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PUNGISHEMOO:
A WILDERNESS QUEST
An Adventure of Search and Discovery in the Canadian Quetico

By Cliff Sakry
With Mark Sakry

Dedication

To the ones I love . . . and they are many.

PROLOGUE

Come, cast aside
The shams of pride
As morning, fresh born,
        Strips the hide
Of darkness from a mountainside;
And watch with me
        As, silently,
The waking dawn's invading ray
Restores the splendors of the day.

Thus I, the Wilderness,
        Your soul invade
To sweep away that blinding shade
By modern modes of madness made . . . .
And bid you come with me,
        Good friend,
Where nature's magic
        Puts an end
To worldly tension and
        Concern . . . .
And lets a long-lost joy
        Return.

Breathe deep my pristine
        Purity;
Let my peace . . . and beauty . . .
        Set you free!

Thus the wilderness calls. And heeding are many who would travel far beyond the outposts of the familiar world simply to find a sight, a sound, or a silence that is yet in a

primitive state of perfection. They go in ever-increasing numbers, these seekers, flowing out of the city in restless streams in search of soul-soothing space and lung-flushing clean air.

But, as many soon discover, the pure private luxury of outdoor solitude is no longer easy to find. The asphalt trails are glutted. And, just as popular enthusiasm for the out-of-doors reaches a new peak in this country, many Americans are becoming alarmingly aware of our seriously squandered heritage. Indeed—almost everywhere you go—there is ominous, swelling evidence of less and less room for more and more people. The vast treasures of unravaged wilderness which once spanned this continent have dwindled to a few mere specks on the map.

Still, onward over the endless highways roars the mighty motorcade, eager for a simple view of wide, wild country. For some, the human urge to escape the urban compound is so strong that even a picturesque crowded highway or a congested public campground may be enough. Sadly, they will experience very little from their speeding car windows; they will camp amidst a host of other campers and wonder why it is little different from their noisy, crowded neighborhoods back home. It is probably just as well that many of them will never realize what they actually missed.

There is yet another group of fugitives, however, who will by-pass the public parks and campgrounds for the remoteness and solitude of what sparingly remains of true wilderness. Fortunately a little … just a little … still endures. And these diehards will not be satisfied until they have penetrated far beyond the outer limits of the human world into the deepest of its primitive recesses. They will probe the wilds on foot and on horseback. They will paddle canoes for days, backpack over difficult portages, trudge over trackless terrain, traverse hidden water trails, assail a thousand natural barriers … simply to find a lake, a river, a canyon, a forest, or a mountain, where silence and solitude still hold an unbroken bond with beauty.

Who are these seekers, and why will they put themselves to such great effort, expense, privation, even hazard, to achieve lonely isolation in some harsh and wild environment far from the comforts of home? Why is the sight, the sound, the silence they seek so important? What, indeed, is this strange allurement which the wilderness seems to hold for them?

Such were the questions which surfaced from the depths of contemplation one wintry evening as I conversed with an old friend of mine who, it might be noted, saw in the world really very little of interest beyond the immediate confines of his day-to-day affairs. In all fairness, however, it must be added about this man that he seemed happy enough within his particular "confines." In fact, Fred would have laughed at any suggestion that he was unfortunate in any way, because he truly was content with his job and home in the city.

To be sure, the cheerful fire before which we lolled in his private study cast such a spell of relaxed well-being over us that one could almost ignore (or at least tolerate) the steady muffled roar of traffic on the freeway nearby. Fred wasn't one to realize, of course, that the very fire he so enjoyed in his own hearth was, in itself, a kind of escape from everyday humdrum not unlike the escape the wilderness traveler seeks on a larger scale. I had a feeling as I watched him staring contentedly at the flames licking upward among the logs that Fred, despite his assertions to the contrary, would not only make a congenial companion on a camping trip but he might actually enjoy it. I was tempted to suggest to him that he was just then responding to something strangely similar to the attraction which the wilderness exerts. But I held back. Certain as I was of a powerful underlying connection between the lure of the wilderness and the simple fascination of a lazily burning hearth fire, I felt at a loss just then to put the impression into words.

I too, of course, was a willing captive to the fire's assuasive spell. Its blue and orange plumes danced and purred with a gentle hypnotic rhythm that soon had my thoughts drifting far away to a pine-canopied rocky island on a starry night long ago … where a lively campfire crackled, free spirits chatted happily, and lifetime friendships were being consummated through one of the richest experiences a group of human beings can share. I could see again those familiar rugged faces, relaxed and cheerful as the firelight played upon them, and I could hear again the wonderful stories, the carefree laughter, the happy camp songs which broke upon the vast silence of the wilderness night. I can seldom sit before a blazing fireplace without being thus reminded of camps and campfires and of grand times on the trail. And now, just as I was joyfully adrift in pleasant reverie, I was suddenly jolted out of it by Fred's voice.

"I can appreciate your concern for the wilderness, Cliff," he was saying, "but aren't you becoming a bit obsessed with it, to the point of exaggeration?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, I know that wilderness is a place where you can find peace, and solitude, and adventure, and all that. I know that it supports a large variety of plant and animal life. And there's plenty of fresh air and lots of room to move around. Okay? But these things can be found in places other than the wilderness. Don't you agree?"

"To a point," I replied. "But there's a difference."

"Enough difference to justify spending billions in federal money to set aside land which contains other valuable resources the nation needs?"

"If you mean spending money to keep our few remaining primitive areas wild, then absolutely yes. In fact, we not only need to save what's left, but we should restore some of the wilderness that's already been lost."

Fred looked at me dubiously. "You aren't very convincing," he said. "Now think about it. You—and others who would defend the wilderness against its so-called "exploiters"—base your argument on a need to preserve solitude, scenic beauty … and even some vague thing called spiritual renewal."

"I'd say these are all valid arguments, Fred. Why wouldn't they be convincing?"

"Because you can find these things in plenty of other places. You haven't mentioned anything to me which could be said to be *exclusive* to the wilderness?"

I was suddenly aware that my friend was armed with all the old defenses for "progress at any price." I listened as he went on.

"It's not necessary to go into primitive country to find great natural beauty. Just think of Niagara Falls or a surf washing up on a California beach … even a flower garden in a city park provides beauty without being primitive. And when you say that wilderness offers silence and tranquility, well, it can be argued that a normal woods or some quiet field in farming country has that quality. It's a well-known fact that even the white-tail deer is more numerous in cut-over forests or on the fringes of agricultural land. In fact, if you want to see a large variety of wildlife, you don't even have to leave the city. Just visit the zoo!"

Oh my, Fred was going too far. I couldn't help thinking how ironic it seemed that he could refer to the city zoo without, in the least, being aware of its woeful similarity to the city itself. I began to feel a little sorry for him. He was talking like some blind, sedentary, big-city office inmate who had never seen the real world nor even wondered much about it—and who, in a very distinct way, had much more in common with those incarcerated zoo dwellers than he realized. I also got the impression that Fred was on the defensive, striving too hard to make his point. He was using those same hackneyed generalities, the same old pragmatic rationalizations

that people have always used to justify their rape and exploitation of the earth. Yet there was a tone of uncertainty in his argument, almost as if he were trying to convince himself that human acquisitiveness justified its own ends.

"As for adventure," he continued, "it's absolutely absurd to say the wilderness is the only place where you can find *that!"*

"True …" I replied.

"Well, there are just plenty of places within easy reach—without going all the way into some primitive, isolated area—where you can find fresh air, clean water, plenty of space, and all the adventure you want."

"So?"

"So … what is it, really, about the wilderness that makes it so different and sets it apart from everything else? Especially other wild areas? What makes it *so* different and *so* important that it must be preserved at all costs?"

I had to admit, that was a tough question. Not because it hadn't any answer, but because the answer was extremely complex. It was as diffuse as the combined meaning and experience of all those who found the lure of primitive country irresistible. By now I was beginning to realize that any attempt to explain its value to a man who had never craved or experienced it would be difficult. Yet I was determined to try, if for no other reason than to clarify my own convictions. And there was one conviction, perhaps because it was the most obvious, which I had already formulated.

"I'm not sure the answer will satisfy you, Fred," I began. "Frankly, it involves values which can't be compared to our usual—highly overrated—materialistic standards. It is simply this: what makes the wilderness so different and so important is the total absence of human influences and human exploitation.

"At Niagara and the other places you mentioned it is impossible to ignore the intrusive influence of other human beings and their works. The wide sweep of a grain field … true, it may give us a sense of peace and spiritual uplift, but it is not wilderness. I don't mean to suggest that such things are not good, or of any benefit to us spiritually, but they are nothing like the primitive wild … which has a powerful way of leading one directly to oneself and to that primary freedom as a creature of nature which, I believe, we can experience *only in nature."*

"Wait a second," Fred interrupted. "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying. The distinction you make seems to suggest that humans are a contamination of some sort! You're saying that people can't even see themselves for themselves … can never even hope to understand themselves … unless they go traipsing off into the wilds. Can you see *everybody* doing that?"

"Of course not," I hastened to reply. "You know that would be impossible. Besides, many people seem content enough—already take life as it comes—without too much concern for its meaning or substance. Perhaps that is fortunate … maybe it's not. It's just the way things appear to be. It would also be absurd to say that anyone looking for meaning in their lives must go to the wilderness to find it. Though, I know of no better place to look."

"But that's just your personal view."

"Look, Fred, I guess what I'm trying to say is that for some people there is something deeply poignant—unique, beautiful, and uplifting—about the wilderness experience. Who knows exactly what it is? But it's like … you're drawn like a bee to a clover field. You only know that you must go, and that total separation from civilization—for even a brief period—is infinitely rewarding. It's not just that it gives you a chance to slow down and get off the

racetrack for a while, either … or even that you have time to think, dream, or meditate without any worldly distractions. You have an opportunity to reduce your life to primitive simplicity—in a beautiful natural setting—a condition which, I have found, is extremely conducive to self-awareness."

Fred now leaned forward somewhat impatiently as he said, "Here again … do I understand you to mean that you can't relax, meditate, or take a good look at yourself now and then without having to go way off into the woods somewhere?"

"Of course not, Fred. But you'll have to admit that society has a lot of sidetracks and dead-ends—it's like an endless maze sometimes—and it often keeps us too preoccupied to let us really discover ourselves. Maybe such an experience is a rare thing in our society. We're all go-go and grab-grab till the day we die. Maybe some people don't want to know themselves. Maybe they're afraid to. Yet to discover your own humanity is the only way I think you can become fully alive. Maybe a person can accomplish these things without going off into isolation. I only know that, for me, there is no place in all of civilization which can so quickly show me myself—or put me so completely and joyfully at peace or give me such spiritual renewal—as the wilderness."

"Come on," Fred broke in. "If running away from the world is your only means of coping with the pressures of work and responsibility, you must find life in the city pretty unbearable."

"Not really, Fred," I replied, "In fact, I think that's one of the things the wilderness has done for me. I find a lot of purpose and fulfillment in my work, because of the *meaning* I have found in work. I consider such things as responsibility, duty, and effort simply normal conditions to successful, happy living. Just like living in a wilderness camp … but *especially* living in a highly organized society. However, not everybody thinks so. These very 'virtues' have also caused plenty of misery. If we allow these things to put excessive pressure on us, give us ulcers and drive us to distraction, then I'd have to say we've either lost sight of some real values or we've missed our calling completely."

"You seem to take duty and work pretty lightly."

"Not at all! If duty and work are a burden, it's because we have become strangers to ourselves and we're on a hopeless treadmill. And if you look around, you'll have to admit, as a nation we are very much on such a treadmill."

"You really believe our national life is that grim?"

"Well, take an honest look at it, Fred. Look at our cramped, deteriorating slums which too many Americans must call their home … look at our great numbers of disenchanted youth groping about in a blinding storm of protest seeking a better society than the materialistic one their parents molded for them … then look at that pathetic legion of affluent, perplexed, middle-aged couples who find cocktail parties and country clubs their only escape from their failures as parents. There are agonizing pressures and tensions everywhere. Our whole society is in such a turmoil of restless frustration and uncertainty that it is difficult to be optimistic any longer about our future. For all our great material success, our technical sophistication, our intellectual triumphs, we are a sick society. Now wouldn't you agree?"

"To some extent," Fred replied as he leaned forward and set a fresh log on the fire. "I guess I don't see things as being all that hopeless. Sure, we've got problems … lots of 'em. But that's life. We've also got the brains and material means to solve them. Besides, I'd say things generally have a way of righting themselves. But even if we are, as you say, a 'sick society,' what does that have to with the *wilderness?"*

What indeed did it have to do with wilderness? I'd never before been faced with a need to explain this strange, vague thing which to me had always seemed so simple and natural, something taken for granted. To feel its influence, to have it so completely inside oneself was one thing. To express or define it was quite another. It was, I suddenly realized, a question which had no easy answer, if it had one at all. Yet a heavy sensation clung stickily in my mind telling me that, out of what I already had experienced in the wilds, I should know there was a connection, a *vital connection.* And it had to do with more than what to me was a rather obvious fact—that humanity, compressed unnaturally into a crowded world, was much like animals crowded unnaturally into cages—our sick society was sick with claustrophobia, to be sure. But it was also sick of spirit … alienated from something in its simpler ancestral past which was still desperately needed.

"I'm afraid, Fred, that it would take a lot more insight than I possess to tie all the strings together. But I have a gnawing suspicion that it is from the wilderness—or, at least, from the most *fundamental manifestations of nature*—that we can ever hope to extract an ultimate solution to the human problem. We have forgotten that we are creatures of nature—a high form of evolved biological animal, if you will—with deep-set instinctual drives which, despite our highly developed brain, still dominate our lives in more ways than we realize or understand.

"In having renounced nature—ignored it, exploited it, violated it, defied it, denied our true ancestral ties with it—we are mortal organisms trying to act like gods. We boast that we have 'conquered' Nature, yet we remain its constant subjects, locked in its formula … structured by it, driven by its forces, governed by its inexorable laws.

"Despite all our civilized conceits, we are strangely compelled to keep involving ourselves with nature at every opportunity. How else can we explain those endless bumper-to-bumper motorcades flowing out into the country, weekend after weekend, in ceaseless obedience to some mysterious attraction which seems to always lead to open spaces and natural surroundings? It's always there, that urge to identify with nature, isn't it? And we simply *must* respond in one way or another … if even hardly knowing why, hardly realizing that somehow, instinctively, we sense a belonging with and a need for the simple natural things."

"All right, all right," Fred interjected in a tone which clearly implied I'd had the podium long enough. "So that's their bundle. It's an important form of recreation. But why complicate it? If people enjoy nature, fine. If it's good for the soul, fine. But I'm afraid you're biting off too big a chunk when you suggest that this civilized human being you call an 'evolved animal' can't make the grade without some kind of massive immersion in nature. You forget that we've created and accomplished a lot that nature never could."

"Not so, Fred." I had to go after that one. "If we're creatures of nature, then anything we accomplish is merely an extension of nature working through us. If what we build or create complies with nature, it can endure. On the other hand—as we've learned through bitter failure many times—nothing we do in defiance of nature, or its fundamental laws, can ultimately succeed. Everything we are and everything we do is simply nature working itself out."

"That isn't exactly what we were taught in Sunday School," Fred countered. "You're giving a lot of credit to nature but very little to God."

"Any credit to one is credit to the other! How can you separate God from nature? To me, they're one and the same … though we may view or interpret our relationship to them in different ways. At any rate, it is impossible to ignore the simple fact that most people—whatever their understanding or belief and whether they realize the fact or not—find it necessary to maintain some kind of contact with natural things.

"What is more typical than our widespread preoccupation with flowers, gardens, shrubs, grass, shade trees? It's pretty obvious to me that these provide city dwellers with the only means of holding onto nature in an otherwise nature-less environment."

"There," exclaimed Fred. "You just said it yourself! There *are* things, even in the city, which give people an outlet for these natural cravings. It confirms what I've said all along … that the wilderness, which most people never see anyway, is grossly overrated."

"Well," I said, "if these things seemed to be enough to satisfy everybody, I'd have to agree. But how do you still account for the great annual migration to the open country? The attraction is there—deep, recurrent, and insistent—yet we understand this urge only superficially … only in obvious terms, only in light of the familiar things which fill our senses and stimulate our emotions. But beyond all that, the question still remains: *what is it, really, that attracts these millions of restless souls?"*

Yes, what is it? If I learned anything at all from my conversation with Fred that night, it was the fact that a full answer to that question has never been adequately expressed. And I wasn't sure that it *could* be answered, since people seem to differ so in their outdoor interests and pursuits. All I was sure of was that there were many such people, of all ages and from all walks of life. And I could only conjecture that something marvelous—and useful—under lied it all … that, despite the variety of courses the nature seekers take, they all seemed to be responding to a deep instinctual motivation which binds humans inescapably to their natural origin.

The question, particularly as it applied to myself, haunted me thereafter, and I became determined to get to the heart of it. Reviewing what I'd learned from my own experience, I could readily empathize with those who see in the remaining wilderness all that is left of the Creator's purest handiwork, and who regard its exploitation for profit as sheer sacrilege. For them, earth's last shrinking remnant of Paradise … this vanishing vestige of what was once a boundless domain of unspoiled outdoor splendor … is now all too limited. Yet it holds a treasure far greater than any other, a wealth so sacred, so precious, so irreplaceable, that it cannot be bought, sold, or measured by any set of mundane values.

Back-glancing into our nation's brief history, I found it difficult to realize that America had begun so very recently as a perfect wilderness. Only a little while ago, the settlers had found it stretching unbroken from ocean to ocean. But to them it was a savage barrier of mountains, rivers, forests, prairies, and deserts that had to be conquered to make room for towns and farms and roads. In but a few short centuries that wild, living wilderness had all but vanished before the assault of rifle, shovel, axe, and plow.

It was virtually a clean sweep. The growing nation had pushed back its frontiers with an incredible surge of energy, and for too long no one foresaw the inevitable exhaustion and, therefore, the need to set aside wild reserves. In a few generations that vast wilderness heritage had shrunk until most was gone. And the rest is going, as a swelling population presses for more room.

All that remain are a few remnants, mostly preserved in federal parks and forest areas. Now, with so little left, the wilderness has become an object of grave concern to those who have sadly watched its rapid decline and, with it, the general decline of much of our national wildlife. No one can predict for certain which of the animal species are marked for early extinction … but if wilderness goes, can any of these be far behind?

Why save these creatures? Or the natural wonders with which they co-exist? Do we really need them? If we do, *why?* Thinking about it, I had to conclude again and again that one

of the main reasons the question has never been fully resolved must be simply that the wilderness has such a variety of special meanings for each of us.

And so, for each who hears the wild call of that enchanting world beyond the highway's end, there can be but one way to find the answer: to put civilization behind and follow the beckoning, hidden trails of humankind's interminable *wilderness quest.*

CHAPTER ONE

The call of the wilderness comes early to men and women of adventure. It favors no age and heeds not that some are yet too young to go forth on their own. My ten-year-old son Mark was such a "man."

It was the year 1963. Through most of the spring and early summer he had been avidly reading everything he could lay his hands on relating to camping and woodsmanship, and there seemed little else he cared to discuss with anyone. He would bring out my wilderness maps, study the lakes and trails, and ply me with endless questions about the primitive country we were planning to explore during the coming July. This is the season when great patches of ripe wild blueberries carpet the forest clearings and the weather is most likely to be warm and stable. It is also a time when the wild bears are feeding heavily on the berries and therefore least likely to be interested in camp kitchens!

About a week before our departure it was necessary to get the group together to finalize our plans. Gene Tomlinson, a Twin Cities business executive (when he wasn't away somewhere camping), provided what turned out to be a most impressive prelude to our canoe trip by inviting us all for an evening cruise on his house boat on Lake Minnetonka. Anchored in a wide bay near Big Island, with the boat bobbing gently beneath us, we were treated to several of Gene's favorite hospitality specials, including charcoal-broiled steaks and a sharp, delectable salad of his own concoction. But even as we sat enjoying the repast we were aware of an unusual amount of din and unrest all about us. Indeed, I felt a kind of disappointment, if not outright resentment, at seeing this beautiful bay in such an opposite condition from the quiet seclusion one might expect in such an out-of-the-way place.

