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*Wildlife Cameraman*  
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*Wolf Brother*  
*Hidden Trail*



*Jim Kjelgaard*

# **CHIP**

## **the Dam Builder**



**ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH RAY**  
**HOLIDAY HOUSE, NEW YORK**

**TO RUTH HARSHAW**

*For Originating the Carnival of Books*

**NINTH PRINTING**

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## *Chapter I*

# DISASTER STRIKES

It was still black night when Chip, the wise old leader of the beaver colony, became uneasy. He did not know why. There was nothing to support his feeling of danger. The beaver knew only that something was not as it should be.

Old Chip swam to the end of the pond which he ruled. It was a big pond, backed by a mud-stick-stone dam that extended almost five hundred feet from end to end. Dimly Chip remembered the time when it had been less than half as big, and there had been only two lodges. Now there were six, inhabited by thirty-one beaver that ranged from five-pound kits to the seventy-pound Chip. And there was still enough aspen growth on the hills around the pond to support the big beaver colony.

Chip dived, swam beneath the surface for a long way, and when he finally broke water he did so with scarcely a telltale ripple. A faint spear of daylight was just beginning to pierce the heavy shroud of darkness overhanging the valley. Chip remained where he had come to the surface, treading water just hard enough to maintain his position.

His eyes and nostrils were above the water, and his broad, flat tail floated, but his back was submerged. His purpose was to see without being seen while he studied the wilderness signs.

Chip lacked any mechanical way of telling time, but he did not need one. He had his own ways. Every morning, at daybreak, the pair of flickers in the big stub at one side of the pond shattered the silence with their strident morning call. The warblers in the willow brush waited another hour, until the sun's warmth was more comfortable. Still later, but almost at the same time each day, a kingfisher rattled over the pond and dropped upon any fish unwary enough to come near the surface. Now, as Chip silently waited, he watched for something else.

For almost two weeks, ever since the warming sun had finally melted the sheathing of ice that had kept the beavers locked in all winter long, a buck had been drinking from the pond. He came twice a day, at dawn and again at dusk, and he was never more than a few seconds early or late. Chip waited because the buck might tell him something he needed to know.

The old beaver turned, rippling the water only faintly as he did so. Then he resumed his original position. His head was a little more tense, a bit higher, for he was becoming more anxious. It was past time for the buck to appear. Chip swung about and swam to the other end of the pond. He made a wide circle in the water and checked the exact location of every pond mate.

Except for two that were inspecting the dam for leaks, the older members of the colony were varying distances up on the banks. Since early December there had been no break in the two feet of ice that locked the pond in impenetrable armor. No enemy had been able to get at the beaver, but neither had they been able to get out. Their only food had been what they had stored the previous summer. Throughout the long winter this stored food had grown old and tasteless, so that now every member of the colony was eager for the new, sap-filled green food which came to life with the spring sun.

Having located his followers, Chip hesitated. Then he swam back toward the place where the buck should appear. He felt a strong premonition of danger, but none had appeared. He must give no false warnings. Before he alarmed the rest, and bade them seek the safety of the pond, he himself must know what threatened them.

Five minutes after he had resumed his post, the buck appeared. He still wore his gray winter coat but it was shaggy and ragged where winter hair was shedding. Watching, Chip's nervousness increased.

The buck was an old and wise one, a creature that had survived for many years because he never relaxed. Now his caution had increased. Always before, when he came to drink, he did so slowly, stopping to look and test the winds every few yards. Now he came even more slowly, and stopped more frequently. When he reached the edge of the water, the buck did not drink at once. Instead he stood with his head up, long ears flicking from side to side as he strove to catch both scent and sound.

Chip made a sudden turn, sending a little wavelet rippling toward the bank. As he did so, the buck gave a nervous leap that carried him five feet up the bank. As cautiously as he had come, he faded back into the forest. Chip rose in the water so that his back broke the surface, and looked toward the places where his pond mates were scattered.

There was still no reason to warn them, though danger was surely near. But at present there was no way either to find or

to identify it. Chip swam toward the upper end of the pond.

Before the beaver came, the creek had been relatively small, perhaps twenty feet at its widest and with neither flood stages nor summer-low levels because the surrounding forest controlled the water that flowed into it. The dam had created a miniature lake in the wilderness, at its widest along the dam itself. Toward the upper end of the pond, and below the smaller, feeder dams, the creek narrowed until it was scarcely wider than its original channel. It was, however, deeper, and on either bank were scooped holes where an imperilled beaver could hide from enemies. Chip swam slowly when he approached the upper end, and kept near the bank so that, if he must, he could dive to immediate safety.

For a full two minutes, while the day brightened fast, Chip lingered near one of the safety holes. When he left it he did so slowly. Nothing happened, but still he did not relax. He neared a smaller dam, built across the creek for the purpose of backing water into the aspens. Before he climbed the well-trodden path that led up the face of this feeder dam, he watched it for a full five minutes.

When he climbed, he went swiftly. As soon as he came to the top of the feeder dam, he plunged into the water on the other side. When he was again in the water he felt more at ease, but his sense of imminent danger suddenly increased.

Chip was patriarch of his colony, and as such it was his duty to be sure that all was well at all times. Early last evening, when everything was still serene, he had visited all feeder dams, and found nothing wrong. Now a quantity of assorted debris, beaver-chewed sticks and twigs, floated against this creek-blocking dam. A faint trace of mud stained the pond he was in.

There was no sign of flood stage on the creek; save for the sticks and muddy water, there was no sign of anything. But the chewed sticks floating against the dam meant that all was not well upstream. Chip knew that there were other beaver dams there, for from time to time he had journeyed upstream to see them. No beaver abandoned so many of their sticks willingly.

They ate the bark, and when they had eaten they built the stripped sticks into their dams or houses. Chip tried to fathom the meaning of this influx of debris, and the significance of the roily water, but there was nothing about that would tell him.

He made an exploratory trip around the upper pond, examining every inch of the dam and the banks that held it in. A brown mink with a snaky head arched its back like a cat, spat at him, and backed into a hole. The mink remained there, purring low in its throat and threatening the beaver.

Chip swam unconcernedly on. He was too big and old to have any fear of mink, though sometimes they successfully attacked and killed young beaver kits when their parents were not near enough to defend them. When Chip came near, the mink spat a final outraged squawk and bounded up the bank. He fled out of sight, his tail fluffed to twice its normal size and every hair bristled. Chip paid no attention whatever.

There were feeder dams on either side of this one, and some in the flats above, but no more across the creek. The side dams caught water that escaped from many little springs that flowed out of the mountain, controlled the flow, and backed water around aspens. Many of the dams were connected by laboriously dug canals which made it easier to move sticks and poles from one to another. Chip made no attempt to enter any of them. The sticks and the muddy water had come from upstream. Something had happened there.

The stream, a mountain creek full of riffles and small pools, had cleared itself and only the pond was still roily. Chip swam a little way up the stream, but when he came to the first riffle he turned and went back. Daylight was well advanced and anything that cared to look could see both the pond and anything in it. It was a dangerous time for beaver who ventured too far from the safety of their ponds, or from water in which they could submerge, and if Chip attempted to go over the riffles he would have to expose himself completely.

He turned and swam toward the main pond. When he came to the feeder dam he hesitated until he was certain that no danger lingered in the immediate vicinity, then went over. He had seen nothing while climbing and he saw nothing now, but as soon as he was again in the water he submerged and swam swiftly along the pond's muddy bottom. A wise beaver never depended entirely on his own senses. There was always a possibility of some lurking peril. Lynx, bears, wolves, cougars, and coyotes came to the pond to see if they could catch a beaver and all of them were good hunters.

Chip surfaced in the center of the pond and again scouted the location of his mates. Daylight was advanced so far that the pond and everything about it was revealed in dim, gray shadow. It was a dangerous time for land-faring beaver, but some were still up on the banks enjoying the delicious new spring food. All the wiser members of the colony had come back near the water and some were already in it. A small beaver with a peeled stick in his mouth swam down to the dam and began to build his stick into it.

Far up the bank, an almost black beaver was still felling a tree. Much nearer the water, a kit chewed cautiously on an aspen twig. Chip watched both, knowing them for what they were. Ebony, the black beaver, was a careless fool who at the same time had been blessed with much more than his share of blind luck. He had had more narrow escapes, and was in trouble oftener, than any other beaver in the colony.

The kit was smart, too alert and intelligent to get very far from water when the day was this far advanced. Young as he was, he was not nearly as careless as his much older cousin up on the bank. Even as Chip watched, the black beaver had another of his miraculous escapes.

There was no visible indication of any danger up on the bank, but suddenly a lynx detached himself from a patch of frozen grass and sprang toward Ebony. Exactly at that time, by sheer coincidence, the tree the beaver was felling toppled directly on the lynx. In panicky haste Ebony scuttled down the slope and leaped into the water.

Up on the slope, the pinned lynx screamed his rage as he wriggled free. Claws spread like a house cat's, bristled, he leaped toward the pond. But now there was nothing for him to catch.

Old Chip had acted the instant he saw the lynx. Arching his body, he curled his flat tail and snapped it down on the water with a report like a rifle shot. At this danger signal every inhabitant of the pond sought safety in the water. Some submerged at once, diving into underwater passages that led to their lodges. A few of the older and more experienced joined Chip in the center of the pond. These were the beaver who knew everything about their way of life and were able to meet any situation. Sleek, Chip's mate, was one of them, and there were Broken-Tooth and Peg. A three-legged beaver, Peg had long ago left his left front paw in a beaver trap. But he had learned how to overcome this handicap, and now could swim and dive with the most expert.

These four veterans watched the enraged lynx come down to the edge of the pond and rear with his front paws on a mossy log. He blinked his big eyes at the swimming beaver. They did not flinch. Unless it were desperately hungry, on the point of near-starvation, a lynx would not enter the water, and the beaver knew it.

After five minutes, waving defiance with his stub tail, the lynx walked back into the aspen forest. Chip swam cautiously toward the bank, then backed out into the water again. The lynx was gone and nothing else was in sight, but the old beaver remained uneasy. In his age and wisdom he had learned to piece together all the signs, all the things that might pass unnoticed by a beaver with less experience. He knew that something more than the lynx still threatened, and was all the more worried because he could not identify it. All he could do was to remain constantly watchful.

Broken-Tooth, Peg, and Sleek went down for a final morning inspection of the dam. Chip returned to the upper end of the pond and swam back, uncertain as to what course he should now take. He did not bother inspecting the dam. The three beaver that had already looked it over knew what they were doing. One by one the three submerged, and swam into their respective lodges. Chip made one last nervous tour of the pond.

Then he made a long, clean dive that took him under water and into the hollowed-out channel that led to the lodge which he shared with Sleek and their kits of the year before. His webbed hind paws were extended straight behind him, and his fore paws were folded along his chest. Chip carried himself along by the sheer strength and power he had put into his dive. Only when he was near the lodge's entrance did he use his hind feet to push himself along, and when he came to the above-water compartment he pulled himself up with his front paws.

Sleek stopped combing her wet fur and came forward to sniff noses with him. Huddled in a pile, like careless puppies, the four well-fed kits slept peacefully. Chip caressed Sleek with his tongue, then fell to combing his own fur. He lay down in front of the roomy lodge's entrance tunnel and slept for an hour.

He could sleep no longer than that because of the nagging unrest within him. The kits merely raised their heads and blinked at him when he rose, but Sleek stared questioningly. Chip listened, as though for some sign or signal. He could see or hear nothing, but he was not reassured. The buck had been uneasy when he came to drink. Sticks that should not

have been there had been bumping against the feeder dam, and the water had been stained with a trace of mud. None of this was normal or usual.

Chip slipped out of the tunnel into the water. He rose beneath a ragged stump that trailed gnarled roots in all directions. From here he could see without being seen.

The warblers in the brush beside the dam were flitting about their usual business, and a brightly painted oriole spilled liquid music into the sun-drenched day. A trio of flapping crows winged lazily overhead.

There was nothing else about, but there should have been. A lithe doe had been lingering near the pond ever since she had left the white cedar swamp in which she had spent the winter. The doe was heavy with fawn, and she had chosen a thicket not far from the pond as an ideal nursery. Usually the doe loafed throughout the day where she could easily reach rich grass that grew around the pond, but now she was nowhere in sight. Then Chip saw the geese.

Ever since the beaver could remember, the same pair of wild geese had nested in some tules at the far side of the pond. Now, as he watched, the pair glided out of the sky onto the water. For a moment they bobbed and curtsied before each other, curling their long necks. Then the gander started a querulous complaint.

Followed by his mate, he swam nervously about. He raised in the water and fluttered his wings, while his white-throated head turned continuously on his long snake-like neck. The geese, creatures of delicate perception, had also sensed that something was not as it should be. Like Chip, they were unable to find or to identify the menace. But they did not take flight.

Chip returned to Sleek and the sleeping kits, and briefly sniffed noses with his mate. The unquiet, the sense of impending peril, had afflicted her, too. Sleek kept her eyes on Chip while he looked about every square inch of their home.



It was mid-afternoon before he went out again, and when he did the geese were still swimming nervously about the center of the pond. As soon as Chip's head broke the surface, they started a nervous honking and half-flew toward the other side. The geese began to swim around and around each other, snaking their heads and hissing while they tried to decide what to do. As though they had suddenly made up their minds, they flapped across the pond and into the air. They spiralled upward, crying protests because they no longer dared stay in the place which had been their home for so long.

Chip did not go back into the lodge. With twilight, Peg and Broken-Tooth appeared to swim beside him. Then Sleek and the kits came out of their lodge. The beaver colony gathered, but only Ebony went up on the bank to eat fresh aspen bark. The night deepened. Twenty minutes later Chip received his first positive danger signal.

It was far-off but very plain, a heavy shuffling accompanied by much crackling of brush. Something slow and clumsy was coming toward the dam. Broken-Tooth swam tensely around Chip, awaiting the danger signal. When it did not come, Broken-Tooth slapped the water with his own tail. Beaver dived toward their lodges, or swam about in bewilderment.

With Sleek following, and their kits strung out behind them, Chip swam away from the dam. Ebony stubbornly refused to come into the pond.

The approaching men, five of them, went to the dam and arranged themselves along it. A moment's silence followed. Then dazzling light, the combined power from five battery-powered searchlights, illumined the pond. Frightened at last, the black beaver started down the slope toward the water, and the snap-snap of exploding .22 rifles followed. True to his luck, Ebony came through a hail of lead and sprang into the water.

Chip dived, but not before he heard and saw pellets striking the water all around him and knew that two kits had stopped swimming to float limply. Hoping Sleek would follow, Chip went deep into the water.

There was a sudden, violent shock that seemed to jar the pond. An orange-red flash, for the briefest part of a second, dimmed even the spotlights. Dazed, but instinctively fighting, Chip floated to the surface.

Again he was aware of the snapping .22's. Swimming beside him, Peg's mate stiffened convulsively. Chip did not know where Sleek was, or anything save that he could not resist the rush of water carrying him toward the hole dynamited in the dam. Calling on his last reserves of strength, the old beaver dived again.

He gave all his power and attention to remaining submerged. He swept through the hole, missing by inches the net spread over it, and was hurled into the snarling flood downstream.

## *Chapter II*

# DANGEROUS JOURNEY

Born in the above-water apartment of a beaver lodge, a kit's first act upon leaving his nursery bed has to be to go down the tunnel and into the pond, since there is no other way out. Swimming, for him, is as natural and much easier than taking the first steps is for a human baby. He is much more at home in the water than on land, and so refined does his experience make his knowledge of water that he learns to respond to its smallest change.

As he grows older, even a slight ripple spreading across the pond carries its own message as exactly as an air current carries news to a fox, deer, bear, or other beast that depends much on its nose. He learns to know whether water is disturbed by big trout chasing minnows, swimming turtles, or wading birds. He becomes so sensitive to changes in the pond that when a tiny leak starts in the dam, even on the blackest night, he can go directly to it. He knows the transformations wrought by rain, snow, and ice. There is nothing about water which a wise beaver does not know.

Thus, when he was forced through the broken dam, Chip was instantly aware that he had no chance of fighting the torrent that carried him along. He simply rode with the tons of water that had been suddenly released when the charge of dynamite ripped a gaping hole in the dam.

The shock of the explosion left him partly dazed, but even so his reactions were almost automatic. Though he was unable to fight the flood, he was not helpless in it. Using his broad tail as a rudder, swimming strongly, he kept his nose pointed downstream. And he used his marvellous knowledge of water to the fullest advantage.

He could not see it, but water curling on both sides told him that a submerged boulder was in his path. Steering with his tail, Chip plunged vigorously with his webbed hind feet and went up and over.

He released some of the air which he had gasped into his lungs a second before he dived. Though he must ride the flood, he had no intention of doing it blindly. And no matter what he found ahead, it could not possibly be more deadly than the terror from which he was fleeing.

The old beaver knew men as well as he did other enemies. A half-dozen times in his memory they had come to the pond with steel traps, and always the pond had lost some of its inhabitants when they came. Chip had seen his mates struggling in traps, or drowned in clever sets, and he had always given them as wide a berth as possible. He had thus learned about traps, and that he must avoid everything which he did not thoroughly understand.

Poachers who dynamited dams were new to him, but Chip had lived partly because he was instantly able to meet and adapt himself to new situations. He understood the difference, if not between life and death, at least between a live beaver and a dead beaver. He was aware that the snapping rifles in the hands of the five men had killed numerous members of his colony. He knew also that men did not have to be close to whatever they wished to kill. Therefore it was well to stay submerged, and out of sight.

Chip surfaced only after he was swept around a bend, more than three hundred yards down the creek. He gulped air into his aching lungs as he continued to ride the flood crest. He could no longer see the lights, but he still heard the snapping rifles and hoarsely shouting men. The poachers at the dam were killing all the beaver left in the pond. Some fled into the lodges, only to have them ripped apart over their heads. Nor was there any place to hide on the bare mud flats which the drained pond had become.

After another two hundred yards, the flood began to spend its terrific initial force. Chip remained on the surface, able to control himself now and swim swiftly downstream. Throughout his life he had known many worried moments, and some fear-filled ones, but there had never been a night of terror such as this. It was unthinkable to go back, or ever again to return to where the dam had been.

Thus the old beaver decided his own hard fate, and he knew beforehand what that decision involved. Among wilderness dwellers, it is unwritten law that everything is entitled to its own home. The kingfisher, for instance, had never hunted farther than a big sycamore overhanging the creek. If he had tried to do so he would have had to fight another kingfisher that had staked out the adjoining territory for his own. Chip had lived in the pond by right of being born there. Now that the pond was no more, he had necessarily become an outcast and a wanderer. Before he could build a new home he must find a place not yet claimed by any other beaver.

Two miles down the creek, the flood was noticeable only because water was lapping banks which ordinarily it would not have touched at this season. In spite of the higher water, there were many shallow riffles, and places where Chip could not submerge. He swam on regardless, not knowing where he was going but not fearing what he would find nearly as much as the poachers who had destroyed his pond. A half mile farther on, the beaver swam to the bank and climbed out.

For a full five minutes he held perfectly still, waiting and watching. Now he understood the full significance of the danger signals he had read yesterday. Chewed sticks again floated past, and the water bore a trace of mud. The night before last the poachers must have blown out another dam farther up the creek. The signs were the same.

When nothing stirred, Chip ventured cautiously to an aspen tree and ate some tender twigs. Regardless of what else happened, he must eat. He felled a small tree, and stripped some of the bark from it.

Terror remained with him. He looked constantly back up the creek and at the water, fearful of what he would see, hear or smell there, and he ate less than half of what he normally would. For a few more minutes he lingered uncertainly on the bank. Like all beaver, he loved the company of his kind and now he was very lonesome for Sleek, Broken-Tooth, Peg, and the kits. But he had no way of knowing whether any of them had escaped. Chip returned to the water's edge.

The stream, swelled by the backed-up pond, was still flooded beyond its usual seasonal run. But the flood was receding fast. Chip inspected it carefully, with an expert's knowledge. Then he chose a rock as yet untouched by water and scented it with castor. It was a heavy, sweetish, musty smell, not at all unpleasant and so powerful that it could have been detected even by the comparatively dull nose of a human being. Chip had chosen his place carefully. The scent would linger for days, and tell any beaver who followed that Chip had passed this way.

Then he slipped into the water and continued his downstream journey. He had never been this far down before, and he did not know what lay ahead. He did know that he could not return to the pond, and its terrors. He must search out a new world and make a place for himself in it. Chip stopped swimming to float silently.

A shadow moved beside the stream, and the angry snarl of a prowling mongrel sliced the stillness. So warily that he left scarcely a ripple to mark the place, Chip dived. With long, powerful strokes he swam downstream, until his progress was halted abruptly by a shallow riffle.

The beaver had only a slight forewarning that the riffle lay ahead. A half second before he came to it the water flowed faster, became shallower, and began to be filled with rocks. With a sudden rush and a great splashing Chip surfaced, and galloped heavily down the riffle toward the next pool.

The big woolly dog, lingering upstream at the place where his proposed quarry had disappeared, heard the noise and barked again. With a long leap, he started toward the riffle. The dog was a confirmed night-prowler and a ferocious fighter. He had never seen a beaver before, and wanted to catch this strange beast before it escaped.

Surprisingly fast despite his squat build, Chip continued to run down the riffle toward the next pool. But it was a long riffle, and the rangy dog could run three times as fast as the fleeing beaver. Snarling, raising spray in his wake, the dog prepared for the last swift rush that would overwhelm his quarry. He closed in.

Chip was a peaceful creature, but he did not lack courage or knowledge of fighting. He humped his back, and flexed the dozens of hard muscles that lay just beneath his thick skin. Slashing like a wolf, the dog got only a mouthful of hair. At the same time, Chip bent his body in a half circle and closed his jaws.

He sank his two-inch teeth, chisels capable of taking a big chip from an aspen or birch, through the dog's front leg. Then he threw all his seventy pounds into a backward lunge. The dog's belligerent snarl changed to a frightened whine, then to a yelp of pain. Chip opened his jaws and sought a new hold, but the dog was too fast.

Still yelping, he flung himself backward so violently that he fell. His shoulder ploughed through the riffle, but almost at once he was on his feet. Tail plastered flat to his rump, racing on three legs, he left a trail of frightened yells behind him as he fled. Chip waited until he was sure the enemy would not return, then resumed his downstream journey.

He stopped again, questing with his nostrils when an acrid taint of wood smoke assailed them. The beaver swam silently to the center of the creek, ready to dive at a second's notice. Dimly he saw a sagging barbed-wire fence that paralleled the creek, and beyond that an open field. Squat shapes in the black night, a house, barn, and out-buildings loomed up

faintly in the field. The wood smoke filtered from the house's tin smoke pipe.

Staying in the center of the stream, Chip swam silently past and rested easily again only when he was once more in aspen forest. But his senses had been sharpened. He gave up all thought of staying the rest of the night around this place, and of perhaps seeking a new dam site. He did not want to live near any human-inhabited building.

Suddenly he was in another clearing, and again the smell of wood smoke tainted the air. The beaver slowed, and made a little circle that carried him back up the creek. Only he dared not go back that way for there lay enemies. He had to continue downstream, but he did not like this country. Too many farms broke the forest.

Twenty minutes later Chip crouched, terrified, beneath a railroad bridge while a train thundered over it. The bridge's brick foundations trembled, cinder specks rained into the creek. The passing train left Chip shivering in the water.

Some beaver build their dams beside railroad tracks, and even fill drainage ditches to enlarge their ponds. But Chip was a creature of the wilderness, and knew only wild ways. To him a train was a monstrous, terrifying unknown. When he resumed his downstream journey he swam faster than ever, and when he neared a small tributary creek he at once swerved into it.

The tributary was a spring-fed brook, a rill that began two-thirds of the way up a mountain that flanked the creek and ran a brawling course to the bottom. It was much colder than the main stream. Chip stopped at the mouth of the creek to leave another castor, as an unmistakable sign that he had passed this way. It was peculiarly his own scent, unlike any other, and among beaver it marked him as positively as a man's finger-prints identify him. If any member of the colony came this far, they could have no doubt that they were following their leader.

Despite the iciness of the tributary, the beaver's downy under-coat kept him both warm and dry. But he was tired and hungry, and would have to find shelter before daylight. He stopped to fell another aspen, and ate the bark from it. Some of the smaller and more tender twigs he ate whole, swallowing them as a rabbit does. Gravely he washed his face and combed out his fur with the single claw on his rear paws.

It was still dark, but the night had almost run its course and dawn was due to break very soon. The morning thrush was already fluting his six-note song and then repeating it backward. Chip planned carefully to meet the day.

The creek was very small, but there were a few wide, deep pools in it. The beaver travelled to such a pool, six feet wide by nine long, and three feet deep. He inspected it carefully. Water spilled from a rock ledge at the upper end, and made a tiny rapids that fell into the pool. Beneath the ledge was a cavern, the rear part of which was dry. Chip crawled out of the water onto the dry spot, and found that he could curl up there. Then he swam back into the pool and came to the surface in the lightening dawn.

