

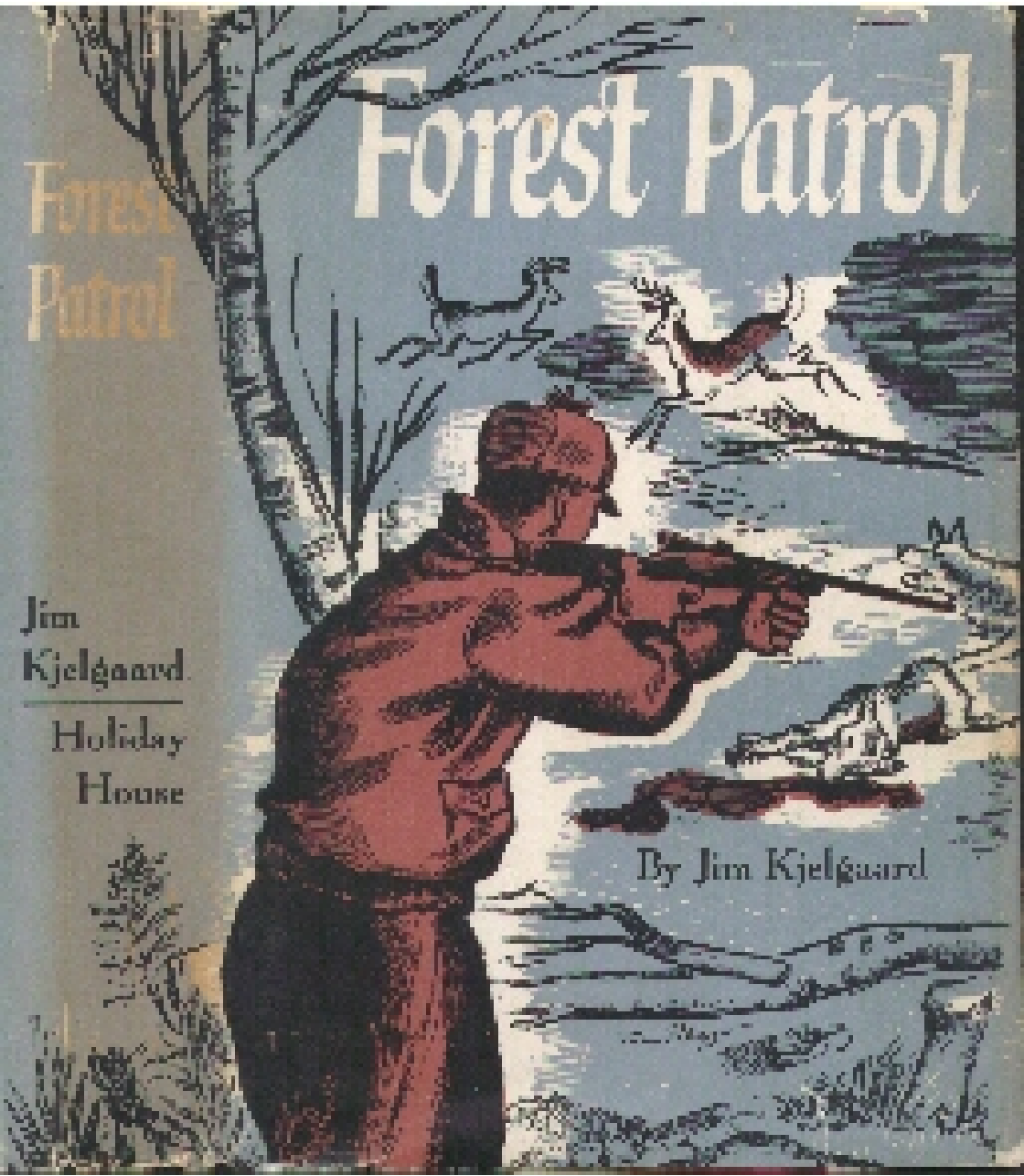
Forest
Patrol

Forest Patrol

Jim
Kjelgaard

Holiday
House

By Jim Kjelgaard



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FOREST
PATROL

By Jim Kjelgaard

Illustrated by Tony Palazzo

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FOREST PATROL

Chapter One

THE MAD MONTH

John Belden was still ten yards from the trap when he knew that it was sprung. The twisted wire that he had carefully buried on the bank now stretched tautly from the trunk of an aspen sapling into one of the black pools of Spatterdown Creek.

Frost-brittle grass cracked under the soles of his knee-length rubber boots as he strode forward along the creek bank. He knelt by the aspen, grasped the wire in a gloved hand, and tugged gently. The wire coiled about his knees as he brought it in. On the end of the fifteen feet of wire, a five-pound boulder with the trap chain snug against it came into view. Trailing the boulder on its twenty inches of chain was a steel trap with a drowned mink fast in it.

John pressed the spring down and took the mink from the trap. He ran his hands along the little animal to wring the water from its fur, and held it up by the neck. The mink, he saw, would grade number one medium and its fur would sell for about seven dollars and a half. He grinned. That put him seven dollars and a half closer to the Ranger School at Tankota.

John dropped the mink into a canvas gunny sack containing two muskrats he had taken from other traps, and stepped down to re-set the trap. He knew that if there was another mink in the vicinity, it would be attracted by the scent of the one he had already caught.

Wading in the water to avoid leaving any human odor on the bank, he went five feet down-stream from the aspen sapling. The roots of a fallen tree formed an interlocking maze on the edge of the creek there, and at the upper end of the roots was a small hole half buried by water--just the kind of hole a mink would be likely to explore when coursing this stream. John pressed the spring down, set the trap on his knee, and laid it squarely in front of the hole, making sure that the trap was covered by scent-destroying water.

Hanging on to the wire so that it would not jerk the trap, he tossed the boulder back out into the stream. The surplus wire, which ran from the aspen sapling to the trap, he covered with leaves.

Minks are water animals. When another stepped into the trap, its natural instinct would lead it into the water rather than out on the land. The ring on the trap chain would slide down the wire and the boulder would keep the trap submerged. Still pulling into the water, the trapped mink would quickly drown. It was a merciful way of trapping, left no crippled animals that pulled out of traps, and lost no furs.

Finally John splashed water over the buried wire to help kill such human scent as might be on the leaves, and climbed back up the bank. It had been a good day. The muskrats were worth not less than a dollar and a quarter each. If he could continue to make ten dollars a day he could enter the Ranger School next fall. But, he sighed, it was impossible to do that well consistently.

He had a hundred and sixty traps set in two circular twenty-mile lines that swung away from his cabin and back again so that the last trap on each line left him close to the cabin at

night. The lines were looked at every other day. But frequently he covered an entire line without taking a single fur.

The sharp November wind was blowing down Spatterdown Creek and John kept his face turned to it as he started up through a grove of aspen trees. It was good to be here, he felt, good to be nineteen, and alive, and in the woods. He took his hat off to let the wind sting his tanned cheek and ruffle his straight black hair, and began humming.

He had started out at four o'clock that morning. But, though it lacked only two hours of the early fall darkness, he was not tired. He turned up a waterless side gulley that led over the high knoll where he had built his trapping cabin. Borne on the wings of the wind, a little storm of leaves swept before him. John laughed. Everything in the woods was good to see—even leaves blowing in the autumn wind.

An orphan, when he had graduated from High School two years ago, his teachers had advised him to give up his dream of becoming a Ranger. Life in the Alleghany Mountain back country, they said, was a lonely one and a young man had better seek his future in the cities where there was a greater possibility of making money. But John had clung stubbornly to his chosen course. He had wanted to take a four-year course in a forestry school, but lacked the money. He had determined at least to take the one-year course at the Ranger School, and had turned to the woods to earn the money to pay for it. And the more he was in them, the more he saw that they were the only place for him.

A brown grouse flushed almost under his feet, and like a feathered bomb went rocking away through the aspens. The

grouse's flight was weaving and crooked. A great shower of leaves arose as he dropped to the ground, to rise almost immediately and come flying back. John watched, and understood.

November was the mad month, but the madness had reason. Grouse families, born in the same nest and together all summer, would suddenly take to the air in wild flights that apparently lacked both aim and purpose. Some of these flights were distance hops that continued until the bird's beating wings would no longer bear it aloft, some were short skips from place to place as though the grouse was unable to make up its mind where it wanted to go. But when the flights were finished, grouse families were broken up and there was new blood in each community.

Buck deer roved the November woods with swollen necks and bloodshot eyes. Hundreds of savage--and sometimes fatal--battles were fought between them on lonely ridges and in lost gulleys as they settled the all-important question of which was the better buck. A buck in November, John knew, would attack anything and was the most dangerous animal in the woods. Among all wild animals, deer were the most dangerous anyway. You never knew what they were going to do.

His hat in his hand, John continued up the gulley. He stopped at a slight motion in the aspens, and his right hand stole down to the twenty-two revolver at his belt. The motion in the aspens was not repeated, and one less experienced in the woods might have passed on with the thought that he had seen nothing. But John knew better. Presently a fine big cock grouse, that like John had caught a flicker of motion, but

unlike him had passed it up as of no consequence, walked out on the end of a fallen log. John raised the revolver slowly, took aim, and fired. Shot through the head, the grouse tumbled from the log into the leaves. John picked it up and went on. No game was better eating than grouse.

He came to a huge rock wedged in the side of the gulley, climbed to the back of the rock, and walked out to the edge to sit with his legs dangling. Below him Spatterdown Creek was a silver ribbon winding away to lose itself in the distance. Endless ranges of hills, overshadowed by November's gray sky but with a faint suggestion of October's blue hazes still hanging over them, stretched as far as he could see. John looked at them, and breathed deeply of the tangy air. Two years of hard work, trapping, working on road gangs, in lumber camps, and for Fred Cramer, Ranger of the Rasca district, had only whetted his desire to become a ranger. Some day, he told himself, he would have charge of a forest district such as the one he could see from here.

John left the rock and walked on up the gulley. A doe snorted and went leaping away. A little farther up, three more grouse strutted on the ground before him. He watched, but did not shoot. One grouse was all he could eat, and no good woodsman killed more than he could use.

Since he felt so fresh, he decided to walk over and see Fred Cramer that night. The Spatterdown Creek country was right on the edge of the Rasca district. Fred Cramer's headquarters, in the little village of Pine Hill, was scarcely six miles from John's cabin. John had borrowed a book on pine seedlings from Fred last week, and had all but committed it to memory. Tonight he would take the book back and borrow one on

control of tree diseases. If he was lucky Fred might have time to talk to him for a while of the forest lore learned from a lifetime in the woods.

Maybe tonight would be a good time to ask Fred for a job on next spring and summer's surveying and fire crews. John needed the money, and every job he got that had to do with forestry taught him a little more about it. He grinned ruefully. Fred Cramer had told him that a ranger had to be not a jack-of-all-trades but master of all. At various times rangers were called on to serve as blacksmiths, mechanics, road and bridge builders, telephone line men, fire fighters, game wardens, police, hunters, and so on, nearly endlessly. It was when John thought of it that way that he wondered if he would ever learn all there was to know.

Reaching the head of the gully, he saw his trapping cabin, a square, tar-paper-covered shack nestling in a grove of pines beside a dirt road. Smoke, coming from the tin pipe that served as a chimney, proved the cabin occupied. But that was all right. Any wanderer in this wilderness country was welcome to make himself at home in any cabin he came across as long as he left the place clean, replaced what wood he used, and brought the food he ate back again on his next trip through.

John went around to the front of the cabin, and hung up his gunny sack containing the mink and the two muskrats. The smell of frying bacon and boiling coffee made his mouth water. It took a day in the open to teach a man how hungry he could be. He licked his lips, and hoped that the stranger had at least made enough coffee for two. Shifting his grouse

to the other hand, he entered the cabin and shut the door behind him.

"Take that thing outside an' hang it until this time tomorrow," a deep voice ordered. "How many times do I have to tell you that game ain't fit to eat 'less'n it's hung a day? Two days is better."

A tall, spare man with graying hair was bending over the stove. John dropped the grouse on the table.

"Fred!" he shouted. "Fred Cramer! How did you get here?"

"Reckon I drove," the old Ranger said dryly. "I haven't sprouted my first pair of wings yet, an' there's even them as say I'll have horns first. I left my car up the road a piece. How'd you make out today, Johnny?"

"I got a mink and two muskrats."

"Huh. We could spare a few minks. They kill a lot of rabbits an' birds, an' whatever else they get hol't of that they think they can lick. They're bloody little devils, for all their use."

"Use? They're just killers."

The old Ranger waved his hand.

"Wa'al, Johnny, most everything in the woods is useful. Minks eat birds an' rabbits, but there's some birds an' rabbits ought to be et. Take a sick rabbit, for instance, or maybe one that ain't really sick but has got a leetle somethin' wrong with it. If we leave a few minks on our cricks, the chances is nine out of ten that they'll catch an' eat such rabbits. If there ain't no minks, the rabbit hops right along, mixes with others, an' they get sick too. In that way there's more rabbits kil't in a week than a mink'll take in a year. The same with deer.

Somebody finds where a bobcat kil't a deer. 'Ha!' they say, 'we must exterminate them fearful critters an' save our beautiful deer!' So they put enough of a bounty on cats so's trappers'll go after 'em. By'n by the cats are caught up, an' the deer has a epidemic an' dies off by the thousands on account there wasn't nothin' to catch the sick ones.

"But get along an' wash up, Johnny. I didn't come here to preachify at you. Hang that bird like I told you, an' come line your stomach with some beans an' sow belly. I thought you'd be home 'bout now."

John hung the grouse outside, and came back into the cabin to wash while the old Ranger set steaming hot food on the table. The boy was greatly thrilled, and proud. He had visited Fred often, but this was the first time the old Ranger had ever come to see him. He burned with curiosity as to the reason for his visit, but asked no questions. Fred would tell him in due time, if he thought best. A man's business was his own unless he cared to reveal it.

They ate in silence, John mindful of one of the old Ranger's sayings--"Don't talk to a hungry man until he's got his vittles in him." The meal finished and the last plate licked clean, Fred pushed his chair back from the table, took a blackened pipe from his pocket, lit it, and began blowing blue smoke rings into the air.

"I was coming over to see you tonight," John ventured at last. "I've studied the last book you gave me, and wondered if you would loan me another? I'd like to learn as much as I can about forestry work before I go to school."

The old Ranger took his pipe from his mouth and held it between two fingers.

"Johnny," he said gravely, "I'm afraid that I ain't goin' to loan you any more books or teach you no more rangerin'."

John frowned. "What have I done now?"

"Son," Fred Cramer said with a grin, "when you're ten years older you'll know better than to make remarks like that. If you'd done somethin' wrong, I'd 'a tol' you straight out. Nope. I come to say goodbye, Johnny. I'm leavin' the Rasca."

"Oh--oh." John's heart sank. About to lose his friend, the boy realized how much the old Ranger had taught him, and what he had meant to him. "Where are you going?" he asked dully.

"Over to the Bandley district. They got fifteen thousand acres of barren land over there that they want me to make into a pine plantation. The Bandley's four hundred miles from the Rasca, Johnny. I'll be away a year, an' I won't get home often. But it's a nice promotion with good pay."

"I suppose it is." John tried to force cheer into his voice. "Congratulations, Fred, and good luck."

"Johnny," Fred Cramer said solemnly, "I spent the last ten years of my life workin' hard in the Rasca. I guess it's sort of part of me. I know every inch of her, an' can just about tell you where to find every tree in her. There's a hunnert an' fifty thousand acres of forest over there, includin' the best ten-thousand-acre white pine plantation in the state. The wild things that live in the woods are countless.

"I don't think I'm any great shakes, but I know what it takes to run the Rasca. An' the Ranger who takes over where I

leave off has got to be somethin' besides a pink tea drinker. He's goin' to have complete charge of all them woods. Everythin' wild in 'em is goin' to be his personal responsibility. There's five hunnert people in the Rasca, an' the Ranger has to see that they mind the forest laws an' has to work with the game warden in enforcin' game laws. He's got to know when to stop an' when to go. He can never lead a personal life, but will have to give everythin' he's got to the Rasca. Such a man will have a big job, but he'll also have a chanst to do somethin' wonderful. Do you follow me, Son?"

"Sure," John said enviously, wondering if the new Ranger would be anybody he knew.

The old man was watching him keenly.

"I think you do follow me, Johnny," he said finally. "I think you really know what I'm talkin' about. Now, as I said before, I expect to be gone about a year. How would you like to take charge of the Rasca until I get back?"

"*Me?*" John was thunderstruck. "*Me?*"

"Yes, you, Johnny. I know you ain't graduated from a forestry school or anythin' like that. I ain't either; such things was after my time. But I talked to the head forester, an' he said that it will be all right to put you in there if you can pass the test. I warn you that it's tough, Johnny. Bein' Ranger of the Rasca don't come under the headin' of easy jobs. It will take every last ounce of sweat you got in you, an' it'll come close to breakin' your heart. It will put you in danger, demand things that no other job will, an' as a beginner it will pay you only ninety dollars a month for everythin' it asks. Now, do you want to take the test?"

"I'd give anything for the chance!" John's eyes were shining.

"Is it hard?"

"Many a college man couldn't pass it."

"I don't know how to thank you for giving me the chance," John said huskily. "But I promise you one thing. If I pass the test and get to take your place, I'll do everything in my power to run the Rasca as it should be run."

"Nobody could do more than that," the old Ranger said gently. "Come on. We'll wash these dishes an' go drill you a little for the test. We'll prob'ly be gone three or four days. If you pass, you won't have to come back here at all."

"But I can't go now," John said, in sudden panic.

"Why?"

"I've got traps out. There might be animals in some of them. If something goes wrong . . . Well, I just have to pull in my traps."

"Johnny, do you put a mink or mushrat hide ahead of your own future? Ahead of the Rasca? Forget your traps an' come on."

John shook his head miserably, his gaze fixed on the hunting license pinned to Fred's suspenders.

"I can't. It's not--well, it's not right, I guess."

"Supposin' somebody else gets the job fust?"

"Then--then I guess they'll just have to go ahead and get it."

John's head dropped. He stared miserably at the floor, scarcely conscious of Fred Cramer's eyes upon him. His

great chance--and he had to miss it!

The old Ranger smiled to himself.

"Johnny, how long will it take you to pick up your traps?"

"Two or three days," John said dully.

"Come see me in Pine Hill when you get the last one in. Everythin' will be all right."

John raised his head eagerly.

"Do you think I might take the test later?"

"Johnny," Fred Cramer said, "you just took the test. This ain't a reg'lar appointment, just a substitute. The chief names the man who takes charge until I get back, but he said he'd put in anybody I recommend. I can get a hunnert men who know all about silviculture, an' dendrology, an' plain an' fancy surveyin'. But what I wanted was somebody who knew a little about all them things an' had somethin' more besides; somebody who put himself last. Anybody who can be considerin' of trapped animals, can be expected to be considerin' of other things. Come over to the house when you get your last trap picked up, an' I'll turn the keys over to the new Ranger!"

Chapter Two

THE WHITE BUCK

Three days later, the twenty-ninth of November, the last of the traps were picked up and cached in various hollow stumps throughout the woods.

His last night in the cabin, too excited to sleep, John sat before a roaring wood fire listening to the snap and crack of the flames and watching the red-hot center of each stove lid expand and contract as the fire alternately leaped high or died a little. Over and over again the same happy thought ran through his mind. Tomorrow he would be a Ranger!

Outside, the wind had shifted from east to west and was carrying big downy snowflakes with it. Already the ground was white with what was to be the first heavy snow of the season. But it seemed a good omen, a clean new world in which to start a new life. It was past midnight when John sought his bunk, and then he slept only fitfully.

He was up again with the first hint of dawn, packing such equipment as he wanted to take with him. The Ranger headquarters at Pine Hill was furnished with everything he needed except blankets and his personal belongings. John folded his two big woollen blankets and put them in the bottom of a wicker pack basket. He placed his tooth brush, shaving kit, towels, wash cloths, and soap on top of them. He filled the rest of the basket with clothing and the few little keep-sakes he had brought to the woods with him. Finally, he threw the lever of his thirty-thirty back to make sure that it

was not loaded, and thrust the rifle muzzle down in the side of the basket.

Buckling the belt that held his twenty-two revolver and hunting knife about his waist, he carried the basket outside. Eighteen inches of snow had fallen and a few flakes were still drifting down. For a bit John stood watching it. The woods were always clean, but never more so than when marked with new snow.

He took his snowshoes from a wooden peg, laid them on the snow, and buckled their harnesses about his soft pacs. Shouldering the laden basket, he turned for one last lingering look at the little trapping cabin, and set his face towards the Rasca.

A blue jay scolded from the top of a stub and flew along with him as he strode swiftly up the road. John grinned at the audacious, pert bird. More than once, on the lonely trapping trail, their chattering and scolding had provided him with welcome company.

An hour's travelling brought him to the top of the mountain behind his cabin. Here enough trees had been cut from the lower side of the road to afford an unobstructed view of a seemingly endless expanse of forest and mountain. It was one of the fire look-outs made to supplement the three eighty-foot steel towers in the Rasca district.

John stopped to look. The country was like that he had left in Spatterdown Creek. But somehow it seemed more appealing and friendly. Far to the west, rolling over mountain after mountain, was a great splash of green that was the ten-thousand-acre white pine plantation--pride of the Rasca.

Almost directly beneath him was the little village of Pine Hill. His gaze shifted to it, skipped over the twenty houses, the numerous hunters' cars, the store, and the hotel, to the Ranger's headquarters.

That occupied about twenty acres of ground where two creeks came together from Big Kettle River. The freshly-painted, gleaming white house was almost on the edge of one creek. Forty feet to the left of it were two small buildings that contained winter wood and fire tools. A hundred feet beyond them was a long barn that housed the road-building machinery and truck that every Ranger's district must have. The rest of the Rasca Ranger station was merely open, level creek land.

For long minutes John stared at the place where he was to live and work. Then he plunged on down the road and a half hour later was in the village, knocking on the door of the Ranger's house. Fred Cramer welcomed him with a broad grin.

"Hello, Johnny. I was hopin' you'd come in today. I got to leave for the Bandley an' sort of get the lay of the land over there. Come on in."

John followed him into a big, comfortably furnished room in the center of which a box stove glowed cheerfully. The old Ranger rummaged in a cupboard, took from it a sheaf of papers and a bunch of keys.

"Here y'are, Johnny. The keys to the buildin's an' machinery on the place, an' a complete inventory of everythin' else here. There's a big truck an' a little pick-up in the barn. I hung the snowplow on the truck this mornin'. There's about a thousand

hunters in the Rasca for the openin' of deer season tomorra. When the head forester gets around he'll give you your badge an' oath of office. But you're a Ranger now."

The old Ranger put on a woollen cap, a short woollen jacket, and heavy driving gloves. He held out his hand.

"Good luck, Johnny. I know I'll find the Rasca in good shape when I come back to take her over next year."

John shook the extended hand, and stood uneasily. Fred Cramer looked at him.

"Was there somethin' else you wanted, Johnny?"

"Aren't you--aren't you going to give me any instructions?"

"Johnny, are you tellin' me how to plant pine over in the Bandley?"

"No. But . . ."

"Then I ain't tellin' you how to run the Rasca. She ain't a machine, Johnny. I can't show you how to throw a clutch an' let her go. You'll have to meet each new thing that comes up in your own best way. If I told you how to do it, an' somethin' come up that my tellin' didn't cover, you wouldn't know what to do anyway. Good luck, Johnny."

The old Ranger's little car had scarcely churned out of the snow-covered driveway to enter the main road when John felt hopelessly lost. Now, as never before, the magnitude of the job overwhelmed him. He was the Ranger of the Rasca, and he hadn't the least idea of the first thing to do! Helplessly he looked at the bunch of keys in his hand, and glanced out the window at the cars lined up in front of Pine Hill's little store.

Suddenly he started. Snow on the ground, hunters coming into the Rasca, the keys fitted the machinery on the place, and Fred had hung the snowplow on the big truck this morning! John grinned weakly. That had been the old Ranger's way of telling him to get out and plow the roads. All the hunters coming into the Rasca would not be expert drivers. Some would certainly get stuck in the snow, and it was his job to see that all got safely to wherever they were going and back again. John's confidence began to return.

But it took two to run a snowplow, one to drive the truck and one to handle the plow, and hired help cost money. John looked hesitantly at the telephone on the wall, then walked over to it and took the receiver down.

"Give me the district forester's office," he told the operator. After a few seconds, he heard a voice on the line.

"Mullins speaking." The voice sounded in a hurry.

"This is Belden," John said. "I've just taken the Rasca over from Cramer. I need a man on the snowplow today. Will you okeh it?"

"Sure. Go ahead, Belden. Give your man fifty cents an hour. How are things over there?"

"Eighteen inches of snow and plenty of deer hunters in."

"Can you manage all right? Do you need any help?"

About to say yes, John choked the word back. Rangers ran their own districts.

"I'll get along all right," he said.

"Okeh, Belden. I'll get over to see you when I can, but that might not be until spring. So long."

John gulped when the click on the line told him that the district forester had hung up. There was fine sweat on his temple, and he was in an agony of indecision. He might have had help, and he had chosen to assume full responsibility for taking care of the Rasca! He looked at the keys dangling from his hand, and clamped his jaws grimly. He would do the job he had set out to do. Going outside, he walked over to the store.

The little store was thronged with red-coated, red-hatted, booted men--hunters who had come in for the deer season. But there must be a few residents of Pine Hill in the store. A heavily-muscled, black-haired man wearing a checked shirt and black woollen trousers was sitting on a pickle barrel at one end of the counter. The man seemed to be about thirty years old, although with his head tilted back and his eyes half closed, it was hard to tell. John approached him.

"Do you live here?"

The man opened unfriendly eyes.

"Yeah."

"I'm Belden, the new Ranger," John said. "I'd like to hire someone to help me to run the snowplow. Do you know anyone who might be interested?"

"Since when've they been makin' Rangers out of babies?" the man grunted surlily.

John flushed. "They make a lot of queer things out of babies," he said. "You were once a baby yourself."

Anger leaped in the man's eyes, and he rose to stride away from John as a roar of laughter went through the store. A toothless old man with a straggling gray mustache detached himself from a group about the stove and came forward.

"I'll help ye, Ranger," he offered. "Me an' Fred Cramer run that snowplow many a mile. My name's Bangorst, Lew Bangorst."

John smiled, and gripped the old man's hand.

"Call me John," he said. "Let's go, if you're ready."

With the old man beside him, John went directly from the store to the barn. He ran the big truck outside and went back to lock the door. When he climbed into the driver's seat again, he saw that the old man was shaking. A strange assortment of sounds issued from his mouth, and John looked at him in consternation. But Lew Bangorst was only laughing.

"They make a lot o' queer things out o' babies!" he choked. "You was wunst a baby yourself! Oh, that was a rich one! Poley Harris ain't gonna like it a'tall. He wanted to be Ranger here hisself, an' so did about half the rest o' Pine Hill. Son, you sure stepped in a hornets' nest."

"I've been in hornets' nests before," said John with a confidence he was far from feeling. "A few good slaps put them where they belong."

"Sometimes they sting fust, though," Lew commented drily. "Best take the plow up the road to begin with. We'll go to Hopper Crick, then come back an' go t'other way a spell. Come night we oughta have all roads clean so's none of these

here city hunters'll have any work to do, such as pushin' stuck cars outa drifts."

John grinned, and accepted the old woodsman's advice. If Lew Bangorst had run the snowplow before, a lot of time would be saved by doing as he said. John had found out, while working for Fred Cramer, that the man who knew most about a job usually could direct it best. The next time the roads needed plowing, John himself would know the best way to go about it.

Moving slowly, the big truck churned up the road while the broad blade in front swept the snow to one side. The cars that had already travelled the road had worn ruts, but they were haphazard and winding, sometimes hard to stay in, and many cars had run out of them to be hopelessly stuck in the snow on either side. But the big truck made short work of dragging them back onto the cleared road.

They reached Hopper Creek, the north boundary of the Rasca, and turned around to plow back down the other side of the road. Once back in Pine Hill, they started up a side road that Lew indicated. Fewer cars had been here, and they travelled half a mile before sighting the first stalled one.

It was a long black sedan that had plunged into a drift deep enough to heap feathery snow over the radiator. A small man in brown hunting clothes and leather boots was trying vainly to shovel it out. Lew flicked a horny thumb towards him.

"There's one pilgrim as don't aim to walk up in the woods an' get his buck. He's gonna drive his car right up to where they be."

John brought the truck to a stop ten feet behind the stalled car and got out to walk up to the sedan.

"Can I help you?"

The little man turned a worried face whose mild brown eyes were shielded by a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. He smiled ruefully.

"I should think I need some help. I'll be glad to pay you well for getting me out of this snow bank. One does encounter such perplexing situations in the woods, doesn't one?"

Back in the truck, John heard Lew snicker. Obviously lacking the least idea of a solution to his problem, the little man stood in the center of the road gazing confidently at John. Somehow he didn't look like a hunter.

"There won't be any pay," John said. "I'm the Ranger in this district, and it's my job to help people."

"The Ranger!" the little man said delightedly. "I'm so happy to meet you! I'm Professor Arthur Crandall, of Bardette University. I'm not hunting here, but do hope to secure some fine snapshots of wild life. I'm remaining in your district until the first of February, and am hoping you'll take me out into the forests when you go."

With Lew's mocking gaze on him, John was a little embarrassed. But he liked the earnest little man. Anyone not a hunter coming into the Rasca in December was worthy of special consideration anyway. Besides, Professor Crandall had said that he was going to take pictures, and a ranger should know something about photography. Here was his chance to learn.

"I'll be glad to do anything I can for you, Professor," he said. "Meanwhile, suppose we get your car out."

Lew wound their fifteen-foot chain about the front bumper of the truck, and the rear bumper of the car. John put the truck in reverse and backed slowly. The chain tightened, and the car backed easily out of the drift. Professor Crandall waved cheerily at Lew and John as he drove away. A half hour later they saw the sedan parked in front of a hunting lodge farther up the road.

All day, and far into the night, stopping occasionally for gas and once to snatch a hasty meal, they plowed the roads. When John finally ran the truck back into the barn, every muscle ached. Stiff-legged, he walked across the barn floor and fell forward to catch himself on the door jamb. Lew looked unconcernedly past him, and the grin on his face might have been interpreted a dozen different ways. From somewhere in the depths of his clothing he took a huge silver watch and looked at it.

"Twenty minutes of two," he said. "I might's well bunk with you tonight."

"Are all roads open?" John asked thickly. "Can we stop now?"

"Ever' road's open," Lew affirmed. "By the way, if ye'r gonna check camps tomorrow, I reckon I'll ride along. Fred left a rifle here. I'll take that an' you take your'n. We might pick ourselves up a buck. With such a passel o' hunters in the woods, the deer's gonna be runnin' ever' which way, an' they'll prob'ly be as many crossin' the roads as they'll be in

the woods. Both of us can use a buck for winter meat; it helps considerable on the meat bills."

"Sure," John agreed. "We'll do it."

Lew beside him, he walked woodenly over to the house, unlocked the door, staggered across the floor to where he remembered having seen a couch, and fell on it. Dimly he was aware of Lew taking his boots off and throwing a blanket over him. He tried hard to fight sleep. But he had never been so tired before. His eyes closed, and it seemed to him that they were hardly shut before Lew was shaking his shoulder and shouting in his ear.

"Hey! Ranger! Mornin'. We'd best be goin' again."

John opened his eyes to look up into a toothless bearded face. He made an effort to rise, and fell back again. The good smell of frying bacon and boiling coffee tickled his nostrils. With a mighty effort he rose to a sitting position, hot needles sticking into every nerve and muscle in his body. He brushed a hand across his eyes. Before becoming a Ranger, he had thought he knew what hard work was!

"Come on, Son," Lew said. "A couple o' cups o' coffee will make a new man outa you."

John stared wonderingly at the old man, and determinedly got to his feet. If anybody as old as Lew Bangorst could keep going, he could. He washed, combed his hair, and went to the table to drink a steaming mug of hot coffee. As Lew had said, it did take away some of his aches and stiffness. But, he told himself grimly, he had plenty left.

While Lew washed the dishes, John ran the little pick-up truck out of the barn and let the motor warm. Today he had to

check camps. That meant collecting a camping fee of twenty-five cents from, and issuing camping permits to, those who had set up tents, counting the men in regular camps, and checking the game they killed, watching to make sure that no camper was cutting valuable wood for fires, keeping an eye out for game law violations, and doing anything else that needed doing.

A rifle in each hand, Lew came trudging out to join him.

"Let 'er roll," he said. "If I was you, I'd get the camps south o' Soonie Crick fust. That's the farthest away you got to go, an' you can work back from there."

John turned south towards Soonie Creek. The road here had been cut in the side of a mountain, with a hundred-foot drop on one side. Lew sat unconcernedly, scanning the opposite hill, only two hundred feet away across a very narrow valley. Suddenly he put a hand on John's sleeve.

"Can you stop 'er?"

John brought the truck to a halt. Lew got out, and began looking towards the opposite hill. John leaned from the window and followed his gaze. The hemlock-covered mountain across the road ran to a sloping nose. At intervals of two hundred feet, hunters were posted along the nose. Farther up the hillside, yelling, pounding on trees, and occasionally shooting off their rifles, at least six men were working slowly towards these watchers. It was a "drive," the men working down the hillside chasing any deer that happened to be on it towards the watchers posted on the nose. When the deer ran by, the watchers would get a chance to shoot.

John and Lew watched the drivers draw up even with them, and go past. Four deer flashed out ahead of the drivers and with white tails hoisted over their backs ran down towards the nose. They disappeared in the hemlocks, but the crashing of rifles told that they had been seen and were being shot at. Again Lew pressed John's sleeve.

"Look!"

"An immense buck walked out of the woods that had just been driven, and came down into the valley. John gasped. Instead of being the customary brown, the buck was a pure and shining white--a perfect albino. One huge antler on the left side of his head lent him a curiously misshapen appearance. Buck deer begin to shed their horns in December, and the albino had already shed his right horn.

