felt—springs and mattress in one, laid underside up, evenly, and a foot deep, all over the tent floor! And how good they smelled! A bed of fir-balsam boughs is more than a bed; it is an oblation to Sleep, and not a vain oblation—after miles of paddling in live water or a day of trailing through the spruce and fir.

There's a long, long trail a-winding
runs the song—

Into the land of my dreams.

But, speaking of sleep, there is no trail, except a forest trail, that winds away to a land of such deep dreamlessness as that of a woodsman's sleep; and no sleep from which a man will waken half so fragrant and refreshing as his. I do not wish to be carried to the skies "on flowery beds of ease," but I should like

this fir-balsam bed, for two or three weeks every summer, in the woods of Maine. A reasonable and a wholesome wish that, as I lay there wrapped in the fragrant mantle of my couch, I coveted for city sleepers everywhere.

The odors (we should spell them with a "u")—the odours of the big woods are so clean and pure and prophylactic! They clear the clogged senses, and keep them in a kind of antiseptic bath, washing a coated tongue as no wine can wash it; and tingling along the most snarled of nerves, straightening, tempering, tuning them till the very heart is timed to the singing of the firs. My bed of boughs was a full foot deep, covering every inch of the bottom of the tent, fresh cut that evening, and so bruised with the treading as we laid them that their smell, in the close, rainy air of the night, filled the tent like a cloud. I lay and breathed—as if taking a cure, this tent being the contagious ward of the great hospital, the Out-of-Doors. All around me poured the heavy, penetrating vapor distilled from the gums, and resins, and oils, and sweet healing essences of the woods, mingled here in the tent with the aromatic balsam of the fir. I breathed it to the bottom of my lungs; but my lungs were not deep enough; I must breath it with hands and feet to get it all; but they were not enough. Then a breeze swept by the tent, pausing to lay its mouth over my mouth, and, catching away my little breath, breathed for me its own big breath, until my very bones, like the bones of the birds, were breathing, and every vein ran redolent of the breath of the fir.

That breeze blew the sharp, pungent smell of wood smoke past the tent. I caught it eagerly—the sweet smoke of the cedar logs still smoldering on the fire. There was no suggestion of hospitals in this whiff, but camps, rather, and kitchens, altars, caves, the smoke of whose ancient fires is still strong in our nostrils and cured into the very substance of our souls.

I wonder if our oldest racial memory

may not be that of fire, and if any other form of fire, a coal off any other altar, can touch the imagination as the coals of a glowing camp-fire. And I wonder if any other odor takes us farther down our ancestral past than the smell of wood smoke, and if there is another smoke so sweet as cedar smoke, when the thin, faint wraith from the smoldering logs curls past your tent on the slow wind of the woods and drifts away.

It does not matter of what the fire is built. I can still taste the spicy smoke of the sage-brush in my last desert camp. And how hot that sage-brush fire! And as sweet as the spicy sage, is the smell in my nostrils of the cypress and gum in my camp-fires of the South. Swamp or desert or forest, the fire is the lure—the light, the warmth, the crackle of the flames, and the mystic incense of the smoke rising as a sweet savor to the deities of the woods and plains.

It is the camp-fire that lures me to the woods when I might go down to the sea. I love the sea. Perhaps I fear it more; and perhaps I have not yet learned to pitch my tent and build my fire upon the waves; certainly I have not yet got used to the fo'c's'le smell. For, of all foul odors known to beast or man, the indescribable stench of the fo'c's'le is to me the worst. What wild wind of the ocean can blow that smell away? When bilges are sprayed with attar of roses, and fo'c's'les sheathed in sandalwood, and sailors given shower-baths and open fires, I shall take a vacation before the mast; but until then give me the woods and my fir-bough bed, and my fire of birch and cedar logs, and the rain upon my tent.

When I woke at dawn it was still raining; and off and on all day it rained, spoiling our plans for the climb up Spencer Mountain and keeping us close to camp and the drying fire. The forest here at the foot of the mountain was a mixed piece of old-growth timber, that had been logged for spruce and pine some years before—as every mile of the forest of Maine has been logged—yet so



CURIOSITY AND ALARM IN EVERY LINE OF HIS TENSE BODY

low and spongy was the bottom that the timber seems to have overgrown and long since ceased to be fit for lumber, so that most of it was left standing when the lumber-jacks went through. We were camped by the side of Spencer Pond in the thick of these giant trees—yellow birch, canoe birch, maple and spruce, hemlock and fir and pine—where the shade was so dense and the forest floor so strewn with fallen trees that only the club mosses, and the sphagnum, and a few of the deep-woods flowers could grow. The rain made little difference to my passage here, so low were these lesser forest forms under the perpetual un-

brage of the mighty trees, and I came back from as far in as I dared to venture on so dull a day, my clothes quite dry, but my spirit touched with a spell of the forest, which I should have missed had the sun been shining and the points of the compass clear.