But, of course, one had to remember that this was not any longer an out-of-the-way place. Privacy, as anyone who knows Lake Minnetonka will tell you, is hard to come by on this attractive but overcrowded water playground. Now almost completely engulfed by the swelling suburban sprawl of the greater metropolitan Twin Cities, Minnetonka is gradually dying, no longer capable of assimilating the sickening, ever-increasing volume of pollutants with which those who have most enjoyed this lovely lady have cruelly defiled her. And even on the calmest summer day her surface seethes in an agony of unrest as thousands of speeding motor craft churn her waters into a cauldron of ceaseless turbulence. At the spot where we were anchored, away

from the active boating lanes, our houseboat nevertheless rocked unevenly to irregular but constant wave action coming in from the open lake.

Anchored all about us in the bay were dozens of pleasure craft ranging in size from small cabin boats to some surprisingly large cruisers. A loud cocktail party was in progress on one of the bigger boats which floated bulkily not more than a plug-cast away, and elsewhere nearby a noisy group of young people was having a beer bust on a pontoon raft. Some were diving and swimming, and at one point a girl screamed as two young men tossed her unceremoniously over the rail. On the nearby beach a bonfire flared, and the sound of boisterous music wafted through the general din. The whole of it was a grotesque kind of condensed bedlam, a weird mixture of compressed noise and energy almost gasping for space, over which—despite the apparent fun and gaiety—a sad note of desperation and futility seemed to hover.

I wondered if I were seeing it as it really was or whether I had let my own prejudices influence my reaction. I can remember that I tried hard to justify this strange revelry, to pass it off as nothing particularly unusual. Yet I could not expunge the feeling that it was all deeply symbolic of something gnawing at the very soul of a congested, overindulgent society. I also wondered how many more boats and people this harassed lake could tolerate before it struck back with some kind of stark spiritual suffocation which finally choked off whatever was left of our human dignity.

Gene Tomlinson was watching a tanned, plumpish, middle-aged female in a bikini on the deck of a big yacht just as her particular choice of diversion had reached an unhappy climax. She was violently vomiting her martinis over the side. A flabby, balding man came over and held up her head with one hand while he massaged her navel with the other.

"Her cup of merriment runneth over," Gene commented wryly. Always a man to make a point, he added, "Sometimes it's hard to tell which is more polluted, the water below the boat or the people above it."

"Aw, they're just out here to have a good time like we are," pleaded Bill Sweasy who had a penchant for defending people. Bill was president of a well-known boot manufacturing company; his sensitive, diplomatic manner always seemed to have a way of putting people at ease.

Tom Manko, sitting beside him, shook his head. "What a way to get away from it all," he said. "But then, I could never afford a yacht like that. I'm just a poor, plain backwoodsman with just enough money to buy a fishing license and a camping stake!" Tom was joshing, of course, for he happened by profession to be a well-respected Twin Cities Boy Scout executive, and as practical and disciplined a gentleman as ever packed a knapsack. For a man in his late fifties, with half his scalp showing, he was remarkably youthful in appearance and as lean and sinewy as a college athlete. Eminently successful as a leader of leaders and trainer of boys, Tom was the kind of man who added something very special to a camping trip. To have him along was to know that there was present a doctor, a nurse, a gourmet cook, a geologist, a zoologist, a meteorologist, a philosopher, a songster, a story-teller, and—best of all—a most engaging companion. He could burst into song upon the slightest provocation, and he had a special genius for making up verses to fit the situation of the moment. We were destined, before our forthcoming project was over, to be pleasantly exposed many times to Manko's unique bit of improvisational magic.

Our host, a conservative, powerfully built man with a direct, authoritative bearing—having seen that we had all paid notice to our highly "civilized" surroundings—now turned away from the scene and started to clear away our paper plates, then said in a somewhat solemn tone,

"Look, guys, I'm sorry. We could have probably met in a less 'nauseating' atmosphere."

"Aw heck, Gene," Bill consoled, "maybe a taste of this will really help us appreciate what we're looking forward to on the trip."

"Well," Gene perked up appreciatively, "I suppose the difference will be really evident if we actually find the Lake of Echoes … and the island of Pungishemoo, as planned."

"Enchanted Isle of Pungishemoo," corrected Tom with a peculiar twinkle in his eye.

"Enchanted isle, eh?" grinned George Daugherty dubiously from a deck chair. "From what I've already heard from you two guys, this Pungishemoo sounds like some impossible Shangri-La."

"Yeah," added Bill Sweasy jokingly, "you'd better not oversell us or we might be real disappointed."

Gene chuckled. "Well," he said, "I guess I've had some doubts myself. But this old friend of mine, this Ojibwa fishing guide from Ontario named Frank Crottin …"

"Frank *crouton?"* my brother Al interrupted jokingly.

"Heh, heh," Gene chortled, "kinda does sound like that, doesn't it? French name, I guess. Well …" he continued, "when *crouton* first told me about the place, it sounded pretty intriguing. It was on a fishing trip up in Canada a couple years ago. The guy got to talking about this fantastic lake in Quetico that the native people used to call the 'Lake of Many Voices.' I guess some pretty strange things have happened there. According to Crottin, who said he's actually been there himself, the fishing is supposed to be absolutely fantastic."

"Strange happenings. Fantastic fishing. The plot thickens," remarked George wryly.

"Ha! Leave it to Gene to cook up a little mystery to spice up our canoe trip, right!" laughed Al.

"Hey, no kidding," Gene reassured, "Crottin even pointed it out on a map, and I've been itching to go there ever since."

The boys—who included Mark, Al's eleven-year-old son Mike, and Bill Sweasy's son Billy of the same age—sensing something mysterious, had moved just outside the circle of deck chairs in which we adults had settled ourselves. They sat goggle-eyed on a low, cushioned deck bench listening intently. Gene's teenage son Will sat overlooking us from the elevated pilot seat at the helm.

"So what's the lake called on the map then?" I inquired.

"There's no name for it on the map. Crottin just called it the Lake of Echoes. I assumed that that was just another version of the people's original name for it … 'Lake of Many Voices.' And I didn't ask. So that's all I know about the name."

"Well, then, since it's not named on the map yet," Al surmised, "it's likely that it could even be named something else someday."

"Yep," Tom offered, "maybe we'll all call it *Gene* Lake someday … after this rambunctious bushwhacker I know!"

"With my luck," Gene laughed, "it will probably go to somebody with some name like … Horatio McFergus."

"Gawd, let's hope not!" I retorted. "I'll keep the Lake of Echoes!"

"If it's anything like the way the legend describes it," Gene replied with a furtive glance toward Tom, "let's hope it never gets a name on the map."

"Legend, huh?" remarked George with a suspicious smirk.

"Give it a moment, George," responded Gene. "We'll get to that in a minute." With that he motioned to Will who grabbed a clipboard hanging from a nail by the helm and handed it to

him. Gene pulled an old folded-up Fisher map from beneath the clip. He spread it out on the small deck table inside our circle of chairs where his marvelous barbecued dinner had been served up. The chart was old and tattered, with numerous canoe routes marked in multi-colored inks. Gene then made a gentle sweeping caress across the face of the map with his index finger and stopped where a string of faint pencil marks smudged the wrinkled chart in a particularly remote area of the Quetico. "Here," he said. "Look here. This is it."

Everyone craned their necks over the map, studying with great interest the lake to which Gene pointed. The boys jumped immediately from the bench and squeezed between the chairs and over the slumped shoulders of their fathers to get a better look. "So that's it!" exclaimed Mark who, by now, apparently knew his way pretty well around a Quetico map. "Hmmm, but compared to that lake over there, it's not exactly gigantic, is it?"

"No wonder it isn't named on the map," quipped Mike. "It's only a puddle."

"Really," Mark mumbled, "I thought it would be bigger than that."

"Oh, c'mon now, guys" retorted Gene, "it's not that small. Heck, Mark, it's almost as big as Silence." This with an acknowledging glance toward me. "Your dad has told you a lot about our favorite little lake in Quetico, hasn't he? And Silence isn't that small … is it, Cliff?"

"Just about perfect, Gene," I replied in his defense. "Bigger, as they say, fellows … isn't always better."

"This looks pretty far off the beaten path, though," remarked Bill. "How hard is it going to be to get there?"

Here Gene bristled slightly. "Pretty tough," he said. "I'm afraid it's going to be pretty tough going. In fact, even with two weeks to do it, I'm afraid to tell you, there's no guarantee we'll even make it there." Here he made a circular hand gesture over the map. "This … this Lake of Echoes … is real isolated. See all this blank area here? I reckon that a lot of it is swamp. And since there are no portages marked on some of these lakes we have to go through, we're probably going to have to do some real serious trail blazing. Depending on the weather, trail blazing through bog could be a real challenge. To say the least."

"There's probably good reason why the lake isn't named yet on the map," interjected Tom, hovering over the map from his chair next to Gene.

"That's right," Gene concurred, "and there are these little rivers and creeks to consider. Again, depending on the weather, you might wind up dragging your canoes over dried-up streambeds … and who knows what else?"

"So what did *crouton* say about it then?" inquired George (resurrecting Al's joke). "Did he have a tough time getting in there?"

"Well," Gene smiled, "according to *him,* he went there with his uncle many years ago. Now, I'm telling you, he didn't say much. In fact, the only reason I think he told me as much as he did was that he trusted me to keep the matter inside the 'brotherhood,' so to speak … and to never divulge the secret of this place to anyone accept those who met a certain high standard of integrity. He trusted me—and my judgement—in that respect, I think, because we shared many fishing secrets and secret fishing locations with each other, without ever spilling the beans on each other."

"So we're going to keep this all a secret then?" I inquired.

"Of course. It's that unwritten code among hunters and anglers, Cliff," answered Gene. "You should know. It's the one you *never* violate … you never squander your best secrets on unworthy or unappreciative souls. That's something you might all want to keep in mind if we're successful on this trip …

"When Crottin paddled to the Lake of Echoes," Gene continued, "he traveled from the northeast. That's not the direction we're taking. He also traveled farther … across a good hunk of Ontario which, at that time, had not been logged or developed yet. So when he says it was rough, it probably means something completely different from what we're looking at. He said he explored much of the area by canoe, and he said it was all rough. But he made a few suggestions about how to get there which, as you can see, I wrote down right on my map. It looks to me like even some of these portages on the map could prove to be inaccurate, real rugged, or hard to find. We could wind up doing a lot of trail blazing, which can be miserable—and very time-consuming—especially if you have to do it all the time."

"Especially through bog," my brother Al added.

"That's right. Especially through bog. Getting to the Lake of Echoes," Gene averred with a concerned glance toward the three youngsters, "could turn out to be an impossible project. And to be perfectly honest with you … even with good maps … it is very possible that we won't even be able to find it."

"Then why," Bill politely inquired, "even bother?"

Gene paused, casting an understanding expression across the table to everyone in the group, then turned and looked at Tom, who's quick smile indicated that something was up between them. Noting this, everyone else looked at Tom, understanding that he must be the one with the answer to Bill's question.

"The legend …" George muttered. "Something tells me we're about to hear that legend now."

The boys' eyes widened. "Are you going to tell us the legend about the Lake of Echoes, Tom?" Billy cut in, unable to restrain his curiosity.

"Yeah … tell us … tell us the story," pleaded the other boys.

"Well, Tom," said Gene, "looks like you're up."

"Ah, yes, the legend," Tom replied, obviously enjoying this sudden burst of enthusiasm. He leaned forward in his chair, taking time to relish the suspense. He pondered for a moment then addressed the group: "This story comes from Naubesah, the fishing guide's uncle. I was with Gene on that trip to Ontario when he learned about this special place. He learned it from Crottin in the boat. I was fishing alone on another lake. Unfortunately, Gene was too busy catching fish to find out more about it …"

Everyone cocked their heads toward Gene, who simply chortled, "I suppose you'd rather I didn't tell you about it at all?"

"As I was saying," Tom continued unabashedly, "Gene was apparently more interested in angling for fish than for more information about this special place. But he told me about it as we cleaned fish.

"The next day, instead of going fishing, I went to the village for bait. I went to Crottin's uncle at the bait shop. No one was at the bait shop except Crottin's uncle. I said to him, 'Naubesah, I have heard of a special place where there is good fishing. It is very far from here. It is a place where you have been, and it is a very special place. Do you know it? Do you know its name?'

"Naubesah sat on a stool behind the counter of the bait shop. He gazed at me for a long time and nodded his head. He nodded his head many times. Then he looked away. He gazed out the door into the street. Then he said, 'It is the falling place, I think.' He nodded his head many more times. Suddenly he looked very sad. Then he looked at me. 'Pungishemoo,' he said. He gazed out into the street again and nodded his head some more. He began to speak in a

strange tongue that I did not understand: *'Mitakuyapi cante waste …'* Then, strangely, after a while I began to understand him. Suddenly he knew that I could understand him. 'You are a man with good heart,' he said in the strange tongue, 'so I will tell you a tale.' Then he began to tell the tale. It was the tale of Pungishemoo. He continued to speak in the strange tongue, so I cannot tell it the same way he did. I will tell it to you my own way. This is the tale he told. This is the tale of Pungishemoo."

Here Tom settled back in his chair and gazed out over the lake to where the sun now lowered in the western sky. Orange reflections played magically on his face, exagerrating his definitions in such a way that he looked many years older than he was. After a long contemplative pause, he began to speak; then he told us the tale of Pungishemoo.

<< Insert “The Tale of Pungishemoo” here >>

As he finished, Tom leaned slowly back. By now the sun had sunk below the horizon leaving a soft, magenta afterglow. No one spoke for a moment. Not even the relentless clamor around us could immediately break the spell which that intriguing account had cast upon our entire group.

"My, oh my." It was George who finally broke the spell. "That is quite a legend."

"Pretty tragic," opined Bill. "I expected something a little more … what should I say … uplifting?"

The boys remained wide-eyed and silent.

"I suppose the meaning of all this will become a little more clear after a person lets it sit for awhile," muttered Al, obviously still a bit overwhelmed.

Mark suddenly remarked, "you mean we're actually going to this place? I mean … the *same* place that this legend is about?"

"That's the idea," Gene replied. "That's *part* of what this whole trip is all about."

"What's the other part?" asked Mike.

"Well," cut in his father, "you sure ought to have figured that out by now."

"Why?"

"Well, you're the one who's so nuts about fishing!"

"Oh." Mike pondered this for a moment then turned to Tom. "Hey, Tom, you mentioned in the story … that lake with fighting black fish … you know where that is?"

"Ha! See, I told you," Al croaked. "I'm warning you guys, sometimes this kid just won't leave the subject alone."

"Gene has a better idea of which lake that might be, Mike," Tom laughed. "You know which one it is, Gene?"

"Heh, heh … I've got a pretty good idea, but I know there's one sure way to find out."

"What's that?" Mike asked.

"Fish it! If you catch a fighting black fish, you probably got the right lake."

"Oh, jeez!" Mike squawked. "There's prob'ly a hundred kinds of black fish!"

"He's got a point there, Gene," Al defended.

"Yeah," intervened George, "just what kind of black fish would it be? You have any idea about that, Gene?"

"I sure do."

"So, what is it? Walleye?"

"Nope."

"What then?"

"Warrior bigmouth!"

"What? What're you talking about?"

"Largemouth bass."

"Huh? Where'd you get that?"

"Frank Crottin."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because," George averred, "native largemouth just aren't common in northern waters."

"Kinda spooky, ain't it?" was Gene's only reply.

No doubt about it, Tom and Gene had succeeded in whetting our anticipation to the boiling point.

The remainder of that evening on the houseboat was devoted to a spirited discussion of the legend we had just heard, as well as our plans to actually seek out and rediscover Pungishemoo. I could not help but feel that somehow my fate was tied to that ancient tale, and that Pungishemoo possibly held some of the clues to my own wilderness quest. I knew that—just as the others would probably do—I would ponder this often during the coming week.

At last, the logistics of the expedition were carefully gone over, the details thoroughly worked out, and all our plans put in order. We were finally ready to pull anchor. The return cruise across the lake, with Gene chatting jovially at the wheel, seemed all too short … so good was the feel of the houseboat's gentle pitching underfoot and the sound of the water rippling alongside. It was a fitting foretaste of wonderful sensations to come.

As if reading my thoughts, Gene smiled as he said, "There's something about the flow and the motion that gets into your system. It's so much better, though, when you're using paddles instead of *pistons* for power, wouldn't you say, Cliff?"

"I know what you mean."

"I guess, as much as I love this old tub, I'd trade 'er for a canoe any day … if I ever had to make that choice. Anyway, we'll soon have it all, won't we? Canoeing, clean lakes, virgin forests, and all the privacy in the world!"

Boy," exclaimed Al, "I might as well take next week off. I won't be worth two cents on the job. All I'll be thinking about is this trip!"

Thus did excitement and anticipation take possession of us. And when finally we left the houseboat at the landing and went our separate ways, a dream went with us. The next time we would all see each other would be at our rendezvous point in Ely, Minnesota, where our wilderness quest would begin.

It would, in the meantime, be a week of impatient, monotonous waiting, brightened only by the frenzy of preparation and the pervasive vision of Pungishemoo. But that would be enough. Whether fact or fancy, that most intriguing legend would be balm to our restless souls … until the day this party of adventurers was happily on its way into the wild unknown.

CHAPTER TWO

Happy day! At four A.M. on the appointed Saturday morning, Al and I, along with our sons Mike and Mark, pulled up in Al's heavily laden Ford pickup-camper in front of an outfitting company at Ely. We had traveled most of the night, Al and I sleeping and driving alternately while the boys slept on top of a stack of duffle in the back. We were early and the first ones there.

We stepped out of the cab to stretch. Beyond the slumbering town to the northeast the sky already wore the first soft glow of approaching dawn. Lights were on in the outfitter store. Checking the two canoes lashed upside down atop the camper, I thought how incongruous and useless they looked up there, and I couldn't wait to get them into the water.

Excited as we were and impatient for action, there was little to do but get back in the car and wait for the arrival of the others. Al promptly dozed off, but my mind was so filled with anticipation of what lay ahead that I found myself wide awake. I sat thinking about the legend. Pungishemoo had somehow become for me a symbol not only of everything I loved about the wilderness, but also of its vast mystery, and suddenly I was praying that we would indeed find the "enchanted" island and the Lake of Echoes. The legend had told of Nature's voices … speaking wisdom and truth for all who would open their ears. And I wondered: did this not hint somehow of humankind's long alienation from nature, of secrets begging to be solved, of knowledge plainly offered but vainly rejected, of primeval connections long repudiated and denied? Surely there must be a message out there in that wilderness … and at any rate, I would have a chance to find out. I would be as close to pure nature as I could ever hope to get, and I would open my ears and my eyes and my mind and my spirit. I would look and listen and meditate … and I would pray that that elusive voice might somehow somewhere single me out and speak to me. If keeping an open ear and seeking mind were requirement enough, as the legend implied, I stood a good chance of hearing, of discovering, of learning … something … anything that might cast further light upon the beguiling mystery that had become the abiding object of my wilderness quest.

It was in the midst of such musings that I heard car motors approach and stop behind us. They were here. We all piled out onto the sidewalk and at once were greeting the Sweasys, the Tomlinsons, Manko, and Daugherty with an enthusiasm which clearly reflected everyone's relief

at having made our rendezvous on time and without a hitch.

"Hi ya, Billy boy!" Mark shouted cajolingly. "I thought you'd never get here."

"Me too. Jeez, what a long drive. We even had to stop along the way to sleep awhile."

"Who could sleep at a time like this?" beamed Mike. "Let's get on to Basswood!"

"Hold it," laughed Gene. "We have a few things to take care of here at the outfitter first … we need our launch reservations and a few more supplies."

At this we all marched into the store. Gene found the proprietor and attended to our launch arrangements while the rest of us browsed among attractive displays of fishing gear, knives, outdoor clothing, camp foods and hardware, tents and accessories, wilderness maps, canoeing gear, Duluth packs—a veritable stockpile of every kind of camping equipment imaginable. A party could come here entirely unprepared and rent or buy everything needed for an expedition. We, of course, had come well-equipped with our own things and had to buy only a few special food items to fill out our needs.

"Well, fellas," Gene finally announced, "we're all set. Let's get some quick chow and then head out for God's country!"

He didn't need to say more. We hurried over to an all-night restaurant and, after catching a hearty breakfast, we were soon driving out the east end of town headed for Winton on Fall Lake three miles away. At Winton we drove down to the loading dock. This was our highway's end, as far as we would drive by car. Here, in such a flurry of ambitious energy as I've seldom seen on the part of the boys, we quickly transferred our canoes and packs from the cars to the big launch.

