

***WILDLIFE
CAMERAMAN***

JIM KJELGAARD

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Title: Wildlife Cameraman

Date of first publication: 1957

Author: Jim Kjelgaard (1910-1959)

Date first posted: May 21, 2015

Date last updated: Dec. 26, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20150550

This eBook was produced by: Marcia Brooks, Delphine Lettau, Greg Weeks, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

WILDLIFE CAMERAMAN

BY JIM KJELGAARD

Jacket by Sam Savitt

Young Jase Mason's ambition was to be a wildlife photographer. To find out whether or not he had real ability, he spent a summer in the wilderness with his dog and his cameras.

It was a summer filled with adventure. Living close to nature, boy and dog both learned a great deal about wilderness dwellers, from rabbits to bears and moose. They also became unexpectedly involved with game wardens and poachers. Through it all, Jase stubbornly stuck to his ambition to become a wildlife cameraman.

Author of a score of fine books about the outdoors, Jim Kjelgaard here combines his mastery of open-air adventure with a story of youthful determination, and hard work in the face of obstacles. He also shows how nature maintains its own balance among living things, and how man can maintain or upset that balance by his attitude toward conservation.

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BY JIM
KJELGAARD

DRAWINGS BY SAM SAVITT

HOLIDAY HOUSE, NEW YORK, N. Y.

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FOR DIANE EGGERT AND JACK STERN

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ONE *HARD LUCK*

Jase Mason untied the ropes that held his rolled-up wall tent on the battered jeep and laid the tent on the floor of his father's garage. With his sleeping bag, gasoline stove, cooking utensils, extra clothing, and the seemingly numberless supplies he needed for a summer in the wilderness, he had a real packing problem. Jase turned to the big black and tan Airedale that sat on the front seat.

“Buckles, if you don't wipe that grin off your face, I'll clobber you!”

Not at all intimidated, Buckles yawned and wagged an amiable tail. Jase scratched the dog's ears absently. The jeep was already loaded, and he still had to have room for his box of photographic equipment. If he discarded . . . But he couldn't discard anything; he'd already pared his outfit down to minimum essentials. He had a sudden inspiration.

“Ah!”

Taking everything out, he repacked boxes and bundles on top of each other, and when he was finished he had a corner big enough to hold another box. Instead

of rolling the tent up, he'd carry it flat, lashing it over the whole load like a tarpaulin. In addition to giving him enough room, that would protect his load in the event of rain. Satisfied at last, Jase patted Buckles.

“Now why didn't we think of that before? Come on, dog.”

Buckles beside him, he entered the house and went to his room. He looked thoughtfully at the wooden box that contained his daylight developing tanks, processing chemicals and equipment, and cartons of film and flash bulbs. His glance strayed from the box to his two leather-cased cameras.

The first was a $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ twin lens reflex, a fine camera for precise composition because, right up to the second of exposure, one could see the scene to be photographed exactly as it would appear on the negative. The second camera was a 35 mm. with a very fast lens that made it possible to take pictures under poor light conditions. In addition, the 35 mm., which Jase thought of as his smaller camera because it yielded a small negative, held 36 pictures as compared with the other's 12, and it could be used with various lenses.

Jase picked up a long cardboard box, handling it as though it were made of egg shells. He sat down with the box across his lap, his eyes shining. Suddenly he was “Mason, famed wildlife photographer,” and the papers on the table beside him became a sheaf of letters from editors who pleaded for first look at the pictures

he'd just brought back from India. His expedition had

Jase's descent from the clouds was rude. Buckles, who had been turning a quizzical head from side to side, padded over to his master and stuck his blunt, wet nose into the famous photographer's face.

"Hey!" Jase squawked.

Buckles sat back, while his black eyes, peering through stiff, curly hair, glinted with mischief.

Then Jase grinned at the dog. He was not exactly "Mason, famed wildlife photographer." Not yet, anyway. He was just Jase Mason, seventeen-year-old high school graduate who, by special dispensation, was to have this first summer after graduation to work toward his cherished goal of becoming a wildlife photographer.

Jase opened the box, lifted out a tissue-wrapped object, and stripped the paper off to reveal a 400 mm. telephoto lens. He held it up for Buckles' inspection.

"How do you like it?" he asked.

Buckles was not impressed, but Jase was. Tenderly he turned the lens over and over again, particularly admiring the focusing and f-stop adjustments. He pronounced final judgment to Buckles.

"It'll do. If we can see 'em now, we can get 'em on film."

A faster 200 mm. lens, and perhaps just a little better one, would have been much more maneuverable.

But those 200 mm. jobs ran into real money. As it was, the 400 mm. lens, even secondhand, had already cost Jase exactly one hundred of the two hundred and fifty dollars he'd been allotted for the whole summer.

Jase was more than satisfied with his secondhand lens. A photographer's equipment was, of course, very important. But much more so was the way he used it. A thousand dollar camera would not take good pictures if the man behind it lacked imagination. Didn't one of the greatest landscape photographers of all still capture his masterpieces on a battered box camera thirty years old? Hadn't Alex Creedon, the outstanding wildlife photographer, earned his spurs by taking his magnificent series of grizzlies with a cheap little folding camera?

Jase's eyes roamed the walls of his room, which was practically papered with Creedon photos cut from magazines.

There were deer, sheep, goats, all kinds of bears, antelope, lions, tigers, rabbits, alligators, ibex . . . Most of the world's wildlife was represented and every picture had that peculiar stamp of genius which was Creedon's trademark. His pictures could be recognized even if they weren't signed.

Jase treasured a story he'd read in some photography magazine. About to start on another expedition, Creedon had been offered a large retainer plus all expenses just to give a certain magazine first

look at anything he brought back. He'd rejected the offer, commenting that the least of his pay he took in money. Most of it came back to him in the satisfaction of a job well done, and in the knowledge that he was presenting the world of nature as honestly as he could. He had said that if he took money in advance he worked under pressure, and if he worked under pressure he couldn't do his best.

Jase appreciated this show of ethics, but much more he treasured Creedon's statement that he himself had scarcely scratched the surface in wildlife photography. The field was wide open. Creedon himself could not name the quality that made one animal picture outstanding and another picture of the same animal just an image. He knew only that the quality had to be possessed by whoever would be successful in the field. The only way to find out whether one had it, Creedon maintained, was to take wildlife pictures, many of them.

Jase did not know whether or not he had the elusive quality. But before the summer ended, he was pretty sure he'd find out. His eyes sought the few Jase Mason pictures among the many Creedons on his walls.

There was the one of Buckles retrieving a stick from a pond; that had won ten dollars in a competition sponsored by the Garston *Sentinel*. Then there was a picture of the cheer leaders at Garston High; a white cat sunning itself on a black roof that had brought an

encouraging letter from a picture editor; fish breaking water in Garston lagoon; a robin with a bit of string in its beak that had won another small prize . . .

Jase grinned ruefully. There were so very few Masons among so very many Creedons and none really worthy of being there. Then he brightened again at the thought of his newly acquired telephoto lens.

He removed his 35 mm. camera from its leather case, took out the standard short-focus lens, and inserted the telephoto. Setting up his tripod, he arranged the telephoto-equipped camera on it.

“Come on, Buckles.”

The Airedale, who had served as a model on countless occasions and who knew what was coming now, flattened resigned ears. Jase led him to the far wall and posed him in a sitting position. Buckles looked sad.

“Can’t you try to be at least a little bit happy?” Jase pleaded. “Pictures should have spirit, and you look as though someone had just stolen your last bone!”

Returning to his camera, Jase peered into the ground glass and focused on Buckles. At this distance, the dog’s head alone filled the ground glass. Jase would have to be much farther away just to get all of the dog onto the film. Jase nodded, wholly pleased. The 400 mm. lens would bring distant subjects satisfyingly close. But he discovered too that he would have to

focus very critically. A hair's breadth off one way or the other, and the image blurred.

"Smile!" Jase said seriously.

Buckles, who had his own ideas about photography as either a career or hobby, yawned prodigiously. If there was any sense in this whole proceeding, it had never been evident to him. Experimenting, Jase deliberately blurred the dog's image and brought it back into sharp focus. He spoke to Buckles again.

"Bend your head a little to the left. There's too much shadow."

Buckles sat perfectly still. Jase grinned.

"Your ear just a little bit forward! No! That's too much! Ah! Perfect!"

"Hello, Son."

Jase looked up hastily to discover that his father had come into the room. Now in his early fifties, Harry Mason had spent half his life building a small store into a big one. Secretly, he thought of it as Mason and Sons. So far it was only Mason and Son. His older boy, George, had been happy to go into the store, but Jason seemed to prefer the outdoors.

"Hi, Dad," Jase said sheepishly. "You're home early."

"Yes. I'm taking the five-thirty plane to Chicago and I did want another talk with you. How's Buckles behaving as a model?"

“I’m trying out my telephoto lens on him,” Jase grinned, “and I guess I sort of talked to him.”

“Oh. That’s a telephoto lens?”

“A 400 mm.,” Jase said eagerly. “With it you can get pictures at a distance, sort of like a telescope. Have a look. With a short-focus lens, you’d see Buckles and a lot of the wall. With this lens, just Buckles’ head fills the ground glass.”

Harry Mason walked to the camera and squinted into it.

“It looks like a good one, Jason. How much did it cost you?”

“It’s secondhand. I got it cheap.”

“How much?”

Jase said in a small voice, “A hundred dollars.”

“Mm-m. That means you have a hundred and fifty left for your trip?”

“That’s right.”

“And with that much money you expect to drive some six hundred miles to this Lasher Wilderness area, maintain yourself all summer, and drive back?”

“I’m sure I can do it, Dad! I *know* I can!”

“It’s up to you. We made a bargain, remember.”

Jase said hesitantly, “Dad, if you’d rather I didn’t go—”

“No, Jason, I want you to go. If you succeed, you’ll have found your own career. If you don’t, you’ll have convinced yourself. In any event, you aren’t going to be

happy in the store or elsewhere until you get this wildlife photography bug out of your system. However, I'm going to hold you to our agreement. You'll have to stretch the rest of your money."

"I understand."

"But," Harry Mason smiled, "don't be foolish about it. If you get in trouble, and need money or help to come back, call or wire the store. Either George or I will always be there."

"Thanks a lot, Dad."

Harry Mason extended his hand. "Good-bye, Jason. Keep in touch with us—and good luck!"

The jeep's headlights stabbed the pre-dawn blackness. Sitting beside Jase, Buckles breathed deep draughts of the cool morning air and bristled hopefully when a scavenger dog appeared under a street light. Steering with one hand, Jase laid the other on the dog's collar.

"Cut it out, Buckles! You're supposed to be my faithful and ever-loyal companion, and not just see how many fights you can scare up!"

When they were safely past the scavenger dog, Buckles relaxed and Jase gave himself over to serious thinking.

He knew that his father, for all his willingness to have Jase make this trip to the Lasher Wilderness, was skeptical of the results. Jase even admitted to himself

that the venture was a shaky one. He had good photographic equipment and a fair amount of experience. But did he have the qualities that went beyond equipment and technique? Did he have what it took to make a great wildlife cameraman?

“What do you think, Buckles?” he asked. “Should we turn back?”

Buckles grunted happily and rubbed against him, and Jase began to feel better. Dismayed by doubt, suppose Alex Creedon had turned back? Had he not once been a rank beginner? It was a safe bet that Creedon never had any guarantee of success, nobody had that, and he must have known his uncertainty and fears. The only way to find out if one could do something was to try doing it. Failure was not as shameful as a faint heart.

Jase reviewed his plans.

He had the jeep, his supplies, and everything was paid for. It worried him somewhat because he had been unable to bring his enlarging equipment along, but that was bulky and there would be no electricity in a wilderness camp. But he did have daylight developing tanks and the proper chemicals for them, and that was a comfort. Too many commercial photographers were careless, leaving negatives scratched, under- or over-developed, or otherwise imperfect. Jase worried most about his lack of money. Of course if he sold some pictures—but he couldn't count on that.

Well, he had a tent and all necessary camping equipment; there'd be no hotel bills. Though he would buy all his meals while going and returning, once in camp he could prepare everything himself. Watched carefully and supplemented with whatever fishing he found in the Lasher, groceries could be held to a minimum. Somehow or other he had to arrange for prints from his negatives, and there was no way to do that except paying cash. But he would have only the best ones printed to submit to editors. There was no way to avoid buying gas and oil for the jeep. But it wouldn't need either in camp. Jase decided he could get by.

He swerved into a lighted cafe, parked, and stepped out.

"Watch it, Buckles," he said. "I won't be long."

He did not worry about the jeep and its load; anyone who tried to tamper with it while Buckles was on guard, did so at his peril. Jase seated himself at the counter and a drowsy man in a white apron looked sleepily at him.

"Yeh?"

"Coffee, bacon and eggs," Jase ordered.

He ate hungrily, bought a couple of hamburgers for Buckles, and drove on.

The sun rose on a glorious day. Jase sped up the road, entirely happy now. At half-past nine, he pulled into a filling station.

“Fill her up, please,” he told the attendant.

He stood watching while two dollars and ten cents worth of gas was pumped into the jeep. Jase took his wallet out, extracted a five-dollar bill, and replaced the wallet. When the attendant brought his change, he tucked it into his watch pocket and climbed into the jeep.

“Pardon me.”

Jase turned to see a stocky, middle-aged man with a tired face and gentle brown eyes approaching. Obviously he wanted something but was hesitant to speak.

“Yes?” Jase asked.

“I—I must reach the Carson Road and have no way of getting there. I was wondering if—”

“Oh, sure,” Jase said agreeably. “Be glad to have you if Buckles doesn’t mind.”

Two and a half hours later, having left his passenger off at the Carson Road, Jase pulled into a new filling station partly for gasoline and partly to stretch his legs.

The indicator on the gas pump stood at \$1.48 and the attendant was checking the oil when Jase reached mechanically for his wallet. He felt again. He looked at the floor, then searched the seat.

His wallet was gone.

TWO *STRANDED*

Jase's first reaction to his loss was to go after the light-fingered hitchhiker; his second was to tell his troubles to the gas station attendant. On second thought he did neither. He knew that the hitchhiker would be out of sight at the first sound of the jeep. And if he told the attendant, what good would it do? The man probably wouldn't believe him, and might even report him as a panhandler or a vagrant or something. At least he could pay for the gas with the money in his watch pocket. Yes, that was still there.

"You need a quart of oil," the attendant told him. "How about it?"

"Okay," Jase replied reluctantly, doing a quick mental addition. "The cheapest grade will do."

While the attendant was putting in the oil, Jase concentrated on his problem. Of course a telephone call to the store, charges reversed, would bring him ample funds to get home. But it would also bring a definite end to the summer he had planned. The odds were certainly stacked against any wildlife photography in

the Lasher, but they were still better right where he was than they would be if he went home.

There was another factor involved, too. If he had to admit that he'd lost all his money before the first day was half gone, and then sneak home like a whipped puppy with its tail between its legs . . . He wouldn't do it. He clenched his fist, thumped it against his thigh, and wished it was the hitchhiker's chin.

He gave the attendant his two dollar bills, and leaned against the jeep, staring unseeingly at the filling station. There had to be a way out of this dilemma because there was a way out of everything.

"Here's your change, bub. Good-lookin' station, ain't it?"

Jase snapped out of it and looked around. "Yes. Yes, it is. Nice place."

"Just opened yesterday," the owner said proudly. "Figure I can build up a real good business here."

"Sure you can," Jase agreed absently.

"Soon's I get time, I'm goin' to have some cards printed up and send 'em around."

Jase's professional instincts were suddenly aroused. He looked again at the filling station, a conventional white building across the front of which, in foot-high letters, was "Henry Elson, Prop." Then there were the gas pumps and the wide driveway leading in. If he gave it proper time and thought, any good photographer could produce an attractive picture.

“A photograph printed on your cards would make people recognize your place when they saw it,” Jase pointed out. “There are some good angles here.”

“Some good what?”

“Photographic angles. I’m a photographer.”

“You are, eh? Old Man Jesseray has a photograph store in town, but he’s such an ornery old cuss that I never thought of it. Not a bad idea, young feller.”

Jase tried to conceal his eagerness. “I can take a good photograph for you right now, and give you an 8 × 10 enlargement. I’ve got all my equipment with me.”

“How much?”

“Well, a commercial photographer would charge at least twenty-five dollars for bringing equipment here, taking the picture, processing it, and delivering it. I’ll do it for twenty.”

“How do I know it would be the one I want?”

Jase was now certain that Henry Elson wanted his picture, but he wanted it as cheaply as he could get it, and he wanted to be sure he would like it.

“You can tell after you see it,” Jase assured him.

“You mean you’ll show it to me first?”

“I guarantee satisfaction, or you don’t have to take it.”

“Well now, on those terms suppose you just make me a picture.”

“I’ll be glad to.” Jase hoped his sigh of relief was not too audible. He studied the building.

The sun was at high noon, all glare with little softening shadow. Even if he could make a picture that would satisfy Henry Elson right now, Jase's photographer's soul objected to so doing. Though he'd snapped many slipshod pictures, he'd never done so if he could help it.

He needed this commission desperately, only he knew how desperately. Until he got his hands on that twenty dollars, he'd better stay right on the job. And if he stayed on the job, he must appear as though he were working. He was fairly certain that Henry Elson knew nothing about photography, therefore he would not understand why a more interesting picture would result if there were shadow detail in it.

Jase could, of course, take a routine picture of the filling station. He wanted something better and was sure he could get it. Then Henry Elson turned toward him, and Jase noted that he had both a pleasing three-quarter face and an engaging smile. The picture he wanted suddenly began to form in Jase's mind.

Henry should be at the pumps, preferably pumping gas into a car, smiling and with his face at exactly the right angle. The background would be the station itself with the words "Henry Elson, Prop.," in sharp focus. Jase frowned. There seemed to be something wrong with that idea, but he couldn't place it.

Perhaps the filling station owner should merely be standing in front of the pumps, his face at the correct

angle, smiling, and with something, maybe a can of oil, in his hand. Jase puzzled. Would lack of cars indicate a lack of business? Or would such a picture, with no cars at all, merely indicate that he was recently opened and ready for business?

Jase had a sudden inspiration. “Do you have any heavy paper?”

“What kind?”

“Any kind as long as it’s dark colored.”

Henry Elson gave him a sheet of wrapping paper. Jase said, “Now if I can borrow a pencil, too. I’d like a carpenter’s pencil if you have it.”

While Buckles slept peacefully and Henry Elson attended to the business that came his way, Jase lettered his paper. He worked carefully, forgetting his misfortune and almost oblivious of the fact that he’d eaten nothing since his very early breakfast. He was doing what he best loved to do, and even though no one but Henry Elson would ever know who the photographer was, if this was going to be a Mason picture, it had to be the best Mason could turn out.

Finishing with his lettering, Jase borrowed a stepladder, mounted it, and worked in front of the building. He descended the ladder, took it away, and stepped back to view his work. Henry Elson came to his side.

“Say! That’s all right! Good idea.”

Henry Elson's name still stood out plainly. But hiding the abbreviated "Prop." were Jase's letters, so that now the sign read "Henry Elson Invites You." Jase looked at the sun, still too high for shadow effect, and wished he dared go find a restaurant where he could spend what little money he had left. But he had an interested prospect, and if the prospect should lose interest, he might lose the prospect. He'd better stay.

He set up his tripod, attached his $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ reflex to it, and squinted through the ground glass for possible picture angles and composition. He moved his tripod and squinted again. That was helpful, but there were only so many possible picture angles and after he'd learned them the readings he took with his light meter were merely a meaningless way to pass time and to impress Henry Elson.

After an eternity the sun dipped low enough for good shadows. Jase, who had determined the exact angle he wanted, set up his camera and posed Henry Elson with a can of oil in his hand. Jase took readings with his light meter, set the camera at the proper f-stop and speed, and went back to squint into the ground glass.

"Your head just a little more toward me," he called. "No, that's too much. Back just a little. Hold it. Now smile."

As Henry Elson smiled, Jase squirmed. His model's natural smile was warm and appealing; his posed one

was reminiscent of a horse trying to rid its teeth of some sticky substance that had adhered to them. But it was up to the photographer to get his picture. Jase continued to peer into the ground glass and kept his voice at a natural pitch.

“Say, you’re handsomer than any movie star I ever saw.”

That did it. For a fleeting second Henry Elson shed his horrible grimace in favor of a natural smile. The instant he did, Jase pressed the plunger on the cable release. He turned his film to the next exposure as Henry Elson walked toward him.

“Go back,” Jase requested. “I want a couple more of the same shot.”

His model was less stiff and more relaxed now. Jase directed him to move his head to the right position, and when it was correctly placed he said, “I’ll bet photographers are more bother than all your money.”

Again the smile and again a picture. Jase took a third shot just to be sure, then waited for a car to come.

The first, a sleek, chauffeur-driven sedan, he passed up. Henry Elson was not going to cater exclusively to the luxury trade. The second, a battered antique with no windows, one fender, and the driver’s door wired on, he did not want either. But the third was a modestly priced three-year-old car which obviously had had care and at the same time much use. It was an average car for an

average driver. Furthermore, this driver was a friend of Henry Elson's.

“What you doin', Hank?”

“Gettin' my picture took to put on some post cards.”

“Well now, if you ain't the cute one! Sure you ain't goin' to give 'em to all your girl friends?”

“Didn't say I wouldn't,” Henry Elson said roguishly. “Wait until . . .”

Looking into the ground glass, Jase listened attentively. For the moment, exchanging banter with his friend, Henry Elson had forgotten the camera. If he would continue to forget it, turn his head to the right position, smile when he had it there—He did and Jase took the picture. He snapped another and another. The remainder of the film he used to take still more pictures from various angles.

“That's it,” Jase said, winding the film back on its spool.

“You all done?”

“With the picture-taking part. But there's a lot more.”

Jase removed the roll of film, got his photography box from the jeep, and took out a developing tank, a bottle of prepared developer, and a bottle of hypo.

“Is there a room here that I can darken completely?”

“Just go in the storeroom and shut the door.”

Jase did so, worked the cap from the tank, slipped it into his pocket, and took out the spool. With his pocket knife he slit the seal that prevented the film's accidental unrolling and unrolled it until he found the emulsified strip beneath the paper backing. Expertly, for he'd done this more times than he could remember, he stripped the film onto the spool and clapped the cover of the tank back on. He tested the temperature of the developing solution, found it at 73 degrees, and didn't like it. Sixty-eight was the ideal development temperature, but Henry Elson had not yet installed his soft-drink stand, where there would be either ice or ice water, and there was no way to bring this down. He would have to compensate for it with two minutes less development time.

Agitating the tank at frequent intervals, Jase developed the film for thirteen minutes. He poured the developer out and the hypo in, poured the hypo out after ten minutes, and let the processed film wash for half an hour under a running tap in Henry Elson's washroom. Then he hooked a film clip to each end, straightened the film, swabbed the excess water off with a cellulose sponge, and examined the results of his labors.

He knew as soon as he looked at them that the pictures weren't masterpieces or worthy of a salon hanging. But they hadn't been intended as such and all were passable. The one in which Henry Elson had been

talking with his friend seemed the best of the lot. While Jase was giving it a minute scrutiny, Henry Elson came to peer over his shoulder.

“Those ain’t pictures!”

“No,” Jase agreed, “they’re just negatives. You make pictures from them. Didn’t you ever take any pictures?”

“Never owned a camera in my life and never aim to. You sure you can make pictures from them little shiny squares?”

Jase grinned. “Not just one, a thousand if you want ’em. But I didn’t bring my printing equipment along. You said there’s a photographer in town?”

“Drive straight into town on this road. Old Man Jesseray’s got himself a place just beyond the residential district and almost in it. It’s about half a mile and you can’t miss his sign.”

Jase rolled the still-damp film loosely, carefully placed it in a dust-proof pliofilm bag, and laid the bag in his box of photography gear. As he got into the jeep, Buckles emerged from the shade of the filling station and came running out to leap in beside him.

Now that he was no longer absorbed in work, Jase’s stomach was forcibly reminding him that it had had nothing to work on for many hours. But it was just as well. If he’d spent his money for lunch when the impulse moved, he would now have nothing with which to pay for an 8 × 10 enlargement. But when he

paid for the enlargement, which at the very most should cost seventy-five cents, he wouldn't have enough money to buy lunch. Jase hoped Henry Elson would not be too hard to please.