This swift little stream that leaped from pool to pool, hurling itself down the declines that intervened, was totally foreign to the beaver's experience. Nor had he ever before been so high up on a mountainside. Chip reverted to his inborn woods-wisdom and his innate knowledge of the wild as he planned to survive whatever this new land might bring.

His former home was a lost cause. The creek, flanked by numerous farm houses, was no better. Nor did the rill offer any possibilities for a dam and the home Chip desired. It fell at too steep a pitch. There were too many stones and boulders and not enough mud banks. Nor was the timber on these rocky slopes desirable. The aspen was small and straggling. There was little birch, and Chip had no special liking for the quantities of beech that grew all around him.

He must go on, but he would have to stay here throughout the day. If it were avoidable, he dared not travel by day. There was too much danger. Even if the same peril stalked by night, darkness still offered a friendly cloak of safety. Chip climbed out on the bank, to wait and watch until the warblers started to stir. Then he dived back beneath the ledge.

He climbed up on the dry part and stretched out to his full length. He filled the tiny space, and the tip of his broad tail dangled in the water. He dozed intermittently, but never so soundly that he could not awaken at the least hint of anything different. This was not the pond, with its safe and friendly lodge, but strange country. Because it was strange, it must necessarily be hostile. Every sense must be tuned to its sharpest pitch.

For an hour, while full daylight bloomed, nothing happened. Then the water in the pool splashed slightly as a saw-billed merganser alighted upon it. A school of speckled trout, little fish no more than four inches long, frantically sought shelter beneath rocks. Four swam hurriedly under the ledge and lingered there, fanning the water with their fins and tails. The

nervous tension that gripped them was evident in their small bodies, poised like living arrows as they awaited the next move of the fish-eating duck.

Wings folded close to his body, saw bill extended, the merganser swam beneath the ledge. He was a dangerous, agile thing which, in a pool so small, could catch even brook trout. The merganser knew all their tricks. After the fish had sought a refuge beneath stones, or under the ledge, he would pluck them from their hiding places. But he had not reckoned with anything save the trout.

Just as he came beneath the ledge, Chip stirred and raised himself so that his back was almost brushing the stone roof. He turned his head, and in the half-light that filtered under the ledge he saw the duck. Startled, the merganser opened his mouth and throat and half-choked on the water that flowed in. Whirling hurriedly about, he used wings and feet to propel himself back into the pool. Bursting to the surface, he took panicky flight.

The beaver relaxed. When he rose, he had wanted only to see what was invading the pool. He identified the merganser instantly, and paid no further attention to it. Such ducks were a threat to fish but never to beaver, and Chip wouldn't have cared if it stayed in the pool.

He remained alert, not because there was any immediate threat but because these unfamiliar surroundings made him nervous. After a ten-minute interval, the little trout emerged from their hiding places and resumed their everlasting business of feeding on minute water life. A hatch of flies fluttered down to the pool, and the trout rose to them.

Throughout the long day there was only one more interruption. A small rabbit, hotly pursued by a weasel, stumbled into the pool and swam wearily across. The weasel poised delicately with both fore paws on a stone and looked at his exhausted quarry. The weasel had no intention of getting wet, so he ran downstream to a place where the creek was shallower and leaped across. As soon as he approached, the rabbit jumped back into the pool and swam to the side he had recently left. Again the weasel bounded across, and again the rabbit eluded him in the water. The little drama was repeated half a dozen times. Finally, refreshed, the rabbit dashed off into the forest. Once more the weasel took up his trail.

Chip paid absolutely no attention. Judged by human standards, his world was a harsh one. But it was the only world the beaver knew, and the weasel-driven rabbit was a commonplace. A thousand times an hour such scenes occurred and there would be one of two endings. The rabbit would get away, or the weasel would catch and eat him.

The sun was sinking when Chip finally came out from behind the ledge. He swam into the pool, and broke water so gently that only his head protruded. Even that, to any watcher, might have been a suddenly appearing bunch of leaves or forest debris. The beaver circled the pool, then climbed out on the bank. He hesitated, calling into play that native intelligence, miscalled instinct, which in times of stress is the final resort of all wild things.

It was a sense as old as the earth itself. The beaver was guided by that same light which had steered the first of his kind so truly and unerringly. He did not know what lay ahead, but somewhere he would find a place to satisfy him. And since he could not go back, he must go ahead.

Old Chip continued up the stream, which became smaller as he went farther. He passed a porcupine that was gnawing at the base of a birch tree, and the porcupine stared placidly when the beaver appeared. He continued to stare until Chip passed him, then resumed gnawing.

When the beaver came to the clear and ice-cold spring where the brook had its source, he stopped for a long while. The spring, bubbling between gray rocks that were hung with streamers of moss, was scarcely six inches deep and no more than three feet at its widest. A few feet to one side was a rotting snow drift, over which a cool wind blew. Chip sat up, folding his fore paws against his chest. His nostrils wriggled as he tested the air. He looked down the slope up which he had climbed, and at the incline that lay ahead.

He saw nothing except boulders and stunted hardwoods, relieved by an occasional open space. Long ago lumbermen had passed through here with ruthless axes. The only reminder of the great trees which had once covered the mountain lay in rotting, lichen-encrusted stumps. In spite of the forbidding prospect, Chip knew that he must travel over the top of the mountain. It was the only course. For the first time in his life, Chip voluntarily turned his back on water.

He started up the slope, guiding himself only by a positive and inborn knowledge. Water was essential to his way of life

and here there was none. He was still sure that he would find some if he went on.

He climbed as fast as he could, but compared with creatures naturally endowed to live in such places his progress was slow and almost clumsy. A snowshoe hare darted away from him. An exploding, feathered bomb, a ruffed grouse took startled wing. A shaggy buck stamped its feet and snorted. But without trouble the plodding beaver gained the top of the mountain.

Here there were only a few snow-free spaces, carpeted with sodden, wet leaves. The timber remained sparse, second-growth hardwoods. Only such things as could find a rooting in the desolation left by the lumbermen had grown on the mountain. It was a bleak, monotonous place.

Old Chip travelled as fast as he could. Throughout his entire life, he had never before been far from water in which he might find safety. Here there was no water. If an enemy threatened, he would have to fight it. But fast travelling was his safest course. Because it was the easiest path, he followed a trail consisting of brush-grown ruts worn long ago by ironshod wheels of teamsters' wagons.

Rounding a bend, Chip came suddenly upon an immense black bear squarely in the center of the path. The bear's pink tongue lolled from open jaws, as he saw the beaver and started toward him.

Chip made ready to fight. He sat straight up, balancing on his tail as he prepared to use his teeth, and studied the bear as it approached. The bear stopped.

Out of hibernation for two weeks, he had been gorging himself steadily since. A fat beaver would not come amiss, but the bear was not hungry enough to fight for a meal. For a moment, head low, he faced Chip. Then he ambled into the brush at one side of the trail and began to snuffle about.



The beaver continued, leaving the tote road instantly when he found a trickle of water. The snow was gone from this southern slope, but the little spring run babbled toward its junction with what Chip knew was a larger stream. He kept steadily on and never left the water. A tense excitement began to rise within him.

He was entering a great forest of aspens that were just beginning to break out their feathery spring buds. Daylight broke and brightened, but still the beaver did not look for shelter. Somewhere ahead lay the water he sought.

Morning was well under way when he reached it. It was a gently flowing brook, with shallow riffles and an occasional deep hole. Chip hurried toward the stream, then stopped short.

A few feet away, hungry and tense, looking like a bunch of mottled leaves on the forest floor, lay Glare, the master lynx.

### *Chapter III*

# GLARE, THE LYNX

Glare had left one of his several daytime lairs, deep in the heart of a blackberry thicket, a little before twilight deepened the last rays of the setting sun. Thirty-five pounds of spring-steel muscles and supple bone, the big cat padded on enormous feet to the edge of the thicket and waited there.

So well did his mottled-gray coat blend in with the gray thicket that, even while in motion, he was very hard to see. An alert blue jay sitting in a nearby tree was unaware of him. The jay flicked his tail and preened his feathers. His head turned almost continuously, and more than half the time his bright buttons of eyes were fixed on the sky. Two days ago the jay had barely escaped a goshawk's strike, and the memory of it was very fresh.

So softly and quietly that his head seemed to be moving on well-oiled hinges, Glare turned his yellow eyes toward the jay. They were large eyes that missed nothing, and were a perfect complement for Glare's sensitive, tufted ears. The big lynx depended on his eyes and ears to tell him what was around him. Compared with most other wild creatures, the lynx had a relatively weak nose. Glare could detect odors only when they were very near or very strong, but with his eyes and ears he did not need a keen sense of smell.

From his vantage point he could see the valley spread far below him. Nearer by, he saw the little herd of buck deer that moved single file down to the stream. He regarded them with only passing interest, but he knew all about them. The bucks were part of a little deer herd which made a home in the aspen forest. Only a few short months ago, when they had sought the favor of the does, they had striven earnestly to kill each other. Then they had dropped their antlers and spent the whole winter peacefully together. Now, while awaiting the growth of new antlers, they remained fast friends.

Glare had no special interest in them because, antlered or not, any adult deer was a fierce and dangerous antagonist. There was easier game: snowshoe rabbits, mice, low-roosting grouse, muskrats, and perhaps an occasional fawn. Glare had stalked and killed full-grown deer when winter starvation drove him to extreme measures, but it was a dangerous game. The lynx did not care to fight for a meal when there was a possibility of getting one without fighting. Glare turned his eyes away from the bucks.

Very far down the valley, the last feeble rays of the setting sun fell squarely on an open pool in the little stream and seemed to set it on fire. Another deer, a doe, moved into sight. Glare stared at her with steady interest. It was too early for fawns, but they would be coming along soon and it was well to know the exact location of every doe. Lacking any scent at all and blending so perfectly with their surroundings that even Glare's wonderful eyes could not see them as long as they lay still, fawns were very hard to find. But they made a tasty meal when they could be had.

Glare studied the valley carefully, and noted everything in it. He saw a flock of crows glide to their night roost in a single great beech that grew among the aspens, and far across the valley he heard a turkey call. Chickadees twittered comfortably in the nearby trees, and the blue jay was still preening his feathers. Glare turned his head ever so slightly.

Ten feet away, and so faint that only very sensitive ears could have detected it, a white-footed mouse had rustled the decaying leaves. Glare heard the sound, and marked it exactly for he knew that it would not be repeated. The mouse, knowing he had erred, would not move again. He would freeze where he was, hoping nothing had heard him. Glare left the thicket.

As soon as he did so the blue jay saw him, and immediately began to scream, fluttering its wings and jerking its tail. It hopped higher in the tree, announcing to everything within hearing that the lynx was abroad. Glare paid absolutely no attention.

He made no noise whatever as he padded toward that place where the mouse had rustled. Coming near, he slapped his broad front paw down on the leaves and closed his claws. Glare brushed away the dirt and leaves he had grabbed, and took the mouse from it. He swallowed the morsel, then licked his chops.

The screaming jay had followed him, and Glare glanced at it with irritation. Then he walked on, knowing that he could neither catch the jay nor prevent its following him. He also knew that, as long as the jay followed him, everything in his path would be warned of his approach. He was hungry, but before he did anything else he must lose the jay.

Glare walked on, seemingly unconcerned but planning exactly what he would do. Not trying to hide, he slipped into

another thicket and walked an old rabbit trace to the center. The hysterical jay flew to a tree on the far side and redoubled his frantic screaming. Glare moved as softly as a puff of wind.

He stole toward the side of the thicket, a moving shadow that did not so much as bend or ruffle one bush. Glare crouched very near the earth, intent on a small knoll toward which he was creeping. It was his intention to slip behind it and into the forest, but the sharp-eyed jay saw him and followed.

Glare whirled angrily. He was a cat with a cat's explosive nervous system, and now it gave way. The lynx leaped high in the air, his front paw outstretched as he sought to grasp the jay and bring it down. The jay fluttered wildly out of reach and sought safety in a tree. From there he screamed insults. The angry Glare sheathed and unsheathed his claws.

He walked on, his stub tail angrily erect and his ruff bristled. His dull nose told him where snowshoe rabbits had been feeding recently, but they were alarmed by the jay's screaming and had fled. Glare leaped again at the jay. Alerted by the first attempt to bring him down, the jay stayed out of reach. Glare halted, twitching his tail, his yellow eyes staring angrily.

Aside from the morsel of the mouse, he had last eaten early this morning, when he caught and killed a small cottontail. It had not been nearly enough to sustain Glare's thirty-five pounds of restless energy for very long. Now he was hungry again, but the jay was frightening everything. After a few minutes of raging, Glare did the only thing he could do and accepted the situation. While the jay continued to scream and cackle, he curled up beside an aspen and slept. He knew perfectly well that no jay cared to risk the terrors that stalked by night, and before long this one would seek a safe roost.

Another hour passed before the jay flew into the shelter of a small nearby hemlock. Glare raised his head, and when he did so the jay uttered another sleepy screech. For a moment the lynx debated the advisability of climbing the tree and trying to catch the jay, but discarded the idea. The hemlock into which the jay had gone was very bushy; even Glare could not climb it without some noise. Probably the jay would fly before he was able to reach him. Glare rose and trod softly into the aspens. The hunger in his belly was a raging thing now, which must be satisfied.

The lynx followed the contour of the hill around to a level space where the slope flattened. There was a profusion of small trees here, shoots and saplings, and there were many open spaces in which new spring grass showed green against the background of last year's dead grass. Glare became a stalking whisper, for this was a favorite haunt of snowshoe rabbits.

His broad paws were soft on the ground as he approached and climbed upon a moss-grown log. He waited there, seeming to melt into the log and become part of it. Once settled, he did not stir. Even the gentle breeze that played along the bench ruffled his silky fur only slightly. His ears were alert, his eyes fixed on the rabbit trace that ran beside the log. Three-quarters of an hour later, Glare tensed.

He heard the rabbit coming before he saw it, and made ready to spring when it was near. But the tensing of his muscles, the preparation for a leap, did not move his body even slightly. A moment later he saw the rabbit. It was a big one, hopping slowly along the rabbit trace. Glare gathered himself to spring.

A split second before he was ready, there was an interruption even more silent than Glare himself. Wraith, the great horned owl, was also hunting on the bench. Flying silently, he swooped down and snatched up the rabbit. Powerful wings bore Wraith and his burden into the air.

Glare sprang, but his groping claws closed only upon a tuft of feathers. The lynx stood in the rabbit trace, his eyes aflame with anger and his short tail jerking, as he watched the owl bear his meal away.

There was nothing he could do about it. Wraith was gone as silently as he had come. Glare must hunt again. He moved along the bench.

But a change had come over the lynx. He had been hungry when he left the thicket where he had bedded throughout the day and he was hungrier now. Nor had his forty-five minutes on the log, waiting for a rabbit to appear, improved his short temper. All wild things must have patience, but Glare possessed a lesser degree than perhaps any other creature. He had no wish to lay a second ambush and wait another half hour, or longer, for another snowshoe. Nor could he stalk them. The long-legged hares with the immense rear feet had ears fully as keen as his. Though he made almost no noise, they heard him coming and got out of the way. The snowshoes could not be still-hunted even by a master stalker such as

Glare.



Twenty minutes after Wraith took the snowshoe almost from beneath his very nose, the lynx left the bench. He trotted through the budding aspens to the tiny stream that coursed down the valley, and followed it. A few weeks ago, swollen by melting snow, the stream had overflowed its banks and strayed far into the aspens. Now it was low, with clear water that struggled down shallow riffles, and into limpid pools. Glare followed the stream to a pool he knew.

It was well up in the aspens, a mile and a half from the never-failing spring where the stream had its source. The stream made a bend here, and violent spring and autumn floods had smashed the banks away to leave a pool which at flood stage was about fifteen feet wide by twenty long, and eight feet deep. Now the pool was less than half that length and breadth, and no more than three feet at its deepest.

Glare crawled onto a half-sunken log that had one end on the stream bank and the other in the pool. He knew this spot well. In summer when the springs that fed the creek were at their lowest, this was almost the only pool in the entire stream that retained more than a few inches of water. Because of that, it was a favorite haunt of such trout as remained in the stream. Since last year a monstrous brown trout had ruled the fish in the pool.

Glare had tried several times to catch the King trout, but always unsuccessfully. Now he would try again. Slowly, making no swift motions that would alarm his quarry, the lynx lowered one front paw almost to the water. He held perfectly still, unblinking eyes fixed on that part of the pool which was just beneath his paw.

A foot away, the pool's surface swirled as one of the trout in it rose to chase a swimming bug. Glare did not turn his eyes; he could catch only what came within reach of his paw. Again he tensed as a shadow moved near the log, then flicked his paw. His claws sank into a fat chub.

Glare gobbled his catch and stood up. He knew he had rippled the water when he caught his fish, and that the rest of the fish would be warned by that and stay away from the leaning log. The lynx could not afford to wait until they became unwary again. He was too desperately hungry.

He walked to the head of the pool, leaped across the shallow stream, and trotted swiftly through the aspens. There were patches of hemlock and pine scattered through the aspens, and grouse were inclined to roost in them. Glare made his way to such a patch, stubby hemlocks whose lower branches almost brushed the ground, and began to stalk.

He caught the scent of roosting grouse, and by walking silently back and forth, with his bristled face tilted upward, he finally saw them. They were dark bundles against the night sky, but already some premonition of danger had reached them. A grouse took its head from beneath a hovering wing, and sat bolt upright. It clucked querulously, and its mates stirred.

Glare tried to be very quiet as he walked to the tree and reared against it, but he was not silent enough. His claws

scraped the bark, and at the sound the roosting grouse took instant wing. They rattled into the night, brushing branches and twigs as they flew, and settled in another tree. Glare whirled about in a rage.

There was good hunting in the aspens, but the big lynx's temper was thoroughly aroused and he would hunt here no more tonight. Glare struck a steady pace through the aspens, following a deer path that paralleled the creek and leaping the fallen logs and boulders that blocked the path.

Two miles farther on the aspen forest ended in straggling patches of trees. Glare swerved, remaining within the trees as long as he could. But when he came out of them he did not hesitate. He knew the valley here and had hunted it before.

Hills once covered with fine hemlock and pine now rose nakedly on either side. When the lumbermen passed this way they had been absolutely ruthless, taking every marketable tree and leaving only the culls and unfit. A few deformed trees and scrub second growth that struggled to get a start were the only remainders of once virginal forests. Because there was no longer any timber to regulate its flow, every spring and every fall the creek ran wild. Flood waters that swept the valley had cut dozens of new channels which were completely dry except in flood time. And high water that overflowed all channels had swept away so much valuable topsoil that whatever grew in the valley was ragged and thin. It was a valley of desolation, but a few stubborn human beings clung tenaciously to the thin soil.

Glare did not like humans or anything about them, and knew that they were always better let alone. But on various occasions, when hunting in the aspens had been difficult, he had raided poultry yards, sheep pens, and twice had even killed calves. He knew the people who owned such stock as relatively dull creatures, slow to respond to an alarm and not too dangerous when they took up his trail.

Glare did fear their dogs, and this fear had its roots in ancient times. From the very beginning, dogs and cats had been natural enemies. It was a foolish fear because, in a fair fight, Glare could have killed almost any dog in the valley. He still feared them.

However, he knew every farm in the valley and was aware of which farmers kept dogs. Following one of the creek's dry channels, Glare went past the first farm house to the second. It was a small, unpainted house sadly beaten by the weather, and a flood which had come to the very doorstep had undermined part of the foundation. Last year the house had had no occupant, but within the past six months a man had moved into it. The last time Glare came this way, he had had no dog.

The lynx left the stream bed and walked openly toward the barnyard. Fifty feet away he stopped, listening and watching. There was no sign of any dog. Glare continued, passing a tethered cow that raised a nervous head as she thought she saw something in the night. Glare gave the cow no further attention; his eyes were on a big apple tree in which both chickens and turkeys roosted.

He paused briefly to look at the chickens, ghostly white shapes silhouetted against the night sky, and at the darker turkeys. Without hesitation he started up the tree, his claws scratching the rough bark. Grouse, or wild turkeys, would have awakened and flown. But these were tame birds. Only when the lynx was creeping out on the limb where they roosted did a turkey stretch its neck and cluck sleepily in the night. Glare closed his fangs on a fat white rooster, and at once the night silence was shattered by a startled squawk.

As though the squawk were a signal, somewhere within the house a dog barked choppily. An instant later a light flared, and the searching eye of an electric torch darted through the window. Inside the house, the barking dog became frantic.

Taking a firm grip on the rooster, Glare scrambled down the tree trunk. He had miscalculated, and in the wilds any miscalculation was apt to be at the price of life itself. Most of the farmers were sluggish and slow to arouse, but this one was not. There was a square of light as a door opened and shut, and the barking dog came out of the house.

Almost at once he became silent, and Glare ran as fast as he could. Various times, when there was snow on the ground, he had been coursed by the motley pack of dogs which the valley farmers could assemble. Glare was afraid of all dogs, but he had learned long ago that dogs that barked on a trail were the least dangerous. Their sound told him where they were and how to avoid them, but twice he had been almost overtaken by silently running dogs who had come upon him without his knowing they were even near. This was such a one.

Glare ran as hard as he could back toward the aspen forest, and because the rooster slowed him up, reluctantly he dropped it. He sprang from the top to the bottom of one of the dry channels, and raced up that. His ears were laid back,

tuned to catch a sound of the pursuing dog. Twice he heard a stone rattle and once an eager whine, then the dog was lost. Glare had outdistanced it.

Hungrier and angrier than ever, the lynx went back to the bench where so many snowshoes lived. Again his own temper thwarted him. He made false passes at two snowshoes and missed them. The morning was well advanced when he returned for another try at the big trout.

It was no use. The school of trout lay motionless in the deepest part of their pool. Glare wandered along the stream, then stopped suddenly. He flattened his ears. His yellow eyes gleamed.

He saw a beaver, a big animal twice his size. It was the first beaver he had ever seen on this stream, but he had fought and killed them elsewhere and he knew how to do it. He had to avoid their teeth, those great, tree-chopping tusks, but he knew how to do that. Glare poised to leap forward to the attack.

As he did so, a rifle cracked. The bullet ploughed into the ground where the lynx had crouched and downstream the dog yelped eagerly. Glare gave a great sidewise spring that carried him behind a group of aspens, and kept running.

## *Chapter IV*

## A NEW HOME

Like all other wild things, Chip had definite rules to fit every known situation. When he did not know what to do, he simply did nothing. Chip applied that rule now; he held perfectly still.

Glare was gone as quickly as a puff of wind, and the black and brown airedale that came in sight a few seconds later was intent only on the lynx's trail. He was a young dog, bursting with puppyish [enthusiasm](#). He bounded to the aspens, snuffled about, and slowly worked out Glare's trail. Chip watched the dog run through the aspens, faltering here and there but always returning to the scent he wanted. The dog was almost out of sight when the man came.

Jed Hale was a young man with long, uncut black hair on a hatless head. He wore khaki trousers and shirt open at the collar, and his feet were encased in leather moccasins. He had thrown on a light jacket, but running had made him warm and he had unfastened it so that it flapped as he ran. A stub-barreled 30-30 dangled from his right hand. Jed Hale paused a moment, ducking beneath the overhanging branches to see which way the dog had gone. Then he ran on, never seeing the beaver.

Chip remained perfectly still, not moving a muscle. He was in plain sight and he knew it, but he also knew the virtues of absolute quiet. This was not the first time an enemy had run right past him because he held still. But had he moved, he certainly would have been seen.

The beaver made no motion at all until the man and dog had been gone for a full two minutes, and then he advanced only a few steps. He sat up, balancing himself on his broad tail while he tested the wind currents with a wriggling nose. Chip's sense of smell was not much keener than Glare's, but he could detect nearby odors and know where their sources were. Now the faint scents told him that Glare, Jed Hale and the dog were a long way up the creek.

Chip dropped to all fours. Only a few feet away, the spring run he had been following down the mountain emptied into a stream. Chip left the winding run and walked directly to the stream. He halted on the bank, wanting to look it over before he made any definite moves.

The stream here was not much bigger than the brooklet he had followed up the other side of the mountain. It varied from narrow, swift riffles to four-foot pools. Chip looked at his own reflection in such a pool, an unusually deep one for a stream this size. It was floored with small stones, and very clear. The beaver slipped quietly into the three feet of water.

The pool was too small and too clear to allow him to hide, but on the east side it extended beneath a hollowed-out cut bank. Chip swam beneath the bank into a roomy cavern, and for the first time since crossing the mountain he felt reasonably safe and comfortable. He was hidden here. An enemy might smell him but none could see him. Should he be attacked, he was in a position to defend himself.