Fall Lake is six miles long. It is one of several access routes to the border waters of Basswood Lake, and many canoe parties going this way used the launch service to get quickly past its busy boating traffic. As we sped smoothly up the lake we were still seeing many signs of civilization: rows of cottages and lodges along its shores with boats resting at docks and, already (though the rising sun was still low in the east) fishing boats out trolling.

A rough, narrow four-mile dirt road, the remnant of an old logging trail, links the upper end of Fall Lake with Hoist Bay on Basswood Lake. This phase of our journey was a dusty, bouncy ride aboard an ancient weathered bus which the boys appropriately called the "bump buggy." If its presence in such a remote place was unusual, so was the fact that it ran. Yet, with only a few coughs of its tired old motor and some loud grinding of gears, it transported us safely through the forest to Hoist Bay. An old beat-up panel truck pulling a rack-trailer followed the bus with our canoes and duffle.

Somewhere along the road, as we rounded a turn, the driver shouted, "Look ahead!" and there, with its big ears straight up, stood a beautiful whitetail deer staring at us. The animal must have been accustomed to seeing this antique shuttle service, for it merely tossed its head up high and strolled indifferently off into the woods.

"Venison," commented Mike.

"All that kid thinks of is food," muttered his father.

"He's a growing boy," offered Bill with an understanding grin.

In the back seat, to the accompaniment of squeaks and rattles, Tom was happily improvising a camp song.

Just ahead of him, George was perusing a nature field guide. An engineer by profession, George had a scientific inclination that was sure to be an asset to our expedition. Beside him sat Gene's son Will, whose first-hand knowledge of the canoe country was second only to his father's. For more than half of his seventeen years, Will had shared many a canoe trip to the

Quetico with his dad, and it was a comfort to know that these two "veterans" of the wilds would be our trailblazers.

Hoist Bay is one of many large bays in big sprawling Basswood Lake and is frequently used as a gateway to the Quetico. Basswood is as lovely a body of islanded, forest-fringed water as can be found anywhere, yet because it is so near the road's end and remains accessible to motor boats [unlimited motor traffic was permitted throughout Basswood in 1963], civilization still pressed against its southern shores. Many wilderness seekers want nothing to do with motorboats or fishing traffic, no matter how dispersed in such a far-ranging body of water, so they move up through Basswood's eighteen scenic miles as quickly as possible—often by launch, as we were about to do—and actually begin their canoe travel to the Quetico from its upper bays.

So we now had only Basswood Lake between us and the all-pervading wilderness. Our gear was set out on the dock ready for the final launch. Gene made a careful inspection of the packs to make sure they were all accounted for and that they were all properly secured for rugged toting.

There would be a short wait as the launch was made ready. With everything else ready, we had our first opportunity to relax and discuss our immediate plans. Bill wanted to know how long it would take the launch to haul us up the lake to our final takeoff point.

"A couple of hours if all goes well," explained Gene. "We'll have to stop and check in at the Ranger Station and Canada Customs on Ottawa Island along the way."

"Then it doesn't look as if we'll be in our canoes much before noon," Tom observed as he studied his map.

"That leaves us about four or five hours of paddling and portaging before we have to pitch camp for the night," George was counting on his fingers. "You know of any good campsites five hours out of Basswood?"

"As a matter of fact," Gene replied, "I have a good spot in mind. We should make it easily if there are no serious delays."

"What would delay us," asked Al.

"A capsizing, maybe?" quipped Tom as he glanced meaningfully at the boys.

"As long as we're on the subject," Gene warned, exhibiting perhaps a little impatience at the present delay, "you kids be sure to wear your life jackets whenever we're on the water. That's safety rule number one on this expedition."

They got the message.

The launch was finally brought over to the loading area. Within fifteen minutes our gear was stowed aboard and we slid away from the dock. It was great to feel the wind in our faces as we raced out of Hoist Bay into the broad, open expanse of the lake. The boys, visibly excited now, stood along the rail and chattered about everything they saw.

Strong waves were running before a moderate breeze, and the bow—as it cut through them—threw up occasional bursts of fine spray. The spray blurred my sunglasses and it felt cool on the skin. White gulls flashed by, attracted by the foaming wake and the possibility of food. Far out ahead to the east, small rocky islands topped by tall pines and spruces broke the continuity of the distant shoreline. Wherever one looked now, the scene consisted of varying combinations of the four primary features which would dominate our environment for the next two weeks: water, sky, rock, and forest. No longer were we aware of anything related to the civilized environment which we were now putting rapidly behind us. Except for two men in a boat anchored off the point of an island fishing—and a speck of a speeding motor launch far to the south, spewing a bright spray in the sunlight—we were quite by ourselves on the big border

lake, passing imperceptibly from America into Canadian waters; we were having our first sensations of the wilderness closing in.

At length, having traversed the open stretch of the lake, the boat operator throttled down and guided the launch into a narrow channel which curved gradually between two densely wooded islands. Turning abruptly out of the far end, the launch headed straight toward another island which, unlike the others, had the open manicured appearance peculiar to human habitation. From a rough-planked floating dock at the water's edge, a pathway wound upward among tall, scattered red and white pines to a rustic, recently painted brown cabin. Conspicuous against the dark green of the trees, the blazing red-and-white ensign of the Canadian government flapped gently at the tip of a high pine pole. By providing the only eye-catching patch of bright color in sight, the flag not only clearly announced the location of the Ranger Station but somehow seemed to reflect a warm note of official welcome.

And, certainly, the official welcome we received from the Ranger himself was no less warm. In that typically friendly, easy manner which one encounters so often among the Canadian people, he stepped to the counter of the cabin's visitor office and processed the required permit forms with a courteous dispatch which showed he understood the importance of saving as much of our time as he possibly could.

"This is your forest travel permit," he explained about the first form he began filling out. "It will tell us of your whereabouts in case of an emergency? How many days will you be in the Quetico, eh?"

"Fifteen," Gene replied, "counting today and the Saturday two weeks from now when we come out.

"Destination?"

"Did you ever hear …" Gene tested the Ranger purposefully, "of the Lake of Echoes?"

The Ranger looked up, and I thought I detected a flicker of incredulity in his glance as he thoughtfully repeated the name. "Lake of Echoes?"

"That's right," said Gene. "You ever hear of it?"

"Not too many people have," he drawled slowly. Here he paused, scrutinizing Gene as though awaiting some further explanation, but it became apparent that Gene was not going to volunteer any more information than he had to. They stood there silently studying each other like a pair of towering backwoods Titans, then I thought, for a moment, I detected between them a faint glimmer of understanding, or recognition, of some kind. For some incomprehensible reason, the Ranger simply continued, "You familiar with the route?"

"Never been there," replied Gene. "But I have a well-marked map." Here Gene pulled the tattered old chart from his fishing vest pocket and spread it out on the countertop before the Ranger, giving him a quick glance to see what his reaction would be … perhaps to his penciled notations, perhaps to the multi-colored routes of numerous previous canoe trips which reflected his experience. Once again, the two exchanged a sudden, mysterious spark of understanding between them, and the Ranger seemed, in some odd way, to express relief as he gave Gene a subtle, confident nod of approval. Gesturing to the map, Gene said, "I know it's off the beaten path … but is this route very bad?"

The Ranger replied, "Bad is not *exactly* the word for it." He glanced around at the rest of us. "But you'd better be in good shape, eh? The area where you're going is very isolated, and there's no quick way for you to get out if you have to. It's only fair to tell you … so you know what you're up against." He pointed to the map. "Obviously, it's not on an established lake route, and you'll have to travel cross-grain to the general direction of the interior lakes. You'll

have to cross lots of bogs and high ridges. And you're certainly not likely to see any canoe parties in that area … so you'll really be on your own. Just so you understand that, eh?"

"Sounds pretty rough," Bill interposed.

"And exciting," added Tom with a smack of his lips, as if the prospect of danger and difficulty were something to be relished.

"Well, if you really want to work for it," the Ranger assured us, "you'll probably have a nice lake all to yourselves."

At this point Al suddenly asked the question which probably was on all our minds. "Do you know this lake, sir? Have you ever been there?"

The Ranger, shooting a quick smile at Gene, simply replied, "Nope. Can't say that I have."

But Al, undoubtedly on his son's behalf, angled for one more bit of information. "Is there any good *fishing* up in that area?"

"Should be excellent. You can be sure it isn't overfished. But now … let's get on with the permit, eh?" With that, the Ranger acquired further information from Gene and entered on the form the general route we would be following and the number of persons in our party.

Next we were issued entry permits for five canoes, for which we were charged four dollars each. Then a campsite permit for five dollars, which was required for occupancy of campsites anywhere in the Quetico. Finally, we bought fishing licenses for the six adults in our party at six dollars a license. The four boys, all under eighteen, would be covered by their fathers' licenses. The Ranger concluded the transaction by providing us with a supply of plastic trash bags to be used for hauling out any litter which couldn't be burned in our campfires.

"Leave a clean and tidy campsite," he said in a parting oration that had the flat recitational cadence of a memorized speech. "Be sure to burn all waste papers and rubbish, including garbage, regularly each day. And remember, green trees make fine scenery but poor firewood, so gather your wood from dry, dead timber. Dig your latrines at least a hundred feet from the lakeshore and the campsite. Make your campfires on bare rock or sand, and *never* leave a fire unattended. Soak it with water until it is dead out. Goodbye, gentlemen." Then he walked around the end of the counter and, giving Gene what appeared to be a meaningful little wink while we all filed out, added, "Have a safe trip!"

One more formality remained—a quick visit to the Customs Station on another nearby island. There, in much the same businesslike but friendly manner of the Ranger, the Customs officer made a perfunctory listing of our gear and food supplies. After some quick calculations with pencil and paper, he concluded that the foodstuffs we were bringing in—which, of course, had been purchased in the United States—were subject to an import duty of thirty-one dollars and twenty-seven cents.

Somehow this raid on our budget by the Canadian government struck me as being extremely irregular. The permit purchases we had been obliged to make at the Ranger Station had seemed fair and acceptable, for they covered services and privileges we would be using and enjoying throughout the expedition. But having to pay twice for one's groceries seemed a low blow, at least in view of the utter necessity of a food supply in the wilderness and the seemingly contrived manner in which Customs took advantage of that fact. Perhaps I was a bit sensitive to such matters, but I could have hoped that my *final* impression of our good hosts, at least, might have been more satisfying.

The matter was soon forgotten, however, in the keen sense of adventure which mounted, mile by mile, as the launch streaked up along the west shore of big Ottawa Island past Canadian

Point, up the long northern arm of Basswood with its grand view of high, green Minnesota Point several miles across to the west … then through the picturesque high-rock narrows of White Island, and finally up into North Bay of Basswood Lake.

During this run we had time to eat a lunch of ham-and-cheese sandwiches, oranges, and sweet rolls which we had brought along in a special parcel for just this occasion. Chocolate candy bars were passed out for snacks later, on the trail. When next we ate, it would be a hot supper off our first evening's campfire.

And now, at last, that great eagerly awaited moment of final transition to the wilderness was close at hand. The launch came to its last stop and we found ourselves floating gently in calm water off the sheltered side of a narrow little island close to the northern shore, an ideal spot for our grand embarkation. In a matter of minutes our one remaining contact with civilization would be severed. Under the meticulous supervision of Gene and Tom, the canoes were lowered to the water one by one and loaded carefully with the number of packs they could safely hold. Some were given three packs, some four, depending upon weight and bulk.

We almost had a dunking when Mark, overly anxious to get into our canoe, slipped while scrambling over the rail of the launch and landed, luckily, in an undignified sprawl across the bow of the canoe. As he settled sheepishly into his seat, amid a chorus of playful chiding by the other boys, Gene cautioned them.

"All right, kids!" he exclaimed. "There's a good example of how things can happen. Now I know you're excited, but let's just slow down … and have a nice *dry* trip. Alright?"

"And," Tom cut in, "make sure you have your life jackets on!"

"Well," said Al, as he checked out his own red-headed, freckled fledgling and lifted a final pack from the deck of the launch into his canoe, "I think we're all set. Come on, Mike, take the bow."

Mike and his father boarded their craft and pulled away a short distance from the launch to await the others. I handed Mark his paddle then climbed down into the stern seat, and we too pulled away.

The canoe felt good under me. For the first time, I realized, I was beginning noticeably to relax. Until now I'd been uptight, impatient, anxious, still under the tensions of the past week on the job. I filled my pipe and lit it. A wonderful elation was coming over me, and I felt strangely grateful that fate and circumstance had made all this possible.

"Ho, Mark," I called out, "how do you feel now?"

"Geeze, Pop," Mark turned around with an expression on his face which would have made his words unnecessary. "Thanks for bringing me along!"

Something in that simple utterance told me I had a fine son, and I wanted to hug him. "I wouldn't want it any other way," I assured him.

Bill Sweasy and his sinewy, blond-headed eleven-year-old were now paddling over to us.

"I've sure been looking forward to this," Bill exclaimed as they came alongside. "What a gorgeous day!"

And gorgeous it was. The bright sun gave a vivid glow to the green forest which stretched away along the near shore, and the sky couldn't have been more blue. The air over the water was cool, clear, and invigorating.

Next came Gene and his stalwart, silent companion, Will. The sure, easy way this father-and-son team handled their canoe indicated they'd done this plenty of times before. I glanced toward the launch. Manko and Daugherty, the last to leave it, were just pushing off. As soon as they were clear, the launch operator started his motor. After a parting shout of "Good luck!" and

a farewell wave of his arm, he churned off with a roar. Silently we watched the launch recede into the distance until its motor could no longer be heard.

"Well, voyageurs," shouted Gene excitedly, "from here on it's all ours! Onward to Pungishemoo!"

If it can be hoped of this account that the full dimensions of the experience shall have been recorded, then certainly, to me, one of the rich enjoyments of this particular trip had to be the way troubadour Tom filled his moments—and ours—with frequent zestful renditions of camping songs, many of which he actually made up to suit the occasion. And now, as he and George glided up to join the flotilla, his good strong voice, mellowed by many summers of carefree campfire vocalizing, burst forth upon the quiet air with a song entirely new to us which we were to hear many times in varying versions. It was, as he would explain later, his "official" theme song for our expedition—something he'd just dreamed up piece-by-piece as we went along and which he had titled, appropriately, *The Song of Pungishemoo.*

And here was our introduction to it, in that assertive yet nonchalant, natural style which gave every Manko song a kind of intimate conversational quality, reflecting much of the spirit and sentiment of our wilderness adventure.

VERSE:
When the spring breezes bring
Warming days and birds that sing,
I dream of Pungishemoo …
I long once more for the peaceful shore
Of the enchanted island campground …

REFRAIN:
Where every trouble floats like a bubble,
Every day is brighter, cares are lighter …
Comes the dawn, packs are on, paddle on and portage on:
Pungishemoo here we come!

VERSE:
How I pray for the day
When I'm paddling on my way
To the Isle of Pungishemoo …
I'll be northward bound till at last I've found
That shining island campground …

REFRAIN:
Where every trouble …

VERSE:
Pack a sack on your back,
Soon we'll pitch a bivouac
On the Isle of Pungishemoo …
Under smiling skies where the seagull flies

You will find our island campground …

Urged on by our troubadour after a few stanzas, we were soon joining him in the song's hearty refrain, its high spirit becoming so infectious that it put everyone in a kind of delirious spell. In an extremely loud if somewhat dissonant chorus we intoned the final repeated phrases as if we wanted that vast silent audience of conifers along the shore to hear every word …

Where every trouble floats like a bubble,
Every day is brighter, cares are lighter …
Comes the dawn, packs are on, paddle on and portage on:
Pungishemoo here we come!

CHAPTER THREE

"Okay, guys," Gene directed good naturedly as soon as the song was over and Tom had been roundly applauded, "we have a long way to go … so let's hit those paddles!"

Whereupon he and Will took the lead and struck out sharply along the shore toward a wide shallow cove profusely grown over with reeds. Behind them the other canoes moved in single file like mallard ducklings trailing their mother. They made a wide turn and entered the narrow channel of a small stream sluggishly winding down through the reeds into the lake. Paddling steadily up this channel we were soon out of sight of Basswood Lake.

As the course of the stream gradually narrowed between two solid walls of spruce, I suddenly realized we were truly within the wilderness now. Watching Mark in the bow as he stroked the water, I knew the excitement which must have gripped him, for as he scanned the shore and then the sky and then the clean, clear water beneath us, I could recall myself in a similar situation long ago during my own first encounter with such a primitive world in the company of my father. Many of the most lovable things I remember about my parents were related somehow to nature and the sharing of outdoor experience. What a bounty of lifelong happiness they had given me through early exposure to the beauty and the mystery of the natural world. And what a satisfaction it was now to be able to pass it on to still another generation.

Here in the shelter of the dense reeds, the air was still and the sun was hot. Perspiration glistened on straining brows. Backs and muscles flexed with every paddle stroke. For a short time the soft rhythmic did-dip-dip of the paddles was the only sound as each of us in his own way fell pensively under the spell of the silent, enveloping forest.

Ah, but it was good to be here. It had taken some doing, but we were into the wilderness at last—we could finally experience that brief edenic freedom which can no longer be found anywhere except in a few remaining wild places such as this.

Where else can be found such freedom? For as free as we may fancy ourselves in the cozy strongholds of urban domesticity back home, where else indeed but in the wild places are we able to feel beholden to so few and to shed so easily the burdens of our temporal concerns? At home, bound as we must always be to the ceaseless demands and pressures of civilization, do we ever really dare to shed our conventional shells and live even briefly outside ourselves? Dare we loiter for even a moment? Dare we take a day off when we please for idle dreaming? Dare

we miss a morning's shave or a monthly payment?

Yes, into the wilderness at last. Free at last! Already you could sense the tension slacken after the first few speechless moments of contact with this strange wild world that would be our home for the next two weeks.

To the boys, of course, the adventure now beginning to unfold was especially impressive and stimulating. I found it fascinating to listen to them react to each new discovery.

"Those trees look like church steeples," observed Mike as he scanned the serrated skyline of the spruce forest.

The trees did indeed appear as spires pointing heavenward, and Mark responded with something I remembered having told him once: "Well, that's because the forest is the only cathedral God built with his own hands."

"Hey, that's pretty good! I like that one," mused Billy, paddling close behind us. "I'll have to remember it."

In the clear water beneath us, which was not much deeper than one paddle length, small fish could be plainly seen darting among rocks and dense patches of vegetation.

"Lots of minnows in here," Mark called back as our canoe glided steadily forward.

"Know what that means?" I replied.

"What?"

"It means this is a good place for a big northern to be hanging out."

I'd hardly finished the sentence when Mark suddenly lurched forward and stared wildly into the water just ahead. With a shout that was more like an uncontrolled squeal, he stammered, "Dad, look! That's a … that's a fish! I thought it was a log! Geeze, it's huge!" He was now rocking the canoe as he shifted about and peered intently over one side and then the other.

"Steady, Mark," I cautioned.

"Ho, man! Did you see it? You guys, I just saw a huge fish—as long as my paddle—in front of the canoe!"

"Aw," Billy shouted back, perhaps a bit dubiously, "that's nothing like the one I'm gonna catch."

"Ha!" Mark returned. "You'll be lucky to even catch one a tenth that size!"

"Yeah, ya wanna bet?"

"Sure … I'll bet you a dollar I catch the first big fish."

"I'll bet *you* I catch the *biggest* fish."

Then, from the canoe in front of us, Mike boasted, "I'll bet you guys I catch the first *and* the biggest fish. So whadda ya think of that?"

"Keep 'er in the channel!" boomed his father as they swerved suddenly toward a protruding deadhead. "Let's get to where we're going first … then maybe we can *all* go fishing."

"Amen to that," I heard Tom mutter from behind.

Suddenly Gene's voice cut in crisply up ahead: "Portage!"

He and Will were approaching a rock shelf at the water's edge that appeared to be the landing. The stream beyond them lost itself among impassable boulders. From the landing a wide rocky trail led up to the top of a granite bank.

Minutes later we were unloading the canoes and lifting them one by one out of the water to negotiate our first portage. Gene quickly sorted the packs by weight and assigned the smaller trail packs to the boys. Then with a firm grip he hoisted a pack, slipped his shoulders into the straps, and with an easy flip of his powerful arms raised his canoe onto his shoulders. "This is a short one, fellas," he called back as he set out gingerly up the trail. "Don't overload—we can

always come back for the rest."