He drove slowly into town, a pleasant little city of some twelve thousand inhabitants, and was half a block away from it when he saw the sign, "T. Harlow Jesseray, Photographer." Jase drew up at the curb, ordered Buckles to watch the jeep, and got out his precious film.

The studio occupied the lower floor of an old two-story house, which couldn't have had any paint for the past twenty years. The steps were sagging, but here and there in the weed-choked yard flowers struggled to survive. Jase put his misgivings aside. What was inside the studio counted a great deal more than its outside appearance. Jase walked up the rickety steps and entered a room that had absolutely no order.

Boxes of photographic supplies were placed haphazardly on floor-to-ceiling shelves, and among them were old cameras, umbrellas, discarded shoes, rolled-up shirts, dangling neckties, picture frames, and a weird assortment of other litter. Except for some boxes of chemicals, obviously fresh, everything in the place had an air of great age. But nothing seemed older, or more peculiarly suited to such a room, than the man who sat on a crazily tilted chair behind an ancient roll-top desk.

Completely bald, the old man had ears so big that it seemed as though a clothespin would have joined both of them over the top of his head. Looking at his face, Jase thought first of a buzzard and then of a hawk. His hands were like claws, his clothing dishevelled, and his temper obviously bad.

“Whaddaya want?”

“I’m looking for Mr. Jesseray.”

“Who do you think I am? The Governor?”

“I have a film here, Mr. Jesseray, and I need one 8 × 10 glossy—”

“Leave it. I’ll get to it tonight, or tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or maybe the month after.”

“But I’m in a great hurry.”

“So’s ever’body else and it don’t do ’em no good.”

The old man glared at Jase, then suddenly closed his eyes as if going back to sleep.

“Please, Mr. Jesseray!” Jase pleaded. “It’s important to me.”

The chair thumped the floor, the head turned, the tremendous ears seemed to quiver, and the old eyes burned into Jase.

“What’d you say?”

“Please do it! I’m working on a job and it’s important to me!”

“Ha!” the old man cackled. “Important, eh? All right, sonny. Lessee your film!”

Jase handed him the pliofilm sack. The old photographer tore it open, unrolled the film, looked carefully at each frame. The face he turned toward Jase was noncommittal.

“Which’n you want?”

“Of course I’d be glad to have your suggestions, but number six looks like the best to me.”

“You picked her, sonny, it is the best. Right exposure, too. With all the high-priced gadgets and foofaraw they got now, and didn’t have when I was a kid, half the films I get are under-exposed, the other half are over-exposed, and most of ’em are Aunt Sue at the beach or somebody’s baby. Every negative you got here’s a good one! You just set tight!”

The old man rose and hobbled into his darkroom. Jase waited nervously. Had he made a mistake? There was nothing about this studio to inspire confidence in its owner, and Henry Elson would settle for nothing less than a good picture. But forty minutes later, carrying a dry print in his hand, T. Harlow Jesseray emerged from his darkroom.

“There you are, sonny. She’s all set, and if Hank Elson don’t like that, I personally will put arsenic in his soup!”

Jase looked at the picture. It said exactly what he’d hoped to say. Smilingly efficient, Henry Elson was inviting one and all to come trade with him. It had been a good picture, and real care had gone into the printing.

T. Harlow Jesseray might be old and cantankerous, but he knew his business.

“Gee! This is wonderful!” Jase said feelingly. “How much do I owe you?”

“Not a blasted cent, sonny! With all the bad pictures that I have to mess with, it done my old heart good to find somebody who knows what a camera’s for! Didn’t think there were good photographers any more! Guess I was wrong, young feller.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“My pleasure, sonny. Come in again and here’re your negatives.”

Jase drove light-heartedly back to Henry Elson’s filling station. He showed the picture and noted instant approval in the other’s eyes.

“Say! That’s all right!”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I do! I sure do!” He went to the cash register, took out a twenty-dollar bill, and gave it to Jase. He grinned. “When you started talkin’ twenty dollars for takin’ my picture, I figured all you had to do was aim your camera, get a picture, and that was the end of it. But I saw how you worked nigh the whole afternoon. You earned your money.”

Jase made a mental note. Maybe more people would be impressed if they knew of the planning and work that went into every good picture.

Henry Elson cleared his throat. "You say pictures can be made from every one of them little—what do you call 'em?"

"Negatives," Jase supplied.

"Want to sell them too?"

About to give away the negatives, of no possible value to himself, Jase thought better of it. Work and thought had gone into each one, and obviously they were of value to Henry Elson. "Will five dollars be all right?"

"Right with me."

Back on the road, Jase stopped at the first grocery he saw. He bought a loaf of bread, oleo because it was cheaper than butter, a chunk of bologna because that was cheap too, some raw carrots, two apples, a half-dozen eggs, a pound tin of coffee, and some cans of dog food for Buckles. Munching one of the apples, he decided he'd better forget about restaurant meals when he could prepare his own more cheaply. When he and Buckles camped that night in a little wooded glade ten miles beyond the town, he wasted no time in fixing them both a hearty meal.

In the middle of the next morning, proceeding cautiously past a sign that warned of road construction ahead, Jase was halted by a man waving a red flag.

"You'll have to wait," the flagman said. "Landslide ahead."

"Will it take long to clear it?"

The flagman shrugged. “Dunno. Will say, though, that we’ll move it faster when we get a bulldozer. Hand shovellin’ is slow.”

“Need some help?”

“I said so, didn’t I?”

“You’ve just hired yourself another shoveller,” Jase announced.

THREE *THE LASHER*

The top of the hill up which Jase drove was dominated by a huge sign, white letters on a red background. The sign read:

U BAR 1 GUEST RANCH, 2 MILES
LODGE, MODERN CABINS, MEALS
FISHING, RIDING, SWIMMING
PACK TRIPS INTO THE LASHER
MODERATE RATES

Jase grinned in delight, fed the jeep a little more gas, and scratched Buckles' ears. Eighteen days after leaving Garston, sixteen days behind the schedule he'd hoped to keep, he was finally nearing his goal. Behind lay a devious trail.

In complete charge of all the operations of one pick and one shovel, he'd worked six days on the road crew. It was hard, monotonous labor, but it had netted him fifty-four dollars. Even after maintaining himself and Buckles in the style to which they were evidently going to become accustomed—a tent to live in and meals prepared over Jase's gasoline stove—he had a considerable sum left.

It should have been enough to get them to the Lasher, but the day after Jase left the road crew, the jeep blew a tire that had to be replaced. Limping into the first town where tires could be bought, Jase had taken a job wrestling freight onto trucks. It paid well, but the tired old jeep had refused to go on when it was time to do so and the services of a mechanic had proven expensive. Jase had decided that secondhand cars were more picturesque than practical.

He had sought more work for his camera, but with a notable lack of success. Except for Henry Elson, nobody had been even slightly interested in pictures of their filling stations, houses, barns, automobiles, selves, or even children. Jase had been ordered to leave one little town for soliciting business that was sorely needed by the local, tax-paying photographer.

Now, as the sign proved, they were almost at their journey's end and also, Jase hoped, their troubles' end. He had forty-seven dollars and sixty-nine cents which, properly stretched, should maintain a wilderness camp at least long enough to let him try his fledgling wings as a wildlife photographer. When the money was gone, he'd get another job for a couple of weeks. But he didn't need one right now; he was going to get some wilderness pictures first. Dazzled by the prospect, Jase broke into song:

*There were two frogs walked over a hill,
Hi ho, hi ho.
One was George and the other Bill,
Hi ho, hi ho.*

Sitting beside him, Buckles pointed his muzzle skyward and gave vent to a rolling moan that did nothing to improve this pleasing melody. Jase stopped singing and patted the big Airedale's bristled head.

"You're no music lover," he chided. "Or, on second thought, maybe you are. Oh well, I never did expect to be a singer. I'm a photographer."

Buckles barked and wagged his stubby tail. Jase exulted, "Just think, we're nearly there! Wildlife, here we come!"

In enthusiastic detail he told Buckles about the Lasher, one of the last great wilderness areas remaining on the North American continent. Roughly the size of Connecticut, it was cut by a wild and wonderful river which only the hardest boatmen dared navigate. Unsited to agriculture and with no known precious minerals, the Lasher had never attracted settlers. There was much timber, but better trees grew in more accessible places. Save for a few trails and fewer questionable roads, the Lasher remained as it had been throughout the centuries.

It was the haunt of game, everything from the midget mouse to the mighty moose, and the streams were full of game fish. Guides took hunting and fishing

parties into the area, but it was not over-hunted or heavily fished partly because of rigid regulations and partly because of the isolated nature of the country itself. Deep within the Lasher, accessible only on foot or by plane, were various hunting and fishing lodges owned by wealthy sportsmen and used for only a short time each year. Dude ranches had sprung up around the outskirts.

The nearest town was Sells, which advertised itself as “The Gateway to the Lasher.” As Jase reached the summit of the hill he was climbing, he saw the town in the valley below him.

His first reaction was keen disappointment. He wasn’t sure exactly what he had expected, but in his own mind he had created a village of log cabins, bear traps, and lean men in buckskin clothing and coonskin caps with long rifles over their shoulders. What he saw was a typical small town which, very obviously, existed almost entirely by catering to the tourist trade.

Sells lay between two mountains, each of which had a dusting of aspen on its lower reaches, a sprinkling of pines farther up, and was treeless at the summit. The main street was the highway, which continued to the north, and a few side streets fanned out from that. Far from weather-beaten cabins, the frame houses were gray, white, brown, or whatever color their tenants fancied. Two church steeples dominated the other buildings.

Just over the crest of the hill were more signs. Jase read a couple:

IN SELLS IT'S TONEE'S TASTEE TREATS
and
DON'T FAIL TO STOP
AT MOBLEY'S SHOP

There were more signs spotted along the road like a row of bright-colored birds standing in orderly line. As nearly as Jase could see, the near and far sides of Sells were devoted exclusively to motels. He heard the faraway sound of tinny music, probably from some amplifier that must be turned to full volume. Jase patted Buckles' shaggy head.

“Jeepers! This is wilderness?”

Jase grinned and drove on. This was modern America where cities and villages were the rule and wilderness the exception, and that was as it should be. But there was wilderness not far from Sells, and Jase was grateful that he was to see it.

The driver of a passing bus warned the jeep with his horn, swerved expertly around it, and continued toward Sells. Jase started. He'd had only a fleeting glimpse of the passengers on his side, but the man gazing out the window, in the third seat from the front, certainly looked like the hitchhiker who'd taken his wallet. Jase stepped on the gas, hoping to catch the bus at its Sells stop. Then he slowed.

He'd had only a glimpse, not nearly enough for positive identification, and he mustn't let his imagination run away with him. Probably, for a long time to come, he'd be seeing the thieving hitchhiker in every fleeting face.

"If I run him down in Sells," Jase told Buckles, "the passenger who has the third seat from the front will probably turn out to be a sausage salesman named Fritz Dumpelkorfer. We mustn't go off half-cocked. But we met that guy once. We may meet him again and that'll be the day!"

Jase drove down into Sells and found that it was a tourist town and modern, down to futuristic neon signs. But there was a distinct air of warmth and friendliness about it, as if the people who lived here did so because they liked wayfarers and were glad to make them welcome. It seemed to Jase that Sells was the modern counterpart of oldtime inns or stage stops on early western trails.

There were a few stores, including a moderate-sized supermarket, and many places devoted to tourist attractions. Signs everywhere invited the traveler to try his skill in a shooting gallery, to while away his time in a penny arcade, to partake of Ma Luder's Delicious Homemade Doughnuts, to be photographed on a stuffed and rather moth-eaten bucking bronco that adorned a vacant lot, and to do everything else tourists are supposed to do. Most places offered free

information about the Lasher and grocery stores made up special food packs for anyone going into it.

Jase pulled up to the curb and stopped. Buckles stood on the seat, ears erect and tail wagging as he watched the passers-by. A tall, lean, sun-browned man dressed in scuffed blue jeans, a faded shirt, and with a battered hat pushed back on his head, approached the jeep.

“Got a match, son?”

“Sure.”

Jase took a pack of matches from his pocket and handed them over. While he watched, fascinated, the stranger took one from a package of cigarette papers, spilled tobacco onto it, expertly rolled a cigarette, and did it all with one hand while he held the matches in the other. He lighted his smoke and gave the matches back.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. May I ask you something?”

“Sure thing.”

“Are you familiar with the Lasher?”

“I know a mite about it.”

“Well, I don’t know a thing,” Jase admitted. “I’ve never been here before but I want to get as far back in as I can.”

“What do you aim to find?”

“Wild animals.”

“You’re not going to hunt?”

“No,” Jase grinned. “Not out of season. All I want to do is take pictures.”

“Pictures, eh? Well, go two miles west of Sells to the Camptown Road, the first left-hand intersection. Three miles up that you’ll come to a sign, ‘Ram Peak.’ There’s a sort of trail or trace there—a jeep can make it—that takes you nine miles back into a park. Set up camp there; you’ll find all the wildlife you want.”

“How about fishing?”

“There’s a trout stream cuts right in beside the park, but you’d best get yourself a license here first.”

“I’d intended to do that.”

“It’s a good idea. Some of these snoopy game wardens catch you fishing without one, it’s likely to cost you ten dollars. A license is only five. You know about camping, fires, and such-like?”

“Yes, I’ve camped quite a lot. I know enough to be careful with fire.”

Buckles, not at all averse to having strangers approach the jeep when he wasn’t on guard duty, pressed forward and wagged a welcoming tail. The lean native tickled his ear and looked him over approvingly. Buckles wriggled happily.

“Want to sell him?” the stranger asked Jase.

“No, sir!”

“Didn’t think you would,” the other grinned, “but I sure wish I had a couple like him.”

“What for?”

“Hunting dogs.”

“Buckles isn’t trained to hunt.”

“Wouldn’t take him long to learn. Airedales are smart and they’re not afraid of anything. If you meet any varmints you’ll be glad to have him. Well, good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The lean man walked away and Jase stared after him. Obviously he was an outdoorsman and probably, to judge by his conversation, a dude rancher who specialized in hunting parties. Quiet, unassuming, but at the same time imparting an air of confidence and competence, there was much about him that Jase liked and he wished he could know him better.

“Watch it, Buckles,” Jase ordered.

He got out of the jeep and walked slowly along the street. Sells was the nearest town to this part of the Lasher. It must necessarily be his base of supplies and, always supposing he got any, the place where he’d have to have prints made from his wildlife negatives. He wanted to find a photographer’s shop and get acquainted.

Far down the street he saw a sign, “Westways Photo Masters,” and started toward it. It was an impressive sign that looked as if it belonged to a prosperous shop. In a place like Sells, with thousands of camera-carrying tourists, photographers should be prosperous. Jase

stopped at an intersection to let a car pass, followed the car with his eyes, and paused in indecision.

Compared to the bustling main thoroughfare, the side street down which he looked was quiet. Jase's eyes were attracted by another sign, a modest black and white one that said, "John Riggs, Photographer." Jase stood uncertainly. Obviously the other shop was bigger, but that was not necessarily an indication that it was better. Jase decided he might as well get acquainted with John Riggs first.

He turned down the side street and stopped before the shop, a little one with a green velvet curtain covering the lower half of the front window. It was not an impressive place, but Jase remembered T. Harlow Jesseray's studio. Who was inside counted a great deal more than what was outside. A tinkling bell announced Jase's entry.

The room in which he found himself was small, no more than twelve feet square. Two straight-backed wooden chairs with a magazine rack between them were arranged on one side. On the other was a small showcase in which were a few cameras, packs of film, and various photographic accessories. In the back of the shop, green drapes covered a doorway that probably led to the darkroom.

Shortly after Jase entered, the curtains parted and a man appeared. He was young, in his mid-twenties, but

pale and stooped, obviously unwell, as though he had been through some terrible illness.

“What can I do for you?” His voice was that of a cultured person.

“My name’s Mason, Jase Mason. I came in to get acquainted. I want to locate a place where I can have some films processed later.”

The other extended a thin hand. “I’m John Riggs. What sort of pictures do you intend to take, Mr. Mason?”

“Well,” Jase admitted, “I’m going into the Lasher and see how good a wildlife photographer I am.”

“A wonderful idea, Mr. Mason, and naturally I’ll be happy to process any films you bring in. Where are you going in the Lasher?”

“I met a man downtown who seemed to know what he was talking about. He told me to go out the Camptown Road and take the trace leading to Ram Peak. He said I’d find a good park to camp in.”

“I’ve heard of it, Mr. Mason, and understand it’s a beautiful spot.”

“Why don’t you call me Jase?”

“All right, Jase. What kind of camera do you have?”

“Two. A $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ twin lens reflex with a 3.5 lens and a 35 mm. with a 1.9,” Jase told him.

“Good enough. Do you have a telephoto?”

Jase nodded. "A 400 mm., but I just got it, and don't know too much about it yet."

"You'd better use it on a tripod."

"I intend to. Say, you seem to know something about this yourself."

"I've read up on it. There was a time when I intended to be a wildlife photographer myself."

"And you couldn't?"

"I can't do much of anything without crutches or a cane. My spine gave out when I was sixteen."

"I'm sorry," Jase said lamely.

John Riggs shrugged. "It was the way things came, and crying won't get you much of anything except a wet handkerchief. I hope you won't think I'm nosy, but you do interest me. I set up in Sells mostly because, even if I can't go into the wilderness, I might handle wildlife photos for those who can. So what do I process? Pa, Ma, and the four kids, sitting on that stuffed bronco down in Joe Alexander's lot."

"But you must get some pictures taken in the Lasher."

"I do. Fishermen take pictures of dead fish and hunters of dead game. But if anybody takes wild *life*, I seldom see the results. I've about decided that it's too difficult a hobby for most people who carry cameras."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. Any competent guide in Sells can put a hunter in rifle range of a moose, elk, deer, or almost

anything he wants. Getting near enough to take a picture is something else again.”

John Riggs had never been able to practice wildlife photography, but he'd read everything he could find about it and he knew as much as anyone else about theory. It was easy to set a baited camera and obtain an uninteresting picture of some animal tugging at the bait. True wildlife photography meant depicting birds and beasts as they were, and, aside from knowing animals and their habits, that called for patience. Not just a little, but patience that might well try the soul of Job. Could Jase, knowing that a bull moose used a certain drinking place at sporadic intervals, build a blind and sit in it for a day, or two days, or ten days, until the moose came to drink? Then, if he did not get what he wanted, could he go back and do it all over again? Could he watch a game trail for endless hours, waiting for exactly the picture he needed?

Had he investigated night photography? Many animals that let themselves be seen fleetingly, if at all, by day, were fascinated by a spotlight and would stand under it. But they were infinitely harder to capture on film. Many a photographer who thought he had a perfect night picture discovered after processing his film that he had nothing at all.

For two hours Jase sat entranced, adding to the things he knew and learning much that he'd never known. Then the door opened and the lean

outdoorsman who had tried to buy Buckles came into the studio. He and John Riggs greeted each other warmly, and the lean man nodded at Jase.

“Your dog’s sitting down there watching your gear. I tried to get near it just to see what he’d do. Thought he might let me in after I petted him, but he didn’t think so.”

Jase said anxiously, “I hope he didn’t hurt you.”

“Didn’t get that close.” The lean man turned to John Riggs. “I’m heading back and came to say so long.”

“So long, Mel. Come in the next time you’re in Sells.”

They shook hands, and with another nod at Jase the lean man left. Jase turned to John Riggs.

“That’s the man who directed me. Who is he?”

“Mel Garth, Mr. Lasher himself.” There was vast respect in the other’s voice.

“What’s he do?”

“He’s a game warden, and right now he’s trying to hunt down a renegade, a big black bear that mauled two fishermen on Cherry Creek.”

Jase thought of Mel Garth’s advice to buy a fishing license, what ‘snoopy’ game wardens might do if he did not, and grinned sheepishly at the way he’d been pumped without knowing it.

“I thought black bears were timid animals.”

“As a rule they are, but now and again one gets too big for his britches. This one just walked out of the woods and tackled both fishermen; no telling what crazy quirk of his brain made him do it. He may chew up or even kill somebody else, and that’s why Mel’s on his trail. But don’t worry. Cherry Creek is nowhere near where you’re going.”

“How can he find the bear?”

“He will if anybody can, but it won’t be easy. Besides being about as big as they come, this bear is clever. He killed both of Mel’s hounds, as good a pair of big-game dogs as you’ll find in this corner of the state.”

“Hm-m. That explains why he’d like to buy my dog.”

“Your dog?”

“A big Airedale; I left him guarding my gear.” Jase looked at his watch. “Holy smoke! I’ve taken up all your time just chin-chopping!”

“It was my pleasure. Be sure to bring your films in.”

“Count on it.”

“I will, and good luck.”

Buckles gave his master a tail-wagging, face-licking greeting. Jase drove to one of the groceries, selected a judicious assortment of staples, and stopped at a sporting-goods store to buy a fishing license. Then he went to the telegraph office and sent a wire to his

parents: “Everything’s fine. Will be in woods for some time. Love, Jase.”

He worried a bit as he drove on. His parents knew that his mailing address would be Sells, and Jase hadn’t wanted to write while stranded along the road because they would wonder why he wasn’t in Sells. However, they would now be reassured that he was all right.

Two miles west of Sells he turned left on the Camptown Road, a well-graded dirt highway. His spirits soared.

For as far as he could see, foothills rose to craggy peaks whose summits were treeless. High above the timberline, patches of snow stood in startling contrast to the gray rocks above and green forest below. This was the Lasher, the Promised Land. Following Mel Garth’s directions, Jase turned up the trace leading to Ram Peak.

Here he needed all his driving skill. The road, if it could be called such, consisted of two deep ruts with a grassy crown between them. Jase put the jeep in low to churn across a morass and make a hairpin turn.

Driving needed so much of his attention that he was almost on the buck before he saw it. It stood in a little glade beside the road, partly in shadow and partly in sun, its antlered head erect and very still. The buck presented the kind of pose that had haunted Jase’s fondest dreams, but his camera was in the photography

box. When Jase reached for it, the buck gave one bound and was gone.

“Lesson number one,” Jase muttered to Buckles, who had been standing stiffly on the seat watching the buck. “Always have your camera ready.”

Thereafter he kept it between his knees, and thereafter he saw no wildlife.

Long evening shadows had crept over the valleys, but the mountain tops still wore a halo of golden sunshine when Jase came to the park and the end of the trace. He looked around, taking deep breaths of the tangy air.

“This is it!” he said to Buckles.

FOUR *DEAD GAME*

The park, or meadow, where Jase set up camp was a long rectangle in shape. About three hundred yards at its widest by two miles long, it began at a sparkling creek that alternately bubbled down riffles or lay quietly in clear pools. Leaving the stream, the park climbed the sloping nose of a hill that was one offshoot of a sky-stabbing mountain, descended the other side, and at its far end thrust a single cautious finger into a forest of mingled spruce and fir. Lush with grass, the meadow was cut by deeply trodden trails of deer and elk that nightly came out of the forest to feed.

Jase pitched his tent beside the stream, beneath a towering fir whose first branch was a full forty feet from the ground. He stored his groceries in boxes, put his perishables such as butter and eggs in glass jars and sank them in the stream, and arranged his gasoline stove on its folding stand. Finally he built a fireplace and cut wood.

Four elk, coming down the path they usually followed for their nightly grazing in the park, caught the scents of man and dog and halted just inside the line

of trees. They tossed nervous heads, stamped their feet, and faded back into the forest. From now on, they would not come out to feed until after nightfall.

In the forty minutes of daylight remaining, Jase turned to the stream. Born high on one of the craggy peaks, fed by melting snow and underground springs, the stream was always cold. With an even flow of water and ample vegetation to regulate that flow, the stream was never unduly low, even in summer. It flooded only in times of melting snow or prolonged heavy rains and even then, because the balance of nature had been so little disturbed here, the floods were not violent.