The mere act of going into it told such a seasoned judge of water a great deal about the stream. Though it had not much of a flow in summer, it would not dry up completely. Water of this temperature could come only from ever-flowing cold springs. Besides, though the stones on both sides of the pool were clean, those in the center were coated with aquatic moss growth which dies unless it is always submerged. When Chip went under the bank he discovered much more.

In times of melting snow or heavy rains, this stream was subjected to fierce, violent floods. Gouged and torn, and littered with loose boulders of all sizes, the cavern could have been excavated only by hammering waters of great force. More rushing water had carried the boulders down to this dead end beneath the embankment.

Old Chip crawled to the back end of the dry cavern and slept. It had been an exhausting, frightening climb over the mountain and down the other side, and he was very tired. But he did not give way to exhaustion, as a human would have. The beaver had learned too many harsh lessons to relax even while he slept.

His senses were attuned to the gentle wash of the pool, and to the murmur of the riffles above and below him. Chip came instantly awake when a light tread sounded directly overhead. As a couple of pebbles fell from the roof to rattle down beside him, he identified the tread as that of a wandering deer. There were sharp, distinct thuds as the doe bounded away.

Chip sat up, unable to hear anything else but alert for whatever might come. Something had frightened the doe. A second later there was a slightly different tone in the upstream riffle's murmuring little song. Something had blocked the riffle for

a split second, and the beaver must be ready for it.

He saw the shadow on the pool a fraction of an instant before Ripple, the otter, slipped under the ledge. Black as midnight, three feet of sinuous grace, Ripple raised his sleek, dripping head and for a moment stared at Chip. There was no fear evident about him, for Ripple feared nothing. A peerless hunter, as much at home in the water as any fish, Ripple turned aside only for Glare. As he slithered his shining length all the way into the cavern, the place smelled of the musk which Ripple carried.

Chip was ready for him. Many times had otter invaded his pond to catch whatever they could, and often, in winter, they had carried their fight right into the lodges. Sometimes they were successful, killing every inhabitant of a lodge. But never of Chip's; he knew how to repulse them. He made ready to battle Ripple, but the otter was in no mood to fight anything so big. He slipped smoothly from beneath the ledge and swam on downstream. Ripple was on one of the far-flung journeys that might take him anywhere at all; he was a freebooter who went where he willed and took what he wanted along the way.

Chip remained alert and nervous. This was unknown country which already, in a very short time, had revealed many dangers. He would have to be extremely careful.

Three hours later he heard Jed Hale and his dog, unsuccessful in their hunt for Glare, pass back down the stream. The beaver held very still as they passed, and when they were gone he moved nervously to the end of the ledge. He had not decided exactly what he would do here, but he was on water and would stay. If he made up his mind to leave the aspen forest, he could travel up or downstream.

For the present, though he was hungry and growing hungrier, he wished to remain hidden. He would go out only when twilight fell. The night had plenty of dangers, but darkness itself was a shield to protect his movements, and he wanted to do some exploring.

The smaller birds had already sought night roosts when Chip came out of his cavern. The birds twittered in the aspens about him as they made themselves ready for the night, then fell silent as Wraith, the great horned owl, flitted noiselessly overhead. Chip was aware of his passing but not concerned by it. Though such owls occasionally plucked swimming kits from the water's surface, they would never attack a full-grown beaver.

For a moment or two Chip remained in the cold pool, ready at a second's notice to dive back into the cave. He saw the sleek doe that had come to drink at the pool, and she stared curiously at him. The beaver returned her steady gaze. He was a true pacifist, a rare wild creature that would fight only when he himself was attacked. He had no feud with deer nor had they with him. Both knew it.

The doe drank and went away to graze. Chip climbed out on the bank and selected a small aspen whose bark was fairly bursting with new spring sap. He reared eagerly, supporting himself on his flat tail and grasping the tree with hand-like front paws as he began to gnaw a circle around the aspen. His teeth bit deeply, taking out big chunks of sweet green wood, and the tree's sap flowed pleasantly over the beaver's mouth. Twice he stopped working to lick his chops, then resumed felling the tree. A moment later, with a soft swishing of branches, it toppled.

Chip set to work, stripping succulent bark with his chisel-like teeth and eating it greedily. He ate until his belly was comfortably filled, then returned to the stream.

He had not yet decided what he would or could do. At no time had there been evidence of gnawed sticks or chips; there seemed to be no other beaver on this stream. Chip could take it for himself if he wanted it. The fact that both Glare and Ripple had established previous tenancies in the valley and on the stream made no difference. They were not of the beaver's tribe and he could do as he wished without regard to either.

First he had to know the stream more thoroughly, must find for himself whether or not it was worth settling. Chip returned to the water and slipped easily back into the pool. He started upstream.

At no time did he leave the water course. Even when the riffles were so shallow that they barely wet his belly, he stayed in them. Water was his element; he felt happiest and safest when he was in it. As he travelled, he noted everything in the creek and on both sides.

The aspen forest was a fine, rich, and healthy growth, ranging from seedlings which Chip could cut with one chop of his

teeth to trees eighteen inches in diameter. And it was a promising forest for beaver. Here, in these aspens, was food enough to supply a whole colony for many years to come.

Chip worked with painstaking thoroughness. He travelled very slowly, and always stopped to examine whatever seemed worth close inspection. Before he had gone half a mile he knew beyond any doubt that beaver could thrive in the upper part of the valley. It had everything they needed. There was plenty of food and a [never-failing](#) supply of water. But there were also other factors to be considered.

The beaver did not linger in the pool where the King trout lived, although he was conscious of the school of fish swimming about beneath him as he passed. Chip gave them not the slightest attention; he ate no fish and fish never bothered him. He went on up to where the stream was a mere dribble, trickling down a rocky bed lined with water-cress. Soon he came to the source itself.

That was a spring which seeped from the very base of a great cliff. Cold and very clear, never getting the sun's direct rays, the spring had washed out a circular basin about two feet deep by three in diameter. Below, other springs fed into the creek but none were so cold and pure as this one. Chip dipped his muzzle into the spring, and liked what he tasted.

More and more, the stream was beginning to impress him as an ideal place in which to rebuild his shattered home. He now knew beyond any doubt that there were no other beaver upstream. He still needed to investigate the lower reaches more completely. Chip started back downstream.

He travelled very slowly, examining all over again places he had inspected when he came upstream. He was a born hydro-engineer with a knowledge of water built into his alert brain, and to that knowledge had been added many years of experience. Now he was looking for the best place to build his dam.

He was satisfied that there would always be enough water to maintain a filled pond, but the stream also had its driving floods. Given enough of a crest, such a torrent might wash out even a well-constructed beaver dam. Before he started to build, Chip had to be acquainted with the height of the banks on either side of his proposed pond, the available food, and the contour of the land. He must take his own labor into account; a small dam in the right place would back more water than a long and rambling structure in a different and ill-chosen location.

When he came to the pool where he had first entered the stream, Chip investigated it thoroughly. It was a good place. The banks were high and all around the land sloped down to the stream. There was plenty of food. Any flood, sweeping down from above, would spend its initial force on the already-hollowed bank under which he had slept. Chip climbed out on the bank and carefully inspected a ten-inch aspen that grew about twenty feet from the edge of the stream. He walked around and around the tree, examining it from every conceivable angle. It would help anchor a dam. Then he returned to the stream and plunged in.

He had already half decided to make a new home here, but before he definitely committed himself to starting a dam he must know more. Chip continued downstream, mindful of everything around him.

In a pool a half mile below the one he had chosen he surprised a family of root-digging muskrats. The muskrat family, father, mother, and three early young, stopped digging and watched when Chip went by. They made no move to flee, and showed no alarm, for they were kin to Chip. Muskrats and beaver live side by side in perfect amity. Almost before Chip was out of sight, the muskrats had resumed their everlasting search for food.

When he came to the lower reaches of the aspen forest, Chip swam more cautiously. He did not like this place of scattered trees, for any beaver would be pressed to find a living here. Suddenly he halted in a deep pool, with only the tip of his nose and his curved back showing.

A buck, one of the five which Glare had seen, leaped across the stream and was gone in the night. Hard on its heels, silent as shadows, came two gray wolves. Chip lingered for a long while in the deep pool. He knew and feared wolves, savage fighters which could kill with one snap of their iron jaws. But there was no immediate danger from this pair. They were interested only in the desperately fleeing buck.

Chip went on, and after another twenty minutes halted again. For a moment he swam uneasily around a small pool while the wind, blowing up the valley, brought him the definite odor of more wood smoke. Mingled with it were barnyard odors, and the various other scents which accumulate wherever humans make their home.

Old Chip had all the proof he needed that people lived on this part of the stream, and he wished to stay near no human habitation. Men were far more dangerous than Glare, Ripple, and the wolves, combined. Still, dangers had to be faced and he had seen only one man back in the aspen forest. He knew of no place he could go where they would not come. And the upper part of the stream, so far unclaimed by any beaver, was an ideal home site. It had everything, and was far removed from any house. Chip remembered the long, dangerous trip over the mountain. Unless forced to it, he had no wish to make another such trip. He turned back upstream.

Dawn was just breaking when he came to the pool near the creek bend. He had eaten only once, when he started out, and now he was hungry again. Chip climbed out on the bank and approached the tree he had felled last night.

When he had eaten enough, Chip sliced a twig-laden branch from the tree and dragged it into the stream. He laid it crosswise in the shallow riffles that curled out of the pool, and watched the water that broke around it. Carefully Chip inspected his handiwork, reassuring himself that the branch lay exactly right. He moved one end so that it lay more snugly against a big stone, then he went downstream, and with his muzzle and front paws, rolled a bigger stone in below the stick.



There was a sudden rattling from a big stub that stood forty feet to one side of the stream. A pileated woodpecker, large as a pigeon, was digging insects from their holes. The beaver did not look around, for this was one of the noises whose maker could always be identified.

Now that he had finally decided upon a dam site, he was troubled by a gnawing restlessness. From the time the previous dam was dynamited until now he had been a homeless beaver, and a beaver without a home is lost. There is no safety for them. Chip knew that if he would survive through the winter he had to harvest food while summer lasted. He must also have a place to store that food. Now that he had decided on another home, he burned with anxiety to be about both building and harvesting. There was no telling how long summer would last, or whether the freeze-up would come early or late.

Chip cut two more branches, smaller ones, and placed them against the big branch he had already laid. Reluctantly, as the day brightened fast, he left his work and slipped into the safe cavern.

The noonday sun was warm on the earth above him, and its warmth penetrated the cavern, when Chip awoke. He moaned softly, and looked around. Since the start of his flight, he had been too harassed and too busy to give much thought to anything except mere survival. Now that he again had the start of a home, he missed Sleek terribly. Chip lay down again, and the misery in his heart was reflected in his eyes. He could not live alone.

But the will to live remained a strong one, and now that he was settled Chip fell naturally back into his old routine. Twilight came and deepened. The doe drank, and Chip felt hungry. He climbed up on the bank, felled a small tree, and ate. Then he set to work enlarging his dam.

He started with a small twig, which he packed into the branches he had laid last night. He scooped mud from in front of his dam and used that to close the openings between the branches. Every now and then he used another stone, and every few minutes he stopped to look and listen. Once the sighing wind brought him Glare's scent, and Chip slipped into the hollowed-out cavern until the lynx had passed. Later, as he worked, he was aware of Wraith cruising softly up the stream, and of the heavy thread of Shuffle, the bear.

Chip dipped very quietly into the pool, where water was already starting to rise. His dam was holding well, and by tomorrow night there should be enough water to permit diving. Making as little disturbance as possible, Chip floated near the cavern. He was afraid of Shuffle, who could kill the biggest beaver, but the bear passed on into the night.

Chip waited a few minutes before he climbed back up on the bank. He started felling a small tree, for it was near midnight and he was again hungry. Chip stopped abruptly. He had come a long way up the bank and was almost dangerously far from the pool. Now, in the aspens on the other side he heard something else approach. Chip whirled about and fled toward the pool. He plunged in. Almost as he did so something else tumbled in the other side.

Chip rushed eagerly forward to meet an exhausted, bedraggled Sleek. Her paws were worn raw, and a prowling coyote she met along the way had left a gaping rent in her side. Tenderly Chip escorted her into the hollowed-out cavern and gently caressed her with his muzzle. He spent a long while beside her, and when at last he resumed work on the dam he was bubbling with new energy and determination.

His mate had come home.

## *Chapter V*

# KING, THE TROUT

The King trout turned from the trickle of water purling into the head of his pool and swam toward the center. The charge of his six-pound body scattered the eight smaller trout and the two chubs who shared the pool with him. The second largest trout, a sixteen-inch brown, moved into the place vacated by the King.

The King settled among sodden leaves in the thirty inches of water that now formed the pool's deepest hole. The leaves stirred sluggishly as his dark body eased to the bottom. There he lay, not moving but with every sense acutely alive to the threat creeping upon the pool.

Dried mud banks rose from the pool's borders. A month ago the pool had been eight feet deep and the trickle feeding it was a stream. Now it was shrunken to less than half its former size.

A telltale network of tracks marked the banks. Night-prowling raccoons, bloodthirsty mink, padding lynx, sleek otter, and ponderous bears had all walked there, and all had left a record of their passing. When the pool had started to fall they had come to feed on the trapped fish within it. The tracks high on the mud bank were hard and dry, sun-baked into the stone-hard clay. The tracks near the water, some of which had been left within the hour, were soft because the mud there was still wet.

The danger that had sent the watchful King trout to deep water approached as softly as a breeze. One second there was only the lowering stream, threading its way among bare rocks that thrust out of the water. The next second Ripple, the otter, who had decided to come back upstream, was framed at the head of the pool.

The fish which had remained at the pool's upper end broke in wild panic, darting into deeper water and seeking a refuge which did not exist. One of the smaller trout splashed in the riffles at the pool's lower end and, unable to swim down them, swam frantically back. Another dropped out of the school. The rest continued to dash about.

Every inch of the King was motionless. Motionless, he might escape notice.

Wet hair tight against his sleek body, Ripple started after the sixteen-inch trout. He was in no hurry; he knew that the pool had become a prison. Following effortlessly, he let the brown rush about. With a final desperate burst of speed the brown flung himself at the despairing trickle that flowed out of the pool, and tried to swim down the thread of water. Half his broad back was exposed. Ripple bounded down the stream, claimed his prize, climbed the mud bank, and disappeared.

Rising slowly from the bed of leaves, the King swam back to the head of the pool. The other trout drifted near him, and the King made a savage rush at a foot-long rainbow that tried to move in ahead of him. The rainbow circled, came up behind the assembled school of fish, and took a wary place in back of the King.

The pool's head was a favored spot. Even though it had become a trickle, the stream still washed down all-important food. A yellow water cricket floated into sight, and the King opened his mouth and engulfed the squirming bug. He ate again when another cricket came along, but when some black midges floated past he let them go by to the fish behind. The twelve-inch rainbow ate greedily, and the six remaining trout crowded in as greedily to get what was left.

Hopefully the two chubs awaited their opportunity to feed. When none was forthcoming, they drifted back into the pool to seek food there. Plebeians in a group of aristocrats, the chubs ate last and least.

The King shifted his position uneasily and backed away from the head. During his long lifetime he had been sought by many enemies but had always found some way to evade them. Now there was little room for evasion in this pool that had become a trap.

A shadow floated over the surface. Before any fish had time to flee, the osprey that had cast the shadow struck. He rose, flapping into the air with an eight-inch trout in his talons, and again the smaller trout scattered in wild panic. The King remained where he was. Too big and heavy to fear anything that came from the air, he did not consider ospreys a source of peril.

Still uneasy, he swam back into the center of the pool. In the spring, when the stream had run bank-full, there had been a great many fish to share it with him. As the pool had lowered, the population had gradually vanished. The lower the pool

had fallen, the more swiftly the fish had disappeared.

The King warily watched a log that slanted from the mud bank into the lowered pool. Glare, the lynx, crouched on the log, his position so fixed that even his mottled fur did not ripple. One talon-tipped paw dangled over the side of the log and almost touched the surface. The King kept away from the log; he knew Glare and how he fished. He moved slowly to the bed of leaves and hovered upon them.

Where the water lapped the mud banks, a narrow, still-wet belt extended up the mud. Yesterday the wet belt had been higher. Because the King always knew the depth of the water in which he swam, he knew that the pool had dropped another two inches. He did not know this in terms of inches, but in terms of water, safety, and life. He was endowed with an instinct as exact as a mechanic's rule.

The King moved back to the head of the pool and again scattered the smaller fish. The big trout was aware of time in the same sense that he was aware of the water's depth. At this time of day he knew that a great many water crickets would wash into the pool.

They came in profusion, little, squirming, zebra-striped bugs which, generations back, had surrendered themselves to that whim of the water. The King fed upon them as they washed down, and continued to feed until he had his fill. Then he went back into the pool, noting as he passed that only one of the chubs had come back to the head. Glare had made a kill.

The moon's rays stole through the trees, painting the pool with clear gold. The sad call of a raccoon floated into the darkness.

A great hatch of night flies dimpled the pool, but the King did not rise to them. Old and wise, he knew that fish that moved a great deal at night betrayed themselves and were the first to be caught. More than once, in this pool and others, the King had lain undetected while some night-prowler passed within inches.

As though it were a suddenly smashed mirror, the golden top of the pool shattered into a thousand moon-tinted lances. On the surface the King saw the outline of a swimming otter. Knowing well where he would find the school of fish, the otter dived toward them. There was a little splash at the head of the pool, and once more the curling ripples spread. The otter did not return.

The King remained uneasily quiet on his leaf bed. A swimming mink, its small head a cutting arrow in the water, swam past and was gone. Something small and dark appeared on the end of the leaning log and a raccoon's masked face showed for a second in the moonlight. There was a great splashing at the head of the pool and three panicky trout fled into deeper water.

Still the King remained over his leaf bed, sensing, interpreting, every moment of threat and panic, but taking no part in the tense movement that went on in the pool. The moon waned before its time and a period of intense blackness preceded the early summer dawn.

A reluctant gray light filtered through the trees and spread dimly over the surface of the pool. The King's watchfulness sharpened. During the night the pool had dropped another two inches. The light, growing stronger, revealed why the moonlight had waned prematurely.

Yesterday the sky had been clear. Now a dirty yellow haze spread across the sky and darkened the rising sun. A bridge of ominous black clouds lay on the tops of the two mountains that formed the upstream valley. A brisk wind sprang up and set the aspens to shaking.

Minutes passed before the King saw Shuffle, the black bear, a monstrous, shaggy shape on the bank. Shuffle's body seemed to consist only of a head and a powerful frame. Not until he moved did his legs become visible. He lumbered down to the pool and fixed his eyes on the bed of leaves.

The King, knowing he had been seen, swam to the riffles at the lower end. The riffles had dwindled to a mere seepage purling slowly around the bases of top-dry rocks. That way there was no hope of escape. The King swam back to the leaves.

Shuffle entered the water and waded down the middle of the pool. Head bent, he raised a sledge-hammer forepaw to strike. But before the smashing blow fell, the King hurled himself through an opening at one side of Shuffle's water-

blocking body and sped upstream.

He raced to the leaning log and sank under it. Shuffle sat down in the water and looked about for the trout. Presently he saw the log and, rising, pawed under it. The King dashed away, and at that moment a sullen murmur shattered the morning silence. Reaching the lower end of the pool, the King flashed back to deeper water and awaited Shuffle's attack.

Lightning suddenly illuminated a morning grown strangely dark. Thunder clashed. Rain slashed the surface of the pool. Bending before the approaching gale, the aspens rattled and groaned.

Upstream, the overweighted bridge of clouds collapsed. The sullen murmur became an ominous roar. A great wall of water—a flash flood from the upstream cloudburst—covered the boulders, transformed the feeble ripples into snarling rapids, and swept dirt and limbs before it.

A whirling log spun dizzily and knocked Shuffle off his feet. Desperately he strove to reach the bank. Turning and tumbling, he finally grasped a tree with reaching claws. With a mighty effort he pulled himself from the water and crawled, gasping, into the forest.

The King let himself ride with the flood. For long he had known that his only salvation lay in escaping the pool, and now he sped downstream. He swerved slightly where the flood hurled all its terrible force against a cut bank.

The King came to rest six feet behind the beaver dam.

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To Chip, hard at work enlarging his dam, the flood warning first manifested itself in a stirring uneasiness. Chip stopped work and swam upstream to where Sleek, completely recovered from the ordeals she had endured, was working on the lodge they would share. Had Sleek failed to come, Chip could have continued to live in a hole under the bank, but her arrival made more elaborate quarters necessary.

The old beaver swam slowly around his mate, who was working in shallow water at one side of the pond. An expert construction engineer herself, Sleek had already built a solid foundation of mud and sticks. The top of it was high above the water level, but Sleek was planning with an eye to the pond that would be. She had used the intelligence born in her to estimate the height to which water would rise when the dam was finished. The lodge itself would be completely surrounded by water, and the lodge's living room would have to be above that level.

Sleek stopped working for a moment and sniffed noses with Chip. She was sprawled on top of the half-built lodge, flat tail dangling in the water, but a moment later she climbed farther up. She sat there, looking at Chip.

Hers was a questioning glance, as though she waited for her mate to tell her what she needed to know. Sleek had her own share of native intelligence, but for long she had depended on Chip to offer the first warning of danger and to devise a way for escaping it. His senses were keener than hers and his wisdom greater. Sleek was ready to accept whatever Chip decided and to do as he thought best.

With his front paws Chip shoved himself away from the lodge and went back into the water. He could offer nothing because he himself knew nothing beyond a growing nervousness. But it was not the same tension which had made itself felt just before the previous dam was dynamited.

Resting a few feet from the edge of the rising water, the doe gave no sign that she sensed anything amiss. Life all around the pool flowed on in an undisturbed and unexcited manner. The stream retained a normal flow. There was still something wrong.

Though there were no outward signs, the tension made itself evident in an electric tautness vaguely felt in the water itself. Chip kept only a normal watch for enemies because nothing else was necessary. Whatever brewed lay in the vital forces of the earth itself, and the change would come from within them.

Old Chip swam back to the dam and painstakingly went over every inch of what he had constructed so far. Even though everything seemed to be holding well, he strengthened it with sticks and mud, then climbed up on the bank and reared beside a tree.

Often, when he wished to fell a tree and there was no special reason for hurrying, he worked more or less indifferently. Sometimes he half-felled as many as six trees, leaving them standing on half-severed stumps until he felt like cutting them the rest of the way through. Now he worked hard and seriously until the tree fell, and as soon as it was down he cut branches which he at once dragged into the rising pond. Then he swam to the bank and dug out quantities of wet clay. Holding it under his chin with his front paws, he carried it to the dam and packed it in among the sticks. Grazing near the pond's edge, a shadowy figure in the darkness, the doe did not even look around when Chip came near her. All night he worked on the dam, but did not attempt to build it higher. From time to time Sleek left her own work and came down to swim near him. She did not linger, interfere, or offer to assist. Sleek had her own pressing duties. Her mate could take care of the dam. She too was desperately working against time, and she needed a lodge.

Dawn broke. Sleek continued to work on her lodge, fashioning it of sticks held together with mud. Chip went up on the bank to cut one last tree. For the first time he stopped working to look at the forming pond.

There was no apparent outward difference. Rising water had backed almost to the bend in the stream. The little riffle that trickled down the bend was slightly more full, but it had not changed markedly. Still, there was an indefinable change. The sun seemed too bright. Though awakening birds made the hushed morning a noisy one, their singing seemed more muted than before. The pileated woodpecker did not hammer on his stub with the same rhythmic cadence and even the doe was beginning to sense something amiss.

She stood at the edge of the pond, and lowered a slim muzzle to drink. The doe looked back over her shoulder into the woods, and stamped a nervous foot. When she left she went deep into the woods.

Chip left his tree half cut and scrambled into the pond. He had heard Shuffle coming a moment before he saw him. The big bear had been up on a hillside ripping decayed logs apart and eating the fat white grubs that lived within them. His paws and chest were flecked with dirt, and his mouth hung happily open. He blinked his little eyes at the beaver, swimming in the center of the pond, drank noisily, then padded on his carefree way.

Chip floated for a few minutes more in the center of the pond, then swam down for one final inspection of his dam. He felt a gnawing desire to strengthen it more, but daylight was here. He swam back to Sleek and waited until she dived, then followed, going deep into the pond and coming up in the hollowed-out cave beneath the bank.

Rising water had flowed into the cave until only the highest part, the far back end, was dry. The two beaver had to huddle side by side, and very close together, to find a dry bed among the boulders. They would not be able to find one after the dam was built a little higher. Chip scratched nervously at the dirt bank, enlarging the space a little, then curled up beside Sleek.

