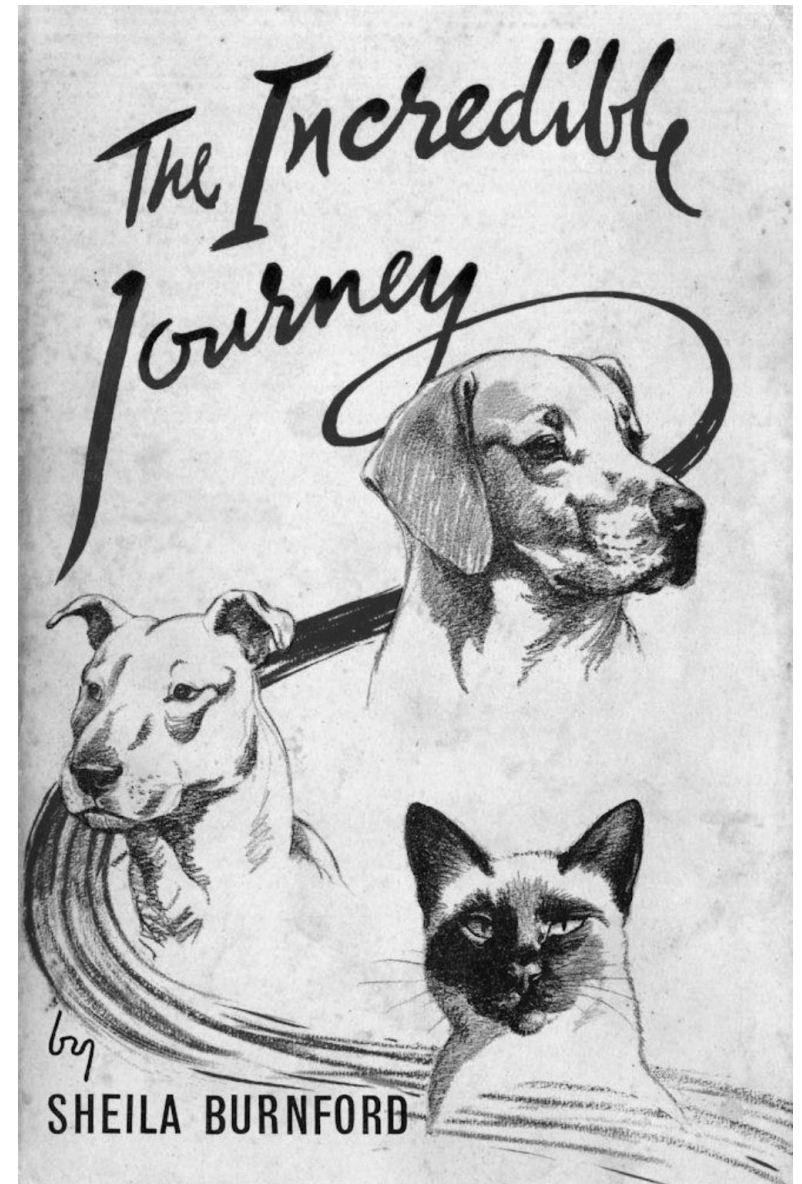


# The Incredible Journey

By Sheila Burnford © 1960

## Part 2





. . . apply it to the dark gashes on the old dog's shoulder.

## *Five*

THE TRIO journeyed on, the pattern of the next few days being very much the same, free of incident or excitement. Leaving their resting place at daylight, they would jog steadily along by day, their pace determined mainly by the endurance of the old dog. Their favourite sleeping places were hollows under uprooted trees where they were sheltered from the wind, and able to burrow down among the drifted leaves for warmth. At first there were frequent halts and rests, but daily the terrier became stronger; after a week he was lean, but the scars on his shoulders were healing, and his coat was smooth and healthy; in fact, he was in better condition and looked younger and fitter than at the outset of the journey. He had always had a happy disposition, and most of the time looked perfectly content, trotting along through the vast stillness of the bush with stolid, unalterable good humour. He was almost always hungry, but that skilful hunter the cat kept him provided with food which, while scarcely ever satisfying, was adequate by his new standard of living.

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It was only the famished young dog who really suffered, for he was not a natural hunter, and wasted a lot of ill-afforded energy in pursuit. He lived mainly on frogs, mice, and the occasional leavings of the other two; sometimes he was lucky enough to frighten some small animal away from its prey, but it was a very inadequate diet for such a large and heavily built dog, and his ribs were beginning to show through the shining coat. He was unable to relax, his constant hunger driving him to forage even when the other two were resting; and he never joined in their amiable foolery, when sometimes the cat would skitter away in pretended fear from the growling, wagging white dog, often ending in being chased up a tree. Then the Labrador would sit apart, aloof and watchful, nervous and tense. It seemed as though he were never able to forget his ultimate purpose and goal—he was going home; home to his own master, home where he belonged, and nothing else mattered. This lodestone of longing, this certainty, drew him to lead his companions ever westward through wild and unknown country, as unerringly as a carrier pigeon released from an alien loft.

Nomadic life seemed to agree with the cat. He was in fine fettle, sleek and well groomed and as debonair as ever, and had adapted himself so well that at times it appeared as though he were positively enjoying the whole expedition. Sometimes he left the other two

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for an hour or so at a time, but they had ceased to pay any attention to his absence now, as sooner or later he always reappeared.

They travelled mostly on old abandoned trails, astonishingly plentiful in this virtually uninhabited region; occasionally they cut straight through the bush. It was fortunate that the Indian summer weather still continued, for the short thin coat of the bull terrier could not withstand low temperatures, and although a thicker undercoat was already growing in to compensate, it would never be adequate. The cat's coat, too, was thickening, making him appear heavier; the Labrador's needed no reinforcement and was already adapted to all extremes, the flat, thick hairs so close together that they made an almost waterproof surface. The short days were warm and pleasant when the sun was high, but the nights were cold: one night, when there was a sudden, sharp frost, the old dog shivered so much that they left the shallow cave of their resting place soon after a bright-ringed moon rose, and travelled through the remainder of the night, resting most of the following morning in the warmth of the sun.

The leaves were losing their colour rapidly, and many of the trees were nearly bare, but the dogwood and pigeon-berry by the sides of the trail still blazed with colour, and the Michaelmas daisies and fireweed flourished. Many of the birds of the forest had already

migrated; those that were left gathered into great flocks, filling the air with their restless chatter as they milled around, the long drawn-out streamers suddenly wheeling to form a clamorous cloud, lifting and falling in indecision. They saw few other animals: the noisy progress of the dogs warned the shy natural inhabitants long before their approach; and those that they did meet were too busy and concerned with their winter preparations to show much curiosity. The only other bear that they had encountered was sleek and fat as butter, complacent and sleepy, his thoughts obviously already running on hibernation, and quite uninterested in strange animals. He was, in fact, sitting on a log in the sun when the animals saw him; after giving them a sleepy inspection from his little, deep-set eyes he yawned and continued the lazy scratching of his ear. The cat, however, growled angrily to himself for nearly an hour after this encounter.

