

NATURE STORIES

By

James Oliver Curwood

Author of "Kazan," "Baree—Son of Kazan," "The Courage of Mary O'Doone," "Jacqueline" (in August Good Housekeeping), etc.

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"Over there is the Yukon!" a country where, before I realized what it means to kill for fun, I was proud of the fact that my twenty-seven guns had left many a scarlet trail"



The game laws call black bears "vermin"; Mr. Curwood calls them "the most lovable of animals"



"Kill or starve" is the law of the wilds. But never again will James Oliver Curwood kill for sport. When "Old Solomon," just above, was dying, he asked his forgiveness for breaking him down and made him this promise

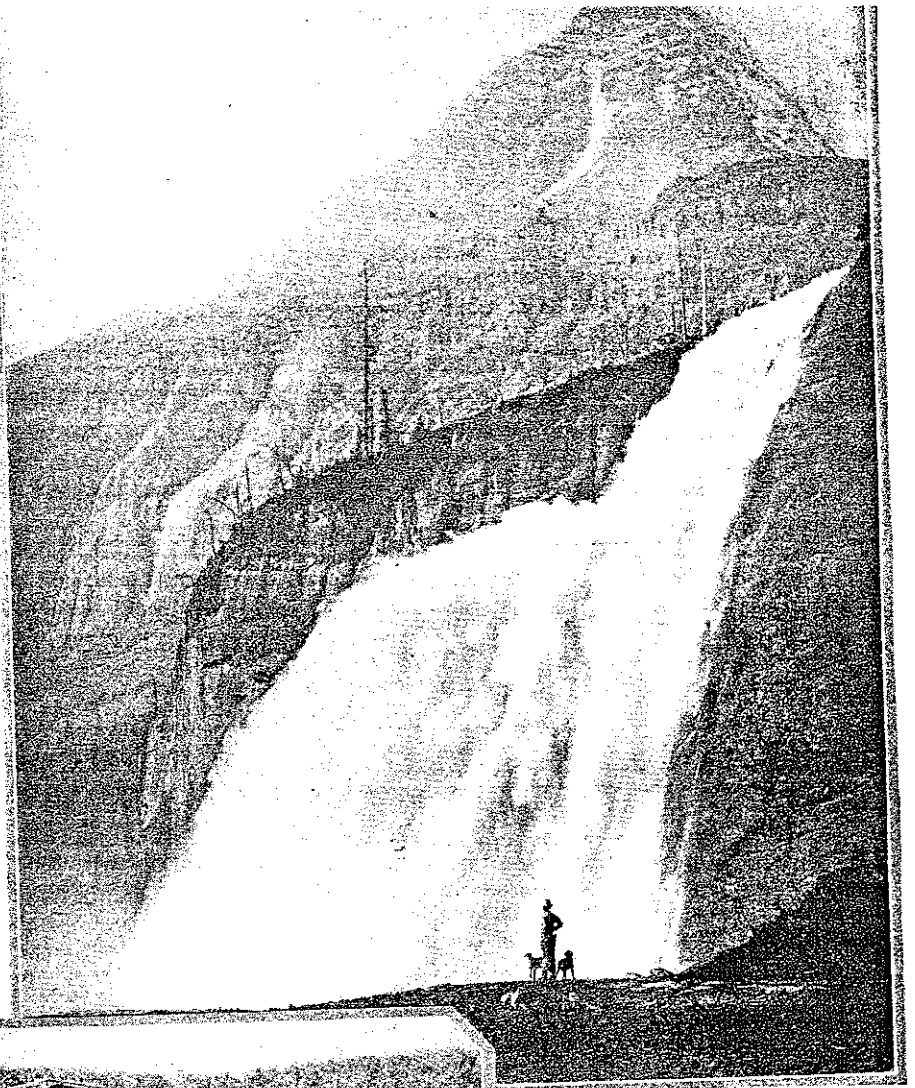
AN editorial request for me to tell something of what I have found in my adventuring in the heart of the wild places finds me in a rather embarrassing position. It is hard for one to confess oneself a murderer, and it is still harder to explain one's regeneration. Yet to be genuine I must at least make the confession, though it is less the fact of murder than the fact of regeneration that I have the inclination to emphasize, now that I have the opportunity. There was a time when I took pride in the wideness and diversity of my killings. Now I am only glad that these killings ultimately brought me to a discovery which is the finest thing I have to contemplate through the rest of my existence. And I am almost superstitiously inclined to believe that, just as my own eyes were opened and my understanding cleared by blood-letting, so will the present orgy of blood among millions of fighting men open up the souls of humanity to the light of finer things than have ever been achieved or realized before.