John gasped again, in admiration this time. The great albino buck had known perfectly well that he was being hunted. But instead of flushing wildly ahead of the drivers he had lain in his bed until they went by, then calmly walked out of their way. John rested his rifle across the door of the truck.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" There was real terror in Lew's voice.

John pressed the trigger. At the shot, the buck went down to thrash crazily in the snow. In a second he was up again, minus his other horn. Wildly he went bounding back into the shelter of the hemlocks. Lew leaned against the truck. His face was white and beads of sweat dotted his temples.

"Man, I'm glad you missed!" he gasped.

"I didn't miss," John said. "All I wanted to do was shoot his other horn off. I thought a buck smart enough to outwit

hunters that way deserves to live. Only bucks are legal game. If the albino has no horns, he won't be shot."

"Man, oh, man!" Lew gasped. "You don't know how close you came to endin' ever'thin'! That was a white buck! Whoever kills a white buck will never kill another deer! White bucks are plumb poison! Bad luck! Oh, but I'm glad you didn't kill him!"

John put the pick-up in low, and glanced sideways at Lew's ashen face.

"But look," he said reassuringly. "I didn't kill him. All I did was shoot his horn off."

The old man shivered.

"It's bad enough jest to *see* a white buck. If you had *kill't* that deer, you wouldn't be drivin' this truck right now!"

Chapter Three

NEAR DISASTER

Lew crouched silently in the corner of the seat, looking steadily past the right front fender of the little truck. The snow that the plow had swept out of the road had fallen over the bank, and what was left had been packed hard and smooth by hunters' cars.

The road wound around a long curve down a hill, and the truck skidded. John heard Lew gasp as he let the truck ease itself out of the skid back into the road. Then they were on the level in the bottom of the valley. Lew sat up and heaved a long sigh.

"I'm sure glad that's over!"

John grinned. "Anybody would think you'd never travelled these roads before."

Lew wagged his head.

"It ain't that. It ain't that a'tall. But some things is best not tinkered with. They's good medicine an' bad. Now don't go gettin' me wrong. I ain't like some o' them ol' wash wimmen in Pine Hill as take stock in 'most any kind of a ha'nt. I only believe in a few."

"Ha'nts?"

"Yes, ha'nts," Lew said belligerently. "White bucks is ha'nts. But if he was gonna do anythin' about you shootin' at him,

he'd o' done it on that stretch o' road we jest come over. I was jest a-holdin' my breath, wonderin' if we'd git over it."

"Oh, I see," John said seriously.

They came to the end of the road where Soonie Creek, a snow-banked little rill, flowed into Big Kettle River. Here twenty cars were lined up in front of a cluster of hunting cabins. Blue wood smoke curled from the cabins' chimneys, and dead bucks hung by their horns from the porches of three of them. A party of hunters came single-file down the trail from the mountain in back of the cabins.

"Did ya see anythin'?" Lew called amiably.

The leader of the party, a middle-aged office worker, shook his head. "We didn't see a buck."

"Oh shucks. That's too bad," Lew said. His glance strayed toward a cluster of pine trees a thousand feet up the creek, and he took his rifle in the crook of his arm. "Go ahead an' tend yore business here, Ranger. I ain't goin' far."

Lew ambled up the creek and John turned to the hunters. They were all city men, spending their vacation on a deer hunt, and all were tired. But in spite of that there was a sparkle in their eyes and a healthy glow in their cheeks from vigorous outdoor exercise.

"Was there something you wanted?" the middle-aged business man asked courteously.

"I just want to check your camps," John said. "I'm the Ranger from Pine Hill."

The man extended his hand. "I'm glad to know you. My name's Cartwright, and this is our first trip into the Rasca.

Our camp's the one on this end, but I'm sure you'll find everything in order. We brought our own firewood. However, you're welcome to inspect us."

Together they walked over to the camp, and John glanced inside. It was well kept and orderly, a good camp. John copied the names, addresses, and hunting license numbers of the camp's occupants from the roster tacked on the door, and went from it to the other camps. Behind the third one he found the raw stump of a freshly cut young spruce. John knocked on the camp's door, and a fat man with a white apron about his middle opened it.

"Who cuts the firewood around here?" John asked.

"I do. But I'm not huntin'. They brought me along to cook-- and a thankless job it is. I can't get a hot fire."

John pointed to the stump. "Did you cut that tree?"

"Yes. It don't burn very good."

"Did you know it's a red spruce, and there's a twenty-five dollar fine for cutting it?"

"No, I didn't." The cook's fat face paled. "Wood is wood to me."

"Come out here," John said.

He took an axe from the back porch and led the way into the woods. The cook followed meekly behind him. John cut notches in three dead chestnut stubs, more than enough wood to last the camp through deer season, and beckoned the cook to his side.

"That's dead wood," he explained. "There's no harm in cutting it, and it will burn. You couldn't get a fire because you tried to burn green wood. The next time take any of these stubs."

"I wish I'd known that," the cook said wistfully. "Twenty-five dollars is a lot of money to me."

"We'll forget the fine this time. But don't cut any more spruce."

"I won't," the cook said gratefully. "Thanks a lot."

John went on to the other camps, whose occupants were out hunting. He copied the roster on the doors and inspected the wood boxes on the porches. The last camp in the line had no roster and the door was locked. John went back to where Cartwright's friends were discussing the hunt they would have that afternoon.

"Tell those fellows in the red cabin they'd better get a roster up, will you?" he asked. "They . . ."

The spiteful smash of a rifle sounded in the pines up the creek. Five minutes later Lew appeared, dragging a buck by one antler. He drew near and let his kill, a small buck with two prongs on each horn, fall limply in the snow.

"How the devil did you get him, almost right in our camp?" Cartwright exclaimed in admiration.

"I jest put two an' two together," Lew said simply. "Take a man now, does he like to walk in snow in his bare feet? Nope. A deer don't neither, when he can git out of it. 'Bout the only place there ain't no snow is in the pines. So's I figgered there oughta be a deer thar."

Cartwright laughed ruefully.

"A man that can walk in and take a buck from under the noses of forty other men must know what he's talking about. I'm going to hunt the pines this afternoon."

"You might pick a side hill to watch, 'long 'bout an hour before night," Lew remarked. "It gits cold on top long before it does in the valleys, an' any deer up thar are purty likely to amble down when the wind gets to cuttin'."

Lew and John put the little buck in the truck, and started back up the road.

"Deer hunter!" John jibed. "Over on Spatterdown Creek they have field mice bigger than that."

"I pick my deer for eatin'," Lew said complacently, "an' there ain't no better eatin' than a four point. Sport is aw right, I guess. But freezin' yerself on a deer runway ain't my idea o' sport. I got my venison, an' now by gummy I can leave my rifle at home."

"How about the other side of it?" John challenged. "That's a young buck. If you'd let him go, he might have lived a long while and helped produce a good many fawns. In six or eight years his usefulness would be gone and he'd have a head of horns a hunter could be proud of instead of that dinky little rack."

"In six or eight years he'd be so tough you'd have to cut him up with a hack saw."

"The trouble with you guys is that you want to kill a deer in the morning and have venison steak the same night," John

said sarcastically. "Hang an old buck two weeks and he'll be as tender as any young one."

"I kil't young bucks fer the past twenty years, an' I'll kill 'em as long's I hunt," Lew asserted stubbornly. "Young bucks is the only ones fitten to eat. As far's lettin' 'em live to breed, they'll be deer here as long's I'm here."

"How about those who come after you?"

"They'll have to rustle for themselves, same's I allus did."

John subsided. There was no use in trying to talk conservation to a man like Lew Bangorst. Old, and set in his ways, Lew would continue to do things just as he had always done them.

At six o'clock that night, after checking more camps, John drove the little truck back into Pine Hill. He took Lew to his little one-room log cabin on the outskirts of the village, and left the old woodsman skinning his buck. John went home, put the truck in the garage, and stamped wearily into his cold house. For a bit he was tempted to eat a cold supper, read a little while, and go to bed. But it was too easy for a man living alone to fall into slipshod habits. He forced himself to prepare a hot supper. Eating that refreshed him so that even doing the dishes was not the task it would have been had he taken only a cold snack.

For the next ten days he checked camps. Then most of the hunters already there left the Rasca, and few new ones came in. John was startled to realize that there were only two days of deer season left and he hadn't killed his own buck. A deer would, as Lew had said, "help out considible on the meat bills."

The following morning, with the thirty-thirty in the pick-up's seat beside him, he started up a side road where there were two camps he hadn't checked. There were no tire tracks in the light sifting of snow that had fallen three days before, which seemed evidence enough that there was nobody in the camps. If there had been, they would have been down to Pine Hill at least once or twice for the impromptu party that was held in the store every night.

But, it was a Ranger's job to check every camp in his district. Of course, John thought with satisfaction, if he arrived at the camps and found them empty, it would give him a chance for a deer hunt.

He reached the camps, two tar-paper-covered shacks set a little apart from the road, and found them with locks on the doors and windows boarded up. John grinned, picked up his rifle, and plunged into the woods. A succession of warm days had melted some of the snow so that he didn't need snowshoes.

Deer tracks were everywhere. After nearly every camp in the Rasca, including Cartwright's, had killed its legal quota of six bucks, it hardly seemed possible that there could be this many left. John strode along the top of a rugged hill, his eyes to the ground, trying to select the track of a buck from among the many in the snow. But most of the tracks were the little, oval, sharply pointed ones of does.

"There must have been a big kill of bucks," John murmured to himself. "If it keeps up this way, they'll have to open a doe season to even things up. If they don't, half the does in the Rasca won't have fawns."

Then, emerging from a pine thicket, he found the big, round tracks of two bucks. John stopped to study them. The bucks had not scented him and taken alarm; they were walking. His heart thrilled with hunter's ecstasy. If the tracks were anything to judge by, either of the bucks should be worth having--provided they hadn't lost their horns.

One finger on the safety of his rifle, ready to shoot in an instant, he started along the trail. He walked very slowly, stopping every few feet for a thorough inspection of the woods ahead of and around him. It was an old deer hunter's axiom that, "When you're huntin' a deer, walk as slow's you can, then cut that speed in half."

The two sets of tracks entered a stand of beech trees on the side of a hill, directly across from him, and there were great patches of scuffed leaves where they had dug for beech nuts. John walked even slower, and stopped more frequently. Obviously the two bucks had come here to feed, and could not be very far away. Yet, though he could see nothing, John had a curious feeling that something was watching him.

He turned to search steadily in every direction. But all he saw were the gray trunks of the beeches. A chill ran up his spine, and he tried to shake off the sensation of being watched. He was, he told himself, as bad as Lew Bangorst with his nonsense about "ha'nts." Determinedly he continued on the buck's tracks.

He was in the center of the beech forest when something ahead of him moved. John stopped, his gaze fixed on the place where he had seen the motion.

Presently he saw something that was the color of one of the beech trees, and yet was not a tree. John turned his gaze away, and looked back. The gray shape took form now. It was a deer that had scented or heard some slight sign of danger, and like John was standing still in his tracks until he placed it. Then came another slight motion, and he saw the glint of light on polished antlers.

Very slowly, in order not to alarm the watching deer, he brought his rifle to his shoulder, sighted, and shot. At the report of the gun, the deer went down. John ran forward to find a mighty buck with great antlers, seven points to a side, kicking in the snow. He shot again, through the neck, then pulled out his hunting knife and knelt beside his prize.

"You pick 'em big, don't you?"

John rose, and whirled, knife in hand. Not forty feet away, standing behind him, was a solidly built man dressed in a stag shirt, breeches, and leather shoes with rubber bottoms. His face was hard, but kindly.

"I never heard you come," John said.

The man smiled, and took off his hat to scratch a shock of red hair.

"I don't think I'd hear or see anything else either, if I was on the track of a fellow that size. But I've been watching you from the other hill since you started. My name's Lambertson, Harvey Lambertson. I'm the State Game Warden in this county."

John extended his hand. "One of the first things I intended to do was come down to Jack Run and get acquainted with you.

But somehow I just didn't have time. I'm John Belden, the Ranger from Pine Hill."

Harvey Lambertson shook the extended hand, but there was a reserve in his greeting. John felt that he was under examination, and would be approved of when he had shown his own worth. It took more than a chance meeting in the woods to make a friend of Harvey Lambertson.

"I was coming up to see you, too," the Game Warden said. "But, like you, I've been hustling since deer season started. Did you run across any game law violations?"

"None outstanding. But this is really the first chance I've had to get out in the woods. A few of the camps I checked didn't have rosters, and a couple of hunters had forgotten to sign their licenses. I told them all to fix things up, but hardly thought they deserved arrest and fine."

The Warden nodded. "That's right. The only time I ever fine a petty violator is when I know that he's a habitual law-breaker. I did arrest two fellows for digging up small spruces in the Ganny Creek Plantation, though. I told 'em to stop, and the next time I went by they were at it again. They said it was public land, and that they had a right to the trees. Didn't seem to realize that they weren't the entire public. The fines will be credited to your department."

"That's good," John said. "I like this method of the forestry department and game commission working together, helping each other. It beats being at each other's throats, the way they used to be."

Harvey Lambertson grunted approval. "Come on. I'll help you get your buck out to the road."

John dressed the buck, and fastened a length of rope that he carried in his pocket about its legs. A short stick was tied cross-ways on the end of the rope. John taking one side of the stick, and the Warden the other, they dragged the buck over the snow to the road, and put it in the pick-up. With a pencil John filled out the big game tag that came with his license, and attached it to the buck's front leg.

"Well, I'll be on my way," the Warden said. "I came cross country from the Beech Top road. I'll be seeing you, Belden. So long."

"So long, and thanks."

John watched the Warden enter the woods and begin his seven-mile trip back toward the Beech Top road. Then he started the truck toward Pine Hill.

Lew Bangorst was in his yard, splitting wood, as John pulled up and leaned out of the window.

"Hey, Lew! Come on over and I'll show you what a *buck* looks like."

The old woodsman sank his axe in a block of wood and came shuffling around the house. He looked at the buck, and stepped back with his hands on his hips.

"Huh," he snorted. "You might just as well eat a hunk o' sole leather."

"Go on," John jeered. "You're mad because you couldn't get one this big. Come down to supper in about two weeks and I'll serve you venison that'll melt in your mouth. Any meat's tender if you know how to cure it."

"I'll come," Lew said. "But I'll fetch my own vittles. I wouldn't take a chanst o' bustin' any o' the three teeth I got left on that ol' veteran. You goin' to the shindig Thursday night?"

"What shindig?"

"A ruckus at the store. The hunters'll all be gone, an' Pine Hill's gonna git together fer a winter party."

"Why--yes. I think I might."

"Do ya good," Lew said. "O' course I know the Ranger business is almighty important, an' ever'thin' like that. But a young feller like you should ought to do somethin' else wunst in a while. I'll see ya thar, Ranger. They'll be lots o' purty gals to dance with, but don't go gittin' yerself married off."

The night of the party he got home early, shaved, took a bath, and put on his best red plaid shirt, freshly washed puttees, and new knee-length leather shoes. At eight o'clock he went over to the store.

The little building was thronged with every resident of Pine Hill who was not bed-ridden, and many had come in from surrounding hill farms and trapping cabins. An old man, who had walked ten miles over the hills to get here, was dancing a jig to the tunes of a battered but lively fiddle in the hands of Clem Hawes, Pine Hill's musician. He was ringed about by a group of applauding Pine Hillers. Babies slept or wailed on chairs and tables in the back room of the store. Children played their own games in corners. The old man stopped his jigging and a caller mounted the counter while old and young alike joined in a square dance. John saw Lew Bangorst dancing with a sixteen-year-old girl. The old woodsman,

going by John, reached forth a hand to grasp him by the shoulder and pull him into the dance.

"Dance, Ranger, dance!" he said. "Can't have no slackers in this outfit!"

"Ice cream and lem-on-ade. Pick your honey and pro-men-ade," the caller chanted.

John found himself paired off with a pretty brunette girl about his own age. They laughed at each other as they started through the dances the man on the counter called for. Then suddenly John was seized by the shoulder and whirled around to come face to face with Poley Harris. Poley's face was flushed, his sullen eyes bloodshot.

"No baby-faced Ranger is danshin' with my girl," he hiccupped.

"It was only a dance, Poley," the girl said nervously.

"You keep out of this," Poley flared. He turned again to John. "I've a good mind to wipe up the floor with you."

"Why don't you?"

Poley took a short step forward. It would have been a long step, John saw, if Poley's bluff had not been called. But he hadn't expected even a show of resistance. However, he had challenged John to a fight, and must go through with it now if only to save his face. He raised his arm to strike.

Then four burly Pine Hillers walked between them. Jubal Crassman, a lumberman with muscles like an ox, placed a hand on Poley's shoulder.

"You don't want to fight in here," he said. "If you have to settle it, come on outside." He turned to John. "Is that all right, Ranger?"

"No," John said, "it isn't. In the first place I'm not having any alley brawls with anyone. In the second place, this man is half drunk. Any time he's sober, and still thinks he has to fight me, he'll find me at the Ranger's headquarters. If he feels that he must take a sock at me now, he's welcome to go right ahead and do it."

"No trouble in dansh hall," Poley Harris muttered thickly. "Don't want no trouble in dansh hall. But I'll see you again, Baby Face." He whirled on the girl. "After thish wa'sh out who you dansh with."

"I will, Poley," she said placatingly.

John walked slowly out of the store. Knowing grins on at least half the men showed that they thought he was afraid to fight Poley. The other half--maybe--had understood why he hadn't fought.

John spent most of the rest of December marking firewood for Pine Hillers who wanted to cut their wood on state land. He chose yellow birch, a tree that has little commercial value. When he could find no birch, he selected crooked and deformed trees that were useless for timber.

The last day of the month he swung out of the woods onto the road, and glanced up to see a man approaching. It was Professor Crandall, bending under the weight of a huge camera. John waited.

"Mr. Belden!" the Professor exclaimed. "Fancy meeting you in this lonely spot! I have been down to your house three

times, and each time you were away. I've been having such exciting times, following hunters about, photographing the quarries they ran to earth, and even watching them dress their kills. The primitive in man comes to the fore at such times, doesn't it? I'm beginning to feel like a savage. But it does me a world of good after five years of scholastic work. I have decided to remain in your beautiful Rasca until late summer."

He heaved a long sigh and set the camera down.

"I've spent the entire day stalking a rabbit, *Lepus sylvaticus*. It was such a thrill to approach the little beast in his brush patch and try to make him pose for pictures. But I have what should be an excellent series of color plates. Would you believe that I had to set the camera along one of his trails, camouflage it with twigs, and spring it with a string from a distance of fifty feet? Who would imagine that a rabbit could be so sagacious?"

John looked at him respectfully. Obviously the little Professor belonged in a schoolroom, and not in the Rasca. But anyone who had the patience and persistence to spend a whole day taking pictures of a rabbit, and the ingenuity to contrive a method of getting such pictures, certainly had a lot to recommend him.

"I'm going out with a blister rust crew the second of January," John said. "Would you like to come along and bring your camera?"

"What in the name of Heaven is a blister rust crew?"

"Blister rust attacks white pine, and kills the tree unless it's checked. Its spores grow on gooseberry and currant bushes. We have a very fine white pine plantation here, and we're

going to check the trees for blister rust, and mark any gooseberry or currant bushes we find for later removal."

"I'd be delighted to accompany you!" Professor Crandall cried. "The operations of your crew should be a fascinating subject for pictures. Shall I come to your house so I will be able to start out with you?"

"That will be fine, Professor. But be there early."

John spent New Year's, a holiday, in resting and making out reports. At four o'clock the following morning he was awakened by a banging on the back door. He got out of bed, hastily donned warm clothing, and went to the door to find Professor Crandall, a camera case dangling from his right shoulder. The little Professor blinked into the flash light John held.

"I trust I'm early enough," he said. "I was so afraid I'd miss you that I set three alarm clocks to ring at five-minute intervals. However, I arose at the sound of the first."

"You're early enough," John said drily. "Come on in while I get some breakfast."

John built a fire in the kitchen stove and the little Professor perched on a chair while John set about making breakfast. Professor Crandall, who had already breakfasted, sipped a cup of coffee while John ate pancakes and sausage and packed a lunch. Breakfast finished, John looked at his watch. It was five o'clock, three hours before the sun would rise, and more than two hours before he could pick up Lew Bangorst, Mel Crane, Wash Jampel, and Tom Rooney, his blister rust crew. John took a chair next to the little Professor and looked at the camera case on the floor.

"What kind of a camera is that?" he asked.

"A Reflex." Professor Crandall stooped, opened the case, and took the camera out. "It's a very good instrument for certain types of work. Its shutter speeds are from one-thirtieth of a second to one five-hundredth . . ."

John sat, entranced, while the Professor explained his camera. Finally his glance again strayed out the window, and he leaped to his feet to look at the clock. It was half-past seven and daylight. The two hours and a half had fled in what seemed scarcely that many minutes.

"We have to be on our way," John said hastily. "I'll get the truck."

Professor Crandall half rose in his chair.

"Oh, I say, are you going in a truck?"

"It's the only way I have."

"If you aren't taking too many men with you, hadn't we best go in my car? I assure you that it will be much more comfortable than any truck."

"It's all right with me if you'd rather take your car."

John loaded pruning saws and an axe in the car, and they drove over to pick up the four men of the blister rust crew. Each man climbed in with only a muttered greeting. The Professor chatted blithely on, but John looked straight ahead as they drove up the road. A slow flush crept up the back of his neck and spread to his temples. He had been alone much of the time since the shindig. But he knew from the actions of the men in the back seat that all of them, even Lew, thought he had been afraid to fight Poley then.

Four miles up the road, John pointed to a wide place in it.

"That's as close as we can drive to the plantation. You'd better park there. It's walking from here in."

The Professor parked the long sedan. Sticking lunches into their pockets, the four Pine Hillers grasped their tools and started up a fire trail that led to the plantation. John and the Professor, who continued his amiable chatter, started up behind them. They came to the top of a hill, and looked down on the first of the pines.

"What a sight!" the Professor gasped. "What an unforgettable sight! There will be a forest here as mighty as any that existed in primeval times! You rangers do a wonderful work!"

"I didn't do it," John said. "The men who came before me planted it. All I can do is keep it growing."

The blister rust crew spread thirty feet apart and started slowly through the pines. They were not looking for blister rust cankers, but for gooseberry and currant bushes. In a plantation this size it would take a crew of twenty men half a year to give each tree the minute blister rust inspection each required. When they found a bush, they would tie a white rag on it so the crew to come through next summer could find it easily and remove it, roots and all. Then the trees within three hundred yards of the bush would be carefully inspected and every blister rust canker cut out. If the tree was too far gone it would be destroyed.

John and the Professor, who enthusiastically snapped pictures of everything, worked a mile through the plantation

to a dry stream bed. John looked at it, surprised. Few streams in these mountains ever went dry.

"Let's follow this a ways," he suggested.

Together they walked up the stream bed and came to a huge beaver dam. The dam, many acres in extent and within two hundred feet of the pines, had been built where a stream divided. It was so tight and high that all the water had been diverted to the other branch. John stamped on the ice that covered the dam, and walked out on it. The wind had swept the ice clear of snow, and a straight line of bubbles could be seen, leading out from a big beaver house in the center of the dam. John pointed where the bubbles led.

"The beavers have a food cache over there."

"How do you know?"

"By that line of bubbles. You know that in the fall beavers cut down the branches and twigs they use for winter food, and pile it below the depths of winter ice. When they want something to eat, they swim from their house to the cache. It's all under water, and when the swimming beaver lets a little of the air in his lungs loose, it bubbles to the top and brings up against the ice. A trapper who set his trap at the proper depth anywhere along that line would be sure to get a beaver."

That night, having thoroughly worked the parts of the plantation assigned to them, one by one the men returned to the car. They climbed in as silently and as coldly as they had that morning, and again John felt a flush mount his cheek.

For nearly a month they worked through the plantation, and except for occasional small snow flurries had fine weather all

the time. Toward the last of January the sky assumed a leaden hue that deepened almost to black. John glanced at it when they left the plantation that night, and turned to his crew.

"You'd better bring snowshoes tomorrow. Looks like we're in for a blizzard."

The four nodded.

"Goodness," the Professor said nervously. "If there's going to be a storm, perhaps I'll stay home. I wouldn't want to be a hindrance to you or your men."

"Maybe you'd better stay home tomorrow, Professor," John agreed.

The next morning he gathered his crew in the pick-up truck. Snowshoes strapped to their backs, and axes in their hands, they started up the trail. They were working deep in the plantation now, miles from the road. The crew separated, each going his own way.

Most of the morning John worked, marking gooseberry bushes and cutting cankers from the few infected trees he found. Toward noon the breeze freshened suddenly, and a few crisp snowflakes pattered against his cheeks. A moment later all vision was blotted out as the blizzard started in earnest.

John strapped his snowshoes on, and turned his back to the wind that was blowing straight from the north. The road was south, and as long as the wind was squarely on his back he would be walking straight toward the truck. He pulled the collar of his coat up about his neck and plodded on. The snow was falling so fast that already it was inches deep on

top of the old crust. Soft and fluffy, it piled up on his snowshoes and made walking difficult. John thought of the lumber-camp language Lew Bangorst was undoubtedly using to express his opinion of the blizzard, and grinned.

In three hours he reached the road. None of the rest of the crew had come out yet. But all were able to take care of themselves. John climbed into the seat of the little truck, out of the wind. Then the snow let up for an instant and he saw a long, snow-covered object fifteen feet ahead. His heart pounding, he got out and started towards it, hoping he had seen wrong. But he hadn't. The little Professor's car was parked ahead of the truck!

John tried to peer up the trail. But the snow beating into his eyes made him blink. He shielded his eyes with his hands, and still could see no more than ten feet into the thick, swirling curtains of snow. A panic gripped him.

The blister rust crew could either get out of the blizzard, or would know what to do if they could not. But Professor Crandall wouldn't have the least idea how to go about either getting out or building a shelter. He had to be found.

Bending his head, John started up the trail. The wind lashed and bit at him, as he reached the top and tried to peer about. But he saw nothing, except the driving snow, and heard nothing except the whine of the rising wind. He tried to shout, but his words were whipped away as soon as they left his mouth.

Again he felt panic. Somewhere up here, he told himself over and over, was a little man who would die in the blizzard unless he was rescued.

But where? John plunged into the pines. The wall of trees about him broke the force of the wind, and he could see farther. But there was no sign of any other life. It was an empty world in which he alone existed. Grimly John shut his mind to the futility of the search. He had to, he *must*, find Professor Crandall.

He came to the dry stream bed and tried to shout, but the wind mocked him. He stood a moment, pondering. Undoubtedly the Professor had come out to take more pictures. But, in a month, he must have taken all the pictures anyone could want of the blister rust crew and the pines. He must be somewhere in the open woods.

John fought his way up the dry stream bed. He stumbled against the beaver dam, and climbed out on it to turn his back to the wind. Then something struck him in the back of the head, and almost sent him tumbling from the dam. He scrambled to regain his balance, and turned around.

The object that had struck him was a camera case, hanging on the limb of a dead tree at the edge of the dam, and blowing in the wind. So Professor Crandall had returned for more pictures of the beaver dam, and by pure luck had left a clue! John walked out on the dam, whose smooth ice was blown free of snow, and started blindly along it. The Professor must have been taking pictures when the blizzard struck, or else he wouldn't have left his camera case hanging. And certainly, when he started to flee, he would have gone with the wind instead of against it.

A thousand feet from where he found the case, John saw the camera lying on the ice. He stooped carefully over it, looking for something to indicate the direction the Professor had

taken. At last he found it, a single scratch gouged in the surface of the ice. The Professor must have fallen and lost his camera. The scratch probably had been made by the compass he wore on the lapel of his coat.

Praying he was right, John sighted along the scratch and walked a perfectly straight line in the direction it pointed. He came to the edge of the dam, placed one snowshoe on the smooth bank of snow that led away from it, and lifted the other snowshoe.

Then suddenly the snow gave way and he plunged down through it, to bring up with a jarring thud. For a bit he sat dazedly.

Then his senses began to return and he reached forth an exploring hand. His fingers encountered cloth, a coat. John struck a match, and saw the huddled form of the little Professor beside him.

Chapter Four

THE EEP SNOWS

For a bit the match flared brightly, then burned itself down to John's fingers and went out. But by its light he was able to see where he had fallen. A log, driven down this creek in the old lumbering days, had cast up on the bank here. More logs had snagged on the first, piling themselves haphazardly to form a wall almost six feet high. The beavers had built their dam close to the log pile, and the sticks they had left protruding over the dam had roofed the intervening space. Snow had piled up on the sticks to make a treacherous trap for anything heavy enough to break them. A few snowflakes sifted through, but for the most part the bottom of the cave was lined with leaves.

The gaping hole he had made in falling through showed dimly above him. With his hand John scraped together a pile of the dead leaves and scratched another match on the rough surface of his water-proof match box. He lit the leaves, and watched the flame eat hungrily into them. The snowshoes were still on his feet, but their frames were broken. By the light of the little fire he took them off, removed the harnesses, and cut the webbing out with his knife. He put the broken frames on top of the burning leaves, and the fire glowed brighter as the dry wood caught.

John rose to his knees, and bent over Professor Crandall. There was a dark bruise on the little man's head, and he was very cold. But his heart still beat, and his pulse, though faint,

was throbbing. John stripped off his own coat, doubled it, and laid it under the other's head. Then he looked about for more wood. For a moment he studied the pile of logs. But they were too big to cut with a knife and there was no other wood. Without a fire, he and the Professor would freeze tonight.

Standing erect, John thrust his head out of the hole. The blizzard still raged in unabated fury, but the pine plantation was only a few rods away. Stooping, John gathered up Professor Crandall's slight form and lifted him out on the dam. He put his coat back on and climbed out beside him.

The wind made him reel when he faced into it with the little Professor on his back, and an intense cold that the wind brought with it chilled him through. He could see little, and guided himself by following the outline of the beaver dam. After ten minutes he laid Professor Crandall down on the ice, slid off the dam, and reached back to take the unconscious form on his shoulders again.

Off the ice, he plunged into snow that was almost hip deep. Grimly he forced a way through it. The pine plantation, he knew, was within a stone's throw of the beaver dam. But a half hour passed, and he was not within the pines yet. John fought a rising impulse to turn in another direction, to plunge off through the storm.

"Steady. Steady, Belden," he told himself. "You're doing all right. Don't lose your head."

Fresh bursts of wind seemed to beat against him, and the Professor's slight weight increased second by second until it was almost unbearable. A series of racking sobs escaped

John, and the tears that flowed from his eyes froze on his cheeks. Then a feeling of lightness and gaiety stole over him. He seemed to be dancing on top of the snow instead of laboring through it. He wanted to shout and laugh. A drowsy warmth drove out the cold.

"Don't be a damned fool, Belden," John told himself. "You're out in a blizzard--and you're going to keep your head."

But in spite of that the feeling of lightness, safety, and warmth persisted. John blinked, and was surprised to find that he was lying prone in the snow with Professor Crandall on top of him. An insistent voice told him over and over again to remain where he was, to accept the snow blanket's invitation of peace. And a million little needles of pain pricked him when he grimly arose to his feet and staggered on.

Ten seconds later the wind's bitter bite grew immeasurably less, and the snow reached only halfway to his knees. But it was no illusion this time. He was in the pines.

A few feet more, and he scuffed a patch of snow away and laid the Professor down. He groped his way to a pine and broke off some of the dead branches on its lower trunk. He knelt in the snow, laid a little pile of small twigs, and touched a match to them. The tiny flame caught, and leaped higher as it found more food for its hungry tongue. John broke the bigger sticks across his knee, piled them on the burning twigs, and by the light of the fire, brought in more wood.

Within five minutes he had a roaring blaze, and turned his attention to Professor Crandall. Both the little man's cheeks were frozen. John scooped up a handful of soft snow, laid it

on the white frost patches, and rubbed the frozen cheeks gently. A bright red glow replaced the white frost bite as the Professor's cheeks thawed. John broke off armfuls of soft pine twigs, made a bed on the snow, and laid the Professor on it. The little man tossed fitfully, and moaned.

"It was such an excellent picture. I . . . I . . . Such an excellent picture!"

"Sh-h, you're all right." John put a gentle hand on the Professor's head and pressed him back down on the bough bed.

He looked at his watch, and was surprised to find that it was half past nine. His own cheeks began to sting and burn. Hastily he leaped for a handful of snow, but let it fall through his fingers. It had never occurred to him that his cheeks must be frost-bitten too. But it was too late to thaw them by gentle methods now. They were already thawed. He arose, made his way into the plantation, and came back with armload after armload of dry wood.

At intervals the Professor moved uneasily, and two hours later sat bolt upright on the bough bed. His serious eyes were fixed with almost comical intensity on John.

"Most amazing!" he said. "Most extraordinary! Surely this isn't my bed!"

"There was a blizzard, Professor," John said. "You got hurt."

"Oh yes. I remember," the little man murmured. "A furious storm came without warning. But do I remember? How did I get here?"

"Maybe the wind blew you, Professor."

"Oh, but that's impossible! The wind could not deposit me in this . . . You're joking! Did you bring me here?"

"Yes. But never mind it now. Just rest."

"You saved my life!"

"Somebody else would have found you if I hadn't. Please don't talk about it. Just forget it."

"I'll respect your wishes," the Professor murmured. "But I won't forget it."

After what seemed interminable hours, the gray light of morning broke on a very cold day. John arose, kindled a smaller fire, and laid green branches on it when it was burning well. Thick clouds of yellow smoke rose to hang like a pall over the plantation. Professor Crandall, who had been dozing, jerked to a sitting position.

"I smell smoke!"

"It's all right, Professor," John said. "There'll be search parties out for us, and the smoke will guide them here."

The tops of the pines rustled slightly, and were still. But John had had a glimpse of a big white bird, floating among the trees on silent wings.

"What was that?" Professor Crandall asked, startled.

"A snowy owl."

"But they're a bird of the far north."

"I know. But they come down here when their hunting gets so hard they can't catch enough to live on. Conditions must be bad up north."

"How very interesting! Owls would present fine subjects for camera studies! I believe I'll go out tomorrow and seek a blind where I might photograph one!"