The rabbits and weasels had changed to their white winter coats; a few snow buntings had appeared, and several times they had heard the wild, free, exultant calling of the wild geese, and had looked up to see the long black V-shaped skeins passing overhead on the long journey southwards. The visitors to the northlands were leaving, and those who remained were preparing themselves for the long winter that lay ahead. Soon the whole tempo, the very pulse of the

North, would beat slower and slower until the snow fell like a soft coverlet; then, snug and warm beneath in dens and burrows and hollows, the hibernating animals would sleep, scarcely breathing in their deep unconsciousness, until the spring.

As though aware of these preparations and their meaning, the three adventurers increased their pace as much as was possible within the limits determined by the old dog's strength. On good days they covered as much as fifteen miles.

Since they had left the Indian encampment on the shores of the rice lake they had not seen any human beings, or any sign of human habitation, save once at nightfall when they were nosing around a garbage can outside the darkened cookhouse of a lumber camp deep in the very heart of the bush. Marauding bears had been there recently—their rank, heavy smell still hung on the air, and the cat refused to come nearer, but the old dog, watched by the other, tipped over the heavy can, then tried to pry off the lid with a practised nose. The can rattled and banged loudly on some rocks and neither dog heard the door opening in the dark building behind. Suddenly a blast of shot ripped through the bottom of the can, blowing the lid off and strewing the contents all over the old dog. Deafened and stunned, he stood for a moment, shaking his head; a second shot clanged against metal and brought him to his senses—he grabbed a bone in passing from the

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plenty strewn all around, and dashed after the Labrador, running so fast that he outdistanced him. A spray of pellets followed, stinging into their hindquarters so that they leaped simultaneously and redoubled their speed. Soon they were in the shelter of the bush, but it was a long time before they halted for the night. The old dog was so exhausted that he slept until dawn. The pellets had been only momentarily painful, but the incident increased the young dog's wary nervousness.

However, a few days later, despite his care, they had another unexpected encounter. They were drinking at midday from a shallow ford crossing an overgrown track to a worked-out silver mine when a cottontail started up in the bracken across the water. The young dog sprang after, drenching the other two, and they watched the chase—the rabbit's head up, the dog's down, linked in a swerving, leaping rhythm of almost ballet-like precision—until it disappeared among the trees.

The terrier shook his coat, spraying the cat again; furious, the cat stalked off.

Alone now, with a brief moment of freedom from the constant daytime urging, the old dog made the most of it. He pottered happily around the lichened rocks and mossy banks, savouring everything with his delicate connoisseur's nose; he flicked the caps of several large fawn mushrooms in some displeasure; a shiny black beetle received his keen attention for a

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while and he followed it like a bloodhound. Presently he lost interest and sat on it. He yawned, scratched his ear, then rolled lazily on a patch of dried mud. Suddenly he lay quite still, his paws dangling limply, his head turned back on the ground towards the trail: he freed a crumpled ear to listen more intently, then his tail registered his pleased anticipation—someone was walking through the bush towards him. He scrambled to his feet and peered shortsightedly down the trail, his tail curving his hindquarters from side to side in welcome. When an old man carrying a canvas bag appeared, talking quietly to himself, the bull terrier stepped out and awaited him. The old man did not pause: small and bent, he hobbled quickly past, lifting an ancient green felt hat from a crown of white hair as he went, and nodding to the dog with a brief smile of great sweetness. Two little grey-and-white chickadees preceded him, flitting from branch to branch over his head. The old dog fell in contentedly behind. Soon the cat appeared in the distance, running to catch up, his eyes on the chickadees; and far behind the cat again, his mouth framed around the dangling carcass of a rabbit, came the triumphant but deeply suspicious Labrador.

The straggling procession continued along the cool, green tunnel of the trail for half a mile, until the trees thinned out and they came upon a small cabin set back in a clearing within sight of the derelict mine workings. They passed, one after the other, through a small, neatly

raked garden, between brown raspberry canes and leafless apple trees, and walked slowly up the few steps to the porch. Here the old man set his bag down, knocked on the green door, paused, then opened it, standing courteously aside to motion his following in before him. The old dog walked in, the cat closely by his shoulder, then the man. The young dog hesitated by the trail's side, his eyes round and distrustful above his burden, then, apparently reassured by the open door, he carefully laid the rabbit down behind a bush, scratching a layer of leaves over it, and, this done, followed the others. They stood in an expectant ring in the middle of the cabin, savouring a delicious, meaty smell.

They watched the old man brush the brim of his hat, hang it on a peg, then hobble over to a small, gleaming wood stove and thrust in another log, washing his hands afterwards in a basin filled from a dipper of water. He lifted the lid off a pot simmering on the stove, and the three watchers licked their lips in anticipation. As he took down four gold-rimmed plates from a dresser, a chipmunk appeared from behind a blue jug on the top shelf. Chattering excitedly he ran up the man's arm to his shoulder, where he sat and scolded the strangers with bright jealous eyes, his little striped body twitching with fury. Two gleaming lamps appeared in the darkness of the cat's face and his tail swished in response, but he restrained himself in deference to his surroundings.

The old man chided the chipmunk lovingly as he set four places at the table, handing it a crust which bulged its cheeks, then ladling four very small portions of stew on to the plates. The little animal's noise fell away to an occasional disgruntled squeak, but he ran from shoulder to shoulder to keep watch on the cat. The old dog edged nearer. Looking very small behind a high-backed chair, the old man stood for a moment with his clear, childlike blue eyes closed and his lips moving, then drew out his chair and sat down. He looked around the table, suddenly irresolute; then his brow cleared, and he rose to draw up the two remaining chairs and a bench. "Do sit down," he said, and at the familiar command the three animals behind him sat obediently.

He ate slowly and fastidiously. Two pairs of hypnotized eyes followed every movement of the fork to his mouth; the third pair remained fixed on the chipmunk. Presently the plate was empty, and the old man smiled around the table; but his smile turned again to bewilderment as he saw the three untouched plates. He considered them long and thoughtfully, then shrugged his shoulders and moved on to the next place. Soon that too came to its confusing end, and, sighing, he moved again. Spell-bound, his visitors remained rooted to the floor. Even the old dog, for once, was nonplussed: although he shivered in anticipation and saliva ran from his mouth at the enticing smell,

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he remained sitting as custom and training decreed.

The old man sat on when the last plate was emptied, lost in his own world, his peaceful stillness diffusing through the little cabin so that the watchers sat graven in their places. A little wind stirred outside, swinging the door wide open on creaking hinges. A grosbeak flew in, to perch on the top, the mellow autumn sunshine slanting on his brilliant plumage, and it seemed as though the living silence of the great forest around surged up and in through the open door with the bird's coming, so that the animals stirred uneasily, glancing behind them.