"Ha!" quipped Tom, watching Gene with his double burden disappear beyond the rise, "don't overload, he says. And he takes the cook pack and a canoe!"

"Why don't *you* try that, dad?" Mike teased his father.

"That remark borders on the impertinent," replied Al with a meaningful smile. "I hope the only thing I have to paddle on this trip is the water." At that he shouldered a canoe and trudged up the trail.

I helped Mark with his pack and off he went. The bill of his blue Little League cap dipped before him as he plodded up the embankment, a tuft of hair bulging like a little brown mushroom through the band on the backside. His moderate build belied a peculiar inherent ambition which took me rather by surprise; he mounted the bank with such astonishing self-determination that I wondered if he might actually be able to handle a Duluth pack himself! I got under a canoe and followed. Behind me came the others, each with his own burden. The distance to the top of the rise was about fifty paces. Reaching it, I could see ahead to where Gene was putting down his canoe at the edge of a lake hardly more than a hundred yards across but which stretched far off to the left. The opposite shore was a solid forest wall of mingled spruce and red pine.

"Not much of a lake," I said as I came to the water and floated my canoe beside Gene's.

"Actually, our next portage is around that point at the far end, about a mile," he motioned.

Appearing over the rise with his canoe, George called, "I hope all the portages are as short as this one!"

Gene merely chuckled.

Soon we were loaded and paddling again, this time over open water where we could proceed in close flotilla-like formation. This proved to be too tempting for the boys.

"We'll race you to the next portage," shouted Mike as he chopped vigorously at the water from his canoe next to us.

"Okay, you're on!" responded Mark, quickening his paddle strokes from the bow of our canoe.

"You guys better knock that off," cracked Al. "Save your strength for later. I think you're going to need it."

"Once we're in camp," I admonished, "you guys can race all day long. Right now, let's just make sure we get there."

"Amen to that," chorused Tom from his nearby canoe.

When we had paddled some distance down the lake, my nephew suddenly croaked, "I'm thirsty."

"Well, help yourself," his father replied. "Your fountain's all about you."

Mike looked glumly at the water "Is it really safe to drink?"

Just then Billy dipped a cupped hand into the lake. "Yeah, I've been waiting to try this," he said. He drank several samplings in quick succession as Mike watched him.

"How does it taste?" the reluctant redhead queried, revealing by a slight hint of repugnance a finicky side to his nature … the progress of which would undoubtedly be interesting to watch under the rugged conditions of wilderness living.

"I don't know," answered Billy. "Pretty good, I guess."

Only when the rest of us confidently dipped in and drank did Mike finally try it, proclaiming good naturedly, "well, it can't be any worse than thirst."

Actually, after a few tries, one gets accustomed to the flat taste of this extremely soft

water. It helps, I suppose, to be aware that you either drink *this* water or none at all. But it really is extraordinary—in this day and age, at least—to be able to safely drink water that stands exposed to the elements all year round. Water that has not yet been fouled by human contaminants. Water that is till as pure as the fountains of paradise!

Watching my companions thus trustingly accept this vital potion from the hand of Nature, I was impelled to wonder: Is not the imbibing of this entirely clean and therefore perfect wilderness water somehow a partaking of heaven's own nectar, a tapping of the Creator's wellspring of life, a receiving of a kind of sacramental pabulum placed here in limitless abundance for the sustenance of all living things? Would it not follow, then, that humankind's widespread desecration of this sacred life source must surely be one of the most perverse acts of defiance and insult against that Creator … and certainly the most stupid and foolhardy of insults, because it is as suicidal as it is unnecessary?

Pondering these things, I no longer needed to wonder. When I dipped and drank of that wild unblemished water with the rest of my companions, I felt sweep over me a sensation of deep reverence and mystery very much like what I experienced as a boy when I received the Sacrament of Communion.

Again I was aware of the plain and simple fact that much of the reason everything in this pristine environment had such irresistible appeal was because it was still relatively free from human influence. This must *surely* be basic to the value and meaning behind the lure of the wilderness.

As we paddled onward, I looked at all of this quiet world about us, thinking how closely purity and beauty walked together. It was wonderful to be able to daydream, rapt in contented musings, filled with the pleasant sensation of peace and well-being. All the things were here that gave strength to the body and peace to the spirit. And they were here in a perfection rarely to be found. Where else was air so fresh, water so pure, or earth so clean? Where else was silence so serene, or sounds so soothing, as where the forests whisper to these ancient rocks?

After traveling the length of the lake and making another brief portage, we found ourselves afloat on a picturesque body of water. Much of the lakeshore was set off impressively by a slanting, bright pinkish rim of weathered granite occasionally indented by small bays. At a distance the slanting rock looked deceivingly like sandy beach. Above and beyond the granite shores reposed the imperturbable forest, its serried north face a cheerful, shimmering green in the direct sunlight, while—opposite—the forest's back lighted south face wore a veil of somber shadow, all providing contrasting moods of "glad" and "gloom" staring at each other across the water.

Ahead and to the right, several narrow points—actually, little more than reefs—jutted out from the shore. Around them a brownish cast to the water indicated extremely shallow rocks (of the kind that have little respect for the thin skin of canoe bottoms!), so we swerved toward the left shore and followed this for about a mile.

At one point a pair of loons swimming just ahead of us dived out of sight. Moments later they bobbed to the surface a hundred yards off to our right. Mark was quite impressed.

"Boy, they sure swim fast."

"Faster than fish," I replied. "They have to get their meals by … out-swimming the swimmers … so to speak."

Mark turned around and looked at me with a half-cocked grin to let me know what he thought of my obviously unsuccessful play on words.

We were cutting along briskly now, with a slight breeze at our backs. Suddenly Tom

started singing again, and I was delighted to hear him reel off another appropriate verse to his song, timing it to coincide with our paddle strokes:

> Glide along, sing a song,
> Paddle steady, paddle strong,
> On the trail to Pungishemoo …
> Leave your cares behind, paddle till you find
> That magic island campground!

… and then again that joyous refrain to which we heartily strained our voices.

Then and there I witnessed a patent demonstration of the magical power music can sometimes have over the human spirit. As if some kind of pep potion had suddenly been injected into those toiling muscles, every paddler among us was—by the time the song ended—taking longer, deeper, strokes. Our speed had increased noticeably. And, for a good part of the day, we continued to make respectable progress on our journey.

We were just rounding a small island off the west shore when Gene's quick eye saw it first.

"Look up there quick!" he shouted excitedly. "That tall tree on the point!"

We all stared off left, and I saw it the same time everyone else did, a huge, dark, raptor-like bird with a white head, perched majestically on top of the highest tree in sight. You couldn't mistake that bird if the only one you'd ever seen was in a picture book.

"It's … it's a bald eagle," I stammered.

"It's a bald eagle all right," Gene replied. "Will you look at that!"

"Boy," rejoined George, "if you need any proof we're in the wilds now, there he sits!"

For me, as it must have been for the others, my first sight of this beautiful, uncommon creature—whose profound message of peace had played such a large part in the legend we had all heard—was a supreme thrill. If I never have the same experience again, I shall always know that I was one of the fortunate few of my generation who have had the rare privilege of meeting this great avian aristocrat in his own territory. "My …" I nearly whispered, "this is truly … a Magnificent Moment."

How rare indeed this encounter was became poignantly clear a moment later when Gene reminded us of the ominous fate which then threatened this stately species.

"Take a good look, everybody," he declared gravely. "This could very well be the last bald eagle you'll ever see. They're going extinct. From DDT."

By now there wasn't a paddle in the water, and several pairs of binoculars were passing rapidly from hand to hand as eager eyes strained for a big, lasting impression. What a noble specimen he was! Through the glasses we could make out clearly the fierce face and eyes, the proud white head and tail, the powerful talons clamping the tree limb.

Bill Sweasy was thinking out loud. "God, it's sad we could let a thing like that happen," he mumbled philosophically. "What the hell is it with us?"

"It's only a matter of time, I'm afraid" Gene replied. "DDT's headed right up the food chain."

"How can *we* even survive," continued Bill, "with such disregard for living things on this planet?"

"Not a very encouraging prospect, is it?" This from George, whose face actually wore an

expression of deep, sad concern.

When at last the bald eagle lifted imposingly on its powerful wings and soared out of sight beyond the roof of the forest, it appeared to be a somewhat solemn group of paddlers who resumed their journey. "So there flies the mighty Thunderbird," George muttered solemnly. "The mighty Thunderbird …"

It wasn't until we arrived at the next portage that our natural exuberance seemed to return and we were able to put our minds to pleasanter things. And this would include a patch of plump, ripe blueberries!

It wasn't a big patch that Tom and Al found near the landing, but it provided a delightful diversion … and just enough of a sampling to whet our appetites for what we would be at greater liberty to indulge in later on.

"Boy," commented Billy as he stuffed a handful in his mouth, "they sure are sweet!"

"Looks like a good year for berries," observed Gene. "But now—we'd better keep moving. We don't have much time to squander today."

The portage upon which we now ventured became our first real test of endurance. Rugged and difficult, it extended upward along an old dry streambed strewn with boulders big and small and so numerous that simply climbing around them was impossible. It was necessary to move over them, stepping and staggering from the top of one boulder to another. Gene, with his powerful frame and heavy load, seemed to have the least trouble. His boots clomped confidently from rock to rock with such deceptive ease that I wondered why my own feet should feel so clumsy and uncertain.

The trick was to maintain forward momentum, with your weight always falling slightly ahead as you stepped out to the next rock. However, there wasn't always a next rock just where I needed it and I would have to stop or lurch sideways to find one within reach. I couldn't help but laugh at the comic weirdness of the choreography we were required to perform over this difficult stretch. From the sounds and exclamations behind me, I knew some of the others were faring no better than I. With a pack on my back and (this time) a canoe on my shoulders, it didn't take much of such exertions to set my heart thumping and lungs heaving.

The boys, of course, with their youthful agility—and burdened only with their small back packs—had to make a noisy game of it … all the way up to where the trail dropped over a low rise then leveled off at the edge of a spongy muskeg swamp.

I was exhausted when I reached the edge of the swamp and I had to lean my canoe against a scrub cedar to catch my breath. Al, George, Tom, and Bill—all puffing and grunting under their loads—came up one by one and joined me in a brief respite at the cedar. Gene, Will, and the boys passed us by and entered the bog in follow-the-leader rank and file.

"Gawd, how do they do it?" gasped George as he watched the procession. "They didn't even stop for a breath. I wish I had all that stamina."

"Well, for one thing they don't smoke," Bill commented, obviously intending a not too subtle but friendly hint to George who was a heavy smoker.

"Hell, I haven't had a smoke since we left the launch."

"Yeah, but I noticed you had three <u>on</u> the launch," Al countered with a testing smile.

"Well … I'm quitting."

"Just like that?"

"Yep, just like that. I'm using this trip to do it."

"Man, that's a pretty tall order for this trip!" I exclaimed, having once smoked cigarettes

myself. "You sure you can do it?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure."

"You cravin' any yet?" asked Tom.

"You bet I am."

"What? You showin' us some will power here, George?" teased Al.

"Will power, hell." George's expression now melted into an odd sheepish grin. "More like … desperation."

"Hah! You're out?"

"Yeah … I'm out alright. I left two full cartons back home."

"Well, that takes some guts anyway," consoled Bill.

"Not exactly.

"Why is that?" asked Al suspiciously.

"I just plain forgot them," George confessed. "I just found out on the last portage … I forgot to put them in my pack!"

We laughed in unison. George just shook his head with a self-defeated grin, got back under his canoe, and trudged resolutely out over a patch of sphagnum and sedge onto the bog. His body disappeared where the trail passed through giant grassy reeds; only his canoe, seemingly afloat—upside down and skimming the tops of the tall plants—was visible.

We soon followed and were promptly introduced to a new kind of leg-stretching exertion. Just enough water saturated the soft peaty ground to create a suction as our boots sank into it. It was necessary to apply extra muscle power to pull free at each step. To make matters worse, one couldn't stop to rest. Even a moment's pause caused the feet to sink deeper into the muck, demanding additional effort.

"They should use this place to train football players," commented Tom, puffing loudly just behind me.

The hot sun made the air over the marsh uncomfortably humid, and sweat flowed profusely. It cascaded off my forehead, smarting my eyes. And wouldn't you know! This was the precise moment—in a condition of maximum helplessness—when those pesky little northern deer flies seemed to almost instinctively choose to launch a buzzing, bite-and-run air attack. And it only takes one, banging and biting at your head, to cause you absolute frustration.

"Aw, geeze! You know, I can usually stand mosquitoes," George, half turning around, grunted just in front of me, "but these infernal flies drive me nuts!"

"And they always seem to find you when you can't fight back," I replied.

"That's all part of the strategy!" hollered Tom from behind. "Pretty clever, huh?"

"Cowardly would be a better word, dang it!" exclaimed George just as he nearly lost his balance trying to evade a particularly persistent assailant.

Tom laughed, then, once again, seemed to sweep away all misery with that booming singing-voice of his:

> Never sigh, never cry
> When you're bitten by a fly …
> On the trail to Pungishemoo …
> It's a meager price for the paradise
> Of that quiet island campground …

To the rhythms of the refrain which followed, we plodded forward. And we were soon back on

solid ground.

The trail continued around a green shallow pond spattered with white water lilies. We climbed another rocky hogback then ambled down through a grove of tall Norway pines to the edge of a broad blue lake. There we joined the others and, anxious to relieve our tired legs, lost no time getting the canoes back beneath us.

We headed into a light breeze which, sweeping over quite an expanse of open water, was whipping up enough wave action to add noticeable resistance to our progress.

"Wow, this is a big lake," commented Billy as we got under way.

"Too big," drawled Mark, yielding to a streak of frustration that usually seemed to show up when he began to tire.

"Oh, it isn't that bad now," I laughed. "It's just that you guys are low on fuel. It's been a long day …"

"But we're almost there," Gene interrupted. "You see that point a couple miles up the east shore? Not far beyond that is our home for the night."

"And we're just going to make it," added Tom as he squinted over his shoulder toward where the sun was well into its down-swing in the western sky.

"We'll pitch camp in an hour or so," Gene assured us, *"if* we can keep the pace."

But holding pace against even this light wave action required real extra effort. Both my arms felt drained of strength; the distance to the jut of land toward which we now pointed our bows seemed an infinity. I wondered if the others felt the same dull in-creeping fatigue I was experiencing. As if in answer to my thoughts, Al broke a particularly long period of silence with the assertion that he couldn't remember the last time he'd put forth so much physical exertion in one day.

"Don't poop out now, Pop," Mike teased.

"Yeah? Well, let's have less lip and more paddle," countered his father with feigned sternness. "I can't push this thing all by myself."

Our course now lay close along the east shore, flanked by the unbroken green wall of the forest. Al had hardly spoken when Billy sounded off excitedly just ahead.

"Look! Look over there—on the shore! That's … that's a bear!"

All paddles abruptly came to rest and everybody stared at the big, shaggy black animal which was poking about among the rocks not fifty yards away. The bear looked up and stared back at us. He sniffed the air, seeking our scent.

"Ursus Americanus!" George pronounced in the manner of a scientist delighted at making an interesting discovery.

"Can he swim?" Mike instantly wanted to know.

"Sure … I guess," answered Mark a bit uncertainly.

"Could he swim out here?"

"Let's not find out," cracked his father, stifling a smile. "Keep paddling."

All the boys promptly displayed an amazing renewal of energy. Their paddles were in the water at once and, as the bear finally turned and lumbered off into the forest, all hands—tired or not—were making a brisk business of closing the distance to the point.

Tom lightened that phase of the paddling with another impromptu version of his song. We all laughed as we joined in refrain, for it certainly did reflect how we felt:

> Muscles sore, what a chore!
> Seems a million miles or more

To the isle of Pungishemoo …
Well, we can't stop here 'cause a bear is near,
So we'll head right for our campground!

As we rounded the point, our stopping place for the night came into view. It was a fine small island, canopied by a tall stand of Norway pine several acres in area and lying just off the east shore about half a mile beyond the point. I well remember what a grand feeling it was, after those many sleepless and strenuous hours, to be within sight of a haven that promised warm cooked food, shelter … and heavenly rest!

Like the final spurt a good runner will save for the end of the race, our paddles now slipped into a strong, steady rhythm which did not again diminish until we entered the channel which separated the island from the shore.

CHAPTER FOUR

There comes that welcome moment during the course of a wilderness journey when, in the waning hours of a long and arduous day, weary travelers set aside the toil-honored paddles and stop to sleep their first night in the restful embrace of nature's trouble-free world. For us, it came when we touched the island that would provide our first overnight campsite. Eagerly we stepped ashore. Gear and canoes were quickly beached and toted up the slanted rock to a spacious clearing among the trees a short distance from the water.

I marveled at the efficient manner in which our two experts, Gene and Tom, took over the orderly establishment of the camp. As Gene supervised the erection of our tents in a semi-circle along one side of the clearing, Tom was already kindling a fire in a natural rocky depression at the center of the site which made an ideal kitchen area. Using small boulders fetched by the boys, Tom built up the sides and back of the fire pit so that our cooking grill could be set firmly over the flames. This accomplished, Tom got out the food and cooking gear and, humming all the while, busied himself with the preparation of supper.

Meanwhile, at Gene's insistence, the rest of us foraged the island for firewood. Billy and Mark couldn't understand why we should be gathering wood when a plentiful supply had already been stacked by previous campers in a neat pile at the edge of camp.

"We've already got all the wood we need," observed Billy. "Look, somebody else made too much and left the rest for us."

"That was just good manners," explained Will. "It's a camping custom up here to leave a wood supply for the next campers. Somebody we don't even know left us that wood so we could get our supper going right away."

"Oh—well, I guess that was pretty nice of 'em, then."

"Yep, and now it's our turn to do the same. It's the Big Circle, see. Somebody does something for you … you do something for somebody else. Just think of the fix we'd be in if we'd gotten here after dark in a rainstorm or something and we had to go looking for firewood."

"Why, is wood that hard to find?"

"Not during the day. But when that sun goes down and the mosquitoes come out … well, you'd just better have all your firewood, right?"

"I s'pose so."

Besides," added the older boy with a twinkle in his eye, "who'd want to meet up with a bear after dark!"

"Ha, ha!" Billy laughed. "We'd better go get that firewood then. Ha! Let's go." With that, the three of them trudged a short distance into the woods to gather wood.

Bill, who overheard this conversation as I had, came over to where I was breaking a dry branch from a dead fallen pine tree. "Isn't that great? What a lesson for the boys," he remarked. Then he added musingly, "The Big Circle, eh? Wouldn't it be nice if people were always that considerate back home?"

There seemed to be some real substance to that observation and, as I thought about it, I realized that the wilderness really did seem to bring out something basically good in people. Not only had those who came before us been thoughtful enough to leave us a stack of firewood but, as I had earlier noticed, they also had left the campsite so clean that the only evidence of their passing was in the charred residue of their campfire. Would these same travelers have behaved in a similar manner back home? I wasn't sure. While some may argue that the wilderness attracts exceptional people, maybe it simply compels ordinary people to think and perform in exceptional ways.

When enough rough wood had been gathered into a pile, Mark picked up Gene's axe and was about to chop a long stick into short pieces when Gene, seeing him, shouted frantically, "Wait, Mark! The sheath! You've got to take off the sheath!"

"The sheath? What … Oh, sorry, you mean this."

Gene was beside Mark in a flash. Snatching the axe from him, he called Mike and Billy over. "Look, guys," he told them, "I know you'll be tempted to use this ax now and then, so just to make sure you don't make any mistakes, I'd better explain a couple things. First, don't ever *chop* a log into shorter pieces. Use the camp saw for that—it's faster and safer. This axe is for trimming off branches and splitting firewood *only*. Okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. Uh-huh," nodded the boys.

"Now … the sheath." Gene pointed to it while looking directly at Mark. "If you want to r-e-a-l-l-y disgrace yourself, just forget to take this off before you start chopping." Here he paused to drive home his point. "And put it back *on* when you're done. Get the picture?"

"Yes, Gene," Mark replied sheepishly.

"See, you won't just ruin the sheath, guys," Gene brightened up a bit, "but your *reputation* … as expert woodsmen. Good lord, you don't want *that* to happen, now do you!"

"Hah," Mike responded to Gene's sudden good humor. "Heavens … we certainly wouldn't want to do that! Good lord, no!"

Billy laughed, "Well, have *you* ever split a sheath, Gene—in all your years of camping?"