John smiled. "They'll be here all winter. I think you'll spend the next week or so in the hospital."

"But that's impossible! I must get all the pictures I can in the time at my disposal. Perhaps I won't have another outing like this for five years. I . . ."

"Thar they be, settin' like two baby chicks 'round a brooder," a voice broke in. "The state pays you to work, Ranger. What in tunket ya loafin' for?"

John turned to see Lew Bangorst and Mel Crane, wearing snowshoes and dragging a toboggan, coming through the pines.

"We see'd yore fire," Lew continued. "Most anybody could o' see'd it. Ya sent up enough smudge to make a body think the hul plantation was on fire."

"So you finally got here?" John asked. "The Professor and I were wondering if there was anybody in Pine Hill with enough ambition to bring us a pair of snowshoes."

"Bosh. If you'd any git an' go, you'd o' tromped through the snow to Pine Hill yourselves."

"Oh, I say!" the Professor exclaimed. "That isn't fair . . ."

John winked at him and the little man subsided, to nod understandingly after a moment. Lew and Mel took a skillet, a coffee pot, and several packages from the toboggan. They bent over the fire, and ten minutes later arose with heaping plates of ham and eggs, bowls of scalding coffee. John

wolfed his. But the Professor was too tired and worn to be hungry.

"Aw right," Lew Bangorst said at last. "If ye're ready to leave these pines, we're ready to take ya."

"Where are my snowshoes?" John asked.

"We plumb forgot to bring any," Lew said solemnly. "Ye'll haf to ride the skidder."

"I can walk," John protested. "I'm no . . ."

Unceremoniously Lew pushed him down on the toboggan, and tucked a huge bear skin around him.

"You ain't walkin'. So shut up."

Mel Crane picked the little Professor up, and bundled him behind John. The two Pine Hillers pulled the toboggan down the fire trail to the road. The snow plow was there, and John and the Professor were put in the seat while Lew took his place at the wheel. Mel Crane lifted the toboggan into the back of the truck, and climbed in himself.

Lew drove down to Pine Hill, and let Mel off at his house. Then he continued on through the village.

"Hey!" John protested. "You're passing my house!"

"I noticed that myself," Lew commented. "But the house will stand."

"If you're taking me down to Grabada, you're crazy!" John exclaimed. "Take the Professor down. He's the one who needs a doctor!"

"It's been a long time sinst I whupped anybody," Lew said. "But if you don't button yore big trap, I'm sure gonna start in on you. Ye're gonna see a doctor."

"I think that's best," Professor Crandall said. "He's been through a lot. Some day we may get the story of how he found me and carried me through that terrible blizzard to the pines."

John paid no attention. "Lew, take me home!"

"Sure, after you've see'd a doctor," Lew said. "Lemme show ya how to run this ol' plow single-handed. If ya hang right in the middle o' the road, where there ain't no culverts or fences to allus be liftin' the plow around, an' let her down so's she's about six inches from the road bed, ya can run along as slick as axle grease."

Lew turned up the hill that led to the little city of Grabada, twenty-six miles from Pine Hill. The big truck cleared its own road until they came to a paved highway that a state truck had already cleaned. Lew lifted his own plow, coasted down the other side of the hill, and brought the truck to a stop in front of Grabada's hospital. The three walked up concrete steps into the hospital's lobby.

"Couple o' fellas here thought they was able to lay out in last night's storm," Lew explained at the information window. "Could they see a pill thrower?"

The clerk rang a bell, and a white-clad nurse came to usher the three men into a clean little room smelling strongly of antiseptic. A doctor appeared.

"Professor Crandall's the one who needs attention, Doctor," John explained. "He . . ."

"They both laid out last night, Doc," Lew Bangorst broke in.
"Don't let him bull ya."

The doctor pressed John back into a chair, and applied a stethoscope to his chest. He took John's temperature, and carefully inspected his frost-bitten cheeks.

"You're all right," he said. "Be careful of those cheeks though."

The Professor took his place in the chair and underwent a similar examination. The doctor turned to Lew and John.

"I believe we'll keep the Professor with us a week or so. He's suffering from exposure, and I don't like a little rasp in his right lung. I think we can stop a beginning pneumonia."

Bidding the Professor goodbye, Lew and John got back into the truck and turned it toward Pine Hill. John drove, and Lew was silent until they approached the Ranger's headquarters. Then he began to speak.

"Wunst I had a houn' what had the makin's of a fust class cat dog. He hunted cats aw right. But when he come up with one he jest went right away ag'in. I purty nigh shot that houn' fer bein' afeared to fight. But I let him hang around a spell. Then one night I heard an awful rarin' out in my apple orchard. I went out, an' thar was the houn' tearin' into a lashin' big bear what come down to eat apples. I knew then that he wasn't afeared o' cats. He jest didn't want'a fight 'em. I never misjeded a houn' wuss in my life. Ranger, you left yore lunch bag in the truck when you come down offa that hill. When I see'd how you'd got safe outa the storm, an' went back up to find the little man, I knew you couldn't o' been afeared o' Poley that night. I shore misjeded . . ."

"Oh, shut up," John said. "You're the gabbiest old coot I ever saw."

Lew grinned.

"Aw right. I stan' corrected. Ranger, what would you say if I told ya they was wolfs in the Rasca?"

"I'd say you were crazy. Whoever heard of wolves in this country?"

"I did, forty year' ago. An' I heard 'em howl ag'in yistiddy when I was workin' in them pines. A pack of wolfs is gonna kill one awful pile o' game if they ain't caught."

"I saw a snowy owl this morning," John said thoughtfully. "If owls are coming down, wolves might come."

"Wolfs *did* come," Lew asserted. "I heard 'em."

"I've got a lot of work to do," John said slowly. "I can't go off on a wolf hunt now. They're rightly the game warden's job anyway."

"Your work's in the woods, ain't it?" Lew pointed out. "An' the woods is whar the wolfs be. Thar ain't no harm in yore carryin' a rifle while you work. Besides, I awready cal't Harve Lambertson about the wolfs. He says I was crazy. That brick top has been chasin' poachers so long, an' had so many dealin's with law breakers, he don't believe nothin' he don't see hisself."

The following day John and Lew cleaned roads, and the day after, wearing snowshoes and carrying his rifle in a sling on his back, John went alone up a side gully that led from the Rasca road.

Two miles up the gulley he came to a side hill where yellow birches grew thickly, with straight young black walnut trees scattered among them. Beginning with the first birch, John cut it down and left it lying on the snow. He went from it to the second, and continued cutting birches until twilight.

For nearly the whole month, carrying his rifle every day, he felled birches. Finally only the walnuts were left standing and the hill side was a tangle of fallen birches. John walked down to the bottom of the gulley, and stood there looking up at his handiwork. His gaze was attracted by motion, and he looked down the gulley to see Lew Bangorst coming toward him on snowshoes. Lew carried a rifle under his arm.

"So this is whar ye been keepin' yerself," he called when he came close. "I ain't see'd you around Pine Hill fer a month. All I see'd was a light in your kitchen now'n then. What do you aim to do with all the birches?"

"I'm going to give them to Clem Hawes."

Lew looked at him suspiciously.

"Do you feel aw right, Ranger?"

"Sure."

"Well, you ain't actin' right. Why in thunder should you spend a month cuttin' birches to give Clem?"

"He sells wood to summer cottagers. And there's enough birch here to last him all summer. He can get a bobsled, scoop a road up here, and haul them all out with his team in two weeks."

"Yeh. But is Clem too old an' weak to cut his own birch? An' why didn't ya cut the walnuts, too, if ya wanted this hill

bare?"

"I don't want it bare. This is strictly a forestry project. Those walnuts are valuable timber, but they had to have room to grow. The birches were crowding most of them out. But there's from twenty to fifty feet between each walnut now. That's going to give the sun plenty of chance to get through to the ground. What happens when the sun hits the ground in a place like this?"

"The wust tangle of brush you ever want to see."

"That's right. But brush is shelter to wild game, and the place is going to keep a lot of rabbits and birds alive through the winter."

Lew scratched his head.

"It do beat all, what people think of nowadays. Spend a hul month cuttin' yeller birch jest so's walnut trees kin grow an' a rabbit kin git his vittles when the snow's on. But what you aimin' to do now, Ranger? I'm goin' up this holler. I got a hunch them wolfs is workin' on the deer up thisaway."

"I've been here a month," John scoffed. "And I haven't heard any wolves or seen a track. But I'll go with you."

He sank the axe into a yellow birch stump, and with his rifle in his hands, followed the old woodsman up the gulley. A mile up, Lew stopped and raised a warning hand.

Two hundred feet ahead, a deer stood in the center of a deep path beaten in the snow. Its head seemed a ridiculously oversized thing on the end of a scrawny neck. Every rib showed, and its flanks were thin and shrunken. It reared on its hind legs to reach into a soft maple tree, the lower

branches of which had already been eaten off as high as deer could reach without rearing. Then an eddying breeze carried the scent of the two men up the gulley, and the deer bounded away.

It ran only to a turn in the path, and stopped to look back. A dozen other deer were seen in a patch of scrub hemlock beyond the turn. All moved when the two men came close. But they kept in the deep paths they had worn in the snow. It was a deer "yard," or place where this little herd had gathered to spend the winter.

John and Lew looked down from the edge of one of the deep paths that were worn to bare ground.

"Ye're in thar, fellas," Lew said. "An' ye'll stay on them paths until the snow melts enough to let ye out ag'in. I allus did say that a sharp-footed hoofed animile got a dirty deal. They can't move hardly a'tall in deep snow. Take a lynx now. With them big paws o' his'n, he kin run right over the top o' most any kind o' snow."

"Look how thin they are," John commented. "They're eating laurel, and see how even the hemlock has been browsed off as high as they can reach. We'll have to start feeding them soon. Lew, I think I'll draft you to help me."

"If you kin spend a hul month cuttin' down yeller birches for rabbits, I don't see how I can kick on helpin' vittle a few deer. I'll help ye."

They continued up the gulley almost to the top of the hill. The gulley was merely a little shallow-sided dip in the mountain here, and it was John who first saw the deer coming toward them. The panting animal's tongue hung out

as he plowed through shoulder-deep snow. Lew came up beside John and gripped his arm.

"Look about a hunnert yards back o' whar he is now," he whispered. "That deer's been hurt."

John followed the laboring deer's back trail up the other side of the gulley, and saw a bright splash of scarlet on the snow. The deer stopped, and his head sank on the snow while an agonized bawl came from him. John and Lew ran forward.

The deer's flank had been torn so badly that part of his paunch hung out. Blood gushed from the wound, and now that they were close to the stricken animal, John could see big splashes of blood all along the trail. He raised his rifle, intending to end the animal's suffering.

"Don't shoot," Lew whispered. "I told you they was wolfs in here. This proves it. That deer jest came from a yard the wolfs lit into. The chances is good that we'll ketch 'em thar. If they made a big kill, they won't leave it. You gotta leave this deer be so's we kin get 'em."

John said grimly, "No, I don't," and knelt with his hunting knife in his hand. He thrust the point deep into the stricken deer's throat, and cut sideways. A little geyser of bright blood spouted and the animal kicked convulsively. Then it lay still.

Leaving the deer, the two ran swiftly along the trail he had made. They burst through a little belt of hemlocks, and looked across a small open space into another deer yard. Eleven deer lay dead in it. Five big gray wolves, tearing at one of them, leaped for the tops of the paths that the deer had beaten. Lew and John brought their rifles to their shoulders, and both shot at almost the same time. Two of the timber

wolves fell back into the yard. John shot again, saw a running wolf drop behind the other two and lie thrashing in the snow.

Lew raced to the left around the deer yard. John remained where he was. He saw the two fleeing wolves, hampered by the deep snow but straining desperately, mount a small mound. He shot again. The bullet missed. But on the next shot the leading wolf turned to bite at his flank. John ran forward, and found a bloody trail where the wounded wolf had dragged himself off. He followed cautiously, and came on the wolf under a small hemlock, facing his back trail. The wolf's jaws were bared, and he lunged at his enemy when John came up. John shot him through the neck, and the big wolf sagged limply in the snow.

A single shot sounded out in the forest. Ten minutes later Lew appeared, dragging the last wolf by its tail. They tumbled the three dead wolves down beside the first two, and looked from them to the dead deer. For a few minutes even Lew was silent. Then he took a huge skinning knife from his pocket, left his snowshoes standing upright in the snow, and slid down to start skinning the kill.

"It ain't a good idea to believe ever'thin' ya hear," he observed. "But, by gummy, I knows a wolf's howl from a puppy dog's yap. The next time I tells ya I hear wolfs, you kin take stock in what I say."

"For once in your life you weren't lying," John agreed. "The next time you tell me you hear wolves, I'll believe you. But it's going to be pretty cold, staying here to skin these five. I reckon I'll get a fire going."

"Go ahead, Son. But this peltin' job ain't gonna take's long's you might think."

John walked back toward a big hemlock stump he had marked when he shot the wounded wolf. He was reaching out to tear a slab from its side, when some impulse prompted him to look into it. He saw the sheen of fur, and the outline of a hibernating bear. Three tiny new-born cubs, scarcely larger than chipmunks, huddled close to her.

John backed cautiously away and gathered an armload of dead pine for firewood.

Chapter Five

LAND OF STARVATION

The last day of the month another snow storm burst out of a leaden February sky and big, soft snowflakes hurled themselves with unrelenting fury at the earth. It was as though the winter knew its days were numbered, and wanted one last blizzard before spring's warmth forced it into retreat.

For two hours, chafing under inaction, John paced restlessly back and forth in the house. While such a storm raged, there was nothing he could do in the forests. And yet it seemed that he must be out there. The wolf hunt had been an exciting and adventurous interlude and would be remembered as such. But, sharp before him, was the mental image of the thin, starved deer he and Lew Bangorst had seen in the deer yards.

He knew that wild turkeys, ruffed grouse, cottontail and snowshoe rabbits, and squirrels must be likewise in desperate need of food. A dozen times he walked to the window and peered hopefully out. But he could not even see the store across the road. Finally he resigned himself to the fact that this was more than just a snow flurry, and went out to the shed where the fire tools were kept.

He built a wood fire in the discarded oil drum that served as the shed's stove, and picked up one of the twenty fire rakes that were racked along the wall. With a machinist's hammer he tightened the rivets that held the rake's four triangular steel teeth on their frame. He inspected the four-foot wooden

handle to make sure that it was not loose or cracked, and when the rake was in condition to take out on a fire, placed it against the opposite wall.

One by one he inspected and repaired the rest of the rakes. When all were in good working order, he sharpened his four hook-bladed bush hooks until they were razor-keen, and ground the axes that were used to remove trees from fire lanes. About to start repairing his three portable water pumps, he realized with a start that night had fallen and he had worked past his dinner hour. He plunged through the storm back to the house.

The next morning the blizzard seemed to have abated a little. Or maybe, John thought, it seemed less because he was hoping so desperately that it would stop and he could get out to start feeding game. He returned to the shed, took the pumps apart, oiled all working parts, and fitted the nozzles with new gaskets. He took his back-firing torches apart and trimmed the wicks.

When the shed's door opened, John leaped erect to blink in dazzling sunshine. Harvey Lambertson came in. The stocky Game Warden wore no snowshoes, and obviously had been wading through hip-deep snow.

"Ranger efficiency!" he said biting. "You working on fire tools, and my car's stopped by a drift at Hopper Creek. I left my snowshoes at the store, but was cussed if I'd put 'em on to come this far."

"You've only been ten years in this country," John remarked. "In ten more years maybe you'll know enough to keep your snowshoes with you."

The Warden laughed. "Maybe I will. But Professor Einstein told me you'd have the roads cleared."

"Who?"

"A little guy I picked up on the Grabada road about three weeks ago. He said you'd put him in the hospital there, but he just couldn't stay because he only had about six months left to get himself some pictures. The poor little mug was about half dead, and had a nasty cough, but still insisted he could walk to the Rasca. I took him home, and showed him those two bob-cats I've got in the cage outside. For the next week he was happy as a lark taking pictures of them. I even took him on a couple of cat hunts."

"Professor Crandall!" John exclaimed. "I thought he was still in the hospital, and wrote him letters there."

"He's a good little guy," the Warden sighed, "but he nearly drove me nuts with his chatter. He thinks you're a seven-day wonder, and insisted we could drive to Pine Hill without a hitch because John Belden was the last word in Ranger efficiency and would be sure to have his roads clean. Joe Cabey's got his plowed to Hopper Creek. How come you haven't?"

John smiled sheepishly.

"I forgot it. I aimed to get out in the woods and start feeding game, and didn't have much of anything else on my mind. When the blizzard stopped woods travel, I came in to fix fire tools."

The Warden nodded.

"I came up here to help you feed game. I've got feeding pretty well organized in other parts of my district, and my deputies and interested sportsmen are carrying it along. But this place is so darn far from everything that few sportsmen reach it--I wouldn't expect Pine Hillers to get out and rustle. Most of them live by their own rules, and feeding wild game's not in their book. How is the game in the Rasca?"

"Poor. And I guess you can blame me for not having started feeding before this. But I worked on a forestry project nearly all February, and naturally there wasn't much game around where I was working. I didn't really get to look it over until Lew Bangorst and I went up into Snakey Flow, and then I realized with a bang just how much the game needs feeding. Did you know we got five timber wolves up there?"

"Yeh," the Warden said ruefully. "I know it. Everybody knows it. It's even been scattered all over the city papers, and I've got about sixteen dozen letters wanting to know what the Game Warden's doing when the Ranger and an old hill billy have to kill his wolves for him. That old woods hermit did call me up to tell me he'd heard wolves in the Rasca. But he's seen and heard so many dizzy things that I wouldn't believe him. But getting rid of the wolves was a good job, and the game commission has put a special bounty of fifty dollars on each of the five. That's a nice hunk of change for you and the old man to split. But how about plowing the road up to Hopper Creek? Me and your Professor pal will be stuck there until spring if you don't."

John went to the barn and ran the snow plow out. With the Warden handling the plow, and John driving, they cleaned the road up to Hopper Creek. The Professor was there,

industriously poking away at a six-foot drift with a short-handled shovel. He ran back to the Warden's car, standing in the road that Joe Cabey had already cleared, snatched a small camera from its running board, and came forward.

"Well!" he beamed. "It's fine to see you again! Perhaps Mr. Lambertson has told you how he and I slew bob-cats, *Lynx rufus*? What savage beasts they were, and how they snarled and spat when the hounds bayed them! I'm so happy that I had the foresight to purchase this small camera when I left the hospital in Grabada. The doctor urged me to stay, but my work was too important. I'm sorry that I lost the Reflex with which I took pictures of the beaver dam. However . . ."

"You didn't lose it, Professor," John broke in. "Lew picked it up and it's at my house."

"Oh that's wonderful! So thoughtful of Lew! And certainly the rest of my cameras are safe at the lodge where I left them. But now that the road is cleared, may we proceed down to Pine Hill? I have Mr. Lambertson's permission to accompany you on your game-feeding expeditions. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Do you want to drive the Warden's car down while we clear the other half of the road?"

"I'll be delighted to do so."

The Professor following, they drove back down to Pine Hill. John stopped in front of Lew Bangorst's house and blew the horn. With red woollen underwear showing through the numerous holes in his flannel shirt, the old man came out and stood with one foot on the running board.

"Do you want to take the truck, pick up Mel Crane, or Wash Jampel, and plow roads?" John asked. "Harve, the Professor, and I are going out to feed game. Incidentally, Lew, those timber puppies are going to be worth just fifty bucks apiece."

Lew fixed the Warden with a baleful eye.

"Sure, I'll clean yore roads. An' the next time suttin people might not be so uppity when I tell 'em they's wolfs in the Rasca."

They left the snow plow for Lew and climbed into the Warden's car. After picking up his snowshoes at the store, the Warden drove over to the barn, into the place that the snow plow had vacated, and raised the trunk of his car to reveal six hundred-pound bags of commercial scratch feed--mixed corn, oats, buckwheat, and wheat. Six more bags of corn on the ear were in the back seat. Leaving one bag of scratch feed in the car, they placed the rest in a big wooden box where mice and rats could not get at it. John squinted at the sky.

"It's late. But there's a flock of fifteen quail up in the old Dadderson meadow. They've got hard rustling about now. Let's start in by giving them a little grub."

Putting the snowshoes on the fenders, they followed the plow up the road to a long meadow that flanked the creek. A stinging north wind slapped their cheeks when they got out. John stooped to buckle his snowshoes on, and shouldered the bag of scratch feed. Bending under its weight, he started across the meadow toward a thick growth of willows.

"This meadow was full of wild timothy and weeds," he called back. "Most of 'em stuck above the top of the snow,

and the quail could get the seeds easy. But look at it since this last snow fall. Every weed's covered."

A little brown bobwhite ran across the snow into the willows. The men came closer, and John saw the rest of the little birds darting away. Hungry and cold, the quail had no desire to fly. John entered the willows, and crossed the splayed tracks of a snowshoe rabbit. Dozens of the willows gleamed yellow where the big rabbit had gnawed the bark from them. John put the sack down, and it sank half out of sight before the snow packed enough to hold it.

"Where do you want to put the quail grain, Harve?" he asked.

The Warden examined the thicket with a critical eye, and selected a particularly heavy growth of willows. He took off one snowshoe, and with it scooped the snow away down to bare ground. A long, sloping ramp was graded out of the pit. The Warden put his snowshoe back on.

"Pour in the grain," he said. "Give 'em plenty. There aren't enough quail that we can afford to lose many."

John slit the strings that closed the grain sack, and poured almost a third of the scratch feed into the pit. Then he and the Warden roofed it over with willow sticks, and covered them with green branches cut from a nearby hemlock. A little snow was sprinkled on top to make the shelter blend with its surroundings.

Professor Crandall, finished snapping a picture, wound his camera to the next one, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Why is this particular place . . . ?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Professor," the Game Warden interrupted wearily. "We build the shelter at this particular place because the brush is heaviest here, and both shelters the quail from strong winds and gives them protection from natural enemies--such as hawks--that might prey on them while feeding. If a mink or weasel finds the shelter, we'll try to trap him."

The little man closed his mouth again.

"Fascinating," he said. "Very fascinating."

They put the grain back into the car and drove down the road. Suddenly the Warden applied the brakes, and the little coupe came to a squealing halt.

Twenty feet ahead a black birch leaned over the road. Nine ruffed grouse were perched in its branches pecking at the buds that grew on them. When the car halted the birds stopped eating, and for a moment sat nervously. Then, one by one, they soared into a small spruce plantation a dozen feet up the hill. The three men got out, and again John shouldered the sack of grain while they snowshoed up the hill into the trees.

Again they flushed the little flock of grouse, and heard them thundering away to light farther in the spruces. The Warden took his hat off, filled it with grain, and wound through the spruces scattering a few handfuls here and there under hollow stumps and against the trunks of the trees. Going in another direction, the Professor by his side, John did likewise. When they had scattered twenty pounds of grain they returned to the car, and through the gathering twilight

started back to Pine Hill. For a few minutes even the Professor was silent. Then,

"I hardly understand," he said finally. "The grouse is a much larger bird than the quail. It is logical to deduce that they require more nourishment. But you gave them less."

John grinned. "That's so. I guess Harve likes quail better."

The Game Warden looked balefully at John, who refused to meet his eye.

"Grouse are very wary birds, Professor," he said, "and extremely suspicious of everything. There are only a few instances on record of their having fed at shelters. So we placed the grain in natural places. The grouse will not go near it even there unless they're desperate for food. However, it might do them some good. If they don't eat it, it won't all be wasted. Squirrels and cottontail rabbits will be sure to find it. By the way, as long as you're going to be part of this game-feeding outfit, why don't you stay at the Ranger's headquarters so you won't miss anything?"

"That's right," John agreed, looking suspiciously at the Warden's expressionless face. "You're perfectly welcome. You'd better stay too, Harve, until this feeding is over."

The stocky man accepted reluctantly.

They stopped at the hunting lodge that the Professor had rented, so he could get his car and his cameras. John and the Warden continued on down to Ranger's headquarters. The Warden started a fire in the kitchen stove, and began hustling around with food, pots, and pans.

"I'll be the cook tonight," he said. "After you've sunk your teeth into a mess of grub I cook, you'll be glad to cook all the rest of the time. But I thought I'd let you find out in time that I can't even boil water without burning it. If I just tell you, you'll think I'm gold-bricking."

"I expect you'll burn it on purpose," John said.

But there was no gaiety in the forced remark. He was possessed by a burning eagerness to be back out in the forest. He sat down in one of the kitchen chairs, but rose after a moment to go out on the porch. The outlines of the mountains that hemmed him in were soft under a star-studded sky. And there seemed to be a million voices calling from those mountains, deer in starvation-pressed yards, wild turkeys that could find no food in the deep snows, hungry cottontail rabbits, squirrels whose winter supplies of food were gone. All wanted help, and all were asking why they did not get it.

Then, with a sudden shock, came the thought that he had only a year in the Rasca and three months of that were already gone. This was his life, and it was to end in twelve--no, nine now--short months. He could still go to the Ranger's School, but no matter where he went from there, or what he did, he knew that he would still be longing for the Rasca.

Harvey Lambertson opened the kitchen door.

"Hey, come and get it!"

John took his place at the table and dawdled over the excellent supper that the Warden had prepared. Harvey Lambertson looked at him solicitously, but said nothing.

John made breakfast long before daylight the next morning. The great sense of urgency, the pressing necessity for action, still gripped him. Breakfast ready, he routed the other two out of bed. The Warden got up, grumbling.

"Crazy notions! Starting out in the middle of the night! What kind of ants have you got in your pants, Ranger?"

"Quit beefing and come eat. There's work to do."

John wolfed the heaping plate of pancakes and sausage he had prepared for himself, gulped his coffee, and with a flashlight in his hand ran out to the barn. Lew had brought the snow plow back, and it stood before the barn door, a hulking shape in the darkness. John unlocked the door, and went in to take a long toboggan from a rack. He loaded it with a sack of mixed grain, the partly empty sack they had been using, and two sacks of corn on the ear. Covering these with a tarpaulin, he lashed a roll of chicken wire on top, stuck a double-bitted axe under the lashings, and went back to the house.

"Hey! Time's a'wastin'."

Carrying his Reflex camera in its case, the Professor came scurrying out. Harvey Lambertson followed him a moment later with five steel traps which he added to the toboggan's load.

"I don't suppose the Rasca has any weasels or foxes, the way it's run," he grinned, "but they can smell a feeding station from the next district."

They laid their snowshoes on top of the toboggan and struck up the plowed road. A mile up they strapped their snowshoes on and turned up a side gulley. Five hundred feet from the

road they came to a yard where at least fifty deer had gathered.

It was a sheltered place, with the mountains on either side protecting it from heavy winds. Up the valley a grove of pines prevented the wind's blowing into it from that direction. But there were only thirty of the original fifty deer left alive.

Near the little creek that coursed through the yard, and that had not frozen in its swifter places, eleven small deer lay dead in the snow. Weasels, mice, and scavenger birds that had been eating the starved animals had scattered hair over a hundred foot area. Five more small deer lay near the pines, and four adult animals were stiffly sprawled where they had dropped in the yard. Of the remaining deer, only the largest were still strong, and the yard bore mute testimony to the struggle that had taken place there.

Among a patch of laurel and rhododendron, one tall bush still had a cluster of green leaves at the top. The rest had been eaten. The lower branches of the white pine and hemlocks were chewed off. The soft maple and black birch about the yard had their lower twigs and branches all eaten and their trunks gnawed. Blueberry and sweet fern bushes were mere stubs, devoured down to the snow line.

A small doe, one of last season's fawns that ordinarily would have weighed about sixty pounds, but in its present emaciated state weighed scarcely thirtyfive, approached a soft maple tree and reared under it. Her extended muzzle did not come within six inches of anything edible. Again and again she reared, each time failing to reach food. A big buck, one of the animals still able to move freely, approached to

chase the fawn away. The buck reared, and his mouth closed on a bunch of twigs.

"I understand now why the smaller animals die first!" the Professor exclaimed. "When the browse is eaten off beyond their reach, they're unable to get food even if the big ones would let them. But why isn't there food enough for all?"

"There are several reasons for it," Harvey Lambertson said. "And the public that owns this herd of deer is partly responsible for the fact that they are now starving. 'Restore the game' they say, forgetting that their fields and forests will not provide food for an unlimited quantity. Public opinion is what laws are based on, so we have a law that a hunter must kill only one buck every hunting season. That's all right up to a certain point. But, after a number of seasons, a great many bucks are killed, leaving the woods populated largely with does and fawns. If, say, every third season, hunters were permitted to take only antlerless deer, most of those you see dead now would be shot and used as food by humans. The bucks and does would be more evenly balanced and there would be few barren does. Also, since most hunters kill big healthy bucks, the bucks that were permitted to survive through every third season would naturally produce big and healthy fawns. It's the same with all other birds and animals. The ruffed grouse, for instance, run in cycles. Every seventh year is their peak, and in that year the game commission might well triple the bag limit of grouse. If they do not, disease strikes and the birds die by the thousand to rot in the woods."

"I see," the Professor said slowly. "What should be striven for in game birds and animals is not only numbers, but

balance."

"That's it," the Warden agreed. "The sexes should be kept adjusted, and no wild creature should be allowed to increase beyond the point where its range will provide food for it."

Meantime John had seized the axe from the toboggan and leaped down into the yard. The hungry deer retreated a few hundred feet and stood watching him approach one of the soft maples. John swung the axe, the tree fell, and he moved on to the next one, driven by guilt that he had not started this work a month ago. He was hardly away when the deer trotted forward. Heedless of man's presence, the biggest ones crowded about the fallen tree and began to tear at the top branches and twigs. The smaller deer hung anxiously about, snatching at stray tidbits and keeping away from the vicious kicks that their elders aimed at them.

"Hey, Johnny, how many cords of wood do you think these deer can eat?"

John paused, and looked around to see a long line of felled trees in his path. The Professor, who had just finished snapping another picture of the smaller deer cropping contentedly at a tree, was looking at him understandingly. The Warden was sitting on top of the toboggan.

"The way you were tearing up through there, I thought you aimed to cut every tree on the mountain," he said. "Don't you think we'd better be getting on with the rest of it?"

John sheepishly climbed out of the yard and strapped his snowshoes back on. The Warden arose, grasped the rope that the toboggan was drawn by, and started up the gulley to another stand of big beech trees. A small spring run, too

swift to freeze, wandered among the snow banks. And the big, three-toed tracks of a flock of wild turkeys were impressed in the snow along the little creek. John took the chicken wire from the toboggan, cut off a strip with a pair of wire cutters, and folded it to form a basket three feet long by eighteen inches in diameter. He nailed the basket to the tree near the creek, with its bottom about a foot from the top of the snow, and filled it with ears of corn.

They made two more turkey feeding stations, and in a patch of blackberry brambles where rabbit tracks were plentiful they left thirty pounds of scratch feed. More scratch feed was placed in a pine thicket where grouse had been roosting, and the Warden set two traps here because of weasel tracks in the pines. Then he looked at his watch.

"It's half past four," he said. "And we're eight miles from Pine Hill. We'd better be making tracks."

Reluctantly John turned away towards a fire trail that led across the mountain down to Pine Hill. He glanced back at the turkey feeder as they left. It seemed a tiny thing, lost in an immense wilderness. He thought of the other feeding stations they had erected today. At best, they would help only a very small percentage of the game in the territory they had covered. Wearily John turned his face down the trail.

In the bottom of the gulley they came to another deer yard. An old doe stood with legs spread and head drooping in the center of it, and twenty feet back of her a small buck lay prone in the snow. The rest of the seven animals that had been in the yard were dead.

John approached the old doe cautiously. She turned to flee, and sank limply down. As he came close, she struggled to get up and could not. Then fear and terror seemed to leave her. Her head was raised, and in her eyes was a calm acceptance of the fate that had overtaken her. John passed his arms about her rump and shoulders, lifted her up, and carried her to the toboggan. She lay without protest while the Warden and the Professor lashed ropes about her and John went back for the buck.

When they reached the Ranger's headquarters both deer were put in one of the empty horse stalls in the barn. John gave them a box full of potato peelings and corn.

"Take that away," the Warden said, "and give 'em a little dry grass. Their stomachs have been empty so long they're scarcely able to move. Loading them up now will kill 'em."

John took the grain away, and replaced it with an armful of dried hay and a dish of water, then followed the Warden and the Professor into the house. Pausing on the porch, he looked up at the mountains.

He still felt a great urge to provide for the starving game of the Rasca, but he knew he had done his best today and that the responsibility for taking care of them was not his alone, but belonged to everyone who had ever found enjoyment in the outdoors. And what he learned he could successfully apply to other years. He would start feeding earlier, and make many more natural feeding places.

The next day they placed all the remaining grain, and after that devoted themselves entirely to the deer yards. Even the Professor left his camera home and enthusiastically went to

work chopping down birches and soft maples. By the end of the first week the horse stalls in the barn were full of deer. Some died, but most recovered to be liberated. These last, instead of striking back for the woods, stayed around the barn to eat the hay that John fed them.

On the fifteenth of the month a bright sun rose. But it was no longer a winter sun. Miraculously, almost over night, the change had been accomplished and spring was here. The top of the snow sagged perceptibly. The little creeks burst their bonds and water rushed through holes to gurgle over the ice. After the deep snows, the big thaw was setting in.

It was still necessary to continue feeding game, and would be until most of the deep snows had melted. John, the Warden, and the Professor were out in the woods every day. Then one day John was startled by an ear-splitting scream on top of a little ridge five hundred feet from where he was working in a deer yard. He leaped erect with the axe in his hand, ready to defend himself.

Lew Bangorst was tearing down the ridge, taking prodigious strides on his snowshoes. He screamed again.

"Ranger! Johnneeeeeeee!"

"What do you want?" John shouted. "What's the trouble?"

"I just see'd it!" Lew yelled, and came panting up to where John stood. "I just see'd it!! A robin! The fust robin! Summer's pra'tically here!"