The chipmunk's shrill voice cut through the silence, and its claws scabbled up the dresser as the cat half sprang—but recollected himself in time and slipped out of the door after the grosbeak instead. In a sudden awakening the old man had started to his feet; he looked around as though wondering where he was, his eyes lighting in surprise on the two dogs by the door. Slow recognition dawned on his face and he smiled down affectionately though his gaze looked through and beyond them. "You must come more often," he said; and to the old dog, who stood wagging his tail at the gentle warmth in the voice, "Remember me most kindly to your dear mother!"

He escorted the dogs to the door; they filed past him, their tails low and still, then walked slowly and with great dignity down the little winding path between the

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raspberry canes and the apple trees to the overgrown track. Here they waited for a moment while the young dog furtively uncovered his prize, and the cat joined them; then, without looking back, they trotted in close formation out of sight between the trees.

A quarter of a mile farther on the young dog looked carefully around before dropping his rabbit. He nudged it with his nose several times, then turned it over. A moment later its red-stained fur lay scattered and both dogs were eating ravenously, growling amicably as they crunched. The cat sat, flexing his claws as he watched. After a while he rose on his hind legs and stretched his forepaws to their full extent against a tree, then methodically sharpened their claws on the bark. His head turned sharply and he paused, still standing, at a rustle in the long dead grass: a split second later he pounced in a bounding arc; a paw flashed out, pinned down and held, his head bent down; and a small squeaking broke off abruptly. Before the dogs were even aware that he had gone he was back again by his tree, cleaning his whiskers with soft rounded paws.

The following day the travellers came down from the hills to find themselves on the banks of a river running north and south. It was about a hundred feet across to the far bank, and although shallow enough in the ordinary way, was far too deep for the animals to cross

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without swimming. The young dog led the way downstream for some distance looking for a means of crossing, as it was obvious that his companions would not even wet their feet if they could possibly help it, both sharing a great dislike of water. Once or twice he plunged in and swam around, looking back at the other two, obviously trying to entice them by showing them how easy it was, but they remained sitting close together on the bank, united in misery, and he was forced to continue trotting downstream, becoming increasingly worried as he went, aware that it was the wrong direction.

It was lonely, uninhabited country, so that there were no bridges, and the river if anything became wider as they trotted along the banks. After three or four miles the young dog could endure the frustration no longer; he plunged into the water and swam rapidly and strongly across to the far side, his tail streaming out behind like an otter's. He loved the water, and was as much at home in it as the other two hated and feared it. He stood on the far bank, barking encouragingly, but the old dog whined in such distress, the cat yowling in chorus, that he swam across again, paddling around in the shallows near the bank. The old dog walked gingerly into the shallow water, shivering and miserable, turning his head away. Once more the Labrador swam the river, climbed out on the far side, shook himself, and barked. There was no mistaking the

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command. The old dog took another reluctant step forward, whining piteously, his expressive tail tucked under. The barking continued; again the terrier advanced; again the Labrador swam across to encourage him. Three times he swam across, and the third time the old dog waded in up to his chest and started swimming. He was not a very good swimmer; he swam in jerky rapid movements, his head held high out of the water, his little black eyes rolling fearfully; but he was a bull terrier, a "white cavalier", and he kept on, following the wake of the other, until at last he climbed out on the far side. His transports of joy on reaching dry land were like those of a shipwrecked mariner after six weeks at sea on a raft: he rushed in circles, he rolled on his back, he ran along with alternate shoulders low in the long grass to dry himself, until finally he joined the Labrador on the bank to bark encouragingly at the cat.

The poor cat now showed the first signs of fear since leaving on his journey; he was alone, and the only way to rejoin his friends lay in swimming across the terrible stretch of water. He ran up and down the bank, all the time keeping up his unearthly Siamese wailing. The young dog went through the same tiring performance that he had used before, swimming to and fro, trying to entice him into the water; but the cat was beside himself with terror and it was a long long time before he finally made up his mind. When he did it was with a



sudden blind desperate rush at the water, completely un-catlike. His expression of horror and distaste was almost comical as he started swimming towards the young dog who waited for him a few yards out. He proved to be a surprisingly good swimmer, and was making steady progress across, the dog swimming alongside, when tragedy struck.

Many years before a colony of beavers had dammed a small creek which had tumbled into the river about two miles upstream. Since the beavers had left, the dam had been crumbling and loosening gradually, until it had become just a question of time before it would give way altogether, and drain the flooded land behind. Now, by a twist of fate, a rotting log gave way and a large section bulged forward under the added strain. Almost as the two animals reached midstream the dam broke altogether. The pent-up force of the unleashed creek leaped through the gap in an ever-widening torrent, carrying everything before it and surging into the river, where it became a swift mountainous wave—carrying small trees, torn-away branches, pieces of riverbank, and beaver dam before it on the crest. The young dog saw the onrushing wave several moments before it reached them, and frantically tried to swim into a position upstream of the cat, instinctively trying to protect him; but he was too late, and the great curling, crested wave surged over, submerging them in a whirling chaos of debris. The end of a log struck

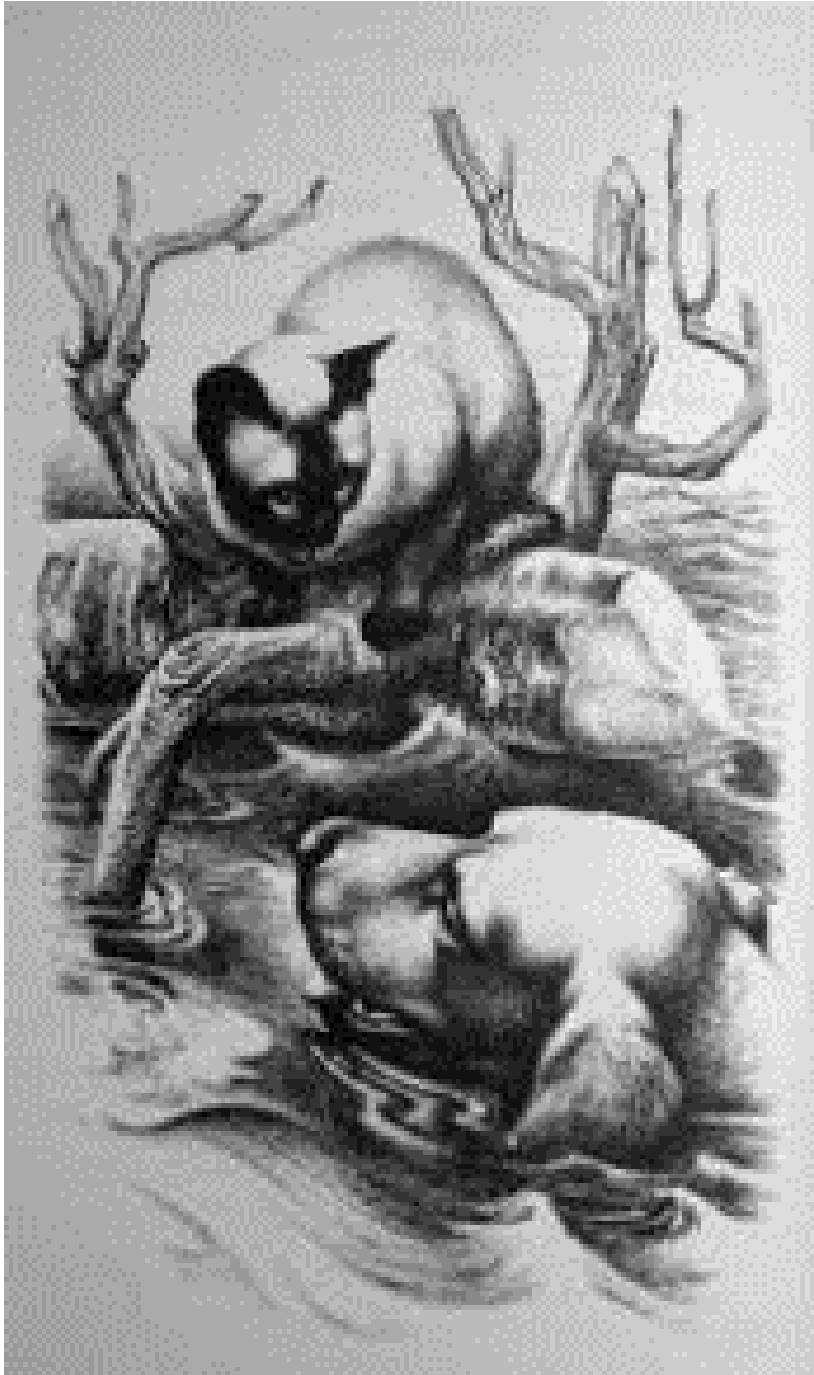
the cat full on the head; he was swept under and over and over until his body was finally caught on a half-submerged piece of the old dam, and was carried along on the impetus of the wave as it tore down the river bed.