She slept soundly, because her mate was here to watch for enemies. But Chip remained nervously alert, dozing in snatches. More faintly now, since the pond had backed up so far, he heard the riffles murmur. It was a different tone than they had had yesterday, and twice during the day Chip slipped out to swim around the pond and inspect the dam. He found nothing wrong.

With Sleek beside him, Chip went out while the last rays of the setting sun still lingered on top of the surrounding mountains. They broke water side by side, and paddled slowly about the pond while they searched the banks for lurking enemies. None appeared, but at last Chip knew the exact nature of the threat that hovered.

A storm was brewing. Even though the sun still shone, the air was heavy and laden with moisture. A flight of swallows skimmed low to the ground across a little opening; they were searching for insects forced down by heavy air. The doe grazed nervously, raising her head every few minutes to look about. The pileated woodpecker was strangely silent.

All the wild things knew now what the beaver had sensed last night; Chip had known it first because he was most directly concerned. Of all the inhabitants of the aspen forest, he could suffer most from a violent storm. His home was directly in the path of anything that might come down the stream.

Sleek returned to the lodge and started building the foot-thick, dome-shaped walls that would protect them from anything that came. Chip went back to his dam. He built more mud, sticks, and grass into it, strengthening the structure all along the line. Restlessly, examining every tiny crevice and crack, he went back and forth over the dam's upstream surface. Then he climbed over and worked the downstream side. But still he did not attempt to build the dam any higher.

The moon rose, and a light almost equalling the light of day shone over the aspen forest. In its light Chip returned to the upstream side of the dam, where he could work in safer water. Now, aware of the danger, Sleek came down to help him.

The moon waned and gave way to intense darkness. Dawn broke slowly to reveal a sky filled with ominous thunderheads. The two beaver hovered side by side in the water, nervously alert. Both had survived many violent storms, but both knew that this was going to be no ordinary rain. Chip glanced once at the bank which covered the hollowed-out cave, but stayed away from it. When the water rose, the cave might well become a deathtrap. Followed by Sleek, he swam over and climbed up on the half-finished lodge.

Lightning streaked, and was followed by a long roll of thunder. Then the rain started.

It splattered into the pool, at first a mere dribble of oversized drops. A wind rose and bent the aspens. Both the wind and the rain gathered force. The surface of the pond became so rain-lashed that all of it seemed to be in motion at the same time. The wind shrieked through the aspens.

Chip and Sleek slipped into the pond, submerging far enough so that only their heads broke the surface. They swam near the lodge, treading water gently while they moved around and around in little circles. The shock of the flood's thundering approach was felt a moment before the crest struck.

The flood roared down the riffles, changing them to snarling, white-crested cataracts, and lashed viciously at the bank which overhung the hollowed-out cave. The roaring water cast an uprooted tree twenty feet beyond any place where there had been water a moment before.

Momentarily thwarted, the snarling water whirled in a great eddy. Then it spilled toward the dam, but the first force, the greatest shock, had broken itself on the ledge. The flood ebbed up on both banks, lashing at the trunks of trees as though seeking to climb them. A wall of water roared over the dam.

Three hours later, when the flood started to subside, Chip knew how skillfully he had chosen his site and how well he had built on it.

The dam had held.

## *Chapter VI*

# THE NEW COLONY

The aspens leafed out, fields of mayflowers carpeted the earth, and white, blue, yellow, and striped violets bloomed wherever there was a damp place. The pileated woodpecker had stopped drumming on the big stub, for now his mate was nesting within it. Trim, the doe, was more careful than ever. Her time was almost upon her; she was going to great lengths to assure privacy and safety for herself and her fawn. The doe knew perfectly well that either Glare or Shuffle would mark her down if they could, and kill her baby afterwards. If the bear or the lynx found her fawn, they would look upon it only as another meal.

Old Chip stood on the edge of the pond, warmed by an early morning sun, and stared over the water. Sleek had completed her lodge. Fresh and clean, newly stripped aspen sticks still gleaming on the outer wall, the lodge was surrounded by a safe area of water. Sleek could not have chosen a better location. She had built on a spot where the underwater entrance would be well below freezing depth. No beaver would be trapped in Sleek's lodge by ice that froze clear to the bottom of shallower water.

Chip looked toward the dam, a strong structure four feet at its highest by twenty-five feet long. It was a good dam, backing a deep pond that extended clear back to the riffles in the bend. Now the wisdom of Chip's refusal to cut the fine healthy aspen tree which he had inspected when surveying the dam site was evident; it served as an anchor for the dam. The old beaver had chosen shrewdly; nowhere else on the stream was there a place where so much water could be backed with so little effort.

The head of a swimming beaver broke the surface and Chip turned his eyes on Ebony. Fat and trim, not at all scarred or sore-footed, Ebony had been attended by his usual miraculous luck when he escaped the dynamiters and came over the mountain. Bears, wolves, lynx, and cougar roamed the mountain, but Ebony had not so much as met one. As far as he was concerned, the journey over the mountain had been only a pleasant, slow walk. Ebony had stopped for ten days in a small aspen grove high on the slope and had even tried to dam the spring run that coursed through them.

Finding that impractical, he had come the rest of the way and was accepted into Chip's pool solely because he had been a member of the previous colony. He had not been accepted into the lodge, nor had he built one. Ebony's mate had been lost to the poachers and he was living in a burrow excavated under the bank.

Though he had been working on the hillside all night, Ebony started back across the pond to fell still another aspen. He was a hard worker on occasion, though again he would do nothing except play for days at a time. Now he seemed to have suffered a belated awakening to the fact that the season was advancing and he had nothing done. Swimming toward the bank, Ebony hesitated near Sleek's lodge.

Chip watched, puzzled, as Sleek set furiously upon him. Swimming in behind Ebony, she punished him with raking teeth and turned to slap with her tail. Ebony forgot his goal, the aspens up on the bank, and at all possible speed made toward the dam. He went up and over it, and as soon as he was down the other side he turned to look for his tormentor. Sleek made no attempt to chase him farther.

She returned to the lodge, climbed onto it, and nibbled indifferently at a green aspen branch which she had dragged there. Chip continued to watch, unable to find any reason for the strange behavior of his mate. For it was true that the gentle and willing Sleek, his adored and adoring mate, had become the meanest of shrews. Chip slipped into the pond and swam easily toward her.

High on the lodge, still gnawing bark from the stick, Sleek did not even glance in his direction. Finished eating, she entered the water, splashed Chip when she passed him, dived, and entered the tunnel leading into the lodge. Chip followed her.

He came up in the wet, muddy, lower portion of the lodge's main room. The room was about five feet in diameter, and at its highest point was eighteen inches above the water's level. Sleek retreated to the far side and lay down. Chip halted indecisively. Any time except this he would have gone straight to Sleek and lain down beside her. He did not know what to do about this new and strange mate, and stole a covert backward glance at the tunnel that led out of the lodge. Sudden departure might be very essential. But when Chip advanced toward her, Sleek only raised her head and looked irritably at him.

Chip lay down, and tried to edge himself close to his mate. Sleek moved farther away. Chip raised an uneasy head, alternately looking at her and at the lodge's entrance. He could anticipate almost anything that had to do with the dam or the welfare of the colony over which he presided. But nothing in nature, and no inborn sense, had ever taught him how to interpret such unusual behavior on the part of his mate. He dozed fitfully.

The mid-afternoon sun was shining directly into the pond when he slid down the underwater entrance and surfaced. He looked about the pond, but all he saw was the doe. She came wearily out of the aspens to the water's edge and halted a long while before she drank. As soon as her thirst was quenched, the doe soft-footed back into the forest.

Chip inspected the dam, diving deeply to look at the upper side of its eight-foot base. He climbed to look over the rest, neglecting no place where water might escape. A properly built and maintained dam meant food, shelter, life itself, to a beaver colony. They could not get along without it. He painstakingly filled every crack in the dam and reinforced every place where a crack might develop. Keeping the dam in good order was an endless task.

Then he swam back to the center of the pond. He never liked to be abroad in daylight, but as long as he stayed in the pond he was safe. Ripple, away on one of his long journeys, hadn't been seen for a long while. Glare and Shuffle came often to the pond, but they were harmless as long as they could catch no beaver out of it. There had been no man near the pond since Jed Hale and his dog chased Glare past it. As long as he did not become reckless, a day-faring beaver need not get into trouble.

Nevertheless Chip preferred the lodge, and he would have stayed in it had Sleek not become so strangely hostile. He swam over close to the lodge, scouting out what lay there, and when nothing unusual appeared he dived into the entrance tunnel.

Sleek met him at the water level, but now she was an ugly, belligerent beast, a complete stranger. She bristled, and when Chip appeared she set upon him with driving teeth. Sleek raked his shoulder with her long, tree-cutting tusks and withdrew to strike again.

Chip beat a panicked retreat, twisting around in the narrow tunnel and swimming down it back into the pond. He surfaced beside three aspens which had been flooded by the rising water and hovered quietly there. Water had washed away the dirt around the aspens' roots, which formed an umbrella-shaped clump. Chip swam underneath part of the grass-grown overhang.

He was aware of motion in the water beneath him. Turning his head, he saw the King trout and a school of assorted fish swim away. The King was not the only fish that had been flood-swept into the pond. Many others, including a dozen trout, had come with him. Here in this beaver pond they had found an ideal refuge and an environment in which they could prosper. There was so much water, and so many places where they could hide, that even Ripple would have trouble catching them.

Chip remained where he was. Presently Ebony's head broke water and the coal-black beaver swam smoothly across the pond. Looking neither to the right nor the left, intent upon some aspens growing on the bank, Ebony swam steadily toward them. Chip left the hiding place under the aspen roots and swam to join his pond mate.

Without any hesitation Ebony left the pond and started up the bank. Chip lingered in the water, unwilling to do anything rash. As soon as he was certain that no enemies lingered on the bank, the old beaver scrambled up to join Ebony.

He was bewildered and totally at a loss. Five long years he had spent with Sleek, and never before had he known her to be so out of sorts with everything that came around. Chip felled a small aspen, ate, and cut a length from the trunk that remained. He rolled it down to the pond, spilled it in, and dragged it behind him toward the lodge. Carrying the length of aspen with him, Chip dived into the tunnel. He swam up to the lodge.

A second time Sleek met him with slashing teeth. Chip dropped his stick. Whirling so hastily that his head bumped the side of the lodge, he dived down the tunnel. Now he dared not go back.

All night long he worked beside Ebony, felling trees, eating what he wanted, and using the rest to put finishing touches on the dam. Throughout the long hours, Sleek did not reappear. At last Chip returned to the lodge and swam tentatively around it. There was no sign of Sleek, but the stick Chip had carried into the lodge now lay just outside the entrance. Stripped of its bark, it bobbed gently in the soft current. At least Sleek had eaten. Chip dived disconsolately into the

entrance of the burrow Ebony had scooped out for himself, and came up beside the black beaver. He did not like it at all, but he would have to spend the day here in bachelor's quarters.

With the approach of twilight he left the burrow, and as soon as he surfaced he glanced toward the lodge. Sleek lay on top of it, gnawing bark from a tree which she herself had cut. When she saw Chip, she dived into the entrance and disappeared.

Chip followed, making a strong, clean dive whose very momentum carried him well up into the lodge's entrance. He hesitated in the living quarters, ready to back out at once should Sleek attack him. But his mate was at the far side of the lodge, shielding with her body something Chip could not see. He walked quietly toward her and she advanced, meeting him in the center of their living quarters. Firmly, admitting no argument, she blocked him with her body. Chip looked beyond her at the five newborn beaver kits that squirmed in a nest lined with shredded wood.

He made no attempt to pass Sleek as he stared at his two new daughters and three sons. Chip glanced once at his mate, then turned toward the tunnel. Now he had his answer to the riddle of Sleek's behavior, even though she had never acted in such a fashion before. She wished to protect her young. Chip could not understand that the dynamited dam, and the terror she had endured, had made Sleek doubly concerned for the welfare of her newest babies. She would stand between them and anything else, including Chip. Nothing must harm them.

Chip surfaced in the pond and scouted about. Ebony, as usual, was a dangerously long way up on the bank cutting a big aspen. There were plenty of smaller trees much nearer the water, and even if Ebony succeeded in felling the big one it would take endless hard labor to cut it into the proper lengths and roll it into the pond, but the black beaver never took such things into account. His only mission was to cut trees. It made no difference how or where.

The old beaver tensed himself and faced downstream. From that direction he heard a faint sound, the far-off scraping of one pebble against another. Instantly Chip curled his tail, and snapped its flat surface down on the water. At this danger signal, Ebony scuttled down the bank and jumped into the pond. Ebony swam up and circled Chip, looking for danger.

The downstream sound was repeated; certainly something was coming. Chip kept his eyes on the dam, unwilling to take action until he knew exactly what approached and what threat it would mean. Then he swam swiftly forward.

On top of the dam he happily met and sniffed noses with Peg, his three-legged friend from the dynamited colony. Close behind Peg came Gray, a young female not yet in her first breeding year. Gray hesitated on top of the dam, but when Peg plunged into the pond, she followed.

Theirs had been a long and hazardous journey. Finding no way to go downstream when the dam was dynamited, Peg had travelled up. He had met Gray, a refugee from one of the upstream dams, and because both beaver were alone they had stayed together. Finding no safety upstream, as soon as the dynamiters left they started down. Instead of climbing over the mountain, they had elected to go through the farm lands. It had been a fear-filled trip, with only scattered hiding places and no real safety anywhere. Far down the river, after many narrow escapes, Peg and Gray had crossed the mouth of this stream. Rather than stay on the river any longer, they had chanced ascending it.

Side by side, Peg and Gray swam around the pond, inspecting every inch. They kept a good distance between themselves and the lodge, for beaver lodges belong exclusively to those who build them. Satisfied, Peg started to climb out on the bank.

Instantly he shoved himself back into the water as a patch of mottled-gray grass came suddenly alive. Glare, coming to the pond while Peg and Gray were inspecting it, had lain one of his ambushes in the hope that an unwary beaver would venture up on the bank. Missing his strike, Glare stalked angrily into the aspens. As soon as he had gone, Peg climbed back up.

Chip watched without trying to interfere. The aspen forest was a good place, but due to the nature of the land it was impossible to build a large dam. The pond he had backed up was not big enough for two beaver families; Ebony could live there because he was alone. If Peg and Gray wished to build a lodge in the pond, it would be difficult to store food for all.

A moment later Peg came down the bank and Gray swam instantly to his side. They climbed on top of the dam, paused a moment, and went over. A hundred and thirty yards downstream, at a spot Chip himself had carefully inspected because

he knew it was a good dam site, Peg stopped to reconnoiter. Then he started cutting an aspen. As soon as it was felled, Peg dragged a leafy branch into the stream and laid it exactly as he wanted it. Gray began searching out the best place to erect a lodge.

Leaving the new arrivals at their labors, Chip cut a limb and dragged it into the lodge. Wary, still not trusting even her own mate, Sleek blocked him from the kits. Making no attempt to go near them, Chip left the piece of aspen and swam back down the tunnel and into the pond. He climbed the dam, swam downstream, and began to help Peg. A wise old beaver who had at once seen the impossibility of sharing Chip's pond, Peg was working very hard to build his own dam. Before morning, a pond had begun to form behind it.

With daylight, Peg and Gray came upstream to spend the day under the safe banks in Chip's pond. Chip entered his lodge, halting at the top of the tunnel and not trying to go near Sleek. She nestled with the kits so that she could both protect them and feed them when they were hungry, which seemed to be most of the time.

Night after night the work went on. Peg finished his dam and Gray completed her lodge. Ebony worked hard but senselessly, felling a great number of trees but lacking more than a faint idea of what to do with them after they were cut. Then, on a lazy early June evening, Sleek brought her babies out of the lodge for the first time.

Chip hovered anxiously near. Because it happened every year, this was a familiar routine. It was also a nerve-wracking one. About the size of muskrats, the kits were as trusting as so many puppies. They proved when they bobbed to the surface and started swimming that they had been born to swim. Aside from that, they knew nothing whatever. These kits had never been hurt; it was impossible for them to imagine why anything should want to hurt them.

Their education began as soon as they emerged from the dark lodge into the infinitely spacious outside world. Night-roosting birds had not yet started their evening song, and the doe was just coming for her night drink when a big black-striped bumblebee zoomed across the pond. He halted to flit around a few green leaves that drooped from a new stick just added to the lodge. The bee lighted on the stick.

Four of the kits, amazed at the pond in which they found themselves and not knowing quite what to do about it, hovered near Sleek. The fifth, a tiny counterpart of Chip himself, kept fascinated eyes on the bee. Bigger and much more venturesome than his brothers and sisters, the kit swam up and put tiny paws on the lodge. Still eyeing the bee, he climbed out of the water and approached it. The kit stretched an inquisitive nose toward the object of his curiosity. Intent on the green leaves, the bee paid no attention. The kit touched it with his nose.

When the bee stung him, the kit rolled backward off the lodge and tumbled into the water. He sank, but surfaced immediately and stared his astonishment. Again and again, the kit dipped his smarting nose into the cold water. He had learned his first lesson.

Fifteen minutes afterward, Sleek shepherded her brood back into the lodge.

She could keep them there only by force. The kits had outgrown the helpless stage of babyhood. They were young, and active as fleas. Even during the day Sleek had to sleep across the tunnel's entrance to keep them from tumbling out. The second night, as soon as Sleek brought them out, the kits scattered.

They had seen just enough of this great new world to convince themselves that they must see more of it. Two climbed up on the lodge, and had a wonderful time sliding down it into the water. One started toward an aspen tree that was completely surrounded by water, and circled it. He came to a partly submerged clod upon which he could stand, and reached up to nibble at the aspen's water-brushing branches. Another grasped Chip's tail and enthusiastically pulled on it.



The fifth kit, the bee-stung baby, struck straightaway for the bank. He had seen Ebony pass, and was resolutely following him. Chip shook his daughter loose from his tail and struck out to catch his son. He circled ahead of the swimming kit, who halted a moment. Determinedly he tried to get around his father, but Chip was too quick for him. He blocked the kit's every move.

On sudden inspiration, the kit dived deeply and tried to swim beneath his father. Chip cut him off. The kit paddled to the surface and hovered, puzzled. There was no way to pass. Finally he turned and swam back to Sleek.

Chip followed, anxious and worried. He knew the world he lived in, and its dangers. The kits hadn't a vague idea that life was not one long happy playtime. Until they learned better, neither Chip nor Sleek could have any rest or leave the kits unattended.

Tiring of their own games, the kits gathered around Sleek. With two swimming on one side of her and three on the other, she started toward some willows that grew at the head of the pond. The willows were a safe distance from either bank, and clumps of earth broke the water around them, providing places to stand. Chip watched his family go, then he fell in behind them.

He neither heard nor saw Wraith, for the great horned owl hunted so silently that few victims were aware of his presence until he struck. Chip only glimpsed the shadow hovering above the water, before he saw one of his daughters writhing aloft in Wraith's talons. With a great burst of speed, Chip tried to overtake and catch the owl before he could rise from the water with his burden, but he was too late.

Knowing something had happened but not realizing what, the four remaining kits clustered around Sleek in bewilderment. She swam with forequarters high in the water, chattering her rage. When Chip came near, she dashed angrily at him. Sleek had seen another of her children go the way so many had before, and grief prostrated her. But it could not for long.

Though one was gone, the four must live. More slowly, turning her head so that she could see anything else that approached, Sleek escorted her brood to the willows and climbed out upon a grassy tussock. The remaining kits followed her.

The four baby beaver stretched inquiring noses toward the lithe willows, but the biggest kit was the first to act. Sitting upright, balancing himself on his tiny, flat tail and supporting his body with his front paws, he began to gnaw. Around and around the willow shoot he chewed, and when it finally toppled he leaped with surprise. He snuffled at the stick, chewed experimentally on it, and looked immensely pleased with himself. The other three kits selected shoots of their own.

Shortly after midnight Sleek escorted her babies back into the lodge. The next night, and every night thereafter, she took them back to the willows. The kits threw themselves wholeheartedly into this new and delightful game, doing it so thoroughly that, five nights afterward, all the willows in safe places were cut. Sleek searched vainly for a tussock, or any

bit of land surrounded by water, from which her babies could work safely. Watching her, Chip climbed up on the bank and went twenty feet to an aspen. He made a half-hearted attempt to cut it, but spent most of his time watching and listening.

Chip knew when Sleek brought the kits in to the bank. The enthusiastic babies started felling some slender aspen shoots. Their father did not glance toward them. His entire attention was centered on anything that might approach.

A few minutes later he heard a faint but heavy tread and recognized it at once. Only Shuffle walked exactly like that. Chip scuttled down the bank, slipped into the pond, and slapped it with the flat surface of his broad tail.

It was the beaver danger signal, a sound never heard except when peril was definitely near, and it should have been instantly obeyed. But the kits were too fascinated with their cutting to pay attention to anything else. Chip slapped the water a second time, and a third. The frantic Sleek tried desperately to get her kits into the water.

Chip swam strongly to the bank. He climbed upon it and passed the kits. Sleek beside him, they went forward to face Shuffle. They met him up on the bank, ten feet from the babies, and Shuffle halted in his tracks. It was his intention to make a meal of one of the fat babies, but Shuffle had no wish to pay for his meal by first fighting through two enraged parents. He swung back up the slope. Chip and Sleek turned back to the kits.

Just as they did so they saw Glare, a leaping shape in the night. The lynx sprang over a fallen tree, paused for a second, and when he raced away he carried another of the kits with him. There could be no pursuit; Glare was much too swift. The three remaining kits submitted meekly when Sleek herded them back into the pond.

They swam very close to her as she started back toward the lodge, and with every little night sound they heard, every shadow that flickered, they tried to get nearer. They had learned that the cost of disobedience was death.

## *Chapter VII*

# TRIM, THE DOE

On a morning in early June, Trim, the four-year-old doe, drank from the beaver pond as usual. Mists blanketed the water, twisting and weaving before the sun rose high enough to disperse them.

Chip appeared in the pond, then dived. Trim flicked her long ears toward the spreading ripples and watched them until they washed into nothingness. Ordinarily she would have paid no attention to so commonplace a thing, but this morning she was enveloped in a cloak of nervousness. This morning she could afford to neglect nothing.

Since the spring break-up, Trim had been living near the spot where Chip had built his dam. It was a good place, with plenty of food, a never-failing supply of water, and no enemies from which Trim could not run away. The old beaver and his family and friends were amiable neighbors; Trim did not mind living near them. Late winter and spring had been a carefree, almost lazy time. But that period of inactivity was now over.

There was nothing lazy about her walk when she turned away from the pond this morning. Her step was quick, furtive. She stopped every few feet to look all about, and flicked her long ears back and forth to catch any sound. She moved into the wind so that her nose would tell her of what lay ahead. This morning she had an extremely important mission and could not allow herself even one mistake. She could choose but once. It must be the right choice.

At no time did she hurry, or increase her slow walk to that point where, by reason of haste, she might miss something. The doe came to a hemlock thicket that grew a hundred and thirty yards from the dam. Fifty times she had been through the hemlocks, and had yet to find where a dangerous beast had walked near them. She must still be absolutely certain; there could not be another inspection.

She entered the thicket, and came out the other side. She circled the hemlocks, her nose to the ground. There was no track, no sign of any enemy. Trim re-entered the thicket and coursed it from side to side and from end to end. She inspected thoroughly every inch of the ground.

Presently, satisfied, the doe trampled a bed in some dry needles. Three times she lay down and got up, and finally she lay down a fourth time. A few minutes later, her fawn was born. Trim stood shakily erect and turned to look at her baby.

He weighed seven pounds, and was twenty-six inches long from the tip of his black nose to the end of his tail bone. His color was dark red, shading into white at the brisket. The little buck's under-belly was white, as was the under part of his tail, and there was a large white spot under his chin. Two white lines, a quarter of an inch wide, ran from the base of his ear to the front of his shoulders. There they became dotted lines which ran down his back and seemed to melt into each other at the base of his tail. His coat was covered with over three hundred very noticeable white spots, which varied from a quarter to a half inch in diameter.

As soon as the fawn was born, he became subject to the forces which would shape him. How he grew and prospered depended entirely upon how well he adapted himself to those forces.

His first act was to spread his long, almost unbelievably delicate front legs and raise the front part of his body. He tried to get up, and fell back. His legs were too weak, too new, to bear even his small weight. The fawn rested, tired by the tremendous effort of trying to get up, while strength flowed into his body. That was part of the mold, part of the plan. The fawn must have a chance to live, and he could not if he was unable to rise.

Five minutes later, the fawn was on his feet. His long legs trembled, but they supported him even though he had to spread them wide in order to make them do so. The fawn took an unsteady step and stood still, as though astonished by the fact that he could move. Then the uncertainty was over. Another wild baby had learned how to get himself about; the fawn knew exactly where he was going.