Chapter Six

THE POACHER STRIKES

By the first of April the last of the snow had gone from a soggy, dripping land. At noon the mail truck came churning down the road, a lane of mud that only the most expert of drivers could navigate, and stopped to leave a letter in the tin mail box in front of the Ranger's headquarters. A couple of Pine Hillers picked their way from the store across the road as John came out to get the letter, and stood interestedly by while he read it.

"The forestry department's issuing me two hundred and fifty thousand pine seedlings," John announced. "That'll mean a tree-planting crew and a chance for you fellows to earn some wages."

He spent the rest of the day digging a row of holes in a shaded part of his back yard, and early the next morning started up an unused logging road to inspect one of the places where the little trees might be planted. Five mallard ducks rose from a little creek at the foot of the trail, and a little farther up John stopped at a quick motion in the road ahead.

A cock grouse stood in the center of the road, his tail spread fan-wise and the black ruff of feathers about his neck erect. All his other feathers, extended, gave him the appearance of a miniature strutting turkey.

Bowing his head so that it rested almost on the ground, the cock suddenly sprang three feet straight in the air. His feet

flew as he clawed and rent some imaginary enemy for the benefit of his lady love, a demure little hen who sat unconcernedly on an overhanging limb. The cock made an agile turn and came down to dash back and forth across the road while the hen stretched her neck and peered interestedly at a bright red berry on a wintergreen bush.

For five minutes John watched the bird's antics. Then he strolled slowly up the road. The hen immediately took wing and soared off into the woods. But the amorous cock, engrossed in his love-making, strutted for almost half a minute before he was aware of John's presence. His feathers indignantly ruffled, he ran a little way up the hill before flying off.

"Just like some of the Pine Hillers," John murmured to himself as he walked on up the road. "Take Jube Crassman and Ann Severn, now. He cuts all kinds of capers for her; only last Monday I saw him lift a hundred pounds above his head with his left hand just because she was watching. But she treats him like a dog until he goes away, then she eats her heart out until he gets back. And I bet that right now that hen's sitting in some thicket just hoping the cock will come back--and afraid he won't."

John walked three miles to a fire-swept plateau. The timber that the fire had burned had been second growth hardwoods, but originally the plateau had been covered with white pines. Towering pines hemmed it in, and scattered groups of small trees grew among the sweet fern and wild grass.

John walked out on the plateau. The wild grass was infested with field mice and moles. He kicked at a nest in a bunch of grass and three brown mice went scurrying away.

"Huh," he murmured. "That's what comes of putting a bounty on foxes and weasels. They would have caught most of these mice if the trappers hadn't caught them. And the whole plateau would have reseeded itself naturally if the rodents hadn't been here to eat the seed that blew down."

He walked around the burned area, and calculated its entire extent as about a hundred acres. At the far end, about ten acres were covered with a healthy growth of young ash trees. The ash was best left alone to grow. But the other ninety acres would make a nice place to plant some of the seedlings.

John started back down the road, revelling in the April sunshine. A cottontail rabbit, fat with new grass, scooted out of a brush patch and scampered ten feet down the road to dive into another patch. Two sleek deer watched him a moment before bounding away. John smiled happily. In spite of heavy fatalities, at least three-fifths of the Rasca game had survived the winter and there was a very fair basic stock.

When he came to the creek, he stopped and peered into a crystal-clear pool at a school of trout fingerlings, less than an inch long. They were, John knew, the hatch of last fall's spawn, and had emerged from the eggs in January. John looked at the sides of the creek in approval. They were firm, held in place by bushes and shrubs. No danger here of falling banks killing the baby trout by clogging their gills with silt.

The first shadows of twilight spread slowly over the mountains. Its color deepened to a gentle gray, and gradually the intense darkness of a spring night folded over the Rasca. John forded the creek on a fallen log and climbed the opposite bank to start towards Pine Hill, five miles away.

An hour and a quarter's fast walking brought him into the little village, and he turned past the dimly-lighted store into the path that led to his own yard. The white house loomed big and friendly in the darkness. It was always good to get back here after a day in the forests. John quickened his step.

He went around to his back porch. On the bottom step his foot struck something soft and yielding, something that slid away beneath it. John stood perfectly still, and groped in his pockets for a match. He struck it, and by its little flame saw the head of a young elk lying on the bottom step. The elk's four hooves lay near the head.

John let the match burn down to his fingers, and blew it out. Elk were so scarce that an open season was never declared on them. Somebody had killed the elk illegally, and done this as a challenge, a taunt, to him. He had authority to enforce game laws, and a poacher was daring him to come make an arrest!

John gathered up the head and feet and locked them in his wood shed. There was not the slightest shred of evidence as to who might have killed the elk. But, if he remained silent, an incautious word from anybody might reveal the poacher.

John went into the house, lit a lamp, and prepared his supper. For a while after eating he sat over the empty dishes, pondering. Then a heavy tread sounded on the porch and there was a light knock at the door. John raised his head.

"Come in."

Lew Bangorst entered the kitchen. The old man's face was set and grim, and there was about him an air of hesitancy and nervousness that John had never seen before. Lew sat

awkwardly down in a chair, and for a moment rubbed his gnarled hands together.

"I ain't never peached to nobody 'bout nobody else," he blurted finally. "Not wunst in my life! But, dammit, I ain't goin' to let a skunk run wild, neither. I came over to tell ya, Ranger, that Poley Harris is vittlin' hisself on elk meat."

"How do you know?" John asked.

The old man shook his head stubbornly.

"Never you mind how I know. I jest came over to tell ya that Poley Harris is eatin' elk meat. An' they's more'n one way o' slappin' a Ranger in the face in case ya might want his job. Ya might kill an elk. Then ya might let him know that a elk has been kil't an' da'st him to do somethin' about it. A Ranger could get hisself in a nice jam that way, if some things was right an' some wasn't."

"All right, Lew. Thanks," John said quietly.

The old man rose.

"It don't look as though I kin be of any more help hereabouts. I'll be scootin' along."

For five minutes after the old woodsman left, John sat alone. Then he arose and put on his hat. He emptied his pockets of his knife and watch--everything that could possibly be used to strike a man--so that Poley Harris could not accuse him of unfair slugging if they fought.

When he passed the store he saw the dim figures of men outlined against the window, and heard the door open after he went by. They were coming, he knew, to watch this encounter between himself and Poley. All of Pine Hill must

know that Poley had killed the elk, but of course not a person among them would swear to that in court. It was no matter for a court of law anyway, in Pine Hill's opinion. Poley had challenged the Ranger openly, and on the way he met that challenge might rest his whole future as a forester. Trees and game and mountains, John thought wearily, provided work for a man. But work and attention were all they demanded. No man could be broken except by himself or another man.

Slowly he walked toward the house where Poley lived with his father and brother. Coming to it, he left the road and climbed the bank on which the house was built. He turned around once. A little group of men stood twenty feet down the road, nearly concealed by the darkness. His judges, he thought grimly. The sentence they pronounced would hinge entirely on what he did now.

He knocked on the door of Poley's house, and stood calmly awaiting for it to be opened. He was not afraid, not even nervous. And, he told himself, he had no desire for vengeance.

The door opened and a fat sloppy man, who looked, John thought, exactly as Poley would look twenty years from now, stood before him. It was Poley's father, Warren Harris.

"Is Poley here?" John asked.

The fat man bobbed his head.

"I reckon he is."

"I want to see him."

"Poley," the fat man called in a high nasal twang, "the Ranger wants to see ye."

Poley Harris' stockinged feet made no noise when he shuffled in from another room. A grin spread his thick lips and his eyes were half closed. John faced him squarely.

"I heard you killed an elk."

Poley's grin became insolent.

"You heard wrong."

"I can get a search warrant in Grabada," John said levelly. "Shall I do that, or are you going to give me permission to search your premises?"

"Poley's allus b'in a good boy," the fat man whined. "He wouldn't do nothin' wrong."

Poley said, "Shut up. I'll handle this. All right, Baby Face, search the house."

With Poley lumbering behind him, John climbed the stairs leading to the attic. He groped in his pockets for a match, but Poley thrust a flashlight into his hand.

"Go on," he taunted. "Look! Look all you've a mind to, an' see what you find."

John swept the flash light's beam through the single attic room and went back downstairs. One by one he searched the three rooms there. But there was no contraband elk meat in any of them, and no place where any might have been concealed.

"I told you you was listenin' to fairy tales, Baby Face," Poley sneered. "Are you satisfied now?"

"No, I want to look in your wood shed."

Poley's face lost its grin and became hard. Cold little lights appeared in his sullen eyes.

"You ain't goin' in that shed."

"Yes I am."

"You ain't! You ain't got my permission to go in there. Go git your warrant."

"Poley," John said easily, "by the time I could go to Grabada and get a warrant, you could take whatever's in that shed away and hide it. Legal or not, I'm going to search it. If I find anything in there that will merit laying a heavy fine on you, I'm going to fine you. If you can't pay it, you can sit it out in jail."

He stepped out the back door and played the light on the shed, a small building fifty feet from the house. Then he saw Poley, who had gone out the front way, tear around the corner of the house and sprint for the shed. John ran forward, but Poley dived through the shed's door ten feet ahead of him. John leaped for the shed and swung his light inside, to see Poley going through a small rear door. He carried the skinned carcass of a large animal on his shoulders. For ten seconds the light clung like a golden cage about the running man, and showed clearly the burden he carried. John smiled to himself.

From the road came a high-pitched yell.

"At' a boy, Poley! Get rid of the evidence!"

A laugh went up as Poley was lost to sight in the woods. John turned off the light, and walked down to the road. The men waiting there moved aside to let him by.

"Why didn't you pinch him?" Jubal Crassman asked, disgustedly. "You could have caught him if you'd wanted to."

"Maybe he didn't wanna," another said.

"Yeah," a third taunted. "I guess the Ranger ain't too keen about ketchin' up with old Poley. Poley might not be as nice as he was that night in the dance hall."

"The show's over, boys," John said quietly. "You can go home."

He walked back to the Ranger's headquarters, went in, and lit the lamp. Then he sat down at the table and cupped his chin in his hands. He had conducted the affairs of the Rasca as he thought best. And, in so doing, he knew that Pine Hill had judged him guilty and condemned him.

The next morning a forestry truck came with the pine seedlings. The little trees were in bunches, with wet moss and mud about the roots. John "heeled in" the seedlings in the holes he had already dug, wet them down thoroughly, and went to find Jubal Crassman. The big lumberman, with a team of huge gray horses hitched to a wagon, was delivering a load of firewood to the store.

"I'd like to hire your team and plow for a few days," John said. "How about it?"

Jubal placed a hand on one of the big horse's hips and for a few seconds stared at the ground. When he looked up there was hostility in his eyes and open contempt in his manner.

"I'm usually pretty particular about who I work for. But I could use some money right now. What do you want me to do?"

John flushed. "Do you know where that open meadow is on the top of Kinneba Mountain?"

Jubal nodded.

"We're going to plant it to pine," John continued. "I want you to go up there and start plowing furrows six feet apart. Then come to the Ranger station tomorrow with your team and get a load of the seedlings."

Early the following morning, a crew of ten Pine Hillers appeared, accompanied by Professor Crandall, who had learned of the expedition through some mysterious system of his own. They loaded Jubal Crassman's light wagon with fifteen thousand little trees and a tin bucket for each man, and set off up the hill leading to the fire-swept plateau. Save for Lew Bangorst, the Pine Hillers kept to themselves.

"I don't see why ya don't smack that overgrown ox down once an' for all," Lew grumbled. "You could do it, Johnny, an' it'd make ya the biggest thing Pine Hill's see'd sinst Tommy Johnson's wife started gettin' fat. That Poley Harris can't lick ya, an' you know dumb well he kil't a elk."

John said calmly, "I'm quite sure he did. But I'll handle this in my own way. Pine Hill can like it or not."

Jubal Crassman unhitched his horses, and drove them down to resume plowing where he had left off yesterday. Each man of the planting crew took a bucket, dipped a little water into it from a nearby spring, and filled it with seedlings. Then each selected a furrow, and travelled along it setting the little trees in six and a half feet apart. When a tree was set, soil was kicked about its roots and trampled down. Professor Crandall nodded his head with satisfaction.

"They go about their work with admirable precision."

"They're used to it," John said. "Every man here has worked on a dozen tree-planting crews, and each will get his fifteen hundred seedlings in by night. That will be fifteen acres planted."

The Professor raised his eyebrows.

"I didn't know it was possible to grow a thousand pine trees on an acre of ground."

"It isn't. I'd say, at an offhand guess, that there're about two hundred to two hundred and fifty big pines to the acre. But we plant a thousand, because the trees will crowd one another as they grow, and the unfit will die. Then, too, crowding kills the lower branches for lack of sun, and that makes for better timber. Did you ever notice an old tree growing by itself in a meadow? It'll usually be branches from the ground up, and side branches make for knotty timber. But walk through a grove of pines and you'll see straight trunks with the branches at the top."

"I see," the Professor murmured. "And you had the furrows plowed to expedite planting?"

"It's partly that," John agreed. "And it's partly because the plowing turns under a lot of grass that would ordinarily compete with the seedlings for moisture. A forest tree is on its own from the day it's planted, and the least we can do is give it a good start."

With nightfall the fifteen thousand trees were planted and the tired crew filed back down the trail. Within the next six days the entire plateau was reseeded, and John took his crew to another area that Jubal had plowed. Three weeks later all the

seedlings were in the ground and the crew was dismissed. After eating supper that night, John sat on his front porch watching a golden spring moon rise over the mountain. In spite of Pine Hill's obvious disapproval of him, he was happy. Two hundred and fifty acres of what had been waste land were planted to pine trees, and the cost to the people of the state had not been much more than the small wages of the men who had planted the trees. When the trees matured, their value would run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. It was in such work, John decided, that a Ranger found his real reward. No one who became a Ranger could expect to get rich. But no one should be a Ranger if wealth was all he cared about.

John was disturbed by the tinkle of his telephone. He arose, went inside, and took down the receiver.

"Belden speaking."

"Hello, Belden," came the voice over the wire. "This is Lambertson. I heard somebody's been poaching elk up in your country."

"That's right, Harve. But I don't know who did it."

"Couldn't catch him, eh? I'll be up one of these days and we'll work on it. But what I wanted to tell you, there's two truck loads of trout coming up tomorrow. Can you go out and help plant 'em?"

"Sure, I'll go out."

"Good. And see that you don't put 'em in some private hole where nobody but you can catch 'em."

"Huh! I don't do things the way wardens do 'em. I heard that last year you planted half a truck load of brown trout in your own back yard pool."

"No," the Warden said blandly. "That was the year before. Last year I planted brookies. So long."

John was on hand the next morning when the two big tank trucks from the fish commission pulled into the yard. Beside the drivers sat two enthusiastic fishermen, who were volunteering their services. As John came up he could hear the soft throbbing of the small motors that aerated the water in the fish tanks.

"What have you got?" he asked the sun-burned young driver of the first truck.

"Two thousand brook and rainbow trout from seven to ten inches long. All of 'em's for fishermen to catch. But the other truck's carrying twenty thousand fingerlings. I told 'em not to send them babies out--too young for creek life. But the hatchery tanks are crowded and they had to go. Do you know any creek where they'll stand a chance?"

"I know just the place for 'em, and you can drive right to it. Come on."

John stepped on to the truck's running board and directed the driver up the road leading to the stream where he had watched the small trout in the shallow pool. The second truck followed, and both stopped beside the creek.

Each man took a bucket and filled it with aerated ice-water. Climbing on top of the tanks, the driver scooped out a netful of squirming little fingerlings and emptied them into a bucket, which John carried to the creek. He spilled the little

fish into the water, and watched them swim out into the current and lie there, facing upstream. One of the fishermen came up with another bucket, and as he emptied it, eyed the creek with approval.

"Fingerlings will really have a chance here. Plenty of food, and nice firm banks with no silt to clog their gills. This stream doesn't vary much, does it?"

"Not more than five or six inches the year 'round," John said. "It's mostly spring fed."

"Perfect! Let's see: if twenty percent of them live, that'll be four thousand trout. That's a lot of good fishing, Mister!"

John grinned. "They're not all in yet. Let's get another load."

The truck moving along with them, getting as close to every hole as it could, they planted the fingerlings along fifteen miles of the stream. Then they turned to the other truck, which John directed to a branch of Big Kettle River. The two thousand trout, intended to help fishermen fill their creels, were emptied along eight miles of that.

Late that night John swung off one of the empty trucks and walked over to his house. In the yard he saw a small brown sedan, with the insignia of the state forestry department on its side. And there was a light in the house. John entered to find Professor Crandall in one chair, and a short, stocky man with a bull-dog face in another. The Professor rose and cleared his throat nervously.

"This is Mr. Mullins, the District Forester," he said. "I came down to accompany you on your fish planting expedition. But I missed you. However I did get an opportunity to become acquainted with Mr. Mullins. Apparently there is

some little difficulty. I have attempted to explain to Mr. Mullins that you must have had reasons for acting as you did."

For the first time John shook hands with the man who had been his boss for nearly five months.

"I came over to get some things ironed out, Belden," Mullins said directly. "I got a report that Poley Harris killed an elk in here, and that you were afraid to arrest him."

"Poley wants my job," John said quietly.

"I know. He's been to me several times. But I don't mind telling you, it takes a man who knows all the tricks to run a district like this. An outlaw generally knows how to forestall other poachers and outlaws. I heard that Harris ran with the skinned elk on his shoulders, and you didn't even chase him."

"Poley ran," John said. "But he didn't have a small elk on his shoulders. He had a calf. I know because he skinned the tail out and left it on the carcass, and elks don't have tails that long. He wanted me to chase him, and throw him in jail for having an elk. Then he would prove it was a calf. That would leave him in a fine position to sue me for false arrest, and also to get me kicked out of my job for settling a personal grudge. I found the head and feet of a small elk on my doorstep, and haven't the least doubt that Poley killed it. But I haven't a shred of evidence to prove it."

"There!" Professor Crandall said triumphantly. "I knew there was another side to the story."

Mullins shook his head.

"Belden, I'll stick to my Rangers as long as they do their jobs. And I'm going to believe your yarn. But if Harris is gunning for you, one or the other of you is going to end up on the short end of the see-saw."

"I know there's going to be a showdown," John said. "But I'm not going to force it. When Fred Cramer comes back to take over here, I'll be free to act as I see fit. Until then I--I'm bound to consider other things."

Mullins looked at him keenly.

"I think I understand," he said quietly. "And I'm sure that Fred's talked a lot to you. He's the best Ranger I ever had. When the final brush with Harris comes, I hope you win it. Well, I'll be beating it along, Belden. I've got to go up and see how Cabey's doing. By the way, have you had much experience on fires?"

"Not too much. I've helped Fred on seven or eight."

"Well, that should be a help. I suppose you know that you should always stop the header first, make your trenches wide enough, run down hill if you have to run, watch yourself for slashings, and, above all, never take a chance with your crew?"

"I think I understand pretty well."

"Okeh. You'd better stick close to the telephone every dry day from now on until the leaves and grass are all out. With the weather as dry as it is, we're bound to have some fires. I'll be seeing you, Belden."

Professor Crandall watched him go.

"A very brusque man," he murmured. "But obviously a competent one. A Ranger does contend with the most hazardous elements, doesn't he? I hope you have no forest fires, John--but how I'd like to photograph one!"

Chapter Seven

FIRE!

May first John was out of bed at half past three and climbing the hill in back of the Ranger's station. A burning spring sun was just coming over the tops of the eastern mountains. The dew that moistened last year's carpet of leaves on the forest floor was already beginning to evaporate. He picked up a handful of leaves and ground them between his palms. They crumbled into bits and a fine dust sifted away from them. John shook his head worriedly. If a Ranger ever prayed for anything, he thought, it would be for a rainy May.

He climbed on to the fire look-out in the road that ran down the mountain and looked over the Rasca. The hill directly across from him was clearly visible through a light film of blue haze. But across the far hills the haze rested thicker, and the more distant peaks were almost obscured. They seemed to be in constant motion, heaving towards the sky and drawing back into themselves as though in the throes of prodigious growing pains.

John glanced down at the forest floor. Here and there a patch of bright spring flowers contrasted vividly with the brown of the fallen leaves. But the new leaves on the trees were only beginning to attain size and form. Until they bloomed fully to shade the forest floor and hold the moisture in it, the entire Rasca would be a huge tinder-box.

The sun rose higher, opened great gaps in the haze blanket and slanted down blistering rays. A breath of warm air came

lazily up from the valley and eddied about John's face. He shook his head as though so doing would shake out the fear that was growing within him. Hopefully he studied the sky for signs of rain. But there was not a single cloud. Everything pointed to the fact that May was bringing a long dry spell with it.

The dry leaves rustled and cracked as John walked back down to Ranger's headquarters. Another warm breeze skipped up the hill and plowed a furrow through the leaves. A cloud of dust came from the road as some early-rising Pine Hiller drove towards Grabada. John paused to watch. Only a month ago the cars that travelled that road had wallowed hub-deep in mud.

Entering the house, he looked at the telephone on the wall. From now until it rained he would seldom dare get out of hearing of its bell. On a sudden impulse he walked over, rang the two long rings of the Buckley tower, and put the receiver to his ear. He heard the click as the receiver was lifted from the other end, and the voice on the wire.

"Buckley tower."

"This is the Pine Hill Ranger station," John said. "Are there any signs of fires, Buckley?"

"Nary a smoke, Pine Hill. But fan me if it ain't dry. I've been in this tower ten seasons and there ain't been a dryer May. Is your crew ready to go?"

"I can pick 'em up in ten minutes. And I'll be near the telephone if you want me."

"You'd better be. I'll rustle you out of there in a hurry if there's smoke in your section."

John called the other two towers in the Rasca district, and heard the same general report. He put the telephone down and immediately was tempted to pick it up again.

"Get over these jitters, Belden," he told himself. "Get over these jitters. Everything's simple. If a fire starts, all you have to do is stop it."

Instead of starting breakfast, he went over to the barn and ran the big truck over to the tool shed. He loaded the truck with fifteen fire rakes, the four bush hooks, two axes, four pumps, the back-firing torches, and twenty canvas-covered canteens. Now, if there was a fire, all he would have to do was pick up his crew.

Fifteen Pine Hillers had volunteered to hold themselves on instant call. It was not, John knew, because they liked him, but because fire fighters were paid forty cents an hour. There were few opportunities to earn money in Pine Hill.

Going back into the house, he lit the kerosene stove and started breakfast. The nervous tension still gripped him, and when he was about to sit down to the meal, a tread on the porch brought him leaping erect. But he relaxed at a timid knock on the door.

"Come in."

Dressed in gray slacks, sandals, and a light cotton sports shirt, Professor Crandall entered the kitchen. Beads of sweat glistened on the little man's forehead. He reached up to wipe them off and put his camera case on the floor.

"My, but it's hot!" he panted. "I consider it extraordinary heat for this time of year. I have written my notations on the weather to Professor Sackley, the meteorologist at Bardette. I

only wish that he were here to observe it himself. I'm positive that he would have some interesting theories to expound. Now, as to the purpose of my visit here, John. I want it clearly understood that my sincere wishes are that your beautiful Rasca will not be devastated by fire. However, if there should be one, I'd like to photograph it. Have you any objections to my remaining here with you, and accompanying you on any fire calls you may receive?"

"None at all, Professor. Can I give you some breakfast?"

"No, thank you, John. I assume that your present emergency duties will keep you rather closely confined to the house?"

"I'm afraid they will, Professor. I have to stay within hearing of the telephone. And then there are several little odd jobs to do about the house."

Professor Crandall nodded.

"I'll be happy to help. Inaction is tedious."

The sun was high over the Rasca now, beating down with relentless intensity. Heat waves danced back from the bare road to meet it. A listless robin, wings drooping, splashed in a shallow pool at the edge of the creek and flew into a tree. John went outside and again peered hopefully into the burning sky. Still no sign of a cloud! Going to the barn, he brought back two garden rakes, and all day long he and the Professor raked the winter's accumulation of litter from the yard.

One hot day followed another with no sign of rain. On the seventh of the month a tiny cloud scudded across the sky and the warm breeze seemed to have freshened. It was a hopeful sign. The Rasca had had no fires yet and a soaking rain might

bring the leaves out enough so that there would be none. For the first time, as he went to help the Professor paint the tool shed, John felt a little free of the nervous tension that had ridden him so long.

Then the telephone rang and John sprang to answer it.

"Pine Hill?" an urgent voice asked. "This is Buckley. There's a smoke coming up from Cattail Hollow."

"What kind of smoke?"

"It's small yet; hasn't got much headway. It looks to me right at the edge of Cattail Creek. Hustle right up there, Pine Hill."

John hung the receiver up and sprang for the door.

"Professor!" he bawled.

Professor Crandall set the paint bucket down, snatched up his camera, and scurried for the truck. John realized with a sinking heart that the little man's hair was moving because the wind was blowing harder. Fire and wind, a devastating combination.

"What is it?" the Professor exclaimed. "Is there a fire?"

"In Cattail Hollow," John gritted. "The big pine plantation's just over the hill from it."

He threw the truck into gear and pressed down on the horn as they thundered out of the driveway. Wash Jampel and three other men, summoned by the horn, climbed into the truck when John stopped in front of the store. Old Lew Bangorst came running from his house to leap for the running board.

"Look how the wind's a'raisin'!" the old man bellowed through the open window. "Ranger, she's gonna be a heller to

put out!"

More men, who had heard the imperative blast of the horn, appeared in the road and climbed into the back of the truck as John paused a second. Then, with the gas pedal to the floor, he thundered up the road toward Cattail Hollow.

Thin blue smoke, drifting from the fire, hung like a pall in the valley. On the sides of the hills, trees were bending under the lash of the rising wind. The truck roared around a curve and drew to a sliding halt where Cattail Creek emptied into the right-hand branch of Big Kettle River.

"Oh, my Gawd! Look at it race!"

Little Tony Pendro had jumped from the truck and stood in the middle of the road staring at a thick column of yellow smoke that was pouring up from the center of the hill. The little man's face was white, and sweat not borne of the heat stood in great beads on his forehead.

"Are you afraid, Tony?" John asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"All right. You take the truck back down to Pine Hill. Get some groceries at the store, and charge them up to the forestry department. Bring them back here, and have plenty of food and hot coffee ready for the men when they come off the hill."

The sucking roar of the flames drowned the whining of the wind. A puff of flame ran over a huge pine as swiftly as a match sears a bit of thistledown. Driven by the wind, great sheets of fire were shooting a hundred feet into the air. John turned to the rest of his crew.

"Is anybody else afraid?"

The fourteen men, wind-bitten, sun-seared, cold-hardened ex-lumberjacks, faced him without comment. John stood a moment waiting for them to speak--it was better to go up with no men at all than with any who might get panicky--and climbed onto the truck. Ten of the men reached up to grasp fire rakes as he handed them down. Mel Crane and Lew Bangorst, the most experienced, each took a bush hook and a back-firing torch. Wash Jampel and Tom Rooney, the best axe men, grabbed the axes. Each man slung a canteen over his shoulder. John threw down a rake for himself, and jumped out of the truck.

"All right," he said coolly. "We've got to hit that header, and we've got to stop it before it gets into the plantation. Each man had better fill his canteen."

John led the way up Cattail Creek, following the same trail that his blister rust crew had used in January, and bound a handkerchief over his mouth and nose as he entered the thick smoke that rested in the valley. A great gust of wind surged down the valley and the smoke lifted momentarily. John turned to see his crew coming silently behind him. He stepped down to the creek, took a long drink, and filled his canteen. One by one the men followed his example. John leaned on his rake while he studied the top of the hill.

The fire was already racing across the top. Its steady roar was punctuated by the snap and crackle of flames, and burning trees screamed like live things as the flames devoured them. Professor Crandall edged up beside John. There was no hint of fear or alarm in the little man's face, only a profound interest that was tempered by great sadness.

"There are no words to express the horror and terror of such a catastrophe," he said simply. "Do you think it safe to go up there and try to fight it, John?"

"No, it isn't safe," John said. "Don't you think you'd better stay here, Professor?"

"I'll go along," the little man said serenely. "Maybe I can help."

"All right, Professor. Stick close to me. I'm going to lead the men around the fire and try to stop it at its head. That's always the worst part. If we can halt that, the rest can be controlled."

"I must confess that I haven't the least idea of how you propose to stop it," Professor Crandall said. "However, I suppose you have your methods."

John led his crew to the top of the hill, and looked down on the smoke-laden pine plantation. Another long valley slanted five miles to the south here, and the fire was not burning down the side of it with the terrific speed it had attained in going up. But the wind still lashed it. A long line of flame leaped over the tops of the trees and nauseous yellow smoke poured up. John turned to Lew Bangorst.

"What do you think of it?"

Lew shrugged.

"Ye're gonna lose ever'thin' betwixt the crick an' the header now anyway. S'pose ya send a man down to back-fire from that crick. Then trench from thar to the head o' Cattail. Cattail will stop the far's crossin' it; it won't burn hard down

that hill anyway. The wind's ag'in it. When that much is trenched an' back-f'ared, go down an' trench t'other side."

"Okeh. We'll try that. Do you want to go down and back-fire from the creek?"

"Shore 'nough."

The torch on his back, Lew plunged into the brush toward the creek. John turned to Mel Crane.

"Mel, take five rake men and Wash Jampel for your axe man. Trench down to the head of that creek. Back-fire as fast as you think you've got enough trench dug to make it safe. I'll let Tom axe for us and work back to Cattail. We should stop the fire here because the header's blowing straight for Lew, and he'll get that."

Wash Jampel and Tom Rooney started in different directions with their axes swinging. Slow, easy-going men, even now they did not seem to be moving fast. But their axes rose and fell with the effortless efficiency born of a lifetime's practice, and trees fell magically before them. John fell into line with the rake crew that was following Tom Rooney, helping to clear a four-foot wide path of trees, leaves, roots, stumps, anything that would burn. With his eye he measured the distance to a huge old beech tree that grew on a little mound where the hill dipped. When the line passed that tree, he told himself, he would go back and start back-firing.

The line passed the tree, and John ran back to where they had started. Mel Crane, coming up the hill, met him there. John struck a match while Mel silently held up his torch to be lighted. He dipped the flaming torch into the leaves at the edge of the trench and set them on fire. The tiny flame

clutched at the food offered it, almost went out, then flared into leaping life. Its ravenous mouth engulfed the leaves and brush in its path. But it left a burned space on the safe side of the fire trail.

Separating, back-firing as they went, John and Mel started back to where their respective crews were still digging fire trench. Twenty minutes later John met Tom Rooney coming up the dug trench and back-firing with matches. They met, watched their two back-fires merge into one another and rear to challenge the main blaze.

"The b'ys got her to the crick," Tom said. "She burnt herself down the hill an' out in the water. They'll be comin' up the hill two minutes apart to make sure that no back-fire crawls over the trench."

"I don't think it will," John said. "Wait here two minutes, Tom, and meet me at the top."

John walked slowly to the top of the hill. All along the trench the back-fire had taken hold, was working back to meet the main blaze. A smoke-wreathed figure loomed up in the trail, and when he got close enough John made out the lean, blackened face of Mel Crane, who had back-fired the length of his crew's trench and come back up again.

"We got it to the crick on this side," the lanky woodsman said. "And old Lew did a good job. We'll stop her sure, which is a good thing. If she ever got in the plantation, nothin' could stop it. My boys are spread out, watchin' the back-fire."

John squinted into the smoke-filled valley. He saw the back-fire creeping up the hill toward the main blaze, that was still

being driven furiously by the wind. The two came close, seemed to snarl and spit like two angry cats fighting over the same saucer of milk. Then they met and a great fountain of flame spurted hundreds of feet into the air while the smoke spiralled straight up.

John watched, fascinated, only beginning to become aware of the fact that his lips were parched and dry, his tongue like a twisted piece of rope within his mouth, and his throat crying for water. Slowly, his eyes on the fire, he unscrewed the metal cap of his canteen.

Then the air was rent by a high-pitched scream. No writhing, flame-twisted tree could have emitted such a sound, and it was not the roar of the fire. Some live thing was in there, caught between the back-fire and the main blaze. John stood rigidly, the canteen halfway to his lips, his eyes fixed on the spot. The thing screamed again.

After a second a buck deer, a wreath of flaming vines grotesquely piled on his neck and caught under his throat, leaped out of the flames and staggered over the area that the back-fire had burned. He fell, and rolled end over end while another agonized bawl came from him. John gasped as the buck got up and dashed wildly for the creek. He leaped it, and fell again. The burning vines touched the dry pine needles at the edge of the plantation, and a thin blue smoke arose. Then the deer was lost to sight in the pines. A long tongue of yellow flame licked up.

"Thar goes yore pine, Ranger," a voice said. "That blaze is gonna eat ever' last tree in the hul plantation."

John turned his eyes away from the burning pines to see Lew Bangorst by his side. The old man's eyes were streaked with red, and the tears that the stinging smoke had started in them had rolled little clean trails through the soot that covered his face. Dimly John was aware of the rest of the fire crew standing about him, of the awe-stricken face of Professor Crandall. He turned his eyes back to the fire.

The flames were spreading in a hungry circle, and the steady drive of the wind was pushing them deeper into the pines. Thick yellow smoke rose to hang like a shroud over the whole plantation. Through it came the shrieking of flame-tortured tree trunks and the crackle of burning needles.

"We've got to stop it!" John gasped.

Lew Bangorst grasped his shoulder.

"Steady, Son, steady. I reckon none of us is feelin' too happy about it. But it's better fer them pines to burn than to burn up a crew o' men. An' it's as much as a man's life is wuth to get in ahead o' that stuff. I, fer one, ain't goin'."

"Nor I," Mel Crane added. "I got a wife an' kids."

John was gone suddenly, running through the smoke filled woods. Dimly, behind him, he was aware of a man shouting.

"Come back! Come back, you crazy fool!"

John ran on, scarcely hearing. His mind became a clear picture of the plantation, and the contours of the land about it.

The fire had started in one corner of the plantation, a triangular neck that thrust deep into the hardwood forests. It was racing into the rest of the pines. But the fire trail that the

blister rust crew had used in January ran beside Cattail Creek. And on one side of the plantation was the huge beaver dam with the dry creek bed running through the triangular neck of the pines!