The old dog, barking wildly in anxiety—for he had sensed the disaster although he could not see it—waded chest-deep into the churning water, but its force knocked him back again, breathless and choking; he was forced to retreat.

The other dog, strong swimmer though he was, made his way to the bank only with the greatest difficulty. Even then he was carried almost half a mile downstream before his feet were on firm ground. Immediately he set off, down the riverside, in pursuit.

Several times he saw the little figure of the cat, half under water, surging ahead on the swift white crest; but he was never near enough, except at one point where the partially submerged piece of beaver dam caught on an overhanging branch. He plunged in immediately; but just as he was nearly within reach it tore free and once more went whirling down the river until it was lost to sight.

Gradually the dog fell farther and farther behind. At last he was brought to a complete halt when the river entered a rocky gorge with no foothold on either side. He was forced to climb inland, and by the time he rejoined the river on the far side of the gorge there was no sign of the cat.



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It was nearly dark when he returned to find the terrier who was walking wearily towards him along the river-bank; the Labrador was exhausted, limping, and utterly spent and miserable—so much so that he barely returned the greeting of the bewildered and lonely old dog but dropped to the ground, his flanks heaving, and lay there until thirst drove him to the water's edge.

They spent that night where they were, by the bank of the river, peaceful at last after the violence of the afternoon. They lay curled closely together for comfort and warmth, and when a thin, cold rain fell as the wind rose they moved under the spreading branches of an old spruce for shelter.

In the middle of the night the old dog sat up, trembling all over with cold. He threw his head back and howled his requiem of grief and loneliness to the heavy, weeping sky; until at last the young dog rose wearily and led him away from the river, long before dawn broke, and over the hills to the west.

## *Six*

MANY MILES downstream on the side to which the dogs had crossed, a small cabin stood near the bank of the river, surrounded by three or four acres of cleared land, its solid, uncompromising appearance lightened only by the scarlet geraniums at the window sills and a bright blue door. A log barn stood back from it, and a steam-bath house at the side nearer the river. The patch of vegetable garden, the young orchard and the neatly fenced fields, each with their piles of cleared boulders and stumps, were small orderly miracles of victory won from the dark encroaching forest that surrounded them.

Reino Nurmi and his wife lived here, as sturdy and uncompromising as the cabin they had built with their own hand-hewn logs, their lives as frugal and orderly as the fields they had wrested from the wilderness. They had tamed the bush, and in return it yielded them their food and their scant living from trap lines and a wood lot, but the struggle to keep it in subjection was endless. They had retained their Finnish identity

complete when they left their homeland, exchanging only one country's set of solitudes and vast lonely forests for another's, and as yet their only real contact with the new world that lay beyond their property line was through their ten-year-old daughter Helvi, who knew no other homeland. Helvi walked the lonely miles to the waiting school bus each day, and through her they strengthened their roots in the security of the New World, and were content meanwhile with horizons limited by their labour.

On the Sunday afternoon that the beaver dam broke, a day of some relaxation, Helvi was down by the river, skipping flat stones across the water, and wishing that she had a companion; for she found it difficult to be entirely fair in a competition always held against herself. The riverbank was steep and high here, so she was quite safe when a rushing torrent of water, heralded by a great curling wave, swept past. She stood watching it, fascinated by the spectacle, thinking that she must go and tell her father, when her eye was caught by a piece of debris that had been whirling around in a back eddy and was now caught on some boulders at the edge of the bank. She could see what looked like a small, limp body on the surface. She ran along by the boiling water to investigate, scrambling down the bank, to stand looking with pity at the wet, bedraggled body, wondering what it was, for she had never seen anything like it before. She dragged the mass of twigs and branches

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further up on land, then ran to call her mother.

Mrs. Nurmi was out in the yard by an old wood stove which she still used for boiling the vegetable dyes for her weaving, or peelings and scraps for the hens. She followed Helvi, calling out to her husband to come and see this strange animal washed up by an unfamiliar, swift-surging river.

He came, with his unhurried countryman's walk and quiet thoughtful face, and joined the others to look down in silence at the small limp body, the darkly plastered fur betraying its slightness, the frail skull bones and thin crooked tail mercilessly exposed. Suddenly he bent down and laid his hand lightly on it for a moment, then pulled back the skin above and below one eye and looked more closely. He turned and saw Helvi's anxious, questioning face close to his own, and beyond that her mother's. "Is a drowned *cat* worth trying to save?" he asked them, and when her mother nodded, before Helvi's pleading eyes, he said no more, but scooped the soaking bundle up and walked back to the cabin, telling Helvi to run ahead and bring some dry sacks.

He laid the cat down in a sunny patch by the wood stove and rubbed it vigorously with sacking, turning the body from side to side until the fur stood out in every direction and it looked like some dishevelled old scarf. Then, as he wrapped the sacking firmly around and her mother pried the clenched teeth open, Helvi

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poured a little warm milk and precious brandy down the pale cold throat.