Approaching a pool, Jase saw the darting black shadows of trout fleeing for shelter. He backed slowly from the pool and returned to camp for his rod. While Buckles tore enthusiastically after a fleeing red squirrel and made an earnest attempt to climb the tree in which the squirrel sought safety, Jase tied a number 14 gray hackle to the end of his leader and returned to the pool.

He approached slowly, keeping a tree between the pool and himself. Most trout, wilderness dwellers or otherwise, were wary creatures that would flee from every shadow. The prey of so many things that walked, wriggled, and flew, they had to be alert if they would stay alive. Jase slipped around the tree and cast his fly.

The water dimpled. Jase felt the strike and creeled a nine-inch brook trout. He waited a few minutes and cast again. He caught a second trout, a third, and

moved to another pool to catch three more. Twenty minutes after he'd rigged his rod, he was back in camp. He might lack for some things here, but obviously fresh-caught trout would not be one of them. Jase lighted his gasoline stove, put coffee over, and greased a skillet. As darkness gathered, the good smells of frying trout and bacon, bubbling coffee, and baking biscuits perfumed the air.

Buckles came trotting to join him. Never one to give in easily, Buckles had been trying to find a way up the tree in which the squirrel disappeared. Now he'd been lured back to camp by the smell of food. Jase stooped to pet him and Buckles wagged his four inches of tail. While he waited for Jase to feed him, he turned to sample the air currents drifting in from the park.

He knew what Jase did not. Deserted by day, the meadow had come alive by night. Deer and elk were now grazing in scattered little bunches, or drinking from the little pools. Buckles, who feared nothing, would not challenge such beasts as long as they kept a respectful distance. So he contentedly offered tail-wagging appreciation of his own dinner and stretched out with his head on his paws.

Suddenly he leaped erect, bristled, and growled fiercely. The dog ran a little way from camp and stood there, a ready and willing barrier between Jase and whatever threatened.

Jase shivered. He knew that most wilderness perils existed only in the imaginations of spinners of tall tales; rarely did a wild beast deliberately attack a human. But somewhere in the Lasher was a renegade bear that had mauled two fishermen, and as Jase squinted into the darkness he thought he saw that bear stalking his camp. He swallowed hard and wished he'd brought some kind of firearm.

Lacking one, afraid and admitting it, but not panic-stricken, he prepared to meet the situation as best he could. He caught up a piece of firewood as a club, and entered the tent to get his battery-powered torch. It was a lantern-type flashlight, with carrying handle and a powerful, thousand-foot beam, the best he'd been able to buy.

Jase flicked the switch and turned his torch full on the stalking bear. It was not a bear at all, only a low, dense hemlock. Jase stood uncertainly. His bear might have been imaginary, but Buckles would not growl at nothing. Jase swung his light and stood transfixed.

On a little knoll, perfectly still and staring straight into the light, stood a huge bull elk. Its head was up, velvet-cased antlers clearly outlined. Fascinated by the light, it took a single forward step and halted again. Jase sighed his relief. The bear had existed only in his own mind. Buckles had challenged the elk because it had come too near camp.

Jase had a sudden inspiration. He turned the light off, snapped his fingers, and Buckles came at once to his side. Jase felt a swelling excitement.

John Riggs had told him that some animals, almost unapproachable by day, will stand transfixed under a light at night. But beyond theorizing that all wild animals feel safer under cover of darkness, he could not explain why. Jase himself thought that a strong light, flashing suddenly in total darkness, shocked and amazed wild animals as a display of magic might amaze humans.

Jase chose his $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ twin lens reflex, the best for this purpose because it did yield a larger negative and lens speed was not essential. While Buckles looked interestedly on, Jase attached a flash gun, and pre-set the focus at sixty feet. He did not think he could get closer than that, but if he did it was all the better. With such a setting, everything between about thirty feet and the effective limit of the flash bulb's range would be in sharp focus. Jase chose a 5.6 stop, large enough to admit plenty of light and still give adequate depth of field, and set his shutter speed at a fiftieth of a second.

Since it was all but impossible to see through the ground glass at night, Jase flicked the sports finder open. He inserted a bulb in the flash gun, connected the cord, and tied Buckles to a block of firewood. Buckles snapped his short handle of a tail between his haunches,

drooped his ears, and rolled sad eyes. Jase petted him and spoke soothingly.

“I’m sorry, Buckles, but this is business. I have to catch that bull if I can and you might scare him.”

Jase put extra flash bulbs in his pocket. Camera in one hand, he snapped the torch on and searched for the elk. While he had made his camera ready, the bull had moved farther away and the torch did not pick him up at once. Jase’s heart sank. Again a picture had presented itself and again he had been unready. He turned his light in a half circle, brought it back, and was about ready to abandon hope when he finally saw the bull.

Feeding, the animal hadn’t raised its head the first time the light passed over. But the second time it stared directly into the beam. So far away that its body was only dimly seen, the eyes glowed as brightly as two electric bulbs. Keeping those gleaming eyes in his light, Jase walked forward.

Anticipating night pictures, he’d bought the most powerful flash bulbs obtainable and the fastest commercial film. Experimenting in his own back yard, he’d proven to his satisfaction that he could get excellent results up to a measured hundred and twenty feet and fairly good pictures up to two hundred. But since the bulbs were expensive, he had limited his experiments. Now he wished that he hadn’t; if he’d

used a couple of dozen more bulbs, he'd have a better idea of what he could do with them.

The eyes disappeared and Jase felt a stabbing pang of disappointment; he'd done something to frighten the bull. Then he saw the eyes again; the animal had merely turned its head for a moment. Jase began to get a better idea of what he was doing and, more to the point, of how the animal he stalked was reacting. But he still felt uncertain.

It had been easy, at home, to measure off fifty, seventy-five, a hundred, a hundred and twenty-five and two hundred feet, and to determine exactly what could be done at any measured distance. But how close was he to the bull now? It was impossible to judge correctly under these deceptive conditions. Tempted to click the shutter and try for a picture, Jase refrained. The animal showed no signs of alarm and the closer it was the better picture he'd get. Besides, he hadn't any flash bulbs to waste.

Walking very slowly, he continued to advance and as he did he saw the bull more clearly. Not moving a muscle, the animal was watching the light steadily now. Jase almost forgot to breathe. He'd never dreamed that it was possible to come so near a wary, wild bull elk. Most hunters who sought them with rifles were lucky to get running shots at a hundred and fifty yards or more.

Jase hoped his pounding heart could not be heard. Though it was still impossible to judge distance exactly, he thought that he was in effective picture range. He took three more forward steps. But when the animal tossed its head and stamped its foot, Jase halted. Evidently the bull was becoming suspicious. He'd better not try his luck too far.

Slipping the torch handle over his wrist, he held the camera with both hands, sighted through the sports finder, and clicked the shutter. The bulb flared, lighting up the meadow all around. At the flash's peak the dark-colored bull gleamed silvery white. Jase stifled a shout of triumph. He not only had a picture but a rare shot, one he'd never seen duplicated.

To his amazement, the bull was still standing there. Jase had been positive that the exploding flash bulb would terrify it. But the bull did not even move. Jase forced himself to be steady. Opportunity was all but taking him by the hand. He'd better accept the invitation.

He ejected the cooling flash bulb into his hand, slipped it into his pocket, inserted a fresh bulb, and walked a little to one side. The bull swung to face him, presenting its velvet-blunted antlers in silhouette. Jase took another picture, then was no longer able to control his excitement. He made a mistake.

Exploding bulbs generate a terrific heat, and even though they cool quickly, they do not do so instantly.

Jase ejected the still-hot bulb into his hand, felt it sear his fingers, and instinctively flung it from him. The bulb shattered on a rock, and the noise it made was loud enough to alarm the bull. It blew through its nostrils, wheeled in alarm, and loped away. Jase followed its bobbing rear with the light and knew that it was useless to take another picture. The bull faded out of the light's beam.

Jase stood still, trembling with excitement. He'd barely arrived in the Lasher and he already had pictures such as he'd hoped to get only after weeks of patient work. Furthermore, while getting them, he had learned. Some wild animals, apparently, would stand under a light until a human being was almost close enough to touch them. But they took fright at any alien noise. It was something to remember.

Returning to camp, Jase unsnapped Buckles' leash. "Got 'em!" he said proudly. "Got 'em good, Buckles! It might yet be 'Mason, *the* wildlife photographer!' "

Insulted because he'd been tied up while Jase went out, Buckles stalked haughtily into the darkness and lay down near the fireplace with his back to Jase. Too happy to notice or care, Jase dreamed of the two pictures already in his camera. Success in wildlife photography was like success in anything else; you just had to get out and work for it. When he succeeded, and he no longer had the slightest doubt that he would

succeed, his father would happily admit that he had chosen the right career.

Jase lighted his gasoline lantern, hung it on a tent pole, and made himself a sandwich. With food in the offing, Buckles forgot his wounded feelings. He got up, came into the tent, sat on his haunches, and expertly caught the crusts Jase threw him. Jase yawned and stretched.

“Tomorrow we’ll fill that film with more Mason masterpieces,” he promised, rubbing Buckles’ shaggy head. “Now I guess we’d better turn in.”

He undressed, turned the lantern out, and was in his sleeping bag before its light died. Drowsily aware of Buckles’ snuggling close to him for warmth, Jase fell into soundless slumber.

When he awakened, the meadow was soft with the wan, hazily beautiful light of early morning. Jase shivered into his clothes and was glad to don a heavy jacket. Yesterday’s sun had been warm, even hot, but the nights in this high country were anything but warm. Buckles padding beside him, he ducked through the tent flaps and looked around the meadow.

About three hundred yards away, near the edge of the forest, six mule deer does that had spent the night in the meadow and were drifting back into the sheltering forest flicked long ears forward as they looked at him. Jase thought of his telephoto lens, but the deer stood only a moment before curving tails over their backs and

running into the woods. Jase laid plans to get more flash pictures that night.

Buckles went back to the tree in which the cowardly red squirrel had hidden, while Jase split dead wood into kindling. It would be easier and faster to cook over the gasoline stove, but on a morning such as this it would be a lot warmer to build a wood fire. Jase lighted the fire, hung his coffeepot from a forked stick, and mixed a batch of flapjack batter. Buckles, who ordinarily received only one meal a day, smelled food cooking and came back to see if there was a chance of getting any. He gobbled the crumbs Jase gave him, then went snuffling off on business of his own while Jase washed the dishes and tidied the camp. He'd intended to bathe in the creek this morning, but it was much too cold. His bath would have to wait until some other time.

Confidently, Jase prepared for the day's business. His doubts were gone; he'd proven that he could photograph wildlife. Carefully he packed the telephoto lens and his telescoping tripod into his gadget bag, added extra films, checked to make sure that his filters were clean, and slung the bag over his left shoulder. He hung the reflex over his right shoulder and let the 35 mm. dangle on his chest, where it would be ready for instant use. Walking, the chances were that any wildlife he might see would see him first. Therefore it would be moving almost instantly, and moving fast. Action

called for fast shutter and lens speed, and in addition to a 1.9 lens, the 35 mm. had a shutter speed of 1/1000 of a second. Slipping the light meter into his pocket, Jase whistled Buckles in and started forth.

This was to be primarily an exploring trip, but not forgotten was yesterday's lesson when he might have photographed the buck and did not have his camera ready. Jase took a reading with his light meter and set both cameras accordingly.

They followed the creek, and were no more than two hundred yards from camp when a cottontail rabbit flushed suddenly ahead of them. With a happy yelp, Buckles tore after it. Its white tail flashing, the rabbit twisted, turned, and disappeared in some willows. Over-running, Buckles cast frantically back and forth. Jase considered.

The rabbit had seemed to run aimlessly, but it had left Buckles behind so swiftly that there must have been a plan and purpose in its running. As best he could, Jase traced its course and near the creek he found what he sought. There was a trail there, a tiny trail for tiny things. Obviously much used, it followed the creek for a short distance, swerved into a clump of willows, then led into a thick patch of briars. Jase marked the trail for future reference; he would want to take a picture there.

Jase swung away from the stream and climbed a forested slope. The place was alive with tail-jerking

chickarees that always scampered up trees as soon as they saw him but always peered cautiously from some lofty branch or around some rugged trunk for a second look. Buckles stalked them endlessly and rushed a dozen or more. Invariably they escaped. Nothing daunted, Buckles always tried again. Finally he raced into the forest and disappeared.

Jase wandered on. Before leaving the Lasher, he wanted a whole series of chickaree pictures but for the present he was interested in bigger, more dramatic game. He had enough supplies to see him through for ten days or so and enough money left to outfit for another ten days. If possible, he wanted to get along after that by selling pictures and it went without saying that he must have some good enough to sell.

Panting hard, Buckles wandered back, tagged at Jase's heels a few minutes, and ran off to hunt more chickarees. Jase smiled ruefully. He'd hoped Buckles would hunt up game for him, but so far the dog had succeeded only in chasing it away. Jase reminded himself that he'd scarcely started. Buckles was quick to learn and, Jase hoped, he'd get the idea.

There was a sudden fluttering, a rush of wings, and a mother grouse took its brood of bob-tailed young into the air. Jase swung toward them, steadied the 35 mm. across his chest with both hands, and snapped the picture. There had been time for only a fleeting glimpse into the ground glass and he couldn't be sure as to

whether or not he had the grouse. But if he didn't he had lost only a single frame of film and he was prepared to lose some. Even the most expert photographer couldn't hope to get a successful picture every time.

Jase marked the grouse down, flushed them again, and tried for a better picture. He wandered on up the slope. Turning, he looked at the country below him and saw the park where he'd pitched camp. But he could not see the tent itself because trees were in the way.

The sun rose higher and a gnawing in Jase's stomach told him that it was lunch time. But when he left camp, he'd expected to be out only two or three hours and he hadn't brought a lunch. Now the country ahead was so intriguing that he did not want to go back for one. Jase picked and ate a few handfuls of wild raspberries that were ripening in the sun. They were not enough to satisfy his hunger, but he could make up for it tonight.

Jase started when a cow elk faded like a ghost into a thicket. Walking softly, camera ready, he stalked the thicket and caught another glimpse of the cow running up a game trail.

Obviously frequently used, the trail quartered upward with now and then a down pitch where it swerved to miss a big tree. Jase's pulse quickened. He'd set out to find good places for taking pictures of wildlife and this looked ideal. Judging by the variety of

tracks, the trail was used by many beasts that normally spent their days in high country but came into the lower lands by night. Jase pondered.

Rarely could even the most expert woodsman, even on a game trail such as this, come upon wild creatures and get pictures of them. He would have to choose a place beside the trail, set up his cameras, and wait for something to come along. But first he wanted to know much more about the country into which he had come and he could well afford to spend some time finding out about it.

He stayed on the trail as it wound steadily upward, and again Buckles came out of the forest to join him. The trees were smaller here, with fewer chickarees, and with nothing to chase, the big Airedale was contented to pad at Jase's heels. The slope became sharper and Jase looked out over miles of unbroken wilderness. He decided to take a picture of a snow-draped, cloud-wreathed peak, and was busy composing it in the ground glass when Buckles bristled.

The dog stood still, testing wind currents and growling softly. Buckles was not afraid of and would not growl for anything harmless. He must have the scent of some big, fierce beast.

Buckles walked stiffly ahead and Jase followed. A hundred yards farther on Buckles lowered his head to sniff, and Jase saw what had alarmed him. A little spring trickled across the trail here and plainly

imprinted in soft earth were the tracks of a bear. They were so recent that they were still muddy; the bear could have passed only minutes ago. Jase gulped.

There *was* a bear here. This was not his imagined beast of last night, but a real one. Jase thought of the renegade that had mauled the fishermen, then calmed himself. There were a lot of bears in the Lasher, and he mustn't imagine the renegade in every track he saw. These tracks were not large, and the very fact that they were going away from him was evidence that the bear had no violent intentions. Maybe he could even get its picture.

The trail split at a rocky and almost treeless cliff that rose a thousand feet into the air. The left fork led into wild, broken, and forested country that looked like a dream of virgin wilderness come true. The right fork, a rocky ledge that varied from four to ten feet in width, wound up the face of the cliff. Jase flipped a mental coin and took the right branch.

Twenty minutes later he knew that he had chosen the wrong way. There were no visible tracks on the ledge and no other sign to indicate that animals used it. But because he had started, Jase continued to follow it. The thin trail clung to the side of the cliff, with only sheer, unclimbable rock above and, presently, a steep grade below. Jase looked down into a wild little valley. He was about to turn back when he stopped abruptly and gasped with delight.

The forested little valley widened to a pleasant park. Toward the far side, just within the trees' shade, lay a young bull moose with stubby antlers. Jase had stopped just in time. He could see the bull plainly, but the moose evidently did not know, or even suspect, that he was here. What little breeze there was blew from the meadow toward the ledge. Fingers shaking with excitement, Jase set up his telephoto lens and attached the 35 mm. to the tripod.

He squinted through the ground glass, focused, and took his picture. It would not be very good because the dark body of the moose blended too well with the shade in which it lay. Now was the time to exercise some of that patience which all wildlife photographers must possess. If he waited, the chances were at least even that the moose would come into the meadow to feed.

Jase leaned back against the wall. Buckles, after one disgusted glance at his master, sensibly lay down to sleep.

Two hours later, the setting sun was casting the valley in shadow and Jase fretted. There seemed to be plenty of light, but the needle on his light meter barely flickered. Jase set his camera for a time exposure.

Finally the young bull heaved itself humpily to its feet, stretched, wriggled its ears, walked out into the meadow, and started feeding. Without too much hope of getting anything good, Jase took two pictures and

was about to take a third when he was startled by the blast of a rifle.

Its whiplash crack was so sudden and so unexpected that Jase jumped involuntarily. The young moose started to run, but the chunk of lead that had plowed into its body sapped the power in its legs, so that it seemed to run listlessly. The rifle cracked again and the moose collapsed.

A man with a rifle in his hands ran out of the forest toward the moose. As he knelt beside it, Jase took his third picture. To do so, he had to swing his camera, and a stray beam of light flashed across the lens. Still looking in the viewfinder, Jase saw the man beside the fallen moose look up, raise his rifle, and fire.

Jase heard the bullet hit the rock above and behind his head.

FIVE *AMBUSH*

Reacting instantly, Jase flung himself flat on the ledge and pulled his camera down beside him. He removed his telephoto lens, telescoped the tripod, put both in his gadget bag, and snapped the lids of both camera cases. His hands trembled and nervous fear made each second ten minutes long, but his photographic equipment had cost him too much to abandon it. Slinging both cameras and the gadget bag over his back, Jase started crawling down the ledge. Clumps of brush grew along the edge of it and the top of an occasional tree from the slope below also helped hide him. He was reasonably sure that the poacher couldn't see him.

Buckles, sensing something amiss, stalked stiffly beside Jase with his ruff bristled and his tail straight. The Airedale always went into battle this way and he was ready to fight whatever came.

Down the slope, in line with the place from which Jase had taken his pictures, the climbing poacher dislodged a stone that rattled. Jase breathed a silent prayer. He had no rifle with which to defend himself

and stood not the slightest chance if the poacher saw him again. He wriggled off the ledge into the brush on the down slope, steadied himself against a boulder, and made his way to a big spruce. Behind its sheltering trunk, he watched and listened, but saw nothing except the trees and brush around him and heard nothing save the far-off, lonely cry of some prowling animal. But Buckles remained tense and alert and there could be only one reason. The poacher was hunting Jase and it went without saying that he would know how to hunt. He also knew how to shoot.

Only the tops of the peaks were bathed in sunlight now and that was fading fast. The valley was in deep shadow and very shortly would be in complete darkness. If Jase was able to elude his pursuer until then, he would make his way back to camp, get the jeep, and go into Sells as fast as possible. Something far more vicious than an outlaw bear roamed the wilderness. The game warden in charge of this district must be told about the poacher who shot at humans as well as animals.

Tempted to get up and run, Jase restrained the impulse. Though the brush was thick here, it was not very high and there were few trees. If he stayed upright, he might be seen. Though the light was growing dimmer with every minute that passed, it was not too dim for rifle sights to be seen. He had better stay flat on

the ground until it was too dark for the poacher to see him.

Jase had come almost straight down the slope, but when he resumed crawling, he angled toward the mouth of the valley. He wanted to be among trees when he finally reached the valley and not in the park where the dead moose lay. It would be much easier for the poacher to hunt him down there; he might even have a light.

Five minutes later, Jase halted again. The sun was gone now and even the tops of the peaks were in shadow. In ten minutes more it would be too dark to shoot. Jase eyed a thick stand of young spruces that grew about ten yards down the slope and decided to take a chance. He rose to one knee, tensed himself, and began to run.

Then the friendly spruces closed about him and he stopped running. Fear made his heart pound and he breathed very rapidly, but he knew he was lost if he gave way to panic. Nothing but careful planning and thinking, plus a lot of luck, could get him out of this.

He was safer than he had been, for it was almost completely dark among the little spruces. Not even an expert rifleman could take proper aim. Walking very slowly in order to make no noise, easing branches back with his hands instead of letting them snap into place, he walked another twenty yards and gently slipped his tripod from the gadget bag. He swung it

experimentally; it would be a good weapon at close quarters.

Jase stood perfectly still because that seemed the thing to do. It was very dark now, and if he didn't move, the poacher would have trouble finding him. If he did move he might make a noise, or otherwise blunder, and guide his pursuer to him. Unable to see, Jase could only listen.

Somewhere in the little trees a roosting grouse, possibly disturbed because men were near, clucked querulously. Jase heard the mournful cry of an owl and up the ridge a coyote yapped. The little stream that trickled down the valley chattered and gurgled, and in the night it seemed ten times as loud as it had by day.

There was no indication that the poacher was even near, but Buckles still bristled and his tail remained stiff. Jase reached down to slip his fingers through the dog's collar. It was fantastic to be hunted like this, and know he was being hunted, without having the faintest idea as to where his pursuer might be. It seemed to him that even his breathing was unnecessarily loud and he tried to quiet it.

Buckles' snarl was so fierce, so loud, and so unexpected that Jase stepped back involuntarily, dragging the dog with him. Then, after a moment of deep silence, a voice spoke from no more than ten or twelve yards away.

“I see you! Come on over here!”

Jase did not move. He himself could see only vaguely a limb that was scarcely six inches from his eyes. The poacher must be bluffing.

“This is your last warning,” said the voice. “Come here or I’ll shoot!”

Buckles twisted, wrenched himself free, and bounded toward the voice. Bushes and twigs rattled in his wake and he snarled again.

Jase shouted desperately, “Buckles!”

Then his fear gave way to anger. Heedless of the branches that whipped his face and tore at his clothing, he plunged forward. Vaguely Jase heard a man’s yell and a dog’s rippling snarls. Not knowing or caring about anything else as long as he got into this fight on Buckles’ side, Jase continued to plunge forward.

When he sensed something moving just in front of him, he made ready to swing the tripod and stopped just in time. A proud and pleased Buckles reared with his fore paws on Jase’s chest, and ceremoniously deposited in his master’s hand a strip of cloth that must have been torn from the poacher’s clothing.

Jase hugged the dog to him, his immediate reaction one of happy relief because Buckles was safe. He wiped a hand across his forehead and it came away streaked with sweat. Jase realized that he had run a long way and tried to reconstruct what had happened.

When Buckles attacked, the poacher had not been able to see to shoot, and probably had tried to defend

himself with his clubbed rifle. In full daylight he could have done so and might even have killed Buckles, but night was something else again, and the Airedale was lightning fast. Knowing there was a man with the dog and expecting him to get into the fight, the poacher had evidently done the only thing left and run away. Buckles must have chased him what he considered a safe distance and returned to Jase.

Jase patted the big dog's head and made his plans. The poacher had a rifle and had already shot at him. Following him would be very dangerous. Jase decided to stick to his original plan and go into Sells at once. The game warden would know how to handle this, and it was a job for an experienced law officer.

With Buckles either beside him or trotting a few steps ahead, Jase slowly made his way down the valley. It was forested all the way, and the dim light from a crescent moon slanted through the thick branches only here and there. Jase bumped into trees, stumbled over rocks, and so taught himself the knack of night walking in the woods. Unable to see with his eyes, he must feel with his feet. It wasn't so hard once the art was learned, and as he improved Jase walked faster.