"No sir!" Gene straightened and his chest puffed out. "Not once. By God, I've never committed that insidious crime … and that's more than a lot of campers can claim. Right, Tom?" Everyone looked over at Tom, who had been listening to all this as he cooked.

"Has he ever split the sheath?" inquired Mark.

"Why don't you ask him?" suggested Gene with an odd little chuckle.

But Tom merely changed the subject with the magic words we had all been waiting to hear: "Chow's on—come and get it!" Thus was abruptly ended Gene's rather blusterous lesson to the boys.

For our first supper in the wilderness Tom provided a delightful surprise. First he served up fresh whole potatoes baked over hot coals, along with steamed green peas and a carrot-slaw

salad. Then he unveiled a veritable *piece de resistance* so beyond our expectations that it must be chronicled as one of the truly pleasant mealtime highlights of our trip. Imagine how tired, muscle-sore, and hungry we were as we formed the chow line. Then imagine what our feelings were as each of us turned loose his ravenous appetite upon, of all things, a huge, sizzling T-bone steak!

Oh, what a supper that was! To this day I marvel at how Tom managed to do it. In the absence of refrigeration he had to take special measures to keep the meat fresh throughout a long night and an entire day of hot, sultry travel. Tom later explained that the key to it was in starting with solid frozen meat packed in an insulated wrapping which, despite the heat, allowed it only a slow rate of thaw. By the time he was ready to cook, our steaks were just right for the grill.

And you can be sure that if to most of us the steaks brought a distinctive pleasure, they brought pure ecstasy to Mike. His happy purring between mouthfuls were a study in perfect gourmet contentment.

"Boy, if this is an example of wilderness eating," he exulted as the last morsel disappeared from his plate, "I'm all for staying here for a month."

"I wouldn't be too hasty to make that claim," laughed Tom.

"Why not?"

"Well, you've just devoured the last of the fresh meat."

Mike gave him a puzzled look.

"What he means, Mike," I quickly interjected, taking advantage of my nephew's momentary quandary, "from now on, if we're lucky … our only fresh flesh will be fish!"

Sitting on a log across from me, Mark grimaced and shook his head. "Sick, Dad."

"But whadda ya mean, *lucky?"* asked Mike, suddenly worried. "Where we're going there's supposed to be lots of fish, right?"

"Y-e-e-e-s, but we've still got to catch 'em. No lake, no matter how legendary, will do our fishing for us."

"If the fish are there, we'll catch 'em," Mike affirmed.

"Well, then, let's just hope we can get there … so we can test that promise," replied Tom.

"Just how sure *are* we of finding this place, Gene?" Bill suddenly inquired.

"Oh, I don't know," Gene answered with a shrug. "We have the map—and we'll sure follow it—but I'm just not sure what we're going to find up there. I've been goofed up plenty of times by scribbled instructions or wrongly marked portages on the map. Just bushwhacking through timber can lead to dead ends."

"Well, if that's the case, then," observed George, "we may as well not even know where it is, right?"

Gene, perhaps a little irritated by his own uncertainty, replied, "Oh, I don't know, fellas. I've been through a lot of the Quetico. And it's true I've never been to this part of it. But we'll give it our best shot. The lake is there, it's on the map … and I intend to find it! That's all there is to it."

I needed that little reassurance. I had by now developed a burning hope that we would reach that enchanted island. I was still confident that somehow—perhaps even from the legendary "voices" themselves—I might learn some of the answers to my wilderness quest. And from that moment on, I kept a wary eye on Gene's every change of mood. It would be a reliable indicator of our progress.

The long lingering twilight of a typical northern summer evening had set in, giving the

boys just enough time to try some fishing along the shore of the island. Nary a fish showed up, but it was Mike, casting near the canoe landing, who spotted much bigger game.

"You guys!" he yelled excitedly. "That *bear* … he found us! Look!"

We all hurried over to where he stood shouting and waving his arms. Sure enough, just across the channel in a small clearing lumbered a huge black bear. Though he seemed to be foraging for blueberries, he could also, as George made haste to observe, have come to investigate what his keen nose was indicating as some especially good eating possibilities in the vicinity.

"Tom, your magnificent steak supper has attracted a customer," George declared with that indirect way he had of using some special incident to pay a compliment.

"That's one customer I don't need," laughed Tom, obviously pleased by the remark.

"He's caught the scent of our kitchen, all right," reckoned Gene, "but I'd be surprised if he'd actually try to swim across all that water for Tom's leftovers."

"Well," asserted Tom with feigned indignance, "if you can *find* any leftovers, I'd be happy to paddle 'em over myself and save him the trouble!"

Gene laughed.

"I'm going to stow the food packs under the canoes, at any rate," Tom proclaimed, "for a little extra security tonight. At least he'll have to make some noise if he moves in on our vittles."

Fortunately, nothing came of it. The bear, seemingly disquieted by the sound of human voices, sniffed hard in our direction several times then ambled off into the forest. And, though Tom had gone to all the trouble of carrying out his "security" measures, that would be the last we ever saw of that particular bruin.

As darkness closed in, so did the mosquitoes. One could only wonder how the ancient people of the woodland, as well as the early voyageurs, lacking the advantages of modern chemicals, ever managed to survive these blood-sucking hordes of *Culicidae*. Together with so many other rigors they had to endure in such a harsh environment, this probably accounts for the fact that few who spent much time here in times past lived much beyond their early forties.

Ah, how they would have welcomed our "bomb," that magic little canister with the push-button aerosol valve which could, with but a few light bursts of its deadly spray, render a shelter totally free of insects within a matter of minutes. [Note: aerosol insecticides had not yet fallen totally into disrepute.] As would be our custom each evening before sleep time, we now performed the fumigation ritual which assured a night of "rest without the pests"—as my esteemed tent mate, Gene, liked to put it. With doorway and ventilation flaps tightly shut, each tent interior was "bombed" with the insecticide and then left closed until shortly before its occupants were ready to turn in. At that time the flaps would be opened, fresh air would flow through the screen netting to disperse the lethal fog, and we could then retire confidently into bugless slumber.

Meanwhile, awaiting the fumigant's effect, and with exposed skins protectively daubed with that other magic chemical, 6-12 insect *repellent*, we lingered briefly by the evening campfire, conversing languidly as the flames cast grotesque highlights across our drowsy faces.

"I'll bet nobody's going to need a sleeping pill tonight," yawned Al as he slowly unlaced a boot. "Do you guys realize it's been two days since we had a full night's sleep?"

"My eyelids weigh a ton," drawled George. "I can hardly see through the slits."

"The tents should be ready to air out in about ten minutes," announced Gene. "Then … I'd say, you'd better all hit the sack."

"Oh, really?" quipped Tom, never too tired to tease his friend. "What kind of advice is

that? That's like advising a dead mule to stop braying."

"Well, I know one mule who wouldn't know when to stop braying, whether he was dead or not," retorted Gene.

"I suppose it takes one to know one," was Tom's angelic rejoinder.

"Hee Haw!" guffawed Gene.

"Ha, ha!" Tom returned.

"Hey, don't you two ever compliment each other?" interposed Al with a chuckle.

"What? And spoil a beautiful relationship?" exclaimed Gene.

"A shocking thought," rejoined Tom. "And, anyway, I don't want those big heavy mitts patting me on the back."

"You see," explained Gene with a wise grin, "you can always trust a friend who dares to insult you. It's the inveterate flatterer you have to watch out for. Not so, Tom?"

"Well put, Gene. I really didn't know you had it in you."

"Hah. There you go again. Well, give it up. We'll continue this delightful nonsense at another time. Just now, my bleary-eyed comrades, I've had it. I'm going to bed!"

Whereupon Gene shuffled to his feet and clomped over to the tents. There we could hear him zipping open the flaps for the final airing. And minutes later, ten weary adventurers made a general scramble for dreamland by the shortest possible route.

For me, this had to be an exception to my usual approach to bedtime—because I am, alas, a night owl. When other people are sensibly bedding for the night, I am usually wide awake. If I should retire at the "reasonable" hours of ten or eleven, I will without fail lie restless and alert with a head full of wildly racing thoughts, tormented by the uncomfortable feeling that I am wasting time or missing something. So overpowering has been this tendency that it created the one difficult personal adjustment I have had to make during our wilderness canoe trips. Here, where the sunsets invariably bring mosquitoes swarming and often a damp chill to the air, it is entirely reasonable (if not downright necessary) to maintain a pattern of "early to bed and early to rise." Of course, in our case, having early *taps* simply made it easier to respond to the sunrise *reveilles*, which—under Tom's meticulous breakfast scheduling—would make early birds of us all. But I would much prefer chatting in the congenial glow of the campfire until all hours past midnight, even at the expense of being the last to retire and (it follows, of course) the last to rise. Then, even after having tucked myself in, I would lie awake for many more minutes with my rambling ruminations.

Not so tonight, however. I was for once—thanks to the big loss of sleep on the previous night—quite exhausted and as ready as the others to welcome the soothing caresses of good Morpheus. Now, as I lay comfortably cocooned in my sleeping bag, staring into the night's dark womb listening to the silence, a beautiful but lonely sound pierced the vast stillness. It was the plaintive call of a solitary loon telling this timeless world of forests, hills, and waters that all was well … that peace prevailed and the night was safe for sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Hot coffee, gentlemen?"

I awoke to see Tom Manko crouching inside the tent entrance, silhouetted against the soft early light outside, holding two steaming cups in his hands, and smiling like some devoted mother wanting to give her waking children a happy, secure impression to start their day. Gene, snoring in his bag across from me, reared up with a sleepy grunt and sat there squinting at our visitor.

"What a sneaky way to impersonate an alarm clock," he muttered between yawns. "Your bedside manner is so charming I can't even give you hell for interrupting a beautiful dream."

"Well," Tom laughed, "if you'd rather I bang a kettle, I'll be glad to oblige."

"No, no. I'll take the coffee."

"Without so much as a thank you?" Tom handed us each a cup.

"Thanks, Tom," I chuckled. "I've never been roused in a more pleasant way. What time is it, anyway?"

"Time to get up. It's five thirty already."

"Already!" exclaimed Gene. "That's the middle of the night. Don't you believe in a good night's sleep? I suppose you've already got breakfast ready."

"The bacon's frying right now … of course, if you'd rather not eat …"

Gene grinned at me as he unzipped his sleeping bag and rolled out. "You know we've been outmaneuvered, don't you?" he said resignedly.

We all had a hearty laugh, and on that pleasant note our second day began.

Though there are some who won't agree, I would have to say that an early morning dip is one of the great pleasures of camping in the canoe country. Nothing can awaken mind and body more quickly and completely than a cold plunge at daybreak. The sudden switch from warm sleeping bag to cool water is an invigorating tonic second to none. It isn't exactly an easy switch to make, however. If you give yourself time to think about it, and if you hesitate even for a moment at the water's edge in the night-chilled air testing the temperature with a reluctant toe, you probably won't make it. And, of course, if you chicken out at that point, you had better be ready for some lively singeing by the stalwarts who didn't panic as you did. You should,

therefore, if you want to protect your status in the camp, learn the surefire early morning technique. It is really quite simple. All you need to remember is to maintain a continuous motion from the moment you leave your tent until you are bobbing about, shocked and shivering, out in the water. The best movement is to lope fawn-like over the rocky slope, thinking brave thoughts and shedding your shorts as you go, and to keep loping until there is nothing left to lope on. By that time you are miserably wet, cold, and swimming. It is especially impressive if you let out a great fearless war-whoop just before you hit the water. After that the sound will be more of a gasp, but you will have done it, and your reputation will have been preserved.

Big Gene was a master at the surefire early morning dip technique. He was also a master at needling anybody who failed to lope the full distance. Knowing this, I stayed right at his heels as he bounded from our tent with a roar and hit the water with a resounding splash. I took the shock a split second after he did.

"Wow, that's cold!" I stammered as I came up beside him.

"Hell, yes, it's cold!" He gasped, treading water like a bull moose. "But that's what puts the pep back in you!"

Now making great grunting sounds, and threshing with arms and legs to get the blood circulating, we swam and splashed about. The pre-dawn light was growing stronger, and for the first time I was becoming aware of our surroundings. Beyond us the morning mists were rising off the lake. Across on the nearest shore the forest, with only its taller treetops protruding dimply above a low-lying fog bank, looked ghostlike and mysterious. Far up the lake toward its northeastern shore the mists had a strange, faintly pinkish tint that matched the widening band of sky glow above the horizon. They reminded me of the low creeping smoke of a prairie fire. And then I was aware of a good feeling surging through me, an exhilaration of mind and body and a powerful sensation of inner vitality and well-being. For all its initial discomfort, the cool dip really was refreshing. My system had quickly adjusted to the sharp change of temperature, and in moments the water had become not only endurable but comfortable.

"Hey, you guys!" Gene boomed toward the tents. "Up and at'em! Last one in does the breakfast dishes!"

That did it. Out they came. The boys all charged down but stopped abruptly at the edge of the low rock shelf from which Gene and I had taken the plunge. Mike reached down into the water with his foot and immediately withdrew it, wincing as he did so. He was obviously still half asleep.

"Forget it," he protested. "The only thing missing is the ice! I'll wash the doggone dishes … that's easier than freezing to death!" His voice shivered at the thought.

"Aw, come on," teased Billy. "You need a bath anyway." With that he and Mark, being also heedful of the rocks, playfully tackled Mike, and all three went off the edge in a tangle of writhing limbs.

"Owoooo … ." Blop! Mike's desperate yelp was cut off abruptly as the lake closed over them. When they surfaced, they were sputtering and spitting water.

"Hey, Mike, you were right. It <u>is</u> cold," gurgled Mark as he treaded water.

"Y-yeah, it is," stuttered Billy.

But Mike surprised everybody. His young husky body had recovered almost instantly. "You know something?" he chuckled, squelching their prank. "It ain't nearly as bad as I thought. In fact, it feels good!" Then he swam about nonchalantly as if this were an ordinary midday splash party. Not to be outdone, Mark and Billy quickly got used to it and remained in the water long enough for a short race along the shore.

Meanwhile, Will had dived in like a veteran, as had Bill and Al. George, however, choosing to eschew the sudden chill, wet himself by slow degrees, a few square inches of skin at a time in what seemed a needlessly prolonged ritual of self-torture, until finally he too was fully immersed, wide awake, and "rarin' to go." As last one in, however, George did draw the booby prize and wound up washing the breakfast dishes. But not without sympathetic assistance from Bill who opined that, since George did actually endure the ordeal … the penalty was far too severe!

Breakfast was a hearty repast of cooked dried apricots, sizzling bacon, and stacks of huge golden pancakes—with coffee and hot chocolate for chasers. It was at this breakfast that Al and George renamed the pancakes *Mankocakes,* in recognition of Tom Manko's superb skill as a campfire cook.

Appetites sated, we worked quickly to strike the camp. Within half an hour tents, sleeping bags, cooking gear, and food supplies were packed and loaded into the canoes. Gene checked his map.

"Listen, everybody," he said. "Save your strength as much as you can today. We've got some tough going ahead of us, so pace yourselves and take rests on the portages if you need to. Like I said, we're getting into country I'm not familiar with. We've got to take one long portage into this other lake chain, and I don't know what to expect. It could be pretty rugged."

"Well, let's go find out!" exclaimed Tom as he stepped into the stern of his canoe.

Now, flexing its blazing haunches for the day's empyrean leap, the sun crouched low in the east. As we shoved off, scattered patches of mist still danced phantomlike over the water at varying distances, catching and diffusing the sunlight. The lake lay glass smooth in the calm, cool air. Beyond the wooded shoreline, mists hung low in the shadowy depressions along the ridges.

We rounded the island and slid northward across open water. The canoes, gliding swiftly and smoothly through the thinning vapors, had an unreal, spectral appearance. I could see that Mark, paddling steadily and silently in the bow, was watching it all in utter fascination. I wondered what grand imaginings filled his thoughts for he was looking upon a scene that had all the semblance of some mythical fantasy.

After a time, the lake narrowed into a channel between high rock palisades that formed a miniature canyon. The sun's warmth had finally burned away the last morning mists to unveil a fine calm, clear day. And now, as we passed at the foot of a particularly smooth granite face, Gene pointed his paddle at some strange red markings about ten feet above the water.

"Look, pictographs!" he exclaimed. One by one the other paddlers quickly came aside with their canoes for a better look at the primitive rock paintings.

"Hey, will you look at that," George remarked.

"Now *there's* evidence that these waterways were once used by Indians," observed Bill.

"Maybe war parties?" suggested his son.

"More likely, nomadic hunters, Billy," his father returned.

"Well, they weren't very good artists," observed Mike. "We drew better pictures than that in kindergarten."

"It's remarks like that that make me wonder how you ever reached the first grade," quipped Mike's father. "These drawings are really remarkable. Look at 'em. They're primitive and simple. If you open your mind a little bit, kid, they might tell you something about the humanity of the people that drew 'em. They probably weren't as different from us as you might think."

"We're probably looking at a hunting account of some kind," offered George. "That four-legged animal figure could be a moose—or even a woodland caribou, which roamed this wilderness at one time—and the two-legged figures the hunters. This must be the record of a successful hunt."

"Or hunting territory," interposed Tom, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Notice how high up the figures are," observed George. "If they were painted from a canoe, it would suggest that the water level was quite a bit higher at that time."

"Either that or the paint brush had a long handle," Mike couldn't resist.

"Good gawd …" is all his father said while everybody else succumbed to laughter.

"Well," Gene finally announced, "we'd better get moving now. We've got a long stretch ahead."

All paddles quickly resumed a brisk cadence as we proceeded up the narrow channel. After about a quarter mile, the passage curved sharply to the left then widened as we entered another lake. Picking our way among a cluster of small islands, we finally came upon a wide expanse of calm, open water.

As we glided along, I would get an occasional feeling that all this was a fanciful dream, something unreal … merely imagined. Everything simply seemed too nearly perfect, as if an illusion that hung upon the telling of an impossible legend were unfolding impossibly with each dip of the paddles. Here we were, somewhere in the great northern forest, our canoes slipping silently over primeval waters, leaving no more trace of their passing than did those of the earliest native people … or the pioneering voyageurs whose paddle trails were, of course, the first by outsiders to penetrate this exquisite, lake-studded wilderness. In a sense we were a reflection and a continuation of that early adventure in which stalwart French fur traders challenged the unknown and braved untold peril and hardship in their own kind of wilderness quest. We could well imagine, in some ways at least, that we were the modern counterpart of those long-ago rugged explorers.

And while the wealth of this wilderness was once the beaver pelts it yielded to those daring few, today it was the *wilderness itself* we sought, and those far richer treasures which it bestows abundantly upon all who come this way. For here in the uncluttered space of this wild, blue-green country, mind and body could partake freely of nature's special gifts of renewal.

Soon we made another landing and, on this occasion, it was my turn as last man in line to see that nothing was left behind when we headed up the portage. The path angled slightly upward over bare rock in such a way that I was able to see the entire party, laden with gear, passing single file up the sunlit trail and silhouetted against the bright sky. The men carried packs on their backs and canoes on their shoulders. The boys toted their trail packs, as well as sundry loose gear carried by hand, while I brought up the rear with the heavy cook pack and a tube of fishing rods.

It was an impressive procession, a sort of portage parade in which all our duffle—food, tents, sleeping bags, cooking gear, clothing, paddles, tackle, and our entire means of transportation—was being borne along by our combined muscle power alone.

Beautiful scenery—ever present, ever changing, ever new and enchanting—made one easily forget how strenuous and sometimes thoroughly exhausting some of these portages can be. While Duluth packs are ingeniously designed for balance and ease of handling, they are also large and can be loaded to weights exceeding sixty pounds. On a long portage, up a steep incline, in soggy bog, or over scattered boulders … they can make the sturdiest legs buckle. So can a canoe when the trail is anything but level and clear of low branches and underbrush.

Perhaps the most exasperating predicament a portager can encounter is a long trek over low swampy terrain where you are so busy trying to slosh your way through muck and vegetation that you can't do a thing about the swarm of mosquitoes which has found you underneath the inverted canoe on your shoulders. This is, admittedly, one of the rare times you may wonder what in the hell you are doing way out here in the middle of nowhere giving free blood transfusions to a horde of bugs! Yet, once the ordeal is over and you are again afloat with a cool breeze in your face, you are soon under the spell once more.