After all, life is just about the cheapest thing in the world. That is why a human's first and most compelling instinct is to kill. Some one has said that there is just so much earth, and just so much water, but of life there is no end. In a mated man and woman there are embryonic possibilities of a nation. There is no end to life. Without death it would very shortly smother the world. And it is the instinctive feeling of this fact, a conviction born without the necessity of reasoning, that makes the mere act of killing one of great thrill and joy—until in one way or another the truth drives home.

I am moralizing now about my own breed, the (Continued on page 149)



"Of the two largest big-horns in all British Columbia, I brought down one"

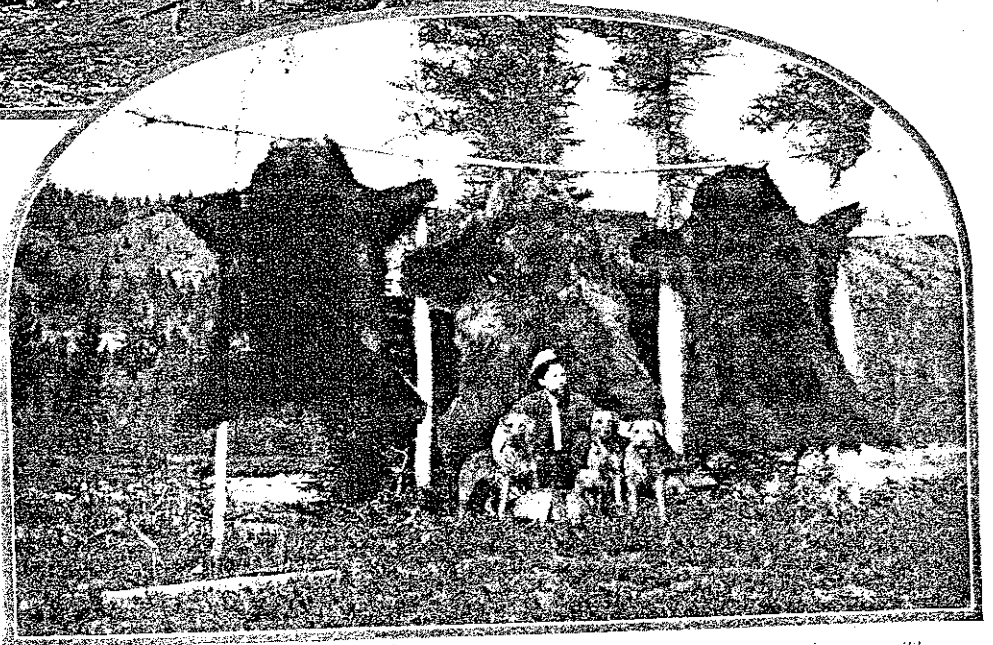


Before the rushing torrent of this nameless waterfall in the heart of the Canadian Rockies, where mountains tower peak on peak, a man is silent, feeling himself a pigmy in the presence of His handiwork



"God's country — and the Woman" was written in this cabin in the Hudson's Bay country, where Mr. and Mrs. Curwood lived hundreds of miles from civilization but very close to the hearts of all the wild things

Three great bears shot in thirty minutes by Mr. Curwood on a mountainside in British Columbia. "In that half-hour," he says regretfully, "I robbed three living creatures of a possible one hundred and twenty years of life"