For in the big woods one is ever conscious of direction, a sense that is so exaggerated in the deepest bottoms, especially when only indirect, diffused light fills the shadowy spaces, as to border on fear. I am never free, in a strange forest, from its haunting Presence; so close to it that I seem to hear it; seem able to touch it; and when, for a moment of some minor

interest or excitement, I have forgotten to remember and, looking up, find the Presence gone from me, I am seized with sudden fright. What other panic comes so softly, yet with more terrible swift-ness? And once the maze seizes you, once you begin to meet yourself, find yourself running the circle of your back tracks, the whole mind goes to pieces and madness is upon you.

"Set where you be and holler till I come get ye, if ye're lost," the guide would say. "Climb a tree and holler; don't run around like a side-hill gouger, or you're gone."

I do not know what sort of animal is Johnny's side-hill gouger; though I saw, one day, far up on the side of the mountain a big bare spot where he had been digging—according to the guide. It is enough for me that there is such a beast in the woods, and that he gets those who turn round and round in the forest on rainy days and forget to look up.

The gouger was abroad in the woods to-day. The clouds hung at the base of the mountains, just above the tops of the trees; the rain came straight down; the huge fallen trunks lay everywhere criss-cross; and once beyond the path to the spring the semi-gloom blurred every trail and put at naught all certainty of direction. But how this fear sharpened the senses and quickened everything in the scene about me! I was in the neighborhood of danger, and every dull and dormant faculty became alert. Nothing would come from among the dusky trees to harm me; no bear, or lynx, or moose, for they would run away; it was the dusk itself, and the big trees that would not run away; and I watched them furtively as they drew nearer and nearer and closed in deeper about me. I knew enough to "set down and holler" if I got turned hopelessly around; but this very knowledge of weakness, of inability to cope alone with these silent, sinister forces, woke all my ancient fears and called back that brood of more than fabled monsters from their caves and fens and forest lairs.

This was the real woods, however, deep, dark, and primeval, and no mere fantasy of fear. It looked even older than its hoary years, for the floor was strewn with its moldering dead, not one generation, but ages of them, form under form, till only long, faint lines of greener moss told where the eldest of them had fallen an æon since and turned to earth. Time leaves on nothing its failing marks so deeply furrowed as upon men and trees, and here in the woods upon no other trees so deeply as upon the birches. Lovely beyond all trees in their shining, slender youth, they grow immeasurably aged with the years, especially the yellow birch, whose grim, grizzled boles seemed more like weathered columns of stone than living trees.

One old monster, with a hole in his base that a bear might den in, towering till his shoulders overtopped the tallest spruce, stood leaning his gnarled hands upon the air, as a bent and aged man leans with his knotty hands upon a cane. A hundred years he might have been leaning so; a hundred years more he might continue in his slow decline, till, with a crash, he falls to lie for a hundred years across a prostrate form that fell uncounted years before.