As we progressed, the trail suddenly ascended sharply and meandered alongside a steep, tumbling rapids which might better be described as a series of small waterfalls. The water, foaming so boisterously toward us from the lake we were approaching to the lake we had just left, got me to thinking of the limitless energy with which nature is endowed and of the many marvelous ways in which that energy is constantly being released and transformed. Just to watch this endless flow of force, and to contemplate it, seems somehow to reveal one's own inescapable involvement with it. One senses that the same force which pulls the waters of a rapids downward along a streambed is the same force that keeps us properly fastened to the earth's surface. It is the force which makes a heavy burden of a backpack and causes an unsupported tent to collapse. It is the force that brings down the refreshing, life-giving raindrops from the heavens even as it holds the global waters firmly in their basins. It is the force that causes the tiniest dust particle or snowflake to drift inevitably to earth … that carves out the canyons and the valleys, that disrobes the crimson vestmented maples in autumn, that keeps the planets in their orbits and regulates the harmony of the stars.

How simple and obvious all this becomes when its manifestations are unobscured by the superficialities with which we surround ourselves in our civilized environment. Perhaps here was another part of the answer to our quest. Perhaps we are drawn to the wilderness because we need some kind of reaffirmation of our strength and meaning in terms of the nature which works within us and which is the total physical substance of our being. Perhaps the link between such realizations and whatever may be our concept of God is essential to any real understanding of our existence and purpose as human beings.

But if force was one of the apparent qualities of that rushing rapids, beauty was even more so—for we were constantly immersed in a luxury of scenic splendor. Even such common objects as the round, smooth boulders which jutted upward and split the rushing water into separate serpentine forks of white foam gave immense pleasure to the eye. Something about the fast moving water and the rocky formations which adamantly resisted and altered its course presented a strong, ever-varying picture that was pleasing and exciting. Add to the rocks and waters the multi-hued greens and shapes and shadows of the ubiquitous forest background and the result was a never-ending supply of aesthetic nourishment for the feasting of the soul.

What a grand adventure for us all, and especially for the boys. Again recalling my own early years, I well knew what they were absorbing through all their senses, and I was reexperiencing through them the piquant boyhood joy of new discovery.

On a particularly difficult stretch of the upward trail, it was a delight to see my young nephew Mike plodding happily along under his load, occasionally practicing with Mark and Billy their imitations of a loon's cry or pausing to snatch a few blueberries out of a patch beside the trail.

It was good to see the wilderness working its wonders in such simple but positive ways. There was something here that tied in with all that was basic in our proud heritage. America was born out of heroic struggle, and the adventurous spirit of its pioneer builders is deeply rooted in

our national character. Daily living, travel, even survival, on the advancing frontiers required great human endurance and ruggedness. Perhaps this is why activities demanding stamina, self-reliance, and physical skill have always been elemental in wilderness recreation, and why many American children, like their parents and grandparents, seem drawn naturally to the woods and the water and the free space which civilization can never give them.

Soon we were on another lake, a beautiful little gem as round and smooth as a saucer and not more than a quarter of a mile across. The tall forest rose from its very edge, enclosing lake and sky—and us—in a broad circular corral. To be in a canoe gliding on such a still surface, with the bright sky reflected beneath as well as shining above, is to feel strangely weightless and feathery and soaring—like a bird suspended in space. One seems to be afloat on a sea of nothingness, and the reaction brings a feeling that is pleasant, airy, yet not without a trace of uneasiness. One gets a sense of extreme detachment and freedom on the one hand, countered on the other by an absence of something solid and familiar within easy reach. The illusion could be frightening to someone not prepared for it. You glance downward, forward, alongside, and behind your canoe—and you are staring into a bottomless abyss of shining azure space! You look upward and find more of the same. The only thing in sight with which to identify is the wide green strip of forest which encircles you like a floating band. And even this, because it appears to be detached and adrift in the same blue void, seems to offer nothing substantial to grasp onto. The entire sensation is only momentary, but it leaves a lasting impression. Fleetingly, you have had a rare and psychic experience which inwardly has drawn you into a marvelous harmony with the world of nature.

At the next landing, Mark and I were the first ashore. As soon as we had our gear unloaded, I flipped the canoe to my shoulders and took the lead up a portage that followed the base of a steep curving bank along a dry, rock-strewn streambed. Except for some occasional mossy overgrowth, much of the bedrock lay exposed and weathered smooth. A few dwarfed cedars and red pine, their roots desperately clinging to cracks and fissures for what little moisture might be available, were a mute reminder of the tenacity of life and, also, of the delicate, precarious balances between survival and extinction. I had always marveled at the ability of the northern pine forest to exist, even thrive, upon these vast rocky barrens where—because of the scarcity of moisture-storing humus—the supply of available water is about as unreliable and unpredictable as the weather.

As I made a half-turn between two stunted cedars, I was suddenly arrested by a pair of spruce grouse and their four half-grown chicks swaggering along directly ahead of me—so close I could have dropped the bow of the canoe on their heads. Did they flush explosively with a whirring roar in the manner of their larger cousin, the ruffed grouse? Not these haughty sultans. They just stopped and stood there, cocking their heads from side to side with the inquisitive but aloof look of curious bystanders watching a stranger pass, and imparting such an air of innocent indifference that I am sure I was more startled than they. They obviously were not in the least afraid of me, and I felt somehow pleased to be recognized as friend instead of foe. To be trusted in the wild by *any* living thing must be one of the rarest compliments one can receive. I realized, of course, that the spruce grouse is unique in this respect, being one of very few wild creatures having little fear of humans. And the thought struck me that this kind of fearless credulity, this gentle innocence, is astonishingly rare in the "civilized" world of human beings. Nature seemed to be insinuating something I was reluctant to admit: that I myself possessed little of the solid confidence and sublime serenity of the spruce grouse and that, indeed, I couldn't safely dare to show such unquestioning faith toward most of my fellow humans. Under the codes and systems

and standards by which the lifestyle of my generation was cast we have painfully learned that one who is a trusting grouse may also be a sitting duck.

Here I watched this beautiful family of friendly fowl, and they watched me. I wanted to linger, to absorb if I could some of their sweetness and to prolong the wonderful, almost mystical elation which filled me. But now my comrades had come up noisily behind me.

"Hey, what's holding us up?" Gene's voice boomed from the rear.

"A family of spruce grouse," I shouted back. "Boys, come up here … quietly … come and see this!"

Mark, Billy, and Mike scrambling in a manner that was anything but quiet, were beside me in a flash. The birds, now a bit restless, waddled a few yards up the trail then stopped again and watched us.

"Aren't they afraid of us?" Billy queried excitedly. "Look, you could walk right up and catch one!"

Everybody had to get a look. Our entire party, loaded down with backpacks and canoes, stood in a tight semi-circle enjoying the pleasant encounter.

"They're Nature's welcoming committee—they've come to greet us," Tom said softly. I caught a hint of warm reverence in his voice. It was on rare occasions like this that Tom's deep love of nature surfaced in this subtle way to disclose a gentle, sentimental side which he ordinarily kept under canvas.

"Heck, even royalty couldn't ask for a better reception," Bill declared. "Isn't that a pretty picture?"

"It soon will be," replied Al, aiming his ever-ready camera and clicking away.

By now the adult birds had begun a soft clucking to which the chicks responded by gathering near the hen. After one parting look at us they began a slow march toward a thicket off to the right of the trail where they disappeared from view.

Finishing the portage, we were quickly on another lake, long and narrow, the west shore of which we followed closely. Gene was now watching the forest wall very carefully.

"This is where the going gets tough," he warned. "The main route continues over a portage at the other end and on along the chain we've been following. But now we have to jump over to another chain that's seldom used and, like the Ranger said, we've got to go cross-grain to get there. From here on, we're off the beaten path."

"So we're looking for a different portage?" Al queried.

"Yep. It has to be right up along this shore. But it could be overgrown … and hard to find. Hah, maybe we're in luck. See that blaze mark on that big Norway? That could be our landing."

Our navigator had put us smack on the target. We scrambled quickly ashore and, as Gene had guessed, the trail we now ventured upon showed none of the wear and tear of heavy boot traffic so characteristic of the main portages. A barely legible pathway wound gradually upward through the forest. Low overhanging foliage and dense underbrush pressed in on it, resisting our progress and making real toil out of what otherwise would have been an easy passage. The canoes were especially burdensome when toted over this kind of trail, for they had to be literally plowed along through the heavy vegetation like so many unwieldy wedges. It was a noisy affair with the loud screeching of boughs along their sides and the frequent banging of their prows against low branches. In such density, no cooling breeze could stir, and the sultry air quickly had us sweat-soaked and panting.

I noticed there was little conversation along this stretch. We were too hot, too busy, and—if the others felt as I was beginning to feel—too weary to talk. The sustained exertions of the trip thus far were already beginning to tell. The brisk pace of earlier portages had diminished to a slower plodding gait. Rest stops became more frequent. On one of these, George, who had sat down with his backpack propped upon a windfall beside the trail, wiped his dripping brow with a soggy shirtsleeve and broke the silence.

"I swear someone's been sneaking rocks into this pack," he groaned. "It gets heavier every time I put it on. Makes me wonder if I'm actually cut out to be a voyageur!"

"Geeze, I hope we don't waste a lot of time just traveling," mumbled Mike who had come up and joined George on the windfall. "Maybe we could set up camp on the next lake and just stay in one place for awhile."

"You mean forget about Pungishemoo?" exclaimed George.

"Well, if it's gonna take us forever to get there. How do we know we'll even find it?"

George laughed as he suddenly realized what might have really been bothering the boy. "Ahh, I get it, Mike," he replied in an assuasive tone. "You'd just rather be chasing big fish than wild geese … right?"

Mike grinned as he drawled, "Something like that."

"Well, don't lose patience, Mike. It's only our second day. We'll get plenty of fishing in yet, I'm sure."

"Yeah, if we're not too pooped out by then to enjoy it."

"Ha! Now, there you have a point."

At that moment Al came crashing out of the underbrush. As we were blocking the narrow trail, he halted and leaned his canoe against a tree. His sweat-soaked shirt clung pastily to his body. Unbuttoning it, he peeled it away from his skin to let in some cooling air.

"What?" he exclaimed jokingly. "You guys loafing again?"

"Oh, we just stopped for a cold beer," replied George.

"Boy, I could use one about now." Al removed his hat from atop a twisted mass of sweat-soaked hair and fanned his face. "Gads, I've never been so stifling hot! This is worse than a sauna. I think I'd rather paddle all day than suffocate in this sweltering jungle. I hope to hell the lake is over that next rise … and it's ten miles long!"

No such luck. Beyond the rise the dense vegetation gave way to an open, scattered grove of tall tamaracks standing in a boggy, sphagnum-carpeted depression about fifty yards wide. The moss looked treacherous. And it was. With Gene leading and cautiously stepping his way forward, we kept close together as we filed across it, picking as best we could the most solid looking footing. Despite all care, someone's boot would occasionally break through the sphagnum and plunge down into black, oozy mud.

"Damn this blasted muck!"

It was George's voice, high-pitched and irate, just behind me, and I turned to see him down to his hip in the sticky stuff, looking very much like a one-legged hiker sitting flat on his prat. His left leg had disappeared entirely beneath him, leaving his right stretched straight out lengthwise. He was trapped. Had there not been others to help him pull loose, I doubt that he could have extricated himself. Serious as it was, I had to laugh, for it demonstrated how nature had managed to provide us with well-preserved fossils through a similar entrapment process in the tropical mudflats of early earth.

"You know, George," I remarked as I set down my canoe to give him a hand, "as one deeply interested in science, you shouldn't overlook this as an opportunity to experience first-

handedly how Tyrannosaurus must have felt when he got stuck in the muck back in the Jurassic."

"Very funny, Cliff," George responded. "Real funny. But it was more like the Cretaceous. Now, would you jokers mind helping me out of this mess!"

Tom and Billy, being closest, had taken one of George's arms and I the other, and we were trying with little success to tug him free. Having no safe standing room of our own, we were all in danger of bogging down until our inventive wizard, Tom, came through with a most ingenious solution.

"Here," he directed, "drag that canoe over next to George. We can stand in that."

I slid the canoe into position. It worked. With the solid footing thus afforded we were able to draw George out of the mire, though not without a considerable amount of prodding, prying, puffing, and pulling.

"If that's what happened to the dinosaurs," George remarked when we finally reached firm ground, "I can *see* why they went extinct!"

Beyond the tamaracks the trail climbed over a low rocky hogback, then wound around a small pond. Disappointment swept through us when we found there was still no indication of a lake ahead.

"Gene, is this portage even on the map?" Al inquired.

"Yes, it's there," Gene replied.

"Well, how long does it say it is?"

"It doesn't on this one. But it looks like it should be about 300 rods. Maybe it's more. We'll just have to keep following the trail and see what happens."

Always, when we needed a lift, Tom could add the touch that helped us dispel doubt and discouragement. Now the troubadour in him took over and he once again brightened our lagging spirits with a few familiar verses of our wilderness song. And just when we were about to sing the final rousing refrain, he threw in an amusing new musical memorial to the incident just past.

> George got stuck in the muck,
> But his buddies brought him luck
> On the trail to Pungishemoo …
> We were there in time to free him from the slime …
> So he could reach our island campground.

At the far end of the pond we were heartened by the discovery of a small beaver dam and a narrow but navigable stream channel leading off through low marshy terrain. The portage trail ended abruptly at the stream. This puzzled Gene, and we gathered around him as he checked his map once again.

"All this chart shows is this dotted line. There's no stream indicated. Do you suppose this portage follows this drainage system … maybe to that small lake off to the right?" he asked Tom.

"But the portage line doesn't even touch that little lake," observed Tom.

"Right, but you've seen that on these maps before. It could vary quite a bit from the actual portage."

"Well, since there's no passage beyond here except the stream, I'd say we'd better follow the water, then go by compass if we need to. At least we'll be headed in the right direction."

The quiet, meandering little stream upon which we now embarked provided not only welcome relief to weary limbs but a pleasant diversion from the sweatsome, plodding pace of the

portage. Its channel, flanked by low sedge tussocks and occasional patches of reeds, twisted through a wide, open swale bordered by spruce forest. At intervals it would widen into lucid, lily-dappled pools and then narrow again.

"Hey, how'd those trees get there?" Billy shouted at one point. He was referring to the bare poles of dead tamarack trees standing here and there throughout the swamp.

"Well, they grew there," explained Tom, "and most likely died out when the beavers flooded this area with their dam."

"Boy, they sure can change the looks of a place."

"Yep. And lucky for us they changed *this* place," smiled Tom, "or we probably wouldn't be paddling this stream."

As it was, some trees had fallen into the stream and formed sunken barriers across its channel, making it necessary for us now and then to step out of our canoes and drag them over the deadheads. The same boot-soaking process was necessary to slide the canoes over a large beaver dam which suddenly appeared before us. Thanks to Will, who stood waist deep in water at the foot of the dam to steady the canoes as they came over, we surmounted the barrier without mishap.

Once again we were on easy water. The stream channel meandered down the middle of a wide shallow marsh. Off to the right a redwing blackbird, its crimson wing patch simulating a flaming dart, landed atop a tall cattail where it swayed prettily and trilled the brilliant rippling notes of its cheery marsh song. Further ahead an American bittern's pumping *dah-oonk* could be heard, and it reminded me of my country cousins of long ago whose name for this bird was the "slough pumper." As we approached it, it suddenly flushed and flapped away. From somewhere near the edge of the forest a hermit thrush heralded its presence with a medley of lovely bell-like tremolos delicately voiced and solitary, yet not without an airy brightness befitting the sunny midday scene. How could anyone think the wilderness a lonely place, I asked myself.

Arriving at the far end of the marsh, we found the stream swerving eastward and narrowing between dense alder growth until we were single-filing along a green-walled gap that cut straight through a stand of spruce. Impressed by the high forest ramparts hemming us in, Tom remarked: "Look at this … we're paddling right down an evergreen alley."

"I suppose that would make a lynx or bobcat in this vicinity some sort of alley cat," quipped Gene.

"Did that brilliant observation come out of you?" teased Tom.

"Yes it did. But how can you compare this pretty place to an alley? You see any trash or garbage cans anywhere?"

"Did I do that?"

"That's the way I see it."

"Well, if that's where you keep your mind … in trash and garbage cans … how could you possibly take it as I meant it?"

"Well, how did you mean it then?"

"Ever hear of a bowling alley?"

"I don't get the connection."

"Well, Gene … see, I was just absolutely bowled over by how pretty this little lane is. Does that strike you as anything?"

Such was the corny nature of the conversation at times between these two when they felt the need to liven the duller moments. They had a way of playing with puns and running on and on with nonsensical chatter which served to cut the monotony of long hours at the paddles and in

general keep up the spirits of the crew.

Tom's "evergreen alley," so narrow it seemed almost a tunnel, extended in a slight curving course for about a quarter mile. Then it hooked sharply left, and as we made the turn we found ourselves gliding onto the open water of a small beautiful lake distinguished at its north end by a long, low, reef-like point with a solitary, weather-gnarled cedar dominating its tip. Gene paused to check his map.

We were right, Tom," he said. "That portage is definitely marked wrong on the map. But we seem to be on a route that's going somewhere. I'm pretty sure that if we keep following the flowage out of this lake we'll wind up in that other chain."

A shallow inlet about the width of two canoes gave us entry from the lake onto a picturesque beaver pond where scattered clusters of gay white water lilies smiled bravely, despite having to share their home with a dismal array of dead birch trunks standing starkly white in the quiet water. Off to the right towered a dense grove of the tallest tamaracks I have ever seen, addressing the sky with a majestic sweep and asserting their dominance by keeping much of the pond in permanent shadow. Along the left edge of the pond extended a long massive embankment that made me think of river levees I'd seen in the South. It was obviously the work of beavers, and it explained the presence of the drowned birches.

It also provided a singular surprise. For as we paddled near this dike we were startled to see the ground beyond it fall away so sharply that we actually were looking down through treetops at another broad pond some thirty or forty feet directly below! It was a strange sensation to glide along the edge of this typical, ordinary looking wilderness pond only to realize it was perched on the very brink of a high shelf where it was held in place by nothing more spectacular than a simple beaver dam. We followed along the dike to where it joined a slight, rounded outcrop of the underlying rock.

Here we witnessed a fascinating example of the beaver's remarkable engineering ingenuity. The long dike had been built up to and slightly higher than the granite outcrop, so that the outflow from the pond was directed over the solid rock instead of over or through any part of the dam itself. This eliminated any deterioration caused by running water and assured a strong, permanent impoundment.

The outpouring water slid smoothly over the granite lobe and then rippled downward in a thin film across a wide face of rock that dropped sharply away at an angle of about sixty degrees.

Peering out over the top of the fall, and along the steep ledge that extended into the thick timber on either side, Gene shook his head. "I don't believe it," he exclaimed. "It's thirty or forty feet to that pond below!"

"We have to get down there?" asked George.

"We have no choice. We're still on the flowage and that's what we have to follow. But danged if I can see any way to get down. How 'bout you, Tom? You see any way around this?"

Tom stepped carefully out of his canoe onto the dike then walked a short distance along the top studying the edge of the shelf. It fell away precipitously into a steep scarp. Presently he was back. "There's no way," he said grimly. "The rock is even steeper over there. It's just one big ridge here. And the beavers built their dam right in the middle of it!"

For a long moment we all sat there staring at each other blankly, perhaps just a bit stunned by the sudden incongruity. We'd been able to handle every eventuality so far, to keep forging steadily ahead. Then this. It seemed almost ludicrous that we should have come this far without undue hindrance only to be stopped dead in our tracks by such an unseemly barrier. If we were to be turned back, prevented from completing our quest, the impediment ought at least

to have been something more dramatic. I had fleeting visions of failure, of having to retreat over back-breaking portages without ever fulfilling our mission, without ever learning if Pungishemoo was more than just a dream. Then Mike spoke up.

"Why don't we just slide the canoes down the waterfall?"

I couldn't tell whether he was in earnest or simply resorting to a boy's way of making light of a grave situation. The other boys chuckled uncomfortably. Another thoughtful moment of silence followed. Then Gene, suddenly bursting with inspiration, boomed, "By golly, Mike, I think you hit it on the head! We can't go around … so we'll go *over*. It's steep, but … yeah, we can just slide our gear down!"

"Slide it down? You're kidding," I stammered. I honestly thought he was suffering from the heat or overexertion or something.

"Gene, you can't be serious," said Bill with a dubious stare.