Badly shaken, he constantly felt the poacher at his back. But when he turned to look, he could see or hear nothing. However, neither had he been able to see or hear anything when the poacher stalked him in the little spruces. Jase halted with his back against a tree.

Buckles reared up and pawed him inquiringly. At once Jase felt easier. He had forgotten what he should have remembered. Buckles was no help at all when it came to photographing wildlife, but no danger could threaten Jase without Buckles' knowing it and offering adequate warning. Instead of watching and listening for what might be about, Jase had only to heed his dog.

He sighed in relief and trotted when he came to the park where he'd pitched his camp. But he couldn't help worrying when he came out in the open where the moon wanly lighted the meadow. A thousand eyes seemed to be watching him.

"Cut it out," he advised himself. "Anyhow, you acted like an ass! Whoever that guy might have been, he had no intention of killing you!"

It was true. The penalty for killing the moose would be a fine or a short jail term; nobody but a born idiot would risk murder to avoid either or both of those. Probably, knowing himself photographed, the poacher had intended only to run Jase down and take his camera away. But until now Jase had not been able to think clearly. At any rate, the poacher should be reported for killing the moose.

Jase deliberated. Probably it would be safe to leave his camp gear; even if the poacher happened across it, he would not know to whom it belonged. But Jase stowed his precious photographic equipment in its box and put it in the jeep. He couldn't afford to take

chances with that. Lastly, suddenly realizing that he'd eaten nothing since breakfast but a few berries, he stuffed into his pockets the biscuits left over from last night's supper.

Buckles leaped in beside him when Jase got into the driver's seat. He started the jeep, swung it around, and turned the lights on. Jase stared in amazement.

The powerful headlights centered squarely on a herd of at least fifteen mule deer that had been grazing in the park. Now they stared, stamped their feet, and flicked long ears forward. A doe jumped skittishly past a velvet-antlered buck and bounced along on stiff legs. She halted to look over her shoulder and see if the light was following her.

Jase eased slowly forward. He had already discovered that a man with a light can get very close to big game, but he had also thought that the least noise frightened the animals. Apparently the sound of a motor did not. Jase was within seventy feet of the herd before it scattered in nervous flight, and even then the deer ran only a few yards and whirled for another look.

Buckles was paying no attention to the deer, but snuffling at Jase's pocket.

"All right, all right," said Jase. "Here, have a biscuit. But look at that, Buckles! Just look at it! All the flash pictures we can use, in as easy a range as we'll ever find them, and we have to go into Sells!"

Munching a biscuit himself, he eased onto the trace leading to the Camptown Road, flushing a single mule deer as he did so. For a while he drove through heavy forest on both sides of the trace and saw nothing. Then a red fox jumped out of the forest and for a moment stood squarely in the center of the road.

Jase could stand it no longer. He stopped to assemble his flash gun, and attached it to the reflex. He pre-set the camera's focus and speed, flicked the sports finder open, and drove on with the camera between his knees. Three times he saw the reflections of eyes beside the trace, but they were too far away to determine the animals that owned them. Jase decided to add another item, a powerful spotlight, to his equipment as soon as he could afford a good one. It would more than pay its way.

Jet black in the jeep's lights, a pine marten jumped into the road, paused a second, and Jase stood up to take its picture over the windshield. He ejected the bulb, inserted a fresh one, and drove happily on. Besides adding to his knowledge of both wildlife and photography, this was great fun.

He came to a meadow where wheel tracks proved that other cars had turned around, picked up a whole herd of deer in his headlights, and snapped five pictures. Herbivorous animals, apparently, frequented the meadows at night. Carnivores, like the fox and marten, might be anywhere.

With several pictures in his camera, Jase began to look for unusual ones. So absorbed was he in trying to watch both sides, and at the same time see what lay ahead, that he almost ran into a leafy branch that lay slanting across the trace.

Jase braked his jeep, for he couldn't pass until the limb was moved. As he came to a stop, Buckles growled. A blinding light flashed into Jase's eyes. Sensing the trap too late to back out, Jase laid a restraining hand on the snarling Buckles' collar. The Airedale was willing to fight, but whoever held the light would be armed, and Buckles was safer where he was.

"Sit tight, friend," said a calm voice. "Just sit tight."

The blinding light was lowered and Jase could see again. Still restraining the raging Buckles, he squinted toward the tall man who was standing beside the road. He was young, but weather-beaten from wind and sun. Black hair framed a hawk face. A revolver hung on his left hip.

Beside him stood a dog, a big, smoke-colored dog with a sad face and flabby jaws. It was a bloodhound, or at least it had a lot of bloodhound ancestry. Buckles strained forward, raging, but the big dog did not even look up.

"What's the idea of stopping me?" Jase demanded.

"Just wanted to see what you've got in the jeep," the tall man replied in a soft drawl. "I'm a game

warden.”

Jase said flatly, “I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?”

“I know the warden of this district!”

“You do, eh? Look, friend, there were a couple of rifle shots back in there, and this is a closed season. It so happens that this road is the only one out. That’s why you were stopped. You don’t happen to have a rifle with you, do you?”

“Look for yourself.”

Keeping a wary eye on Buckles, the man stepped closer to peer into the jeep. He saw the camera on Jase’s lap.

“What are you doing with that?”

“Trying to take pictures.”

“At night?”

“Flash pictures,” Jase explained. “I came to the Lasher to photograph wildlife.”

“That’s what he told me, too,” said a familiar voice.

Another man stepped around the limb and in the jeep’s headlights Jase recognized Mel Garth, the warden he’d met in Sells.

“Sorry I didn’t show myself sooner, son,” said Garth, “but I wanted to see if you told Tom the same story you told me in Sells. This is Tom Rainse, a special warden attached to this district.”

“Well!” Jase exploded in relief. “Here I was going into town to look for you! How’d you happen to be

here?”

“We get around,” Mel Garth said casually. “Matter of fact, we were cruising the Camptown Road when we heard rifle shots and set up this road block.”

“This here young man,” Tom Rainse interrupted, having finished his inspection of the jeep, “seems to be shooting everything right and left. But as long as he’s doing it with a camera, we won’t jail him for more than ninety-five years. What’d you say your name was?”

“I didn’t,” Jase said, “but it’s Mason, Jase Mason.”

“You said you were looking for me, Jase,” Mel Garth put in. “Know anything about those shots?”

“I sure do. It was a poacher, and he shot at *me!*”

Jase told of leaving his camp to take pictures, of finding the trail, the ledge, and the young bull. He described the killing, the flash of light from his camera lens that had betrayed him, the shot directed at him, the chase, and his escape. The two wardens exchanged glances.

“You’re sure he shot at you?” Mel Garth asked skeptically.

“I should know!” Jase said indignantly. “I guess he was just trying to scare me—but he sure did!”

“People who shoot at other people,” Tom Rainse observed, “are apt to find other people shooting right back. Can you take us to this moose?”

“Sure.”

Buckles, who had been waiting his chance, leaped to the ground and rushed joyously at the sad-faced hound. The big smoke-colored dog, to all outward appearances too tired to move, slithered aside, blinking mournfully, and Buckles' lunge carried him past.

Jase yelled "Buckles!" and jumped to the ground. He slid his hand beneath the big Airedale's collar, but for the first time in his life Buckles was not straining to get back into a fight. This violated the rules he knew. When he rushed another dog he should meet another dog, and the fact that he had met nothing was so astonishing that he didn't know what to do.

"Think they can be friends?" Tom Rainse asked. "Be better that way."

"I don't know," Jase said uncertainly. "Buckles will get into every fight he can."

"Smoky'll keep out if he can, but I never saw him licked once he was in. Bring your Airedale here."

Jase led Buckles over to Smoky, who wagged his tail indifferently and looked sadder than ever. Still unsure what to make of this strange dog, Buckles made ready for anything. Then he condescended to sniff noses, and when he did his tail wagged stiffly.

"No Damon and Pythias team," Tom Rainse observed, "but they'll get along. There's a turn-around down about a hundred yards, Jase. Our jeep's parked there and we'll follow you in. Can you feed Mel and me for a while? We didn't bring any grub."

“What do you intend to do?” Jase asked.

“Camp with you while we see if we can warm the tail of our nature-loving pal.”

Jase thought of his skimpy rations, the little money he had left, and two more hungry mouths to feed. He hoped he sounded cordial when he answered.

“Be glad to have you.”

SIX *MAN HUNT*

Curled tightly in his sleeping bag, Jase was having a restless dream. He had surprised a poacher, a man almost eight feet tall, killing a moose the size of an elephant. The poacher turned on him, but instead of being ugly he was very courtly. Bowing low, he said that a duel was the only honorable way to settle this. Jase had no weapon, but that could easily be remedied, the poacher said. A row of pointed icicles hung from a nearby ledge and they would duel with these. Breaking off one of the icicles, the poacher invited Jase to choose his weapon. They took duellists' positions. But the poacher's arms were so long that he could over-reach Jase's guard, and almost at once he stabbed Jase lightly in the cheek.

Jase awoke sputtering, and for the first bewildering moment he still felt the icicle in his cheek. Then, in the thin light that filtered into the tent, he saw Tom Rainse standing over him and about to pour again from the glass of cold water he held in his hand. The big warden grinned amiably.

“Roll out, Jase. It’s twenty minutes to five already. The day’s nigh onto half gone!”

“My gosh! Are you starting this early?”

“Have to. The trail that poacher left won’t be getting any fresher. Mel and I sort of took it on ourselves to cook breakfast. Come and get it.”

“Be right with you.”

Jase slipped out of his sleeping bag and into his clothes. He remembered now, and with remembering came rising excitement and anticipation. In his mind’s eye he saw a whole series of pictures: “Grim Hunt for Poacher in Wild Lasher Area.” No doubt they would be snapped up fast, and for a large sum, by the first editor who saw them.

Buckles, who had preferred to sleep outside, heard Jase stirring and came wagging through the tent flaps to greet him. Jase stooped to pet the Airedale and noted with relief that Buckles and Tom Rainse’s big dog had not chewed each other up. At least, not yet. Jase stepped out of the tent and stared in bewilderment.

Tom Rainse and Mel Garth could not have been up very long because it hadn’t been light enough to see for very long, but they had practically remodeled his camp. The fireplace had been torn down and rebuilt, and Jase knew now why he’d found the fire difficult to control when he cooked over it. The prevailing wind was west, and the two wardens had changed the opening of the fireplace to take advantage of the fact and control the

draft of the fire. Over the fireplace they'd built a cross pole from which pots could be hung, and they had even made a cache for Jase's boxes.

Mel Garth was sitting comfortably on a chunk of firewood baking flapjacks, and Jase took one fleeting glimpse of his sack of pancake flour. He'd hoped it would last for ten days, but already it was nearly half gone.

"Mornin', Jase," Mel said cheerily. "Wash up. Chow's about ready." He nodded toward a pail of hot water that was steaming on the cross pole.

As Jase dipped water from the pail, he began to acquire a new appreciation of and respect for these men. While there was little doubt that they could be as rough and ready as the occasion demanded, they believed in comforts and knew how to make them possible. In a short time, and apparently with little labor, they had transformed the camp from a place where one could live to a comfortable wilderness home.

Jase washed his face and hands and brushed his teeth. He turned to see Tom Rainse, the mournful Smoky looking on, making two packs out of most of the food Jase had left. Jase grinned wryly.

"Looks as though we'll have a hearty lunch."

"If you don't eat, you can't work."

"Yes, but what'll we have for supper?"

Mel Garth chuckled. “Did you really think this was just a lunch?”

“I didn’t know. It looked like it.”

“Mel and I get hungry, but not *that* hungry,” Tom Rainse reassured him. “Once we get on that sky-hoot’s trail, we may have to stay on it a piece.”

“You mean we’ll camp out for several days?”

“Depends on what happens. If we’re thirty miles back in the Lasher tonight, nobody’s going to feel like walking back here for grub.”

Jase not only felt better, but elated. A man hunt was exciting enough, but he’d supposed they were coming back to camp when night fell. To stay out for several days, to see and photograph the way these men hunted a poacher, was something he’d never expected to have come his way. The opportunity was well worth the supplies.

“Here y’are, Jase.”

Mel Garth handed him a plate laden with golden-brown flapjacks and sizzling strips of bacon, and passed him a cup of coffee. Mel gave the same to Tom and himself, and the syrup jar went around.

“What’ll you do if we corner the poacher?” Jase asked.

“Depends on the corner,” Tom Rainse grinned.

“If he sees us first, he might shoot.”

“Might,” Mel Garth said between chews.

Puzzled at first, Jase began to understand. These men were old hands at the dangerous game they were about to play. They'd hunted poachers before and, doubtless, they'd been shot at before. As far as they were concerned, this was another job and they were the ones to do it.

“John Riggs told me you were hunting a big renegade bear,” Jase said to Mel Garth. “Did you get him?”

“Haven't lined my sights on the critter yet. He's way over Cherry Creek way.”

“I saw the tracks of a bear about two miles from here, but I don't think it was a big one.”

“Lot of bears in the Lasher. Most of 'em will light out when they see you, but don't take any chances.”

Tom Rainse finished breakfast, put his plate down, and poured himself another cup of scalding coffee. He looked curiously at Jase.

“You're a photographer, eh?”

“That's right.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Well, that is, I don't exactly work for anybody.”

“Who buys your pictures?”

“Nobody has yet,” Jase admitted, “but I hope I can sell some of the ones I take this summer.”

He told them about the bargain with his father and how he had agreed to let Jase come here on his own. Omitting what he considered unnecessary details, such

as the hitchhiker who had stolen his money, working his way to the Lasher, and being low in both money and supplies, he spoke of his love for photography and his heartfelt yearning to be a wildlife cameraman. Both men listened intently.

“I have the summer,” Jase finished. “By that time I should know whether I’m any good or not.”

“And if you aren’t, it’s back to daddy’s store?” Tom Rainse inquired.

“That’s about the size of it.”

“How will you like that?”

Jase grinned. “Everybody has to make a living. If I don’t succeed here, I guess they’ll let me work in the camera department.”

“Couldn’t you tie in with some newspaper or magazine?”

“None of them would take a chance on sending an unknown into the field.”

Tom Rainse looked puzzled. “Just how do you become known?”

“One way is to free-lance, and that’s what I hope to do. I have a list of photographic editors who’ll buy the right pictures. Then, if they’re good enough, you can just about pick your own assignments.”

“Seems to me you’ve set up a hard deal for yourself.”

“It’s the one I want if I can make it.”

“Hadn’t we better move?” Mel Garth interrupted. “Time the sun gets warm, that’ll be a pretty tough trail for Smoky to pick up.”

“You haven’t done the dishes yet,” Tom grinned.

“I haven’t? Who cooked the breakfast?”

“I’ll wash them,” Jase offered.

“Sucker!” Tom Rainse commented. “Around this outfit you never offer to do anything. Now you’re stuck.”

While Jase washed, Tom Rainse dried the dishes, put some of them in their box, and tucked others into the two packs. Finished, both men slung revolvers on their belts, then each shouldered one of the packs.

“I’ll carry something,” Jase said.

“There you go offering again,” Tom Rainse reproved. “Guess you just naturally don’t learn and it would serve you right if I made you carry mine. But Mel and I will totter along with the packs. You can bring a camera and take my picture capturing the poacher.”

Jase arranged his equipment as before, with the gadget bag on one shoulder, the reflex on the other, and the 35 mm., cocked and ready, hanging down his chest. Tom Rainse whistled.

“Great gobs of sticky mud! You tote that all the time?”

“You have to be ready for anything.”

“I’ll stick to my little old pack,” Tom announced. “That doesn’t weigh more’n three tons. Lead off, my picture-taking friend.”

Buckles, still determined to catch a chickaree, raced off to hunt one. Smoky padded dutifully beside his master. Jase, who had been wondering about the big dog, decided that he was a rather lethargic pet. He seemed a strange companion for the energetic Tom, but men had strange reasons for liking dogs. Jase struck off into the forested little valley down which he had come the night before.

He planned his picture story as he walked. He’d begin with a shot of Tom and Mel at the dead moose. Then he’d picture the working out of the trail and end, he hoped, with the poacher’s capture. He tried to think of an apt title for the picture story to be, and was so engrossed in doing it that he came to the park where the slain moose lay almost before he was aware of it.

Two coyotes streaked away. Hopelessly out-distanced but always willing to try, Buckles raced in hot pursuit. Smoky paid no attention. Tom and Mel saw the dead moose and Jase noted curiously how angered they both seemed. They were not, he decided, doing the job they did for the salary it paid. Evidently they worked because, if somebody did not protect wildlife, poachers would have a free hand.

Jase took a light reading, set his camera accordingly, and when Tom, Mel, and Smoky were all

standing beside the dead moose, he took a picture. Just to be on the safe side he took two more and knew that the first part of his picture story was safely on film. Then Jase devoted himself to what his two companions were doing.

“. . . or maybe even a catbird,” Tom was saying.

“Catbird or vulture,” Mel added grimly, “our fine-feathered friend took only the loin.”

Jase looked down at the carcass. Of the whole moose, only the choice loin had been taken. Where it had been cut out, and in the places where the coyotes had been feeding, red flesh contrasted strangely with black hide. Flies were buzzing around.

Tom Rainse cut two chunks of meat from the dead moose, put them in his pack, and Jase grimaced.

“Is that evidence?” he asked.

“It’s evidence that if this poacher knew where he could sell moose meat, he’d have taken a lot more. This guy took only what he could use himself. He’s got things to hide, or he’s hiding.”

“Furthermore, if you want to be practical,” Mel pointed out, “he’s taken about a thousand dollars of the taxpayers’ money and thrown it away.”

“How do you figure that?” Jase asked, puzzled.

“This way. A permit to kill a moose in the Lasher costs one hundred dollars. Nobody around here has that kind of money to spend on hunting licenses. Who has? Eastern dudes. In addition to the hundred dollars for his

moose permit, the dude pays fifty for a non-resident hunting license. He has to get here and go back, and no matter whether he comes by car, plane, or train, he's spent money getting here. If he's got any sense, he isn't coming this far to hunt just a couple of days. He'll stay anyhow two weeks, and depending on what he wants, a guide and a pack outfit will set him back from thirty to maybe seventy-five or a hundred bucks a day. So, if you look at just the practical side, this poor little bull represents a lot of money that quite a few people would have shared."

"And if you want to be still more practical," Tom broke in angrily, "he killed the bull in violation of the game laws, which happen to have a point. The mating season's coming on, and there'll probably be one or more barren cows this fall because this bull died. Let these skunks go and they'll soon kill everything."

"They couldn't really do that, could they?" Jase asked.

"Didn't any of your books ever tell you about the passenger pigeon, the heath hen, the Arizona elk, and quite a few more? It's been done!"

"Suppose we quit chewing the fat and go after him?" Mel suggested.

"Right," Tom agreed.

He took a short leash from his pocket and snapped it on Smoky's collar. He said, "All right, Smoky, take it," and Jase watched the big dog come suddenly alive.

He bent his head. Long ears dangled over his eyes and flabby jowls quivered as he snuffled. After a second, he started across the meadow.

Jase's heart leaped. Smoky did not merely resemble a bloodhound. He *was* a bloodhound and right now he was on the poacher's trail. Jase snapped three pictures of this part of his story; maybe it would be a lot better than he'd hoped!

Jase fell in behind Tom and Mel, who walked just fast enough to keep up with the straining Smoky. The trail led into the forest and presently Tom Rainse stopped with a snort of disgust.

"What's the matter?" Jase asked, hurrying forward.

"That low-down skunk had a horse here. See the tracks? He's ten miles away by now."

"Can't Smoky follow the tracks?"

"He's a man hunter. He won't track horses."

"Too bad this isn't a movie," Mel Garth said sadly.

"Why?" Tom snapped.

"Well, the hero—naturally that's me—would also have a horse hidden. The hero would whistle, the horse would come, the hero would jump on, overtake this craven wretch and drag him from the saddle, there'd be a fist fight on the edge of a cliff, and the hero would not only throw the villain over but find that he had rescued a beautiful doll as well."

"Oh, for pete's sake!" Tom Rainse said disgustedly.

“Well, I do have an idea. Don’t you want to hear it?”

“Not if it smells like that one.”

Mel Garth grinned. “This yazoo knows he’s been seen and he’s going to make tracks. Where’s he going to make ’em to? Where vicious wardens, whose only joy is preying on innocent poachers, can’t find him. How’s he going to get there? How else except through Raven Pass?”

“You’re a genius!”

“I know it,” Mel said modestly.

Jase, who had been taking pictures of Smoky vainly casting about for scent, waited expectantly. Tom Rainse turned to him.

“Feel set for a tough hike?”

“I’ll do my best. Where are we going?”

“To see if we can beat this hoodlum to Raven Pass. There are a couple of short cuts horses can’t make.”

“Let’s go.”

Smoky paced easily beside them as they set off at a fast walk. Buckles came in, stayed with Jase a few minutes, then dashed off on his own. After a while Jase shifted the gadget bag on his shoulder; somehow it seemed a lot heavier than it had been. He wondered whimsically how to put this killing pace on film so it might be recorded for his story.

Perhaps, if they ever slowed down, Mel and Tom would pose for him. But with steel springs for muscles

and bellows for lungs, how would either one register weariness to indicate that they had been traveling fast? He'd have to think of a better idea than that.

Buckles came back and stayed at Jase's heels as they walked right through the lunch hour. They had come into high country now, and Jase looked curiously at a snowdrift that lay in a little sheltered valley. Tom Rainse led them out on a ledge so narrow that, Jase thought, his right shoulder overhung the abyss below while his left one brushed the cliff. He forebore looking down after one hasty glance. Anything or anybody that slipped from this ledge would fall at least a quarter of a mile.

Evening shadows were long when Tom led them into Raven Pass, a little forested depression that sat oddly like a huge bird's nest between two rocky crags. Mel and Tom examined the trail, then cursed their luck.

"He's gone through, maybe four-five hours ahead of us," Tom told Jase. "Must have pushed his horse half the night."

"Well, let's go after him," Jase forced himself to say. "There's still some daylight."

They knew he was tired, and said so with understanding grins. "No use going on tonight," Mel told him. "That poacher's got forty thousand square miles of woods to run around in down there and a hundred ways out of it. We might as well bed down right here until sunup."

He attacked a dead tree with a hatchet, while Jase shivered in the cold wind that whistled through Raven Pass. He was exhausted and exhaustion had brought on depression. For a moment he resented the man-killing hike that had ended in failure anyhow. Almost at once he was ashamed. Tom Rainse and Mel Garth had traveled just as hard, and if they were disappointed they weren't showing it. Aching in every muscle and bone, Jase forced himself to his feet and began to gather up the wood Mel was cutting.

“Where do you want it?” he asked.

“Right in front of that boulder.”

Jase turned to where Tom was kicking sticks and accumulated forest trash from in front of a boulder the size of a cabin. Jase threw his wood down and turned back for another load, cheerful again. He had discovered for himself another secret of living in the wilderness. When you're cold, no matter how tired you may be, work will warm you up.

Tom Rainse laid a pile of twigs, applied a lighted match to them, and fire licked through the kindling. Tom added larger pieces of wood as Jase brought more. Smoky curled up by the fire with his head on his paws and even the restless Buckles was content to sit quietly. Mel Garth disappeared with the coffeepot and a small kettle and came back with both spilling water from their brims; apparently there was a spring nearby.

Tom opened his pack, took from it the two chunks of moose meat he had cut, and threw one to Smoky and one to Buckles. Then he began to prepare their own supper, boiled rice with a handful of raisins cooked in it, coffee, and stewed apricots.

“Can I help?” Jase offered.

“This is pretty much of a one-man job.” Tom looked up. “You cold?”

“I’ve been warmer.”

“Sit with your back against the boulder.”

Jase did so and immediately felt a delicious warmth. He realized again that these men knew how to make themselves comfortable wherever they happened to be. The fire’s heat reflected from the boulder in the right amount and from the right angle. Jase nodded and was almost asleep when Tom Rainse pressed a plate and cup upon him.

“Here. Pack this into your innards.”

Jase ate hungrily. The simple food seemed one of the best meals he’d ever eaten. And he decided that the ground wouldn’t make for bad sleeping as long as he was warm.

“What are we going to do next?” Jase asked the wardens.