His feet braced to keep himself from falling, he fed and butted Trim's flank with an impatient head, as though by doing so he would make the milk flow faster. As soon as his belly was filled, he dropped down into the hemlock needles. He stared with fascinated eyes at the world into which he had been born.

His bed was almost under a bushy hemlock. The tree's long, spreading branches formed a triangle that effectively prevented his seeing anything on the two sides of the angle in which he lay; but on the other side, ten feet away, was another hemlock. The fawn looked across that dizzy space, and blinked his eyes when the hemlock's higher branches

moved, revealing patches of sky and more trees beyond.

The fawn slept for fifteen minutes, then he awakened and rose on legs that were a bit stronger and steadier. He snuffled at a dangling hemlock bough, poked his inquisitive nose at a leaf, and stood on braced legs to watch the anxious Trim. He knew—without understanding the reasons for it—that she was alert and fearful.

He wandered back to his bed, and when Trim uttered a hoarse bark, he dropped instantly into it. The doe's bark had been a command. Lying so still that he did not so much as flick an ear or twitch a muscle, the little fawn watched Trim slip through the hemlocks and disappear. She had gone out to feed.

As days passed, the fawn gained strength and spirit. Within a week he had visited and thoroughly explored the hemlock across from his bed. Before a month passed, he had travelled the thirty vast yards to the borders of the thicket, and looked out on the great world beyond. The fawn stood quietly and did not venture farther; he was not yet ready for that world. He could walk, and even run, but he was still a helpless baby whose only means of protection lay in silence and camouflage.

His life within the thicket had been one of peace and quiet. The only creatures he had even seen were birds, a red squirrel, and his mother. The squirrel lived in one of the hemlocks, but often descended to the ground to dig for food, and the fawn had spent fascinated hours watching him.

The little buck discovered dramatically that there were other creatures in the world one late June day when at last he went outside the protecting thicket. He walked trembling, a little fearful, but fascinated by the bush-strewn clearing that lay between the thicket and the nearest aspens. Then a new scent, a heavy and strange odor, assailed his nostrils. The little fawn stretched his neck interestedly.

Then he heard Trim's warning, dropped to the earth, and lay quietly. The alien scent grew stronger, more pungent, as the beast from which it came drew nearer. But though the fawn was puzzled and very curious, he did not move. The little breeze that played about him did not even ruffle his soft hair. His head was flat on the ground, but his liquid eyes were wide open when the wolf from which the scent came passed within ten feet. The wolf did not smell him; until he was older, and able to run or to defend himself, the fawn would have no scent.

Though he had never seen a wolf, deep within him the fawn felt the first faint stirrings of fear.

He watched his mother. Her head was high, her tail erect and flashing from side to side. The fawn felt the vibrations when the doe tapped the earth with her front hoof, and remained exactly where he was. When ordinary danger threatened, Trim merely uttered her bark. Now she was flashing her tail and stamping the earth, talking to the fawn in every way she could, and bidding him remain still while she lured the wolf away.

The fawn saw the wolf turn, stand a moment, then spring toward his mother. She leaped away, bounding high but not running fast, tempting the wolf to follow her.

This was an old wolf, a veteran of the trails and killer of many fawns. Trim's actions had told him plainly that there must be a baby near. Instead of following her he sat down, squatting like a furry dog while he ran his tongue out. He turned a knowing head toward the thicket.

Trim bristled, and continued to stamp her foot and flash her tail. When the wolf refused to chase her, she ventured back toward him.

He whirled so quickly that he came within a breath of catching her off guard, but Trim just escaped the slashing jaws. She leaped clear over a huckleberry bush, her white tail flashing as she ran at full speed.

The wolf was chasing her because he thought he had some chance of catching her, and Trim knew it. She knew also that he would not chase her very far, for beyond any doubt he was aware of the fawn's presence. He did not know exactly where her baby lay hidden, but if he searched the thicket thoroughly, as he certainly would, he was bound to stumble across the little buck. She would have to change her plan.

Trim hesitated just long enough to reassure herself that the wolf still followed, then suddenly increased her speed. A dancing gray shape, she raced madly through the aspens, and made a short circle that carried her directly back to the thicket. When she called to the fawn he rose to his feet at once.



Trim slowed her pace so the fawn could keep up, while she started toward the one sure refuge she knew. Then she dropped back to run behind her baby. When he lagged, she urged him on with a prodding muzzle. The fawn tired and dropped to a walk. Only a few yards away, sparkling through the trees, Trim saw the beaver pond.

The doe stopped in her tracks, and when she halted the fawn did likewise. He turned, long ears tilted questioningly forward while he braced himself on uncertain feet. Trim jumped impulsively forward, and when she did the startled fawn turned and also ran toward the pond. He hesitated within a few feet of the lapping water while Trim turned to battle the wolf.

She had been too anxious to get back to the fawn, and had not made a wide enough circle. The wolf was very close upon her. Trim whirled, striking with her knife-sharp front hooves as she did so, and the wolf rolled to get out of her way. In the split second it took him to recover, Trim made a long leap toward the fawn.

The wolf came back fast, feinting to the left, then to the right. Trim met his threats for she saw his purpose. The wolf wanted to get past her to the trembling fawn. When he could not, he sat down, tail stiff and ruff bristled. The wolf, unaccustomed to being balked by a deer, was growing angry.

Trim took the fullest advantage of every lapse on his part to inch nearer the fawn. When the wolf attacked again, Trim reared on her hind feet, pivoting as she did so to knock her fawn into the water. She hurled herself backward when the wolf struck at her under-belly; his slashing fangs missed by less than an inch. Trim righted herself in mid-air so that, when she landed in the water, she did so feet first.

The bewildered fawn was swimming, as a natural instinct when suddenly pushed into the water. He came near Trim and stayed close beside her as she struck toward the center of the pond. They reached a shallow place, a ledge upon which the fawn could stand, and looked back at the enraged wolf.

He ran along the bank, trying to plan the best way to get at his escaped quarry.

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Sleeping in the lodge, Chip was aware of something about to happen a full two minutes before Trim and her fawn sought refuge in the pond. Faintly he heard Trim's thudding hooves, and even more dimly he was aware of the wolf's bubbling growls, but it was not completely that which warned him. It was something else, a sharp sense which humans have lost almost completely but which Chip possessed in full measure. Trespassers in the pond literally telegraphed their approach. Something was not as it should be, and because he understood that thoroughly the old beaver came fully awake.

A second after Chip raised his head, Sleek raised hers and looked steadily at her mate. Intent on the faint impulses that

were reaching him, Chip let nothing distract his attention. The kits stirred fretfully when Sleek arose and crossed over to her mate. The biggest kit, who was more and more proving himself the true son of Chip, separated himself from his brother and sister and walked across the lodge to join Sleek. Angrily she drove him back into the nest.

Chip remained alert and tense, every nerve, muscle, and sense straining to receive and interpret the impulses that were penetrating the lodge's walls. At first he thought Glare was again at the pond. The big lynx came almost every day or night, and sometimes both, to see if he could catch another of the kits. Chip had conceived a deadly hatred for Glare, his most persistent enemy.

A second later he knew that, this time, it was not Glare who was stalking the pond. Chip recognized Trim's thudding tread, and was surprised because she came openly to the pond in daylight. For a long while now Trim had come to drink only at dawn and dusk, and as soon as she satisfied her thirst she hurried back into the aspens. There was another, smaller deer, with Trim. And there was also something else.

Without being aware of exactly what it was, Chip knew that it was dangerous. Trim and her fawn never would have acted as their sounds told Chip they were acting under any normal circumstances. Therefore they were in trouble.

The old beaver slipped down the entrance tunnel, and as soon as he disappeared Sleek moved over to take her place in it. She stood still, blocking the tunnel with her body and ready for instant action. If anything got past her to the kits, it would have to kill Sleek first. She listened intently, trying to piece together what was happening outside from the noises that drifted in. Sleek knew when Chip reached the end of the tunnel, and she heard the little ripple he stirred when he surfaced. Because she could see nothing, she could not tell exactly what was taking place. Only Chip could.

He remained exactly where his head had broken the water, not moving at all until he had studied the situation thoroughly. He saw Trim and her fawn standing on the ledge, with the fawn almost concealed by its mother's body. Chip gave each only a passing glance. He knew Trim well and definitely she was not an enemy. She had never offered to hurt any beaver and she was doing no harm in the pond.

The fawn's tiny head was turned toward his mother, but Trim was looking backward over her left shoulder. Chip followed her gaze and saw the wolf. True pacifist though he was, fierce anger boiled within him.

No wolf ever came anywhere in peace, and this one could not be an exception. Chip knew that the wolf could not get into the lodge, for no animal unable to submerge and swim under water could do that, but still he was at the pond. Left there unchallenged, he would pose another threat to the kits as well as to any adult beaver he might attack. There was already too much danger.

Chip paddled slowly to the dam and made his way along it. Looking over, he saw Peg swimming beside his newly completed lodge. The invisible electric something that carried information from one pond to the other, had been felt by Peg. Only Ebony remained in his burrow beneath the bank. Chip prepared his plan of battle.

He expected no help from Ebony, and Peg had his own lodge and mate to protect. Sleek would not leave the kits. Whatever was to be done, Chip would have to do. If it occurred to him at all that the wolf was here because Trim and her fawn sought safety in the pond it made no difference. He was certain only that the pond was threatened. That threat must be coped with.

As though he had suddenly made up his mind, Chip left the dam and made a bee-line for the grassy bank upon which the wolf was standing. The beaver came to a stop in the three feet of water directly in front of the wolf. He swam in little circles, his eyes on the furry beast. The wolf returned Chip's gaze, let his eyes dwell for a moment on the beaver, then resumed looking at Trim and her fawn.

The wolf had a cunning brain, but had made a mistake when he chased Trim instead of hunting at once for the fawn and refusing to be lured away. He had no intention of making another mistake.

He glanced again at Chip, whom he had no reason to fear, and returned to his study of the doe and fawn. The wolf was fully aware of his problem. He was not an aquatic beast, and in the water both the doe and fawn could swim as fast as he could. Strategy was very much in order here. After he had studied the situation from every possible angle the wolf made his decision.

Trim and her fawn would not stay on the ledge after he came near, and if they went into deep water it was probable that

he would be unable to catch them. The wolf decided that he would have to force them into shallow water at the head of the pond, and he could do that by swimming below them instead of making a direct approach. The wolf cast another passing glance at Chip, then leaped lightly from the bank. Water splashed, and curling ripples spread across the pond. Still standing on their ledge, Trim and the fawn watched fearfully.

They saw the wolf take two strong forward strokes. His third one was labored. He whirled about, arching his neck and looking frantically for his attacker. The wolf snarled, and snapped his steel-trap jaws, but got only a mouthful of water. He raised himself very high while he tried to cope with this unexpected enemy.

He could not. The wolf knew beaver only as slow, clumsy creatures which had sometimes furnished a meal when he caught one on land. Never before had he met an enraged beaver in the water, and his first meeting was bidding fair to be his last. In the water the beaver was more than a match for him.

Sleek hair plastered flatly against his powerful body, Chip dived. He slashed the wolf's paw, sinking his teeth almost through it. Surfacing only to gasp more air, never coming within reach, he dived again to strike at the wolf's chest. Almost as agile as Ripple, Chip attacked at will.

It was the wolf who abandoned the battle. Turning desperately, he swam toward the bank. Chip struck twice more while he climbed out. Then the wolf found solid footing and scratched his way to safety.

Torn and bleeding, he limped into the aspens.

## *Chapter VIII*

## WINTER HARVEST

In July Ebony left the pond. He went over Chip's dam, swam through Peg's pond, and over his dam. For days Ebony had been afflicted with a growing restlessness. He had done little except cut enough trees to supply himself with food, and when he wasn't doing that he tried to display his swimming ability and general all-around prowess for Sleet's benefit.

Busy with her kits, Sleet had no time for him. When Ebony became too much of a pest, either Chip or Sleet drove him away. But the black beaver was not one to admit graceful defeat. Failing to lure Chip's mate, he swam into Peg's pond and made advances to Gray. Peg set furiously upon him, punishing with his teeth and slapping with his tail. Ebony scuttled back over Chip's dam, dived into his burrow, and sulked for an entire day.

He was that most forlorn of all beaver, one without a mate. Until he found one Ebony must live in the burrow under the bank, tolerated but always lonely. He had no hope whatever of realizing a beaver's true destiny: fathering young to carry on the race after he was no more. But aside from both that and loneliness, a mate had a very solid practical value.

When Ebony went to cut food he always had to go alone. There was no mate to accompany him and help watch for danger. If he were attacked in the pond, Chip would help him fight because it was to the community interest to keep the pond free of enemies. But if Ebony were surprised up on the bank, or if his burrow were invaded, he alone would have to repel the attacker.

It was a serious situation. To correct it, Ebony had to leave. Not knowing where he was going, only that he must wander until he found another mate, Ebony was off on a beaver's journey. He would not return alone. If he found no mate he would not return at all. He would become one of the wandering bank beaver, creatures that lived wherever circumstance dictated.

Ebony's departure made little difference in the normal life of the two ponds. Though he had lived with Chip and Sleet in their pond, he had been an awkward guest. He was forever getting in the way, or cutting trees which Chip had marked for other purposes. Largely because he hadn't built it, Ebony seldom helped keep the dam in repair. Though he was not driven away, things were better now that he was gone.

Two hours after his departure Chip came out of the lodge. For the old beaver, the season had been one of constant anxiety and great activity. Blasted out of his former home, he had had to find a new location and build a new dam. His new home was scarcely finished when the kits came along, and after that he had not dared relax.

Even though conditions were somewhat improved, and the kits were beginning to acquire some sense of their own, Chip still dared not leave them alone or trust anything to luck. The kits had learned some of the more obvious lessons, but they were anything except experienced beaver. Baby-like, they were curious and inclined to investigate whatever caught their fancy. They did not always bother to look carefully before they began their investigations.

Chip inspected the dam, and patched it where it needed patching. That was very little. Well-built to begin with, the dam had caught silt, sticks, and grass, which floated down from above, and was strengthened by every addition. It was holding well, and had stood against two more floods that had washed down from above. A steady stream of water flowed over it into Peg's dam, and over that into the stream bed. The stream maintained a steadier flow than it had known since the lumbermen destroyed the trees which had originally controlled it.

Chip climbed out on the dam and stood quietly for a moment while he inspected the banks. He saw Trim and her fawn, the latter now a strong and agile young buck, come down to drink before browsing on the sweet grass that grew all around the pond. Chip watched them intently.

He knew Trim was wary and sensitive, and missed very little. He studied her now because he wished to see if she was even slightly nervous. But she ate quietly, keeping her eyes on the fawn.

Chip swam away from the dam. Keeping well out in the water, he started around the pond. Trim had betrayed no nervousness, but Chip wished to leave nothing to chance. Glare, who knew all about the beaver kits, was making regular stops at the pond in the hope that he could surprise another one. The lynx never came at the same time every night and never approached from the same direction twice in succession.

The beaver approached the head of the pond, where the riffles had once been. Now water flowed over them and only a

gentle current remained to mark where they were. The King trout and his mates lay in the current, rising freely to a great hatch of night flies. Here, where there was plenty of water in which to maneuver and many hiding places, the trout were unafraid to move by night or day. And the King and his school were getting fat on the prodigious amounts of food available.

The trout did not flee when Chip swam over them; having lived in the pond for so long they knew its builder and master. The beaver swam up the stream that flowed into the head of the pond. He stopped when he came to a riffle, treading water and prepared to retreat instantly if necessary.



For a long while he had been worried about the food supply which could be reached by a comfortable safety margin. All of the trees near the pond had been cut, some to make the dam and lodge and others for food. Up here were a great many aspens, an endless supply, but any beaver who undertook to cut them would have to venture far from safe water in order to do it. Chip lingered for ten minutes, examining the virgin stand of aspens. Then he turned and swam back into the pond.

He was driven by a restless urge. Summer was at its height, but summer would not last forever. Chip knew that, and felt ill at ease. There was so much to be done before cold weather.

Chip's ears were assailed by a loud, full-throated roaring. Like an echo, a similar roaring sounded from a different quarter. The beaver listened indifferently, recognizing the sound as that of two bull frogs exchanging messages in the night. He needn't concern himself about the frogs, who lived in a tule-bordered swamp some distance from the stream. As far as he was concerned, they were harmless.

He swerved toward the lodge. He saw Sleek, her head a dim shape on the water, swimming around and around the three kits while she tried to maintain some semblance of order. The biggest kit, Young Chip, started toward the bank and Sleek cut him off. Chip glided past, Sleek fell in behind, and the three kits followed her.

Chip struck directly for that place where Trim and her fawn were grazing. He had the utmost confidence in the doe's keen senses. The very fact that she continued to graze near the pond, and to let her fawn do so, was evidence that she had seen, heard, and smelled nothing to bother her. Now when Chip climbed out on the bank, Trim merely looked at him. The fawn spread his front legs wide and stared. He looked at his mother, waiting to see if she would warn him, and when she did not the fawn wandered curiously toward the beaver family.

Chip ignored him. The two smaller kits stayed as near Sleek as they could get. The third, the biggest, walked hesitantly forward. The fawn stared in astonishment. Then, as hesitantly as the beaver kit, he came forward. The kit advanced another few steps. There, in the warm night, the two babies of the wild touched noses.

The fawn blew through his nostrils, and trotted back to Trim. The impetuous kit remained where he was, chewing on an aspen seedling.

The pond was ringed by an array of stumps from which aspens had been cut. All about the border of the stumps was a fresh and green aspen forest. Here and there among them a tree had been cut, but most of the living aspens were beyond the safety line, beyond the point a beaver should venture from his pond.

Chip fretted. The summer was passing. Before winter came and ice locked the pond there must be many trees stored in it, enough to last Sleek, the three kits, and himself, throughout the long winter season. But those trees could not safely be reached from the pond as it was now.

Meanwhile, the beaver family had to eat. Chip looked once more toward the grazing deer, then at a little clump of aspen shoots growing halfway between the edge of the pond and the untouched aspens. Followed by his family, he started toward them, and halted when he reached the shoots. Chip looked back at the pond.

It was only a few yards away. Sleek and the kits could reach it if they were threatened. Chip left his family working on the aspen shoots and walked uphill into the forest. He selected a small tree growing near the edge, reared beside it, and began to gnaw his hourglass incision in the trunk. The tree toppled. Chip had just started to eat bark from its trunk when Trim's sharp snort blasted the night.

It was a danger signal as pronounced as the slap of a beaver's tail. Turning, Chip scuttled back to the pond. As he fled, he saw Trim and her fawn, shadowy shapes in the night, racing away into the aspens. Then the beaver caught the hated scent of Glare, his enemy.

Sleek had started hurrying the kits toward the water as soon as Trim snorted, and when Chip reached the pond they were already in it. Chip scrambled in beside them. He curled his tail, slapping its flat surface down on the pond, to warn Peg. Chip heard Peg slap the water in turn; he was relaying the danger signal to Gray. The smell of Glare grew stronger as the big lynx came nearer.

Sleek took the kits to the lodge, and the four of them climbed on top of it to await developments. Chip remained where he was, swimming near the bank while Glare approached. Presently he saw the lynx.

Silent as a shadow, Glare came down to the pond and stared across it at the lodge. His stub tail was angrily erect, his tufted ears very stiff, and his yellow eyes reflected the frustration he felt as he looked at Sleek and the kits. He had come to the pond for the sole purpose of catching one. Now, defeated, he spat his rage as he sheathed and unsheathed his claws.

Chip remained just off the bank, making swirling little circles in the water and venturing so near Glare that his front paws touched solid earth. He knew that the big lynx was a relentless and pitiless killer, and that nothing around the pond would be safe as long as Glare continued his harassing raids. Chip tried to entice him into the water.

On the land he was no match for Glare and he knew it. But if he could lure Glare into the water, where he had successfully battled the wolf, the advantage would be his. Glare refused to be tempted. He snarled at Chip, and swung a taloned front paw in the air. Then, defeated for the moment, he trotted softly away to hunt rabbits.

Sleek and the kits remained on top of the lodge, gnawing bark from a tree that had washed down. Chip climbed out on the bank, ready to jump back into the pond should there be any indication that Glare was returning. He stared worriedly at the uncut aspens.

They were there and ripe for cutting, but he dared not fell them. His element was the water; on land he was slow and clumsy. It took a long while, far too long, to travel to the best aspens, and just as long to return to the pond. Glare, or even Shuffle, could catch him on the banks. Nevertheless, the winter supply of food must be gathered.

Leaving a wake of curling ripples behind him, Chip swam back to the head of the pond. The King trout's school was still there, catching the flies that floated down, and once more they held their places while the beaver swam over them. Chip continued up the stream, and hesitated for a long while in the center of the creek. To his left, a willow-lined spring run trickled into the stream. Coursing through a grove of fine and healthy aspens, the run had its source almost two hundred yards from the stream bed.

Chip swam to the mouth of the run, sliced a couple of willows, and laid them across the run. He raised an alert head when something ran through the aspens beyond him, but continued his work when he recognized it as a running snowshoe rabbit. He packed mud behind his willows, and watched a tiny pond begin to form. He cut more willows and built his

dam higher. After an hour, with a sizable dam blocking the mouth of the streamlet, he swam back to the lodge.

Trim and her fawn had returned to the pond, and were eating grass beside it. The nervous Sleek had taken her kits back to the aspen shoots, where all the kits were busy cutting and eating. The mother beaver remained alert, tense, glancing often toward Trim for warning of approaching danger.

When Chip came up the bank, Sleek left her kits to go forward and sniff noses with him. Chip climbed higher up, into the aspens, and he resumed gnawing on the tree he had just finished felling when Glare came. When he had eaten as much as he wanted, he dragged part of his tree into the pond.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, and with the first streaks of dawn Trim took her fawn back into the aspens. Dragging part of a small tree behind him, Chip went down the slope to the pond. He pushed the tree in. The heavy green wood sank, leaving a few leaf-clothed twigs and branches to thrust above the surface. Chip gave the dam its morning inspection, then joined Sleek and the kits in the lodge.

The next evening he went out while the sun was still up, and his head cut a clean furrow in the sunlit water as he swam upstream. Chip stopped in the center of the creek, looking all about before he ventured to the dam he had started last night in the struggling spring run. Its water, having reached the overflow point, spilled down the face of the little dam. Behind it a pool about twenty-five feet long by four feet wide backed into the aspens. Chip climbed over the dam and swam slowly in the new pool.

Now the deep wisdom and intelligence which went into all his planning became very evident. The beaver could no longer climb to the aspens that grew beside the pond; to do so meant to risk death. Last night it would have been just as unsafe to go into the shallow spring run, but no longer. The trees had not been near the water, but by careful planning and expert engineering Chip had brought water to the trees. Two dozen aspens of various sizes were already flooded; they could be cut without even getting out of the forming pond. Many more were within safe cutting distance.

It was not enough to satisfy the old beaver, and he spent an hour enlarging his pond. He started wings to capture the water that was trickling around the sides of his dam, and only when it was time for Sleek and the kits to emerge did he return to the lodge.

That night, while Trim and her fawn grazed and played nearby, the beaver family again cut aspens on the hillside. Twice they fled into the water, when the heavy-footed Shuffle padded by and when Glare came to hunt. Then, for two hours after Sleek took the kits into the lodge, Chip worked on his new dam.

The next night he escorted Sleek and the kits up to it. Wraith flitted silently overhead, but the kits had grown and were too big for him. The owl could do nothing except fly on in search of smaller game.

Chip climbed over the center of the dam, paused a moment to look for enemies, and finding none, plunged into the newly formed pool. It was longer now, and wider, and many trees were flooded. Many more were very near the rising water of the new pond. Chip and his family could work safely in the midst of plenty, and after the trees were cut it would be little trouble to take them down into the main pond. Instead of being laboriously dragged over dry land, they could be pulled through water.

Now Sleek and the kits seemed to share the same restless urge which had been besetting Chip. The kits climbed upon a little island and immediately attacked some slender trees growing there. The older beaver selected larger aspens, felled them, and trimmed the choicest branches. Chip and Sleek dragged the branches over the dam, and pulled them into the main pond. Each dragging a limb suitable to its size, the kits followed.

Chip had already chosen the place he wanted, and when he came to it he let go of the branch he was pulling. While it was being pulled, buoyed by Chip himself, the branch had floated. Now the heavy green wood settled slowly into the deepest part of the pond. Sleek left her branch beside his. Imitating their elders, the kits released their twigs.

Diving deeply, Chip used his broad muzzle and forefeet to nudge the branches into place. He pushed stones over the bigger ones that had a tendency to move in the gentle current, and interlaced the twigs among them. Finished, he left a neat, compact pile of twigs and branches securely anchored on the bottom of the pond.