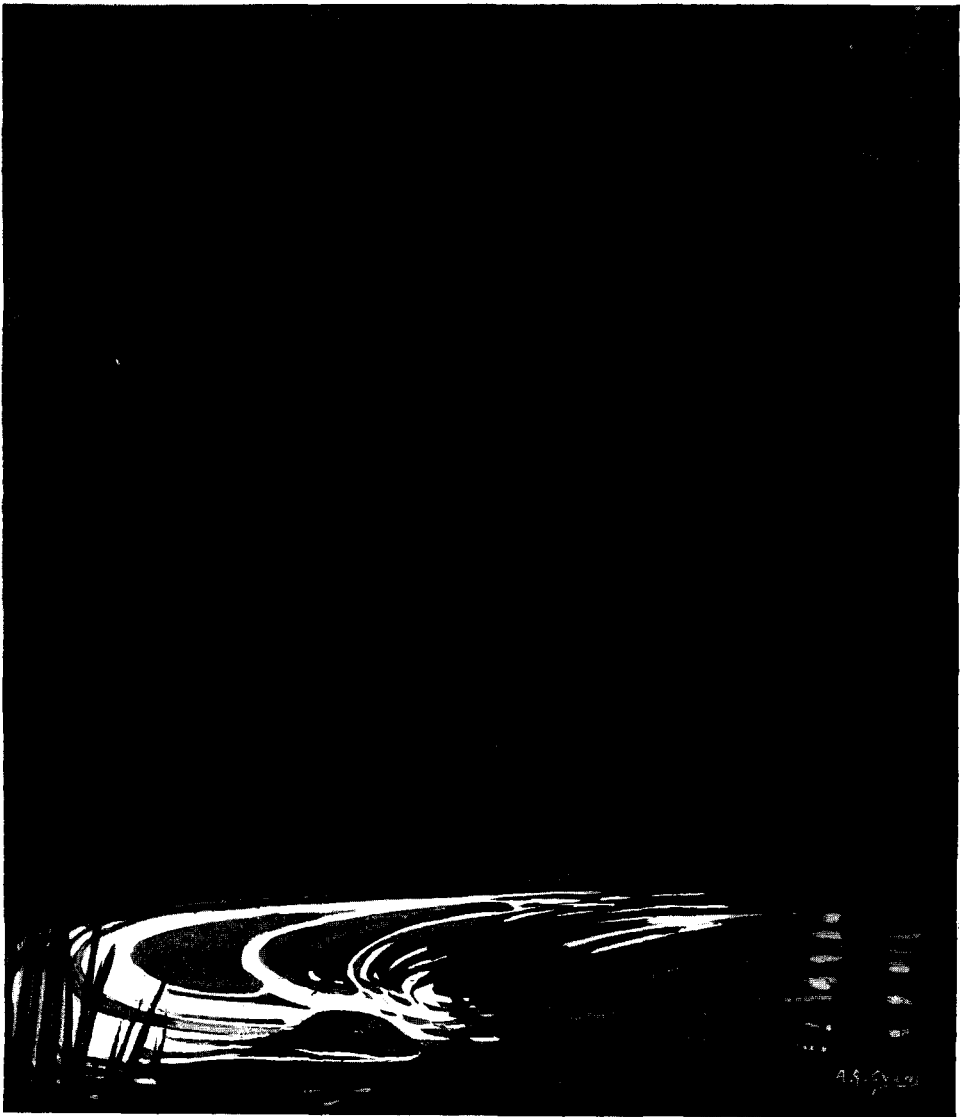
I was standing on the tough, hollow rind of such a birch, so long, long dead that its carcass had gone to dust, leaving only this empty shell that looked like a broken, half-buried piece of aqueduct. It was neither tree nor pipe; however, but the House of Porcupines, as I could plainly hear by the grunting inside. A pile of droppings at the door of the house told the story of generations of porkies going in and out before the present family came into their inheritance. I knocked on the rubbery walls with my foot, but not hard, for I might break through and hurt Mother or Father Porky, or possibly the baby that I saw along the pond that night. No careful, right-minded person steps on or hurts a poreupine in any manner.

I went on out of the sound of their teeth, for chattering teeth are not consol-

ing, and the woods were gray enough. Gray and vast and magnificently ruinous, yet eternally new they were, the old walls slowly crumbling, and over them, out of their heaped disorder, the fresh walls rising to the high-arched roof that never falls. To-day the deep, hollow halls were shut to me by the arras of the gloom, and so smoky rolled the rain beneath the roof that even the black rafters of the birches were scarcely visible; but all the

closer about me, in the wildest wealth and splendor, lay the furniture of the forest floor.

Never were woofs dyed and woven with a pile so rich and deep as the cover of mosses and lichens that carpeted this rude, cluttered floor. Rolled and wrinkled and heaped up over the stumps, it lay, nowhere stretched, nowhere swept, a bronze and green and gold ground, figured and flowered endlessly; and down