Why I Write Nature Stories

(Continued from page 32)

killers of wild life. They number millions. They have emptied the world of much that is beautiful. Most of them are still on the job. But I have quit. And now to answer the main question—my ambition in writing my nature romances is to make others quit. Paradise, we are told, was lost on the day the beasts became afraid of human presences, and the Biblical prediction is that it shall be won again when the beasts and birds of the fields are once more at peace with men. I am inclined to believe it, for I am a pantheist. Most people are pantheists at heart. But it takes shock—some unusual or monstrous occurrence—to make them realize it. The shock of the world war will make millions of them. They will not label themselves pantheists, but the spirit of it will be in their souls, nevertheless, and a better race will spring forth because of it. War is hell, physically speaking; spiritually it is a great iconoclast, breaking down untrue things and rearing up in their places things that are true. Not many months ago the thing came home to me, in rather a forceful way.

IN my mail for that day were two letters. One was an official communication notifying me that I had been credentialed by the government to go to France as a war correspondent, to write of the thrill of man killing man. Another was from a lieutenant in the trenches, thanking me in behalf of himself and his men for the pleasure they had taken in reading my "Kazan." They had read it aloud in groups, he said, until the book was worn to a rag. In the hell of war it had brought to them, poorly and inefficiently I must confess, a vision of nature as it still existed away from the roar of guns. Then he went on to tell me of a pair of birds that had built their nest in a wire entanglement over which shot and shell crashed daily, and of how they sang even in that tumult of death, unafraid, "as though possessed of souls stronger than our own, or sent there by this great spirit which you describe to give us courage and cheer." Then he added, "I not only see but I feel now your point of view, for I would as soon think of shooting one of my comrades as killing these blessed birds."

"Fine line of talk for a man whose home is filled from cellar to garret with mounted heads and furs!" I hear some of my good friends say. Quite true, too. Some of the pictures on these pages voice the same sentiment. Observe how proudly I pose before the skins of the three big bears I shot in one short half-hour on a mountainside in British Columbia! In that half-hour I robbed three living creatures of a possible one hundred and twenty years of life. But I had thirty minutes of exciting fun. In my home are twenty-seven guns, and all of them have been used. Many of the stocks are scarred with tiny notches whereby I kept track of my "kills." With them I have left red trails to Hudson's Bay, to the Barren Lands, to the country of the Athabasca and the Great Bear, to the Arctic Ocean, to the Yukon and Alaska, and throughout British Columbia. This is not intended as a paean of triumph. It is a fact which I wish had never existed. And yet it may be that my love of nature and the wild things, at the last, is greater because of those reckless years of "sport." I am inclined to believe so. In my pantheistic heart the mounted heads in my home are no longer crowned with the grandeur of trophies, but rather with the nobility of martyrs. I love them. I commune with them. I am no longer their enemy, and I warm myself with the belief that they know it—that they know I am fighting for them now, and that I love the winged and four-footed things of the free forests better than I love men.

So I have answered, in a way, the question which I have been asked—how I have found the paradises in nature of which I write. Instead of seeking with a gun, I have sought with a new and growing understanding. And I have found a great deal. I do not mean to say that

I have entirely ceased to kill, for in the wilderness one must kill for meat. But there is no longer the old thrill in it.

