

A TRAGEDY OF THE FOREST

IT is Christmas eve. A man lies stretched on his blanket in a copse in the depths of a black pine forest of the Saginaw Valley. He has been hunting all day, fruitlessly, and is exhausted. So wearied is he with long hours of walking, that he will not even seek to reach the lumbermen's camp, half a mile distant, without a few moment's rest. He has thrown his blanket down on the snow in the bushes, and has thrown himself upon the blanket, where he lies, half dreaming. No thought of danger comes to him. There is slight risk, he knows, even were he to fall asleep, though the deep forests of the Saginaw region are not untenanted. He is in that unexplainable mental condition which sometimes comes with extreme exhaustion. His bodily senses are dulled and wearied, but a phenomenal acuteness has come to those perceptions so hard of definition—partly mental, partly psychological. The man lying in the copse is puzzled at his own condition, but he does not seek to analyze it. He is not a student of such phenomena. He is but a vigorous young backwoodsman, the hunter attached to the camp of lumbermen cutting trees in the vicinity.

The man has lain for some time listlessly, but the feeling which he cannot understand increases now almost to an oppression. He sees nothing, but there is an unusual sensation which alarms him. He recognizes near him a presence—fierce, intense, unnatural. A rustle in the twigs a few feet distant falls upon his ears. He raises his head. What he sees startles and at the same time robs him of all volition. It is not fear. He is armed and is courageous enough. It is something else; some indefinable connection with the object upon which he looks which holds him. There, where it has drawn itself closely and stealthily from its covert in the underbrush, is a huge gray wolf.

The man can see the gaunt figure distinctly, though the somber light is deepening quickly into darkness. He can see the grisly coat, the yellow fangs, the flaming eyes. He can almost feel the hot breath of the beast. But something far more disturbing than that which meets his eye affects him. His own individuality has become obscured and another is taking its place. He struggles against the transformation, but in vain. He can read the wolf's thoughts, or rather its fierce instincts and desires. He is the wolf.

Undoubtedly there exists at times a relation between the souls of human beings. One comprehends the other. There is a transfer of wishes, emotions, impulses. Now something of the same

kind has happened to the man with this dreadful beast. He knows the wolf's heart. The man trembles like one in fear. The perspiration comes in great drops upon his forehead, and his features are distorted. It is a horrible thing. Now a change comes. The wolf moves. He glides off in the darkness. The spell upon the man is weakened, but it is not gone. He staggers to his feet, and half an hour later is in the lumbermen's camp again. But he comes in like one insane—pallid of face and muttering. His comrades, startled by his appearance, ply him with questions, receiving only incoherent answers. They place him in his rude bunk, where he lies writhing and twisting about as under strong excitement. His eyes are staring, as if they must see what those about him cannot see, and his breath comes quickly. He pants like a wild beast. There is reason for it. His thoughts are with the wolf. He is the wolf. The personalities of the ravening brute and of the man are blended now in one, or rather the personality of the man has been eliminated. The man's body is in the lumbermen's camp, but his mind is in the depths of the forest. He is seeking prey!

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“I am hungry! I must have warm blood and flesh! The darkness is here, and my time has come. There are no deer to-night in the pine forest on the hill, where I have run them down and torn them. The deep snow has driven them into the

lower forest, where men have been at work. The deer will be feeding to-night on the buds of the trees the men have felled. How I hate men and fear them! They are different from the other animals in the wood. I shun them. They are stronger than I in some way. There is death about them. As I crept by the farm beside the river this morning I saw a young one, a child with yellow hair. Ah, how I would like to feed upon her! Her throat was white and soft. But I dare not rush through the field and seize her. The man was there, and he would have killed me. They are not hungry. The odor of flesh came to me in the wind across the clearing. It was the same way at this time when the snow was deep last year. It is some day on which they feast. But I will feed better. I will have hot blood. The deer are in the tops of the fallen trees now!"

Across frozen streams, gliding like a shadow through the underbrush, swift, silent, with only its gleaming eyes to betray it, the gaunt figure goes. Miles are past. The figure threads its way between the trunks of massive trees. It passes over fallen logs with long, noiseless leaps; it creeps serpent-like beneath the wreck left by a summer "cyclone"; it crosses the barren reaches of oak openings, where the shadows cast by huge pines adjacent mingle in fantastic figures; it casts a shifting shadow itself as it sweeps across some lighter spot, where faint moonbeams find their way to the

ground through overhanging branches. The figure approaches the spot where the lumbermen have been at work. Among the tops of the fallen trees are other figures—light, graceful, flitting about. The deer are feeding on the buds.

The eyes of the long gray figure stealing on grow more flaming still. The yellow fangs are disclosed cruelly. Slowly it creeps forward. It is close upon the flitting figures now. There is a rush, a fierce, hungry yelp, a great leap. There is a crash of twigs and limbs. The flitting figures assume another character; the beautiful deer, wild with fright, bounding away with gigantic springs. The steady stroke of their hoofs echoes away through the forest. In the tree-tops there is a great struggle, and then the sound comes of another series of great leaps dying off in the distance. The prey has escaped. But not altogether! The grisly figure is following. The pace had changed to one of fierce pursuit. It is steady and relentless.

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The man in the bunk in the lumbermen's camp half leaps to his feet. His eyes are staring more wildly, his breathing is more rapid. He appears a man in a spasm. His comrades force him to his bed again, but find it necessary to restrain him by sheer strength. They think he has gone mad. But only his body is with them. He is in the forest. His prey has escaped him. He is pursuing it.