THE MUSKRAT'S WAKE BRINGS LIGHT AND STIR INTO THE DARK SILENCE



THE CARPET OF THE WOODS IS WOVEN OF MOSSES, LICHENS
AND MUSHROOMS

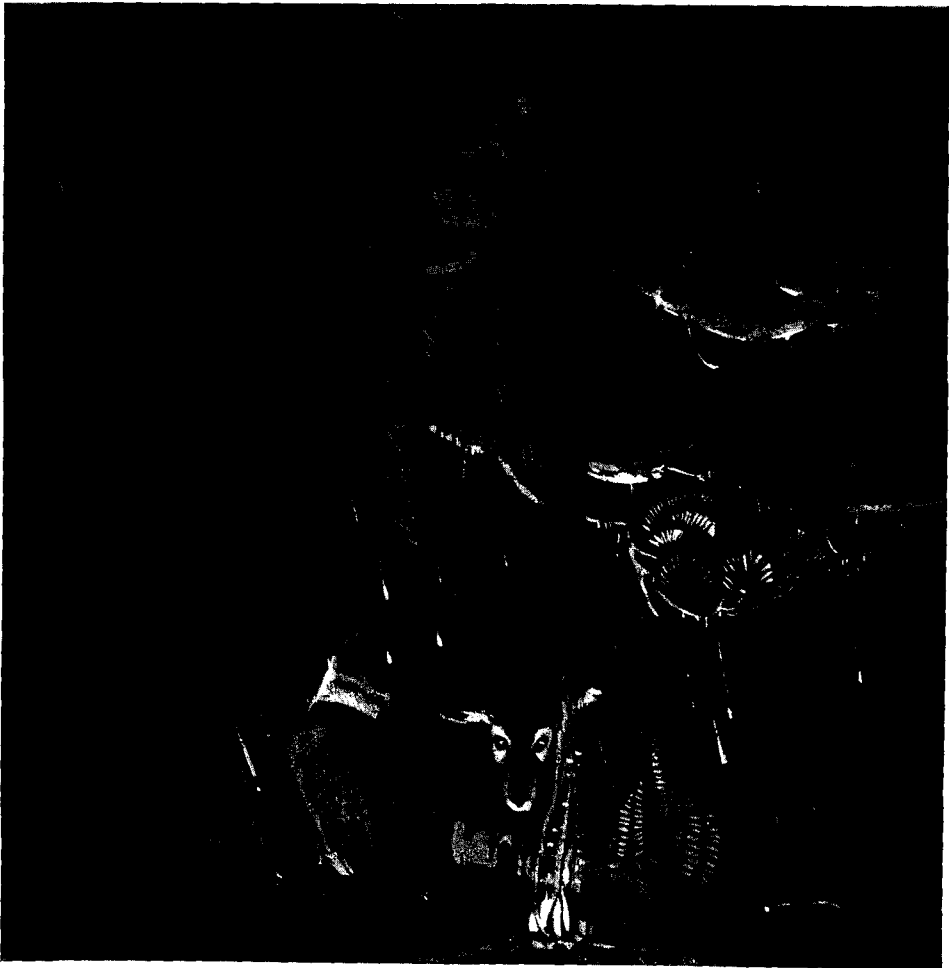
the longest, deepest wrinkle a darkling little stream! It was a warp of sphagnum moss with woof of lichens, liverworts, ferns, mushrooms, club mosses, and shy flowers of the shadows, that was woven for the carpet—long, vivid runners of lycopodium, the fingered sort, or club moss, and its fan-leaved cousin, the ground pine, now in fruit, its clusters of spikes like tiny candelabra standing ready to be lighted all over the floor; and

everywhere, on every tree-trunk, stump, and log, and stone the scale mosses, myriads of them, in blotches of exquisite shapes and colors, giving the gray-green tone to the walls as the sphagnums gave the vivid bronze-green to the floor. Down to about the level of my head, the dominant note in the color scheme of the walls, hung the gray reindeer moss, tufts and shreds and pointed bunches of it like old men's grizzled beards. Some