"Look," Gene reasoned. "I'm sure we could find another way around—if we wanted to spend the next few hours exploring both sides of this ridge. But we'd probably wind up having to set up a maverick camp down *there* somewhere for the night … after beating our brains out crashing brush. And if we backtracked, it wouldn't be before dark that we got to a decent campsite. We need to save all the time we can getting out of this crossover and into that other chain. I think our chances of finding a good place to camp will be a lot better. I say we go right over the top. Stick to the flowage. We can go right down this spillway. It'll be hard work, but it can be done."

"Well, you're the captain," said Al who, like all of us when the chips were really down, knew that if we couldn't give full confidence to our leader we had no business being here. "Let's get to it."

Tom meantime had quickly anticipated what Gene had in mind and by tacit agreement was already opening one of the packs. From it he removed a coil of heavy rope.

"Great, Tom, we'll sure need that," said Gene. "We'll lower these canoes loaded."

"Loaded?" Bill muttered dumbfoundedly.

"Oh, it'll be easier than you think, Bill," consoled Gene. "The weight of the packs will keep 'em hugging the rocks. And everything will stay dry. I think we've got the manpower—just make sure our loose gear is secured."

"Somebody should be down below," prompted Tom.

Gene then directed Bill and George to handle the canoes when they arrived at the bottom and to float them out of the way. "Looks like the best place to climb down is right here alongside the spillway," he instructed.

Using the rope—anchored by Tom, Al, and me—George and Bill simulated mountain climbers as they took turns making their way down to the foot of the fall.

"The next job is for you boys," Gene announced. "You're gonna have to get a little wet, too, but we need you on the spillway to help steady the canoes. I think you can get some good footholds down there along the rock. The main thing is to keep 'em from tipping over so the packs don't fall out." Then he instructed Will to station himself near the top, Mike about halfway down, and Mark and Billy closest to the bottom. "Got it, guys?"

"Yeah, sure. Let's go!" chorused the boys, sensing adventure. In a few minutes they were at their appointed stations, the water gurgling merrily around and under them. Pits and cracks in the rock provided what little foothold they could find. We were now ready to send the first canoe down the chute.

I noted that had there been any greater volume of water over this fall, we would not have

been able to attempt such a hazardous descent. As it was, we were exposing the canoes to considerable risk. Any slip, any loss of balance or control, could result in serious damage. I had visions of smashed canoes and of our being helplessly stranded in this utterly wild and remote place. I glanced back at the tall brooding tamaracks across the pond and felt strangely uncomfortable under their silent stare. Did they resent this noisy disturbance of their repose, this invasion of their privacy? I wondered if my companions were experiencing the same uneasy sensation of suspense that suddenly took hold of me.

With one end of the rope fastened securely to the painter eye on its stern, Gene carefully inched the first canoe over the edge. Tom, Al, and I braced ourselves as we grasped the rope. We weren't at all sure that the sixty-degree angle of the spillway would allow the heavy packs to remain snugly wedged in place. So we watched in breathless silence as the canoe teetered on the brink and Gene carefully, ever so slowly, tilted the prow forward and downward.

"Hang on tight!" he cautioned. "Don't anybody lose their grip!"

Down, down went the bow as the stern countered in an upward arc. And then gravity took over. The canoe slipped awkwardly downward several feet … and Gene almost went with it.

"Hang on! Hang on!" he commanded as he scrambled back from the slippery edge and added his two strong hands to ours on the rope. Everything held. The canoe now rested keel and bottom against the face of the spillway, slightly tilted to its right side. Its prow was just out of Will's reach. The packs stayed in place. We strained mightily to keep the rope steady.

"Okay, Will … grab it and keep it on the keel as we let 'er down," Gene directed. "Try to keep the hull off the rocks as much as you can."

"Looks as if we'll have to leave some aluminum here, anyway," observed Al, noting the metallic scrape marks left by the canoe on the top edge of the spillway.

"The keel can spare the loss better than the skin can," he replied. "That's for sure."

We were now easing the craft down as gently as possible. Despite his difficult footing, Will was able to balance it on the keel as it slowly slid past him. Soon it was under Mike's guidance and finally it passed Mark and Billy on their lower perch until its prow was safely in the hands of Bill and George. Standing in water up to their hips at the foot of the fall, they kept the prow from dipping under while the stern came down to level position. The canoe was then stashed in a nearby patch of reeds to await the others.

After much tense and strenuous effort, the fourth canoe had completed its descent and we were beginning to congratulate ourselves over the successful execution of a difficult task.

Then came canoe number five. And trouble. It proved to be the most heavily laden and at the same time the most poorly balanced. We knew we were in trouble the moment Gene got its bow down over the brink. It nearly slipped away from us at once, so quickly did it lunge downward, and it was only with Gene's added strength on the rope and a quick restraining grasp by Will as it reached him that we were able to bring it to a stop. A further complication developed as the prow, instead of heading straight downward, began sliding over to the right.

"Not enough weight toward the bow," groaned Gene. "She's top-heavy at the stern. Any chance of shifting some of those packs forward, Will?"

Will suddenly was too busy to answer. His left boot had slipped from its foothold and he was frantically struggling to recover his balance. He let go his hold on the canoe and, using his hands to grasp whatever small clefts and protrusions he could find, managed to clamber to the safety of a small ledge at the side of the spillway. The canoe meanwhile began sliding slowly, its prow continuing to swerve further toward the right as if caught on some unseen diagonal fissure.

By the time it reached Mike's precarious position the canoe was sliding almost sideways. At that moment the prow became lodged in a crevice off to the side and the canoe began to tip over. Mike, making a frenzied effort to steady it, lost his footing entirely and seized the gunwale to save himself from a fast bumpy slide to the bottom. The canoe promptly rolled over, dumping its cargo. Four large packs tumbled downward. One rolled right over Mike, flattening him to the rock, but he miraculously hung on.

"Watch out!" Gene shouted. "Let the packs go! Save yourselves!"

Mark and Billy, who were directly in their path, dodged wildly as the packs missed them by inches, then both boys slipped from their perches and joined the duffle for the rest of the trip. Down the watery chute they shot, adding two more falling objects for George and Bill to duck away from. The packs splashed into the pool between the two men, followed immediately by two very startled boys. Thoroughly dunked, the boys were quickly on their feet wading through water up to their waists, clinging to a couple floating packs for support.

"You boys alright?" I hollered, completely unnerved by the accident.

"Yeah!" Mark yelled back to my relief.

"You sure? You okay too, Billy?"

"Yeah! But what the heck *happened* up there?"

"Sorry, fellas!" Gene replied. "This business just got away from us, that's all."

"Just discovered a quicker way to lower the gear, eh?" drawled George, appearing a bit unnerved himself.

"You boys get bumped very bad?" Bill asked his son.

"Naw, actually it was kinda neat, Dad," Billy answered. That was kinda fun, wasn't it Mark?"

"Sure. I'd like to try sliding all the way from the top!"

"Ho, right!" Bill smiled objectionably at the boys. "All we need is a broken arm or leg to round out this whole episode."

"We'd better hope we've seen all the sliding we're going to see today, boys," added George.

From the top of the fall we held the empty canoe in place with the rope while Mike worked along it to the edge of the spillway from where he was able to climb down the remaining distance. Then with a tug of the rope we easily disengaged the lightened canoe and lowered it to the bottom. Minutes later, after using the rope to help ourselves down the escarpment, we were all finally safe and sound at the foot of the fall.

Tom, as the last man to descend, demonstrated an impressive bit of mountaineering lore by using a traditional sheepshank tied to a deadhead to let himself down. Reaching the base of the wall, he merely gave the rope a quick, loose snap, and the knot parted at the top where he had made a special cut while the rope was still under tension, releasing all but a foot of rope to remain at the deadhead.

Fortunately, thanks to the pool which softened their fall down the spillway, the packs escaped without damage. And thanks to Gene's insistence at the start of the trip that all our packs were properly equipped with strong, waterproof plastic liners, they all floated and none of their contents got wet.

"That was a close call," remarked Gene, "but we made it—eh, boys? We did it!"

I suddenly felt sweep through the group an immense feeling of satisfaction, an unspoken sense of accomplishment, at the success of our task. We were at once united in a kind of comradeship which can only be felt after surmounting—through wilderness teamwork, effort,

and skill—such a seemingly insurmountable obstacle as that which we had just crossed over. Although we were wet and exhausted, our spirits were buoyant.

A small grassy clearing at the edge of the pond provided space for everyone to stretch out for a brief rest while Tom opened a food pack and served up a quick lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, dried beef jerky, raisins, and three squares each of semi-sweet chocolate—all washed down with plenty of Tom's "nectar of the gods," a flavored sweet drink made out of Kool-Aid and pond water.

"Eeeish! There's a big green bug in my juice," Mike exclaimed suddenly. He almost gagged as he sat staring into his drinking cup.

"Well, don't just sit there," admonished his father. "Fish the poor thing out before it drowns!"

"Yuk! I would have swallowed it if I wasn't looking."

"Ohhh, but Mike," Gene said matter-of-factly, "every bug has its own distinct flavor. You've just got to find out which ones you prefer."

"Yeah, I suppose you'd eat 'em too, huh?"

"Pretty hard to avoid. After all, we *are* out-of-doors …" I noticed Gene wink playfully toward Al.

"Yup," added Tom, struggling hard to maintain a serious expression, "every time you lift a forkful of food up here, there's a good chance some little creature will be starin' ya right in the eye."

"Won't they make you sick?" Billy suddenly wanted to know.

"Naw," replied Gene with a reassuring smile. "They'll just clog up your craw a little bit, is all!"

"Yeah, but most bugs are pretty small," observed Mark, joining the fun. "I'll bet you'd need a thousand mosquitoes to make a mouthful."

"Eeish! Do we have to keep talking about this?" exclaimed Mike, wincing.

"Yeah," Billy was catching on, "I guess we'll just have to put up with 'em, Mike. Mmmmm, that one was good!"

"Yep, must be why they call it *bug juice,"* concluded Mark.

"Well, I wish these damned deer flies would feed on each other instead of on me!" exclaimed Gene, slapping his neck suddenly. "Let's eat up and get out of here!"

As we finished lunch, Tom quickly put things away and buckled the straps of the food pack. "Into the gondolas, men," he prompted lightheartedly.

In moments we were again afloat, gliding among broad patches of white and yellow water lilies and green lily pads. At the opposite end of the pond we encountered another beaver dam, a short low obstruction over which we were able with our paddles to "pole" the canoes without disembarking. The stream beyond meandered through a wide meadowy stretch over so erratic a course that it brought a bemused reaction from Mike.

"Look, there's so many twists and turns that you practically meet yourself coming back," he shouted to Mark as our canoes passed each other moving in opposite directions on the two legs of a sharp horseshoe bend.

At length—after much strenuous winding and pushing and dragging along a channel which narrowed sometimes to less than the width of a canoe—we came to the end of the meadow. There the water diverged into shallow tricklings as it percolated through an accumulation of boulders along the streambed, forcing us to proceed on foot. Dense vegetation and rough terrain on either side confined us to the streambed and thus imposed upon us what

proved to be one of the most grueling exertions of the entire trip. Treacherously loose, wet stones cluttered the way, testing weary muscles to the limits of endurance. A slimy coating of algae made the rocks as slippery as wet ice, putting an added strain into every cautious step and reducing progress to a snail's pace. We literally had to shuffle our way over the smaller boulders and around the bigger ones, and this slowed motion, sustained for what seemed like an eternity under the oppressive weight of our burdens, drained off most of what physical stamina we had left.

As for myself, I found the heat stifling and felt my legs gradually weakening as I advanced until finally I had no control over them. It was then that my boots slipped out sideways from under me, and I found myself kneeling on bruised knees in four inches of water, my canoe tilting awkwardly forward from my shoulders and its yoke pressing hard into the back of my neck. I rolled the canoe off to the side, stretched out my legs and just sat there in the cool water in a sheer ecstasy of relief. It felt so good that I lay back full length to get the full benefit of its soothing effect.

Meantime, George had been staggering under the weight of two packs not far ahead of me. Now, as I sat up and began to ladle handfuls of cool water over my head and face, I glanced at George just as he lost his footing. In his case, his feet slid out forward until he fell backward—and luckily, as it turned out, for the backpack cushioned his fall. However, he was pinned to it by the weight of the front pack which now rested on his upturned chest and made him resemble nothing so much as some kind of jumbo sandwich. He too seemed in no hurry to move, preferring to take full advantage of his sudden escape from the throes of overexertion. He was content, for the moment at least, simply to remain in his sandwiched position between the two packs.

Then Al came tottering by and caught sight of us from under his canoe. "I'll be damned," he exclaimed. "That's a funny way to take a break. You guys tired or something?"

"Naw," drawled George. "Not really tired. Just paralyzed!"

"That's a poor excuse for goofing off," kidded Al. Then he glanced at me. I was still wallowing in cool delight. "And that's a poor place to swim, Cliff. Why don't you wait till we get to a lake?"

"I wasn't sure I'd ever see a lake again," I replied. "God, aren't your legs ready to cave in?"

"Yah, they are," replied Al. Whereupon he let down his canoe in the shallow water. His legs buckled as he did so and, willingly or not, he joined me sitting in the water. "Ahhh," he sighed contentedly. "Now this is living!"

Bill and the boys had now come up from behind. Bill, too, lowered his canoe, but, managing to stay on his feet, he simply set it upright, climbed into it, and took his rest on the stern seat.

"You fellows sure like to carry things to extreme," he commented.

"It wasn't really by choice," I explained. "We sort of 'fell' into it! But it's refreshing."

"You guys look pretty funny," snickered Mike.

"Aren't you tired?" asked his father.

"I'm more hungry than tired."

"That figures. The boys get hungry, the men get tired. There's your *real* generation gap," laughed Al.

Gene, Tom, and Will, who had led the way, had moved out of sight around a bend just ahead. Minutes later we heard Gene shouting from not far off: "Hey, hustle it up, you guys! It's

just around the bend!"

Everybody slowly dragged back into action—except George. In striving to get to his feet, he inadvertently rolled over sideways between his packs and was even more helpless than before. He lay there emitting sundry profanities until the boys, with their lighter loads, moved over and helped him up. They likewise helped Al, Bill, and me get back under our canoes and soon we were all once more toiling wearily over and among the slippery rocks of the toughest trail of all our travels.

Thereafter, even big Gene seemed no longer as strong and nimble as he ordinarily was on the portages, nor did the lively boys scamper like squirrels across the boulder tops and hogbacks. From here on, fatigue stalked us relentlessly, and for the first time I wondered if we hadn't taken on more than we could handle.

At that point from which Gene had called to us, we found easier footing along a high, dry granite outcrop which skirted a treacherous looking quagmire, the mud-filled remnant of a defunct beaver pond through which the stream imperceptibly filtered its way. On limbs numb with weariness we plodded around it. When again we picked up our waterway, at its outlet from the mud swamp, we were much relieved to find it had the appearance of a stream again, navigable and leading off promisingly through a break in the forest. Amid great sighs, gasps, and grunts we lost no time in ridding ourselves of our burdens. I was too exhausted to lower my canoe in the usual gentle manner; I just dropped it. The resulting bang echoed loudly through the surrounding forest. A startled blue jay scolded from a distance.

Though anxious to hurry on so as to assure finding a good campsite before nightfall, Gene and Tom nevertheless thought it expedient that we have a fifteen-minute rest.

"We'll take a breather before going on," Gene announced.

About thirty yards down the stream bank the boys discovered a clearing fairly a-burst with huge, ripe blueberries. Everyone immediately invaded the patch on hands and knees, plucking and gulping the berries by the handful.

"I've never known blueberries to taste so good," rhapsodized George.

In their haste to consume as much of the feast as possible before time ran out, the boys stuffed away the juicy morsels with a gluttonous fervor that left their mouths and chins stained a livid blue. They joked and giggled over the resulting comic expressions.

"I would have to say," remarked Gene, "that this is the best blueberry year I've seen up here yet. There've been summers when you couldn't find a single berry. But apparently the weather's been just right for them this year. And we've found 'em at the very peak."

Watching my companions, especially the boys, thus happily replenishing themselves, I marveled at how quickly they could forget fatigue and discomfort in the enjoyment of so simple a pleasure. Surely this was part of the magic of the wilderness, made manifest in yet another of nature's priceless and bountiful treasures … unguarded … unrestricted … free for the taking. Here in the pure simplicity of nature's own garden lay another part of the answer to my quest. For, behold, there were no worldly riches here, yet somehow in the mere gulping of a few handfuls of blueberries we had become immeasurably enriched!

"Is it true that too many blueberries make you wacky?" Billy inquired through a cheek-puffing mouthful.

"Could be," Gene answered with a chomping grin. "All I know is that they're hard for *me* to resist. In fact, first chance I get when we're settled, I'm to going to spend an afternoon wallowing in a blueberry patch and eat myself into one big bellyache."

"That's a lot of ache," quipped Tom. "Filling *that* big pot will take more blueberries than

you could find in a square mile."

Gene merely laughed as he crammed another handful into his mouth.

"Count me in when you do, Gene," uttered George.

"It's a deal. But it ain't gonna happen here and now. We'd better get moving." At Gene's goading, though reluctant to leave the blueberries, we quickly reloaded the canoes and were soon dipping paddles down the stream.

We had proceeded about half a mile when the channel widened and deepened noticeably, indicating, as it turned out, that we were approaching a sizeable lake. The forest receded gradually to either side and then we were meandering along the channel through bur-reeds and cattails so tall and dense on all sides that we could see nothing beyond them.

"Great place for waterfowl," I heard Al remark to Mike when a pair of black ducks flushed from cover. Several times mallards and mergansers passed in flight. And when the welcome call of a loon signaled big deep water in the near distance, Gene, though we were still screened-in by the reeds, called out exultantly: "We made it, guys! We're finally out of this damned obstacle course. The lake's ahead!"

"Finally!" sighed Mike in the canoe directly behind me.

"Hallelujah!" shouted George. "Now if you can just keep us skimming over open liquid, Gene …"

"What! You mean you'd rather paddle than portage?" he guffawed.

"Any day of the week," George replied emphatically. "I must prefer doing my work sitting down."

"Ay-men … ay-men to that," Tom concurred, voicing the words in sing-song fashion.

"Hey, Dad," Mark exclaimed suddenly. "Sounds like seagulls, too."

"Yup, I hear 'em," I replied. "Great sound … a sure sign of a fine lake coming up."

I'd hardly got the words out when we burst from the reeds into full view of a beautiful, broad expanse of calm, open water. In a wide bay extending off to the left, and looking like a small fleet of green galleons lying at anchor, rose a cluster of five pine-crested isles. Straight before us on a low, narrow reef of dung-whitened rocks, an unusually large number of roosting gulls chattered in garrulous concert. Some took flight and circled noisily as we glided around them.

"Sounds like a political convention," commented Bill.

"Probably electing their chief mo-gull," punned Tom dryly.

"For a weak brain-blurp like that, you should get the gull-otine," chided Gene.

"And for such impudence you should do some time as a gully slave," cracked Tom in quick rebuttal.

"Will, my boy," Gene grunted to his son in mock disgust, "I don't know how I get into these *stupid,* these *ridiculous* exchanges of verbal trivia with that contentious old coot in the other canoe!"

Ignoring all this, Al had swung his canoe close in on the birds for a few quick shots with his camera. As he clicked away, the gulls prattled uneasily like fidgety matrons all a-fuss at having their pictures taken.

Beyond the reef we rafted our canoes by gripping them together and rested our paddles while Gene took another look at his map. He squinted against the sunlight as his keen eyes scanned the western shore to the far end of the lake.

"We probably shouldn't gamble on finding a camp further on," suggested Tom, glancing at the mid-afternoon sun. "We have a much better chance of finding a good campsite on a lake

this size, don't you think?"

"Just what I was thinking," agreed Gene. "We've already had a rugged run today. It might be smart to make camp a little earlier so we can get plenty of rest for tomorrow. I have a hunch it's going to be another grueling day."

"Another one?" exclaimed Mike. "Geeze, aren't we ever going to get where we're going?"

"How far do we still have to go?" asked Mark.

"Oh, not too far … I hope," Gene smiled understandingly. The boys' impatience was no surprise to this seasoned leader who had guided many a troop of youthful explorers into the wilds. "But right now, finding a campsite is the first order of business."

"I'm all for that," interjected George. "Shall we grab the first one we see?"