Soft arms of thick yellow smoke curled about John as he dove into the pines. He choked and gasped in their deadly embrace, but kept running. Stumbling into the dry creek bed, he bent close to the ground for the air that clung there as he turned up it. He came to the beaver dam, and swung his rake aloft to bring it savagely down on the top layer of sticks and mud.

A thin trickle of water spilled over the break as the sticks came away. John swung the rake again, hooked its four steel teeth into more sticks and jerked them from the dam. The trickle became a miniature cataract that carried more of the dam with it as its force increased. John dug furiously, enlarging the break. Suddenly the entire side of the dam gave way and a mighty flood spilled down the dry creek.

Throwing down the rake, John ran to the edge of the flooding creek bed. He struck a match, tossed it into the dry needles, and waited while they caught fire. He broke a pitch-laden knot from a dead tree, held it in the fire until it blazed, and ran on down the creek setting more back-fires. The roily water filled the creek from bank to bank, and flooded into the pines on either side. John looked down, surprised to find that he was running in knee-deep water, and cut out of it back to the dry pines to set more back-fires. A sheet of flame leaped up to enfold him. John staggered backwards out of it and ran on. Two thoughts filled his mind. The plantation was on fire,

and he could stop the blaze by back-firing from this newly flooded creek.

It was with very great astonishment that he finally saw hardwood forest on either side of him. He looked back toward the heavy yellow smoke hanging over the plantation, and tried to return to the pines. But he couldn't go back. His body had become a wooden thing that would no longer obey the commands of his mind. He sank down, tossed the torch away, and watched the blaze it started in the leaves beside him. He tried to get up and could not.

The back-fire crawled to a dead beech stub, sprang up it. John's gaze was attracted to something under the stub, something that looked like part of the forest floor but was not. It was a spotted fawn, lying perfectly motionless where its mother had left it. John grasped a tree and pulled himself erect. Steam rose from his wet clothing as he strode through the back-fire, whose flames were singeing the hair on the little deer's back, and stooped to gather the fawn in his arms.

John turned around, bewilderedly looking for some familiar thing. The snap and crackle of the back-fire and the sting of its smoke in his nostrils drew his gaze to the ground. The blaze, he saw, was licking about his feet.

"I have to get out of here," he muttered thickly. "Get out of here or burn up, too."

Carrying the fawn, he staggered over to the creek and started up toward the pines. A great oppression, a sense of immense frustration and weariness, lay on him like a heavy weight. There were about two thousand acres of the plantation on the south side of the creek bed, and he knew all that was gone

because he had back-fired from the creek. If the fire had crossed into the rest of the plantation, all would be burned.

He felt relief, but no leaping exultation, when he saw that the back-fire had stopped the main blaze. His depression increased as he looked at the burned side of the plantation. Not a tree in the two thousand acres remained alive. All were charred skeletons of once-living things. The ground beneath them was scorched and black. Thin wisps of smoke curled up from it. Here and there a blazing tree still crackled and snapped.

John sat down on the unburned side of the creek while a series of choking sobs came from his throat. The spotted fawn twisted uneasily in his arms. John raised his head to look once more into the scorched plantation. He shook his head miserably. As soon as he got home he would telephone Mullins and ask him to send another man into the Rasca. He couldn't go through this again, couldn't learn to love trees and see them destroyed by fire. He'd done the best he could, but he wasn't hard enough, tough enough, to be a ranger.

Wearily he arose and continued on up the creek, back toward the trail that led down Cattail. A hundred feet farther up he came to the charred carcasses of five dead deer that had been caught between the two blazes and had struggled this far before falling. The body of a tiny cub bear bumped against a rock in a shallow pool. The scorched bodies of birds, weasels, rabbits, foxes, and mice that had been burned, but had crawled to water before dying, lay along the little water course. John looked into the burned trees and turned his eyes away, afraid to think of the terrific carnage that the flames must have wrought there.

He jumped backward as a grouse arose almost from under his feet. The grouse, a little brown hen, flew to the other side of the creek and stood with feathers ruffled, clucking nervously. John's eyes strayed back to the place from which she had flown.

Blue smoke curled from the trunk of a still burning pine there, and three feet away from the pine the grouse had made her nest in a cluster of grass. The water from the flooded stream bed had come high enough to dampen the nest and the grass about it. None had burned, and the thirteen eggs in the nest were uninjured.

Awe-stricken, John glanced once more at the scolding, nervous grouse. The wariest of all game birds had dared return to the fire, a thing it feared even more than it feared man, because its nest was there! There came to John a slow realization of the magnificent courage, the undaunted bravery that the grouse had displayed. And with that his own ebbing spirits began to return. He felt a sense of deep shame because he had even thought of giving up. John put the fawn down, took his shirt off, wet it in the creek, and wrung it out on the burning trunk. The brooding grouse could safely return to her nest now.

He felt more cheerful as he gathered the fawn up and continued walking. One fifth of the plantation was lost, but all of it might easily have been. He glanced at the bank of clouds that had gathered in the sky, and knew that they had rain in them. A little pulse of happiness began to beat within him. With a good soaking rain to wet the old leaves down and bring the new ones out, this disaster would not be repeated. Any more fires wouldn't be so hard to handle.

A long, rolling, mournful wail echoed over the wilderness.

"Hall-ooo!"

John stopped, surprised. He hadn't even considered the possibility that anyone might be searching for him. But the voice was that of a man, and he must be looking for someone. John cupped his hand to his mouth and answered.

"Hall-ooo!"

There was a moment's silence. Then,

"Ranger! Whar be ya?"

"Down the creek, Lew."

Three minutes later Lew Bangorst and Professor Crandall came running down the creek bed. Coming in sight of John they stopped a moment. Lew leaped forward.

"Oh, Ranger! Johnny! I b'in down this crick three times without findin' ya! Look at ya! Yore clothes is half burnt off, an' yore face is as black as tar, an' you got a fawn, an' you stopped the f'ar! When you tore off through the woods that'away, I figgered sure I'd see'd the last o' ya. Johnny! You damned fool!"

John pressed the fawn into the old man's arms.

"I'm still alive, Lew. You can't kill a backwoodsman. You couldn't find me because I went through the pines into the hardwoods."

"Young man, you did an insane thing," Professor Crandall said tautly. "I've been in a state of extreme agitation since you disappeared in the smoke. Never do anything like that again."

"I won't," John said meekly. "But I really wasn't in any danger, Professor. All I did was tear that beaver dam out and back-fire along the stream bed."

"Your clothing is proof that you were in peril," Professor Crandall said. "It has been burned in numerous places. But I will have to admit that no one else thought of the beaver dam and the dry stream bed. Yours was the only way of saving the plantation. John, you have my sincere congratulations, and my severe condemnation!"

"Don't stand thar scoldin' him with four dollar words!" Lew flared. "Come on, Ranger. You need a bath an' some rest an' a heap o' ointment. I got jest the thing fer them burns. B'ar oil. I'll put it on fer ya, too. Darn ya, Johnny. You sure give us a turn. If ya wasn't so done in awready, I'd give ya a spankin' myself!"

With Lew carrying the fawn, they walked slowly down the trail. Reaching Cattail Creek, Lew handed the fawn to Professor Crandall and turned to John.

"I want to show ya somethin', Ranger. The f'ar started right here."

He led the way over the charred ground to the edge of the creek. The stub of a cigarette, burned down to where it had been wetted between the smoker's lips, lay beside the water. Leading away from its ashes was a burned weed, up which fire had run into the dry leaves. Lew rose, and with a sweep of his hand indicated the burned forest.

"All that done jest because some damn fool fisherman wanted a smoke an' didn't think to drop his cigarette in the

crick, where it would o' went out," he said simply. "But come on, Ranger. Don't trouble yore haid about this now."

Back at the Ranger's headquarters, Lew and Professor Crandall gently removed John's clothes. Lew went out, came back with a tin can full of bear grease, and gently massaged John's entire body with it. The grease began to work into the pores, soothed John's many burns and helped to ease his aches. A great drowsiness stole over him.

"I've got to write a letter," he murmured.

"You're going to bed," Professor Crandall said firmly.

"I must write this letter," John insisted. "Two thousand acres of the plantation's gone. It can't be replanted now because it's too late in the season. But it can be done this fall and next spring, and the fall and spring after that, until it's all replanted. I have to let the district forester know that the Rasca can use two million trees. He won't be in now, so I can't telephone."

"Telephone in the morning," Professor Crandall suggested.

"It will be quicker than a letter."

"That's so," John said dully. "It will, won't it?"

He stifled a yawn, and walked slowly toward his bed. For a moment he lay there while Professor Crandall drew blankets over him. Then a smile spread John's lips as a new sound intruded on the little night noises of the Rasca. He dropped to sleep with the sound pleasant in his ears.

It was the steady falling of rain on the roof.

Chapter Eight

CANNIBAL FISH

John awoke the next morning to the sound of rain dripping from the eaves of the house. For a few minutes he lay drowsily enjoying the warmth of his bed. He was sore and stiff, but Lew's ointment had done its work well, for he felt no pain from his burns. He looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock; he had slept twelve hours. He dressed guiltily, and peered out the bedroom window.

Overnight a dry, parched world had become a soaking wet one. Water dripped from the branches of the trees that surrounded the house, stood in puddles in the road. The leaves were soaked, and the usually clear waters of Big Kettle River were tinted a light brown. Gray rain clouds still had command of the sky, and banks of mist rode low on the mountains.

John went downstairs to find Professor Crandall reading in the kitchen. The little man rose, shoved a pot of hot coffee back on the stove, and put a frying pan full of ham in the place where the coffee had been. He looked concernedly at John.

"I hope nothing interfered with your rest."

John laughed.

"Nothing did. I never batted an eye until about five minutes ago."

"I'm glad," Professor Crandall said simply. "Lew and I agreed that I remain here during the night in readiness to summon a doctor should one become necessary. I looked in on you several times, but you appeared to be quiet."

"Gosh," John mumbled sheepishly. "Have you been awake all night taking care of me? I'm as husky and sound as a draft horse. All I needed was a little shuteye."

Shaking his head, the Professor set fried ham and bread before him. John ate ravenously, and gulped three cups of steaming hot coffee. Then he arose from the table and phoned the district forester.

"Belden speaking. We had a big fire yesterday."

"I know. All three towers reported it to me. I tried to send some more crews in to you yesterday, but every local man was on a fire in his own district. I started two crews from here, but the Buckley tower reported the fire out so I had them returned. How much did you lose, Belden?"

"About twenty-four hundred acres, two thousand of it in the big plantation."

"Why did you let the fire get into the pines at all? The towers told me it started on Cattail Creek. It seems to me that you might have been able to stop it."

"We did stop it. But a deer got caught in the blaze--must have run through a tangle of burning wild grape or bittersweet vines in trying to get out of it. He ran into the pines with those around his neck."

"Well, I guess that couldn't be helped. I've been trying to get the Buckley tower all morning, Belden, and can't do it. There

must be something wrong with the telephone line up there. Go up and look into it, will you?"

"I'll go right away. But first, can anything be done toward getting enough trees to re-plant the burned pines?"

"That will be Fred Cramer's job," Mullins said shortly. "You go fix the telephone."

There was a click as the district forester hung up. John turned away from the telephone, hurt and angry at the implied censure in Mullins' voice. He hadn't been able to prevent the plantation's burning. If he hadn't thought of the beaver dam, all ten thousand acres would have been destroyed. And this was his official reward!

"Did he receive your explanation favorably?" Professor Crandall asked.

"He told me to go fix the telephone line."

"But you'll get wet!"

John spoke bitterly. "Just as long as I don't drown before the telephone's fixed, it'll be all right with Mullins."

"Oh, but I'm sure Mr. Mullins isn't that heartless!"

John laughed as the excited little Professor's voice broke the tension that gripped him. A ranger, he should have learned by now, never got praise for doing a good job and always had to have an explanation for failures. Besides, Mullins himself was probably nursing a headache this morning, wondering how he was going to explain the loss of two thousand acres of pine to the forestry department.

"I'll go fix the line," John said. "And I don't think I'll drown."

"I'll go with you," Professor Crandall said. "If a little wetting won't hurt you, I'm sure it will not injure me."

John put his safety belt, wire cutters and pliers, a small axe, his climbers, fifty feet of wire, and four insulators in the back of the pick-up, and with the Professor beside him drove up the road to where the telephone line leading from the Buckley tower joined the main line. Carrying the repair equipment, they started up the hill toward the Buckley tower. A mile from the road a wet branch, blown from a nearby tree, had hung on the top wire of the line and brought it down to touch the bottom one. John cut a sapling with the axe and poked the branch loose. The top wire sprang back into place, relieving the short in the line.

John and the Professor continued on to the tower, an eighty-foot skeleton of steel on top of which the observer's box rested. Doc McGinty, the Buckley tower's observer, came out of the small cabin at the foot of the tower to meet them.

"A fine place for a tower man to be," John jibed. "How come you're not up looking for fires?"

"Mebbe you'd like me to spot another like you had on Cattail yesterday. She give you merry hell when them pines began to go, didn't she?"

"Nah. Just a kindling fire. We put it right out."

"John put it out," Professor Crandall corrected. "He went in alone, ahead of that terrific blaze, and tore out a beaver dam. That created a water flow from which he back-fired."

Doc McGinty scratched his head.

"That's a new one--beavers made your water supply, eh? I thought it was goodbye pines when I saw 'em catch. I phoned Mullins an' told him so."

"Speaking of Mullins, he's been trying to get you," John said. "There was a short in your line down a ways. See if you can get him now, will you, Doc? But don't tell him I'm here or he may scare up more work."

"Sure thing."

Doc limped into his cabin, that had a connecting line to the tower phone, and came out a moment later.

"The line's open," he grinned. "Mullins says that seein' you're so handy about fixin' telephone lines, you should cut across an' see can you find what's ailin' the Stackpole line. He can't get the Stackpole tower now."

John and the Professor cut from the tower across the top of the mountain. Only scattered bunches of small trees, fire cherries and aspens grew here. The sweet fern and laurel, that made a matted jungle of the rest of the mountain top, dripped water. Walking through them, the clothing of the two was quickly as soaking wet as if they had walked in the rain storm itself.

A mile from the Buckley tower they came to a pool in a small stream, the source of the one in which the twenty thousand trout fingerlings had been planted. Its bottom was shining white sand. The sand and the water's crystal clearness gave it an impression of extreme shallowness.

"We might as well wade," the Professor said cheerfully. "My clothing certainly cannot absorb more water than it has already."

He stepped into hip-deep water, and instantly turned around to splash back to the bank.

"It's . . . it's cold!" he gasped. "I believe its temperature must be nearly that of ice!"

"It's spring-fed, Professor," John said. "On the hottest day of summer it will still be ice-cold."

Sharply outlined against the pool's white floor, a big fish moved sluggishly two inches upstream and sank back to the bottom. A school of small trout, two or three inches long, wriggled out of his way.

"Look at that bass!" John pointed at the fish.

Professor Crandall squinted into the pool.

"Oh, yes. I see him. He's a big fellow, isn't he? Let's frighten him!"

The little man stooped, picked up a stone, and cast it into the pool. The stone splashed on top, and settled slowly through the clear water to land within a half inch of the bass's snout. But the fish did not move. Professor Crandall turned puzzled eyes on John.

"Do you suppose he can be ill? Fisherman friends have assured me that the bass is the gamest and scrappiest of fish. But this one is almost inert."

"No, he isn't sick, Professor. I don't know how or why he's here. Perhaps an osprey picked him up in Big Kettle River and dropped him. Or maybe he just swam up. But this is no bass stream. Bass hibernate in winter, you know. They lie up against a rock or bank and stay there, and sometimes slush ice even freezes around them. The cold is what's ailing this

one. It makes him dormant. That's why no *very* cold stream ever makes good bass fishing, even though it may be full of bass. In a stream like this they don't become active at all. And in streams a good deal warmer than this they don't get around to taking lures and flies until the sun warms the water, some time in June. You can just bet that if this stream was warm enough to suit that fish, there would be no small trout in this pool. He'd have eaten every one of them."

"Are bass so savagely cannibalistic?"

"Most game fish are cannibals. But, except for pickerel, bass in these waters head the list. If you want to stock a lake or pond with bass, you must stock it with pan fish a year or two before. Unless that's done, the smaller bass are eaten by the big ones until only the big ones are left. And I imagine that the biggest and strongest would finally tear all the rest to pieces until he was alone. Then he'd die of starvation."

"I think I would be dormant too, if I had to live in that temperature." The Professor shivered. "How are we going to ford this stream?"

John grinned. "If we walk to the bottom of the pool, we can step across the stream most any place."

They continued, on past the ninety acres that had been planted to pine that spring, to the telephone line that ran to the Stackpole tower, and started along the row of poles. A quarter of a mile from where they struck the line a wire was broken. John put on his climbers, climbed the pole, cut the broken wire off, and tied the wire he had brought along to the insulator that had held the broken one. He strung it out to the

broken wire that hung from the next pole, and connected them together.

"There," he said. "It doesn't hang very far off the ground, but it will do until I can bring my stretchers up here and stretch the wire tighter. The tower's a long way from here, on top of Stackpole Mountain, and we can't make it today. I'll give 'em a ring from headquarters to see if the line's open. If it isn't, I'll come out again tomorrow. But they don't have to have the phone today. There's no danger of any fires to report."

They returned to the plantation, and started down the logging road that led from it. When they came near the bottom of the hill, the Professor stopped to photograph a large white trillium that was blooming alone at the foot of a stunted hemlock. John wandered on down the trail, and stopped to peer into the pool where he had seen the fingerlings. Aside from those already there, they had planted about two hundred little trout in the pool.

But now scarcely a dozen fingerlings fanned their fins in the down current, and these darted to the shelter of the flat rocks in the bottom when John's shadow fell on the pool. John frowned. He had expected that, in time, some of the fingerlings would work their way upstream. And some would be caught by fish-eating birds and animals. But there should be more than these few left. The bottom of the pool was crawling with larvae of aquatic insects, and there was food in plenty for twenty times as many fish as the pool contained.

Shallow riffles, at no place more than two inches deep, filtered into the pool. John walked up them to the next deep place and saw its bottom black with trout. His puzzled frown deepened. Something was creating terrific inroads among the

baby trout in one pool and not harming them in the next, only a few yards away. The Professor came down the trail and stood watching him.

"What have you found now?" he asked.

"There's a murderer loose."

"Murderer! I had no idea . . ."

"He's only murdering baby trout," John explained. "But he must be caught. This pool's got two dozen trout in it, and the next one has two hundred. What do you make of it?"

"Anything I said would be a mere guess."

"Well, I'm guessing too. But here goes. A mink or otter raiding these fingerlings would get up those riffles into the next pool and work on the fish there. A man who might be poaching 'em would do the same thing. So something that lives among 'em, another fish, is getting these fingerlings. He's too big to swim up the two inches of water into the next pool. But he can range from here to Big Kettle River."

Professor Crandall smiled.

"A logical deduction, John. Can you identify the villain? Is it another bass?"

"Possibly. But even down here this stream's pretty cold for bass. I think it's a big brown trout."

"Why a brown trout?"

"Because brook trout in these waters seldom weigh over two pounds, and a two-pound trout could get up those riffles. But it may be a big rainbow. Let's see if we can get a look at him."

Dropping to his hands and knees, the Professor doing likewise and following, John crawled along the bank of the little creek. In the third pool below he found the raiding fish.

The pool was deeper than most, full of submerged stumps and snags. Its under-cut, root-matted banks hung out over the water. Fifty or sixty fingerlings lay at the bottom of the pool. In the center of it, thirty inches long from the tip of his undershot jaw to the end of his square-cut tail, the red spots on his sides bright in the clear water, the brown trout lay two inches from the bottom.

"Do you see him, Professor?" John asked excitedly. "He'll weigh eight pounds if he goes an ounce. And he's found a regular paradise. All he needs to do is hang in a pool until he's cleaned the fingerlings out of it, then swim downstream to the next one."

"I see him," Professor Crandall whispered. "And he is a monster! I must have a closer look."

The Professor stood up and the big fish was gone under a stump. A little gravel floated out, but the brown trout did not reappear. John stood up beside the Professor.

"That trout's going to be hard to take. But he'll kill every fingerling in every pool he can reach if he isn't taken."

"How will you get him?" Professor Crandall asked.

"I suppose he could be netted. But, if Pine Hill ever found out that I netted a trout, half the men in the village would be taking their fish that way, and in the long run we'd lose more fish than this old cannibal will eat. Besides, if I get that baby on a rod! Boy, oh boy!"

The next night, after supper, John returned to the pool. He carried a five-ounce, nine-foot, split bamboo rod rigged with a tapered line, a six-foot 2X leader, and a number 6 hook. Brown trout as large as this one, he knew, did not often rise to flies. So the bait he carried was a tin bucket of live minnows and a can of worms.

On hands and knees he crawled up to the pool, and peered over the brush surrounding it. The monster was there, in the same position. John fished a squirming minnow out of the bucket, hooked it through the mouth, and cast it into the pool just ahead of the big trout. The falling minnow made a gentle splash that broke harshly on the stillness of twilight.

Breathlessly John watched the minnow sink slowly to the bottom of the pool. The big trout moved an inch forward, another inch. Then he darted up to the minnow and opened his great jaws to suck it in. John waited until the minnow was well within his mouth, and with a quick jerk of his wrist set the hook.

Instantly, savagely, the big trout lunged straight up the pool. John elevated his rod, and paid line out as the monster rushed. Suddenly the trout turned and came charging back. Straight for a stump he headed, and swam around it to tangle the leader. The leader snapped, and the big trout was gone.

John sank back on the bank, the disappointment he felt tempered by admiration for a great fighting fish who knew how to make use of every strategy. Slowly he reeled in his line. An hour later the brown trout swam out from under another stump to resume his old position. John put on another leader and hook, attached a minnow, and threw it in

to let it float past the fish. But the trout was gone the instant the bait splashed.

Night after night, using worms, minnows, crickets, grasshoppers, hellgrammites, and crayfish as bait, John fished for the cannibal brown trout. It became a game, in which he tried to devise new ways of presenting bait to the fish. But the big trout, having been hooked once, was doubly suspicious of everything now. Within a week he had eaten most of the fingerlings that remained in the pool and moved downstream to the next one.

This was the last pool he would enter, John vowed grimly. If he couldn't catch him, he would net the big fish here and trust to Pine Hill's not finding out. But still he hesitated. Netting him now would be an admission of defeat, a confession that he could not catch the fish on a rod. And each night the big brown trout continued to take his toll of fingerlings. He killed, John estimated, at least ten of the little fish every night.

On the third night of June, a soft summer moon rested low over the mountains as John made his way across to the pool that held the big trout. Warm little breezes played about his face, and the air was alive with insects. Darting, silent-winged bats swooped up and down the creek, catching the bugs that swarmed over it.

John looked into the pool. He could not see the cannibal fish. But from his daytime observations he knew exactly where the trout was lying. For a moment he toyed with the idea of stringing a gob of wriggling worms on the hook and trying to catch the fish with them. But, in the month he had been fishing, the only bait the trout had even nibbled at was the

first minnow. John sat down on the bank. He hadn't tried flies. But everybody knew that a trout this size wouldn't rise to a fly more than once in a blue moon.

On sudden impulse John took out his fly and leader boxes. He tied a nine-foot leader, tapering to 2X on the line, and attached a number fourteen Drake with lemon-colored hackle, body, and wings to it. He put a drop of oil on the fly, greased ten feet of line, and whipped the rod back and forth two or three times before making a cast.

The fly settled lightly on the surface of the pool, and under the steady pressure of the rod, danced across the top. A fingerling struck savagely at it, and John pulled the fly away to keep from hooking the little fish. Again he cast, whipping the fly back and forth over the pool to dry it before letting it settle down to the water, and again only a fingerling struck. John drew the wriggling little fish in, wet his hand in the pool, and gently removed the hook from the trout's tiny mouth. He threw the fish back into the water, and for a moment sat idly with the rod thrust straight up in his hand.

Suddenly one of the darting bats paused in its erratic flight, snapped up the dangling fly, and started straight across the creek. The line jerked as its slack was taken up, and the bat fell to the surface of the water. A little row of ripples came up to lap the creek bank as he beat the water with fluttering wings. Then the bat was gone, sucked beneath the surface. Breathlessly John let the line hang slack for a moment. When he struck, he immediately felt the terrific lunge of the big trout.

Straight toward the head of the pool the big trout charged. The rod bent nearly double, and a little wave rose where the

taut line cut the water. The trout turned and came shooting back. John stripped line in furiously, let it coil about his feet. He let it out again as the trout entered the riffles, splashed into and out of them.

Again the trout raced up the pool, and John stripped line in. But the fish kept on up the riffles this time, and he had to let the line run back out. Then a coil of line that had been resting on the ground wrapped about a dead stick that brought up at the butt guide with a jerk that threatened to break the rod. John began to run along the bank, trying to keep pace with the fish. He could pay out no more line now.

The trout came to the next pool, and for ten minutes thrashed and plunged furiously around it. John held the rod up, let its spring help tire the fighting fish. Once more the trout headed up through the riffles.

But he was tiring now, exhausting himself with his own frantic efforts. When they came to the stump-ridden pool, he again tried to twist the leader about one of the submerged stumps. John kept him away from it, held him over next to the bank. His back showing out of water, the cannibal fish began fighting up through the shallow riffles.

Then suddenly John was aware of a flash light playing on the water just ahead of him. A man standing there stooped to grasp the monster trout by the gills and lift him up. When the line went slack, John straightened to come face to face with Lew Bangorst.

"That's a right smart fish, Ranger," the old man said. "An' I see how he fit ya 'most all the way up the crick. But law,

ye're still gettin' big things, ain't ye? Do you expect to eat that ol' submarine?"

"I sure do."

"He ain't gonna be no good eatin'," Lew assured him. "No more than that buck you got last season."

"How do you know?" John scoffed. "You wouldn't even try a piece."

"I know how he would o' et," Lew said stubbornly. "That's why I wouldn't try him no more'n I'll eat a hunk o that fish. These is the kind to ketch for eatin'."

He opened his basket and played the light within it to reveal a half dozen shining little brook trout. John looked at them, and glanced soberly up at the old man.

"Lew, you know that you've got two fish there under the legal six-inch limit."

The old man grinned slyly.

"Didn't you ever hear that them kind eats best?"

"I'm serious, Lew. Those two trout could cost you ten dollars apiece--and if you catch any more I'm going to arrest you."

"Ye're funnin', Ranger."

"I'm not. Laws were made to be obeyed by everybody, including you."

"Oh, aw right," the old man growled sulkily, "if you want'a git so uppity about a couple o' fish. Goo'-bye, Ranger."

Lew stamped off through the brush and John watched him go. The brush with Lew took some of the thrill from his

conquest of the big trout. But he could have done no differently, he told himself. People who would not respect conservation had to be taught--sometimes by harsh methods--that it was a very real part of everyone's life.

Three weeks later, just as John was sitting down to supper, a car drove into the yard. A moment later Harvey Lambertson entered the kitchen. The Game Warden's ruddy face was grim, and little hard lights danced in his eyes.

"Howdy, Ranger," he said. "How would you like to go out on a little job tonight?"

"It's okeh with me, Harve. What's up?"

"That guy who killed the elk. I don't know whether he's still at it or whether somebody else has gone into business. But I do know that contraband venison has been finding its way from the Rasca into Grabada, and maybe into other places. I haven't been able to pin anybody down, but just got a pretty straight tip. I figured that tonight might be a good time to trip the poacher up. He must be doing his shooting by night. I've been in the hills every day for the past ten days without hearing a shot. I've heard three by night, but couldn't run 'em down."

"Sure. I'll trail along, Harve. Have you got anything special up your sleeve?"

"Only this. Yesterday I was sitting behind a big beech tree at the edge of that meadow on the Granson road. Poley Harris and a man I didn't know came up the road and looked the meadow over. They didn't say or do anything else. But a lot of deer graze in that meadow at night, and I've just got a hunch that they aim to knock one over there."

"Well, we can go up and lay for 'em."

As soon as it was dark, John and the Warden left the Ranger's headquarters. Once on the Granson road, a dirt highway winding through the forest, the Warden drove five miles with his lights off. A mile this side of the meadow, he ran the car off the road into a little clump of hemlocks. The green branches closed about the car and hid it from anyone else who might drive up the road. John and the Warden walked through the forest to the edge of a meadow. Harvey Lambertson guided John to a big beech tree.

"You stay here," he whispered. "I'll go over to the other side. If anybody comes, sit tight. If he gets his light on a deer, let him shoot it. Then we'll have him dead to rights."

John settled down at the foot of the beech. A wan slice of moon that rode high in the heavens shed a little light. But drifting clouds that floated over it now and then made the blackness more intense. Off in the forest a whippoorwill began to cry, and up in the branches of the beech tree a cicada started to sing. An hour passed, two hours. John stifled a yawn and fought an increasing drowsiness.

Then suddenly a beam of light stabbed the darkness. Bright and piercing, it darted over the meadow and stopped on five deer. The deer raised their heads to stare in fascination at this strange small sun that had so unexpectedly risen over their night-time grazing ground. A big doe stamped her foot nervously and walked a little out of the light. The rest of the deer followed.

John crouched close to the trunk and forgot to breathe. The poacher would shoot when the deer stopped walking. Then

he would come up and get his game. John tensed himself for the leap that would carry him out into the meadow.

All at once the light darted to one side, caught John squarely in its blinding glare. He blinked, and turned his head away.

A tongue of orange flame licked the night, and the "chug" of a blasting gun rolled like thunder in the stillness. John heard the ball thud into the beech tree, an inch above his head. Then he was racing toward the place from which the shot had come. Blind anger gripped him, and a fierce fighting urge swelled within his breast.

From the other side of the meadow Harvey Lambertson's flash light winked on. John heard the Game Warden shout, "Across the road! He's crossed the road!"

John sprang toward the road, leaped into it. He stopped there, bewildered. There was not a sign, no crackling brush, no pounding footsteps, not even tracks in the hard road to show which way the poacher had run. Harvey Lambertson jumped down the bank to stand beside him.

"The -- -- -- missed the deer and got clean away from both of us!" the Warden lamented bitterly.

"He didn't shoot at a deer," John snapped. "He shot at me."

"*What?*"

John led the way back to the beech tree. He took the light from Harvey Lambertson and played it over the trunk to find a round hole with bark splinters about it. With his knife John began to slice bark and wood fibers away from the hole. Imbedded an inch deep in the tree, he found a single, round

ball. He rolled it in his hand, and gave it to the Game Warden.

"There it is," he said grimly. "A slug, shot from a twelve-gauge shotgun. A shotgun has no rifling, and we've got no chance of tracing the gun."

"Maybe we can sort of narrow the chase down, though." The Warden's voice was hard. "How many men in Pine Hill have twelve-gauge shotguns?"

"Four," John said. "Tony Pendro, Wash Jampel, Lew Bangorst, and Poley Harris!"

Chapter Nine

POISON FANGS

Nothing was said as John and the Warden trudged together down the road, and Harvey Lambertson backed his car out of the hemlocks. He remained silent, but John sensed the seething anger that boiled within him at the poacher who had escaped. But the poacher had only won another skirmish in a war that would last until he was captured. Harvey Lambertson combined a lot of qualities, but the dominant one was a bulldog persistence. It was that trait, John decided, that had made him the best warden in the state. They were nearly out of the Granson road when the Warden finally spoke.

"That guy's not going to let up. Running away from us tonight must have him feeling pretty cocky about now. And I doubt if he'll give up the easy money he's been making by selling his illegal game. I'm going to stay on his track until I land him. The next time I think he's in a pocket, I'll get you, Ranger. You deserve a lick at him for the slug he tossed at you."

"I wouldn't mind a lick," John said quietly. "I'll go out with you any time, Harve. You'll find me home any evening after six o'clock. I'm going to get in some early work on fire trails, and will be on 'em every day."

"Okeh!" the Warden snapped. "But I'm going to run that skunk into a hole and dig him out if it's the last thing I ever do. I can't help a strong hunch that he's your pal, Harris."

He let John out in front of the Ranger's headquarters, and drove on. John walked over to the house, and felt in his pocket for the key to the back door. But he had forgotten it, must have left it lying on the table. Savagely he shoved the door, and heard the spring lock snap as it gave way. John went in to bed, mentally adding the repair of the lock to the tasks to be done when he had time.

Early the next morning he knocked on the door of Lew Bangorst's house. The old man came to the door, and blew into his whiskers when he saw John.

"Huh! I s'pose you changed yore mind, an' come back to pinch me fer them two dinky fish!"

John grinned.

"Quit sulking, you old walrus. That's over and done with. How about helping me on fire trails awhile?"

"Danged if I kin make you out, Johnny," Lew said plaintively. "One day ye're gonna put a man in jail fer the rest o' his days, an' a couple o' weeks later you offers him a job whar he can earn hisself some foldin' money. Will you really arrest me if I ketch any more small trout?"

"I certainly will."

"Then," Lew sighed, "I guess I better not ketch no more. Aw right, Ranger, I'll help ya."

With Lew carrying an axe, and John a fire rake, they started up the fire trail nearest the Ranger's headquarters. Lew swung his axe at a poplar sapling that was growing in the center of the two-foot trail, and cut it cleanly off an inch from the ground.

"I dunno why they call these here dolled-up cow paths f'ar trails," he grumbled, tossing the sapling out of the way.

"They was never yet one of 'em stopped a f'ar."

John walked a few feet ahead, and with the rake slashed down a heavy growth of ferns. He raked them to one side, and kicked them out of the trail.

"I'm darned if I know myself why they call them fire trails. The trails do help fire crews get to fires that are deep in the woods. And they make nice walking for hunters and fishermen who want to go far back. They're a help to timber cruisers and surveyors, and they save a lot of time for hard-working Rangers like me."

"Huh," Lew snorted. "Sometimes it seems that they ain't nothin' but a bunch o' sissies around now. When I was a young'un, I come in here drivin' my Pappy's ox cart. We made our own road from Hopper Crick down, an' built our house o' the trees that was standin' whar yore headquarters be. When we wanted winter vittles, we haul't off an' kil't a mess o' deer. They wasn't no seasons, no licenses, an' no nothin' o' the foolishness they got now."