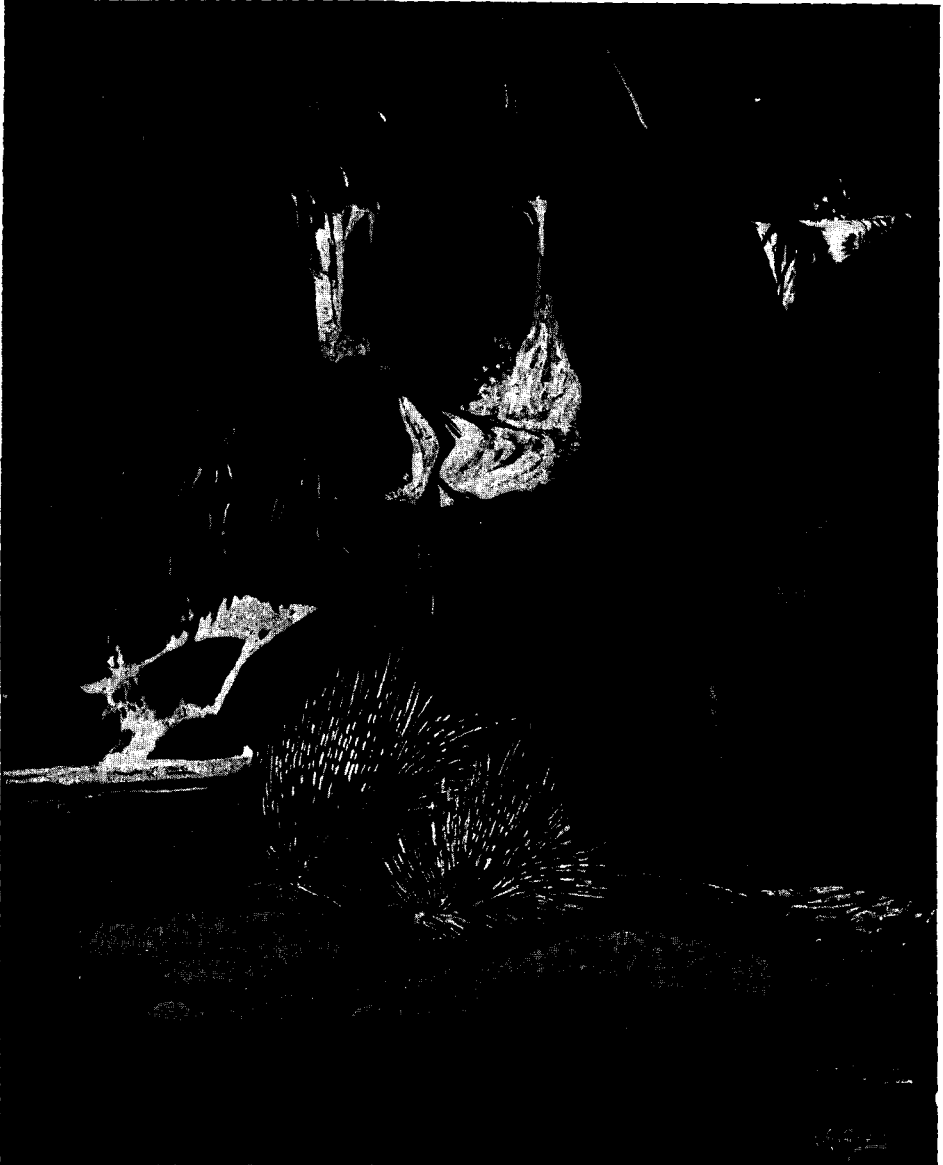
of the spruces and twisted cedars were covered with it. Shorter in staple than the usnea of the South, stiffer and lighter in color, it is far less somber and funereal; but a forest bearded with it looks older than time. This moss is the favorite winter food of the moose and caribou and deer, and so clean had they eaten it from the trees, up as high as they could reach, that the effect on a clear day was as if a thin gray fog had settled in the forest at an even six-foot level from the ground.

Worked in among the lichens and mosses, quite without design, were the deep-woods flowers—patches of gold thread, beds of foam-flower and deli-

cate wood-sorrel and the brilliant little bunchberry. Wherever the sunlight had a chance to touch the cold, boggy bottom it seemed to set the punk on fire and blaze up into these scarlet berries, stumps, and knolls, and slopes aflame with them, to burn on through the gloom until they should be smothered by the snow. Twin-flower and partridge-berry were laced in little mats about the bases of the trees; here and there the big red fruit of trillium and the nodding blue berries of clintonia were mixed in a spot of gay color with berries of the twisted stalk, the wild lily-of-the-valley, and the fiery seed-balls of the Indian turnip.



INVESTIGATING THE SIGN OF THE HUMAN INVADER



THE PORCUPINE READING HER BABY A LECTURE ON MANNERS

These touches of color were like the effect of flowers about a stately, somber room, for this was an ancient and a solemn house of mighty folk. If the little people came to dwell in the shadow of these noble great they must be content with whatever crumbs of sunshine fell from the heaven-spread table over them to the damp and moldering floor. There

were corners so dark that only the coral orchid and the Indian pipe pushed up through the mat of leaves; and other spots, half open to the sky, where the cinnamon fern and the lady fern waved their lovely plumes, and the wood fern, the beech, the oak, and the crested shield ferns grew together, forced thus to share the scanty light dropped

to them from the overflowing feast above.

But I never saw mushrooms in such marvelous shapes and colors and in such indescribable abundance as here. The deep forest was like a natural cavern for them, its cold, dank twilight feeding their elfin lamps until the whole floor was lighted with their ghostly glow. Clearest and coldest burned the pale-green amanita, and with it, surpassingly beautiful in color and design, the egg-topped muscaria, its baleful taper in a splotched and tinted shade of blended orange yellows, fading softly toward the rim. Besides these, and shorter on their stems, were white and green and purple russulas, and great burning red ones, the size of large poinsettia blooms; and groups of brown boletus, scattered golden chanterelles, puff-balls, exquisite coral clusters, and, strangest of them all, like handfuls of frosted fog, the snowy medusa. These last I gathered for my lunch, together with some puff-balls and a few campestris, whose spores, I suppose, may have been brought into the woods with the horses when this tract was lumbered years ago. But I had little appetite for mushrooms. It was the sight of them, dimly luminous in the rain, that held me, their squat lamps burning with a spectral light which filled the dusky spaces of the forest full of goblin gloom.

