



WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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If this story has a moral, it is: don't shoot too soon, or you may never know what you hit!

IN THE FOREST

By Leslie Perri

Illustrated by Dick Rockwell

THERE was a wind. It blew through the topmost branches of the tall trees in a silent, autumnal forest. Dry leaves trembled nervously as the dark tree trunks stirred in a thrust of the wind. A

scarlet maple leaf lay unmoving on the inky surface of a cold spring. Behind an interlacing of nakedly-white birches a young deer stood still with wide lacquered eyes fixed on him. Its tar-black nostrils shone

in a quivering of fright and then like the wind it rustled momentarily on the forest floor of crackling leaves and disappeared.

He breathed heavily with disappointment. He had transmitted fear, his own apprehensions, again.

He moved from the protection of an overhanging rock. The ease with which he moved delighted him sensuously. This sportive exhilaration had to be curbed; it made him less sensitive to the problem at hand. He had to communicate.

There were obviously lower orders, mainly the winged beings. Some were tiny and fragile. They would approach and light on him with the unwariness of the naïve, trusting to their speed to escape from danger. From them he had no consciousness of intelligence. They buzzed and swarmed and hummed with monotonous idiocy. The larger winged beings were more interesting but they wore the drabness of the forest on their sleek wings. They would not come close but made inquiring sounds and swooped away at his approach.

He had learned to move silently through the silent forest. He felt almost weightless and infinitely agile and this delight he had to renounce for the time. He could walk erect, or run with incredible rapidity. And when he stood erect his body attained a new vitality and with his head above the lower woody vegetable growths he experienced a new dignity and regality. He was no petitioning refugee from the pitiless vise of unending cold. Here in this autumnal forest was the warmth and promise

of spring, for him.

Excitement made him warmer and more jubilant still. He had to communicate. But with whom? With which of these beings could he share his unbelievable adventure? He ran down a sloping floor of the forest and ran and ran, slipping and sliding on the leaves until he was breathless. And came to halt in a marshy spot with the spikes of dried vegetation towering about him. His heart beat with transcendental joy. He ached to babble of his happiness and then to relive his adventure in the telling of it to another intelligence the equal of his.

He breathed more slowly and more slowly yet. Above the trees, caught in the web of branches, a brilliant blue sky gleamed and virgin cloud forms of purest white drifted slowly above the trap of the forest. And there, lower than the clouds, was the magnificence of a burning sun, a brilliance whose golden shadow warmed the tree trunks, the faces of the dry leaves, the soft, sucking black earth of the marsh and—him. In this warmth he luxuriated, with every sensibility in his being. His body had starved for warmth.

And while he stood thus, a long slithering form passed before him, describing in its movement across the moss and rocks and black leaf-moulded earth resilient, graceful curves. It passed him without notice, conveying nothing, an impenetrable life form.

And then, as suddenly, his muscles tightened and he withdrew reluctantly from the warmth of the sun.

HE MOVED closer into the dried, tassel-topped grasses, feeling the scrape of sharp seed-bearing burrs as they clung to him. In a closely woven burrow, hidden from the sun and the reach of the wind, he heard a new sound, a louder, sharper crackle in the forest. A new scent crowded into the burrow and overpowered him with a new sensation, a suffocating awareness of danger.

He was cold again, and taut. The shadow from which he had escaped enclosed him again. This same deadly shadow of fear sapped his new vitality and destroyed his sensuous joy.

There was that sharper sound, a baying shrillness that resounded through the forest quiet and hammered at the tree trunks and unresisting vegetation with an unreasoning insistence. The echo of this new, insane voice of danger stirred him.

He moved cautiously and quickly from the burrow and through the marsh. He was not erect now, but low and rapid-moving. He thought desperately of survival now, not communication. This howling, yapping being had found him out, scented him in the forest and he knew only that he had to escape.

The forest floor rose gradually to greater and greater heights. He recognized the terrain and the character of this part of the forest. There was, at the summit, a sudden drop down a face of irregular outcroppings of stone. And at the base of this lay a vast body of water in which he could hide. He could manage the tall face of stone,

hiding and blending into its cold greyness.

The baying and yapping was closer and he moved even more rapidly. The chase seemed directed to him, not purposeless. Behind the baying and shrill crying of this hunter was yet another will. And this chilled him with hopeless horror. He felt instinctively that he could communicate with this will, that this was the intelligence he sought. But between it and him was this unleashed agent for his destruction.

He ran more quickly and with a new sensation of weariness as the slope mounted. The vegetation was green here, and somewhat sparser. There were fewer places of refuge. At times he ran without the protection of any covering, only the moss and green ground vines underfoot.

As he reached the summit he heard a new sound, a sharp undecipherable crack and whine overhead. When he had reached the top of the sharp rise, he stood erect for a moment, seeking the surest path for his descent of the sharp rock face. The body of water below gleamed warmly blue. The sun was a glorious, almost perfectly round entity, low in the sky. His body straightened involuntarily, rose up in the warmth of the sun, darkly and strangely outlined against the unbroken blue of the sky. And then as the crack and whine of the gun sounded in the evening quiet, not once but twice, and inexpertly a third time, his shape crumbled against the sky and he toppled from the cliff edge into the still blue of the lake below.

The man breathed heavily as he came up the hill. He was red-faced from exertion and frustration. He was heavy and clumsy in the perfection Abercrombie and Fitch had tailored into his hunting clothes. He held his rifle, an expensive and aesthetically beautiful instrument of destruction, like a blunt, ugly club.

He stood at the edge of the cliff

and looked down. There was nothing. Only the serenity of the early evening, the unanswering quiet of the lake, the ridge of mountains, the darkening sky.

"Now what in the hell was that?" the man muttered.

The dog, beside him, shivered and sat down suddenly. Its howl was unbidden, undirected, and it filled the forest with unrest.

————— THE END —————