She watched as a spasm ran through the body, followed by a faint cough, then held her breath in sympathy as the cat retched and choked convulsively, a thin dribble of milk appearing at the side of its mouth. Reino laid the straining body over his knee and pressed gently over the ribcage. The cat choked and struggled for breath, until at last a sudden gush of water streamed out, and it lay relaxed. Reino gave a slow smile of satisfaction and handed the bundle of sacking to Helvi, telling her to keep it warm and quiet for a while—if she was sure that she still wanted a cat.

She felt the oven, still warm though the fire had long died out, then placed the cat on a tray inside, leaving the door open. When her mother went into the cabin to prepare supper and Reino left to milk the cow, Helvi sat cross-legged on the ground by the stove, anxiously chewing the end of one fair braid, watching and waiting. Every now and then she would put her hand into the oven to touch the cat, to loosen the sacking or to stroke the soft fur, which was beginning to pulsate with life under her fingers.

After half an hour she was rewarded: the cat opened his eyes. She leaned over and looked closely into them—their blackness now contracted, slowly, to pinpoints, and a pair of astonishingly vivid blue eyes looked up instead. Presently, under her gentle stroking, she felt a

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throaty vibration, then heard a rusty, feeble purring. Wildly excited, she called to her parents.

Within another half-hour the little Finnish girl held in her lap a sleek, purring, Siamese cat, who had already finished two saucers of milk (which normally he detested, drinking only water), and who had groomed himself from head to foot. By the time the Nurmi family were eating their supper around the scrubbed pine table, he had finished a bowl of chopped meat, and was weaving his way around the table legs, begging in his plaintive, odd voice for more food, his eyes crossed intently, his kinked tail held straight in the air like a banner. Helvi was fascinated by him, and by his gentleness when she picked him up.

That night the Nurmis were having fresh pickerel, cooked in the old-country way with the head still on and surrounded by potatoes. Helvi ladled the head with some broth and potatoes into a saucer and put it on the floor. Soon the fishhead had disappeared to the accompaniment of pleased rumbling growls. The potatoes followed; then, holding down the plate with his paw, the cat polished it clean. Satisfied at last, he stretched superbly, his front paws extended so that he looked like a heraldic lion, then jumped on to Helvi's lap, curled himself around and purred loudly.

The parents' acceptance was completed by his action, though there had never before been a time or place in the economy of their lives for an animal which did not



*After half an hour she was rewarded; the cat opened its eyes . . .*

earn its keep, or lived anywhere except the barn or kennel. For the first time in her life Helvi had a pet.

Helvi carried the cat up to bed with her, and he draped himself with familiar ease over her shoulder as she climbed the steep ladder stairs leading up to her little room in the eaves. She tucked him tenderly into an old wooden cradle, and he lay in sleepy contentment, his dark face incongruous against a doll's pillow.

Late in the night she woke to a loud purring in her ear, and felt him treading a circle at her back. The wind blew a gust of cold rain across her face and she leaned over to shut the window, hearing far away, so faint that it died in the second of wind-borne sound, the thin, high keening of a wolf. She shivered as she lay down, then drew the new comforting warmth of the cat closely to her.

When Helvi left in the morning for the long walk and ride to the distant school the cat lay curled on the window sill among the geraniums. He had eaten a large plate of oatmeal, and his coat shone in the sun as he licked it sleepily, his eyes following Mrs. Nurmi as she moved about the cabin. But when she went outside with a basket of washing she looked back to see him standing on his hind legs peering after, his soundless mouth opening and shutting behind the window. She hurried back, fearful of her geraniums, and opened the door—at which he was already scratching—half expecting him to run. Instead he followed

her to the washing line and sat by the basket, purring. He followed her back and forth between the cabin and the wood stove, the henhouse and the stable. When she shut him out once by mistake he wailed pitifully.

This was the pattern of his behaviour all day—he shadowed the Nurmis as they went about their chores, appearing silently on some point of vantage—the seat of the harrow, a sack of potatoes, the manger or the well platform—his eyes on them constantly. Mrs. Nurmi was touched by his apparent need for companionship: that his behaviour was unlike that of any other cat she attributed to his foreign appearance. But her husband was not so easily deceived—he had noticed the unusual intensity in the blue eyes. When a passing raven mocked the cat's voice and he did not look up, then later in the stable sat unheeding to a quick rustle in the straw behind, Reino knew that the cat was deaf.

Carrying her schoolbooks and lunch pail, Helvi ran most of the way home across the fields and picked up the cat as well when he came to meet her. He clung to her shoulder, balancing easily, while she performed the routine evening chores that awaited her. Undeterred by his weight she fed the hens, gathered eggs, fetched water, then sat at the table stringing dried mushrooms. When she put him down before supper she saw that her father was right—the pointed ears did

not respond to any sound, though she noticed that he started and turned his head at the vibration if she clapped her hands or dropped even a small pebble on the bare floor.

She had brought home two books from the travelling library, and after the supper dishes had been cleared away her parents sat by the stove in the short interval before bed while she read aloud to them, translating as she went. They sat, in their moment of rare relaxation, with the cat stretched out on his back at their feet, and the child's soft voice, flowing through the dark austerity of the cabin, carried them beyond the circle of light from the oil lamp to the warmth and brightness of strange lands . . .

They heard of seafaring Siamese cats who worked their passages the world over, their small hammocks made and slung by their human messmates, who held them second to none as ship's cats; and of the great proud Siamese Ratting Corps who patrolled the dockyards of Le Havre with unceasing vigilance; they saw, with eyes withdrawn and dreaming, the palace watch-cats of long-ago Siam, walking delicately on thin long simian legs around the fountained courtyards, their softly padding feet polishing the mosaics to a lusted path of centuries. And at last they learned how these nobly born Siamese acquired the kink at the end of their tails and bequeathed it to all their descendants.

And as they listened, they looked down in wonder, for there on the rag rug lay one of these, stretched out flat on his royal back, his illustrious tail twitching idly, and his jewelled eyes on their daughter's hand as she turned the pages that spoke of his ancestors—the guardian cats of the Siamese princesses. Each princess, when she came down to bathe in the palace lake, would slip her rings for safe-keeping on the tail of her attendant cat. So zealous in their charge were these proud cats that they bent the last joint sideways for safer custody, and in time the faithful tails became crooked forever, and their childrens' and their childrens' childrens' . . .

One after another the Nurmis passed their hands admiringly down the tail before them to feel the truth in its bent bony tip; then Helvi gave him a bowl of milk, which he drank with regal condescension before she carried him up the ladder to bed.

That night, and for one more, the cat lay curled peacefully in Helvi's arms, and in the daytime during her absence he followed her parents everywhere. He trailed through the bush after her mother as she searched for late mushrooms, then sat on the cabin steps and patted the dropped corn kernels as she shucked a stack of cobs. He followed Reino and his work horse across the fields to the wood lot and perched on a newly felled pungent stump, his head following their every movement, and he curled by the door of the stable and

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watched the man mending harness and oiling traps. And in the late afternoons when Helvi returned he was there waiting for her, a rare and beautiful enigma in the certain routine of the day. He was one of them.