As I sat watching the uncanny lights there was a rush of small feet down the birch at my back, a short stop just above my head, and a volley of windy talk that might have blown out every elf light in the neighborhood. It was very sudden and, breaking into the utter stillness, it was almost startling. A moose could hardly have made more noise. I said nothing back nor took any notice of him. He could kick up the biggest sort of a rumpus if he wished to, for the woods needed it. I only wondered that he had a tongue, dwelling forever here in this solitude. But a red squirrel's tongue is equal to any solitude, and more than once I have caught him talking

against it, challenging the silence of all outdoors, as I have seen small boys challenge each other to a blating-match.

By and by I turned, and so startled him that he dropped a cluster of green berries from his mouth almost upon my head. It was a large bunch of arborvitæ berries that he was going to store away, for, though he sleeps much of the winter, he is an inveterate hoarder, working overtime, down the summer, as if the approaching winter were to be seven lean years long.

I was glad he had not obtruded earlier, but now he reminded me properly that it was long past noon, and high time for me to get back to camp. It was later than I thought, for the woods had gradually grown lighter, the rain had almost ceased, and by the time I reached camp had stopped altogether. While we were at supper the sun broke through on the edge of the west and ran the rounded basin of the pond over-full with gold. I stepped down to the shore to watch the glorious closing of the day. The clouds had lifted nearly to the tops of the mountains, where their wings were still spread, feathering the sky with gray for far around; a few fallen plumes lying snowy white upon the dark slopes of the lesser hills; then pouring down the hills into the pond, splashing over the gleaming mountains and up against the sky, burst the flood of golden light with indescribable glory.

"All ready," said the guide, touching me on the arm, and I stepped into the bow of the canoe as he pushed quietly off. An Indian never moved with softer paddle, nor ever did a birch-bark canoe glide off with the ease of this one under the hand of John Eastman, as we moved along in the close shadows of the shore.

The light was passing, but the flush of color still lay on the lovely face of the water with a touch of warmth and life that seemed little less than joy; a serene, but not a solemn joy, for there was too much girlish roundness and freshness to the countenance of the water, too much happiness in the little hills and woods

that watched her, and in the jealous old mountain that frowned darkly down. Mine, too, were the eyes of a lover, and in my heart was the lover's pain, for what had I to offer this eternal youth and loveliness?

The prow of the canoe swerved with a telling movement that sent my eyes quick to the shore, to see a snow-shoe rabbit racing down a little cove hard at me, with something—a stir of alder leaves, a sound of long, leaping feet making off into the swamp—that had been pursuing him. It was probably a wildcat that had leaped and missed the rabbit and seen us from within his covert. What lightning eyes and lightning legs, thus to leap and turn together! The rabbit had run almost to the canoe, and sat listening from behind a root at the edge of the water, ears straight up and body so tense with excitement that we nosed along close enough to touch him with a paddle before he had eyes and ears for us. Even then it was his twitching, sensitive nose that warned him, for his keen ears caught no sound; and, floating down upon him thus, we must have looked to his innocent eyes as much like a log or a two-headed moose as like men.

Softly in and out with the narrow fret of shadow that hemmed the margin of the pond swam the gray canoe, a creature of the water, a very part of our creature selves, our amphibious body, the form we swam with before the hills were born. Brother to the muskrat and the beaver, I stemmed along, as much at home as they among the pickerel-weed and the cow-lilies, and leaving across the silvery patches of the open water as silent a wake as they.

Nothing could move across such silvery quiet without a trail. So stirless was the water that the wake of a feeding fish was visible a hundred yards away. Within the tarnished smooches of the lily-pads a muskrat might move about and not be seen; but not a trout could swirl close to the burnished surface of the open water without a ripple that

ran whispering into every little inlet around the shore. The circle of the pond was almost perfect, so that I roved, at a glance, the whole curving shore-line, watching keenly for whatever might come down to feed or drink.