"If you were the only one in the Rasca, you could still kill all the game and cut all the trees you wanted, and never make a dent in what's left," John said. "One person couldn't do too much harm. But, for every hunter in the Rasca when you were a boy, there's a thousand now. It used to be that a person who lived three hundred miles from here would take ten days getting in. Now they can get here in a day. Automobiles make that difference, Lew."

"Yeh," Lew grunted. "I reckolect the fust gasoline buggy as come into Pine Hill. He started from Grabada the day before, an' hung up on the road ten mile down it. The next day the driver walked into Pine Hill an' got Wash Jampel's Pappy to come haul his car in with a ox team. Ever'body come in to look at the car. The day after a hul flock o' people come in from Grabada, tinkered with the car, an' run it back down the road. Nobody never thought then that they'd amount to nothin'."

John laughed, and raked a bunch of leaves out of the trail. At noon they sat down to eat the sandwiches they had brought with them, and drank icy water from a spring that trickled over the trail. John was stuffing the paper sack in which he carried his sandwiches into his pocket, when the air was cut by the high-pitched scream of an angered hawk.

"Do you hear that?" he asked Lew.

"Suttinly I hear it. Do ya think I'm deaf? Somethin' that hawk don't like is messin' with him. Let's see kin we git a look at him."

They stood in the center of the trail, looking about at the mountains. The hawk screamed again, and directed their gaze toward a towering beech that grew above all the rest of the trees.

"Thar he be!" Lew exclaimed.

"Where?"

"Hangin' over that beech. He must have a nest thar, an' somethin's botherin' it. Or else he's fightin' somethin' in that tree. Let's go look."

The old man started up the trail, and turned from it toward the beech. John followed. The hawk's screaming was continuous now, and when they were in the forest where the rest of the trees shut off vision, the noise guided them toward the beech. They came close to the tree, and saw the hawk wheeling a dozen feet over it, at intervals diving almost into the top branches. Fifty feet from the ground a branch shook violently.

"Thar's a b'ar in that tree," Lew whispered. "Watch out he don't jump on ya, when you git under him."

Cautiously they edged up to the tree, and peered into it. Professor Crandall was high in the tree, bracing himself with both feet, hanging on to the trunk with one hand, and trying to maneuver a camera with the other. Above him was the hawk's nest, a four-foot wide structure of sticks and grass perched in the top crotch of the beech. Talons extended, the enraged hawk dived down to swoop away just as it seemed he must strike the little man's head.

"Wal' call me a brush monkey!" Lew ejaculated. "Our pilgrim ag'in. You find that guy in the gol-ding-dest places!"

"Careful, Professor. That bird's mad," John called.

The little man turned his sweat-streaked face downward, and grasped hastily at the trunk as he swayed and nearly lost his balance.

"Hello," he called cheerfully. "Pardon me a moment, John, while I photograph this nest. It's that of a fine goshawk, *Astur atricapillus*. And don't fear. I doubt if the bird will attack me."

The Professor balanced himself precariously, raised his camera in both hands, and took the picture. He closed the camera and lowered it with a long string. Then, scrambling from branch to branch and apparently in grave danger of falling from each of them, he began to descend the tree. When he came to the long straight trunk, he wrapped arms and legs about it, and slid down. John looked at him when he finally stood on the ground. The little man's clothing was torn, a ragged branch had ripped a bloody furrow across his cheek, and his hands were raw and bleeding. But he rubbed them briskly together while a satisfied smile flitted over his lips.

"I must admit that ascending and descending some of your trees is a task," he said. "But I should have a fine picture of the nest."

"Did you break the eggs?" Lew demanded.

"Goodness no! That would be a terrible thing to do! The *Accipiters*, to which sub-family our goshawk belongs, are somewhat destructive of other wild life. But who could picture a wilderness without some of them?"

"Hawks is hawks," Lew grunted. "They oughta be kil't. None of 'em's any good."

"I must disagree with you," the Professor asserted. "Professor Jewett, Bardette's ornithologist, and I have decided to our own satisfaction that they are an essential part of our feathered life. We made no snap judgments, I assure you, and decided nothing on hearsay. But, over a ten-year period we journeyed to the Rocky Mountains, the western prairies, the deep south, and the north, including two expeditions into

Canada. We concentrated on *Accipiters*, *Falconidae*, or falcons, and *Buteos*, with opportunities to observe *Pandioninae*, ospreys, and *Circinae*, or harriers. We have written two books on the subject, and I'm convinced that the only hawks anyone is ever justified in killing are *Accipiters*: goshawks, Cooper's hawks, and sharp-shinned hawks. However, I did not want to kill this one, nor break its eggs. It's the only specimen I have observed in this district. But I have had exceptional opportunity to study the *Buteos*."

"What's boot-ee-os?" Lew snorted.

"Buzzard hawks," Professor Crandall said. "In the Rasca they include the red-tailed, the red-shouldered, and the rough-legged hawks. I saw one specimen of what I believed to be a Swainson's hawk. But I could not be sure."

"A hawk's a hawk," Lew grunted. "An' if you tacked a hunnert nine-dollar names on him, he'd still be a hawk. An' whenever I sees one, I shoots him."

"But that's wrong!" the Professor cried. "The insects and rodents most hawks kill more than compensate for the occasional rabbit or chicken they take. John, certainly you can make him understand this."

"I'm afraid I can't, Professor." John felt a little embarrassed. "I don't understand it clearly myself. The only hawks I can identify are the red-tailed, the red-shouldered, and the common osprey or fish hawk. I've even shot them, thinking they were very destructive of song birds and game. However, I'd like to read your books on hawks so I will know something about them."

"You shall have the books," the Professor assured him. "And until you're familiar with hawks, I suggest that you kill no more. But what forestry work brings you into this valley now, John?"

"We're cleaning fire trails, Professor. Are you looking for more pictures?"

"I'm always looking for subjects to photograph. Do you think you'll run across any in the course of your fire-trail work?"

"'Bout two weeks from now we'll be down in Mud Bottom," Lew ventured. "They's plenty o' bell birds down thar."

"Bell birds?"

"Rattlesnakes," John explained.

"Fine! I've tramped the length and breadth of the Rasca looking for a rattlesnake, and haven't found one. I should say they would be interesting! Do you know that, in all our ornithological expeditions, we encountered only one rattlesnake? Professor Jewett killed that one before I had a chance to study it. We ran across numbers of cottonmouth moccasins, and a few copperheads. When do you intend to work in Mud Bottom, John?"

"Let's see, this is Saturday, the fifth. Suppose you come down to headquarters early in the morning two weeks from today, the nineteenth. We'll all go on from there."

"I'll be on hand," Professor Crandall assured him.

Two weeks later John packed his snake-bite kit along with his lunch. He, Lew, and the Professor climbed into the pick-up truck and drove down toward Soonie Creek. They parked the truck at the mouth of a long valley, the sides of which

were covered with a straggling growth of scrub pine, laurel, and sweet fern. Getting out, they had scarcely started up the fire trail when Lew gripped John's shoulder.

"Look thar!"

Twenty feet up the valley, and a hundred feet up the side of the hill, the albino buck stood on a little promontory. The animal's new, velvet-covered horns had not yet emerged into their clean state, and grew club-like and grotesque on top of his head.

"What a truly magnificent beast!" the Professor breathed, struggling to put a telephoto lens in his camera.

Lew shook his head anxiously as the Professor took a picture.

"I don't like it. I don't like it a'tall. White bucks is ha'nts. Somethin' might happen jest on account ya took his picter."

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the buck tossed his head and danced three feet sideways. He reared on his hind legs, and brought his front ones stiffly down on the ground. His two white front feet twinkled as he danced up and down. The Professor wound his camera furiously and took picture after picture.

"Fascinating," he murmured, "and most unusual. Why is he performing in such a peculiar fashion?"

"I think he's killing a rattlesnake," John answered.

"But he'll be poisoned!"

"No he won't. Deer have few blood vessels below the joints of their front legs, and snake venom must get into the blood

stream before it can hurt anything."

After two minutes the buck stopped his mad dancing, and stood smelling the ground. An eddying breeze carried the scent of the three men to him. For a second, a graven statue, he stood with head upraised. Then he snorted and turned to bound up the hill.

"I don't like it," Lew groaned. "I don't like it a'tall. He's winded us. Tha's the same buck we see'd last huntin' season, Ranger. We'd best turn around an' go right home while we're still able."

"Let's go look," John suggested eagerly. "See if he really did kill a snake."

Lew said flatly, "I'm staying right here."

The Professor following, John started cautiously toward the promontory where the albino buck had stood. Fifty feet from the trail, a low-pitched buzz sounded from a bunch of sweet fern. John bent the brush back with the head of the rake.

A three-foot diamond-back rattlesnake was coiled at the base of the sweet fern. His rattles, thrust up from the middle of the coil, vibrated so fast that they were only a moving blur. Ready to strike, his poised head hovered on a neck that was gracefully thin compared to the fat and ugly body. The Professor shivered.

"There's death in the very sound of those rattles! And yet how beautifully marked he is. Be careful he doesn't leap at you, John."

"He can't," John said. "That's one of the popular fallacies about rattlesnakes. The farthest they can strike is about two-

thirds of their own length. But they strike very fast, and with great strength. Here, hold the head of this rake down where he can hit it, Professor."

He gave the rake to Professor Crandall, who gingerly extended it toward the coiled snake. The flat head flicked out, the rake moved two inches sideways, and the snake was back in his coiled position. Professor Crandall turned to John.

"I was gripping the rake tightly with both hands!" he cried. "And yet the force of his strike moved it!"

The snake uncoiled and began to crawl sluggishly away.

"He isn't afraid of us," the Professor said. "See how slowly he crawls."

"That's as fast as he can crawl, Professor. Rattlers have a reputation for being lightning swift. But their speed is all in their strike. When crawling, they're really clumsy."

John raised the rake and brought its teeth down just behind the rattler's head. The severed head remained where it was. But the sinuous, dry body twisted and writhed, and the rattles buzzed furiously. After a bit the rattle died away, to a rasping rustle, and ceased altogether as the body lay still.

"I must have a close look at him," the Professor said.

He reached forward to grasp the snake by the tail, just ahead of the rattles. Instantly the body moved, and the bloody neck shot back to strike the Professor's wrist. The little man threw himself backward to land in a sitting position at John's feet. His face was white, and beads of sweat stood on his temple.

"Good Lord!" he panted. "It's still alive!"

John helped him to his feet.

"Not really. I was going to warn you to be careful about touching him, though I knew that the most you could get was a good scare."

"But he struck me!" the Professor insisted.

"Not with his fangs," John assured him. "His head's off. If you'd touched him in the middle, his neck would have come back there. For four or five hours after he's dead, a rattler will strike at anything that touches him. I think that a rattler's 'brain' consists in part of an intricate system of nerve cells distributed all over his body. When anything touches him, he instinctively strikes at it--whether he's dead or alive. Lucky for you this one had no head!"

"Well, I shan't touch him again," the Professor said, "no matter if he's dead two days. But I will look at him."

He knelt beside the dead snake and counted the gray rattles on its tail.

"Thirteen," he said. "Does that indicate that this snake is thirteen years old? I've heard that they get a rattle for every year of their life."

"Not necessarily," John said. He placed a foot on the snake and stooped to pull the rattles off. "See how easily they break? Snakes frequently lose their rattles. The idea that rattlers have one rattle for every year of their life is like the notion that buck deer add one point to their antlers every birthday. I've seen two-year-old bucks with eight points. I've seen six-foot snakes with one rattle. But let's go up and see what the buck was stamping."

They continued on to the promontory, and found where the white buck had trampled a five-foot rattlesnake into bloody bits. The Professor examined every inch of the ground, and took numerous pictures of it. Then they returned to the fire trail. Lew stood with folded arms, his axe dangling from his right hand.

"I hope you know what you're doin'," he said. "By the time you've see'd as many white bucks as I have, mebbe you'll o' learn't to leave 'em alone. 'Twas jest luck you wasn't bit by that rattler you kil't up thar. I wouldn't git off this trail for forty dollars an' a new rifle."

"We didn't hurt the buck, Lew," John said.

"Ya don't have to hurt 'em. Ya jest have to mess in their bizness. I wish I was home right now."

"Do you want me to take you there?"

"I guess if you can be enough o' a dum' fool to go on up this holler, I can be enough o' one to tag along," the old woodsman said sourly. "But somethin's goin' to happen."

For an hour they worked up the fire trail, cleaning brush and trees out of it. The Professor wandered on ahead, and presently his excited voice floated back from around the bend.

"John! Lew! Come quick!"

The two ran up the trail, and found the little man standing on the edge of it, peering down into a small open space. John came up beside him, and the Professor pointed to a nest of rocks where a seven-foot, slim-bodied snake was basking in the sun.

"I thought at first it was another rattler," he said. "But it isn't. Can you identify it, John?"

"It's a black snake."

John leaped down and killed the snake with the fire rake. Lew came panting up the trail. The old man had been simmering all morning, and now he boiled over.

"What'd ya kill him for, ya dum' fool?" he shouted. "Don't ya know that them snakes kills rattlers?"

John climbed back to the trail.

"How many black snakes did you ever see killing rattlers, Lew?"

"Hunnerts an' hunnerts."

"Name me one time. And tell me how the snakes fought."

"I . . . Wal', mebbe I never did acktilly see one. But ever'body knows black snakes kill rattlers."

"Sure, everybody knows it. But somebody else always sees the black snake do the killing. Black snakes don't kill rattlers, but do kill a lot of song birds and small game. They're one of the very few things we'd be better off without."

"It must be nice to know ever'thin'," Lew snorted. "I still wish I was safe out o' this dam' gulley."

"What, besides deer, are the natural enemies of rattlers?" the Professor asked.

"Pigs," John said. "There are reports that gray foxes and horned owls will kill them, but I never met anybody who could prove it."

"Then why are they so scarce in some places?"

"Because--look!"

Fifty feet up the trail, and a little to one side of it, a brown thrush was picking caterpillars from a worm-infested huckleberry bush. The bird hopped from limb to limb, and finally was within a foot of the ground. The rattler, that John had seen lying under the bush, struck, and a tiny feather floated into the air. Slowly the bird started to climb back to the top of the bush. He spread his wings, tried to fly, and could not. For a moment he stood upright on the top limb. Then, obviously very sick, he sank lower on it. Finally he released his hold and fluttered to the ground.

"There's your answer," John said. "The main reason rattlers don't increase faster is because of their food problems. Once in a while you'll find a rattlesnake in our forests. But not very often, because the birds and squirrels on which they feed stay in the trees out of their reach. But in brushy country like this, the birds are close to the ground. The brush offers good natural cover to rabbits and mice, so they're abundant. Such conditions make for plenty of snakes."

"I'm going up to look at that fellow," the Professor declared. "I was so unnerved at meeting the first one that I forgot entirely to take any pictures of him."

"Be careful," John warned.

"I shall be."

The Professor left the trail and started toward the bush. He reached it, and stood looking down at the ground.

"I don't see the snake," he called. "Perhaps . . ."

Lew and John saw the head flash out from a bunch of grass within six inches of the Professor, saw it strike the calf of his leg.

Lew hissed, "Somethin' *did* happen!" and began running forward. John ran beside him. Reaching the bush, Lew brought his axe up and down to cut the rattler's head off. John turned to the Professor. The little man glanced sideways, and a wan, painful smile flitted over his white lips.

"Why, I do believe I've been bitten," he said slowly.

John gulped.

"That's right," he said with forced calmness. "You've been bitten. But it's nothing to get excited about, Professor. You didn't get the full force of the venom. Most of it was spent on the bird."

"That's very reassuring, John. I promise you that I'll try to remain as calm as possible. Excitement makes the heart pump faster, doesn't it, and hurries the poison through the blood stream? This snake was not nearly so unnerving as the headless one. I knew it was about and alive. The other, believe me, I hadn't expected to move. I saw this one just before it struck. It did not rattle, and its body was extended instead of coiled. Can you explain that, John?"

John rolled the little man's trouser leg up, revealing two fang punctures halfway between the ankle and the knee. The flesh about them was purplish, beginning to swell. John wrapped the rubber tourniquet from his snake-bite kit two inches above the fang marks.

"Professor, it looks as though you've acquired a liberal education in rattlesnake lore," he said. "Rattlers are always

supposed to rattle before they strike, but as often as not they strike first. And they can strike from any position, coiled or not. Now grit your teeth. This is going to hurt."

He took the new razor blade from his kit and made a cross incision, a quarter of an inch long and the same depth, over the fang marks. Thick, clotted blood bubbled out of it. The Professor closed his eyes and heaved a long sigh. His face was bathed in perspiration.

John took the suction cup from his kit and applied it to the wound. He pressed the bulb, and emptied the poisoned blood the cup sucked in.

"All right, Professor," he said finally. "I think we'll take you down to the hospital at Grabada now."

On his back John carried the little man down to the road and put him in the truck. Lew drove, while John sat with the Professor's bitten leg across his lap. Every ten minutes he loosened the tourniquet for a moment, and at intervals applied the suction cup. They drew up before the hospital, and John carried the Professor inside. For half an hour he and Lew sat anxiously while doctors conferred in an inner room. Finally a white-clad nurse entered the waiting room.

"Doctor Frisbie says that your friend is all right," she said. "Emergency treatment nullified most of the effects of the venom. He is resting comfortably now, and will have to stay with us for a few days."

The next afternoon John got home early to find Harvey Lambertson's small coupe in the yard. The red-haired Warden, sitting in a chair on the porch, jumped up as John approached.

"Hi, Ranger," he said. "Your pal, Harris, has really got his foot in it now. He's been dynamiting trout. I found five dead ones in the north branch of Big Kettle River, and I ran across three pools that had had their bottoms blown up. He's got a seine stretched across the mouth of Tumbling Run right now, to catch the trout that run up into cold water. Are you ready to go?"

"Sure."

They got into the Warden's car, and he drove through the village up the road to Hopper Creek.

"We're going wrong," John said. "Tumbling Run flows into the other branch."

"I know it. But the whole village saw us drive up here. They'll know if we come back. If anybody wants to pull that seine tonight, they can do it safely as long as we're up this branch. Do you get the idea?"

"I get it."

They ran the car off the road deep into a spruce plantation. Leaving it there, they climbed the mountain and descended the other side. Until night, they lay hidden in the forest. Making no noise, they waded the river, walked up its banks to Tumbling Run, and hid in the willows.

Three hours later, driving without lights, a car came up the road and stopped. A man got out of it, and came down to the mouth of Tumbling Run. He took a flash light from his pocket, played it cautiously in the water, and reached down to grasp the seine. Harvey Lambertson leaped from the willows squarely on the man's shoulders, bore him down to

the water and struggled for a good hold. Then the Warden dragged his choked, gasping captive up the bank.

John turned his flash light full on the startled, fearful face of little Tony Pendro.

Chapter Ten

A BEAR TURNS KILLER

Harvey Lambertson thrust his right hand in the front of Tony's shirt, and jerked the little poacher to his feet so hard that his head snapped back.

"I didn't do it," Tony Pendro gasped. "It ain't my seine."

"No? I suppose you just saw it there and wanted to pick it up and see what it was? That seine's going to cost you just a hundred dollars, Tony, or a hundred days in jail. You can come across and take that rap like a good boy, or you can stay on your high horse and I'll stick you for dynamiting the creek too. You did dynamite it, didn't you?"

"No," Tony growled sullenly.

The Warden said, "Keep your eye on him, Ranger," and went down to cut the seine loose. He came back dragging it from his right hand, and faced Tony.

"I think I'll wrap this around you, weight it with a few boulders, and toss it back into the hole there," he said calmly. "Everybody will think that you got tangled in your own net and drowned. After you're dead, I'll pull it up and take the boulders out."

He tossed the net over Tony's head and began winding it about his body. The little poacher kicked and struggled. A moan broke from his lips, and it was followed by a choking sob.

"Don't do that! Please don't do that!" he begged.

"Did you set the seine?" Harvey Lambertson's voice was as cold as ice.

"Yes, I set it."

"You dynamited the creek too, didn't you?"

"I--I--Yes. I wanted to get some fish to sell to fishermen. They pay a lot of money for big ones."

The Warden unwrapped the seine.

"All right, Tony. Go on home and get some dry clothes on. I'll meet you there in ten minutes and take you to Grabada where we can see a justice. I'm going to let you off this time with only a fine for setting the seine. But, if you ever break another game or fish law, you're going to jail for dynamiting. Get it?"

"I got it. Oh, Santa Maria! I wish I'd never . . ."

Tony sobbed again, and started up to the road where he had left his old car. John was quiet for a moment, ashamed of the fact that he had tacitly agreed to the bullying of Tony by Harvey Lambertson. But he knew that as long as there were men like Tony to break the law, there would have to be harsh methods of handling them. Still--it did seem as though the Warden might have been more gentle.

"Well," he said finally, "the poacher problem's settled, Harve."

"At least *this* poacher problem is."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe you've forgotten that somebody shot at you up on the Granson road? It wasn't Tony."

"How do you know that?"

"You said there were four men in Pine Hill with twelve-gauge shotguns. I investigated all of 'em, and Tony's gun has been broken since March. Lew Bangorst's, Wash Jampel's, and Poley Harris' are all in good working order, though. It might have been any of those three, and it might have been somebody outside of Pine Hill entirely. Whoever it was, he'll have to wait now. I've been transferred to the Manacon country for two months to patrol some bass lakes there. I'd hoped to land that lead-slinging friend of yours before I went. But it wasn't Tony."

"Why aren't you fining Tony for dynamiting, too?" John asked. "He admitted he did it."

The Warden shrugged.

"That fine's five hundred dollars, and he couldn't pay it in the next fifteen years. He'll have all he can do to take care of the hundred-dollar fine I'm going to lay on him. And the dynamiting gives me a club to hold over him. If his foot ever slips again, he'll be charged with that, and he knows it. So at least one Pine Hiller will be pretty likely not to break any game laws for a long while to come. Well, come on. I want to get Tony down to Grabada. I'm leaving for the Manacon early tomorrow morning."

They drove down to Pine Hill, and the Warden drew up in front of Tony's house. John got out and walked over to the Ranger's headquarters. He went to bed, and for a quarter of an hour lay uneasily contemplating the part he had played in

the arrest. There had been nothing heroic about it, nothing glorious. Tony would have to skimp and save, deny himself the few little luxuries he had been accustomed to, in order to pay the hundred-dollar fine that was being levied on him. But, John assured himself, there was nothing exactly heroic in using seines and dynamite to kill fish that rightly belonged to every fisherman, either. And with that thought he went to sleep.

The next day he and Lew worked on another fire trail, a short one that was finished two hours after noon, and John got home early. When he ran the pick-up into the barn, he saw a sway-backed old roan horse with a blanket folded over his back and held in place by a piece of rope. Wearing no bridle, the old horse was munching contentedly at a manger full of the choice clover hay Clem Hawes had cut and stored in the barn. John patted the horse's bony muzzle.

"Your boss, whoever he is, makes you right at home in other people's barns, doesn't he?" he murmured. "Have a good time, horse. You look as though some hay might do you good."

There was no one about the house, but the kitchen door stood open. John ran over, and entered the kitchen to see a fiercely mustached, chunky man with bristling black eyebrows, fast asleep in a chair. The man's bare feet were stretched across another chair. John coughed, and the man stirred, to raise his head and open piercing black eyes.

"Are you quite comfortable?" John asked dryly.

"Sure! Sure, I'm com'table! Whatta ya think I haul't off an' fixed these chairs fer? But come in, stranger. Come in an' set.

Don't stand there jibber-jabberin'."

"Thanks," said John. He took a chair and faced the chunky man. "How did you get into the house?"

"I jest shoved away on the door an' she opened. The barn was open, so I put my horse up too. These days, what with people bein' suspicious of each other an' spittin' like two ornery tomcats ever' time they come together, it gives a body a heap of comfort to find a house he kin put up at. I wouldn't of come in, but Lew Bangorst told me about the Ranger. 'Zack,' Lew says, 'that guy's got the confoundest mixed-uppest set o' notions chasin' one another through his brains.' Them's the very words Lew used, stranger."

John chuckled.

"Did Lew say anything else?"

"I was goin' to tell ya, stranger, until you busted in on my talkin'," the other said a little stiffly. "Lew says, 'Zack,' says he, 'I had begun to think that the ol' mountain breed had all died off, what with men as is s'posed to know better wearin' pink shirts, an' havin' to have their bath ever' week an' sometimes twi'st a week, an' buying little brushes to scrub their teeth. But it ain't all died off. At least part of it's got itself a whamdoodlin' big eddication an' become the Ranger at Pine Hill. That John Belden, Zack, is aw right. Sinst I met him I even begun to think they might be somethin' to them new-fangled notions, Zack, if you combine 'em with a dose o' old-fashioned horse sense.' That's iggzactly what Lew said, stranger, an' I never expected to hear him talk as much. But I knowed that anybody like he made the Ranger out to be would expect a body to make hissself right to home."

"Have you got business with the Ranger?" John asked.

"Now jest what do you think I rid' that horse twelve miles from the Hamtrack country fer? Sartainly I got business with him, seein' as the Warden has took hissself over into the Manacon instead of stayin' home where he should ought to stay. Missis Lambertson she says to me, says she, 'Go up to Pine Hill an' see the Ranger. He takes care of such things when Harve ain't to home!'"

John laughed and extended his hand.

"I'm the Ranger. What's on your mind?"

The other rose. "How-dee-do, Ranger. My name's Zack Wilson. You are a likely lookin' lad, though I must say you don't look as pert as Lew Bangorst made ye out to be. Still, I always says that ya can't tell by the color of a frog's pants how far he can jump, says I. Have ya got a good rifle, Ranger?"

"A pretty good one."

"Then ya might git a chanst to use it. An ol' big black b'ar come out of the woods this mornin' an kil't one of my sheep. I thought it was my bounden duty to come tell somebody about it. Mebbe you better jog up thataway an' git him, Ranger."

"Did you see the bear kill the sheep?"

"Sartainly, else how would I knowed he kil't it?"

"Then why didn't you shoot him yourself?"

"I ain't goin' to tell ya no long tales about that, Ranger, though I expect mebbe I should. But I allus says there ain't

nothin' like bein' honest, says I. For ever' sheep that b'ar gits, the state pays me seven dollars an' a half. Tha's about four dollars more'n I could git by sellin' 'em on the hoof. But I ain't gonna have the stain on my immortal soul of not tellin' somebody about the b'ar afore he gets a dozen or two sheep. I ain't gonna kill him myself on account I think he might git that many. So I jest haul off an' tell a state man about him. Thataway I git the hul thing off my conscience, an' ever'thing gits a even break. I'm rootin' fer the b'ar. The b'ar's rootin' fer the sheep. An' the state man's rootin' fer the state. Git it?"

"I get it," John said. "There's nothing like being both practical and moral, is there? Where's your farm, Zack?"

"Go up Mary Mountain Road to Hamtrack Swamp, an' take the fust road to the left of the swamp. It leads right in to my place. Well, goo'bye, Ranger. I don't git into Pine Hill but seldom on account I don't like cities, so's I prob'ly won't be seein' you here. An' I won't be seein' you up in the Hamtrack on account it wouldn't be right fer me to root fer the b'ar an' have a hand in killin' him. But, after you git the b'ar or he gits all my sheep, I'll be seein' you agin. Jest go right into my place an' make yerself to home. Use anything thar as you sees fit. I'll bunk in the woods tonight."

Zack Wilson went to the barn, mounted his horse, and rode toward a fire trail that cut into another leading up Mary Mountain. John watched him go, half-amused, half-irritated. But the irritation gradually died while the amusement increased. A mountain farmer's life was a never-ending fight with weather, insects, and the game that raided his none-too-plentiful crops, herds, and flocks. Nobody who understood all these things could rightly blame Zack for wanting the

bear to kill all his sheep so he could collect more than double the market price for them.

But the bear would have to be killed, and the sooner the better. John knew that such animals, once they raided a sheep fold or calf pen and found how much easier it was to get food that way than to work for a living in the forests, would continue their forays. No farm animals in the Rasca would be safe as long as the bear was at large.

John put new batteries in a five-cell flashlight and tested it. He laid that and his thirty-thirty on the pick-up's seat beside him, and stopped at the store for a pail of honey. Then he drove up the Mary Mountain Road to Hamtrack Swamp.

The road leading to Zack Wilson's farm was merely two grass-grown ruts in the forest. The pick-up bumped and rattled down them, and after a mile emerged into a sixty-acre clearing that was surrounded on all sides by hardwood forests. Zack's house, a ramshackle log building whose roof was thatched with sod, stood on a little knob in the center of the clearing. The log barn was about a hundred and fifty feet behind the house. A fence made of saplings enclosed a half acre of ground at one end of the barn. On one side were patches of oats, corn and buckwheat. A neat vegetable garden grew within twenty feet of the house. A well-beaten path that, John suspected, led to Zack's still, wound through the clearing to disappear into the woods. Thirty-six scrawny, mongrel sheep whose wool was matted with burrs, grazed at the edge of the woods. They raised their heads to look at John, and resumed grazing.

With the rifle in one hand and the pail of honey in the other, carrying the flashlight in his back pocket, John went to the

barn. The sheep that the bear had killed hung from a wooden peg driven into the side of a rafter. John leaned his rifle against the barn door, set the pail of honey down beside the flashlight, and went out to look around.

Evidently the sheep grazed in the clearing by day and came back to be shut in the fence by night, for beaten paths ran from the gate into the clearing. At the far end of the fence a section of rails had been broken down. John walked over.

A few long black hairs still clung to the broken rails. John knelt to study the ground, and a low whistle escaped him as he found one of the bear's tracks. By spreading his hand, he was barely able to touch one end of the track with his thumb and the other end with his little finger.

"That old pirate sure grew big!" he murmured.

He returned to the barn, built a small fire ten feet from the door, and poured a little of the honey on it. The sweet, sickish scent of burning honey rose to hang heavily in the air. John spread the rest of the honey over the front of the barn and around on the inside of the fence.

When the pail was empty, John climbed the ladder into the hay mow and opened the creaky door that overlooked the sheep fold. He shoved flashlight and rifle through the aperture to make sure that he would have plenty of room to use both when and if the occasion arose, and descended the ladder to wait for nightfall.

Two nighthawks began to wheel over the clearing when twilight came, and a family of barn owls that had their daytime abode in the peak of the barn began their querulous chattering. The sheep trooped toward the fence, passed

through the gate, and lay down. John climbed back into the hay mow, and settled down on the soft hay with the gun and flashlight beside him. The sweet smell of the honey mingled with the oily stench of the sheep.

"The honey and the sheep together ought to kill all my scent," John assured himself. "That old pirate shouldn't suspect anything."

The hay rustled softly as mice scurried back and forth across it. A whippoorwill's song drifted into the barn, and a blood-curdling shriek rose as out in the forest a rabbit fell prey to a hunting fox or wildcat. At intervals a sheep bleated or changed its position. A wind sprang up, whistled softly through the various cracks in the barn. One of the owls came back to its roost in the peak, and his plaintive chattering filled the cramped hay mow.

A three-quarters moon rose over Mary Mountain. John peered through the open doorway. Below him the sheep were bulky shadows in the moonlight. The trampled ground inside the fence turned shimmering white under the moon, and the fence itself was a thin black line. Beyond, the clearing was a big lake inhabited by drifting shadow-fish. A bank of clouds covered the moon, and solid darkness closed in. John settled back in the hay, and with his head pillowed on his hands began chewing on a stalk of clover.

Suddenly, drowning out the little night noises, there came the sound of a heavy blow. John jumped to his feet as the peaceful night became a bedlam. The sheep were bleating, and their hoofs pattered on the hard ground as they ran blindly about inside the fence. One leaped against the barn wall and fell back. John thrust his flashlight out the aperture

and by its white beam saw three sheep running madly toward the gate.

Something intercepted them, something so black that at first it seemed a part of the night. The black thing faced the light, and its fangs were dazzling white as its mouth gaped open. It struck, three times, and the three sheep went down.

Slowly, fighting his excitement, John thrust the gun out beside the light. He gritted his teeth, and steadied himself while he sighted on the black bear. He pressed the trigger, and a bright bloom of orange light clung for a second to the muzzle of the gun. John heard the sodden "spat" as the bullet struck flesh, and the bear bawled twice.

There came a great sobbing as the wounded animal tried to draw breath into his bullet-pierced lungs. John shot again, and again. Then the bear had gone, and John was unable to get him in the light. Hastily he descended the ladder, ran out to the side of the barn, and cast about with the light. The bear's rasping sobs were coming from the far end of the fence now, and John ran that way. The light found the bear, lying on the ground and raising himself a little with his front feet. He swung his massive head slowly, and John shot him squarely in his open mouth. The bear dropped his head to lie still.

John levered another bullet into the chamber, and walked over beside the dead bear. A great triumph that was mingled with pity swept through him as he looked down. The old feud between man and animal, that supposedly had died hundreds of years ago, was still alive and would remain living as long as there was a patch of wilderness left and a

man who wanted it. Always, in such cases, the animals who disputed ownership with the man must be killed.

"I heard the shot," Zack Wilson's voice said suddenly, "an' I come right over. Did ya get 'im?"

"I got him."

"Well, I can't say's I'm glad an' I can't say's I'm mad. I always says things will work out in some way, says I."

Zack came through the night to stand beside John.

"Tha's a right smart b'ar," he said. "I'd jedge that he'll weigh some'ere between four hunnert an' fifty an' four hunnert an' seventy-fi' pounds. I'll dress him fer ya."

The two rolled the dead bear over on his back. From somewhere in the depths of his clothing Zack produced a huge clasp knife. He hog-dressed the bear, and disappeared in the darkness. Five minutes later he came back leading the old horse, that now wore a patchwork harness.

"Some hosses is scairt of b'ars an' some ain't," he said amiably. "This is one what ain't. I dunno whether he ain't got brains enough to be scairt, or if he jest don't give a hang."