But on the fourth night he was restless, shaking his head and pawing his ears, his voice distressed at her back. At last he lay down, purring loudly, and pushed his head into her hand—the fur below his ears was soaking. She saw their sharp black triangles outlined against the little square of window and watched them flicker and quiver in response to every small night sound. Glad for him in his newfound hearing, she fell asleep.

When she woke, later in the night, aware of a lost warmth, she saw him crouched at the open window, looking out over the pale fields and the tall, dark trees below. His long sinuous tail thrashed to and fro as he measured the distance to the ground. Even as her hand moved out impulsively towards him he sprang, landing with a soft thud.

She looked down and saw his head turn for the first time to her voice, his eyes like glowing rubies as they caught the moonlight, then turn away—and with sudden desolation she knew that he had no further need of her. Through a blur of tears, she watched him go, stealing like a wraith in the night towards the river that had brought him. Soon the low swiftly running form was lost among the shadows.

## Seven

THE TWO DOGS were in very low spirits when they continued their journey without the cat. The old dog in particular moped badly, for the cat had been his constant close companion for many years—ever since the day when a small, furiously hissing kitten, with comically long black-stockinged legs and a nearly white body, had joined the Hunter family. This apparition had refused to give one inch of ground to the furious and jealous bull terrier, who was an avowed cat hater, and the terror of the nearby feline population; instead it had advanced, with every intention of giving battle evident in the tiny body. The dog, for the first and last time in his life, capitulated. That day a bond had been formed between them, and thereafter they had been inseparable. The kitten, surprisingly enough, had no love for cats either, so they formed a wickedly humorous partnership that waged unceasing war against them. When they sallied forth together the neighbourhood emptied suddenly of not only cats but of dogs as well. They had mellowed with the years, however, and were now more tolerant,



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exacting only the dutiful homage they felt to be their due as conquerors. They had opened their ranks only to the gentle young dog when he arrived years later; but, fond as they were of him, the affection they bore for one another was something quite apart.

Now the dogs were thrown completely on their own resources. The Labrador did his best and tried to initiate the other into the art of frog and field mouse hunting, but the terrier's eyesight was too poor for him to have much success. But they were luckier than usual: once they surprised a large fisher in the very act of dispatching a porcupine. The shy fisher disappeared in one swift fluid movement at their approach, leaving the slain, out-stretched porcupine, and the dogs enjoyed a feast that day such as they had never known before, the flesh being sweet and tender.

Another time the young dog caught a bittern, who had stood like a frozen statue on the edge of a lake, his long neck topped by the slim head flowing into a line down to the elongated body, and nothing moving but an apprehensive, blinking eye. He took off as the dog sprang, but his awkward clumsy flight, the long legs trailing, was not fast enough. The flesh was stringy and fishy, but it was all gobbled down voraciously, nothing remaining but the beak and feet.

One day they skirted a small farm, where, wary though he was of human beings, the young dog was hungry enough to cross an open field within sight of

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the farm and snatch one of a flock of chickens feeding there. They were still crouched over the mess of blood and scattered feathers, when they heard an angry shout, and saw the figure of a man at the far corner of the field, and a black collie running ahead, snarling as it came towards them.

The young dog braced himself for the inevitable attack; a few yards away the collie crouched low, lips drawn back, then sprang for the vulnerable throat before him. The young dog was a hopeless fighter, lacking both the instinct and the build; for, heavy and strong though he was, his mouth had been bred to carry game birds, and the jaw structure, with its soft protective lips, was a disadvantage. His only hope for survival against the razor-like slashing of the other dog's teeth lay in the thick protective folds of skin around his throat.

All too soon it was obvious that he was fast losing ground, and the effects of his inadequate diet were beginning to show in his endurance. He was on his back with the collie on top, ready to give the final slash, when the old dog took over. Up to now he had merely been an interested spectator, taking a keen interest from a professional point of view, for a good fight is meat and drink to a bull terrier. Now a look of pure, unholy joy appeared in the black-currant eyes, and he tensed his stocky, close-knit body, timing his spring with a mastery born of long practice. A white,

compact bundle of fighting art shot like a steel projectile to the collie's throat. The impact knocked the black dog over as though he were a feather; the ecstatic bull terrier tightened his grip on the sinewy throat under him and began to shake his head; out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the Labrador was on his feet again. But the terrier's teeth were blunt nowadays, and with a tremendous effort the collie threw him off. The old dog's feet had barely touched the ground before he sprang again for that terrible throat grip, springing as if the years had dropped away and he were back in his fighting prime. Once more he brought the collie down, this time taking a firmer grip on the throat, shaking his powerful head until the dog below him was choking and strangling. The collie made a desperate, convulsive effort and rolled over, the silent white leech still hanging from his throat. He struggled to his feet: the terrier released his hold and walked away, his back turned arrogantly but his eyes slewed slyly in his flat head so that he looked almost reptilian. The collie stood shakily, blood dripping from his throat, awaiting the protection of his master. Normally he was a courageous dog, but he had never before encountered anything like these vicious, silent onslaughts.

The Labrador would have called it a day and left now, but the terrier was enjoying himself and still eyed the collie speculatively. Then his peculiar blend of bull

terrier humour got the better of him, and he used an old fighting trick of his breed, which normally he kept, so to speak, up his sleeve, for those occasions when he intended not a killing, but merely punishment. He started to circle, faster and faster, almost as though he were chasing his own tail, and then, like a whirling dervish, he approached the bewildered collie and spun against him, knocking him several feet with the force of the impact, and following up his advantage with another crash at the end of each turn. Terrified at this unprecedented method of attack, bruised, bitter and aching, the enemy dog seized a split second between turns and fled, his tail tucked well between his legs, towards his master—who received him with a cuff on his already reeling head.

The farmer stared incredulously at the two culprits, who were now making off across the field to the cover of the bush, the young dog with a torn and bloodied ear, and several deep bites on his forelegs, but the happy old warrior jaunty and unscathed. When he saw the mass of feathers he flung his stick in sudden rage at the retreating white form, but so many sticks had been thrown after so many fights in the course of his long life that the bull terrier dodged it instinctively without even turning his head and continued at a leisurely trot, swinging his rounded stern with gay insolence as he went.

This battle did much to restore the morale of the old

dog. That evening he even caught a field mouse for his supper, tossing it in the air with a professional flip which would have done credit to his ancestor who had killed sixty rats in as many minutes a hundred years ago.

Despite the stiffness and soreness from his wounds the young dog seemed happier too; perhaps because the west wind that blew that night brought a hint of remembered things, and stirred some deep awareness that every day, every hour brought them nearer to their destination; perhaps it was that the country they were crossing now was less rugged, less remote, and becoming more like the country in which he had been raised; perhaps it was just because his companion was so infectiously pleased with himself; but whatever it was, he seemed more at ease and less strained than he had been since the outset of the journey.