“Go have a look-see,” Tom replied. “Our friend’s given us the slip for now, but there’re three-four hunting lodges down in there that are empty this time of year. He might have shacked up in one of them.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Mel said thoughtfully. “Whoever he is, this bird knows his way around. Why’d he push so hard to get through Raven Pass if he didn’t think we might cut him off here? If he’s smart enough to do that, he may be too smart to leave tracks by breaking into a lodge for supplies.”

“Then flushing him out will be a tough job,” Tom admitted. “But if he keeps on poaching, and these birds seldom stop, sooner or later we’ll get him.”

The fire gave forth a comforting glow as Jase stared at it through a haze of weariness. He eased back against the boulder, enjoying its warmth, and dozed off. Twice during the night he was awakened by Mel Garth throwing more wood on the fire. Sleepily he watched the shower of sparks that floated upward. The next thing he knew, morning had come.

Tom and Mel were already up, and the enticing aroma of sizzling bacon and bubbling coffee filled the air. Feeling surprisingly rested, Jase joined them and they breakfasted leisurely. The wardens’ air of desperate urgency was gone; the hunt had now become a methodical search. They started through the pass with Tom leading, and when they came to a steep down slope, he stopped.

Jase and Mel joined him and they looked down on a series of low hills that had once been fresh and green. But fire, the forest’s greatest enemy, had raged across them. Here and there was a little island of green that

had escaped the holocaust, but for the most part, once-proud trees were charred skeletons with only grotesque stubs for branches. With little living foliage to absorb and thus control it, water had gouged long ditches down the sides of the hills. A doe nosed forlornly about on the nearest one.

“How’d that happen?” Jase asked.

“The way most fires happen,” growled Tom Rainse. “Some fisherman didn’t watch where he threw his cigarette, or somebody didn’t put out a campfire. And because somebody didn’t think, thousands of dollars worth of timber were destroyed, and a lot of animals were burned to death. It’ll be thirty to fifty years before that area is restored. Say, can you get me some good pictures of it?”

“Sure. But why?”

“I’d just like to have ’em.”

Jase set up his telephoto lens and focused on the doe, whose head was raised inquiringly. Jase snapped three pictures and then a fourth when the doe changed her position.

“Can I have a squint through that lens?” Tom asked.

“Help yourself.”

Tom looked into the ground glass and whistled. “Sure brings her close! Have a look, Mel.”

Mel looked, then Jase removed the telephoto lens. Replacing it with the customary 50 mm. short-focus lens, he attached a light yellow filter for the fleecy

clouds that hung over the burned area, set a small aperture to get great depth of field, and compensated for the filter and stepped-down lens with additional time. He composed his picture on the ground glass, then, dissatisfied, moved thirty feet to one side for a different angle.

After taking that picture, Jase moved again, and again, so absorbed in what he was doing that he was only half aware of the interest it aroused in his companions. Finally he took the camera down and stowed the telescoped tripod in his gadget bag.

“That should do it.”

“Quite a bit more to this picture taking than you would think,” Tom Rainse observed.

“You might as well get ’em right while you’re at it.”

“That’s so with just about everything. Well, let’s go.”

That night, having inspected one of the lodges in that section of the Lasher without finding any trace of the poacher, they camped beside a sparkling little stream. While Jase devoted himself to taking pictures of a colony of striped chipmunks that flitted back and forth, the wardens took hooks and lines from their pockets, attached them to willow poles, found worms by kicking rocks over, and caught trout for their evening meal.

The next day and the day after, without finding anything, they visited two more of the widely scattered lodges. On the evening of the fourth day, they came to the last one.

It was a big log structure on the shore of a beautiful little lake. Owned by a group of wealthy sportsmen who visited it only in big-game season, it was furnished as luxuriously as a fine hotel. Like all lodges in this wild country, it was never locked; the rare visitor was welcome to take shelter, but was expected to leave the lodge in as good condition as he found it.

As in the cases of the other lodges they had visited, the wardens watched Smoky and knew from his failure to find scent that the poacher had not been here.

“Well,” Mel grinned tiredly, “we’re doing all right in one way. I know the owners, and have got a standing invitation. There’s plenty of canned chicken, canned ham, and canned just about everything else in this high-class joint. What I aim to have for supper is a whole ham, all by myself.”

They entered, Smoky and Buckles slipping in beside them. Mel wandered out to the kitchen, but Tom sank disconsolately into a chair and stared at the empty fireplace.

“All this time and all this work,” he said wearily, “and we don’t even know what he looks like!”

“Maybe we can find out!” Jase said in sudden excitement.

Tom swung toward him. “How’s that again?”

“I said we might find out. I didn’t get a good look at him. But when he leaned over that moose, I took his picture!”

SEVEN *THE PICTURE*

For a long moment, it was as though time stopped. Even the dogs held perfectly still, and Mel Garth stood in the kitchen door, his mouth open.

“You knuckle-head!” Tom exploded. “Why didn’t you tell us before?”

Jase squirmed. “So much has happened, I just forgot about it.”

“Forgot! Maybe we could have saved this whole trip and just gone to pick him up if we’d known what this bird looks like!”

“I said we *might* find out what he looks like,” Jase replied weakly.

“You took his picture, didn’t you?”

“That’s right. But I doubt if it’ll be any good.”

“Who cares how good it is, just so we can see his face!”

“Hold it, Tom,” Mel broke in. “You’re a good game warden, but what you know about taking pictures you could write on the head of a pin. Jase, why do you doubt if the picture will be any good?”

“It was too dark when I took it, and I was a long way away.”

“Now let’s go through this again,” Tom said, trying his best to be patient. “Where were you when you first saw this moose?”

“On a little ledge, a sort of trail, on the slope above the park where the moose was.”

“What time was it?”

“I don’t know exactly. Maybe two hours before sundown.”

“Did you take any pictures when you first saw it?”

“One, but it won’t be good because the moose was lying in deep shadow. I thought that, if I waited, he’d feed into the park and I could get him there.”

“When did he come out?”

“Just about ten minutes too late,” Jase said ruefully. “My light meter barely registered. I estimated a time setting and took two more pictures.”

“How long after that did you hear the shot?”

“I don’t know,” Jase admitted. “I was so busy that I paid no attention to the time. But it was later, and darker.”

“Yet, with this man near enough to photograph, you still didn’t get a good look at him?”

“He had his head down, watching the moose, when he came out of the woods. Then, when he did look up, I was looking into the ground glass and that made it darker still.”

“How about after that?”

“After he shot at me I didn’t try to look.”

Mel Garth chuckled. Tom Rainse drummed his fingers thoughtfully, no longer depressed. He whirled on Jase.

“Look, is there any chance of that picture turning out?”

“There’s always a chance.”

“Where is it?”

“Back at camp, with my photographic supplies. But we’ll have to go to Sells to have a print made.”

“Are you fellows game to go back across the mountains tonight? We can be at Jase’s camp by daylight and—”

“Aw, have a heart,” Mel Garth broke in. “The picture will be there tomorrow.”

“But it’s only—”

“Yeah, only about twenty miles or so. If we’re going to stumble around in these mountains, we can do it better by daylight. Besides, how often do we get a chance to tear into grub like this place stocks or sleep in beds made for millionaires?”

“Maybe you’re right at that,” Tom Rainse said reluctantly.

“I’m sure of it. Now you two take it easy while I open a mess of whatever I can find and fix some chow. Just leave Papa Mel take care of it.”

Buckles beside him, followed closely by the wardens and Smoky in their jeep, Jase steered his own jeep down the trace leading to the Camptown Road. He was tired, for the hike to Jase's camp had been another endurance grind. Arriving, they had eaten everything Jase had left, picked up the precious film, and started at once for Sells. Tired as he was, Jase was in high spirits.

His food was gone and his money was half gone, but in only a few days he had learned things about the Lasher that might have taken him weeks if left to his own devices. Some parts of the country into which he had gone with Mel and Tom he might never have found himself. He had seen a lot of wildlife, had some of it on film, and that was why he was here, after all.

He was confident that, of his many pictures, there were a few that would catch and hold editorial attention. He'd send prints of them from Sells, stock up again with what money he had left, and by the time those supplies were gone, Jase hoped, there would be a check or two waiting for him. However, he'd have to be very careful in his buying. By the time he'd paid for a selected lot of enlargements that were suitable for editorial submission, more of his money would be gone.

The first roll of film, on which he'd captured the night-roving bull elk, the moose, and the poacher, he would not handle himself. It was most important to know the poacher's identity, and Jase would let John

Riggs do all the processing of that film. In the first place, Riggs should be able to do a better job. In the second, if the picture was a dud, a very likely possibility, Jase himself would not feel at fault if it failed to turn out.

Jase emerged from the trace onto the Camptown Road and speeded up. He stopped at the highway junction to let a car pass, swung east toward Sells, and bowled along at fifty miles an hour—all the speed he could get from his old jeep—into the tourist town. Jase slowed, swung down the street to John Riggs' studio, and drew up at the curb. Almost immediately, the wardens pulled in behind him.

“Here we are!” Tom said impatiently. “Let's get going!”

“Not yet,” Mel said easily. “The place is dark.”

“Doesn't he live here?”

“Yeah,” Mel said sarcastically, “he sleeps in an old camera case. Hang onto your shirt while I go fetch him.”

Smoky eased his long length out of the jeep as Mel got in and bounced away. Jase fidgeted. Tom Rainse, in a fury of impatience, seemed to be looking at him both suspiciously and angrily. Jase was glad that he did not have to develop and print the poacher's picture. If nothing came of it now, Tom Rainse probably would explode and there was no telling where or whom the flying splinters would hit.

After what seemed an unnecessarily long time, Mel Garth came back. There was nobody with him, and as the lean outdoorsman parked the jeep he shook his head.

“John’s not feeling too chipper and he couldn’t come. But he gave me the key, and said Jase can use any of his equipment.”

“Okay, Jase,” Tom said imperiously. “Let’s go.”

Jase hung back. “But I don’t know anything about his equipment. I’ve never even seen it.”

“You know how to process pictures, don’t you?” Mel asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“Then don’t be afraid to tackle it, Jase. If the picture doesn’t come out, it doesn’t come out.”

Jase’s lips felt hot and his heart beat fast as he followed Mel Garth into the little reception room. Tom closed the door behind them, and with this assurance that they wouldn’t be going anywhere for a little while, Buckles and Smoky stretched out on the floor. The wardens looked expectantly at Jase, who suddenly wished he was back home in his father’s store.

Then, for no apparent reason, Jase thought of Henry Elson, the man who had paid him twenty dollars for a picture of his filling station. He’d impressed Henry Elson by appearing to be competent and sure of himself. Since there was nothing else to do anyhow, he

might as well appear competent now. Jase tried to make his voice brisk and professional.

“The darkroom must be back here.”

Closely followed by the wardens, he ducked through the drapes covering the rear doorway, felt around for and found the lights, and snapped them on. He was in a hallway from which two doors led. Jase opened the first one and entered John Riggs’ darkroom. His knees turned to water.

Half again as big as the front entry room, the place was modern and completely equipped with all kinds of gadgets whose use Jase understood only vaguely. It was a professional’s darkroom and no mistake. Jase thought longingly of the simple equipment with which he was familiar, but he still tried to keep up a front.

“Now just show us what you want us to do,” Tom said briskly. “We’ll help.”

“Just sit down and stay out of the way,” Mel advised. “Let Jase handle it.”

Too busy to notice, Jase finally found the four flat, enameled pans he was looking for. He arranged them in order on a bench and took his first film from the film box. Then he turned his back so the others would not see his nervousness. He had one chance, and if he muffed it there would not be a second. He got a grip on himself, realizing that to think failure almost certainly meant to fail.

He prepared his developing solution, using a formula he had already found satisfactory. He weighed his developing agent, preservative, accelerator, and restrainer to the grain, and measured his water to the drop. In their proper order, he poured his chemicals into his tray of water and stirred each with a glass rod until every grain was dissolved before adding the next one. It was a slow and painstaking process, and one that set Tom Rainse's tense nerves on edge.

“Does it *have* to take so long?”

In his own element now, Jase turned to the warden in annoyance. “Look! Why don't you go for a nice long walk?”

“That,” Mel Garth agreed, “is the best idea I've heard in a long while. Come on, Rainse. You can't help and there's no point in hindering.”

“Well,” Tom said sulkily, “if I'm just in the way—. When'll we know about the picture, Jase? Maybe fifteen minutes?”

“You'll know when it's ready! I'm doing the best I can.”

“You heard the man,” Mel chuckled. “He's the big buck in this lick.”

They left and Jase sighed with relief. Ordinarily he was not temperamental, but this was no ordinary occasion. The picture, always supposing there was one, could only be brought out with careful patience. Jase prepared his hypo, the solution that halts development

and fixes the image, with precise care, then tested the developer with a thermometer.

The chemicals had been dissolved in warm water and the solution was still far too warm. Jase put the stopper in the sink and let the cold water run. He had no ice, but he was sure that the tap water came from mountain springs and would be cold enough for his purposes. Jase filled the sink with water that tested 55 degrees. Satisfied, he poured his hypo and developer into two clean bottles that he found in a cabinet, corked them, and put both bottles in the cold water.

Jase licked his lips. The film was medium-speed panchromatic, one of the most useful for wildlife photography. But it must be processed in total darkness; light could ruin it completely. Jase found a daylight developing tank, turned out the light, stripped his film onto the spool and replaced it, and capped the tank. He wished that John Riggs were here to make the decision he must make now.

Exactly what was on that film? He'd been able to take no accurate light reading and had estimated both his camera's aperture and speed. The chances that he had a normal negative, with shadows and highlights in proper balance, were very remote. The light had been dim; therefore the negative must be under-exposed. While nothing he could do to it would produce a perfect print, five minutes of over-development would result in greater contrast and, if he could get any at all,

a better image. If by any chance the negative should be normal, five minutes' over-development would increase the contrast but still leave a printable negative.

Jase took his developer from its cold bath, found that it had dropped to 73 degrees, and put it back in. Sixty-eight was the proper temperature for development, and while a few degrees more would ordinarily make no great difference, Jase needed all the breaks he could get. When the developer stood at exactly 68 degrees, Jase filled the tank.

Watching the time, he gave the rod that controlled the film spool a gentle twist every forty-five seconds. Fresh developer should reach all parts of the film equally, and agitating the spool helped it do so. At the end of twenty minutes, Jase poured the developer back into its bottle, rinsed the film thoroughly, and poured the hypo in.

He was getting impatient himself, and wanted to look at the results. He had to force himself to let the hypo work for a full fifteen minutes, then he removed the tank's cap with trembling fingers and lifted the still-damp film to the light. Immediately he felt sick to the stomach.

He had guessed wrong! The film had been over- not under-exposed. It should have been under-developed. His afternoon's shot of the moose, while it had a little more contrast than it would have had had he developed it for fifteen minutes, was very plain. The two frames

that should have shown the moose in the park, and the one showing the poacher bending over his quarry, were so dark as to be almost opaque.

Still more than a little sick, Jase looped the film back into the tank and let a gentle stream of cold water run over it. While the film washed, he turned once more to John Riggs' store of chemicals. He had, he thought, been almost incredibly stupid; somehow he should have known that he'd let too much light reach the negative. But, though the situation was nearly hopeless, it was not entirely so.

Jase dissolved 68 grains of potassium ferrocyanide in two ounces of clean water. In a separate container, he put eight ounces of his hypo solution, and prepared a clean white tray. He attached a clip to either end of the washed film, hung it up to dry, and squeezed the excess water off with a cellulose sponge. Then he cut the three moose pictures from his film, emptied the hypo into the clean tray, poured the potassium ferrocyanide solution into the hypo, and mixed it thoroughly with a clean glass rod. Dropping the three negatives in, he sloshed them gently about with the same rod.

Forgetful of time, and conscious only of what he was doing, Jase stared steadily at the negatives. Even against the tray's white bottom, they appeared almost black. There was almost no visible detail.

Then, gradually, Jase thought he saw the moose. Taking the three negatives from their solution, he held

them up to the light and saw that the moose *had* appeared. Not plain, it could still be distinguished. Jase felt a ray of hope. In the third photo, the dead moose was still a shapeless mass. But the poacher's face, turned toward the camera, could be seen. Jase put his negatives back in the reducing agent for another five minutes.

Purposely he forebore looking at them. None of the three would produce a good print, but Jase was past caring about that. He'd be not only satisfied but grateful for a recognizable image.

Jase put the negatives back under the running faucet to wash while he prepared a paper developer. While it stood in cold water so its temperature could come down to 68, he experimented with the smaller of John Riggs' two enlargers. It was a type he'd never used, but he was familiar with its principles and in a drawer he found an enlarging lens with a two-inch focus, the proper lens for such a negative. He inserted it in the enlarger.

He removed excess water from his negatives with a sponge, hung them up to dry, and waited impatiently until they were dry and he could put the one he wanted into a dustless negative carrier. Jase laid an easel in place, darkened the room save for a single safe light, and snapped the enlarging light on. He held his breath and focused.

The image that appeared was not plain, but very definitely it was present. Jase slipped a sheet of 8 × 10

enlarging paper into the easel, exposed it for what he considered the correct time, and ducked the paper into his developer. Again he licked dry lips.

After two and a half minutes, the paper had darkened. The image was there, but it was not recognizable.

Jase took the paper from his solution, crumpled it, and threw it away. He had been in too much of a hurry, and in hurrying he had erred. Looking for the first time at the number on the package from which he'd taken the paper, he saw that it was intended for normal negatives. Jase thumbed through John Riggs' stock of paper until he found the hardest grade available.

He took two sheets, and with only the safe light glowing, cut each into ten equal pieces. Thrusting the rest into a drawer where no light could reach them, Jase put the first on his easel and exposed it for fifteen seconds. He developed it for two minutes and transferred it to the hypo. The second strip he exposed for twenty-five seconds, the third for forty-five, the fourth for sixty-five, and the fifth for ninety. He gave each two minutes' development time before transferring it to the hypo.

The first and second strips were far too light. The third was just a little under-exposed, the fourth just a shade too dark, and the fifth almost black. Therefore, the proper exposure for this negative was somewhere between forty-five and sixty-five seconds. Beginning at

fifty seconds, Jase exposed three more strips at five-second intervals and cut the time down to between fifty-five and sixty seconds. Beginning with fifty-six seconds, he exposed three more strips a second apart and determined the precise exposure time to be fifty-seven seconds.

When he slipped the final sheet onto the easel, Jase knew that it was his last chance. He could do no more. Exposing for exactly fifty-seven seconds, he snapped the enlarger off, dipped the exposed sheet into the developer, and with fingers so nervous that they threatened to upset the pan, rocked it gently back and forth.

Then the image faded in, and Jase looked down to see, bending over the dead moose, the hitchhiker who had stolen his wallet.

EIGHT *JOHN RIGGS*

Jase lifted the print out of the developing solution, put it into the rinse, and transferred it from there to the hypo. It was not a good picture by any means, but both the moose and the man who had shot it were clear enough for unmistakable identification. Jase rocked the pan of hypo gently back and forth and the solution rippled over the picture. He let the hypo settle and looked again.

There was no possible doubt. The man on the picture was the one he'd picked up his first morning out of Garston and taken to the Carson Road. If he was not a desperate criminal, at least he was a shady character who would steal wallets when the opportunity offered, and kill game out of season. Jase sighed in mingled relief and happiness at the outcome of the picture. The man might successfully deny stealing the wallet, but he could never deny this deed. Jase took the print out of the hypo and put it in a clean pan for the necessary washing. Then he walked into the waiting room to tell the wardens the news.

His head tilted back, Tom Rainse slept on one chair, while Mel Garth was sprawled on the floor. Smoky and Buckles were also stretched on the floor, asleep. Jase looked at his watch and was surprised to learn that it was a quarter past five. He'd been in John Riggs' darkroom all night, but it hadn't seemed that long.

"Hey!" he shouted.

Smoky and Buckles raised their heads slowly, but Tom Rainse jumped as though a hot coal had been dropped down his back. Mel Garth came awake sputtering, "What's matter?"

Tom said, "Oh, it's you, Jase! Say, it's morning!" Then he came fully awake. "How about the picture?"

"It turned out," Jase said tiredly.

"You can recognize the poacher?"

Jase nodded.

There was no sleep left in either Tom or Mel. "Let's see it!"

"Wait a minute!" Jase protested. "You can take a look, but that print has to wash a while longer. Then it must be ferrotyped."

"All we want's a look!"

The two wardens crowding behind him, Jase went back into the darkroom and lifted the print from its wash.

"That's the one!" Tom whooped.

"Sure 'nough is!" Mel agreed excitedly.

"Who is it?" Jase demanded.

“The Cat Bird! You did it, Jase! You did it, boy!”

“Oh,” said Jase, almost asleep on his feet, “the Cat Bird’s a man?”

“No!” Tom said emphatically. “He just happens to look like one! The slimiest worm under the wettest rock is better than he is!”

“Well who the blazes is he?”

“As slick a poacher as there is!” Mel told him, “and as dangerous! Last year, over in Crawford County, he badly wounded a warden and got clean away. Tom and I thought of him when you said he shot at you. Then when he beat us through Raven Pass and was too smart to tip his hand by staying at the lodges, we knew we were up against somebody pretty sharp! Now we *know* that it’s the Cat Bird!”

“Look, Jase!” Tom Rainse said impatiently, “if you can run us off maybe two hundred more of these right away, we can send them around to newspapers and have them posted.”

“What?” Jase heard as though the words had come from very far away. Now that the job was done, he was all in.

“Oh, I forgot!” Tom said sympathetically. “You’re going to sleep before you do anything else. I’ll take you to my hotel room.”

“And I’ll go see if John can come,” Mel suggested. “He can take over.”

“Good idea.”

“Wait,” Jase said thickly. “Can’t go yet.”

He looked at his watch, saw that the print should wash five minutes more, took a pencil and a sheet of paper, and sat down to write. He tried to concentrate while a red fog of weariness washed through his brain. Painfully he tore from his mind the exposure time, the grade of paper, and the solutions he’d used. He blinked owlishly at Mel.

“Give John this.” Jase extended the paper.

He reeled a little as he took the print from its wash, squeegeed it onto a ferrotyping tin, and turned solemnly to Tom.

“It stays there until it falls off by itself,” he instructed. “Get that? Until it falls off by itself.”

“All right, Jase,” Tom said gently. “Now you come along.”

When Jase awoke, the afternoon sun was streaming through the windows of his bedroom. He sat hastily and guiltily up, for the moment not realizing where he was, or why. Then he remembered and sank back down to enjoy for a few minutes more the warmth and comfort of his bed. Buckles, who had been sleeping in one corner, padded over to the bed and reared to put both front paws on it. Jase tickled his ear.

“Hello, faithful dog.”

Buckles wagged his stump of tail and dropped back to the floor. Jase looked at his watch. It read twenty-

five minutes of three. Since he had already slept most of the day, a few minutes more couldn't make much difference. He relaxed and mulled over the events of last night. He recalled developing the print and the wardens' excitement over it. Afterward, he dimly remembered walking to a jeep, getting in, being driven, stumbling up some stairs, and someone helping him take off his clothes.

This, he supposed, was Tom's hotel room. In any event, it contained the bed, a dresser, a hard-backed and a cushioned chair, a writing table, and if the door Jase was looking at right now led where he thought it did, very shortly he was going to be enjoying a hot bath.

Jase sat up and swung his feet over the bed. Buckles, sure that his master was going nowhere at least until he got some clothes on, yawned and went back to sleep. Jase opened the door he had been inspecting and smiled happily. Bathtubs were one of the scarce items in the Lasher. Jase poured water as hot as he could stand it, worked up four inches of suds, and got in to soak.

He didn't know where his jeep and photographic equipment were. But wherever they were, they'd been there since last night and there was little use in becoming excited about them right now. Probably everything was still at John Riggs', and Jase decided to go back there as soon as he finished his bath. But when he was scrubbed, rubbed, and clothed again, his

stomach reminded him that he had eaten nothing since last night.

Jase hesitated, for hotel rooms and meals cost money, but he did not hesitate very long. He had money and obviously this hotel was not one of those plush affairs that feel justified in charging a dollar and a half for a ham sandwich. Jase went out the door into a hallway, walked along it, turned right at a corridor, and found himself face to face with a fat little man who stood behind a desk and beamed at him.