He wrapped a chain that was dragging from the harness about the dead bear's neck, and led the horse back to the truck. He loosened the chain, and before John could move to help him, wrapped his pudgy arms about the bear and heaved it into the truck.

"Thar," he said. "Ye're all set to roll, b'ar an' all."

John climbed into the pick-up.

"Did the b'ar git any more sheep?" Zack asked hopefully.

"Four I know of. I heard him kill one and saw him kill three."

A broad grin spread over the mountain farmer's face.

"I guess ever'buddy oughta be satisfied then, 'ceptin' mebbe the b'ar. I'll put the claim in to the game commission, Ranger."

"Do that," John said. "So long, Zack."

"Goo'bye, Ranger. But fust I wanted to tell ya that Lew Bangorst, he calls his shots pretty straight. Do ya know what I thought?"

"No."

"I thought you was too much of a sissy to get that b'ar."

The next morning John took the dead bear to Grabada and turned it over to Harvey Lambertson's deputy there. He drove from the deputy's house to the hospital, and went to the information desk.

"I'd like to see Professor Crandall."

"Professor Crandall was discharged early this morning," the clerk told him.

"Did he say where he was going?"

"He called a taxi to the hospital, and I heard him tell the driver to go to Pine Hill. Are you a friend of his?"

"Yes, I'm the Ranger from Pine Hill. How is the Professor?"

"He was scarcely affected by the snake bite, and is quite well now."

On his way home John met the returning taxi, so drove on through Pine Hill to the lodge the Professor had rented. The

little photographer was in the lodge's main hall, busily going over a room full of photographic equipment.

"I guess it takes more than a rattlesnake to get you down, Professor. You look as chipper as a month-old rabbit."

Professor Crandall whirled around.

"John! I'm so glad to see you! What's been happening?"

"Nothing much," John said with affected casualness. "I killed a four hundred and fifty pound bear in Zack Wilson's sheep pasture last night. He was raiding the sheep."

"And I missed it!" the Professor moaned. "Please tell me the details, John."

For two hours they chatted back and forth, until John rose to go.

"I have to be getting back down to headquarters. I haven't done a thing all day. How long will you be in the Rasca, Professor?"

"Until the last of October, John. Professor Jewett's landing at New Orleans the first of November. I'll meet him there, and he and I have planned to spend a month in the south studying bird life before returning to Bardette. I'll occupy the rest of my time here taking pictures of animals. I want especially a series of photos of deer in their autumn coats."

Three weeks later John and Lew completed two hours' work on the last of the fire trails. John drove down to Pine Hill, and let Lew off at his house. He ran the pick-up on home, but had scarcely closed the kitchen door behind him when Lew strode in. The old woodsman wiped the sweat from his forehead, and sank wearily into a chair.

"If 'tain't one thing, it's about six more," he grumbled. "I was all sot for a nice afternoon on that deep pool back o' the house--I know dum' well I could get me a couple o' bass down thar an' never move out o' the shade. But Mel Crane, he jest come down an' told me to tell you they's a f'ar up Dingbat Crick. I figgered you might want me to go along an' help."

"How long has it been burning?" John asked.

Lew shrugged.

"Mel says they's been smoke a-hangin' in the gulley sinst early this mornin'. There ain't nobody in the towers now, or else they might o' reported it. I dunno why some o' these lazy cusses as are so good at spottin' f'ars an' such-like cain't stir their stumps enough to do somethin' about puttin' 'em out. Are you goin' up, Ranger?"

"I'll have to. Or do you want me to let it burn all summer?"

John ran the pick-up to the tool shed, and put a portable pump, two fire rakes, an axe, and a grub hoe in the back. Lew climbed in beside him and they drove up a branch of the Rasca road to Dingbat Creek, a quiet little rill that trickled out of the mountains. A blanket of blue smoke, unmoved by any wind, covered the valley from one end to the other. John ran the truck as close to the mouth of the creek as he could get it, and got out to shoulder the pump and grasp a fire rake. Lew carried the axe, the grub hoe, and another fire rake.

They reached the fire, that so far had burned scarcely ten acres, and mentally John compared it to the blaze on Cattail Creek. That had been a raging, racing inferno, driving flame hundreds of feet into the air and gulping acres of forest in

one hot mouthful. But many of the hardwood trees that the spring fire had passed over would live to bud again simply because the flames had gone by them so swiftly.

Here, the green vegetation that carpeted the forest floor all but smothered the flames. The fire was deep in the ground, burning roots and the centuries old accumulation of dry vegetable matter that had gathered there. Every tree in the burned area would die.

Each taking a rake and working in opposite directions, John and Lew scooped a wide, clean trench about the fire. John went over the trench with the grub hoe, probing deep for roots and dry stumps over which the fire might run into the unburned forest, while Lew filled the tank at the creek and thoroughly drenched every place from which smoke was rising. John's shirt grew wringing wet with sweat, and his arm and shoulder muscles ached. Still he worked on. Finally, just as twilight came creeping down from the hills, Lew stopped beside him with the empty tank.

"Kind o' looks as though we got her, as much as she can be got," the old woodsman grunted. "She'll smoke an' smoulder fer days, though. C'mon over an' take a look at the crick, Ranger."

John walked over. Due to the extended rainless weather, Dingbat Creek was very low. The pools were polluted with ashes, and the riffles connecting them were mere trickles of water winding among sun-baked rocks. A pile of buried hemlock logs had burned hotly beside a pool, and the edges of it were lined with dead trout. John thrust a finger into the pool, and found the usually ice-cold water lukewarm. He glanced down the stream, and knew that the warm water

would kill most of the fish in the pools below. There was no escape for the fish. The shallow riffles trapped them in the pools.

John glanced back at the fire. Every live plant destroyed. It would be years before any green thing would grow to sheltering size in the burned area. The sun would beat down through the open place in the forest, warm the waters of Dingbat Creek, and what had been a nice trout stream would be only a meandering trickle of water.

His gaze strayed across the creek. Tacked on a big beech tree was a cardboard sign:

PREVENT FOREST FIRES IT PAYS

Chapter Eleven

POISONED WATERS

A searing sun rose in a cloudless sky on the last day of August. The grass, already wilted, shrivelled to a matted brown carpet on the ground. The leaves on the trees drooped, and the tree trunks were warm to the touch. The little wind that stirred was like a hot blast from a furnace.

John stepped out to the porch, fanning himself gently with a folded newspaper. He sat down on the top step and listlessly watched a crow wing heavily up the river, alight, and begin pecking at dead fish on the bank. Due to prolonged rainless weather, the river was three feet below its normal spring level. Riffles meandered lazily down their course, breaking on either side of sun-baked rocks that they usually covered. Pools that were usually too deep to wade now could be crossed nearly any place. The blazing sun did not reflect from the water, but seemed to burn right into it.

John glanced up to see Lew Bangorst coming down the road, followed by a little trail of dust. Lew turned in at the path leading to the Ranger's headquarters, and mopped the sweat from his face with a huge bandana handkerchief.

"It's hot," he announced. "I disremember any sech warmish weather as this the hul time I been in the Rasca."

"Maybe if you'd take that woollen underwear and flannel shirt off, you'd be cooler," John said. "How come you wear the same clothes winter and summer, Lew?"

Lew shrugged.

"Wearin' the same kind o' clothes all the time is pra'tical. Take now if I had diff'rent kinds. On a coolish day in summer I'd be botherin' my head wonderin' if I shouldn't ought to wear my heavy clothes. An' on a warmish day in winter I'd be thinkin' that mebbe I should put on my light ones. Havin' all the same kind o' clothes saves a heap o' thinkin'. But what was you aimin' to do, now, Ranger?"

John yawned.

"I'm going up to clear boundary lines. September's a good time for that. There won't be much new growth now until the middle of April, so the boundaries will stay open that long."

Lew stepped back, put his hands on his hips, and regarded John quizzically.

"Boundary lines!" he snorted. "An' you're the one as has been tellin' me all along that we got to save an' keep things. Wha's got into ya, Ranger?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean them fish! Look how low the river be. An' them little streams without half as much water! They's a million trout back in them as ain't got more'n a spoonful o' dampness to cover their backs, an' they ain't gonna have that if the sun keeps a-burnin' down thisaway. Them fish gotta be took to deeper water. Bound'ry lines kin wait. But dyin' fish can't."

John sat perfectly still a moment, while a rush of gratification and delight swept through him. He had long ago abandoned as entirely hopeless any attempt to teach Lew even the fundamentals of conservation. And here he had somehow

learned them, and apparently more too, by himself. But, John knew, Lew's new-found regard for conservation must be accepted as a matter of course and treated as an entirely natural thing. Any praise or congratulations might send the old man sulking back to his old ways. John snapped his fingers.

"Doggone! I knew there was something I should have thought of and didn't. You're right, Lew."

"O' course I'm right. I got a couple o' buckets, a minnie seine, an' a ten-gallon milk pail over to the house. Do ya wanna start now?"

"Sure. Is anybody loafing at the store, Lew?"

"Wash Jampel's settin' thar. He's been thar sinst the last o' Joo-ly."

"We'll ask Wash to go along."

Lew regarded him suspiciously.

"Do ya jest wanna give Wash a ride? You know Wash don't like you."

"That's exactly why I want him, or somebody else from Pine Hill. You and I are known to be pretty thick, Lew. When the village finds out we're netting fish, there's nothing to stop them from thinking that we're putting as many into our jeans as we're putting back into deep water. I want somebody along who'll report to the village, or else they'll all be out netting trout."

They got the pick-up, and John drove over to the store. He stopped there while Lew stuck his head out the open window.

"Hey, Wash," he called, "do you wanna go help us ketch some trout?"

Wash Jampel arose, and slouched over to the little truck.

"Whar ya goin'?"

"Up some o' the little cricks to ketch the trout as is stuck in shaller pools. They ain't no pay in it. But ya git a free ride, an' it's a heap sight cooler up them little cricks than 'tis settin' in front o' the store."

"Tha's a p'int to consider," Wash admitted. "An' I ain't got nothin' else to do. Sure. I'll trail along."

He climbed in beside Lew, and John drove on to Lew's house. They loaded the pails, the minnow seine, and the ten-gallon milk pail on the truck, and continued up the road to the first of the little creeks that emptied its water into Big Kettle River. John stopped the pick-up, and the three got out.

"Have we gotta walk up thar?" Wash Jampel demanded.

"I sure don't see no railroad runnin' up that holler," Lew said amiably. "An' we gotta go up it. But ponder on what ye're gonna find when ya git up thar--ice-cold little cricks to slosh around in. You ain't gonna miss that, be ya, Wash?"

"I come to get cool an' I'm gonna get cool," Wash announced grimly. "C'mon."

He grabbed a pail and started up the fire trail that paralleled the creek. Lew stuck the seine in the other pail, and with John fell into line behind him. John looked at the creek.

"She's plenty low down this far, Lew," he said. "But there's at least enough water in the pools so the trout can move around."

Up near the head's where we'll find it bad."

The stream grew smaller as they traveled up it, and at length died away to a mere seepage of water dampening the gravel in the creek bed. John left the fire trail and cut down to the creek. There were no trout here--there was not enough water for even a fingerling to find swimming room--but he knew that there had been fish the full length of the stream. Fifty feet up from where the seepage began, he found the first pool.

Ordinarily about six feet wide and two feet deep, the pool had dried until now it was scarcely three feet wide by eight inches deep. Trout lay nose to tail and side by side so thickly that their packed bodies covered the bottom. They swirled around the pool when they saw John, and stopped to resume their original positions.

"Look at 'em," John said to Lew. "Nearly two hundred trout where there's hardly room for twenty. And look at the tracks on the bank. The 'coons and minks have been having plenty easy living on these fish."

"Yeh," Lew grunted. "But we come here to get 'em out, not for a teaparty. The way you keep gabbin' sometimes, Ranger, a body dunno if ye're in your right mind or not."

Lew tied two willow sticks to the sides of the seine, and with the net in his hands made ready to wade into the pool. Wash Jampel stepped up beside him, and took the net from his hands.

"I don't give a hang fer the fish," he said. "But I do aim to cool off. An' if there's any splashin' around in the water to do, I aim to do it."

Lew grinned, and stepped back to fill both pails with water. The seine spread, Wash waded into the pool. A grin of sheer delight spread over his face as the cold water lapped his ankles. Wash sat down in the pool, then rolled over in it. He sat up with water dripping from his drenched head and running from his clothes.

"It ain't half bad," he announced. "It's pretty nigh wuth walkin' up here for."

"Come on an' git the fish," Lew growled. "Fust thing ya know somebody's gonna see you thar an' put you in the seine--whar you'd look more to home."

Wash scooped the seine through the pool, and brought it up laden with shiny, wriggling little trout. He emptied the net into Lew's bucket, and the old woodsman started back down the creek toward a deeper pool. John waited while Wash scooped out another seineful and caught the stragglers remaining in the pool. Carrying them in his pail, he went downstream and emptied them.

Two hours later they had worked to the head of the stream, taken the trout from the bubbling spring at its source, and gone on to the next little stream. That one was paralleled by a road, and instead of emptying each pailful of trout as they were seined, they were placed in the milk can in back of the truck and driven to deeper water.

One by one, taking each little stream as they came to it, finding few trout in some, and others swarming with fish, they worked on. Night came, and they went home to sleep the dreamless, deep slumber of men who had worked hard. Every morning for the next three weeks they were out again,

taking trout from small, drying streams and putting them into deep water where they could live.

"How come our pilgrim ain't here with his picter box?" Lew asked one day.

John shrugged. "I don't know exactly. He told me that he was going to get some pictures of bucks in their autumn coats, so I reckon you'll find him along the deer runways."

Wash looked up from the center of a pool he was seining.

"I dunno's I'd want any picters of me seinin' trout anyhow. It might be used as evidence the next time Harve Lambertson gets me in court. Where's Harve, anyway?"

"Over in the Manacon country. He'd be helping with this work if he was here."

"I reckon he would," Wash grunted. "An' I'll bet a dime to a keg of rusty horseshoe nails he wouldn't be puttin' all these fish back either. I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd seine up'ards of seventy thousand trout an' never taste one neither. How many streams ain't we worked, Ranger?"

"Three. The right-hand branch of Willow Creek, Socking Creek, and Bad Mix Creek. We should finish tomorrow."

Wash glanced at the sky.

"Well, we sure ain't gonna finish today. Them shadders is creepin' down from the tops of the hills, an' it's gonna be dark right soon. Let's call it a day."

They emptied their buckets into the milk can and drove the canful of trout down to deep pools. John turned the pick-up toward Pine Hill, let Lew and Wash off at their houses, and

drove home. A soft, cool breeze sprang up as he walked from the barn to the house, and there were a few clouds in the sky. That breeze promised something besides rain. There was a tang and sparkle to it, and an almost indefinable voice that spoke of frost and snow to come, of migrating ducks and geese, and of the winter that would soon close down on the Rasca. John looked at the red maple in his yard--during the time he had been seining fish it seemed that he had been too busy to look at anything else--and was startled to see that its green leaves had turned fiery red. The summer was waning fast.

He went into the house, cooked and ate supper, and was washing dishes when the telephone rang. John took the receiver from the hook.

"Belden speaking."

"Hello, Belden. This is Mullins. The paper mill at Staban has emptied its acid vats into the river again. A lot of fish are dying. How about taking a couple of men over there tomorrow to see what you can do about it? The fish commission is sending some tank trucks along."

"Sure. I'll go. How about paying the men for the work they do over there? Two of them have been helping me the past three weeks for no pay. We've taken about seventy or eighty thousand small trout out of drying streams and put 'em in deeper water."

"Well, the budget for this year . . . Okeh. Pay 'em. Give 'em fifty cents an hour."

John picked Lew and Wash up early the next morning, and started over a dirt road that led to the small city of Staban.

"You'll get paid for your swimming today, Wash," he said.

"Mullins said I could allow you fifty cents an hour."

"What's up?" Wash asked.

"The Staban Paper Mill's vats have gone into lower Big Kettle River again. We've got to see what we can do about the fish it's killing."

"Ugh! You two can do the swimmin' today. I've seen this before."

They reached Staban, and drove through it toward Big Kettle River. Three tank trucks, with two men in each truck, met them in front of the paper mill's sprawled buildings. Lew's nostrils began to twitch, and he pinched them together with his thumb and forefinger.

"It smells like lightnin' struck a den o' about fifty skunks," he grumbled. "What in tunket is it?"

"Jest wait an' you'll see," Wash promised grimly.

They entered a side road leading to the river, and John stopped the pick-up to get out and stand on the bank. The three tank trucks lined up behind them, and for a moment their crews stood with John's, just watching.

The usually clear waters of Big Kettle River were tinted a bluish black. Fish that the acid had killed lay piled against either bank: bass, suckers, pickerel, mullets, whitefish, carp, and chubs. Their upturned bellies showed ghostly white through the poisoned water. Hordes of screaming sea gulls flew up and down the river, alighting to peck at the fish and flying on again. The stench of thousands of rotting fish

combined with the smell of the acid, and poisoned the air as well as the water. John turned to a driver of one of the trucks.

"What can we do about this?" he asked soberly.

The driver shrugged.

"Nothing about the dead ones. But every place there's a spring or creek flowing into the river we'll find plenty of live ones. The flow of water will sweep the acid back away. Of course, some creeks will be deep enough so the fish can run right out of the river up them. I've been here seven times before, and know where every spring and creek is."

"Seven times! Does this mess happen that often?"

"It happens pretty often. But when the acid is released in high water, it doesn't kill so many fish. There's enough volume of water to dilute it. In low water, it kills three-quarters of the fish in the river. Well, we'd best get along. The first spring's right down here."

The driver led the way down the bank to where a clear spring bubbled out of the rocks. The trickle of water that came from it had pushed the acid back to form a clear pool about five feet square. The pure water was crowded with as many fish as could get into it. At its lower edge five fine black bass floated belly up.

Wash Jampel announced tautly, "I think I will swim after all," and waded into the pool with the seine spread. He brought it up, sagging under the weight of flapping suckers, bass, and pickerel. The fish were dumped into buckets that the truck crews carried, and taken up to be emptied into one of the tank trucks. One of the crew ran a big dip net through the pool, and brought it up filled to the top with fish. Finally

the pool was emptied and the trucks were driven down to the next one. They worked silently, grimly, carrying a bucket in each hand and running to the truck to empty them when they were filled.

In less than an hour the first tank truck was filled to its capacity of four thousand fish, and drove away to empty them into a clean stream as the crew started filling the second truck. That was filled, and driven away. The third truck was nearly filled when the first came back.

All day the men worked, and far into the night. John kept Wash and Lew at the Staban Hotel that night in order to get an earlier start in the morning. Toward the end of the third day, far down the river, the effects of the acid began to wear off and there were only a few dead fish. John straightened, and sighed in relief as he watched the last truck load of fish pull out toward clean water.

"That's done. Now to go and settle with the paper mill."

Lew, who had spoken only in grunts and monosyllables for the whole time they had been on the river, turned towards him.

"Kin I go along? I'd like to see this."

"Sure. Come ahead."

They climbed into the pick-up and drove back to Staban. John stopped in front of the paper mill, and with Lew beside him, entered the offices. He said to the girl in the outer office,

"I'd like to see Mr. Griswold."

The girl pressed a buzzer and spoke into a tube. After a bit she looked up.

"Mr. Griswold will see you. Go right in."

John and Lew entered a luxuriously furnished office to confront a fat man sitting behind a mahogany desk. But, for all its flabbiness, there was keenness and intelligence in the fat man's face. He smiled, opened a drawer, and took out a check.

"I've been expecting you," he said. "Here's your money. The check will act as its own receipt. You're new here, aren't you? Harvey Lambertson usually collects the fines."

"Yes--I'm new," John said slowly.

For a moment he stood with the folded check in his hand. A sense of mounting fury gripped him, but was held in check by a feeling of utter helplessness. He put the check in his pocket, turned on his heel to stalk out of the office, and went down to where Wash waited in the pick-up. Lew climbed in, and settled back in the seat as they started toward the Rasca. The old woodsman was fuming.

"I saw that check. It was only a hunnert dollars."

"That's all the law says I can fine 'em, Lew."

"Oh, so that's the law," Lew said. "Tony Pendro set a seine, and kil't mebbe a hunnert fish so he hadda pay a hunnert dollars. That guy kills a hunnert thousan' fish, an' he pays a hunnert dollars too. Where's it even up, Ranger?"

"It doesn't," John said wearily. "All I know is that the law says anyone polluting the water in such a way as to kill fish shall be sentenced to pay a fine of one hundred dollars. It

doesn't mention the number of fish they might kill. I don't make the laws, Lew. I only enforce them--and the law has to be enforced."

"Yeh, I suppose so." The old woodsman's voice was heavy with scorn. "The law's the law, an' Tony Pendro, who don't carry any more weight than one of the rabbits as goes into his stew pot, ain't got any voice in makin' law 'cept his one vote. If he had more pull, you can bet that the fine fer settin' a seine would be ten cents instead o' a hunnert dollars. But that guy at the paper mill, an' more like him at other paper mills, tanneries, an' acid factories, got a tight fist closed over nobody knows how many votes. That gives 'em jest as tight a hold on them birds in the state capitol who make the laws. An' seein' as how it's cheaper to pay a hunnert dollars to dump acid an' sech-like into some handy crick or river than it would be to build some kind o' place to get rid o' it, the fine for dumpin' it's only a hunnert dollars. Ranger, they's quite a few things wrong with yore system."

"Lew, there are," John said honestly. "But all we can do is work and hope to correct them. Just give us time, and you'll never see anything like that any more. There's going to be real teeth in the pollution law, just as there will be in others. Eventually conservation's going to win."

The old woodsman looked at him keenly.

"Huh," he snorted. "You put me in mind o' a banty rooster I wunst had, as thought he could lick a big old Plymouth Rock. Ever' time he see'd the big rooster, he bristled up an' picked a fight. An' he allus got the daylight whammed out o' him. But he kept pickin' fights."

"How did it end?"

"Why one day the banty hopped on the big rooster's back, where the Plymouth Rock couldn't peck him or shake him off, an' rid' him all over Pine Hill," Lew said amiably. "After that the banty was boss o' the chicken coop. The big 'un was scairt o' him."

John laughed, and drew up in front of Wash Jampel's house to let him out. He took Lew home, and drove on to the Ranger's headquarters to find Harvey Lambertson's coupe in the yard. The Warden was sitting on the porch, and looked up to face John.

"I hear you've been down to Staban the past three days," he said.

"Yeh. I have."

"What were you doing the day before you went?"

"Wash Jampel, Lew Bangorst, and I were taking trout from drying creeks."

"You were? Did you work all day and all night too?"

"Why no . . . Say, what are you driving at anyway?"

"I got home yesterday," said the Warden, with no friendliness in his voice, "and I found out who's been doing most of the poaching in the Rasca. No wonder we didn't catch him."

"Who was it, Harve?"

The Warden looked him straight in the eye.

"You!"

Chapter Twelve

ALMOST THE END

John stood quietly, searching the Warden's face. He saw no mercy there, only the burning anger that swept through Harvey Lambertson whenever he caught someone breaking game or fish laws. John asked finally,

"How did you ever come to dream that up, Harve?"

"I didn't dream it up! I've got you just as dead to rights as I ever had anybody! And I'll get a confession . . ."

"Hadn't you better take it easy, Harve? You're not dealing with Tony Pendro now. I'm not afraid of you."

"Bah! Don't try to bluff me or I'll kick you all the way to Grabada! The young forester . . . ! I thought you were on the level! Killing game out of season and selling it is the lowest trick there is. I've got a lot more respect for the man with nerve enough to rob a bank!"

"I told you you'd better take it easy." There was something in John's voice that made the Warden hesitate. "Any time you feel that you must start kicking me anywhere, you're perfectly welcome to try it. But we'll get farther on this if we use some sense. Just what am I accused of?"

Harvey Lambertson sneered, "You're a damned good actor and liar both!"

"Maybe, but I'm neither acting nor lying now. And you might as well find out that you can't bulldoze me. If you want to

come down to earth and act like a human being, we'll thrash this out some way. If you want to stay the hard-headed, hard-boiled guy, that's all right too. Just what are you accusing me of?"

"I'm accusing you of killing a yearling buck in the Silver Spring Plantation. I think you did the rest of the poaching around here too, but I know you did that."

"I haven't been near the Silver Spring Plantation in six weeks."

"You're a liar!" the Warden shouted. He sprang forward and wrapped his right hand in the front of John's shirt. "There's always a way of handling you smart guys! Tell me the truth! Tell me before I . . ."

John braced his feet, and swung from the ground. His hard right fist connected sharply with the point of Harvey Lambertson's chin, and the Warden's head snapped back. He released his hold on John's shirt, and for a split second stood blinking his eyes. Then he bent his head and charged in with an angry, bull-like roar.

John tasted blood as the Warden's fist cracked against his mouth. He backed away, trying to dodge the rain of blows that was pelting him. Harvey Lambertson's fist drove into his right eye, and a bright series of red and blue lights flashed before him. The Warden kept boring in, seemed to have a thousand fists flying from all directions. A nausea overcame John, and he retched a little. He felt his knees going limp. Then he was on the ground, and Harvey Lambertson's voice was coming from far away.

"Get up! Get up, you yellow skunk! You talk a lot better than you fight!"

John saw a dim, shadow-like form standing over him, and lay quietly while his head cleared. The Warden's wavering shape took on a distinct outline. John swallowed a little of the blood that was coming from his cut mouth. The other had hit fast and hard, with his hands constantly at John's head. Fighting that way, he had to leave his body unprotected.

Placing his hands on the ground in back of him, John sprang suddenly to his feet. He saw Harvey Lambertson brace to meet him, and ducked aside as the Warden's lightning-like right hand shot past his ear. John closed in, and kept his head down as he swung a hard right to the heart. Immediately his left smashed in to the same place, and he swung his right again. The Warden's breath left him in a heaving grunt. He gave ground. John followed, keeping close enough so that the Warden's murderous fists could not get their full swing, and pounded at Harvey Lambertson's body. The Warden grunted again, and sat down suddenly in the grass. John stepped back.

"Get up!" he snapped. "You're not such a hot fighter yourself!"

Harvey Lambertson launched himself from a sitting position straight at John's legs. His arms closed about John's knees, and brought him crashing to the ground. The two men clinched, and rolled over and over while their pounding fists hammered each other. John drove his left fist squarely against Harvey Lambertson's nose, saw the blood spout. He braced his knees, shoved the Warden away from him, and

sprang to his feet. Harvey Lambertson leaped erect and came in fighting.

Twilight crept over Pine Hill. Its shadows deepened, and still the two pounded each other with now one and now the other on the ground. Finally a smashing blow on the chin sent John reeling against the house. He braced himself to meet the Warden's charge. But Harvey Lambertson stood with his back to a tree, glaring at John.

"I'm coming over there and rip you apart, in a minute," he panted.

John laughed, a little gasping sound that gained volume to become a great blast of laughter. He bent his head while tears of merriment flowed down his battered face. Slowly, still roaring, he sank to a sitting position with his back against the house and his head resting on his knees. Harvey Lambertson grabbed the tree trunk with both hands, and stared, suspiciously.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded.

"In a minute!" John gasped finally. "I think you could push me over with a feather! I couldn't walk over to take another sock at you if my life depended on it! We've licked each other!"

John went off into new peals of laughter, and Harvey Lambertson joined in. For five minutes more they both roared helplessly, and finally they rose to their feet. The Warden rubbed his jaw ruefully.

"I feel like a mule kicked me," he said. "Are you sure you didn't have a horseshoe in your hand?"

"I needed one, but I didn't have it. Now suppose we get down to business. What makes you think I killed a buck in the Silver Spring Plantation? What makes you think I killed any of them? Do you figure I shot at myself that night up on the Granson road?"

Harvey Lambertson said doggedly, "I don't know about that night. But you're stuck for the buck in the plantation. It'll mean you lose your job besides paying the fine. But you should have thought of that before you killed the buck."

"For Pete's sake, how do you know I killed it?"

"I cut a 30-30 bullet out of that deer. Then I broke in here to get your rifle, and proved by a ballistics test that the bullet was shot from your gun. I never yet let a game-law violator off, and I won't let you go."

"I see," John said quietly. "I don't expect to be let go. What would you say if I told you I had nothing to do with killing that deer?"

"I wouldn't believe you."

"Suppose you tell me how you found the deer."

"I got an anonymous telephone call that the buck was lying in the Silver Spring Plantation, and also that I might ask the Ranger in Pine Hill who killed it. I found the deer by Pigeon Spring, and cut him open to find the slug in his spine. I came right down to see you yesterday morning, but you were gone. I knew that you shot a 30-30, and I began to wonder if you'd killed the deer yourself. Deciding to find out, I pried a window open and got your gun to make a ballistics test. The slug I found in the deer came from your gun."

"I see. Wasn't there anything unusual about your getting an anonymous telephone call suggesting that I'd killed a deer?"

"No. I get lots of such calls."

"Does the rest of it all stack up?"

"Yes. The evidence is strong against you."

"I reckon it is," John said slowly. "Harve, I'm not begging off, and I'm asking for only one thing. This job means a lot to me. I want at least a clean record when Fred Cramer comes back to take it over. If you'll give me the rest of the month to produce the real poacher, I'll do my best to bring him in. If I can't . . ." He shrugged eloquently.

The Warden sat silently, staring into the night. Finally he turned his head.

"We'll let it stand that way," he said quietly. "I'll give you a month. But if you can't bring your man in by November first, with proof that he killed the buck, I'll have to stick you for it."

"Good enough, Harve."

The Warden rose. "I'll be leaving. So long, and I wish you luck."

As John watched the red tail light on the Warden's car fade out of sight, he felt hopeless and alone. It seemed as though nothing he had done or tried to do in the Rasca had come out right, or the way he had planned it. He had entered Pine Hill to find hostility, and he would leave it in disgrace. The record he made here, he knew, would be thoroughly investigated wherever else he might go. And nobody would hire a forester who killed the game he was supposed to protect. He had to

find the real poacher. John walked slowly over to the telephone and gave the operator's one long ring. He heard the operator's professional,

"Number please."

"Hello," John said. "Say, can you tell me if Harvey Lambertson got any calls yesterday morning?"

"Why, I suppose he did. He gets calls every day."

"There was one call about a buck in the Silver Spring Plantation," John said desperately. "Can you remember it?"

"We don't keep track of anything but long-distance calls. The phones on this line pay by the month for local calls."

"I know, but will you please see if you can remember this call? It's very important."

"Let me think." There was a moment's silence, and the operator spoke again. "The line was awful busy yesterday morning and I didn't get a chance to listen in on many calls. I'm sorry, but I can't remember this one."

John went to bed, and spent a sleepless night tossing there. Unless he could find the poacher he was done with the Rasca, and the Rasca and all other forests were forever done with him. The best he would be able to do was eke out a living as he had been doing in the trapping cabin on Spatterdown Creek. But the life of a trapper paled into insignificance, seemed tasteless and insipid, compared to the life a ranger led.

Just before dawn he fell into a fitful doze, and the sun was high when he awoke. John got wearily out of bed to go downstairs and eat a cold breakfast. In his mind, again and

again, he went over the entire population of Pine Hill. Most of the residents of the little mountain village who had passed the romper stage carried guns and hunted. Any one of them might have killed the buck in the plantation. Only luck, John knew, could give him a clue as to the one who had broken into his house, stolen his rifle, shot the buck, and put the gun back.

There was a knock on the door, and John opened it to admit Tom Rooney into the kitchen. Tom stood with his back to the wall, busily shifting a chew of tobacco from one cheek to the other.

"What you been doin'?" he demanded. "Yore face looks like it got in a argyment with a stone crusher."

John asked shortly, "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yeh. You can go mark me some wood. Winter's comin' on, Ranger, an' it'll prob'ly be jest as cold as last winter was. I gotta get the old axe busy. There's a big stand of yaller birch up Bushnell Crick, an' I'd admire to have my wood marked in it. It's handy to my house an' a good place to haul from."

"All right, Tom. I'll mark some for you."

John took his marking maul, with the state stamp on both sides of the head, and went out to run the pick-up from the barn. Dullness and despair rode with him as he drove toward Bushnell Creek. He stopped in front of Professor Crandall's lodge, and was surprised to see the doors locked and heavy wooden shutters over the windows. One of Mel Crane's children, a freckle-faced, grinning boy of twelve, came running across the grass.

"He went home two days ago," the boy announced. "He was in a tearin' hurry to git thar, an' he gimme two dollars fer helpin' him pack his gear. He had the gosh-darndest amount of stuff in there, nigh as much as was in the store."

"Did he say where he was going?" John asked.

"Nope, he didn't. He jest kept sayin', 'Gracious!' an' 'Goodness!' But he was sure in an awful rush to git wherever he was goin'. Pa says I can buy a gun with the two dollars, as soon's I earn thirty more to go with it."

"That's swell," John said dully, driving off. "I hope you earn it."

The load of depression that weighted his shoulders was even heavier. He had, John felt, only two real friends in Pine Hill, Lew Bangorst and the Professor. Now the Professor had gone without a word of farewell and without leaving any message. Only Lew remained, and Lew's solution to any problem was always the most direct one. If he took Lew into his confidence, told the old woodsman what he faced, Lew would no doubt advise him to select somebody who might be the poacher and go choke an admission out of him.

However, something approaching such a course would be wise. John's work would take him into the woods. If he listened for rifle shots, and investigated any he heard, he might be able to catch a poacher red-handed. The chances were fair that whoever had killed the buck in the plantation, was also doing most of the rest of the poaching in the Rasca. There was a possibility that he could be made to admit stealing John's rifle and killing the little buck. It was a very slim chance. But it was the only one.

He marked enough wood to last Tom Rooney through the winter, and went back to Ranger headquarters. The next day the fall rains began. For five days John fretted at small tasks about the house and in the barn. Then suddenly the weather cleared. But the mild blue skies of summer had given way to the steel-gray one of autumn. And, now that fall was definitely here, the rest of Pine Hill wanted winter wood marked.