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“It has escaped me! I almost had it by its slender throat when it shook me off and leaped away. But I will have it yet! I will follow swiftly till it tires and falters, and then I will tear and feed upon it. The old wolf never tires! Leap away, you fool, if you will. I am coming, hungry, never resting. You are mine!”

With the speed of light the deer bounds away in the direction its fellows have taken. Its undulating leaps are like the flight of a bird. The snow crackles as its feet strike the frozen earth and flies off in a white shower. The fallen tree-tops are left behind. Miles are covered. But ever, in the rear, with almost the speed of the flying deer, sweeps along the trailing shadow. It is long past midnight. The moon has risen high, and the bright spots in the forest are more frequent. The deer crosses these with a rush. A few moments later there is in the same place the passage of shadow. Still they are far apart. Will they remain so?

Swiftly between the dark pines again, across frozen streams again, through valleys and over hills, the relentless chase continues. The leaps of the fleeing deer become less vaulting, a look of terror in its liquid eyes has deepened; its tongue projects from its mouth, its wet flanks heave distressfully, but it flies on in desperation. The distance between it and the dark shadow behind has lessened plainly. There is no abatement to the

speed of this silent thing. It follows noiselessly, persistently.

The forest becomes thinner now. The flying deer bounds over a fence of brushwood and suddenly into a sea of sudden light. It is the clearing in the midst of which the farm-house stands. Across the sea of gold made by the moonshine on the field of snow flies the deer, to disappear in the depth of the forest beyond. It has scarcely passed from sight, when emerging from the wood appears the pursuing figure. It is clearly visible now. There are flecks of foam upon the jaws, the lips are drawn back from the sharp fangs, and even the light from above does not dim nor lessen the glare in the hungry eyes. The figure passes along the long bright space. The same scene in the forest beyond, but intensified. The distance between pursuer and pursued is lessening still. The leaps of the deer are weakening now, its quick panting is painful. And the thing behind is rushing along with its thirst for blood increased by its proximity. But the darkness in the forest is disappearing. In the east there is a faint ruddy tinge. It is almost morning.

“I shall have it! It is mine—the weak thing, with its rich, warm blood! Swift of foot as it is, did it think to escape the old wolf? It falters as it leaps. It is faint and tottering. How I will tear it! The day has nearly come. How I hate the

day! But the prey is mine. I will kill it in the gray light."

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The man in the bunk in the lumbermen's camp is seized with another spasm. He struggles to escape from his friends, though he does not see them. He is fiercely intent on something. His teeth are set and his eyes glare fiercely. It requires half a dozen men to restrain him.

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The deer struggles on, still swiftly but with effort. Its breath comes in agony, its eyes are staring from its sockets. It is a pitiable spectacle. But the struggle for life continues. In its flight the deer had described a circle. Once more the forest becomes less dense, the clearing with the farmhouse is reached again. With a last desperate effort the deer vaults over the brushwood fence. The scene has changed again. The morning has broken. The great snowy surface which was a sea of gold has become a sea of silver. The farmhouse stands out revealed plainly in the increasing light. With flagging movement the fugitive passes across the field. But there is a sudden, slight noise behind. The deer turns its head. Its pursuer is close upon it. It sees the death which nears it. The monster, sure now of its prey, gives a fierce howl of triumph. Terror lends the victim strength. It turns toward the farm-house; it struggles through the banks of snow; it leaps the

low palings, where, beside great straw-stacks, the cattle of the farm are herded. It disappears among them.

The door of the farm-house opens, and from it comes a man who strides away toward where the cattle are gathered, lowing for their morning feed. After the man there emerges from the door a little girl with yellow hair. The child laughs aloud as she looks over the field of snow, with its myriads of crystals flashing out all colors under the rays of the morning sun. She dances along the footpath in a direction opposite that taken by the man. Not far distant, creeping along a deep furrow, is a lank, skulking figure.

“Can it be? Has it escaped me, when it was mine? I would have torn it at the farm-house door but that the man appeared. Must I hunger for another day, when I am raging for blood! What is that? It is the child, and alone! It has wandered away from the farm-house. Where is the great hound that guards the house at night? Oh, the child! I can see its white throat again. I will tear it. I will throttle the weak thing and still its cries in an instant!”

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The man in the bunk in the lumbermen's camp is wild again. His comrades struggle to hold him down.

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A horrible, hairy thing, with flaming eyes and

hot breath, which leaps upon and bears down a child with yellow hair. A hoarse growl, the rush of a great hound, a desperate struggle in the snow, and the still air of morning is burdened suddenly with wild clamor. There is an opening of doors, there are shouts and calls and flying footsteps; and then, mingling with the cries of the writhing brutes, rings out sharply the report of the farmer's rifle. There is a howl of rage and agony, and a gaunt gray figure leaps upward and falls quivering across the form of the child. The child is lifted from the ground unhurt. The great hound has by the throat the old wolf—dead!

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The man in the lumbermen's camp has leaped from his bunk. His appearance is something ghastly. His comrades spring forward to restrain him, but he throws them off. There is a furious struggle with the madman. He has the strength of a dozen men. The sturdy lumbermen at last gain the advantage over him. Suddenly he throws up his hands and pitches forward upon the floor of the shanty—dead.

They could never understand—the simple lumbermen—why the life of the merry, light-hearted hunter of the party came to an end so suddenly on the eve of Christmas Day. He was well the day before, they said, in perfect health, but he went mad on the eve of Christmas Day, and in the morning died.