They slept that night in a dry shallow cave amongst the outcroppings of an abandoned molybdenum mine on the crest of a hill. Outside the cave was a large, sloping slab of exposed rock littered with discarded garter-snake skins, so light and dry yet supple that all night long they swayed and whispered to every small breath of wind as though repossessed.

The first pale streaks of dawn were barely showing across the sky when the young dog sat up alertly, hearing the shuffling approach of some animal through the dead leaves and twigs. He sat quivering, every nerve tense, recognizing the smell, and presently past the

opening of the cave waddled a large porcupine, returning peacefully home from a night's foraging. Remembering the delectable meal the fisher had inadvertently provided for him, the young dog determined to repeat it. He sprang at the porcupine, intending first to overturn then kill it as he had seen the other animal do, but unfortunately he had not seen the patient preparatory work that the experienced fisher had put in before the kill—the relentless, cunning teasing, resulting in the harmless embedding of most of the quills into a fallen tree; then the quick, skilful flip at the base of the shoulder while the partially unarmed animal was still protecting its tender nose and throat under the tree. The porcupine turned at the instant of his spring, aware of the danger, and with incredible swiftness for such a clumsy-looking animal, spun round, whipping its terrible tail in the dog's face. The dog yelped and leaped back with the unexpected shock of pain, and the porcupine ambled away, looking almost outraged.

The Labrador was fortunate in that the tail had struck a sidewise, glancing blow, so that the quills had pierced only one side of his cheek, missing the eye by a fraction; but these quills were about two-and-a-half inches long, barbed at the piercing end, and were firmly and painfully embedded.

Try as he might the dog could do nothing to remove the pliant quills; he only succeeded in pushing them

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farther in. He tore at them with his paws; he scratched at the sites until they bled; he rubbed his head and cheek along the ground and against the trunk of a tree. But the cruel, stinging barbs dug in farther, and their stinging torture spread through his face and jaws. Eventually he abandoned the attempt to free them, and they journeyed on. But every time they paused the Labrador would shake his head, or scratch frantically with his hind leg, seeking release from the pain.



*The porcupine spun round, whipping its terrible tail  
in the dog's face . . .*

## *Eight*

THE CAT by himself was a swift and efficient traveller. He had no difficulty at all in picking up the trail of the dogs from the point where they had turned off in a westward direction from the river, and the only thing that held him back was rain, which he detested. He would huddle miserably under shelter during a shower, his ears laid flat, his eyes baleful and more crossed than ever, waiting until the last drop had fallen before venturing out again. Then he would pick his way with extreme distaste through the wet grass and undergrowth, taking a long time, and stopping often to shake his paws.

He left no trace of his progress; branches parted slightly here and there, sometimes there was a momentary rustling of dried leaves, but never a twig cracked, and not a stone was dislodged from under his soft, sure feet. Without his noisier companions he saw everything and was seen by none, many an animal remaining unaware of the cold, silent scrutiny in the undergrowth, or from up a tree. He came within touching distance of the soft-eyed deer drinking at

the lake's edge at dawn; he watched the sharp, inquisitive nose and bright eyes of a fox peer from the bushes; he saw the sinuous twisting bodies and mean vicious faces of mink and marten; once he looked up and saw the otterlike head of a fisher high above him, framed in the leafless branches of a birch, and watched the beautiful tail stream out behind when the animal leaped a clear fifteen feet through the air into the swaying green obscurity of a pine; and he watched with disdain the lean grey timber wolf loping quietly along the trail beneath him as he rested on the limb of a tree above. Those that he encountered face to face would not meet his eyes and turned away. Only the beaver went about his business and paid him no heed.

Age-old instinct told him to leave no trace of his passing; the remains of the prey he killed with such efficient dispatch were all dug into the ground and covered over; any excreta were taken care of in the same fashion, fresh earth being carefully scraped over. When he slept, which was seldom, it was a quick "cat nap" high in the thick branches of evergreens. He was infinitely cunning and resourceful always, and above all he feared nothing.

On the second morning of his travels he came down at dawn to drink at the edge of a reed-fringed lake; he passed within a hundred feet of a rough, concealing structure of reeds and branches on the lake shore,

in which crouched two men, guns across their knees, and a Chesapeake dog. A fleet of decoy ducks bobbed realistically up and down in the water in front of them. The dog stirred uneasily, turning his head and whining softly when the cat passed by, silent and unseen, but one of the men bade him be quiet and he lay down, ears pricked and eyes alert.

The cat stayed staring at him from behind some bulrushes for a while, then raised his tail so that it alone was in sight and twitched the end, enjoying the dog's silent frustration. He turned and stole silently down to the lake shore, where presently his long slim body, crouched on a rock, was seen in the binoculars of one of the men.

"Here, kitty, kitty!" called an uncertain voice, after a moment's silence. Then "Puss, puss . . . here, puss!" it tried, in gruff embarrassment—ignored by the cat, who curled his pink tongue down to the water and drank slowly and deliberately. Two voices called now, with an undertone of laughing disbelief. He raised his head and looked directly at the two figures standing up, black against the sky.

He heard their excited argument, and then, an intentional poseur, he shook each paw daintily in turn, stepped delicately down from the rocks, and vanished from the men's sight. Behind him he heard a burst of incredulous laughter, and continued on his way, well satisfied.

The cat went on through the early morning mists, still following the trail of the dogs; and here it could not have been very old, for he found a partly chewed rabbit-skin, and several other clues, near some rocks where they had evidently passed a night, and the scent was still quite sharp to his acute sense. They had cut across country at one point, through several miles of deep spruce and cedar swamp, so that the going was, alternately, soft and dry and strewn with needles, then damp and spongy. It was a gloomy place, and the cat appeared uneasy, frequently glancing behind him as if he thought he were being followed. Several times he climbed a tree and crouched on a branch, watching and waiting. But whatever it was he scented or imagined showed equal cunning, and never appeared.

But the cat remained wary and suspicious, and felt with every nerve in his body that something was following—something evil. He increased his pace, then saw with relief that the area of deep, gloomy bush was coming to an end: far ahead of him he could see patches of blue sky which meant more open country. An old fallen tree lay ahead of him on the deer trail he was following. He leaped on to the trunk to cross it, pausing for a brief second, then every hair on his back rose erect, for in that moment he heard quite distinctly and felt rather than saw the presence of the following animal—and it was not

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*The lynx stopped in the centre of the trail, gazing up at him with gleaming, curious eyes.*

very far behind him. Without further delay the cat leaped for the trunk of a birch tree, and clinging with his claws looked back along the path. Into view, moving with a velvet tread that equalled his own, came what appeared to be a large cat. But it was as different from the ordinary domestic cat as the Siamese himself was different.