Every day John was in the woods with his marking maul, and every night he cruised the back roads in the pick-up truck with darkened lights, lurking near open meadows, salt licks, fruit trees, and any place where a jack-lighter might try to kill a deer. The leaves turned color, and the entire Rasca became a riot of yellow and red. Ordinarily it was the most glorious time of year, a time to be felt keenly and lived to the utmost. But the shadow that hung over John now darkened everything else. October was going, and he still had no shred of evidence as to who the poacher might be.

On the twentieth of the month he went back up Dingbat Creek to mark wood for Emile Gateau, a French trapper who had built a shack at the mouth of the creek. Crystal clear, the little stream flowed bank full after the autumn rains.

John passed the barren area that the summer fire had burned, and stopped in his tracks as he saw motion in the bottom of a gravelled pool ahead. He dropped to his hands and knees, and crept up the bank. There were ten brook trout, from eight to twelve inches long, in the pool. Bright colored, their silvery sides and red specks gleaming now as they did at no other time of the year, the trout were paired off side by side. One of each pair was wriggling its body gently back and

forth, prying into the gravel with its nose and fanning the loose stones aside with its fins.

"Huh," John murmured to himself, "spawning trout. There should be some fun in that pool pretty soon now."

He fixed his eyes on a female close to the bank nearest him. She shoved the last few pebbles out of her spawning bed, arranged it to suit herself, and held perfectly still while she deposited her eggs in it. The eight-inch male that accompanied her dropped his milt on the eggs. Then, with her nose and fins, the female began shoving back the pebbles that were to cover the eggs. The male swam indifferently away.

With his eyes John followed the male as he approached another spawning bed across the pool. The foot-long male who lay there rushed savagely at the little intruder. His teeth raked the eight-inch trout's shoulder, and he whirled to score again. But the little trout, a silver streak in the water, dashed up the riffles into the next pool. The bigger one deposited milt on his own spawning bed, and swam lazily to a bed bossed by a male an inch shorter than himself. The smaller fish came out to meet him, and for a second lay poised in the water.

Suddenly, like a flung dart, he hurled himself at his challenger, and the two fish came together in the center of the pool. A thin stream of blood came from the invader trout's silvery belly as his enemy's raking teeth scored. He backed up and darted straight ahead at the eleven-inch fish. Again the other came up under him, and closed his jaws on the raider's belly. They struggled the length of the pool. Finally, streaming blood, the larger trout swam up the riffles.

The victor returned to the pool and darted at a spawning bed presided over by another eight-incher. The small one fled while the eleven-incher took his place beside the female. He fertilized the eggs there, and returned to deposit milt in the bed from which the twelve-inch fish had drawn him. Then he swam about the pool looking for another spawning bed. But the five females were arranging pebbles over their fertilized eggs now, and the only other male trout that remained in the pool lay at the foot of the riffles. The eleven-incher took a place beside him for a while, and then swam up the riffles, looking for new worlds to conquer.

A little farther up John saw a goshawk, probably one of those that had been born in the nest Professor Crandall had photographed, swoop down and snatch a gray squirrel from a stump. Twisting and struggling, raising his head in an attempt to bite the hawk, the squirrel was carried to the top branches of a big beech tree. The hawk pecked him in the head, and the squirrel was still. Carrying his prey in his claws, the hawk flew out of sight in the forest.

John approached the stump that the squirrel had been perched on, and reached down inside it. The squirrel had stored almost two quarts of beech and butternuts in the stump. John left the nuts undisturbed. Squirrels and chipmunks, he knew, that made such caches of nuts and then were either killed or forgot where the caches were, accomplished a great deal of natural reforestation. Left alone, the nuts would sprout and grow to become trees.

October drew swiftly toward a close, and still there was not the slightest clue as to the identity of the real poacher. Near the end of the month, driving home, John stopped to pick up

Lew Bangorst, who was leading three mangy looking dogs. The dogs were all small black and tan beasts that weighed about twenty or twenty-five pounds each. Their ears were tattered and ripped, and their muzzles were scarred. They sat solemnly in the road, looking up at the truck.

"Put your menagerie in back, Lew," John said. "They'll ride there, won't they?"

"They'll ride most any place rather than walk," Lew grunted. He lifted the three dogs into the back, and heaved a comfortable sigh as he climbed into the seat. "These gas buggies is some good wunst in a while. I hoofed it clean from t'other side o' Magadie Crick, up to Lob Gisney's place."

"Is that where you picked up the flea cages?"

"Flea cages!" Lew snorted. "Them's the best varmint dogs as ever smel't a track in these here woods! Lob's been keepin' 'em for me. But I sort o' got a yen for varmint huntin', with this cold weather comin'."

"Can't say I blame you," John said absently.

Lew looked squarely at him.

"We ain't see'd much o' ya for some small time, Ranger," he said casually. "Whar ya been keepin' yerself?"

"I've been pretty busy marking wood, Lew."

"I guess worryin' about whether or not Pine Hill gits its winter wood put them black circles under yer eyes an' that leanness whar yer belt oughta be tight. What kind o' trouble ya in, Ranger?"

"None."

"Johnny, tha's a ol' woman's answer. An' you know dum' well ye're lyin'."

"It's my business," John said shortly.

"Wal, now you could o' said that at fust, couldn't ya?" the old man asked aggrievedly. "A man knows how to take a straight answer, an' if it's yore bizness, 'tain't none o' mine. How would ya like to go on a lynx hunt tomorra?"

"A what hunt?"

"A lynx hunt. Thay's skassly anythin' like a good varmint chase to git a man's mind off hisself."

"You're crazy. There's no lynxes in here."

"It seems to me I was crazy about wolfs too," the old man murmured. "But you'n me kil't five."

"Well . . . Sure, I'll go with you. Might be fun."

The next morning, at five o'clock, he drew up before Lew's house and got out of the pick-up. The dead grass beside the road was brittle with frost, and a sharp wind was blowing out of the north. Lew came out with his rifle in one hand and the leashes of the three little dogs in the other. He lifted the dogs into the truck and got into the front seat.

"It's a bit snappish this mornin'," he observed. "We'll prob'ly git some snow right soon. Drive 'er up to Bake Run."

The three little black and tan dogs stood with their front paws on the sideboards of the truck, and began to whine plaintively. The sun came over the top of the mountains, and

they began to bark. The wind soared down the valley, and a great shower of autumn leaves rained from the trees.

"What's the matter with your pups, Lew?" John asked.

"They know they's goin' huntin'. You can't fool a varmint dog."

"How do they know it?"

"Law, they see'd the gun, they smel't the frost, an' we're headin' out, ain't we? What more's a dog need?"

"Nothing, I guess. How did you know there were lynxes in here? Nobody else knows it."

Lew shrugged. "I been rousslin' around these here hills a good many years, Son. I got a couple o' purty good eyes, an' I knowed whar lynxes would come if they come in here. I went up to see, an' they was lynx tracks in the sand. They been livin' on them snowshoe rabbits at the head o' Bake Run. I got two lynxes up thar 'bout nine years ago. But here's whar we stop, Ranger."

John steered the pick-up over to the side of the road and stopped. The little dogs leaped from the back and dashed into the brush. Lew jumped from the front seat.

"Here, you! Come on outta thar! Whatta ya think ya are, rabbit dogs? Come on outta thar or I'll cut a gad an' fan the hide clean off ever' one o' ya!"

The three dogs came sheepishly out of the brush and sat on their haunches looking up at Lew. The old woodsman grasped their trailing leashes.

"I think I better keep 'em strung up awhile," he grunted.

"They oughta know better'n to go tourin' off on their own thataway. But then, they ain't been hunted fer nigh six months, an' they're plumb anxious to chase somethin'. Bring my gun, will ya?"

Leading the dogs, Lew started up the fire trail into Bake Run. Another stiff little breeze came sailing down the side of the hill, and stripped a storm of leaves from the trees. The dogs raised their heads and strained upwind. Lew jerked them back.

"Come on! I dunno what ye smell up thar, but this mornin' ye're gonna chase what I want ya to chase!"

Half way up Bake Run the trees began to give way to scattered blackberry brush, and then to a dense laurel and rhododendron jungle. Lew climbed a little knoll, and knelt by an ant hill to study the ground.

"I found fresh lynx tracks on the ant hill t'other day," he announced. "They ain't none here now, but them cats ain't far away. They allus stay in one place when they's good huntin' nigh. Guess I'll set the dogs loose."

He unsnapped the leashes from the collars of the three little dogs, and stood erect to wave his hand.

"Lynx in thar!" he shouted. "Go roust 'em out, boys! An' don't ferget he'll claw ya some if he's able."

The dogs dashed into the laurel and disappeared. Lew sat down on the knoll and began to chew complacently on a straw. John sat beside him.

"We gotta wait now," Lew announced. "They'll uncover the varmint."

A half hour passed, and lengthened into an hour. John began to grow restless. He stood up to study the far-flung hills, and sat down again to trace little circles in the ground with the point of a broken laurel branch. Finally he turned to Lew.

"I don't believe your dogs could find a skunk in a wash tub. I . . ."

"Hark!" Lew held up his hand.

Far off in the brush there came the sharp yap of a dog. There was a moment's silence, and all three dogs began yelping wildly. Three minutes later their trail cry changed to a shrill medley of barks and howls that all came from one place. Then they were off, racing through the brush.

"They jumped him in his bed," Lew announced. "He fit 'em fer a little while. But he's jest et, an' he won't run far."

"How do you know all that, Lew?"

"I know they jumped him in his bed on account their howlin' changed right after they hit the track. He fit 'em because they stayed thar awhile. I know he's jest et because, if he hadn't, he'd o' left his bed as soon as he heard the dogs. Cats an' most other things is sluggish after they've et. He won't run far because cats never run far, an' this one's still sluggish. The dogs'll git him soon . . . Thar! They got him now. C'mon!"

Again the dogs' trail cry changed to shrill yelps and barks that, to Lew, spoke of bayed game. He rose, and started through the brush at a run. Twenty minutes later Lew stopped in his tracks to point.

"Thar! Thar he be, Ranger! Git him!"

A hundred feet ahead a huge rhododendron bush, whose trunk was as big as that of a small tree, was bending and swaying violently. John studied it, but saw nothing. Then one of the little dogs sprang from the surrounding brush straight up the rhododendron. He found a branch, clung to it a second, and fell back out of sight. A snarl ripped from the rhododendron, and the bush bent perilously as the lynx climbed into the topmost branches. The little dogs yapped hysterically, and the three of them sprang into the air. Another snarl came from the bush as the big cat backed cautiously down to safer footing.

"Now!" Lew whispered. "Thar he be!"

John saw a patch of gray fur showing through the green leaves. He drew the rifle up, sighted on the gray patch, and squeezed the trigger. At the blast of the gun, the bush shook violently. A moment later the lynx, hanging head down, swung into view. Holding on with his hind claws, he swung back and forth twice. Then he released his hold to drop to the ground. Immediately the three little dogs were racing off across the top of the hill.

"Thar's two of 'em!" Lew panted as they raced toward the bush. "The dogs have took after t' other."

They reached the rhododendron and found the lynx, a male that weighed about sixty pounds. The lynx opened and closed his jaws, and lay still. Lew took a buckskin thong from the bulging pocket of his tattered canvas hunting coat, tied it about the lynx's hind feet, and hung the big cat on the bush.

"He's a whopper, as big as all three dogs put together!" John said excitedly. "I don't see why he'd run from those flea hounds of yours."

"Cats is cowards," Lew grunted. "They never fight when they kin run or reach a safe place. C'mon, Ranger, we gotta folla the dogs."

The dogs were almost out of hearing now. Lew broke from the brush onto the crest of a boulder-strewn knob. A few stunted, wind-bent oaks grew among the boulders. Lew climbed to the top of a huge rock, and stood with his mouth open, listening. The barking and yelling of the dogs was borne very faintly up the hill.

"They're an awfully long ways off," John said.

"No, they ain't," the old woodsman corrected. "They's right here on this knob, down in a pocket whar we can't hear 'em so good."

Walking slowly along the knob, Lew stopped every few seconds to listen. Finally he plunged down a shallow gully, and almost at once the faint howling of the dogs became startlingly plain.

"Thar they be," Lew announced.

The three dogs were clawing and tearing at a hole in the base of a huge rock. Something came partly out of the hole, something that spat, snarled, and slapped about with lightning-like paws. The dogs tumbled hastily over to get out of the way, and returned to paw at the hole when the lynx retreated within it. John and Lew strode up, and the dogs sat hopefully back on their haunches. One of them had a deep scratch down the side of his face, but the other two were

unmarked. Numberless brushes with raccoons, wildcats, and bears, had taught them how to keep out of the way of a cornered animal. Lew knelt to peer cautiously into the hole, and arose.

"If we shoot him in thar, we'll have to blast the hole bigger to git him out," he said. "So's we'll git him out afore we shoot him."

He took a hatchet from his hunting jacket, cut a small tree, and trimmed it off to a stout pole about eight feet long and three inches thick. Again, from the apparently inexhaustible store of material that he carried in his jacket, he produced a number four steel trap and a length of rope. He set the trap, and bound it to the end of the pole.

"Git ready with the gun, Ranger," he said calmly. "Shoot when I snake him out, an' shoot straight. They's a lot o' things as is more fun than havin' a fightin'-mad lynx clawin' at yore briches."

Cautiously he thrust the pole, with the set trap resting on the end of it, under the boulder. A continuous angry purring growl came from the lynx. John heard the metallic snap of the trap as the big cat struck at it. Lew drew the pole out, re-set the trap, and thrust it in again. The lynx snarled, and they heard the trap snap again. Grabbing the pole with both hands, Lew braced his feet and tugged.

"He's comin' out. Be all sot. Git back, you dogs!"

Suddenly Lew stumbled backward as the lynx, with the trap clamped about his right front paw, bounded out of the hole. The animal's fur bristled, and his snarling lips were drawn back from murderous teeth. He crouched a split second at the

edge of the hole. Then, carrying the trap and pole with him, he sprang straight at John's face. Lew flung himself forward in a desperate attempt to catch the end of the whipping pole.

"Shoot!" he screamed. "Shoot!"

John brought the gun up and pressed the trigger just as the lynx's hooked left front claw fastened in the front of his jacket. Taking the whole front of the jacket with him, the big cat dropped violently to the ground as the heavy slug plowed through his chest. John stepped three paces backwards, and stood looking down at the dead lynx. He reached up to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Whew!" he whistled. "That was close!"

"Plenty clos't," Lew grunted. "Did he rip ya?"

"Nothing but my jacket."

Lew wagged his head.

"Law," he said shakenly, "if he'd got that claw in yore belly, you wouldn't have many in'ards left. I thought sure I could hold him. I've done it afore."

John walked over to a rock and sat down on it. His knees shook and his hands quivered. He laughed nervously, and forced himself to his feet.

"Well, we're still in one piece. We might as well take the hide off this one, and collect the other on our way back."

"We might as well," the old woodsman agreed. "And now that I've showed ya lynxes where there wan't any, mebbe ye'd like to go b'ar huntin' with me. The season opens the fust o'

November, an' that's only two days off. These dogs is jest as good on b'ar as they are on cats."

"I'll see," John promised.

October faded into the first of November's gray days. John awoke very early in the morning, and for a while lay dully in bed. His month was up, and he had not produced the poacher. Harvey Lambertson would be in to get him today. He would be branded as a criminal for a crime he had not committed.

He went downstairs and ate a tasteless breakfast. For an hour he puttered at meaningless little tasks about the house. Then he strolled over to take two letters from his mail box. He opened the first, a pencilled scrawl on the back of a Ranger's report sheet.

Dear Johnny: I will be home the eighth of the month. I have the key to the house. Regards,

Fred Cramer

The second letter was a neatly type-written page.

Dear John:

I simply cannot tell you how much I regret having had to leave your beautiful country without saying goodbye. But it was a case of absolute necessity. Professor Jewett was stricken with Malta fever and returned to the hospital here in New Orleans a month before he expected to land. I received a telegram urging me to come at once. Of course I had no choice.

I am glad to say that Professor Jewett, who hovered between life and death for seventeen days, is well on the way to complete recovery now. Naturally, my sick friend came first. However, now that he no longer demands my undivided attention, there are other obligations to discharge.

I shall never be able to thank you for the wonderful time I had in your Rasca, and shall never forget that I owe my life to you. As a meagre expression of thanks, I am having a new rifle sent to you. I am also enclosing this photograph, which I was fortunate enough to get one afternoon while crouching on a deer runway. I know that you will be able to make the best use of both the rifle and the picture.

At my first opportunity, I shall certainly return to the Rasca and see you again. Please write me when you can. Tell me what you are doing. If your duties can spare you for a few days, I'll be delighted to have you as my guest at Bardette over the Christmas holidays.

Sincerely,

Arthur Crandall

John looked at the picture. He raised his head, lowered it to look again at the photograph, and strode swiftly up the road. Wash Jampel, standing in front of the store, called to him.

"Hey, Ranger, ye're steppin' right high an' smart this mornin'. Did yore rich uncle die?"

Unhearing, John walked on.

Chapter Thirteen

AT HOME

He climbed the bank leading to Poley Harris' house, and rapped on the door. When the door opened a few inches, the fat face of Warren Harris was framed in it.

"Where's Poley?" John demanded.

"Poley hain't here," the fat man said. "He's gone b'ar huntin'."

"Where did he go?"

"Why, I dunno's Poley'd like hit hif I tol' ya. He never wa'r one to want his huntin' grounds pried intuh."

"Tell me where he went!" John blazed. "If you don't, I'll have every game warden in the country on his trail!"

"Why--why Poley's went down to Mud Bottom. But don't ya let him know I tol' ya or he'll have it in fer me."

John turned on his heel, and walked away from the door. He whistled as he strode back down to Ranger headquarters. Now, at last, the long-standing feud could be settled. He could show Pine Hill that he was not and never had been afraid of Poley Harris.

He ran the pick-up out of the barn and started down toward Mud Bottom. The sun disappeared behind a bank of gray clouds, and a few light snowflakes pattered against the windshield. John laughed, and lowered the window so the wind could blow on his cheek. Life was good again, and the

sharp autumn breeze had all of its old zest. He hummed a gay, careless little tune as the pick-up rocked down the dirt road.

A brown grouse fluttered out almost from beneath his feet as he started up the fire trail into Mud Bottom. John stopped and watched the bird fly to the top of a dead stub. For a moment it perched there with its neck foolishly out-stretched, and hopped to a lower limb. Suddenly it flew straight up into the air, went up almost out of sight. November had again brought its madness.

John climbed on up the fire trail. Warren Harris might easily have lied, but somehow John knew that he hadn't. Somewhere in the wild reaches of this back country he would meet Poley Harris, meet him and lick him!

Suddenly, up a side gulley that led into Mud Bottom, a rifle blasted. Its echo bounded back from the distant peaks, and was lost in the distance. The shot was not repeated, and there was no other sound. John studied the tracks in the fire trail. Only one man besides himself had come up it this morning, and that man must be Poley Harris.

The sharp November breeze whipped at John's clothes as he started up the nose of the hill overlooking the gulley. The brush of Mud Bottom, bending and sighing in the wind, stretched before him like an endless ocean. But, two-thirds of the way up the opposite hill, a little bunch of poplars that had lost all their leaves stood stark and bare. Among them, bright against the somber hill, was a patch of shining white. John focussed his eyes on it. It was the white buck. John shouted, but the buck did not move. The rifle shot he had heard must have killed the albino.

At a little trot John went down the hill, and up the other one. He came to the poplars, and stood soberly at their edge while he looked down at the dead deer. A huge animal, the white buck lay with his head down the hill. His antlers were dug into the ground, and the ground above him was ripped and torn where he had struggled after the death shot struck him. His snowy white shoulder was stained with a big patch of blood. Three separate little streams of blood had trickled down his side to run under his belly.

John put his hand on the dead deer's warm body. Blood still bubbled from the wound in his side, and his leg muscles twitched spasmodically. John stood erect to search the poplar thicket with his eyes. He had found the dead buck. Now to get the man who had killed it!

Twenty feet up the hill, behind a huge log lying crosswise of it, the leaves rustled. John watched the log a moment. Then he walked slowly up the hill to look down on Poley Harris.

Poley lay face down in the leaves, one hand on the stock of his rifle. His jacket and shirt had been ripped to shreds by flying feet and raking horns, and were soaked with blood. Blood bubbled from his bare back, and had seeped through his torn scalp to dampen his hair. Again he moved feebly, and the leaves on which he lay rustled.

"He shot the white buck!" John ejaculated. "And the buck did this to him! The Mad Month!"

At the sound of his voice, Poley raised his head. Almost immediately he sagged back again to lie motionless in the leaves. After a short interval, with a mighty effort he turned his face sideways and looked up at John.

"Baby Face," he muttered weakly. "You--you got me just where you want me now."

John said gently, "Don't try to talk, Poley."

A little puzzled wonder flickered for a minute in Poley's pain-filled eyes. "Leave me alone," he said.

"You can't stay here, Poley. Buck up now. This is going to hurt plenty."

Poley's inflamed face went dead white, and a shuddering groan escaped his lips as John placed both arms about him and turned him over. Poley's left arm was doubled grotesquely under him, his right hung limply. The buck's antlers, John saw, had spread across Poley's chest, and the end tines had pierced both Poley's biceps with enough force to break the bones. Poley's chest sagged where ribs were broken. John shuddered. Nothing was a more terrible enemy than a buck of the Mad Month. And the Rasca had taken a more terrible vengeance on Poley Harris than John or any game warden could ever take.

John sighed in relief when Poley's head went limp on his lap. The wounded poacher would feel no pain now. With his knife John trimmed away the remnants of Poley's shirt and jacket. He took out his handkerchief, and being careful to break no clots that would start a new flow, wiped the blood from Poley's chest. He took off his own shirt and wrapped it about Poley's battered body. Carrying the wounded poacher across his shoulders, he picked a careful way down to the road.

Lying in the back of the truck, Poley had not regained consciousness when John pulled up before the hospital in

Grabada. John went inside, and accosted a white-clad orderly.

"There's a man, badly hurt, out in the back end of that truck. Will you get him?"

Two orderlies wheeled a stretcher out, lifted Poley onto it, and brought him inside. John took a seat in the waiting room, and left it in two minutes to pace the floor restlessly. After an hour, a doctor entered the waiting room.

"How is the man I brought in, Doctor?" John asked.

"Oh, did you bring that fellow in? What in the name of Heaven happened to him, anyway?"

"A deer. A mad buck."

"He must have been mad. Your friend will live, young man. He has the constitution of a draft horse. But he's never going to forget that he was in this fracas."

"Will he be badly crippled, Doctor?"

The doctor looked at him keenly. "We're going to have to amputate the right arm. The left will never fully recover."

"Will he ever be able to hunt again?"

"Definitely not, with a rifle at least. If he's lived by hunting, he'll just have to find some other work. But don't feel too badly, Son. Other badly crippled people get along in great shape. There are societies that help them."

"Thank you, Doctor," John said soberly.

He drove slowly back to Pine Hill. Over and over in his ears rang Lew Bangorst's words of nearly a year ago. "Whoever

kills a white buck will never kill another deer."

Harvey Lambertson's coupe awaited in the yard when John arrived at Ranger headquarters. The red-haired Warden, sitting on the porch, studiously avoided John's eyes. He asked, with affected carelessness, "Did you have any luck?"

John said briefly, "I got my man."

"Who was it?"

"Poley Harris. He killed that white buck that's been hanging around Mud Bottom this morning, and the buck all but killed him. He's in the Grabada Hospital now. Go down and talk to him yourself, Harve. I want nothing more to do with it."

"Did Poley admit that he killed the yearling buck at Pigeon Spring?"

"Poley wasn't able to talk. But I have proof that he killed the buck. Here--," John took out a photograph. "Professor Crandall was watching Pigeon Spring when Poley shot the buck there. Everything's clear in the picture. You can see the buck, and the spring, and Poley shooting. It must have been my gun. The lock on the kitchen door here's broken. I intended to get it fixed, but didn't. Poley must have found out, come into the house while I was seining fish on Big Kettle River, got my rifle, killed the deer with it, and put the gun back again. That's the only way I can explain it, Harve."

The Warden dangled the picture from his hand. "That's good enough," he said slowly. "How many kinds of a conceited, headstrong ass do you think I am for trying to lay it on you?"

"I'm not holding any grudges. You did what you thought was right."

"Okeh," the Warden said soberly. "I'm glad you aren't. I think that after this I'll do a little looking before I leap, Ranger. I guess I've let a hot head run away with common sense too many times. Well, I'll go down and get the buck Poley killed. Where is it?"

"In the poplars on the south side of Horse Gulley. You can't miss it. They're the only poplars there."

The Warden drove away, and John went to the tool shed to get an axe. He came back to the kitchen for a drink of water, and stared at the calendar on the wall. This was the first of the month, and on the eighth Fred Cramer was coming back to take the Rasca over. John turned the calendar to the wall. The mountains and forests he had learned to love were his for only one more short week. But he would not think of that, until Fred actually came. The Rasca was his until then.

He put the axe in the pick-up, and drove up to Hopper Creek. All the rest of the day, until night drove him from the hill, he slashed brush from the northern boundary of the Rasca. The next day he was back again, and the next, trying to forget his thoughts in hard work. But he could not. The year he had been the Ranger of the Rasca district was the happiest year of his life. It seemed to have flown by in twelve days instead of twelve months. Next week he would be a ranger no longer. And more than ever before, he knew now that a ranger was the only thing he wanted to be.

On the morning of the eighth John left his axe home and packed a lunch. This last day belonged to him and him alone.

He drove the pick-up to the knob overlooking Spatterdown Creek, and walked in to his little trapping shanty. A heavy-

antlered buck with the swollen neck of the Mad Month stood ten feet from the shanty's front door. He stretched his muzzle toward John, and his mane bristled. Then he walked stiffly into the woods.

John looked around. Porcupines had gnawed the corners of the shanty, and the door stood crookedly on rusted hinges. Cobwebs, heavy with dust, were draped about the doorway and spun from the ceiling. Chipmunks, red squirrels, and mice had carried most of the packing out of the mattress, and porcupines had gnawed a huge hole in the floor. A red squirrel stuck his head through a hole in the roof and scooted away again. The patter of his flying feet was soft on the roof.

Once more John re-lived in his mind that scene of nearly a year ago. He saw himself, coming in from his trap lines with the mink and two muskrats, and finding Fred Cramer in his shanty. Again he heard Fred's breath-taking announcement that he was to be the Ranger of Rasca for a whole year. John sighed. His life had really started that night. But he half-wished now that he had never become a Ranger. He had been happy as a trapper, and would never be happy to return to trapping. Gently he drew the broken door shut, and walked away from the shanty.

He drove from it to Cattail Creek, and climbed the fire trail to the height overlooking the pine plantation. The burned part spread like a great dirty sore on a beautiful body. But beyond that the eight thousand acres of pines that had not burned waved triumphantly and spread defiant tops to the November breeze. John glanced at them soberly, and a little uneasiness stirred in him as he looked back at the burned

trees. They must be replanted, and some time John must make a trip back here to make sure that they had been.

The gray clouds in the sky spilled a little snow, and John remembered the great blizzard of last January. He thought of how he had found the Professor in the cave by the beaver dam, and carried him to safety. Again in his mind he saw the fire leaping through the pines, and his own wild, mad dash to the beaver dam. Somehow, thinking of them that way, all those things seemed to have taken place very long ago.

John walked down the hill toward the pines. He had no particular destination in mind, but just wanted to feel as much as possible of the Rasca beneath his feet in this, the last day he would be in charge of it. The tips of the pine branches brushed his face and scraped across his jacket. But he was scarcely conscious of them.

His mind had become a magnet that drew past events to him. He thought of the wolf pack, the starved game he had fed, the cannibal brown trout, the great bear in Zack Wilson's sheep fold, the lynxes. But, when he tried to focus his thoughts on the single outstanding thing he had accomplished here, he was unable to do so. There had been no outstanding exploits, nothing wonderful. All he had done was the best he had been able to do.

For hours he walked, past the plantation and into the mountains beyond. When twilight came, he had found his way back to the pick-up. And, somehow, he had also found partial solace. The thought of leaving the Rasca still stung him keenly. But he had saved almost a third of his salary. That money, added to what he had already saved, would pay his way through the Ranger School at Tankota. He would

graduate from there and ask Mullins for a job. Perhaps, some day, he would get a chance to come back to the Rasca.

John drove slowly down the road and through Pine Hill. A light burned in the Ranger's headquarters. John put the pick-up in the barn, and entered the kitchen to find Fred Cramer sitting at the table.

"Howdy, Johnny." The old Ranger rose and shook hands as casually as though they had parted only yesterday. "I didn't know when ya'd be in, so I cooked some grub an' kep' it warm. What ya been doin'?"

"Just walking, Fred. I didn't hit a lick all day."

The old man nodded understandingly. "Well, come on an' pack your inside with vittles now. We'll have a little powwow after we've et."

Fred Cramer put the food on the table, and the two ate silently. Finished, Fred pushed his chair back and whittled a toothpick from a match.

"Well, Johnny, now that you've had a little whack at it, how do ya like bein' a Ranger?"

"It's the only job. I'm going to continue in it as soon as I've graduated from Tankota."

"Tha's the way I like to hear young fellers talk, Johnny. Sometimes they think a job they want's gonna put 'em in their seventh Heaven. When they git into it, an' find out it's mostly hard work like any other job, they turn belly up an' call it quits. What kind of shape are you leavin' the Rasca in, Johnny?"

"Why--gee, Fred, in as good shape as I can."

"Well, le's figger things up. Take the red ink side of the ledger first. Ya didn't start feedin' game early enough an' ya lost too much of it. True, that ain't all your fault. Harve Lambertson should have looked into that too. Ya lost two thousan' acres of our best pine plantation. Ya had Pine Hill down on ya sinst ya been here, an' it's still down on ya. Ya ain't allus kep' yer telephone lines in repair, an' some of yer roads has been impassable plenty much of the time. Thar's work you should of done on your cricks that ya didn't do. Thar's several other things, but them's the main ones an' pretty nigh enough for one young feller fer one year. Now, jest what stacks up on the black ink side?"

"Why, I don't rightly know, Fred. Not very much, I guess."

"Well, le's figger it out together. Take the winter-killed game. Ya did yer best to feed it when ya finally did get aroun', an' ya halped kill five wolves. Take havin' Pine Hill ag'in ya. How many real frien's have ya made here?"

"Only two. Professor Arthur Crandall and Lew Bangorst."

"Could ya count on 'em in a real pinch?"

"I could count on those two for anything."

"Aw right, we'll take that. Ag'in losin' one-fifth of the plantation, ya planted two hunnert an' fifty acres of pine. Ag'in the work ya didn't do, ya ain't got nothin' to show. Now, jest how does that stack you up?"

"As pretty much of a flop, I guess," John said miserably.

"Do ya think ya could do better when ya git another ranger's job? Have ya learned anythin'?"

"I don't know, Fred. Sometimes it seems to me that I've learned a lot. But, when I compare it to what I still have to learn, it seems that I don't know anything. Maybe, after I've gone to the Ranger School at Tankota . . ."

"They ain't gonna teach ya nothin' thar you can't teach yerself," the old Ranger broke in. "Lemme put ya straight on yer real standin' here, Johnny. Ya done jest about what any hard-workin', good man would of done. Nobody with as little experience as you've got could of done better. As fer the work ya didn't do, no Ranger ever gets caught up on his work. As far as the plantation fire's concerned, Mullins hisself tol' me this mornin' when I saw him, 'If that young fool hadn't run in there an' torn out that beaver dam, we would have lost all ten thousand acres. He's a man to keep an eye on, Fred.' I know why Pine Hill's down on ya. They thought, an' still think, ya was afeard of Poley Harris. I warned you about such things, Johnny, when I handed you this job. A Ranger's gotta go his own way if he thinks he's right, even if all the rest of the world thinks he's wrong. As fer yer frien's, I'm old enough to know that a man's doin' pretty good if he makes two real frien's in a lifetime. But you got more of 'em than ya think, Johnny. Harve Lambertson wrote a letter to Mullins an' blew ya sky high. Mullins likes ya. An', if I still count, I'm on your side an' will be able to get into the Rasca from time to time. Mebbe I kin give ya some pointers."

"What did you say?" John gasped.

"I said that I been assigned to permanent work on pine plantations, an' from now on you're the Rasca's permanent Ranger. Do ya think we wanna lose a good man?"

"But, Fred, I don't understand . . ."

But the tinkle of the telephone bell interrupted him. John sprang up to answer it. He talked a few minutes, and returned to the kitchen.

"Fred, a bear hunter went up Snakey Flow this morning and didn't come out. He's lost up there, and I have to go find him. I'm sure sorry to leave you so soon . . ."

The old Ranger waved his gnarled hand.

"Tha's all right, Johnny. A Ranger's gotta do his work."

John made a sandwich, wrapped it in paper, and stuck it in his pocket. He snatched up a flash light and ran to the door.

"So long, Fred," he called.

Somehow Fred Cramer's voice seemed weighted with a meaning it had never held before when he called back,

"So long, Ranger."

About the Author

Jim Kjelgaard's first book was FOREST PATROL (1941), based on the wilderness experiences of himself and his brother, a forest ranger. Since then he has written many others--all of them concerned with the out-of-doors. BIG RED, IRISH RED, and OUTLAW RED are dog stories about Irish setters. 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 halfwild dog. HAUNT FOX is the story both of a fox and of a dog and boy who trailed him, and STORMY is concerned with a wildfowl retriever and his young owner. FIRE-HUNTER is a story about

prehistoric man; BOOMERANG HUNTER about the equally primitive Australian aborigine. REBEL SIEGE and BUCKSKIN BRIGADE are tales of American frontiersmen, and WOLF BROTHER presents the Indian side of "the winning of the West." The cougar-hunting LION HOUND and the greyhound story, DESERT DOG, are laid in the present-day Southwest. A NOSE FOR TROUBLE and TRAILING TROUBLE are adventure mysteries centered around a game warden and his man-hunting bloodhound. The same game warden also appears in WILDLIFE CAMERAMAN and in HIDDEN TRAIL.

[The end of *Forest Patrol* by Jim Kjelgaard]