I think the most dramatic climax of my desire to let live came when I was seeking material for my book, "The Grizzly King." With a pack outfit of a dozen horses I had gone into the British Columbia mountains, and in a wonderful valley I came one day upon the track of a huge grizzly bear. It was the biggest track I had ever seen, and as there was no particular limit set to my time I struck camp. For three weeks my mountain companion and I hung to that grizzly like grim death. He was a monster, weighing twelve hundred pounds if he weighed an ounce. I watched him feed. I saw him fight. I followed up his daily life until gradually there came over me an overwhelming desire to possess the skin and head of this king of the mountains for myself. I named him Thor, and I began to watch my opportunity to kill him. At the end of the first two weeks I believe he felt that I was not going to harm him. Then I got a shot and put a bullet through his shoulder. After that it was a game between the cunning and trickery of two men's brains and a brute's instincts. I got two more shots on two different days, and hit him both times. The third time I was surprised that Thor did not face the battle and charge. And then, almost a week later, the thing happened. I had climbed the steep side of a mountain to get a look over the valley with my hunting glasses, and rested my gun against a rock. Then I went forty or fifty feet farther on, following a narrow ledge, until I found myself in a little pocket, with the sheer wall of the mountain at my back and a hundred-foot precipice below me. Here I sat down and began to scan the valley. Perhaps fifteen minutes had passed when I heard a sound that stopped every drop of blood in my body—the *click, click, click* of clawed feet coming along the ledge. With my rifle fifty feet away, and no escape up or down, I sat petrified. And then along the ledge came Thor!

He stopped squarely in front of me, not more than six feet away, and turned his great head toward me, swinging it slowly from side to side. His jaws were open a little, and they were drooping. His eyes were small and shone with a dull red fire. In that moment I knew that my end had come, for the big grizzly had smelled me many times, he had seen me and had felt the sting of my bullets, and vengeance was rightly his. I saw the great patch of raw flesh where one of my bullets had torn his flank. As he stood there he favored the shoulder through which another of my bullets had passed. Silently, so silently that I could hear the pounding of my own heart, he looked at me. And now I saw that there was no anger in that look. It was quiet, calm, and searching, with the head swinging just a little from side to side, and it must have been some monstrous fear inside me that made me say, "Old boy, I'm sorry!" But what right had I to pray for mercy? The words were a coward's plea. And yet not quite, for I remember that in those terrible moments my heart went out to that great, lonely brute, and I must have meant what I said. For perhaps two minutes the grizzly stood there, his little eyes never for an instant leaving me, his nostrils twitching slightly, his head swinging, and then with a great breath he turned his head and went away, leaving me unharmed! And yet he knew that I was hunting him, that I had shot him, that I was his enemy! I was weak when I got on my legs again.

From that hour something new was born in me, a new world opened up for me, and in all my adventures since then that world and its possibilities have grown steadily more wonderful. Since that day I have slept with the flank of a half-grown grizzly for a pillow. That grizzly had been trained to carry a pack, to follow



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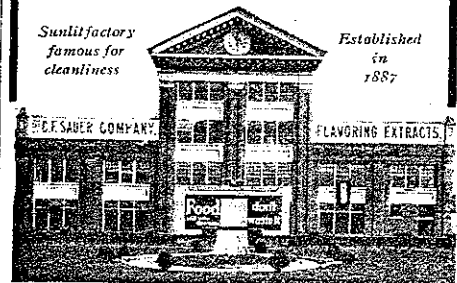
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Why I Write Nature Stories

on the trail like a dog. Since Thor gave me my life, the best friends I have had on earth have been my wild animal friends. I have learned the truth of the Biblical prophecy. It is not wild life that is at war with man, but man that is at war with wild life. In the heart of the wild creature, waiting to be fanned into life, is a love for man. No dog could have loved me more than Muskwa, my black bear comrade and brother; no humans could have been more loyal than Kazan, and Barea, and old Beaver-Tooth, and Baby-Foot, the pink-palmed albino porcupine whose greatest desire was to cuddle between my blankets and sleep with me at night on the trail.