We came up to a patch of pickerel-weed and frightened a brood of half-grown sheldrakes that went rushing off across the water, kicking up a streak of suds and making a noise like the launching of a fleet of tiny ships. Heading into a little cove, we met a muskrat coming straight across our bows. A dip of the paddle sent us almost into her. A quicker dive she never made nor a more startling one, for the smack as she struck the water jumped me half out of the canoe. Her head broke the surface a dozen yards beyond us, and we followed her into the mouth of a stream and on to a hummock into which she swam as a boat swims under a bridge, or more as a train runs into a tunnel, for an arching hole opened into the mound, just above the level of the stream, through which she had glided out of sight. Hardly had she disappeared before she popped up again from deep under the mound, at the other side, and close to the canoe, starting back once more down-stream. She had dodged us. Her nose and eyes and ears were just above the water and a portion of her back; her bladelike tail was arched, its middle point, only, above the surface, its sheering, perpendicular edges doing duty as propeller, keel, and rudder all at once.

As she made off the guide squeaked shrilly with his lips. Instantly she turned and came back, swimming round and round the canoe, trying to interpret the sounds, puzzled to know how they could come from the canoe, and fearing that something might be wrong inside the house. She dived to find out. By this time two young ones had floated into the mouth of the tunnel, thinking their mother was calling them, blinking there in the soft light so close that I might have reached them with my hand. Satisfied that the family was in order, the old

rat reappeared, and no amount of false squeaking would turn her back.

A few bends up the stream and we heard the sound of falling water at the beaver dam. Fresh work had been done on the dam; but we waited in vain for a sight of the workers. They would not go on with their building. One of the colony (there were not more than two families of them, I think) swam across the stream, and came swiftly down to within a few feet of us, when, scenting us, perhaps, he warped short about and vanished among the thick bushes that trailed from the bank of the stream.

A black duck came over, just above our heads, with wings whirring like small airplane propellers, as she bore straight out toward the middle of the pond. We were passing a high place along the shore when a dark object, a mere spot of black, seemed to move off at the side of us against the white line of the pebbles, and I found that I was already being sent silently toward it. My pulse quickened, for the thing moved very slowly; and behind it a lesser blur that also moved—very slowly; so deep was the darkness of the overhanging trees, however, that the nose of the canoe plowed softly into the sand beside the creatures, and I had not made out the fat old porcupine, and, creeping a foot or two behind her, as if he might catch up by to-morrow, perhaps, the baby porky.

The old mother was feeding on bits of lily-pads washed up along the shore, picking them from among the stones with her paws as if she intended to finish her supper by to-morrow, perhaps, when her baby had covered the foot or two of space between them and caught up with her. She was so intent on this serious and deliberate business that she never looked up as I stopped beside her; she only grunted and chattered her teeth; but I disturbed the baby, apparently, for he speeded up, and pretty soon came alongside his mother, who turned savagely upon him and told him to mind his manners, which he did by humping

into a little heap, sticking his head down between two stones, and raying the young quills out across his back in a fan of spines. He didn't budge for about five minutes. Then he hurried again—right up beside the old one—a thing so highly improper in porkypinedom, and so deleterious to porkypine health, that she turned and, with another growl, humped her fat little porky again into a quiet and becoming bunch of quills. This time she read him a lecture on the "Whole Duty of Children." It was in the porcupine-pig language, and her teeth clicked so that I am not sure I got it verbatim, but I think she said, quite distinctly:

"A child should always say what's true,
And speak when he is spoken to,
And behave mannerly at table:
At least as far as he is able"—

for, seeing him so obediently and properly humped, she repented her of her severity and, reaching out with her left paw, picked up a nice, whole lily-pad and, turning half around, handed it to him as much as to say, "There, now; but chew it up very thoroughly, as you did the handle of the carving-knife in the camp last night."

It was a sweet glimpse into the family life of the woods; and as the canoe backed off and turned again downstream I was saying to myself:

"Every night my prayers I say,
And get my dinner every day,
And every day that I've been good
I get an orange after food"—

or a nice, round lily-pad.

The precious light was fading, and we had yet more than half the magic circle of the shore to round. As we passed out into the pond again a flock of roosting blackbirds whirred noisily from the "pucker-brush," or sweet-gale bushes, frightened by the squeal of the bushes against the sides of the canoe; and hardly had their whirring ceased when, ahead of me, his head up, his splendid

antlers tipped with fire, stood a magnificent buck. He had heard the birds, or had scented us, and, whirling in his tracks, curiosity, defiance, and alarm in every line of his tense, tawny body, stood for one eternal instant in my eye, when, shaking off his amazement, he turned and, bounding over the sweetgale and alders, went crashing into the swamp.