“How’d you sleep?” he asked Jase.

“Like a log!”

“Glad to hear it. Like I always say, we got the best beds in Sells.”

“Uh, do I pay for the room here?”

“Not for the room, no pay for the room at all. It’s reserved for the Game Department and if Tom Rainse said you were to have it, that’s his business.”

Jase breathed a little easier. At least the room would cost him nothing.

“Can I get something to eat?”

“Something,” the little fat man beamed, “but I don’t know what. We don’t serve dinner until five-thirty. Dining room’s first door to your right but your dog can’t go in. House rule.”

“Can he sit here?”

“That he can. That he sure can.”

Jase said, “Stay, Buckles,” and entered the dining room with its row of white-draped tables up the center and booths on both sides. He seated himself and a waiter presently appeared from the kitchen.

“Bring me ham and eggs, fried potatoes, coffee, apple pie, and,” Jase drew a deep breath, “make it a double order of everything.”

When he had finished the meal and paid his check, Buckles rose to join him as he went back through the lobby. Jase started toward John Riggs’ studio, and as soon as he turned the corner he saw his jeep standing where he had left it. But except for the jack, jack handle, and a few tools, it was empty. Jase stifled a little panic. His box of film, he remembered, he had taken into the darkroom. But all the rest of his photographic equipment had been left in the jeep.

The tinkling bell announced his arrival and a second later John Riggs appeared through the curtains in the back. He was still pale and wan, as when Jase had first seen him, but there was a sparkle in his eye.

“Hi!” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you, and I didn’t think it would take a week, either.”

“Come again?”

“Tom thought you’d sleep for a week,” John Riggs grinned. “He said you wore yourself into a frazzle last night.”

“It wasn’t quite that bad, but I sure wished you were here.”

“And I’m glad I wasn’t. I saw what you did, and I’m just as glad I didn’t have to tackle it.”

“It was so important,” Jase explained, “that I guess I worried myself tired. By the way, is any of my gear around?”

“All of it, I think, including your jeep keys. Say, that was a picture to be proud of.”

“It wasn’t that good,” Jase protested.

“No? Come on in.”

Jase followed into the darkroom where he had worked so long and hard. John Riggs plucked a print from a pile of 8×10 glossy enlargements and Jase studied the picture he had brought out last night. It looked, he had to admit, better than it had.

“My hitchhiking little pal,” he murmured.

“You’ve seen that man before?”

“Yes. About five hundred miles south of here. He hitched a ride with me. When he left he took my wallet, and just about every cent I had in the world, with him.”

“No!”

“Yes,” Jase said gloomily.

“How’d you get here, then?”

“Worked around, earned a dollar here and a dollar there and things like that. I made out.”

“And you didn’t run back to dad, eh?”

Jase looked sharply at him. “Who told you about my dad?”

“Tom Rainse. But he seemed to think you had at least enough money to last through the summer. Well, this picture will earn you some.”

“That?” Jase was startled. “Why—! Why look at it!”

“I know. It violates all the rules of good photography. But it has something that makes the rules unimportant. That’s news value. It’s the only picture known of the Cat Bird.”

“But if there were no pictures, how did Mel and Tom know who he was?”

“They both knew about him and Tom saw him twice. Unfortunately, neither time did he have any reason for arresting him; it was before he shot the warden. A known poacher, the Cat Bird has never been in jail. That’s why this picture is so valuable; now every warden can see for himself what the Cat Bird looks like. His days of wandering wherever he wishes, with little danger of being recognized, are done.”

“That sounds good.”

“It is good. It’s also the most fun I’ve had in ten years. Mel came in to get me about half-past five this morning. I hadn’t been feeling very well, but after a night’s rest I was doing better. When we got here, Tom Rainse was walking up and down, boiling like a teakettle. He shoved the picture at me and wanted me to run off two hundred prints right away! Christmas!”

Jase grinned. “That’s a couple of days’ work. How many did you make?”

“Twenty, and sent him on his way before he exploded. He and Mel are going to spread those in the right places and as soon as they’re ready I’m to send the rest to various Game Department Districts all over the state. Tom has plans for displaying them on every trail outdoorsmen travel, every stream they fish, and every road they drive. It’ll be a feather in his cap if he can catch the Cat Bird, but he isn’t concerned about that. All he knows is that a vicious poacher is loose. He doesn’t care who catches him, but both he and Mel would like to.”

“Where do they think this Cat Bird is?”

“Tom thinks he’s left the Lasher and gone elsewhere; says he’s too smart to hang around where he knows he’ll be hunted. Maybe he’s even gone to some other state, and Tom’s going to send pictures to other State Game Departments. After Tom left I ran off about a dozen extra prints.” He grinned. “There’s one sale already. The Sells *Sentinel* is paying three dollars for the privilege of printing the Cat Bird’s picture. I’ve also sent prints to ten other papers and one outdoor magazine, and will send more. You’re sure to have some sales that will net you anywhere from three to perhaps ten or twelve dollars. If the magazine takes it, and I know the editor and think there’s a good chance, they’ll pay fifty dollars.”

“Say, that was good of you. Let me pay for those you sent out.”

John Riggs shook his head. “You take a picture, you sit up all night making it come out, you get me an order for two hundred 8 × 10 enlargements, and you should pay me? I ought to pay you. Besides, as I’ve already mentioned, I’m getting plenty of kicks out of this. It’s the sort of work I seldom have a chance to do. By the way, Jase, I developed and printed the rest of your pictures.”

“What do you think of ’em?” Jase asked eagerly.

“Not very much.”

“But—”

“Take it easy,” John Riggs broke in. “I can’t go take wildlife pictures. But one of the things I’d hoped to do here in Sells was act as sort of a clearing-house for photographers who can go. I’ve studied the field as extensively as I could. Among other things, I’ve written to every editor I could find who could possibly use a wildlife picture and asked them to tell me their exact needs. Many of them obliged. So I have some idea of what I’m talking about. Now which do you want? A pat on the back, or honest criticism?”

“Honest criticism. Don’t pull any punches.”

“Well, then, consider this one.” John Riggs picked up Jase’s flash picture of the bull elk. “It’s all right, and except that it’s over-developed a bit, it’s a good picture of an elk. But when you’ve said that, you’ve said

everything. There's nothing about it that arrests the eye and nothing that tells a story. It's just another bull elk."

"But people like to look at wild animals."

"Sure they do, and most people would give this one a passing glance. That's just the trouble. No picture is worth publishing unless it can inform, excite, or interest those who are to look at it. They have to command more than passing glances. It's a nice picture of an elk, but probably there are two thousand just as good and just as prosaic."

"What's it need to make it outstanding?" Jase demanded.

"If I could tell you that," John Riggs said, "I could start a school here in Sells and turn out master wildlife photographers in gross lots. Frankly, I don't know exactly what you need. Generally, many things, including experience, patience, knowledge, understanding and, this is important, the ability to recognize not only a picture but *the* picture when you see it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just this. There's a little lake not far from here. Probably thirty thousand tourists a year pass it. But not until a photographer friend of mine, Joe Donaldson, passed, did that little lake make the front cover of a national magazine."

"Just like that?"

“It wasn’t quite that simple,” John Riggs said wryly. “Don’s been twenty years learning his trade. He took a motel room here in Sells for ten days, and he was at that lake all day and every day until he got exactly the effect he wanted. Some people would call him lucky, say that all he had to do to earn a few hundred dollars was click a camera shutter. You know better.”

“I sure do,” Jase said ruefully.

“Remember,” Riggs commented, “that I mentioned experience and patience. The first you can get only one way. If you don’t have the second, you’d better acquire it. Remember also that the truly great photographs, the sort the whole nation takes to its heart, are not waiting around every corner. The photographer who gets one of them in a lifetime *is* lucky.”

“Then luck does play a part?”

“Certainly. Luck plays a part in everything. But luck isn’t all. Otherwise some photographers could not be so consistently successful while others make the grade only now and again.”

“How about technique?”

“Essential, but that isn’t everything either. Of all the pictures you brought in, the one that has most value from an editorial standpoint is, technically speaking, one of the poorest.”

“Go on,” Jase said grimly. “Tear the rest to shreds.”

John Riggs proceeded to do so and, as he did, Jase saw that he was entirely right. As Jase had seen them in the wilderness, the animals had been vibrant, alive, inspiring. But he had not transferred them to film as he saw them. He had produced good and faithful images. But they had no life and pictures must live. Knowing or learning how to make them live, Jase thought, might be the vital difference between an Alex Creedon and a tourist with a box camera.

“How about my picture story?” Jase asked finally.

“Picture story?”

“Where we had Tom’s bloodhound on the Cat Bird’s trail.”

“Oh yes. I wondered what you were trying to do, and the fact that I had to wonder proves it’s no picture story. If it was, it would tell itself.” He held up a picture of Tom, Mel, and Smoky beside the slain moose. “This one might have worked. But it doesn’t have the impact of the Cat Bird’s picture and the two would conflict. As for these horse tracks, mountain ledges, and the rest, you know where you were and what you were doing. But the pictures do not tell that to the viewer.”

“A complete wash-out, eh?” Jase sighed.

“Not at all,” John Riggs said seriously. “You didn’t get any immortal wildlife shots. But you did get some priceless experience and some very fine pictures. Look at this.”

He showed the picture of the doe standing forlornly on the fire-seared hill. The destruction was there, and the doe, somehow, seemed to represent the tragedy of all wild creatures that had died in the fire. Jase had composed his picture well, and clicked his shutter at a rare moment.

“That’s really good,” John Riggs commented, “and the rest of your fire pictures are first rate. But they serve a special purpose and are not for public consumption.”

“Tom wanted them.”

“Well, I suppose Tom has some use for them, then. Has what I’ve told you been discouraging?”

“Some. I knew it was a tough proposition, but didn’t realize I’d made so many mistakes. Thanks a lot.”

“Jase, long ago my father told me that the only people who never make mistakes are those who never do anything. There’s a lot of wisdom in that. Also, the only people in the world who aren’t up against something tough are those who always swim with the current. Most people have well-defined paths which they may follow. They know the rules. Photography is different. Aside from teaching you the basic mechanics and giving you the benefit of experience, nobody can teach you how to be a successful wildlife cameraman. You break your own path, and make your own rules as you do it.”

“Yeah,” Jase said glumly. “It looks as though every photographer should be at least ten men.”

Riggs said quietly, “That’s about it. But it’s no disgrace to back out if you feel you’re in a blind alley.”

“Maybe I am, but I’m going back into the Lasher tomorrow morning and see if I can grow ten more hands. Maybe one of them can take the kind of pictures I want.”

“Good boy!”

John Biggs’ smile was sympathetic as Jase and Buckles left. In this raw and stubborn youngster there might be the makings of a great photographer.

NINE *LITTLE TRAIL*

Jase swung into the Camptown Road, parked his jeep just beyond the junction of that and the main highway, and got out. Buckles, with a deathless ambition to catch a chickaree and always alert for the main chance, hopped out beside him and with nose and eyes inspected the single great pine that grew where the two roads joined. Sighting no chickarees, and unable to snuffle out the trail of one, Buckles gave himself over to a job that had needed doing for the past fifteen minutes. He scratched his right ear with his right rear paw.

Jase took out one of the three posters that lay in the back of his jeep. At the top of the rectangle of white cardboard, with an even margin on either side, was pasted the Cat Bird's picture. Below, in John Riggs' neat script, was printed:

IF YOU SEE THIS MAN, GEORGE DANGO,
ALIAS THE CAT BIRD, REPORT AT ONCE
TO ANY LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER. DO
NOT TRY TO APPREHEND HIM YOURSELF.
HE IS ARMED, AND DANGEROUS.

Below, in small letters, were the names and addresses of several law enforcement officers to whom anyone seeing the Cat Bird might report.

Jase tacked the poster to the big pine's trunk and stepped back to view it. It was effective. Unless they were driving a lot faster than anyone should when swinging into the Camptown Road, passing motorists couldn't help seeing it.

Jase climbed into the jeep and Buckles jumped in beside him. As he went on up Camptown Road, Jase reviewed his current plans.

He'd bought very carefully, confining himself largely to flour, rice, dried fruits and vegetables: staples that stretched a long way without costing much. The only luxuries he'd permitted himself were a three-pound slab of bacon, a pound of coffee, a package of tea, two dozen eggs, and a few cans of fruit. Though he might tire of fish, there were plenty of trout in the Lasher and if necessary Jase could eat them two or even three times a day. Instead of canned dog food, he'd bought the less expensive dog meal for Buckles. This time, he felt, he could stay in camp at least a month. Then, when he finally had to renew supplies,

there should be enough money from the picture of the Cat Bird to enable him to stay another month. He'd still have his summer and, he vowed, he'd prove himself before it was over.

He stopped again where the trace branched from the Camptown Road and nailed up another poster. As he looked at it, he remembered his talk with John Riggs. Just how, Jase wondered, did one persuade a deer, elk, wild goose, or bald eagle to pose against a dramatic background? What was the secret of making any wild thing turn its head this way or that for a more effective picture? Jase had found it difficult just to get in camera range of any of them.

He nailed his third poster on a tree beside the creek that meandered past his camp. That done, he drove on into the park and turned his jeep. As he did, a cottontail rabbit flushed from its set and streaked across the clearing. Voicing a happy roar of anticipation, Buckles jumped out and raced in pursuit. Jase watched speculatively, and as he watched an idea formed.

Wildlife photographers had taken numerous pictures of deer, elk, bears, lions, rhinos, elephants, all the more dramatic species of big game. Thinking of the outstanding ones he had seen, Jase realized how right John Riggs had been. The memorable pictures were more than just images; they offered something to capture the viewer's interest. Jase recalled one of Creedon's masterpieces. It was another bull elk, but

instead of just staring into the camera, the elk was bugling. Its neck was outstretched, jaws parted, antlers flung back. In that one picture, Alex Creedon had captured the whole spirit of the world out of doors.

But of all the outdoor photographers, how many had bothered with cottontail rabbits? There were a few good single pictures of which Jase knew, but had anyone ever filmed the natural history of the cottontail rabbit as Creedon had that of the grizzly? If so, Jase had never seen it. Of course cottontails were not dramatic. But a bull elk, as such, was not especially outstanding either when transferred to film. The drama must depend on the photographer. It could be a marvelous picture story! He'd call it . . .

Jase restrained himself. He'd already had a number of marvelous pictures, until it turned out that they were all in his own mind. It was just as well not to go overboard again until he saw the results. But cottontails were something to think about.

Jase stowed his groceries in the cache Tom and Mel had built, put his photographic equipment in the tent, and started chopping wood. Very short of money, he had tried to make every quarter do the work of a dollar and he'd bought only three gallons of gasoline. Most of that had to be used in the lantern. He'd cook with the gasoline stove only when he had to; a heavy rain might force him to use it inside the tent. Otherwise he'd chop

wood. Besides, he thought wryly, was not wood-chopping healthful exercise?

“Sure,” he muttered to himself. “Sure it is. But I’ll still bet that the poet who wrote all those lovely lines about the scent of new-mown hay never pitched any.”

He chopped until there was a respectable pile of wood beside the fireplace, then hung his cameras and gadget bag around his neck, and went out to take pictures. Presently he began to feel better and happier. Sells was a hospitable town and there was nothing wrong with it, but somehow he had felt cramped and closed-in there. How much more confined would he feel in Garston, and how greatly would the feeling increase if, all day long, he must stay in one small department of his father’s store. Here in the wilderness, he seemed to be in the place where he belonged.

Failing to catch the rabbit, Buckles had wandered into the forest and Jase followed him. With no special destination or plan, he thought only that a walk might help him get completely back in tune with the wilderness. He halted suddenly.

A hundred feet ahead, sunlight glinted in a little clearing. A skunk was moving about there. Unconcerned, as skunks usually are, it halted to pick up and eat something that Jase thought was a beetle. Jase added this to the mental list of wildlife lore he was compiling. He’d always thought of skunks as carnivorous animals, but watching this one he

concluded that they could not be entirely so. Probably they ate meat when they could get it, but since they were too slow to catch most other wild creatures, it necessarily followed that they must feed on vegetation, fruit, and, doubtless, such tidbits as the eggs and helpless young of ground-nesting birds. The skunk caught and ate another beetle and this time Jase was sure.

He took a light reading in a splash of sunlight that fell against a nearby tree, set up his tripod, and attached the telephoto lens to his 35 mm. camera. Jase grinned to himself. He'd thought the telephoto would be useful only for photographing the more wary wild things, but it had other uses. Skunks were good subjects, but what photographer in his right mind wanted to get close to one?

Jase focused, got his picture, and was about to take another when, peering into the ground glass, he saw Buckles bounce stiff-leggedly out of the forest and charge joyously on the skunk. The dog leaped, and, upset as he was, Jase remembered to get the picture. Buckles leaped away as violently as he had rushed in, and sneezed. Running to what must be a nearby burrow, the skunk ducked into it.

Buckles sneezed again, rolled in the grass, and got up to shake himself. Not one to give up regardless of who or what his enemy might be, he sniffed hopefully

into the burrow. It was a forlorn hope. Having launched an effective broadside, the skunk had gone to earth.

A second later, catching sight of his master, Buckles raced enthusiastically toward him.

“Buckles!” Jase squawked.

Tail wagging, eyes beaming, ears proud, Buckles, who had almost caught something at last and had come to tell his master about it, continued to run forward. Jase waved frantic hands.

“Go on! Go on! Get away from me!”

Buckles looked puzzled, but only for a moment. Obviously Jase was playing some new and fascinating game. He took another step toward his master.

“Go away!” Jase begged. “Go on away!”

Half-convinced, Buckles halted. His ears drooped. His tail sagged. He questioned with his eyes. Jase waved his hands again.

“That’s right! That’s just right! Stay away!”

Sadly, a perfect picture of the rejected waif, Buckles turned and slunk into the brush. Jase sighed his relief.

“Whew! That dog hasn’t the brains of a half-witted jack rabbit!”

Cautiously, looking warily in all directions, Jase made his way back to camp. Buckles came wistfully to meet him and again Jase waved and shouted. Making it very plain that nobody loved him, a poor, forlorn dog, Buckles lay down a hundred feet away. Jase mixed a

dish of meal, carried it to him, and put it where he could reach it. Wondering what he'd done to deserve such treatment, Buckles rolled mournful eyes.

“Nope!” Jase said firmly. “I like you, but I’ll like you better when some of that skunk smell wears off. Even when you’re this far away, it’s too close!”

Offended, but seeing no reason why that should interfere with his appetite, Buckles gobbled his dish of food and trotted off to see what he could find in the forest. Grinning, Jase prepared his own meal. If wildlife photographers had to suffer hardship and privation, camping with a skunk-sprayed dog was all part of the game.

Too healthy to let anything interfere with his rest, Jase slept soundly, but awakened to the scent of skunk again. It was not quite as overwhelming as before, but bad enough. Going out, Jase found Buckles sleeping near the tent flaps.

“You old fool!” he said. “Muddlehead! Of all the things there are to chase around here what do you pick on? Skunks!”

Overjoyed at being forgiven, Buckles bounced forward. Jase held up a restraining hand.

“Whoa! Take it easy! We can be friends again but not *that* friendly!”

As he prepared and ate breakfast, Jase pondered seriously. John Riggs’ advice was penetrating deeper and deeper. Joe Donaldson, Riggs’ friend, had clicked a

shutter and received several hundred dollars for the resulting picture. But it had taken him ten days to determine the exact moment at which that shutter should be clicked and twenty years' experience to enable him to recognize the moment when it arrived. Jase wondered if those at the top owed as much to their own genius as they did to their willingness to work harder than others. He'd never thought of taking ten days for any one picture, he realized, as he reviewed his own experiences.

He admitted honestly that he had planned nothing. With reasonably good equipment, he had thought, an aspiring wildlife photographer fared forth into the woods and proceeded to photograph wildlife. But there was more to it than that. The pictures had to be planned. They couldn't just happen. Therefore, a moose might easily be just another picture, and a mouse could be a masterpiece.

Jase thought of his plan to photograph cottontail rabbits. When he first came into the Lasher, the idea would have seemed silly. Now it didn't. A series of the right cottontail pictures should make a fine picture story, but again he controlled his enthusiasm. He'd thought two wardens and a bloodhound on a poacher's trail would be a good picture story, too. However, photographing cottontails was an idea and whether or not it was a good one could be determined only after

the pictures were processed. First he had to have the pictures.

Cameras and gadget bag around his neck, carrying a hand axe, Jase went up the creek to the little trail he had found his first day out. He examined it carefully and reaffirmed that it was a much-used pathway. But, now that he took the time to look closely, Jase saw that a whole network of other trails led into it. Rabbits, coming out of the thick brush to feed in the park, evidently used the same main path every time and branched out to wherever they wished to forage.

Buckles became bored and wandered off to find some excitement. Jase sighed with relief. Buckles was a fine dog and a wonderful companion, but for the time being the air was much purer when he was not around. The dog off his mind, Jase tried to plan out a good course.

He needed a blind, he decided, some place from which he could see the path without being seen, and it went without saying that it must be an inconspicuous blind, not to scare the rabbits away.

Just up the slope was a big boulder and when Jase went to investigate he saw a little depression behind it. Lying full length in the depression, he sighted his camera around the boulder and discovered that he could cover all except the lower third of the area where the rabbits fed. Jase cut branches, stuck them in the ground by the rock, bent their tops together, and fastened them

by tying one supple twig to another. Going back to the little trail, he looked critically up at his blind. The branches were too high; not only evident but obvious. He shortened them a little.

A second time he inspected his blind, and this time he approved it. Jase took light readings in both the shadow and sunshine and set his camera accordingly. He attached the telephoto lens, crawled into his blind, and focused on the little trail. No tripod was necessary; the camera could be braced on the ground and against the boulder and he could give it additional support with his hand.

Buckles came back, looked around disdainfully, and wandered away again. Jase stretched full length and waited for his first subject to appear.

Nothing came, but he hadn't expected anything at once because of his own activity; no wild animal would soon come out where a man had been moving so recently. But after what seemed about two hours, when normal activity should have reigned again, Jase looked at his watch and discovered that only twenty-five minutes had passed. He set his jaw and lay still.

He'd built the blind so that there were only about six inches on either side and six over his head, but that furnished enough flying space for a big blue-bottle fly. It buzzed inquiringly around his head, then lighted on and crawled about his neck. Taking one cautious hand from his camera, Jase tried to trap the insect. It made a

perfect take-off and resumed buzzing about his head. If Jase struck at it, he would frighten anything that happened to be near. If he didn't, the buzzing fly would shortly drive him insane. Split seconds before that point was reached, the fly buzzed out of the blind and flew away. But his troubles weren't over.

The grass-carpeted ground behind the boulder had felt wonderfully smooth and inviting at first. But the grass, apparently, was a deceitful mask designed and spread for the express purpose of concealing several dozen knobs, stickers, and points that prodded or stabbed him wherever he couldn't scratch. Jase found temporary relief by moving to one side, then back again when the stickers on that side became unbearable.

His thirst was only an annoyance to begin with, but as the sun climbed higher it became torment. Jase moistened dry lips with his tongue until even his tongue went dry. He put a small pebble in his mouth because he'd read somewhere that thirsty desert dwellers used one as an antidote for thirst. But he discovered for himself that not everything appearing in print is the strict truth. In spite of his thirst, Jase fought against leaving the blind, for if he did he must begin his long vigil all over again.

The hawk saved him. It dropped gracefully out of the sky, and, as though supported by some invisible string, for a moment poised just above the grass. Jase

forgot his thirst and the knobs that tormented his flesh. Here was wildlife.

As the hawk came down, he focused his camera, closing the lens one full stop because it was set for shadow and the hawk was in sunshine. Jase snapped the picture and flicked the lever that advanced another frame into position. Neither rising nor lowering, the hawk cruised back and forth with outstretched wings. Jase followed with his lens, waiting for another picture. When the hawk, with almost no warning, dropped to earth and caught a field mouse, Jase snapped that picture too. The hawk rose back into the sky with the mouse plainly visible in its talons.