Among these friends of the wild my wife and I have found the great joy of living. For months at a time we bury ourselves hundreds of miles away from civilization, and when we leave the shack we have built it is to us like leaving a beloved home. Once we built ourselves a cabin two hundred miles up in the Hudson's Bay country, and for seven months we saw only an Indian trapper, Jackpine. It was the happiest winter of our lives. In that cabin I wrote my "God's Country—and the Woman." It happened that the Indian's trap-line ran not far from us, and it was my wife who hit upon the unusual idea that gave us so much fun that winter. About three out of every four of the traps would be sprung by "trash"—that is, big snowshoe rabbits, owls, squirrels, and jays. Jackpine insisted on killing this "trash" for bait, but my wife's plea saved the big rabbits. Jackpine said that if he let them go with their broken legs they would die in the intense cold, which was true. So we hit upon the idea of going over the line with him and caring for the huge "snowshoes" in our own way. We would carefully amputate the broken leg, pull the fur down over the stump, and finish the job with a string. My wife's diary shows that we performed two hundred and fifteen operations that winter. The result was both interesting and amusing. Everywhere along a certain stretch of the line we would see the tracks of the three-legged rabbits. Many of them became so tame that we could approach them and pick them up. In time some of these three-legged rabbits began to get caught. Then we would perform the operation again, and the snowshoes would continue life with two legs and two stubs. There was one old fellow as large as a small dog, who got caught a third time, so that he had only one good leg and three stubs. We took him to our cabin, and he became as homelike as a house-cat.

thin, and a gray patch over his temple turned white. The mightiest efforts of his friends could do nothing. He wanted to be alone, alone in his home, where he could grieve himself to death by inches. I know that his case was harder because he was merely tolerant of religion. One day the idea came to me that resulted in his physical and spiritual salvation. I took him in my auto, and we went out into the country four or five miles, opened a gate, drove down a long lane, and stopped at the edge of a forty-acre wood.

"Fred, I am going to show you a wonderful city," I said. "Come with me—quietly."

We climbed over the fence, and I led him to the heart of the wood, and there we sat down, with our backs to a log.

"Now, just to humor me, be very still," I said. "Don't move, don't speak—just listen."

IT was three o'clock in the afternoon, that wonderful time of a summer day when nature seems to rouse herself from midday slumber to fill the world with her rustling life. The sun fell slantwise through the wood, and here and there under the roofs of the trees we could see golden pools and streams of it on the cool earth.

"This is one of the most wonderful cities in the world," I whispered, "and there are hundreds and thousands of such cities within the reach of all."

The musical ripple of a creek came to our ears. And then, slowly at first, there came upon my friend the wonder of it all. He understood—at last. About us, through all that forty acres of wood, the air seemed to whisper with a strange and wonderful life. Over our heads we heard a grating sound. It was a squirrel gnawing through the shell of a last autumn's nut. On an old stub a woodpecker hammered. Close about us were the *cheep, cheep, cheep*, and *twit, twit, twit* of little brown brush-birds. A warbler burst suddenly into a glorious snatch of song. A quarter of a mile away a crow cawed, and between us and the crow we heard a fox-squirrel barking and a little later saw it with its mate scrambling in play up and down the trees. My friend caught my arm and pointed. He was becoming interested, and what he saw was a fat young woodchuck passing near us on a foraging expedition to a neighboring clover field.

For an hour we did not move, and through all that city there was the drone and voice of life, and that life was a soft and wonderful song, soothing one almost into sleep. And when at last my friend whispered again, "It sounds as though everything is talking," I knew that the spirit of the thing had got into him. Then I drew his attention to a colony of big black ants whose fortress home was in the log against which we were resting. They were working. Two of them were trying to drag a dead caterpillar over my friend's knee. When we rose to go I led him past a little swale in which a score of blackbirds had bred their young. On a slender willow a bobolink was singing. A land turtle lumbered back into the water, and the bright eyes of green-headed frogs stared at us from patches of scum. Under a bush a score of toads were teaching their tiny youngsters to swim. When my friend saw the little fellows clinging to their mothers' backs he laughed—the first time in many months.

And when we went back to the car, I said: "You have seen just one ten-thousandth of what nature holds for you and every other man. You haven't believed in a God very strongly, but you've got to now. That's God back there in the wood."

That was two years ago. Today my friend lives in the heart of nature. I think some of the things he has written about the woods and the fields are the most beautiful I have ever read.

And that is why I write nature stories. Because I know they will do the world no harm, and may do some good.

(Mr. Curwood's thrilling North Woods story, "Jacqueline," appears in the August Good Housekeeping)

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