Chip surfaced, paddled around Sleek and the waiting kits, and struck upstream again. Tiring of hard work, the playful kits now chased each other around the pond, wrestling happily when they caught each other. Chip and Sleek worked on,

cutting branches, dragging them to the main pond, and anchoring them in their stock piles. Cicadas droned in the trees about them, and whippoorwills called. Once Glare came to the pond, and Sleek herded the kits up on an island. Chip beat a slow patrol back and forth in the water, keeping himself between the lynx and his family.

Glare stared at the kits, futilely sheathing and unsheathing his claws. He could do nothing else. There was deep water between himself and his intended quarry, and Glare had a cat's natural aversion to getting wet. After half an hour he went away.

Chip and Sleek resumed their labors. Thus, while lazy summer droned on, they assured themselves of plenty to eat when winter came.

## *Chapter IX*

## DOWN IN THE VALLEY

Down in the valley below, a speckled rooster sitting in the apple tree outside Jed Hale's house extended an inquiring head in the half light of early dawn. The chickens beside him began to stir, and the big tom turkey in the same tree sailed gracefully to the ground. The two hen turkeys followed, alighting beside the tom and scraping barnyard litter with powerful legs.

The speckled rooster took a firm grip with both feet, rose, and crowed. He crowed again, and again, shattering the morning silence with the ancient challenge of a healthy cock. The rooster clucked gutturally to his harem, then fluttered down from his roost. With a great squawking and fluttering of wings, the hens did likewise. Lying comfortably in a patch of grass, Jed's tethered cow turned mildly surprised eyes on all this commotion.

The strutting cock stalked haughtily to Jed Hale's fenced garden and peered between the meshes that kept him out. The rooster's bright yellow eyes gleamed as he looked upon the rows of fresh green things within the fence.

It was not as though he remembered last year, and the fact that then there had been no garden, nothing except dusty ground separated by struggling patches of choked grass, for the rooster could not remember clearly what had taken place even yesterday. His was a dull little brain, that merely bade him eat, rule his hens, go to roost at night, and crow in the morning. But the rooster looked as though he were making comparisons, as though he knew all about the miracle that had come to the valley.

Last year the stream that now flowed past the house had been only a drying bed, with a few scattered pools inhabited by discouraged chubs and minnows. This year the creek maintained a steady flow. A few yards upstream, a neat board dam with a well-constructed spillway backed a sizable pool upon which six white ducks swam. Leading from the pond, controlled by a sluice gate, an irrigation ditch conducted water into the green garden.

The rooster clucked again, and in the soft earth outside the fenced garden scratched vigorously until he had uncovered a fat white worm. The rooster ate the worm and promptly began scratching for another.

Inside the house, Pete, Jed Hale's bristled airedale, rose from the rug near his master's bed and stretched. Pete yawned, and stretched again, then his toenails clicked on the carpetless floor as he walked over to the bed and thrust his muzzle into Jed's dangling hand. Jed stirred lazily, and tightened his hand around Pete's muzzle. Pete wagged his stub tail happily, and reared to put his brown paws on the bed spread. His master sat up in bed and yawned.

Pete wagged to the door, nudged at it with his muzzle, and stood looking back over his shoulder. His ears were cocked forward; his merry eyes invited Jed to follow him. Jed swung lightly to the floor, and padded on bare feet into the kitchen. He let Pete out, pumped his tin wash basin full of water, and stared reflectively at the face that looked back from the mirror over the kitchen sink.



It was a lean young face, tanned and healthy. Wide-set brown eyes and a sensitive nose pleasantly complemented a firm jaw. Jed fingered the stubble of beard on his chin, and continued to stare at his own face.

It seemed incredible that less than a year ago the same face had been pale and colorless, and the body to which it belonged that of a semi-invalid. "You'll have to get out into the country," the doctor had said. They had been fearful words to an almost penniless youngster whose city job paid only moderate wages.

Jed glanced away from the mirror. He had had less than a thousand dollars saved, but the real estate man to whom he had taken his problems seemed to have all the answers. He had just the place, Paradise Valley, a true beauty spot in the mountains. There was a fine house, thirty acres of land, and all of it could be bought for less than seven hundred dollars.

Jed slipped a blade into his razor and squeezed a bit of lather onto his shaving brush. He grinned wryly; he'd had to come into Paradise Valley, and see it, to know what the natives thought of it. Last year, when Jed had first moved into his house, he would cheerfully have sold it back for what he had paid. Now he did not want to leave.

The real estate man had been unscrupulous, but the doctor was absolutely right. The valley might be desolate, but the air was clean and the sunshine good. Jed could not remember feeling as well as he did now. Though he was not earning much money, not nearly what his city job paid him, he could eat well and supply his few simple wants. There were no rent or fuel bills to pay, and all the kerosene he needed to keep his lamps burning for a month could be had in exchange for a dozen eggs.

Jed finished shaving and fixed his breakfast, four fresh eggs fried in lavish gobs of butter, biscuits, and three glasses of rich milk. Gathering up five dozen crated eggs, and with five pounds of butter in another parcel, he went outside, called Pete, and started down the dirt road.

The morning sparkled, and the air was cool. Later in the day, when the sun rose high, it would bring heat but it would not be oppressive. The valley no longer seemed the desolate place it had been.

A miracle had visited it. For the first time in more than a dozen years, according to the natives, the stream had maintained a steady flow all summer long and supplied water to everybody who wanted it. Long-dry wells were filled again, and discouraged people who had resigned themselves to life in a summer-parched land were beginning to take heart.

More than that, destructive floods which had taken an annual toll in the valley were strangely gentle this year. There had been one, early in the year, which flooded some buildings and filled some of the many channels which floods had cut. The two floods following that had been so mild that, most places, the stream scarcely overflowed its banks.

Just as old Mose Willow, who ran the crossroads store, had always claimed, the valley was coming back. Mose, who had known and loved the valley when it was fresh and green, and tree-covered, had never lost his faith. The Lord, old Mose claimed, had vented His wrath for the destruction wrought by the lumbermen and now He had relented. Now that the stream flowed steadily, and never destructively, the valley would again be paradise, he said.

It might at that, Jed conceded as he walked along. Old Mose had more money than anyone else in the valley, and he was smart, but he was also supposed to be a little queer. He still was not too far out of line. If a healthy young man cared to take a firm hold in the valley he would do all right. If, for instance, he planted pines to replace the slaughtered trees, he could reasonably expect to live until the valley was again forested. Meanwhile he could get along, and though doubtless he would make more money elsewhere, there were worse careers than that of restoring devastated land.

Coursing ahead of Jed, Pete stopped to bark when they came in front of a down-valley farmhouse. The owner, a lean mountaineer named Riley Hankins, came to the door.

"Hi-ya, Jeddy boy?"

"Doing all right, Riley. How's yourself?"

"Fitten, I'm fitten."

Pete bristled at Riley's big brown and white collie, and walked stiffly forward. The dogs sniffed noses, two tails began to wag, and they were off for a romp. Jed walked up to Riley Hankins' cabin, where the mountaineer leaned against the

door frame.

"On your way to the store?"

"That's right. Got some butter and eggs to trade."

"I was there yistiddy," Riley murmured. "Had nigh onto nine dozen eggs, and that's more'n my hens laid all last summer. Queer how a flowin' crick and fresh water in the pump can make even a hen feel more like workin'."

"Yeah. You've been here quite a while, haven't you?"

"Twenty year," Riley said, "and this is the first time in the past fifteen when I ain't had a good mind to go elsewhere. Last year we hauled even our drinkin' water from a spring on Sump Mountain. Looks like a body won't have to scratch so hard to make a livin'. He might even collect a few dollars ahead."

Jed laughed. "Don't tell me you're making money?"

Riley sniffed. "A dollar seventy to go until I make my first million, but I'm doin' better'n I was. Not havin' to haul water this year, I spent a spell down on the river. Ketched ninety-six muskrats, I did."

Jed frowned. "I thought muskrat trapping was closed for two years in this country?"

"It is, Jeddy boy, it is. I had to sell them pelts cheap on account they was poached, but I still got a dollar and a half each for 'em. How's about goin' down the river with me when 'rats are prime next spring?"

"I'll think about it," Jed evaded. "Well, I'll be getting along."

Jed frowned as he continued down the road. Most of the valley residents were like Riley, neither vicious nor lawless at heart, but simply living for the moment only. Adversity had taught all of them to take what they could get while they could get it. They were thoughtless and selfish, and all they cared about was their own immediate needs.

Jed called Pete in to heel, and held the airedale's collar before he crossed the macadam transcontinental highway that ran partly through the valley. When there was a momentary lull in the stream of passing cars, Jed and Pete ran across.

On the other side, at the corners where macadam road crossed dirt, old Mose Willow had his neat store, filling station, and lunch counter. A half-dozen cars were lined up at the gas pumps and Mose himself, an old man with snow-white hair and beard, was helping his two men service them. Pete galloped gaily up to lick the old man's hand, and Mose turned to face Jed. When he spoke, his voice was soft and gentle.

"Hello, Jed."

"Hello, Mr. Willow." Nobody ever thought of calling the old man by his first name.

"Got some trading goods, eh, son?"

"Eggs and butter."

"Let's go in."

Pete sprawled on the porch, panting, while Jed followed Mose Willow into the store's cool interior. It was neat and clean, freshly painted, and stocked with the wide assortment of goods which any country store must carry. Old Mose wiped his face with a fresh towel.

"It's good to be in here," he sighed. "Ofttimes I wonder where everybody's going in such a hurry, and why more of them don't kill themselves getting there. But I suppose the Lord knew what He was doing when He gave His children motor cars."

"I suppose He did, Mr. Willow."

Mose Willow looked at Jed's butter and eggs, and tabulated their value on a strip of wrapping paper. Jed glanced at the figures idly; old Mose never cheated anybody.

"Give it to me in flour, sugar, salt, and a cake of yeast," Jed said.

The old man nodded absently, as though his mind were filled with other things. He put the requested articles on the counter and twisted the stub of a pencil between his fingers. "Here you are. Jed, what do you think of our valley now that you've lived in it?"

"I seem to have hit it lucky. From what I hear, this is the first year in many that there's been water."

"That's true, but that was not what I meant. You came here to regain your health, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did, and I can't remember ever feeling better than I do right now."

"I'm glad to hear that." Old Mose glanced at him questioningly. "Then I expect you'll be leaving us soon?"

"I had been thinking about it," Jed admitted. "I'm sure I can get my old job back. But I'm not sure I want it now, Mr. Willow. When I first came to the valley I thought it the most forsaken spot on the face of the earth, but it sort of takes hold of you. I feel good here, and now that there's water again, everybody's land is beginning to produce. Besides, there could be extra work that would help piece out. I've been thinking. Once these mountains grew big pine forests. If we could prove to the State Forestry Department that we're willing to take an interest, couldn't we get seedlings, and wages for planting them?"

"You could," the old man replied, "and I'm glad somebody feels that way. This valley has become a sore spot, one of thousands resulting from greedy exploitation. That damage can be repaired with a little far-sighted effort. But neither this valley nor any other will be worth anything without a constant supply of fresh water." He paused a moment. "Do you know why, for the first time in years, the creek flows evenly and without destructive floods?"

"I suppose it just happened."

"Nothing just happens." Old Mose reached beneath the counter and brought out a foot-long aspen stick, stripped of bark and with serrated, chisel-like markings on either end. "Do you know what this is, Jed?"

"No."

"It's a beaver cutting. I picked it up on the stream bank the other day. Jed, the reason the creek has a steady flow, and the floods are less violent, is because there are beaver dams up above you."

"Have you been up to see?"

"No, but this cutting and the way the creek flows prove it. I have spoken of this to none but you."

"Why?"

"The valley people are short-sighted. With no help from them, the valley has been started toward restoration. But if anyone except yourself knew that there are beaver in the aspens, they would see only the price they could get for the pelts."

Jed remembered Riley Hankins' muskrat trapping. "I see what you mean!"

"I thought you would. Those beaver must be left alone; the valley's future depends on it. And they are not going to be unless somebody bothers to protect them. Almost nobody goes into the aspen forest in summer; there's nothing to attract them. But when autumn comes, hunters will go up there, and the beaver colonies will be found."

"Do you mean I should protect them? How?"

"That's up to you. The valley has given you back your health, and here's your chance to repay the debt. Think it over."

Carrying his parcels, with Pete trotting beside him, Jed left the store. He was so filled with the old man's words that he only waved half-heartedly at Riley Hankins when he passed Riley's house. Jed walked on to his own house, stowed his groceries away, and did his chores. It was late afternoon when, on a sudden impulse, he whistled to Pete and started up toward the aspens.

He approached carefully. An almost black beaver—Ebony had come back to the aspens with his hard-won mate—was working on the dam. Jed watched, fascinated. He stole silently into the aspens and resumed his upstream journey. Passing Peg's pond, he saw no beaver in it.

Just then he heard the pistol-shot report of Chip's water-slapping tail. The old beaver, always alert, had known for minutes that something was coming. Jed walked to the very edge of Chip's pond and looked it over. Old Mose Willow was right. Beaver dams near the head waters were controlling the stream.

## *Chapter X*

## UNDER THE ICE

Old Chip heard Jed Hale when he came to Ebony's pond, but at such a distance the big beaver could not identify exactly the tread of a man and he would sound no alarm until he was sure something that meant trouble was coming. Chip swam over to Sleek and the kits, and found his mate alert. She too had sensed something.

Sleek urged the kits to swim in front of her, and when Young Chip would not she nipped him savagely. Swimming behind her babies, not permitting them to lag, Sleek took them into the lodge. Tensely watching, Chip remained where he was.

He knew when the man left Ebony's pond and started for Peg's. Peg and Gray were in the habit of emerging late from their lodge and as yet they had not come out. Having no young to feed, they did not have to store nearly as much food as Chip and Sleek. Jed Hale was near Peg's pond when Chip slapped the water with his tail.

Far down, he heard Ebony echo the sound. Ebony could have sounded the alarm first, but he was too busy. Now that he again had a mate of his own, and his own pond, he was the very incarnation of zeal. He spent most of his time cutting branches to work into the dam or lodge. Ebony went into a frenzy of excitement if Mab, his small mate, so much as ventured near the bank.

For a few seconds Chip remained in plain sight, wanting to be positive that Sleek and the kits were in the lodge before he himself sought a hiding place. Then he did not go into the lodge, but chose a position where he could watch the approaching stranger and, if possible, determine his intentions. Chip dived, [surfaced](#) beside the lodge, and stared steadily downstream.

He saw Jed coming, and slipped around the lodge so that it would shield him. Only his eyes and nostrils thrust above the surface, Chip trembled with nervous tension. He had always been uncomfortable whenever human beings approached his pond and doubly so when the lodge contained kits that could be so easily injured. Chip kept his steady gaze on the man.

As Jed Hale came nearer, the beaver slipped farther around the lodge, ready to dip beneath the water. But the man merely stood at the edge of the pond and gazed across it. Chip shied involuntarily when Pete trotted out of the woods to join his master.

Chip had seen few dogs, but he trusted nothing which he did not know and Pete looked somewhat like a wolf. To his relief, the creature did not enter the pond. He merely lapped a mouthful of water, then he and the man turned and disappeared among the aspens.

Waiting until he was sure they were out of sight, Chip dived easily. He swam through the tunnel into the lodge, and met Sleek at the entrance. Ready to fight anything else that came in, Sleek relaxed at once when her mate appeared. She knew he would not be there if the threat still lingered. When Chip left the lodge, Sleek and the kits followed.

The first pale stars were showing. A dozen bats skipped over the pond on light wings, catching insects. Up toward the head of the pond, the King trout and his school kept the water constantly dimpled as they rose to flies. Chip swam down to inspect and repair his dam.

He saw Peg and Gray, hard at work in the aspens. Trim and her fawn, now a well-grown little buck, pulled grass beside the pond. There was another doe, a stranger with twin fawns, near them. Leaving a wake of curling ripples, Sleek and the kits were swimming toward the head of the pond. Chip followed them.

The harvest season was well under way and much food was already anchored at strategic places in the bottom of the pond. But there was not nearly enough. There was no possible way of foretelling the length and severity of the coming winter season. Chip had known winters when no ice froze until January and the thaw came a month later. He had lived through others when his pond froze solid in November and remained ice-locked until March. Since he could not be sure of a mild winter, he had to prepare for a long and hard one.

There were three feeder dams at the head of the pond now, and Sleek and the kits climbed over the first one. A few trees still grew within easy reaching distance of the pond and Sleek and the kits went to work on them.

Chip climbed over the second and third dams and plunged in the third pond. He inspected it thoroughly, looking at the banks for ambushed enemies. He could detect none. When the beaver family started working in these aspens, Glare had

come every night and occasionally two or three times in a single night. Failing to catch any of the kits, the lynx had finally given up. Now he came only when he thought there was a possibility of a surprise move.

Satisfied, Chip returned to the dam and climbed on it. Twenty feet away a cluster of fine aspens grew very close together. They were desirable, just the sort of food to store in the bottom of the pond, but they were too far from the water. Chip knew he could fell them one by one, cut them into easy-to-handle lengths, and drag them into the pond. But that would take a long time, and time was precious.

Leaving the dam, Chip swam once more around the pond, inspecting every inch of the banks. Returning to the dam, he re-climbed it and looked around him with a true engineer's eye.

There was little possibility of backing water up to the desired trees. They grew on a mound, and to cover it with water would mean that a very high and unwieldy dam would have to be built. Chip swam smoothly to the bank and tested it with his front paws. Finding the place he wanted, he began to dig. Dirt flew as he scraped it behind him into the pond. Going down almost to the bottom water level, Chip slanted his canal upward as he approached the trees.

The night wore on. Sleek and the kits felled aspens and took their harvest back to the main pond. Chip continued to dig. Daylight was still two hours away when his water-filled canal was at last within two feet of the trees he wanted. Chip climbed out, felled an aspen, and cut a branch. Pulling it down the canal, he climbed over the three dams and dragged his branch into the home pond. He anchored it on one of the food piles.

Then he surfaced, warned by some inner sense, and swam in uneasy little circles. Something was coming through Peg's pond. No alarm sounded, but Chip continued to wait.

Presently Digger and Root, parents of the muskrat family that lived downstream, came over the dam and entered the water. They swam wearily to the lodge, climbed up on it, and huddled there. Chip made no move to stop them or drive them away. Digger and Root were his true cousins. As peaceful as he, they were entirely welcome to live in the pond if they cared to. Muskrats ate nothing except bulbs, water weeds, mussels, wild fruit, and grass. They would interfere not at all with the normal life of the pond or with the welfare of the beaver family.

Chip swam downstream to the place where Digger and Root had climbed over the dam. He knew they had been chased because they were exhausted, and they gave out the fear scent. Presently he saw what had chased them.

It was Killer, a white-throated brown mink. Coming upon Digger and Root downstream, Killer had set out in pursuit. Twice he had been within closing distance, but both the muskrats together had fought him off. Killer had been diverted by the scent of a family of cottontail rabbits, and had swerved to hunt them. Killing one, he had eaten what he wanted. Then he had again taken up the pursuit of the muskrats.

Killer halted at the foot of the dam, one forefoot lifted like a pointing dog's and the other upon the dam. As he saw Chip, his lips formed a soundless snarl. Defeated, he faded back into the stream, and his head cut a smooth furrow as he swam across Peg's pond.

Dawn broke slowly, but Chip waited. He was not afraid of Killer, and knew that the mink could harm neither himself nor Sleek. But if he caught one of the kits alone, beyond its parents' reach, he might easily kill it.

Chip swam twice around the lodge. Huddling upon it, the muskrats watched him with somber eyes. Knowing they would be neither attacked nor evicted, they made no move. The sun rose and Chip entered the lodge.

His sleep was restless and broken. A dozen times he rose to pad nervously about Sleek and the sleeping kits. There was not enough food stored in the pond, and though the days were still warm and sultry, the nights were beginning to assume a distinct coolness. Chip left the lodge before sunset.

Perched on one of the stub's snag-like limbs, the young of the pileated woodpeckers sat in a row. They had learned to fly but were still awkward and uncertain. A blue jay found the family and at once began to squawk his discovery. Annoyed by the screeching jay, the young woodpeckers took clumsy wing into the aspens.

Because he was looking at the jay, Chip saw Wraith appear behind it. Silent as death itself, Wraith grasped the jay in powerful talons and bore it away with him. The beaver looked disinterestedly on.

With dusk Sleek and the kits appeared, and Chip led them back to the head of the pond. He stopped well out of reach of the first dam, treading water while he looked at it. The wind was blowing away from him, therefore he could scent nothing. But there was something on top of the dam, something so flat and still that it looked like part of the structure itself. It did not belong there. Having seen it too, Young Chip started in for a better look. Wrathfully Chip cut his rash son off and took the dangerous post for himself. He swam closer to the dam, and still closer.

He was so near that his feet almost touched the dam when he pushed himself suddenly backward. As he did so, Glare sprang. The big lynx caught himself at the water's edge. His tail twitched, he bristled, as he looked at the swimming beaver. Chip came nearer, taunting the lynx and trying to lure him into the water. But again Glare would not be tempted.

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Before August faded, the two bull frogs from the nearby swamp came to live in the pond. Beaten by a pitiless sun, their pond had shrunk daily. When only a puddle remained, the two frogs set out toward the beaver dam, guided by an unerring instinct which told them where it was. They needed two nights for the short trip, crouching motionless in a tiny spring-fed puddle when the first morning sun overtook them. They completed their trip early on the second evening, and now their roaring was added to the pond's nightly chorus.

The days passed, and though they stayed warm the nights became increasingly colder. Trim and her fawn, who had lost his white spots and now sported a somber gray coat, came less often to the pond and did not stay as long when they came. The night winds bit harshly, and doe and fawn preferred the sheltered woods. The aspens exchanged their green leaves for bright yellow ones, which fluttered continually to the ground.

As the nights became colder, the two bull frogs stopped their roaring. They were lazy, unwilling to move, and one night they merely dug themselves into the mud on the pond's bottom and did not come up. They would stay there, dormant and breathing through their skins, until the spring breakup.

Chip redoubled his furious efforts to store food in the pond. As the days shortened he increased his working hours, starting to harvest trees while the sun still shone and not stopping until it rose again. The young woodpeckers flew away.

In late September a flight of little green-winged teal, the first of the ducks to fly south, skidded out of the sky and alighted on the pond. They bobbed nervously, and when night came they huddled near the beaver lodge. Wraith swooped down, caught one, and bore it away. The rest awakened nervously, quacked among themselves, and changed their position. They moved again, toward the bank, when Chip swam past, dragging part of a tree.

There was a sudden outcry among them, and they took fluttering wing. Glare was also aware of the possibilities offered when the waterfowl flight was in progress. For a long while he had lain in wait, hoping the teal would come near. When they did, he made his kill.



Every night now frost glittered in the air and covered the trees and grass, wrapping even the cut aspen stumps in a coat of pure silver and transforming them into things of beauty. A week after the first frost, Chip saw Trim and her fawn for the last time that season.

They came to the pond at twilight, with the disconsolate little fawn wandering out of the aspens first. Then Trim came, side by side with an antlered buck. The fawn, whose buttons of horns were just beginning to show through the hair on top of his head, trotted hopefully toward Trim. The buck dashed rudely at him, striking with a front hoof, and the fawn ran off a few feet. The buck and Trim lay down side by side. The fawn continued to nibble disinterestedly at frozen grass.

Though he knew he must harvest more aspens, Chip watched the deer closely. He had not forgotten their sensitivity, their alertness. The actions of the trio would tell him whether or not something to be feared was approaching the pond. Sleek and the kits emerged from the lodge and set off toward the head of the pond. Chip swam in little circles.

The buck jumped suddenly to his feet, looked back over his shoulder, and snorted. Trim arose, and the fawn trotted over to join them. All three stood for a second. Then they bounded gracefully out of sight.

Without any hesitation Chip slapped the water with his tail. He could see, hear, or smell nothing coming. But when deer took alarm, something was sure to appear. Chip heard Peg echo his danger signal, and down in the third dam Ebony repeated. Sleek herded the kits hurriedly into the main pond, to seek refuge in the lodge. A few seconds later, Shuffle appeared.

He was a fat and lazy Shuffle, a bear that had spent almost all his summer eating so he could sleep through the winter. But he was willing to eat more. He squatted on the bank, and scratched an ear with a hind paw. The bear yawned sleepily, as though in anticipation of the warm bed which he would occupy through the cold months. Then he ambled down to the dam and started across it.

Chip swam nervously about, watching the big bear crush the top, the weakest part of his dam. Water flowed over in a dozen additional places, and sticks and mud were swept away. Shuffle halted in the center of the dam, and swung to face the pond. The frantic beaver swam to within a few feet. He had no ideas about fighting Shuffle, in the water or out, but he did want to be about repairing the dam. But it was almost five minutes before the bear lumbered to the other side and climbed the slope into the aspens.