Jase missed that picture by the wink of an eye. But his thirst did not seem quite so acute now nor were the knobs and points quite so hard or sharp. He'd built his own blind and taken pictures from it. He knew he'd get more.

The sun was low in the west when the first cottontail came out. It appeared, as Jase had thought it would, from the thicket near the willows and on the little trail. One moment it was not there and then it was lurking in the shade of the willows. Outstretched, back bent in a graceful arc, ears pointing back toward its shoulders, it seemed to be listening and watching.

Jase took its picture then held his breath, hoping the rabbit would do what he wanted it to do and fearing it

wouldn't. It did. With unhurried little hops it came out into the meadow. Jase took another picture.

Almost forgetting to breathe, Jase held his camera on the cottontail. It was sitting perfectly still now, ears up and big eyes alert, and again it seemed to be listening and watching. "Not only a picture," John Riggs had said, "but *the* picture." What second might the cottontail present that one?

After a moment it sat up, licked its front paws, and washed its face. Jase took three pictures of the process, not sure he was getting anything worthwhile but not daring to miss anything. The cottontail hopped to a patch of succulent grass, started to feed, and Jase snapped another picture.

Then, suddenly, there were four cottontails in the park. Apparently they'd all come down the little path; the thicket must be their daytime abode. Jase tried to cover all four with his lens, succeeded in getting only three of them, and waited for the straggler to hop close enough to be included.

Jase muttered under his breath. One of the four had hopped close to another, was soundly kicked for its pains, and he had not been ready with his camera. Jase waited tensely for another fight. There was none. Each of the four rabbits staked out its own feeding ground and there was no more trespassing to cause a battle. Jase risked a reading with his light meter and when he did one of the four, attracted by the flicker of motion,

sat bolt upright and held that pose for a full three seconds. It dropped back and resumed feeding. Jase adjusted his camera to compensate for failing light.

Presently the thicket was alive with cottontails that ranged all the way from babies that might have sat comfortably in the palm of Jase's hand to big and battle-scarred old bucks. They were scattered over a wide area, so he couldn't possibly capture all of them in his lens. But he did take two pictures including as many as he could.

Jase wondered whether the first four rabbits were the old and experienced veterans who knew their way around or merely the silly who did not mind exposing themselves. He decided they were the former. The babies would certainly be more foolish and they hadn't come until later. Evidently some cottontails had confidence in their own ability to take care of themselves, and acted as leaders.

When death struck the cottontails, it came so suddenly that Jase's first intimation of trouble was a twinkling of white tails as rabbits bounced here and there in panic. Silent as a ghost, a great horned owl swooped from the sky and seemed scarcely to interrupt its flight as it seized a victim. But the owl's seemingly lazy flight was deceptive. It traveled so swiftly that Jase was able only to swing his camera and click the shutter.

His heart pounded and his hands trembled. This was *the* picture, the one John Riggs had talked about,

and Jase feared he'd missed.

Ten minutes later it was too dark for more photography. Jase backed out of his blind, stood up, and again the rabbits scattered. But feeling safe under approaching night, they did not run very far.

Jase made his way to camp, where Buckles, who had probably been pondering the strange idiocies of human beings, came to meet him. Jase patted the dog's smelly head, took a big drink of water, prepared his evening meal, fed Buckles, and crawled into his sleeping bag. He was tired, but not until he left the blind had he realized how tired.

At dawn the next day, this time with an ample supply of water and a lunch, he was back in the blind. The cottontails, still feeding, fled at his approach but stole back to feed again after he was hidden. Trying to repeat nothing he already had, Jase took a few more pictures of different poses. His basic idea, to tell the story of cottontail rabbits in a series of pictures, expanded and enlarged. Some scenes that he still must have become clear in his mind.

Definitely he wanted two of them fighting. Also, there was stark drama here in the form of swift death, and he wanted some predator catching a rabbit, for he was not sure he had a picture of the horned owl. He also wanted their scattered flight when an enemy appeared.

The sun rose, warming the park, and one by one the cottontails went back into their thicket. The wind blew gently, a couple of quarrelsome crows flew over, and the lazy droning of a cicada filled the air. A few small birds fluttered about, but out of range. Jase fought a powerful temptation to go to sleep.

The hours dragged endlessly. Might it be better, Jase wondered, to enter the blind at daylight, stay until mid-morning, do something else until mid-afternoon, and then go back into the blind? It might very well be, but as sure as he did he would miss some dramatic happening.

Toward evening, the cottontails again began to leave their thicket and it seemed to Jase that they came in the same order as before. Though he had no positive means of identification, he thought the first big one to come out was the same that had appeared first last night. Then the three came. The rest followed. Watching closely, Jase saw them emerge from a dozen places. He now knew definitely that there was more than one way out of the thicket.

Nothing happened that afternoon that he wanted to record on film, but some things that had puzzled him were being clarified by observation.

There was only one cottontail, a big buck with a torn right ear, that he could identify positively and every time. He was reasonably sure but never certain that he knew a few of the others. The rabbit population

seemed neither to increase nor decrease, but it did not remain static. Jase thought that the same individuals did not come down the various paths every night, and when the buck with the torn ear failed to put in an appearance, he was certain of it. But there was always a great number of young.

Doubtless the thicket was a happy hunting ground for foxes, coyotes, weasels, owls, and other creatures of prey. Probably at least one cottontail a night went to fill some hungry belly. But for every one taken, there was at least one born. The pattern of nature began to emerge for Jase. It was a controlled and fascinating thing.

A hungry fox with cubs in some forested den might catch a rabbit for them. No doubt the same fox plus other predators came to this thicket often. The rabbits were killed fast, but they bred fast, and if they weren't held in check they'd soon overrun everything. However, if they weren't there, what else would the fox cubs eat? An occasional squirrel, perhaps, or now and then a grouse. Foxes were not well equipped to catch such creatures; the perfect staple for them was rabbits. So because of the rabbits the cubs could thrive, and because of the cubs' need for food, the rabbits were held in check. Of course no young rabbits were born in winter, but neither were there any young carnivores to feed. Jase came to think of this thicket, and dozens more like it, as the grocery stores of the Lasher.

It was the fourth day before he got his fight. This battle was more prolonged, and more vicious, than the first, and Jase got two good pictures.

The seventh day, death struck the cottontails again and Jase found out what John Riggs meant by luck. He had his camera trained on a rabbit that had hopped down the little trail and was feeding near the creek. Suddenly a mink, a lithe, brown, snakelike thing that came so silently it seemed born of the earth itself, was upon the cottontail. It came from behind, scissoring its jaws through the rabbit's spine even while it used all four paws to help hold its wildly bucking victim. Jase clicked his shutter, then took two more pictures of the mink half dragging and half carrying its victim back to the creek bed.

Now he needed the assembled rabbits bounding away from an enemy, but it took him two more days to discover just how simple it would be to get such a picture. In the cottontails' eyes, Jase himself was an enemy. When a dozen or more rabbits were in the feeding patch, Jase covered as many as he could with his lens, made the cable release ready, and stood up. When the rabbits fled, he took their picture.

That night he developed and dried his films and looked critically at the negatives. As he suspected, he had missed the horned owl completely. But he had what he thought were excellent pictures of the mink and its victim. The battle between two rabbits was good, but

the picture showing the cottontails in scattered flight would have been much better if it also showed what frightened them.

Of all the rest, some sixty negatives, there might be the eight or ten he needed to complete his picture story. He couldn't tell until he saw finished prints. But if he didn't have what he needed, he would spend another week, another two weeks, or another month, in the blind.

But right now he was tired of the blind and wanted to do something more active.

TEN *BEAR WALLOW*

Left to his own devices for the past nine days, Buckles had not exhausted all his resources. Though he'd chased hundreds of chickarees and so far had not come within snapping distance of even one, hope always remained. But he had not given all his time to chasing the jerky-tailed little squirrels.

In spite of Jase's opinions to the contrary, the brush with the skunk had not been unpleasant to Buckles. At least twenty times he'd gone to the skunk's burrow for another round but always he had been disappointed. What Buckles could not know was that the skunk, one of the few in this high country, had actually fallen prey to a great horned owl on the very night after the dog's encounter with it.

A wanderer by nature, Buckles had ranged miles from camp. He had discovered where the deer and elk, that fed in the park by night, lay up in the forest by day. He was acquainted with the furtive little paths where foxes and coyotes made their secret ways. He knew where the grouse and wild turkeys fed and roosted. Once he'd watched a pine marten flash through the

branches of a tall tree in close pursuit of a chickaree and, to Buckles' envy, catch it.

Buckles had also discovered that, with one exception, he might be the undisputed king of this forest empire. Big as they were, the deer and elk fled as soon as he approached. His appearance was the signal for all smaller creatures to fade into burrows or race out of sight. Buckles had had his doubts only about bears.

His first contact with a bear had come about on the first morning he'd gone out with Jase. The scent, obviously that of a great and powerful beast, had mystified and puzzled him but it had not frightened him because fear had no part in Buckles' makeup. He had decided only that bears might merit watching.

Shortly afterward, breaking carelessly into a little open glade, he'd come face to face with a bear that had immediately turned and fled. Knowing now that even bears feared the mighty Buckles, he'd chased it up a tree and yapped hysterically beneath for a few minutes. Feeling very proud and with a whole new opinion of his own strength and prowess, he had wandered on.

Two days later he'd run across the fresh track of another big bear and had known instantly that something was wrong. This bear was unlike others or, for that matter, unlike anything else he had scented in the wilderness. There was something about the scent that went beyond the known and trespassed on the unknown. If this bear was met and wherever it was met,

it was far better avoided. Beyond that, Buckles gave the whole matter no consideration. Had it been a deer, elk, or even rabbit, and had he sensed the same subtle characteristic that set it apart from others of its kind, Buckles would have left it alone.

This morning, when Jase came out of the tent, Buckles as usual looked hopefully up from the bed where he'd spent the night. He would go adventuring on his own when he could not go with Jase, but it was a lot more fun if Jase was with him and every morning for nine mornings Buckles had wanted Jase to go into the woods instead of merely lying all day in the blind. Every morning he'd been disappointed, but Buckles' basic philosophy was that of a dog, not a man. Far from depressed by a continued run of bad luck, he felt that, sooner or later, he'd have good luck.

So he wagged up to Jase, made several playful bounces around him, watched every move while Jase built the fire, heated water, washed, cooked breakfast, ate, and tidied the camp. When Jase was finished, Buckles trotted toward the woods and turned to look appealingly over his shoulder.

Jase grinned. "Yep. We're going together today. I guess I have been neglecting you. But even you should admit that you're a lot less smelly company now than you were nine days ago."

Jase hung his cameras and gadget bag in their usual positions, took a light reading, and set his cameras. He

started with a long and happy stride. Nine days in a blind were not too many if the right pictures resulted, but after nine days he was ready for a walk, any kind of a walk anywhere. Jase lifted his eyes to the rock crags that rose all around him.

Somewhere up there were mountain goats, those unbelievable creatures with short horns, long coats, and suction hoofs that carried them along ledges and thin little trails where even cats might hesitate to venture. Skilled and patient hunters had shot the wary creatures, but not many photographers had. Still, he might get a glimpse of one.

Buckles padded beside Jase until they were safely past the blind, then barked his delight and dashed off to see if there were any chickarees near. Jase continued climbing.

Wet with last night's dew, ground-hugging foliage dampened the bottom six inches of his trousers and an occasional branch brushed clammily across his cheek. It made for quiet walking, and Jase suddenly saw something between two trees that halted him in his tracks.

Through the foliage he glimpsed a little mountain lake. A filmy bank of morning mist overhung the far side. On the near side, a doe had waded into the shallows to get a drink. As near as it could come to the water without getting wet, a spotted fawn was stamping an angry forefoot and jerking an impatient tail. While

he quietly adjusted his reflex camera and crept forward through the screening foliage, Jase smiled at the story that was evident here.

Fed by melting snow from the surrounding peaks, the lake was always cold. Though the doe did not mind, the fawn had no desire for chilled feet. Obviously annoyed because its mother was in the lake, the fawn stamped its hoof again. Looking back over her shoulder, the doe regarded her offspring with big, limpid eyes.

Finally summoning its courage, visibly shrinking from the cold, the fawn entered the water. Lifting its feet very high and walking slowly, it waded out to the doe and butted her flank. The doe swung her head, brushed her baby's back with a soft muzzle, and Jase snapped his picture.

At the click of the camera, doe and fawn wheeled, splashed to shore, and bounded into the forest. Jase grinned happily and went on.

The slope rose more sharply, the trees became smaller and the wind colder. Jase wished he'd brought a jacket, but he hadn't and he'd lose too much time if he returned to camp and got one. But he had added another bit to what Jase was humorously beginning to think of as What Every Wildlife Photographer Should Know. Going into the heights, even on a summer day, he should carry a jacket.

Jase stooped to drink from a trickle of water and when he rose again Buckles was beside him. Jase looked up the slope.

Not very far ahead, the forest gave way to rolling, grassy meadow. Far up that stood a rocky abutment on the top of which grew a single tree. No more than six feet high, the tree was probably a hundred years old. Bitter storms, the fierce wars the elements raged at this altitude, had prevented anything like normal growth. Storm-beaten and wind-battered, the tree still stood staunch and green. Hoping to get a picture of it, Jase went on through the meadow and climbed to the top of the abutment.

Below, the world they had left that morning was spread out in miniature. Creeks sparkled like silver ribbons thrown haphazardly and down below him was the blue of the lake where he had photographed the doe and fawn. Jase saw the park where his camp was and picked out the meadow where the poacher had killed the moose. He saw that, by swinging to the left instead of returning the way he'd come, he could go down the valley where the game trail split and come out near the ledge from which he'd photographed the Cat Bird.

He knew that a picture of the whole scene wouldn't be good; even a wide-angle lens could not capture the majesty and sweep of what he saw. But the picture would be strictly for his personal use; if it never said anything to anyone else, it would always remind him

that he once stood here and saw all this. Jase took a light reading and set his reflex. The better to compose his picture, he stepped back from the ancient, storm-beaten tree and in the ground glass framed the distant scene with the trunk and one gnarled limb. He took two pictures from slightly different angles, then climbed down the abutment.

For a little way he ran to warm himself and Buckles raced joyously beside him. Then they were in the forest again where trees blunted the wind's sharpest edge, and slowed to a walk.

The long shadows of late afternoon were slanting across the little valley when Jase came again to the dead moose. A couple of crows took hurried wing and scolded him raucously as they flew. Jase muttered softly. A wonderful opportunity for pictures had been right here all the time and he'd never even thought of it.

Wild animals, obviously carnivores, had taken liberal advantage of this feast that had been spread for them. There was nothing left of the moose except bones, and they were scattered over a wide area. Even the tough hide had been ripped to shreds and birds, probably crows, had pecked it full of holes. Jase got down on his hands and knees to see if he could determine, by any tracks that might be left, just what had been here.

The meadow was grassy and did not retain tracks well, but the place where the moose had lain, and

where it had been torn apart, was trampled almost flat. No coyotes or foxes had done this; some beast or beasts that weighed a great deal had been tearing at the moose. The splintered bones were further evidence, for they must have been cracked by mighty jaws.

Jase cast back and forth, and on a crumbled ant hill he found the single track of a big bear. Again he murmured in disappointment. If he'd been on the ledge with his telephoto lens, he might have had a complete pictorial record of everything that had taken place here. He cast farther, and in a soft spot found more and smaller bear tracks. There had, then, been more than one bear.

Buckles, who as usual had been chasing chickarees, came out of the forest to join him. Jase felt a little easier. With rare exceptions, such as the renegade, bears were timid and would flee from people. But it was comforting to have company when inspecting a place where bears had congregated.

The Airedale dropped his nose to the earth and sniffed. Not as keen-scented as a hound's, Buckles' nose was still sufficiently good to tell him what had been here. Buckles ran toward the far end of the little park. Following with his eyes, Jase saw what he had not seen before.

A rank growth of weeds formed their own little jungle where the park met the forest, but something had beaten a path through them. Camera ready, Jase went

slowly forward. He examined the beaten path and stopped in surprise.

There was a tiny bog here, which explained the lush weeds. So many bears had walked back and forth through it that they had trod a path three inches deep by a yard wide. Plainly marked, the path led on into the forest and disappeared around a big tree. Jase's heart fluttered. Bears might be inoffensive creatures as far as man was concerned. But suppose not all bears knew that? Suppose he ran onto the renegade?

However, there was only one renegade that he knew of, the one that had attacked the two fishermen, and it hadn't been heard from since. Following the path might yield a rare picture. But before he followed, Jase called Buckles to heel. If it should be necessary, Buckles would protect him—Jase hoped.

Marked for a ways by dried mud that the bears had picked up in the bog, the path wound in and out among the trees. Jase started at a motion, but it was only a black squirrel that, running on the far side of a fallen tree, showed only its back. Jase jumped again when a grouse took thundering wing.

A quarter of a mile from the dead moose he came to another little opening in the trees and stopped to stare.

In the very center of the little glade was a mud hole about twelve feet in diameter. Fed by a spring with force enough to keep the hole muddy, but without enough volume to overflow it, the mud was literally

churned to pieces by bear tracks. A half-dozen beaten trails led away from it into the forest. Jase had stumbled on a bear wallow, a place where, perhaps because its mineral components were soothing, bears came to soak themselves in the mud. Smelling or stumbling across the dead moose, they'd gone from the wallow to it and come back again.

Taking the fascinated Buckles with him, Jase turned back the way he had come. He trotted to the park in which the dead moose lay, climbed to the ledge from which he'd taken the Cat Bird's picture, and ran excitedly up it. There were plenty of bear pictures but, Jase grinned, he had never seen one of a bear taking its beauty treatment. He might just be lucky enough to get one that very day.

When he thought he was opposite the wallow, Jase slowed to a walk. He came to a beaten path with bear tracks in it that ascended the slope, followed the ledge for a ways, and then disappeared in a narrow canyon that cut the high cliff. A hundred feet beyond the spot where the bear path joined the ledge, Jase came to a turn in the path from which he could see the wallow.

Happily he set up his telephoto lens and clamped the 35 mm. camera on its tripod. He focused on the wallow, took a light reading, adjusted the camera, and sat down to wait. Buckles, who saw no reason to revise his dim view of photography, especially that part of it

which involved waiting, rambled on up the ledge to entertain himself.

Jase considered his chances. The path below him, leading to the wallow, was only about thirty or thirty-five yards away and in plain sight, as was the wallow itself. Remembering to bring a lunch and a canteen of water, he'd be here with daylight, stay all day long, and into the night. He'd use both cameras, equipping his $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ reflex with the flash gun. Perhaps he'd be able to get a flash picture of bears on the path. It should be effective and he knew it would be rare. As far as Jase was aware even Creedon, the master of them all, had no flash pictures of bears. Certainly they were hard to get, but definitely they were worth trying for.

Jase froze when he saw motion in the trees beyond the wallow. Presently a small black bear walked into the clearing, stopped to sniff at something that interested him, and sat down to scratch his hairy belly with a front paw. Jase got that picture, flicked another frame into place, and took a second picture of the bear poised on the edge of the wallow.

Suddenly, with all the reckless abandon of a youngster racing into a swimming pool on a hot July day, the bear charged into the wallow. Mud flew high and splashed on all sides. The bear turned around three times, exactly like a dog settling for a nap, and lay down to enjoy the luxury of his mud bath. Jase got three shots of him there and waited. The bear turned

over to soak his other side, then ten minutes later shuffled out of the wallow. A shower of mud sprayed in all directions as, again almost like a dog, he shook himself and ambled into the forest.

No more bears came, and when it was too dark to take pictures, Jase gathered up his equipment, called Buckles, and strode down the ledge. The dog joined him, and they made their way back to camp.

Jase fed the Airedale, cooked his own meal, and sat back to watch a full moon that rolled like a huge golden wheel up the nose of a little slope. Soft moonlight made the park almost as bright as day.

Jase yawned happily. He still did not know if he could be a successful wildlife photographer. But if he failed now, he would at least know that he had given it his best. He had planned as well as he could and worked as hard as he could. About to go to bed, Jase saw motion on the moonlit slope.

An antlered buck raced into view, reared, and cut the air with its front hoofs.

ELEVEN *RENEGADE*

Always ready for any adventure that came along, but not regarding deer as adventurous, Buckles expressed his feelings in a canine sigh. He had smelled the buck and identified it long before Jase saw it. But deer always ran. They couldn't be caught and they would never offer a good fight; therefore they were uninteresting. The photographic aspects of the situation intrigued Buckles not at all. In his opinion, a heaping plate of hamburger had far more eye appeal than any deer playing in the moonlight.

When Jase began quietly to attach his flash gun to the reflex camera, Buckles bowed to the inevitable. There were going to be more pictures and there was nothing he could do about it, so he gave himself over to watching the deer.

Tense and quivering, completely enmeshed in some overpowering spell cast by the moon itself, it stood motionless on the hillock. Then it kicked up its heels, lashed out with both rear feet, ran a hundred yards, and pranced like a circus pony. It came tearing wildly back, and lay down to roll over and over.

Buckles sat down and cocked a supercilious ear. He too knew the witchery of moonlight, but he usually reacted by howling at the moon. If he leaped and bounded, there would have to be a good reason for it and chasing chickarees ranked high on Buckles' list of good reasons. Feeling himself far superior to any such undignified display as the buck was staging, Buckles had only a figurative sneer for it.

He looked wonderingly at his master when, with camera in hand, Jase began stalking softly toward the buck. Had he been able to speak, Buckles could have told Jase that there was no need for stealth. Having given itself completely to the moon, for the time being the buck had forgotten everything else. It was not conscious that a man and dog were near.

The flash bulb exploded and Jase got his picture. The buck jumped skittishly, knowing this was alien but still too much in the moon's spell to take alarm. Jase got another picture, and another. Finally coming to its senses, getting the full scent of the man and dog, the buck snorted and bounced away.

Because he might as well have some fun out of this too, Buckles chased the buck a little way. Panting slightly, he trotted back to Jase and wagged an amiable tail. He could see no point whatever in photography. But obviously Jase could, and as a good dog, it behooved Buckles to bend himself to the wishes of his master. The Airedale waited expectantly for the next

move and was glad when Jase turned back toward camp. That was good, for tomorrow promised to be a big day. Buckles knew of at least three chickarees that had grown a little careless the last few times he'd chased them.

The dog slipped into the tent, watched gravely while Jase undressed and crawled into his sleeping bag, and padded out again. He himself was not sleepy, and anyhow the best sleeping was done in the sun's warmth. He wished greatly to go wandering, but did not because of the night. He was unafraid of it, but his master was sleeping and Buckles must stand guard. For want of something else to do, he amused himself chivvying a herd of deer across the park, then lay down beside the fireplace.

When daylight came, Buckles charged into the tent, stuck his cold nose against Jase's cheek, and began to wash his master's face with a sloppy tongue. Jase came reluctantly awake, and the dog did an eager little dance by alternately lifting his front paws up and putting them down again. Jase glowered.

"For pete's sake! Just because you're awake, everybody should be?"

Buckles beamed, knowing this for only a momentary spurt of grumpiness. Jase stretched, yawned, and finally grinned.

"All right. All right, you old flea trap. Be right with you."

Anxious to be off, Buckles fretted while Jase prepared and ate breakfast. The morning and evening meals, in Buckles' opinion, were other human eccentricities. He himself ate only once a day and found that quite enough. While Jase washed the dishes, made his lunch, and filled his canteen, Buckles paced nervously back and forth. He watched critically while Jase arranged his cameras and gadget bag, knowing just where each would go. When they were in place, Buckles whirled around to lead off.

He ostentatiously ignored the rabbit blind, hoping that, if he failed to see it, Jase would miss it too. The strategy seemed to work and Buckles' spirits became gayer. Obviously they were going into the woods, and as long as they did, where they went made no difference.

Sure that there would be no stopping, Buckles raced happily off to hunt a chickaree he'd already stalked at least six times. Its home was in a big spruce that was surrounded by smaller trees, and when Buckles came near, he began to slink. Head down, ears flattened, he soft-footed toward the grove. Just within its borders he halted, searching with his eyes and listening with his ears. He saw the chickaree, a darting little wisp of a thing, descend one tree, start toward another, and halt halfway between to scrape the ground with busy paws.