This one was almost twice as large, chunky and heavy, with a short bobtail and thick furry legs. The coat was a soft grey, overlaid with a few darker spots. The head differed only from an ordinary cat in that it was framed in a ruff of hair, and the ears rose into tufted points. It was a wild, cruel face that the Siamese saw, and he recognized instinctively a wanton killer—and one that could easily outclass him in strength, ferocity and speed. He scrambled as far up the young birch as he could go, and clung there, the slender trunk swaying under his weight. The lynx stopped in the centre of the trail, one heavy paw lifted, gazing up with gleaming malicious eyes; the Siamese flattened his ears and spat venomously, then looked quickly around, measuring his distance for escape. With a light bound the lynx landed on top of the fallen tree trunk, and for another endless moment the two pairs of eyes tried to outstare one another, the Siamese making a low eerie hissing noise, lashing his tail from side to side. The lynx leaped for the birch, straddling it easily with powerful limbs; then, digging

in the long claws, he started up the trunk towards the cat, who retreated as far as was possible, and waited, swaying perilously now. As the heavy weight came nearer, the tree bent right over, and it was all that the cat could do to hold on. The lynx reached a paw out to its full length and raked at the cat, tearing a strip of the bark away. The cat struck back, but the tree was waving wildly, and he lost his grip with the movement and fell. The tree was so far bent over that he had not too far to fall, but even in that short time he twisted in the air and landed on his feet, only to hear a heavier thud a few yards away; the tree, whipping back, had dislodged the lynx almost at the same time, but the heavier animal had fallen with more impetus and less agility; for a split second it remained where it was, slightly winded. The cat took advantage of that second and was off like a streak, running for his life up the narrow deer trail.

Almost immediately he heard the other animal close behind. It was useless to turn and fight; this was no stupid bear who could be intimidated, but a creature as remorseless and cunning as the cat himself could be, to other smaller animals. Even as he ran he must have known that flight was hopeless too; for he leaped with desperation up the trunk of another tree; but they were all saplings and there was little length of trunk for him to climb. This time the enemy was more cunning: it followed only halfway up, then deliberately swayed

the pliant young tree from side to side, determined to shake the cat off. The situation was desperate and the cat knew it. He waited until he was on the lowest arc of the swing, then, gathering up his muscles under him until he was like a coiled spring, he leaped for the ground. The lynx was almost as quick, but it missed by a hair's breadth when the cat swerved violently, then doubled on his tracks and shot like a bullet into a rabbit burrow that opened up miraculously in the bank before him. The terrible claws so close behind slashed harmlessly through empty air. The cat forced himself into the burrow as far as he could go, and crouched there, unable to turn and face what might come, for the burrow was very narrow. His pursuer, too, dropped to a crouching position, then pushed an exploratory paw into the burrow. The cat was fortunately out of reach, so the lynx lowered its head and rashly applied one malevolent green eye to the hole, withdrawing it quickly, however, and shaking the tawny ruffed head in baffled fury when a flurry of earth hit it full in the face—the cat's hind legs were working like pistons, hurling the earth back out of the hole.

The lynx drew back, to work out its next approach. Complete silence fell in the clearing, and all seemed peaceful and quiet in contrast to the wildly beating heart of the desperate, trapped cat.

Systematically the lynx began to dig away the earth



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around the entrance to the burrow with its powerful forepaws, and was so engrossed that it failed to hear, or to scent, the soft downwind approach of a young boy wearing a bright red jacket and cap and carrying a rifle, who had entered the bush from the fields beyond. The boy was walking softly, not because he had seen the lynx, but because he was out after deer: he and his father, half a mile away, were walking in a parallel course, with prearranged signals, and the boy was very excited, for this was the first time his father had considered him responsible enough to accompany him with his own rifle. Suddenly he saw the infuriated animal scabbling away at the earth, and heard it growling softly as a continuous hail of earth coming from an unseen source covered it. In that same instant the animal looked up and saw the boy. It crouched low, snarling, and no fear showed in its eyes, only pure hatred. In a split-second decision, whether for fight or flight, it sprang; and in the same instant the boy raised his rifle, sighted and fired, all in one quick motion. The lynx somersaulted in the air and fell, its breath expelled in a mournful whistle as it hit the ground; the forelegs jerked once, a last spasm of nerves flickered across the fur, and it lay dead.

The boy was trembling slightly as he approached the dead animal, unable to forget the look of evil, savage fury on the catlike face which now lay before him, lips still curled back over white, perfect fangs. He stood

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looking down at his unexpected victim, unwilling to touch it, waiting for his father, who presently came, panting and anxious, calling as he ran. He stopped, staring at the tawny body lying on the pine needles, and then at the white face of his son.

He turned the animal over and showed the boy the small neat hole where the bullet had entered.

“Just below the breastbone.” He looked up, grinning, and the boy smiled shakily.

The boy reloaded his rifle and tied his red neckerchief on a branch, marking the entrance to the clearing for their return. Then they walked off down the trail together, still talking, and the hidden cat heard their voices receding in the distance.

When all was silent he backed out of his refuge, and emerged into the sun-dappled clearing, his coat covered with sandy dirt. Completely ignoring the dead body even though forced to step around it, he sat down within ten yards of it, coolly washing his fur from the end of his tail to the tip of his nose. Then he stretched himself luxuriously, and with a final gesture of contempt turned his back on the lynx and dug into the earth with his hind claws to send a last shower of dirt over the animal's face. That done, he continued on his way, cool and assured as ever.

Two days later he caught up with the dogs. He came out on the crest of a hill forming one side of a valley,

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where a small stream meandered between alder-grown banks. Across the valley, clearly discernible among the bare trees on the opposite slope, he saw two familiar and beloved golden and white figures. His tail switched in excitement; he opened his mouth and uttered a plaintive, compelling howl. The two figures on the hill opposite stopped dead in their tracks, listening to the unbelievable sound as it echoed around the quiet valley. The cat leaped on to an overhanging rock, and as the hollow, raucous howl went ringing back and forth again the dogs turned questioningly, their eyes straining to seek the reality of the call. Then the young dog barked frenziedly in recognition and plunged down the hillside and across a stream, closely followed by the old dog. Now the cat began to run too, bounding like a mad thing down the hill, and they met on the banks of the little stream.

The old dog nearly went out of his mind with excitement: he covered the cat with frantic licking; twice he knocked him over with his eager thrusting head; then, carried away with enthusiasm, he started on the same tight intricate circles that he had used on the collie, whirling nearer and nearer until he finally burst free from the circle and rushed at the cat, who ran straight up the trunk of a tree, twisted in his own length, then dropped on the back of the dog below.

All through this performance the young dog had stood by, slowly and happily swinging his tail, his

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brown eyes alight and expressive, until at last his turn came when the old white clown collapsed in an ecstatic panting heap. Then the Labrador walked up to the cat, who rose on his hind legs, placing black forepaws on the neck of the great dog who towered above him, gently questing at the torn ear.

It would have been impossible to find three more contented animals that night. They lay curled closely together in a hollow filled with sweet-scented needles, under an aged, spreading balsam tree, near the banks of the stream. The old dog had his beloved cat, warm and purring between his paws again, and he snored in deep contentment. The young dog, their gentle worried leader, had found his charge again. He could continue with a lighter heart.