Sleek and Chip immediately began the repair job. They packed more sticks, from which bark had been chewed, in the holes left by Shuffle, and cemented them with mud. Two precious hours were lost before the work was completed to their satisfaction. Then they swam back upstream and resumed the vital work of harvesting. Great stock piles were already safe in the bottom of the pond, but they wanted more.

The King trout and his school were haunting mud banks at the upper end of the pond. This was their spawning time, and

thousands of fertile eggs were deposited in safe beds. The King was alert and pugnacious, flying at shadows and almost ready to charge the beaver family when they came too near.

The first ice formed around the edges of the pond the third week in October. It was brittle, shell-like, and crumbled even beneath the kits' weight when they climbed out on it. Ten days later winter struck with full fury.

It began with wind-whipped snow that blew out of the north and pattered into the pond. As the day lengthened, the wind shrieked louder and the snow storm gathered violence. Streamers of feathery snow whirled over the pond, curtains so thick that the aspen forest could be only faintly seen from the lodge. Snow piled up on the banks in great white drifts. Sheltered by driven snow, Chip made a few exploratory trips through the pond.

He dived, passing the King trout and his school. Warned by the storm, they had come back to deeper water and were lurking there. Digger and Root huddled safely in the burrow they had dug under the bank. Satisfied, Chip returned to the lodge. He shook himself dry, and climbed over to where Sleek and the kits slept.

With night, the snow stopped as abruptly as it had started. Stars glittered, and a pale winter's moon rose over the aspen-clad hills. Intense cold followed.

The thin ice at the edges of the pond hardened and strengthened. Venturing out, Chip had to break ice forming over the pond's center. He plunged through it for a ways, breaking more ice as he swam. Frost rimed his whiskers, and after a bit he dived into the warmer water.

It was too cold for even a beaver to be out. The aspens were entering their dead time. Glare lay motionless in the depths of a favorite thicket. Shuffle, deep in a snug cave, slept soundly. Even Wraith huddled in a tree. He knew that it would be no use to hunt, for nothing would be stirring.

Thus, in a single day and night, the forest was taken by winter's first real attack. Two inches of ice formed over the center of the pond, and it was even thicker at the sides. Piercing cold continued to strengthen the ice.

Going out at mid-day, for now it was as safe to venture out of the lodge by day as by night, Chip could not break the ice. He surfaced to breathe in one of the many air pockets beneath the ice. A little trickle of roily water rippled past; Digger and Root were busy scraping bulbs out of the banks. Caught beneath the ice, the pair of muskrats could not escape until the spring thaw. But they were safe. There was air for them to breathe and plenty to eat.

Chip dived, staying in a deep channel and gliding smoothly toward one of the food piles. Now the wisdom and foresight he had used in storing his winter's supply became evident. Part of the pond was crystal ice which light penetrated only feebly. The rest of it, where the water ran still and deep, was clear. The beaver's food reserves were beneath that. The bright rays of a winter sun penetrated the clear ice and revealed the food stocks.

Selecting a stick, Chip swam back into the lodge. He entered the warm, ice-insulated living quarters and contentedly began to gnaw bark from his stick. For a moment he stopped eating.

There was something walking on the ice, a step so soft and faint that it was almost inaudible. A second later, the sound of rough scraping vibrated the walls. Undisturbed, Chip resumed his interrupted meal. He knew that Glare, who had at last found a way to reach the lodge without getting himself wet, was ripping at it. Chip knew also that the lynx could not enter. No animal could. The lodge was frozen solidly together, as tough as concrete. Unperturbed, Sleek and the kits swam down the tunnel to get food sticks.

It was a time of peace and plenty. The beaver had worked very hard to perfect their lodge and dam and to stock the pond with food. Now there was little to do except keep the dam in repair and eat when they were hungry. Chip stripped the last of the bark from his stick and carried it out to pack into the dam. Sleek and the kits came in to eat.

While the drifts piled up outside, and most other warm-blooded creatures prowled constantly and desperately for something to eat, the beaver family lived in the midst of abundance. The threat of danger seemed far away.

## *Chapter XI*

# RIPPLE, THE OTTER

For the first time in his life Ripple, the otter, was caught unaware by a storm. Ripple had left the aspens in early spring, a few days after he came face to face with Chip, and gone to live along the sluggish river into which the stream emptied.

Only a beast of supreme courage and intelligence would have dared stay there. The river was flanked by farm lands and spotted every few miles by a village, town, or small city. The only wild vegetation consisted of tall grass, weeds, willow thickets, brambles and vines, and occasional clumps of aspen or sycamore trees.

Shuffle or Glare would have fled as fast as they could if some circumstance had led them even near such a country, but Ripple came of a different breed. Like Chip, he was aquatic and spent almost his whole life in or near the water.

The river was a good place for Ripple because only the rich alluvial fields and broad meadows had been completely captured by civilization. The immediate banks were a little wilderness in themselves. In some places the willow thickets were so impenetrable that the few fishermen who came through them had to hack paths. In other spots the banks were sheer, and a human being could have descended them only at the risk of life and limb.

Ripple knew the river bank thoroughly for twenty miles either way from the place where the stream emptied into it. He could slip instantly into any of a hundred hiding places, knew all the thickets, and was even fairly well acquainted with the small towns through or past which he swam when night lowered its friendly cloak. He could go directly to pools where fat and lazy carp and suckers swarmed by the dozen, and where it never took him more than a few minutes to catch all he wanted to eat. After chasing trout that lived in smaller and colder streams, such fish were not even fair game for a fisherman of Ripple's prowess.

Besides the wildness of the banks, the otter had another advantage. The people who lived along the river were farmers, traders, or townsmen, rather than trappers and hunters. Though Ripple made sure that nobody ever saw him, dozens of people saw his tracks in the mud without ever knowing what they were or who had left them. At various times his tracks were identified as those of a muskrat, porcupine, and fox, but never an otter's. No human even dreamed that an otter was living along the river, and Ripple was not afraid of the occasional prowling dog which came upon him. He had only to slide into the water and slither away, and a dog had no more chance of catching him than it would of catching a fish.

Nevertheless, as winter approached, the otter became uneasy and restless. He was uneasy because he knew the river would freeze, and all his previous winters had been spent among the small headwaters. At its best winter was a hard time. Ripple knew how to get along in the small creeks but he was not sure how he would fare on the river. His restlessness sprang from a different reason.

Ripple was an adventurer, a wanderer who knew too much of freedom to be happy without it. And he had spent a long time on the river, which offered a changeless diet of sucker, carp, and an occasional muskrat. The trout in the headwaters were much better eating, and there would be grouse and rabbits to catch in the aspens. So one cold autumn night Ripple started back up the same stream he had come down.

With daylight he crawled into a hole, curled himself into a warm ball with his sensitive nose covered by his furry tail, and slept. It was there that the storm caught him.

Ripple awakened when it struck, and nervously shifted his position. He knew what the storm portended, for he had lived through many such. He snaked to the mouth of the hole, and thrust his nose out. There was nothing about the storm that would affect his present circumstances. The hole was warm and dry and its entrance was well above the water level; there was no danger of his being frozen in.

Neither was there any point in travelling. He could go on if necessary, but it would be a difficult and hungry journey because the chances were greatly against his catching any food en route. Nothing would move in the fury outside. So Ripple slept all day, all night, and all the next day.

When he left his bed he did so cautiously, and stopped at the mouth of the hole to test the winds. He could smell nothing, see nothing moving about the frozen, snow-heaped stillness which the valley had become. Ripple emerged from his hole and started up the ice-covered creek.

He was very hungry, but all the pools were frozen and ice clung even to the riffles. The otter thrust his nose into a half-

inch opening and tried to get his head in. He could not, nor could he break the ice on either side. Ripple scraped hungrily at it. If he could get beneath the ice he might catch some fish, but there was no opening he could enter.

Nor was there anything he could catch in the willow thickets beside the creek. Twice Ripple stopped and sniffed hungrily at enticing odors that came from the barnyards. There was poultry in the sheds and it might be had, but Ripple was too clever to leave his tracks in the snow around any houses. He would raid chicken coops only as a last desperate resort.

All night he found nothing to eat, and when morning came he crawled into another hole. Ripple seldom made a mistake, and it would definitely be one to try travelling through the farm lands by daylight. He knew too well the power of aroused human beings, and their weapons.

An hour before dark he came suddenly awake. For a tense second he lay still, until the sound that had awakened him was repeated. It was a gentle snuffling and a heavier tread. Ripple knew that a dog was coming. He waited until he heard a man following the dog, then he flashed out of the hole.

He saw the dog as he left, a lean, short-legged hound snuffling at his tracks. Much farther down, the man raised a shotgun and Ripple heard its blast. He felt two stinging pellets burn into him as he raced upstream.

Ripple was not afraid of the dog, and ordinarily he would not have hesitated to fight it. He did fear the man, and now he had no choice other than travelling by daylight.

Behind him he heard the dog, roused to yapping excitement by the sudden appearance of his quarry, but rapidly losing ground. Ripple ducked into a place he knew, a tributary valley cut by a smaller stream, and he raced up it. There were fewer houses in this valley, and darkness had fallen by the time he passed them.

The dog's baying died, but Ripple kept running. He was perfectly aware of the fact that he left tracks in the snow, and that those tracks could be followed. He came to the stream's source and slowed to a walk. Morning found him high on an aspen-covered hill.

For a long while he stood looking at his back trail, but he could detect nothing on it. Ripple remained nervous, alert, not knowing for certain whether or not he was still followed. Like a slim snake he prowled into a laurel thicket and stopped to hunt.

He caught and ate a snowshoe rabbit, a small one that did not satisfy his raging appetite. Ripple prowled on, knowing that he must put as much distance as he could between any possible pursuers and himself. Also, he was uneasy in the hills. His habitat was water.

The otter spent ten days in the hills, weathering two more storms, catching whatever he could, and eating where he brought game down. Finally, satisfied that his trail had been lost or forgotten, he cut back toward the stream.

Having made a great circle, he returned to the stream well up in the aspens. He reconnoitered, testing the winds and watching and listening. Cold-tortured trees snapped, and frost glittered in the still air. The wind, blowing up the creek, brought only stale scents.

Then, momentarily, the wind reversed itself and brought Ripple a fresh, hot scent which set him drooling. He had eaten little in the hills, and not since entering them had he had enough food all at one time to satisfy his hunger. Now the wind brought him the warm scent of fat, winter-locked beaver. Ripple bounded up the ice.

He came first to Ebony's dam, and mounted the lodge to snuffle at the two beaver within. He scratched experimentally at the frozen lodge, and when it did not yield Ripple leaped from it to prowl around the pond. Like a coursing dog he quartered back and forth over the ice, and when he found no way to get under it he snarled his rage.

The otter raced over Peg's dam, and again found himself blocked. Peg's pond, like Ebony's, was all still water. There was no hole or crevice that even a weasel could have slipped through. Driven by hunger to extreme recklessness, ready to attack anything he could eat, Ripple mounted Chip's dam. He was in a mad rage when he snuffled the third lodge.

He smelled the three kits and two adults within, and in a frenzy of impatience scraped futilely at the lodge. Unable to budge even one frozen stick, he sprang eight feet out on the ice. Forcing himself to be patient, he explored the ice-

covered pond. Presently he halted, deadstill, and turned his head upstream.

Faintly, like distant notes of soft music, he heard the wash of open water. Following his ears, Ripple bounded to it. He found the foot-wide hole a hundred feet above the pond. Swift ripples flowed here, and their motion kept the water open. Without any hesitation, the otter slipped into the hole.

Once beneath the ice he swam smoothly, graceful as a trout, and headed straight for the lodge. Ripple had marked its exact location, and he did not swerve to either side as he darted toward it. He found the entrance and glided into it.

The hunger-mad otter came up in the lodge, breathed, and looked about. Chip blocked the entrance-way. Behind him, Sleek was battle-ready in front of the kits. Ripple's eyes turned on Chip.

That was his first enemy, and his most important. After he had killed the old beaver he would have no trouble killing Sleek and the kits. There would be meat in plenty, and Ripple could occupy the lodge as long as he wished. He closed in.

The beaver's throat, where life pulsed nearest the surface, was his objective. Ripple slashed at it, and discovered the instant he did so that he had found a Tartar. Chip blocked with his shoulder the slicing teeth intended for his throat, and struck back.

More agile than any cat, Ripple whipped his slim body around so that it lay against Chip's, out of reach. The beaver missed. Ripple quested with his teeth.



Suddenly the otter squalled, an ear-slitting scream that filled the lodge with noise and even sent faint echoes out over the ice. Concentrating on his immediate antagonist, he had neglected those behind him. Young Chip, edging around Sleek, had noted Ripple's flowing tail and bitten it half in two. The otter leaped convulsively, flinging himself against the lodge, and when he did, Chip had another opportunity to bite. He sank his teeth as deeply as he could, and withdrew them to strike again. But Ripple was too swift.

Defeated, he plunged down the entrance way and up beneath the ice. He could not swim as swiftly now, and blood stained the water behind him. When he climbed out on the ice, he left red streaks to mark his way as he walked slowly and painfully upstream.

Back in the lodge, Chip lay in a pool of his own blood. For a few minutes he did not move, not because he was unable to but because he thought Ripple might return and he wanted to be ready. When the otter did not come, the sorely hurt beaver limped to the entrance tunnel and swam down it. He surfaced in an air pocket, unable to swim easily because of his wound. Ripple's teeth had gone through skin and flesh into the bone.

The old beaver knew the quickest way to congeal flowing blood. Presently the cold water exerted its healing effect;

blood flowed less freely and numbness stole some of the pain. Chip remained motionless, breathing from the air pocket and trying not to use his right front foot and shoulder at all.

After a while, travelling very slowly and favoring his injured side as much as he possibly could, Chip swam down to a stock pile, selected a food stick, and carried it back to the lodge. He limped into the living quarters, ate less than half the bark from his stick, and went to sleep.

Growing hungry, one of the smaller kits swam down to get food. Sleek made no attempt to interfere. The kits had learned a great deal during the summer. Now they were learning more of what a beaver must know; how to live beneath the ice. Sleek made no move to stop her kit because she was sure that Ripple would not be back. If he intended to return, he would have done so before this. The kit could take care of herself.

Chip slept uneasily, awakening now and then to cry softly to himself. Sleek remained alert, not relaxing when the other two kits sought food sticks and brought them back into the lodge. She watched them eat, and carry the stripped sticks out to pack into the dam.

The kits returned, and Sleek went out to get food for herself. She ate, gave the dam a careful inspection, and returned to the lodge. But she did not take her customary place near the kits. An able-bodied beaver must be constantly in the entrance-way, ready to fight whatever came, and until her injured mate could again do so Sleek would.

Chip mended swiftly, but the encounter with Ripple had done much to intensify his natural caution. He worked on the dam, and made regular patrols through the pond, but he had no wish to venture very far from the lodge. Chip knew well that Ripple's visit had been no accident, and that the otter might come back when his own wounds were healed. He must be ready. But the winter ebbed on and Ripple did not return.

It was Sleek who took the longest journeys. One late-winter's day she was swimming up the pond when she stopped suddenly.

The pattern of the ice-locked pond, dark shadows under crystal ice and much lighter ones where the ice was clear, had become very familiar. Sleek stopped in surprise because she saw something that did not conform to the routine she knew, something that was out of place.

She studied it carefully. Deep water washed the edge of the bank, and was ordinarily very dark. Now it was clear. Sleek saw a patch of sun-brightened water, not the softly changing winter shadows. She waited until she had identified the reason for the change.

A spring bubbled out of the bank at that point, and during the summer it flowed constantly. In winter it froze, but now the spring had burst its icy shackles, and had melted a circular patch of ice. The sun was shining into the pond.

Sleek swam cautiously toward it, as though unwilling to believe what she saw. Then she entered the melted place, thrust her head out of water, and for the first time since ice had locked the pond, breathed deeply of fresh, untainted air. She trembled with sheer delight as she looked at a patch of willows six feet from the edge of the ice.

The food stored in the pond had been there all winter, and though it was still nutritious it had lost most of its taste. Sleek climbed out on the ice, a dark spot in a white world, and walked toward the enticing willows.

She reared, balancing herself on her broad tail while she sliced and ate a willow. Ready to cut another, she was warned by a shadow that drifted between her and the melted hole. Sleek turned to see Glare, less than four feet away.

The big lynx, a thin and hungry shadow of his former self, had been stalking through the aspens in the hope of finding rabbits or grouse when he saw Sleek come out on the ice. It had been a long and bitter winter, with food scattered and hard to get. Now, at last, he saw food in plenty.

Glare had waited until the beaver reached the willows before he made his stalk. His objective was to cut her off, and prevent Sleek's getting back under the ice. He had almost done it.

The lynx stood erect, his broad paws gripping the ice and his yellow eyes glowing. He made his spring, dodging and coming in from the side as Sleek scuttled down to the ice. His talons sank into her thick hide, and pinned her down. Glare opened his mouth to drive his sharp teeth through her spinal cord. The ice suddenly gave way.

The dripping spring had opened long cracks in the ice, and the light jar of Glare's springing body was just enough to open them wider. The ice around the spring hole broke into four separate cakes.

The smallest, that upon which Glare struggled with Sleek, tilted into the water. The beaver strained toward it, pulling with all her strength. The lynx strove to pull her in the opposite direction, toward the bank. The cake of ice tilted farther. A second before it tipped completely over Glare released his hold and sprang for firm land. He made it, alighting on all four feet just beyond the water's edge.

A second later, the head of another beaver broke water and a wrathful Chip appeared beside his mate.

## *Chapter XII*

## JED HALE'S PROBLEM

After weighing all possible factors, Jed Hale had finally made up his mind to stay in the valley. And now that he had decided, he gave himself wholeheartedly to furthering his plans.

Above all, he knew that the beaver in the aspens must be protected so they could go on with their work of conservation. Water had flowed evenly all summer long, and the valley had enjoyed the most prosperous year it had known since lumbering days. If the beaver responsible for that were destroyed, then the creek would again bring roaring floods in spring and fall and leave a drought the rest of the time.

A dozen times, always starting very early in the morning or late in the afternoon so nobody else would offer to accompany him, Jed went up into the aspens to see how the beaver were doing. Summer melted into fall and still the beaver remained undiscovered. But they would be found before very long; late fall and winter, when there were few chores to do and men had time to hunt, would be the danger period.

In mid-October, feeling he had to share his problem with someone else and recruit help if possible, Jed walked down to Riley Hankins' house. Riley's youngest son, a freckle-faced boy called Bud, was playing in front of the house. Bud flashed a wide grin at Jed.

"Hello, Bud. Is your dad home?"

"Yeah. He's inside."

Jed knocked, and was greeted by Riley's drawled, "Come in."

Riley was sitting in front of a pot-bellied wood stove in his front room, cleaning a rifle. He squinted through the barrel, put a clean patch on his ramrod, and shoved it through the bore. The patch came out spotlessly clean. Riley replaced the bolt and stood his rifle in a corner.

"Runnin' out of deer meat," he explained casually. "Got to go find me some."

"You might wait until the season opens."

Riley grinned. "Seasons is for them as believes in such foolishness. Me, I get my game when and where I wants it. What's on your mind?"

Jed fumbled and Riley looked keenly at him. "I just came in to say I've got extra vegetables in my garden if you need any."

"Right nice of you, Jeddy boy. Right nice it is. Mary!" Riley raised his voice. "How about a cup of coffee?"

Riley Hankins' wife, a thin woman who managed to retain grace and good humor despite the hardships she must accept, came into the room with a coffee pot and two cups. Jed greeted her, and took the cup she gave him. He drank it thoughtfully.

He had intended to tell Riley Hankins all about the beaver, and to make a frank appeal for help in protecting them, but now he changed his mind. Riley was too ready to do anything, without regard as to whether or not it was legal. Jed put out a cautious feeler.

"What's making the creek stay so even this year?"

"Jest the way it is," Riley Hankins said. "Some years she's good and some years she ain't. Jest happens to be a good year."

"Is that all?"

"Sure! Cricks flow one way or t'other. Good thing she kept up this year, though. Everybody was better off for it."

Jed finished his coffee and left. He was depressed, but he should have known that his mission was fore-doomed to failure. Mose Willow and himself were the only two who understood what the beaver were doing for the valley. He'd

better keep their presence a secret as long as he could.

The storm helped. Striking suddenly, it was accompanied by winds so violent that Jed had to reinforce the windows in his house. Leaning against the wind, he struggled to his outbuildings to see how the poultry and cow were doing. Snow fell furiously, whirling around the buildings, and Jed could not even see the house from the barn. Feeling his way, he returned to the kitchen.

The storm was far worse than any he had experienced last winter. Snow blew against the house and whirled to the ground, piling up so swiftly that drifts covered the lower halves of windows that faced the north. Intense cold followed, and Jed clung close to his big wood stove. Pulling his bed near it, that night he slept beside the stove.

It was in the night that the idea came to him. Last year there had been heavy snows, but at no time was there more than two feet of it on the ground. Sporadic thaws had melted and packed it, and it had not been especially difficult for hunters to go wherever they wished.

This first terrible storm of a new winter was different; in the first few hours there were more than two feet of snow and the high wind had heaped tremendous drifts. The next morning Jed woke to a cold, snow-covered world. He scraped frost from the window pane to look at his thermometer, and whistled when he saw it hovering at ten degrees below zero.

Jed ate, then put two wool shirts over a double layer of underwear. He slipped a checked wool jacket over that, pulled a stocking cap down to cover his ears, and went outside to harness snowshoes to his pacs. When Pete would have followed he ordered him back. The snow was much too deep to allow any dog freedom of movement. Jed started up the valley.

The deep snow seemed almost Heaven-sent. Coming early in the year, it provided a definite handicap to travel. Only the most ambitious of the valley men were ardent enough hunters to strap their snowshoes on and go into the aspens through such a heavy fall. And if they did, they would follow a broken trail rather than break one of their own.

Jed stopped to rest. The snow was soft and fluffy; despite his snowshoes he sank deeply. He opened his jacket and pushed the stocking cap up on his head. Wiping a film of perspiration from his forehead, he went on.

He stayed away from the creek, remaining on an old tote road that ran a quarter of the way up a hillside. Jed stopped when he came opposite the beaver dams. He could not see them; neither the frozen ponds nor evidence of beaver cuttings were visible from the trail. Jed continued plodding through the snow, breaking his trail up to a point more than a mile above the beaver colonies. That should lead any hunters safely past. He stopped again, trying to think of something else he might do.

There was nothing, no way to prevent any hunter's leaving the trail and stumbling on the ponds. Or a dog, pursuing game, might bay it on one of the beaver ponds and thus make them known. Jed had done all he could and something must remain to chance. Certainly it was reasonable for anyone who wished to go into the aspens to follow the trail he had laid out.

The next day Riley and Bud Hankins passed Jed's house. Riley carried a double-barrelled shotgun, while Bud proudly clutched a rusty BB gun. Smelling the pair, and recognizing them, Pete barked disinterestedly. Jed went to the door.

"Come on," Riley invited. "Me and Bud are goin' up to see can we get us a mess of snowshoes."

Jed shook his head. "Not today, Riley."

"Aw, come on. Do ya good."

"Got work to do."

"Well, we'll haul our tails along then."

"Good luck."

Jed waited, gnawed by worry. With evening Riley and Bud came out of the aspens with half a dozen big snowshoe hares slung over their backs. Riley stopped to leave two at Jed's house, and accepted the cup of coffee Jed gave him.

"You should of come," he said. "We had good huntin' and easy travel. Did you break out the snow into the aspens?"

"Yeah. Went up yesterday."

"Right handy," Riley said. "We didn't have no trouble a'tall. Hardly got off the trail."

With every fresh snow, Jed re-packed his trail into the aspens. At the head, where his trail ended, a dozen different snowshoe traces showed where different men had headed into favorite hunting grounds on the slopes. So far, nobody had gone toward the beaver colonies. Jed crossed his fingers and hoped luck would continue to run his way.

In the middle of March the winter broke. Sun shone brightly, and streams of melting water made the dirt road a quagmire. Water ran over the ice on the creek, and the snow melted swiftly. Two days later patches of snow-free ground spotted the drifts and some of the creek was free of ice. Then the ice broke, sweeping down the creek in a piled-up jam. Jed saw a flight of crows, the first he had seen since fall, and then a meadow lark. The next morning a disconsolate robin huddled on the ridgepole of his house. Jed waited expectantly for what he knew would come next, and two days later he heard it.

It was a far-off, muted gabbling, like laughter in the skies. Bareheaded, Jed ran out to scan the cloud-blocked highways used by northbound birds. He saw the geese while they were far down the valley, a thin, wavering line that breasted strong wind currents. The geese settled lower, and still lower, until they were only a few hundred feet above the ground. The head winds did not blow so powerfully at that altitude, and the ragged column straightened out.