Buckles continued his stalk, eyes fixed on the chickaree, and when he thought he was near enough, he

rushed. Just as he was on the verge of catching it, the squirrel leaped, dodged, sprang three feet into a tree, climbed another four feet, turned completely around, and chattered at Buckles.

The dog sat down, again frustrated and not understanding why. It never occurred to him that the chickarees were merely playing or that they always saw him long before he sighted them. These chickarees, merely to stay alive, had to elude coyotes, hawks, martens, weasels, foxes, all master hunters who lived their trade and practiced it constantly. Escaping a dog, apparently always in the nick of time, was sheer kindergarten stuff. But Buckles had not yet learned that.

Giving up the chickaree, the dog paused to sniff at the skunk's den, then raced off in search of Jase. He found his master's trail, skipped happily along it, and brought up short.

Jase sat on the ledge, back against the cliff and telephoto-equipped camera focused on the bear wallow. Along with his lunch, canteen, and gadget bag, the other camera, flash-equipped, rested on a little shelf in the cliff. Seeing Buckles, Jase said softly, "Quiet, pooch."

For a short time, Buckles lingered near. But he was far too restless to stay for very long and obviously this would be another day when he must depend on himself. Judging by past experience, his master would be here

until night came. The dog turned and went down the ledge.

Back in the forest, Buckles enjoyed rushing at a flock of grouse and seeing them thunder into the air. For variety, he chased a rabbit and then a fox. Four times he wandered back to Jase, and when the sun was highest he slept for a couple of hours near his master. The evening shadows were long and he was stalking another chickaree when he halted suddenly.

For no explainable reason he was uneasy. Though he could hear or smell nothing that seemed out of place, he sensed something alien and dangerous. Forgetting the chickaree, he ran back toward Jase. The wind eddying out of the valley bore a terrible scent, that of the bear which was like no other.

Buckles bristled, and had he been alone he would have run. But he was not alone and he could not run; Jase was in danger too. The Airedale raced to the bear trail and plunged down it to give battle.

After spending all morning on the ledge, Jase had just one very doubtful picture. A small bear had come out of the woods, poised on the edge of the wallow, and almost instantly raced back to cover. Evidently a cross wind had borne Jase's scent to it.

At noon Jase ate his sandwiches, sipped sparingly from his canteen, and waited while the afternoon dragged interminably on. He must have patience, John

Riggs had said, and patience he would have, now and after dark. If he did not get a flash picture of a bear tonight, there was tomorrow night, the night after, and a succession of other nights when he could try again. Certainly he'd never get one if he did not try.

When evening's long shadows sloped across the valley, Jase took a reading with his light meter and discovered that the needle scarcely quivered. He removed the telephoto 35 mm. camera from his tripod, and clamped the $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ flash camera on. As he did so, it suddenly occurred to him that, if he succeeded at all, he would need the wildest sort of wild luck.

He had no possible way of knowing whether any bears would go up or down the path at all. If they did, they probably would scent him and flee, for the path was only a little more than a hundred feet away. Even if he did not frighten them, just how, in the dark of night, was he to know they were there? About to dismantle his cameras and go back to camp, Jase looked toward the wallow and gasped.

Plain enough even in the semi-darkness that filled the valley, a huge bear had come out to the edge of the wallow. It stood very still, as though testing wind currents, and the white star many black bears have on their chests seemed to accent its owner's blackness. The bear turned its head to listen. Then, without going into the wallow at all, it shuffled toward the path that led up to the ledge.

Almost forgetting to breathe, not daring to believe this incredible stroke of good luck, Jase focused his camera exactly on that place where the bear must cross the ledge, and waited with his hand on the cable release. This one-in-a-million chance might yet pay off, though any number of things could turn the bear. If nothing happened, if the animal crossed where it should and he got a picture, he knew it would be what John Riggs meant when he mentioned *the* picture.

Jase turned his head to look for the bear, and in the thickening gloom saw it still shuffling among the trees. It was coming, definitely on the path, and Jase tried hard to quiet his pounding heart. It seemed to him that the bear must hear it.

Suddenly Buckles appeared, bristled and stiff-legged, and rushed down the path to give battle. For a second, not exactly sure what had happened, Jase refused to believe it. Buckles' rolling snarl brought reality to the sickening situation. The chance of a lifetime, within his grasp, had been ruined by his own dog!

He looked down and saw the bear break out of the forest. But instead of fleeing, it began to climb the brush-grown slope down which Buckles was rushing. Jase licked dry lips; on his tongue was the awful taste of beginning fear.

The biggest black bear, according to the books Jase had read, would flee when attacked by the smallest

dog. But this one did not. Instead, like a great, overgrown cat, the bear bore swiftly down on the dog. Jase stood rooted, helpless to do anything and knowing it. He had no rifle. A cast stone, or even a rock, would mean no more than the bite of a flea to such a bear.

Buckles dodged and rolled down the slope, the bear after him. They disappeared among the trees and Jase heard Buckles snarling. The truth, that he had not dared admit, burst upon Jase.

This *was* the renegade, the bear that had mauled two fishermen, and something besides chance had been bringing it up to the ledge. Standing near the wallow, the same wind currents that had warned the smaller bear had told it of Jase's presence. It had not started up the path because it wished to go into the canyon, but because it had smelled him! And now it was attacking Buckles!

"Hi-eee!" Jase shouted, desperately hoping to scare it.

The bear reappeared, started running up the slope, and Jase's last lingering doubts disappeared. The bear was coming *because* of a man. It was coming to kill!

A streak of sheer fury, Buckles raced up behind the monster and sliced savagely at its rear. The bear swapped ends, lashed out, and Buckles went spinning through the air. His fighting snarl died away in a moan. Jase swallowed hard. There was complete silence

except for the sound of the bear scrambling up the slope.

Sweating, more frightened than he had ever been in his life, Jase grabbed the gadget bag and the telephoto-equipped camera, slung the tripod over his shoulder, and ran madly up the ledge. He did not know where he was going, but only that he must go. Somehow, somewhere, there had to be a refuge from the terror that haunted him.

He stopped suddenly, realizing that he could go no farther. The fog in his brain cleared away. In the nearly complete darkness that enveloped him now, he saw the end of the thin ledge and the awful slope below. Unaccountably, he thought of his father.

“Jason,” he had said from both experience and wisdom, “there may be times in your life when, no matter where you turn, you see only disaster. You won’t know what to do or how to do it. Instead of flying in all directions, go ahead on your original course and you’ll be all right.”

Jase set his jaw grimly, knowing suddenly just what his father would do. If he had determined to be a wildlife photographer, and if he were here now, he’d still try to get his picture. He would not know what was going to happen next, or whether he’d live to see the picture, but he would try to get it.

With shaking hands he set up his tripod and pointed his flash camera down the ledge. Forcibly he reminded

himself that bears were basically afraid of humans. Jase swung his telephoto-equipped camera by its straps. The lens was heavy, as good a weapon as he could find under the circumstances.

He strained eyes and ears into the near-blackness. He heard only the wind sighing among the trees in the valley. He saw only the ledge, the slope, and the cliff above him.

Then came a sound born of no wind, no tree, no trick of the imagination. It could come only from something made of flesh and blood. A labored 'uh-uh-uh,' it sounded at exactly-spaced intervals. Nothing except a panting animal made such a noise; the bear was coming up the ledge. Then he heard the shuffle of its ponderous feet. There was something definitely and terribly final about its approach. The renegade seemed to know that its quarry was cornered.

A few seconds later Jase saw it. Fifty feet down the ledge, it was a deep shadow in a mass of shadows. The hand Jase held on the cable release turned to ice. He could not push the plunger, but he had to, he did.

The flash bulb exploded, and its weird white light turned the ledge into something blindingly unreal. Forty feet away now, the renegade looked as big as an elephant. Head up, jaws parted, tongue lolling, the beast was staring straight at the flash.

Then it was gone, plunging down the slope. Jase heard it rolling and sliding, and the avalanche that

followed as it went downward. The great bear had been turned by an exploding flash bulb, magic it could not understand.

Jase stood weak-kneed and trembling. He had the renegade on film and knew it. It was *the* picture. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity had presented itself and he'd been ready. And being ready had probably saved his life.

He pushed the spent bulb out and inserted a fresh one. The bear was gone, but there was no assurance that it would not come back and Jase must be ready. He walked shakily down the ledge and stopped where the trail ascended to it.

“Buckles!” he called.

The mocking echoes were flung back at him: “Buckles! Buckles! Buckles!” But no dog climbed the path and there was no answering yelp to show where Buckles might be. Jase knew he was somewhere down there, certainly hurt and perhaps dead. He must not be left there, but to go look for him at once meant only that Jase would have to stumble around in the dark. He needed his electric torch and his axe, the best weapon he had.

Jase ran down the ledge.

TWELVE *THE CAT BIRD*

When Jase came into the park, he stopped running. He was winded, and the cold night air made him gasp for breath. He made his way to the tent and fumbled for his gasoline lantern. He tried to light it, but a sharp little gust of wind blew the match out and left him in total darkness. Jase shivered, not entirely sure that it was the wind that made him do so.

He closed the tent flaps to shut the wind out, lighted his lantern, and hung it on the ridgepole. He breathed easier. Common sense told him that the worst danger was past, but it was comforting to have a light all the same. Jase caught up his electric torch and tried its beam. It was bright and piercing; bulb and batteries were in good shape. Jase stuffed a roll of bandages and a pair of scissors from his first-aid kit into a side pocket.

Buckles had attacked the renegade on the path leading over the ledge. If Buckles was dead—Jase swallowed hard and crossed his fingers—he lay somewhere near the path. If wounded, he might be anywhere. Possibly he was even now trying to drag

himself to camp. More likely, if he could move at all, he was looking for the bear. When Buckles started a fight, unless he was forcibly torn away, he would make it a fight to the finish.

Jase left his gadget bag in the tent but kept the flash camera dangling down his chest and the telephoto slung over his shoulder. The renegade, not only willing but anxious to attack dog or man, was somewhere up in the dark valley. An exploding flash bulb had frightened him once and might a second time, and Jase needed all the weapons at his command. The telephoto lens would be a handy club if it were needed. Electric torch in his right hand, Jase stepped outside to retrieve his axe from the woodpile.

The gasoline lantern burning within penetrated the tent's fabric and gave the outer walls a translucent glow. Jase decided to let the lantern burn. He felt a crushing loneliness, as though he were the only person in the world, and to know there would be light waiting for him at camp provided some small measure of comfort. He stooped to wrench his axe from the block of wood in which he had stuck it.

“Stand right still! Don't even *try* to move!”

The words came from the outer darkness. They were so unexpected, and yet so familiar, that they froze Jase in his tracks. He had heard that voice before. Long ago, or was it so long? The man who owned it had asked Jase for a ride and been given one. Later, the

same man had hunted him through the dark spruces. It was the Cat Bird, and the Cat Bird had already shot at him. He would not hesitate to shoot again.

“Straighten up!” the Cat Bird commanded.

Jase obeyed, knowing as he did so that he was perfectly silhouetted against the lighted canvas wall. He squinted into the darkness and saw nothing, but at the same time he knew the Cat Bird could see him clearly. To move was hopeless.

“Stand as you are,” the Cat Bird ordered. “And don’t reach for that axe.”

He came from the darkness like a spirit, and stood in the outer fringe of light, only half visible. But there was no mistaking him. Jase suddenly thought wildly of the Cheshire cat. The Cat Bird’s legs and body were a blur, but the satisfied grin on his face stood out very clearly. So did the rifle in his hands. He spoke again.

“It took me a little while to figure how my pictures got all over the place, and longer to find your camp. You took the picture, didn’t you?”

Jase found his voice. “Yes.”

“Didn’t you know I’d be back?”

“Tom Rainse figured you’d left the Lasher.”

“What I thought he’d figure, just what I thought he’d figure, and that’s why I stayed. But I’m leaving now.”

“You are?” Jase asked, his mind busy with a sudden idea.

“Yes, and you’re leaving with me. When your warden pals come back to your camp, they’ll find a little note. It’ll tell them the Cat Bird’s gone. It’ll also tell them that, if anybody comes after me, they’ll find your corpse before they find the Cat Bird.”

“You won’t get away with it,” said Jase, turning his body slightly toward the voice.

“You’d be surprised at the things I get away with. Now I’m coming in to have a look around. Unless you want a dead kid photographer found right here, you won’t do anything foolish.”

Jase’s left hand stole to the dangling cable release of his flash camera.

“I said don’t move!” The words were as venomous as the strike of a snake.

“I’m not moving.”

“What’s that on your shoulder?”

“A camera.” Jase was sure now that the Cat Bird could see him only in silhouette, and so had not noticed the other camera on his chest.

“Take it off and hand it to me.”

Jase removed the telephoto camera with his right hand and let it dangle by the straps. He stood tensely, ready for exactly the right second. Since he had his back to the tent, he could see the Cat Bird better than the poacher could see him.

A step at a time, the Cat Bird came out of the darkness and into the faint light. His rifle, gripped in

both hands, never wavered from Jase. Now he was a spirit no longer, but a man, the same inoffensive-looking man with the deceptively mild voice that had asked Jase for a lift. The Cat Bird was six feet away, then five. He came a half step nearer and Jase pushed the plunger on his cable release.

The fierce white light of an exploding flash bulb burst in the Cat Bird's face, but even as it did Jase saw him take a quick sidewise step. For a split second he shut his eyes against the blinding glare. Jase leaped forward, swinging his heavy, telephoto-equipped camera by the straps. He felt it collide solidly with the Cat Bird's head and at the same time sensed, rather than heard, the rifle go off. As though pushed by a heavy hand, Jase staggered back.

He reeled, not at all sure just what had happened. He had a hazy sensation of floating, as though through a swirling bank of clouds, and his right side had unaccountably gone numb. There was no pain, though it seemed as though there should be. He steadied himself against the tent and shook his head to clear away the red mists that were swirling through his brain.

He tried hard to bring himself out of it. It seemed as though he should remember exactly what had happened, but he couldn't. He had taken a picture—but which camera had he used? Raising his 35 mm., he saw his precious telephoto lens bent at a thirty-degree angle away from the mount. Hot and bitter tears came to his

eyes. He remembered now. He had hoped to spend the summer in the Lasher, taking pictures of wildlife. Now he couldn't because his telephoto lens was broken. It would be impossible to get another; they cost a great deal of money.

Half conscious, Jase still remembered to lay his cameras down carefully as he staggered away from the tent and lurched toward the creek. Half lowering himself and half falling, he buried his face and upper body in the ice-cold water.

The shock quickly revived him, and with the return of coherent thought came a rising panic. After blinding the Cat Bird with a flash bulb, he'd hit him over the head with his telephoto lens. Where was the Cat Bird now?

Jase tried to get up, stumbled against a big boulder, and using the boulder as support, pulled himself erect. His right side remained numb, and when Jase touched it, his left hand came away streaked with a mixture of blood and water from his drenched clothing. He had, then, been wounded. Just how badly he did not know and there was no time to find out.

Again on his feet, he felt more steady, and made his way back to the tent. Unable to find his electric torch, he ducked through the flaps and plucked the burning lantern from its hook. Carrying the lantern in his left hand, he went outside the tent and held his light high.

No longer dangerous, looking like nothing more than a heap of disheveled clothing, the Cat Bird lay where he'd fallen. Jase felt a spasm of cold fear. He'd hit as hard as he could when he swung the lens. If he'd killed the man . . .

He tried to transfer the lantern from his left hand to his right and almost dropped it. His right hand was numb; he could not even close his fingers. Setting the lantern on a chunk of firewood, he knelt beside the unconscious Cat Bird and explored with his left hand. The man was breathing and his heart was beating; he was still alive.

Jase tried to get up but stumbled to his knees again. He crawled toward the woodpile, and as he did his left hand felt the cold steel of the Cat Bird's rifle. Jase dragged it with him to the woodpile. Finding a long stick, he used it as a crutch to lift himself erect. Propping the rifle's stock against his chest, he awkwardly levered a fresh shell in with his left hand and let the hammer down to safe position. A spell of nausea rippled through him.

He considered the idea of tying the Cat Bird's hands and feet, then knew how impossible was such a notion. Unable to use his right hand at all, scarcely able to stand erect, he could not do an effective job of tying anything. Nor could he drive the jeep through the rough and twisting trace; therefore it was impossible to go for help.

Jase leaned against the tent, and when its canvas walls sagged beneath his weight he sank to a sitting position beside it. That was better and more comfortable, and he did not feel quite so sick. Resting the rifle across his upraised knees, he drew the hammer back to firing position with his left thumb.

The gasoline lantern burned brightly. Out in the park, the various beasts whose nighttime forage ground it was, snuffled and snorted uneasily. Jase fought an overpowering urge to sleep.

He hadn't the least idea of what he was going to do when and if the Cat Bird revived. He could neither tie him nor take him anywhere. But neither, Jase thought with grim determination, could he let him go. He'd have to sit here, and sit here and sit here . . .

Jase jerked himself awake to find the Cat Bird struggling to a sitting position. His eyes were wide and staring, and he seemed very pale. Jase realized that a 400 mm. telephoto lens, when converted into a weapon, was very effective. Anybody hit over the head with one would naturally show the effect.

Jase muttered thickly, "Stay where you are."

The gasoline lantern hissed monotonously. Jase kept his eyes on the Cat Bird, and was aware that the Cat Bird was also eyeing him. His name, Jase thought fuzzily, should have been shortened to Cat, for his eyes were those of a cat: a cunning cat that plotted and planned to leap on a victim and bring it down. Why had

he ever thought those eyes were soft and gentle? They weren't. They were sly, plotting, scheming.

Jase realized suddenly that the man had come out of shock and was sizing up the situation.

"You like sitting there, kid?" he asked slyly.

"I like it, and you'd better like it, too!"

"Your shirt's bloody. You may be bleeding to death."

"You scare me."

"Don't you trust me?"

"What do you think?"

They were more than ever a cat's eyes, a crouching cougar's eyes. Jase was positive that, if he could, this man would kill him and go back into the wilderness he knew so well. Then who could catch him again? Tom Rainse and Mel Garth, two experienced wardens, hadn't been able to do it.

Wanting desperately to go to sleep, to relax, to rest, to forget everything, Jase kept himself awake by biting his lip so hard he tasted blood on his tongue. The Cat Bird—the Cat—saw and knew. He inched forward. Jase's hand tightened on the trigger, and the Cat Bird resumed his original position.

"You're tired, kid."

Jase said fiercely, "I'm not!"

But he knew that he was, more tired than he could remember being. He must not give way to weariness. There was a job to be done and only he could do it. He

had a wild notion that, if he didn't do it well, his father would be ashamed of him and make him come home.

“How about it, kid?”

Jase jerked his head erect. “How about what?”

“We can deal.”

“Sit still!” said Jase sleepily.

The Cat Bird answered softly, “I won't have to sit much longer. You lose, kid.”

In spite of himself, Jase knew he was right. It was impossible to stay awake much longer. He was very cold, his side was throbbing, and his eyes felt glazed. The lantern seemed to be darkening; he looked through a shimmering haze. Vaguely he saw shadows moving; was it an animal? No, it was—

Then he fainted.

When Jase awoke, he looked through sleep-ridden eyes at a ghost. He came fully awake and the ghost took the shape of a trim, white-uniformed nurse with a pleasant smile and a voice to match.

“How do you feel?”

“Tired. Where am I?”

“In the hospital at Sells.”

“What time is it?”

“Eleven o'clock. You've been under sedatives and had a nice long sleep.”

“I see. Can I have something to eat?”

The nurse laughed. “Sure. Now we know you’ll be all right. I’ll bring something right away. You have visitors waiting, too.”

The door closed behind her and almost immediately opened again to admit Tom Rainse, Mel Garth—and Buckles. Buckles bounded over and reared to put both front paws on the bed. Jase encircled the dog’s neck with his left arm and would have added his right if it hadn’t still been numb.

“Buckles! Where did you find him?”

“Maybe three miles from your camp,” Mel drawled. “He was trying to climb a tree where sat about as big a bear as we ever killed in the Lasher.”

“But I saw the bear kill him!”

“You saw the bear hit him,” Mel corrected. “Probably knocked him out, but I guess he went right back to the bear soon’s he came to. These Airedales haven’t any more sense than photographers.”

“It was the renegade.”

“We know,” Tom grinned. “After we picked you up, you babbled enough about it to convince anybody.”

“Where’s the Cat Bird?”

“Where he belongs, and where he’ll be for the next nine hundred years, I hope. You idiot! What’d you tackle him for?”

“He tackled me.”

“And in the scuffle he creased your right side and you bopped him over the head, eh?” Mel added.

“Soon’s you get out of here, in about a week, I’m going to paddle your hunder hard enough to beat some sense into you! Poachers are a warden’s business, son.”

“How’d you fellows happen to come?”

“We were putting up some pictures over near Granny Creek when Smoky picked up the Cat Bird’s trail. Soon’s we figured that our little pal was heading toward your camp, we decided to push right on even if it was night. And a good thing, too.”

“Jase,” Tom interrupted, “do you remember those pictures you took of the burned area for me?”

“Sure.”

“I gave ’em to Dr. Goodell, one of the Department’s big brains. He says you can have a job if you want it.”

“What job?” Jase demanded. “What are you talking about?”

“The conservation magazine the Department’s getting out,” Tom said. “Dr. Goodell’s going to edit it and you, I hope, are going to be the official photographer. Not much salary,” he grinned, “but all expenses paid. Want it? You’ll be afield most of the time.”

“Gosh yes!”

“Of course you may not keep it long,” Mel said. “We took your pictures and stuff to John Riggs. Look.”

He held out an 8 × 10 glossy enlargement of the renegade bear on the ledge. Its head was up, fur bristled, mouth snarling. The flash bulb had caught all

the menace and primitive savagery of the beast's hatred. Jase's heart leaped; even Alex Creedon would have been proud of such a picture. He tried to sound casual.

“It isn't bad.”

“Bad!” Mel snorted. “I thought John would spin himself into a fit! ‘Look at it!’ he said. ‘Just look at it! The picture of a lifetime!’ ”

Then, unknowingly, Mel used the same term that Jase had once dreamed would identify him.

“Five-six years from now,” he said, “we'll all be talking about Mason, the famed wildlife cameraman.”

JIM KJELGAARD

THE author of WILDLIFE CAMERAMAN spent his boyhood in country much like that described in this book. “Those mountain farms,” Jim Kjelgaard remembers, “produced more rocks to the acre than anything else. But they provided my brothers and me with plenty of ammunition for fighting the neighboring boys across the creek. One of our jobs was to shoo the cows out of the corn patch, which was more exciting than it sounds. There were always two or three yearling bulls in the dairy herd, and when we wanted to get home quickly, we’d each grab one by the tail. The bulls would light out for the barn, their feet hitting the ground about every two yards, and ours in proportion. But the really entrancing thing was the forest that surrounded us. Mountains filled with game, and trout streams loaded with fish were so appealing that quite often we didn’t have time to attend school—until the sad day when our teacher called at the house!”

Jim Kjelgaard has been writing since he was ten, beginning with outdoor articles and short stories. His first published book was FOREST PATROL, based on the

wilderness experiences of himself and his brother, who is a forest ranger. Since then he has written many others concerned with the wilderness and its wildlife that he loves so much. BIG RED, IRISH RED, and OUTLAW RED are stories about Irish Setters. HAUNT FOX, KALAK OF THE ICE (a polar bear) and CHIP, THE DAM BUILDER (a beaver) are wild-animal stories. SNOW DOG and WILD TREK describe the adventures of a trapper and his half-wild dog. REBEL SIEGE and BUCKSKIN BRIGADE are tales of American frontiersmen, and FIRE-HUNTER is a story about prehistoric man. The cougar-hunting LION HOUND and the greyhound story, DESERT DOG, are laid in the Southwest, where Jim now lives. A NOSE FOR TROUBLE and TRAILING TROUBLE are adventure-mysteries centered around a young game warden and his dog (the same Tom Rainse and Smoky who appear in this book).

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected including the substitution of the mathematical '×' where camera and photographic specifications were described.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

The illustrations can not be used as they are not in the public domain.

A cover was created for the eBook.

[The end of *Wildlife Cameraman* by Jim Kjelgaard]