I had neither camera nor gun; but, better than both, I had eyes—not such good eyes as John Eastman's, for he could see in the dark—but mine with my spectacles were better than a camera; for mine are a moving-picture theater—screen, film, machine, and camera, all behind my spectacles, and this glorious creature for the picture, with the dark hills beyond, the meadowy margin of the pond in the foreground, and over the buck, and the pond, and the dark green hills, and over me a twilight that never was nor ever can be thrown upon a screen! I had come into the wilds of Maine without so much as a fish-line—though I have fished months of my life away, and am not unwilling to fish and shoot away a considerable portion of whatever time may still be left me. But am I not able, in these later days, to spend my time “in the solitude of this vast wilderness with other employments than those employments, perfectly sweet and innocent and ennobling? For one that comes with a pencil to sketch or sing, a thousand come with an ax or rifle. What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of nature! . . . Strange that so few ever come to the woods to see how the pine lives and grows and spires, lifting its evergreen arms to the light—to see its perfect success; but most are content to behold it in the shape of many broad boards

brought to market, and deem *that* its true success! . . . Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it.”

Thoreau did not teach me that truth, for every lover of life discovers it himself; but how long before me it was that he found it out, and how many other things besides it he found out here in the big woods! Three-quarters of a century ago he camped on Katahdin, and on Chesuncook, and down the Allegash; but now he camps wherever a tent is pitched or a fire is lighted in the woods of Maine. His name is on the tongue of every forest tree, and on every water, and over every carry at twilight may be seen his gray canoe and Indian guide.

The light had gone out of the sky. It was after nine o'clock. A deep purple had flowed in and filled the basin of the pond, thickening about its margins till nothing but the long chalk-marks of the birches showed double on the shore. The high, inverted cone of Spencer stood just in front of the canoe as we headed out across the pond toward the camp, its shadow and its substance only faint suggestions now, for all things had turned to shadow, the solid substance of the day having been dissolved in this purple flood and poured into the beaker of the night. A moose “barked” off on a marshy point near the dam behind us; a loon went laughing over, shaking the hollow sides of Spencer and all the echoing walls of the woods with his weird and mirthless cry. Against the black base of the mountain a faint bluish cloud appeared—the smoke of our camp-fire that, slowly sinking through the heavy air, spread out to meet us over the hushed and sleeping pond.

COMMAND

A NOVEL

BY WILLIAM McFEE

Author of *Casuals of the Sea*, *Captain Macdoine's Daughter*, etc.

VIII

MR. SPOKESLY sat at a little distance from the large table in the Transport Office and listened to the gentleman with four rings of gold lace on his sleeve. It was a lofty and desolate place in the yellow stucco building opposite the dock entrance. The transport officer was a naval captain, with a beard, a brisk, decisive manner, and a very foul brier pipe. He was explaining that they needed a third mate for a ship going to Basra and Mr. Spokesly would just do for the job if he would waive his right to a passage home and go to Port Said instead. It was at this point that Mr. Spokesly, rather shaky still from his immersion and extensively decorated with pieces of plaster, took a hand.

"No," he said and kept his gaze on the floor.

"Why not?" demanded the captain, very much astonished.

"No reason s' far as I know. But I'm not going third mate of anything, anywhere, any more. That's that."

"Well, of course we can't *force* you to go, you know. But we shall really have to draw the attention of the owners to the fact that you refused to volunteer."

Mr. Spokesly stood up. He was in a rage. Or, rather, he was resuming the rage which had assailed him when the *Tanganyika* was going down, and which had been suspended while he made good his claim on life. The smug way in which this bearded stranger disposed of him was intolerable. Mr. Spokesly

knew this man would never dream of sending one of his own caste to a third mate's job on a Persian Gulf coaster with the hot season coming on.

"Volunteer!" he repeated. "Excuse me, mister, I came home from outcast and took a second-mate job, there being nothing better about. I went mate when the other man died. I've had a master's ticket this ten years. Now you want me to go third mate. Where shall I end up? In the fore-castle? Volunteer! I can tell you, I'm beginning to regret I ever left Hong Kong."

"I see. Of course we can't help that, you know. You'd better go and see the Paymaster. Perhaps he can put you on a ship."

Mr. Spokesly took the cap, a size too large for him, which he had got on credit at Stein's Oriental Store, and went out. He was feeling very bitter. No man feels he is doing himself justice in clothes that are too large for him. Mr. Spokesly wanted to go away and hide until he could get rid of his enormous golf cap and the coat which hung on him, as he himself put it, like a bosun's shirt on a capstan bar. He went downstairs into the street. He would go to the Paymaster, who was in the Olympos Palace Hotel, and get the price of a drink, anyway. He put his hands in his pockets and whistled. His hand had closed over the ring. He thought of Archie, the shingly successful one, the paladin of pilferers, the financial genius, down among the crawfish and awaiting those things he saw on a stall just over there, eight-armed horrors with enormous bald