Jed watched, fascinated. There was something about the geese, far travellers who summered in the north and wintered in the south, that never failed to capture the imagination and to provide a thrill. More than anything else, wild geese represented the real spirit of lost and lonely wilderness. They were the truest of all adventurers.

Suddenly, down the valley, a rifle blasted. There was another shot, and another. Riley Hankins was shooting at the geese with his deer rifle. The flying column scattered, and climbed as fast as it could. Jed watched the birds re-group, and except for one, all continued their journey.

Trying desperately to keep up, the lone straggler fell far behind. The geese were over the aspens now, with the laggard still trying to overtake his fellows. Riley Hankins had scored a hit. The wounded goose called desperately. A single bird left the column and came back to fly beside its mate. They dipped lower, and still lower, until finally they disappeared in the aspens.

Fifteen minutes later, Bud and Riley Hankins came up the road. Bud carried his rusted BB gun; Riley packed his deer rifle. The lean mountaineer's face was alight, his eyes excited.

"I hit one, Jeddy boy! I hit one and am I tickled! It's many a month since I sank my teeth in roasted goose!"

Jed faltered. "I—I didn't see one come down."

"Wan't one," Riley Hankins said. "There were two, and they're bound to be some 'res on the crick! We're goin' to get 'em! Come on along!"

Jed fell in beside Riley. The geese were down on the creek, no doubt about it. It looked to him as though they had descended on one of the three beaver ponds, but maybe he could persuade Riley to search above or below the colonies. Jed swerved toward the creek.

"Let's go down here."

Riley shook his head. "They're further up. I know jest about where."

Jed's heart sank as Riley Hankins swerved from the tote road straight toward the upper pond. Silent as a puma, the lean mountaineer held his rifle ready. Jed saw water sparkle through the trees and knew that, at last, the secret was out. There was no mistaking a beaver dam. When Riley Hankins turned around, his eyes glowed.

"Beaver! Thar's beaver in here!"

Jed tried to remain casual. "Thought you were after geese?"

"Not when thar's beaver about! You know what this means?"

"What?"

"Nobody else knows about it! Not a single soul! You'n'me can ketch these beaver ourselves and split up what we git for 'em."

"Beaver are out of season."

"Oh foosh! You and your laws! Told you afore that I know where to sell pelts."

They came out beside Chip's pond. Bud, who had never seen a beaver colony, stared wonderingly at the lodge. Riley got down on his hands and knees to examine a felled aspen. He turned delightedly to Jed.

"Old pair and some last year's kits," he announced. "Come on. Let's go see what's below."

"I wanta stay here and watch," Bud said.

"Don't reckon you can do harm just watchin'. Mind you don't get into trouble."

"I won't."

Jed caught a fleeting glimpse of the two geese, staying very near the shore as they sneaked upstream. But his mind wasn't on geese. There was a possibility, a faint one, that he could talk Riley out of harming the beaver. But how to do it?

Riley stopped beside Peg's pond and examined the cuttings.

"Old pair," he said, "and that one's a big cuss. That's good. Blanket beaver are worth more."

Riley led the way toward Ebony's pond, and Jed followed helplessly. The argument would have to come there, he decided, and if argument didn't work, fists might. When Riley started to search for sign around Ebony's pond, Jed touched his shoulder.

"Riley, it won't work."

"What won't?"

"Trapping these beaver. For the first time in twenty years, there have been no floods down the valley and water flowed all summer. These beaver are responsible."

"So what! Their pelts are worth plenty."

"Their pelts aren't worth the good they're doing. You've got to leave them alone."

When Riley looked at Jed, his eyes were clouded with hostility.

"Are you tellin' me to lay off?"

"I'm telling you that these beaver have done what we couldn't. The creek is under control. Don't you see . . ."

He was interrupted by Bud's terrified scream.

### *Chapter XIII*

## END OF A KILLER

Chip, out for a morning's scout, heard the geese when they alighted on his pond. He halted in the water, remaining motionless while he identified the source of the disturbance. The gander, obviously in trouble, came down with a great splashing and much rippling of the water. The goose descended more gracefully, scarcely rippling the pond when she touched it. She swam at once to her crippled mate.

The beaver paid no further attention to them, but he was glad they were there. Even Trim, who had returned alone to the pond, was not more alert or wary than they. The geese were sensitive to every change, and nothing could come even near without their noticing it and giving the alarm. If the pond provided them with a nesting place, and water for their goslings, it would be a safer pond because they were in it.

Chip swam on to the feeder dams at the head of the main pond, no longer afraid to venture abroad in daylight. It had been a safe year. During the winter, while the pond was ice-locked, no man had walked on it, nor had he seen one since. And he was unafraid of any four-footed creature as long as he remained in the pond. Therefore he now swam by day.

Sleek and the kits were in the lodge. The kits were becoming more restless almost daily. They had been with their parents almost a year now, and had learned all the basic essentials of a beaver's life. Young and fretful, all three wanted to set out on their travels for that, too, was part of a beaver's destiny. Having learned how to fell trees, and as much as any youngster could of dam and lodge building, the kits were ready to seek or be sought by mates of their own.

Chip climbed up on the bank and felled a young aspen. He was not particularly hungry, but he ate anyhow, the fresh wood tasted so good. The stock piles in the pond had lost their succulence. They were not to be compared with the fresh, sap-filled green aspens. As soon as Chip was certain that the pond would not freeze again, he would clean out last year's food reserves and build them into the dam or lodge.

The beaver stopped eating to hold perfectly still for a moment. He dropped to all fours, looking across the pond, and ready to scuttle into the water.

Presently Trim came out of the aspens. She ambled down to the pond almost carelessly. This season, until her next fawn was born, was the only time Trim could be carefree. Winter was a ceaseless struggle to find enough to eat. Throughout part of the spring, all summer, and most of the fall, Trim must care for her fawn. Now she had nothing except herself to concern her. She walked down to the pond and drank.

Chip resumed eating bark, then looked around again when there was a splashing in the shallows.

It was only the King trout, chasing minnows. Like everything else in the protective pond, the King and his cohorts had wintered through very well. Presently the thousands of eggs they had deposited would hatch, and fill the pond with tiny trout. Digger and Root were already sheltering their first litter of young muskrats.

Then Chip glanced toward the geese, and noticed that they were hovering close to the bank. The beaver slipped unhesitatingly into the water. When the geese gave a warning, it could always be trusted. Chip slapped the water with his tail, and heard Peg repeat the alarm. Chip had started toward the lodge when his eyes were attracted by faint motion in a thicket. A second later Glare walked out of it.

He soft-footed down to the pond, his head erect and tail twitching angrily. The lynx lifted one paw, curling it beneath him, and stared at the beaver. Chip swam nearer the bank, hatred in his eyes.

Glare was his most persistent enemy, the greatest peril to visit the pond. Not forgotten was Glare's raid of last summer, and the kit he had taken then. Only weeks ago he had almost killed Sleek. Chip swerved when less than ten inches of water lay between himself and the bank. He remained still, inviting the lynx to attack. Glare snarled, and looked at Chip with hungry eyes.

The geese had left their sheltering bank to return to the center of the water. The lynx stared at them, and licked his chops, but he knew geese too well to plan any stalk. Wild geese could be caught only by the greatest of good luck. They were alert and never seemed to rest. Still, Glare marked them as something to watch. The geese could not be caught, but in due time there would be goslings that were not so wary.

Chip was also watching the geese, but for a different reason. Black necks almost straight up, they were paddling in uneasy little circles. Then they suddenly lowered their heads, seemed to melt into the water, and started swimming toward the upper end of the pond.

When Chip looked again for Glare, the big lynx was gone. Worried, the beaver swam to the lodge. Sleek and the kits had to come out to feed, and their only food was up on the banks. If Glare decided to stay around the pond, any beaver that ventured out of it would be in danger. Chip looked once more at the two geese, slinking close to the bank, and then slipped behind the lodge. Something was coming.

Two men and a smaller human came directly to Chip's pond. Leaving the boy where he was, the two men went downstream toward Peg's pond. Chip heard them pass that. When he could no longer hear the men, he came around the lodge far enough to look at the boy.

He kept his head low, so that only his nostrils and eyes showed above the water, while he studied the strange creature. Never before had he seen a human being so small. Chip remained half curious and half afraid. Then his fear began to fade. Since coming into the aspens he had been disturbed by no humans, and surely there could be no harm in one so little. Chip came farther around the lodge.

The boy saw him, and a smile broke on his freckled face. The beaver stayed where he was, not too much inclined to hide again. The small human did not seem threatening, and he had not moved.

Chip suddenly stiffened. Glare had come to the edge of his thicket, and now sat on his haunches like some great house cat while he looked intently at the boy. The lynx was as curious about this strange being as the beaver was.

A jay alighted in a tree behind Glare and began to scream. The boy turned around to look. He saw the lynx, less than twenty feet away, and took a backward step. He took another, and another, until he had backed to the very edge of the pond. Slowly, fighting for control of himself, he raised his rusty little BB gun and aimed it.

Chip heard the snapping report, and saw the transformation it wrought in Glare. Left alone, the lynx was merely curious. But stung on the nose by a BB pellet, Glare became a mad thing. He was a volatile creature anyhow, and his always uncertain temperament was further unsettled by hunger. For a second he crouched at the edge of the thicket while he wavered between running and rending the thing that had hurt him. Then he sprang forward.



The boy screamed, and desperately clubbed the BB gun to defend himself. He had retreated to the very edge of the pond, a place where lapping waters had undermined the bank and left a thin shell of grass-covered earth overhanging the water. As the snarling lynx whipped his paws about and brushed the ineffective gun aside, a few clods splashed from the under side of the earthen shelf into the water. Then the shelf collapsed, breaking cleanly at the point where it joined solid earth. Boy and lynx disappeared and, sputtering, came up again.

Ignoring the boy struggling toward the bank, Chip swam powerfully forward.

This was what he had waited and hoped for, ever since Glare started visiting the pond. His arch-enemy was in the water, where Chip had hoped to catch him. The beaver came up in back of the wet lynx, put his paws on Glare's back, and bit hard. All he got in his teeth was a mouthful of fur.

Glare bent like a whip, scoring Chip's side with his teeth and raking with powerful claws. The beaver held his grip, unmindful of hurts. He struck again, taking his enemy in the ribs, and this time a long strip of Glare's velvet fur came loose in Chip's teeth.

The beaver was fighting a blind, courageous, bulldog's battle. He was bigger than Glare, but the lynx was made of spring steel and whipcord. He could bend himself almost double, and did. His raking claws sought and found Chip's belly, ripping away skin and flesh, but he reached no vital spot. The hard muscles that sheltered Chip's whole body were his armor. The snarling lynx was unable to pierce them.

Glare tried to break away and reach the bank. Chip dragged him back, striking with his teeth and flailing with his paws. The big beaver had forgotten everything now save that he finally had the battle he had long wanted, in his own element. A second time, and a third, Chip dragged Glare away from the bank.

For Chip nothing had any meaning except this death battle with his hated enemy. He did not even see the boy climb up the bank, nor did he notice the return of the two men. The beaver was fighting ferociously to destroy something that had terrorized his colony, killed one of his kits, and almost killed his mate.

The lynx stopped trying to break away and gave his whole effort to winning the battle. He struck with claws and teeth. But Chip was an elusive creature that gave with the water, and Glare's best efforts worked only superficial damage.

They were over deeper water now, and the water-logged lynx tried one last time to sink his teeth into a vital spot. Then he was overwhelmed, forced beneath the surface. Chip had fastened his teeth in Glare's neck and was dragging him down. A fighter to the last, the lynx tried to strike back.

When he opened his mouth, water flooded into it. Before he could rake with his claws, he was forced deeper. He could not reach his enemy.

Finally Glare moved no more.



Up on the bank, the three human beings stood spellbound, silent, aware of the final stages of the battle only because of the violently surging, roily water. Then the water grew still. The beaver did not reappear, but the limp body of the lynx bobbed to the surface.

Riley Hankins brushed the sweat from his face. "Let's go," he said. "Got to get my wet young'un home."

"What about—"

"Jeddy boy, if them beaver want to move into my parlor, they can do it any time—and welcome!"

## *Chapter XIV*

# THE HUMANS COME

All the rest of the day and half the night Chip stayed in his lodge, licking the wounds inflicted by Glare. None of them was as serious as the shoulder slash given him by Ripple, but there were a great many more cuts, and after he had lain still for half an hour, Chip began to stiffen. He got up, forcing himself to move around the lodge.

The old beaver was a healthy wild animal, tough-bodied, hard-muscled, and inured to hardship. A human being, wounded proportionately, would have been hospitalized for weeks. But Chip had mended enough so that he felt hungry by midnight. He slipped down the passageway and into the pond.

Chip swam slowly, careful not to exert himself too much. The snow-cold water was both soothing and stimulating. He felt better, and save for an occasional twinge his stiffness had departed. The wounds were healing fast; by tomorrow night Chip would be his old self. He swam slowly up to the dam, where Sleek was busy at something.

Limp and bedraggled as a wet dish rag, Glare's body lay where the water had cast it up on top of the dam. Sleek had climbed up beside the dead lynx. She shoved with her nose and shoulder until she had tumbled the carcass down the front of the dam.

Off in the aspens a prowling wolf heard the noise. The gaunt and hungry beast stopped in his tracks, ears pricked up and tail drooping. Then he trotted straight toward the dead lynx. Thus ended Glare.

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Two days later a stranger came into the valley. He was a shaggy man, red of hair and beard, and he carried a beaver cutting in his hand. The red-haired man strode purposefully past Jed's house toward the aspens. Two hours later he came back. Jed stopped him.

"Looking for something up this way?"

"Yeah. People who mind their own business."

The stranger passed on and Jed questioned him no more. But he knew. Somewhere down the creek the stranger had picked up a beaver cutting, and he had come clear to the head of the valley to find the colony or colonies from which it had floated.

Jed did not go to bed that night. The hour was very late when Pete growled warningly. Jed silenced the dog, and went to his front window. He saw five shadowy shapes in the night going toward the aspens.

Jed slipped into a jacket and went out.

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Chip swam easily, carefree for the first time since the ice had broken. Ripple had not returned to the pond after his winter's attack on the lodge. Glare was dead. Of course there was Shuffle, but since he had crawled out of his winter's bed the bear had been spending his time high in the hills, ripping apart old logs for the grubs they contained, and digging roots. Even if he came back to the pond, Shuffle was a clumsy beast who always announced his own approach. He could catch only very careless beaver.

The water was cut suddenly by a line of ripples. Digger and Root were taking their young for a swim. The King trout, exuberant and wishing to demonstrate his prowess, leaped clear of the water. He leaped again and again, wriggling when he went into the air and splashing back. The King submerged and swam swiftly up the pond, scattering his mates as he did so.

Although he did not know it, in a single year the beaver had wrought a miraculous change that affected every creature in the stream and in the valley through which it ran. Aside from Chip and his family, his pond had provided a refuge for the trout, for the muskrats, for the geese, and for the frogs. In time of great stress, the pond had even been a haven for Trim

and her fawn.

More than that, the three ponds now controlled the creek. There was always an even flow of water, never floods. The stream was adjusting itself to what it was intended to be. Now that they again had a favorable environment, the creatures who lived in it were multiplying. Nature was working to restore what man had destroyed.

The old beaver was aware of none of this as he swam to the bank. He knew only that he was hungry, and he ascended the slope to a grove of young aspens. He did not stop eating when Young Chip paused beside him.

The kit had grown like a milkweed in the sun, and was fulfilling his early promise of superior size and intelligence. A third bigger than the other two kits, he had proven his skill at mastering the crafts which a beaver must know. He could patch the dam almost as expertly as Sleek and Chip, and in one corner of the pond he had already built his own small lodge which he entered whenever the impulse moved him. Young Chip had learned all his parents could teach him, and from now on he would have to be taught by experience.

He was restless. A little distance away, the other two kits were contentedly chewing bark. They were restless too, but not in the same degree. Young Chip left his father to go straight to the pond. He plunged in and swam upstream. Then Sleek's head cut a clean path across the water as she followed her son. Chip watched his mate trail the kit up the pond, but made no move to follow.

When Sleek came back she came alone. She had followed her impetuous son clear to the bubbling spring at the source of the creek, and had tried to turn him back. He would not be turned. Reaching the spring, he had unhesitatingly started into the aspens. Young Chip had started out on his travels. If he returned at all, he would have a mate with him.

Sleek swam across the pond and climbed up to where the two remaining kits were eating aspen bark. They would go soon and Sleek would try to stop them; her maternal instinct was very powerful. But grief at losing her babies would be alleviated when new ones arrived. Then Sleek would have all she could do, and it was well that the others were going. It would be impossible to take care of all of them.

Chip, having eaten all he wanted, returned to the pond and climbed out on top of the lodge. He saw the geese float lazily past, gently propelling themselves with webbed feet. The goose's head was under her wing, but the gander's was erect. The two geese, never very far apart, did not sleep at the same time. One or the other was always wide awake. They knew too well the dangers of the life they lived to relax even for a minute. In the wilderness, death never took more than an instant to strike.

The gander spoke softly to his mate, and she raised her head. Alert, the two geese remained side by side and swam a little faster. A second later Wraith cruised over the pond.

There was a series of splashes at one side of the pond as Digger, Root, and their young, dived from the bank into the water. Wraith swooped low over them, and when he rose he bore one of the young muskrats in his claws. Digger and Root, and their remaining young, frantically sought their burrow.

Chip watched, unaffected one way or the other and not understanding that this was part of a muskrat's destiny. On land the big snowshoe rabbits bred prolifically, producing several litters a year and sometimes increasing so rapidly that every brush copse concealed one or more rabbits. In water the muskrats did the same. Within a few weeks the young rats would have young of their own, and Root was already heavy with another litter. Muskrats had no weapons of offense and few of defense. They survived only if they multiplied more rapidly than their enemies could kill them.

When the sun rose, the two kits and Sleek sought the lodge's snug interior. Chip lingered a few moments more to inspect and repair the dam. Trim came down for her morning drink. The doe moved almost lazily. She flicked her long ears at Chip, stood a moment, and then ambled back into the aspens. Chip dived deeply to enter the lodge.

He felt so much better that, when he went in, Sleek rose from the place she had taken beside the entrance and moved over to sleep near the kits. Chip stretched out in the doorway, again ready to meet any enemy that tried to enter the lodge. He dozed peacefully. In the middle of the day he rose to make an exploratory trip around the pond. He saw the geese, resting comfortably near the lodge, and up on the bank Trim stretched in the sunshine. There was no disturbance, nothing to fear. The only sound was the familiar rattle of the pileated woodpeckers, who had come back to their stub and were drumming on it. To all outward appearances, everything around the pond was normal. All the beaver's old acquaintances of last

year were back. Chip stopped again to look up on the bank.

Trim's fawn of last year, now a strutting little buck with six-inch antlers, came out of the aspens and, bursting with self-importance, trotted toward Trim. She waited until he was within twenty feet, then rose. The hair on top of her neck bristled, she bleated angrily as she rushed her son. The little buck whirled and fled back into the aspens. Trim returned to her basking place. She was staying near the pond because experience had taught her that it was a safe nursery. Since she would soon be called upon to take care of a new baby, she could not concern herself with the old. The little buck must take care of himself.

Chip re-entered the lodge to sleep again. He came out at sunset, and at once went down to repair the dam. The two kits climbed up on the bank to fell trees and eat bark, while Sleek joined her mate at the dam. They reinforced weak places, and packed mud and sticks in wherever so much as a trickle of water escaped. Then Chip left the dam to climb up to his anchor tree.

There were trees that could be safely reached if the pond were only bigger. Chip made a careful trip around the bank, trying to decide what he should do in order to accomplish the desired objective. He swam across and surveyed the other bank.

The dam already backed a large body of water, but by building it higher, and lengthening the right wing, Chip could flood another part of the natural basin that was not already water-covered and reach at least a portion of the desired trees. That was an engineering project for the immediate future.

He swam toward the geese, dipping for succulent aquatic bulbs in one of the pond's shallower spots, and the geese hissed at him when he passed. It was not a vicious threat, for the geese knew and tolerated Chip. He had never even attempted to harm them, but they wished to remain certain that their own privacy would be respected. They wanted no intimate acquaintances save each other.

Chip climbed up on the bank to join Sleek, and sat erect until he had located the kits. They were a few yards away, hard at work on two trees they were cutting. Chip gnawed a small aspen, cut the peeled portion from the tree, and dragged it into the pond. He laid it on top of the dam, and again ascended the bank to examine the place he wanted to flood.

Then he swam up the pond, intending to climb over the feeder dams and go into the aspens there, when he saw the geese go past. They were skulking, heads low and settled as far into the water as they could get. They paddled softly to the opposite bank, and headed toward the upper part of the pond. All Chip's old nervousness returned.

Though he could see, hear, or smell nothing, his inner senses warned him that something was coming. The geese always knew. Chip curled his flat tail and slapped it down on the water. He heard Sleek and the kits scrambling down the bank, and then the water splashed slightly when they entered it.

The kits dived at once into the lodge, the safest retreat they knew, but Sleek swam to her mate's side and circled him questioningly. Chip did not move. He was high in the water, his head raised so he could detect any scent or sound. When he looked around for the geese, they had melted into the darkness at the upper end of the pond.

Sleek entered the lodge to be with her kits. Chip climbed on the dam. He crouched there, head and shoulders up and broad flat tail behind him. Out in the aspens a night-waking bird twittered and went back to sleep. The King trout splashed.

Two minutes later Chip heard a sound that struck terror in him. A year ago, almost to the day, he had heard the same sound at his previous dam, a short time before the dynamite exploded and Chip began his journey of fear. Again humans were coming in the night, several of them.

The old beaver remained where he was, trembling, not knowing what to do, as he awaited their arrival. He saw their flashlights, winking bright eyes among the aspens, coming nearer and nearer. Chip slipped into the pond, swam to the lodge, and hid behind it.

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His fear grew. He could fight Ripple if need be, and Glare, and even Shuffle. He did not know how to fight men or the

weapons they carried. His life had taught him only how to cope with the wilderness.

He did not move when the men halted on the banks of the pond, but ducked farther behind the lodge when a flashlight's beam strayed toward him. His fear deepened, for an eddying breeze had carried the men's scents to him, and they were identified as positively as humans identify close acquaintances by their faces.

There was no doubt now. They were the same humans who had destroyed his previous dam.

Then there was a new sound, one so faint that even the beaver could scarcely hear it. More men were coming, but they came very quietly, making no unnecessary noise. Chip knew when the two groups came close together, saw a bright light beamed from the second group, and heard a strong, commanding voice. He could smell the fear smell which came from the first group of humans.

The watching beaver saw the light gleam on bright objects which the first group had carried. Then there were various sounds as the objects were dropped on the ground. The first humans raised their hands above their heads. There was a short interval, and the sound of angry voices. Then, leaving their objects on the ground, the first group went back down the valley.

Chip trembled, worried because the second group was staying near the pond. He knew two of them; they were the ones who had come with the small human, the day he had fought Glare. For a long while the second group stood beside the pond, looking across it. Then they picked up the objects the first group had left on the ground, and they, too, went away.



It was early on a lazy, late-summer day. Chip floated near his dam, waiting until he was sure Sleek had taken her five small kits into the lodge. Trim and her twin fawns cropped grass beside the pond, and the King trout's school loafed near the headwaters. Once in a while a large trout left the school to go chase some of the hundreds of tiny trout that swam in the shallows. The geese escorted a flotilla of downy goslings, and the two frogs were croaking near the bank. Digger and Root were safe in their burrow with a brand new family.

Above Chip's pond, Young Chip and another older kit had their own dams and lodges and were living with the mates they had won. The third kit had never returned.

Chip came suddenly alive, disturbed by a sound he had never heard before. It was an offensive sound, loud and wailing, and he could not identify it. The beaver gave the warning signal, then hid behind the lodge. He peered around it, and through the trees saw a strange white animal. Because he had never seen one before, Chip could not know that it was a white horse hitched to a cart with ungreased wheels.

The cart stopped and Riley Hankins and Jed Hale leaped out of it. Shouldering packs of pine seedlings, carrying mattocks in their hands, they walked side by side through an opening in the aspens, digging with their mattocks as they walked. Every place they dug a hole, they put a seedling in and tamped the earth over it. Chip stared, mystified by such behavior.

Being only a beaver, he could not know that one day some of his own descendants, far in the future, would again know the cool shade of mighty pine forests.

#### **Transcriber's Notes:**

- hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in the original (other than as listed below)

Page 62, with puppyish enthusiam ==> with puppyish [enthusiasm](#)

Page 70, neverfailing supply of water ==> [never-failing](#) supply of water

Page 165, surface beside the lodge ==> [surfaced](#) beside the lodge

[The end of *Chip, the Dam Builder* by Jim Kjelgaard]