"Actually, by the looks of those rocks," Gene pointed far up the lake, "that northwest shore looks pretty promising. The possibility of a campsite is good where you can see a lot of low exposed rock like that. Looks like the better part of an hour's paddle from here … but I think it'll be worth the effort."

Promptly we set our hands to the paddles and pointed our prows toward the distant end of the lake. An absence of wind and wave action made that final paddling stint of the day unexpectedly pleasant. After the earlier exertions, such effort as was now required seemed hardly any effort at all. Canoes become marvelously light and responsive on calm water, and we were fortunately experiencing some of that stable weather common to this period of the summer in which, though temperatures may soar, the air will upon occasion remain fairly still for several days at a time. To the canoeist such weather is murder on the sweltering portages, but it is a joy on the water. There is always something special about slipping over a body of water that lies glassy smooth from shore to shore. In this instance it was a combination of the physical and the picturesque: the easy, almost restful pace of the paddling and the utter serenity of the scene. Green islands lifting from the lake's sky-blue lacquered surface toward the east shore gave soft perspective to a bay beyond them, making the lake seem larger than it was.

On such water, when paddles are lapped for a brief rest and the canoe glides effortlessly forward of its own momentum, two thin emerald riffles curl transparently outward from the bow, spreading away in the wake and capturing the dreamer's eye in a mesmeric spell … filling the searching spirit with a tranquility that approaches the sublime. For such a moment—though it can never provide more than a fleeting, uncapturable glimpse of what heaven must be like—it would be impossible to set a price. Yet to the venturesome soul hungering for such moments and for the rare and beautiful fulfillments they can bring, the price is little more than the time and effort it takes to wander for awhile in nature's ever-beckoning retreats.

Rapt in such musings I hardly noticed that we had quickly closed the distance and were now cruising along the rocky shore Gene had pointed out. Tom and George were out ahead of the rest, and as their canoe rounded a turn into a small cove, Tom shouted back: "Campsite! We're going in."

"Ah, we're in luck," commented Gene as he and Will made the turn and scanned the cove. "That clearing at the other side is made to order."

CHAPTER SIX

And indeed it was. Even from the water we could discern an excellent landing area at the foot of a granite shelf which slanted gently upward from just above the waterline toward a flat spacious opening along the forest edge. Part of the shelf was obscured at the nearer side by a narrow patch of dense shrubbery, mostly sweet gale, and several dwarfed cedars extending down close to the water. Tom and George, skirting this shore side thicket, were first to approach the landing. Just as their canoe touched the shelf, George, who was in the bow, suddenly went into such frantic gyrations he almost fell out of the canoe. With his paddle he shoved violently away from the rock and stroked backward in a frenzy as he blurted out: "Damn! Back, back, back! Quick, quick!"

Only then did the rest of us see what had caused this astonishing reaction. Two huge bears, which had been hidden by the foliage until George had met them literally face to face at the landing, stood there staring out at us, appearing quite as startled as we were.

"Jeez, let's get outa here fast!" squealed Billy, jabbing the water wildly with his paddle.

"More bears!" shouted Mark. "Oh no! Whadda we do now?"

"Oh, hold on now, guys!" exclaimed Gene, as he and Will quickly moved in toward the landing. "Don't get in a big panic. We'll find out if these buggers are actually afraid of us."

The boys watched with great amazement—and not a little trepidation—as Gene and Will carefully edged close to the shelf. Then, waving his paddle in the air, Gene let loose such a formidable burst of thunder from those big lungs of his that I almost felt sorry for the bears.

"Get out of here, you big devils!" he roared. "Go on! Haroomph! Beat it!"

Meantime, Will banged out a loud, fast beat with his paddle on the side of the canoe.

The bears took the hint. After one bewildered look, away they fled, disappearing quickly into the forest.

"Keep the canoe ready, please" Gene implored Will who was holding the craft flush with the landing. Gene cautiously stepped ashore, paddle in hand, and slowly crossed the clearing toward where the bears had gone out of sight. He waited awhile, listening, and then returned to the landing.

"This is too good a campsite to surrender to a couple of rogue bears," he announced. "I think they'll respect us now, but we'll take some precautions anyway. Let's make camp!"

"C'mon, guys," Tom called out, noting our hesitation as we sat out there in our canoes visibly stunned by the prospect of wild bears running loose so near our campsite. "Let's get those tents up and get a fire going!"

"Dad, is it safe?" asked Mark, suddenly very much the little boy I had so often lovingly held and comforted in the trials of his younger years, and needing now to place his trust on that one ultimate reassurance which only a devoted parent can give. For a fleeting moment he seemed so precious, so much a part of me, so needful still of my paternal strength and protection, that impulsively I wanted to cuddle him like the infant son he once had been. But of course I realized he was already so much a budding young lad that any such show of affection would be an embarrassment to him. A growing boy wants love, but he wants it only in the knowledge that it is there. So, I gave it to him in the way he would want it, in a simple man-to-man expression of my confidence: "Oh, I'm sure it is, Mark. Gene isn't one to take foolish chances. You can trust him and Tom to know what they're doing. We can handle those bears! So … come on. Let's go in now and get settled."

Reluctantly, amid such misgivings as would only be normal under the circumstances, our weary crew landed and proceeded quickly to set up a tight camp. Anxious, bear-wary eyes kept the surrounding forest under constant surveillance as we hustled to make everything secure. For the boys' sake, the tents were erected close together in the middle of the clearing in a semicircle surrounding a central fire pit, with the boys' two tents snugged in between those of the adults. An ample stockpile of firewood was gathered by the boys from a plentiful supply of beached driftwood scattered along the nearby shore. Al, Bill, and George laid the canoes end to end close by the tents to form an enclosure around part of the camp.

Meanwhile, Tom busied himself with the cooking, singing away in his accustomed manner as he worked. As might by now be expected, he had a new version of his song to spring on us, designed to suit the situation and to ease some of the tension brought on by the bears. It served its purpose, for it put everyone, the boys particularly, back in a relaxed and cheerful mood. Tom treated the matter of the bears in this light:

> If a bear comes to share
> In our meager bill-of-fare
> On the trail to Pungishemoo …
> Let him have his wish—we can live on fish,
> Till we reach our island campground.

And in the follow-up refrain, sung with gusto by the crew as usual, the boys recovered their boastful bravado to the extent of threatening to lasso the next bear they saw and tie him to a pine tree.

With everything in order, we all took a cool swim and got into clean, dry clothes before mealtime. Tom had a fine hot supper ready for us, consisting of fried Spam, baked beans, mashed potatoes, bread and butter, apple sauce, coffee, and hot chocolate.

As we sat around the campfire enjoying our meal, I noticed that the three younger sons, though ordinarily quite restless and ranging about even while eating, were content to huddle cross-legged inside the circle in comfortable and *safe* proximity to their sires. And, of course, their excited chatter was mainly about bears.

"Do you think those bears will come back?" Billy asked Tom.

"I wouldn't rule it out," Tom chuckled. "We'll have to take some precautions for tonight,

at any rate."

"What precautions?"

"Oh, you'll see … I'll show you after supper."

"Are they going to give us any trouble?" asked Mike.

"Well," Gene cut in, "bears generally try to avoid people, but sometimes bears and people cross paths. And that can spell trouble … for *both* of them."

"Won't they attack you?"

"Oh, the black bears in this part of the country are pretty harmless. But I'd still give 'em a pretty wide berth. Just remember," said Gene, "the only reason they come into camp is to get at the groceries. They're not after people. They just want a free lunch. That's why you hang your food. And …" here he shot a quick glance at each of the boys in turn, "you don't keep any food in your tent. Right?"

The boys each looked at one another.

"What would happen if you did?" queried Billy.

"You might find your tent pulled down on top of you and ripped to shreds in the middle of the night …" answered Gene.

"And the bear crawling all over you to find the tasty little morsel he smells inside!" blurted Tom.

"Would …" Mike hesitated. "Would bubble gum attract 'em?"

"Ho!" Gene bellowed. "You'd better get that gum out of your tent right now and put it in the food pack. And that goes for anyone else who has food stashed in their tent!"

To the amusement of their elders, the boys all jumped up and bee lined toward the tents. After some noisy groping they returned to the circle, each with his personal supply of chewing material … which Tom then stored away in the food pack.

At length, Gene rose stiffly, groaning from the effects of the hard rock he had been sitting on during the meal. "I don't mind telling you," he said, "bears or no bears, I'm bushed. Let's try to get everything done that needs to be done right away tonight. Cliff and Bill, I guess you got KP. The rest of us can button up camp."

"What about those bear precautions?" asked Billy.

"Well," announced Tom, "I'll show that to you now. C'mon with me … and anyone else who wants to come." With that, everyone went off and busied themselves in some way to get camp ready for the night, leaving Bill and me alone with the kitchen duties.

"Well, Cliff," remarked Bill as he dropped an aluminum plate onto the stack of dishes next to the wash pot, "now we've got *bears.* Ha, ha! It's been quite a trip so far, hasn't it?"

"Oh my, yes!" I replied.

"I mean … what do you think? In spite of all the rough going, we've still had some pretty exciting things happen so far, haven't we?"

"For me, even the rough going has had some merit. It's been real challenging. But you're right. Look at how much we've already encountered … even before reaching Pungishemoo!"

"And the boys! What a tremendous experience this has been for them so far. Don't you think?"

"Oh my, yes!"

"Hell, we've already seen deer, moose, *bears* … oh, and a bald eagle! How could I forget that? Wasn't *that* something!"

"Ho man, Bill, for me that was a Magnificent Moment!"

Bill paused momentarily, then said, "You know, Cliff, I've heard you use that expression

on several occasions now. Man, I know you like to coin words and phrases sometimes—and, I'll have to tell you, a lot of times they come off as pretty corny!—but somehow, I have to admit, 'magnificent' fairly describes a lot of 'moments' we've had so far. You trying to get it into the Dictionary or something?"

"Oh!" I replied, scrubbing a plate self-consciously and chuckling a bit at his allegation of "corniness." "I reserve that expression for all the best experiences in my life."

"You always use it?"

"I guess I started using it when I was a kid."

"When?"

"I can't even remember when … maybe it was when my mother started giving me my first introductions to the wonders of nature in her garden. She acquainted me with a lot of fascinating things there … insects, birds, plants, a lot of things."

"That's interesting. Like what?"

"Well … for example, I remember vividly the first time she showed me how the ants in our garden actually tended and 'milked' their own little 'flocks' of aphids. You know, those tiny sap-sucking plant lice that most gardeners go to great pains to get rid of?"

"Yes?"

"Well, my mother liked them there. One day she showed me how the ants actually 'domesticated' these aphids and used their natural sugary secretions as food, in somewhat the same way that we use dairy cattle! … The moment I saw this, I was completely awestruck. It was the first time in my life, I think, that I truly recognized the interconnectedness of nature. It was momentous for me. Somewhere along the line I must have simply muttered, 'what a magnificent moment!' then started referring to all my most profound experiences that way. That's all."

"Well, you know," said Bill, "I've never been one to label, or name, such things as you do. But …" he laughed, "I guess I *will* let you off the hook on this one!"

I laughed, plopping an aluminum plate into his rinse kettle with an exaggerated gesture of defeat.

"In fact," he added, "who knows? Maybe you'll even start hearing *me* use the expression … to describe my own 'momentous' experiences!"

"I'm flattered you would find the term a useful one," I replied.

"So," Bill continued, "tell me. What was one of your *most* … Magnificent Moments?"

"Oh, my marriage … and the births of my four children, most definitely."

"Same with me," responded Bill. "But I'm talking about something more personal—something especially unique. To you, not anybody else. And … well, I don't know … maybe something else relating to nature?"

"Well, let's see …"

I thought for a moment, probing the dimmest recesses of my memory. I really had to ponder, for I realized that—in spite of the many hardships I'd had to endure in my life, spanning both the Great Depression and the most horrendous war this planet had ever yet witnessed—I had experienced many profound, gratifying, and deeply personal episodes of enlightenment in my life. Realizing, too, that Bill's interest in all this perhaps reflected his own unique, personal quest toward some sort of self-discovery—and, possibly, how such a wonderful place as the one in which we now found ourselves, with all its mysterious powers and exertions, might also profoundly be effecting him—I answered: "Let me tell you a little story, Bill, which may add some scope to this whole idea of personal enlightenment … and, possibly, how Nature can

sometimes work through us to manifest some of those Magnificent Moments in our lives."

"By all means—go ahead."

"Well," I began, "as a young boy, I was privileged to spend most of my summers in the country at the farm of an uncle. It was a bustling, beautiful place, teeming with life and happy activity—in great variety. To accommodate the huge work load, which included tending a veritable menagerie of sheep, cattle, pigs, horses, chickens, turkeys, ducks … even honey bees! … Uncle Frank and Aunt Hattie had prudently brought forth a fine, big resourceful family.

"On this particular summer, three sons and six daughters were living at home. I have never seen a better example of rural efficiency. Work was a way of life. Everyone, including the youngest of my cousins and myself, pitched-in according to age and capability. Because work meant survival, it was pretty much taken for granted. It was performed happily and willingly by everybody and had priority over everything else. The farm, superbly harnessed to nature and managed according to nature's simplest requirements, was a complete community within itself. And, young as I was, I could usually help with such tasks as watering and feeding the livestock, gathering eggs, shocking grain in the fields, and picking vegetables and berries from the garden. What a wholesome, interesting life it was … living and laboring so intimately with Nature and sharing so fully in her bounty.

"Not that it was all work. There was plenty of time for play, which meant for us younger sprouts … time for rambling, exploring, and adventuring out at the pond or in the nearby woods. One of our favorite diversions after supper—after the, ahem, *kitchen* duties were done, of course!—was to take an evening walk barefooted along a section road that ran between a big stretch of woods and the north boundary of the farm. After a hot day, the fine, soft dust of the road would be warm and soothing to the feet, and I can still feel it sort of oozing up between my toes as I walked. On one particular evening, feeling a bit lonesome for my home and family in St. Cloud, I slipped away from my cousins and went quietly down the dusty road alone. The evening was warm, still, and humid. As I came opposite the densest part of the woods, I heard an owl hooting from a distance and stopped to listen. The silence, broken only by the occasional 'Who cooks for you?' of the owl, gave me an uneasy feeling and I decided to rejoin my relatives with the greatest possible haste.

"Just then, from very nearby, I was startled by another, much louder call that, as I later remembered it, sounded like an indignant inquiry … 'Who are *you?* Who are *you?* Who are *you?'* Repeated at short intervals, sometimes from nearby, sometimes from farther away, it had a strange, haunting, *insistent* quality, seeming at one moment to be scolding and interrogating me, at another to be lamenting the loss of the day. The underlying note was melancholic and, for me in that spooky moment, eerie. Oddly, though I was alone at the edge of a brooding forest with darkness rapidly closing in, I was as fascinated as I was frightened. My boyish imagination quickly had me surrounded by a host of unfriendly spirits shrieking menacingly, 'Go away! Go away! Go away!'

"I panicked then, and go away I did—as speedily as my legs and fright could propel me—back to the shelter of the farmhouse. My cousins told me that they knew of this wild evening bird and had heard its call at certain times, but they hadn't the slightest notion as to its name, habits, or appearance. They had never seen it, and its song was just another of many strange sounds in the night. But, whenever I could persuade any of the other children to go with me, we'd hike over to the woods and listen for it.

"Thus I managed to hear my twilight ghost several more times that summer, always well after the sun had set when too little light remained to permit a sight of it. I also visited the woods

in the daytime, never knowing what to look for or where, and the results were what you might expect. I finally gave it up and, in typical boyish fashion, soon found other mysteries to occupy me. Not again through many years of outdoor excursioning did I encounter that weird beguiling sound.

"But the story didn't end there. It climaxed many years later in the darkening dusk of a quiet summer evening. It was in an isolated little camp clearing Al and I had established deep in the oak forest at our tree farm in central Sherburne County—that's the Christmas tree plantation we own near Sand Dunes State Forest. Now … if you will allow, Bill … I will digress for a moment, just to give you a little background so I can tie all this together. It's a rather interesting story in itself, actually, involving one of my proudest accomplishments."

"No problem, Cliff," Bill replied. "Go right ahead."

"Well, I had come to this wild place on Sherburne's beautiful oak savannah late in the day with County Agent Enock Bjuge and Minnesota State Tree Nurseries Director Ray Clement … two close friends with whom I had fought side by side in many a bitter conservation battle during the critical resource years of the '40s and '50s.

"As you probably know, in those early years of emerging resource awareness, 'conservation' was an unpopular word among many sportsmen's clubs and certain civic groups who associated it with restrictions on hunting, fishing, and other flagrant resource exploitation … and among many farmers who resented being told they were unwittingly destroying their soil through wasteful agricultural practices. 'Ecology' was then an esoteric term seldom heard outside biologists' laboratories, and 'pollution' was dismissed as the war cry of fanatics and alarmists."

"Yes, I remember," Bill replied, "and it wasn't that long ago, either!"

"Well," I continued, "the three of us had worked together as part of a small group of dedicated conservationists who led the fight in 1947 for legislative enactment of the historic State Tree Nursery Program … which was to eventually transform our lands and restore Minnesota to prominence as a strong forestry state.

"Certain large commercial nurseries had bitterly opposed this legislation out of an unfounded fear that it would put the state into competition with them. The bill which we three originally helped draft, together with the late George W. Fredrich, whom you may remember—he was known at that time as Minnesota's 'Dean of Conservationists'—proposed that the *state* establish and operate large nurseries to supply low-cost conifer seedlings to fill the vast demand existing throughout much of Minnesota. The greatest initial need had been that of farmers wanting protective windbreaks and shelterbelts to prevent disastrous wind and water erosion of their croplands.

"Through a series of hardheaded confrontations before legislative committees and an extensive statewide publicity campaign which I had the privilege of spearheading myself, the tree nursery program was finally pushed through … despite all opposition!"

"Boy, that's really something, Cliff," Bill remarked. "What was the result of it?"

"Oh my. Since that time, we who fought that difficult battle have seen our dream realized …

"Even now—and it's only been about fifteen years!—there are literally *thousands* of woodlots, windbreaks, and shelterbelts already growing across much of the state, with dramatic evidence of expanding soil and water conservation efforts, as a result. You may have noticed that many miles of Minnesota highways are now attractively bordered by roadside evergreen plantings … and the trees are already standing tall enough to screen out many of the old ugly

billboards! Some of the vast northern scrublands, where the original pine forests were stripped clean by earlier loggers, have since been replanted … and an entire new northern evergreen forest is well on its way. It's also worth mentioning that, in addition, there has been an unexpected economic bonus. Today a whopping annual $60,000,000 Christmas tree industry—of which Al and I are also a part—flourishes in the state … all made possible by that original tree nursery legislation!"

"I see," interjected Bill. "I'm starting to get the picture. So there you were, all three of you, out at your *tree farm …"*

"Yes! … long after the great 'Conservation Wars,' gathered together like a pride of aging generals to celebrate the victory and to reminisce over the old battle campaigns!"

"What an appropriate place to do so," remarked Bill, now absent-mindedly probing the bottom of his rinse kettle with a pair of tongs for a lost fork. "So, what happened then?"

"Well, having already enjoyed some fine charcoal-broiled steaks, which Ray had prepared, we all settled around a campfire for some leisurely talk. I remember, Ray was especially elated that evening because his state nurseries had just yielded a record annual volume of 55,000,000 seedlings.

"Enock, likewise, was pleased to announce one of his most successful years as County Agent. Many poor farmers in the Zimmerman-Orrock area, who had struggled for years trying to subsist on the sandy acres located there, had finally been persuaded to switch from unprofitable crop farming to the raising of Christmas trees. That light acidic soil, while unsuited to the growing of corn and other grains, had been found to be extremely hospitable to conifers … and those who had turned to tree farming were suddenly enjoying some of the best incomes they'd ever realized off those silty barrens. What a fantastic conservation breakthrough the tree nursery program had proven to be!

"In reviewing the results, we realized we had played a singular part in literally changing the face of our state. The millions upon millions of tree seedlings which had flowed out from the nurseries to beautify and enrich the lives of so many people were becoming a permanent part of our heritage … for populations yet unborn!

"This realization, this proud and gratifying moment—knowing that I had given part of myself to a cause infinitely more important than personal matters—was for me one of my most memorable Magnificent Moments. Then, to be able to share with these faithful friends the joy of such an achievement—to relish it leisurely on a calm evening in a woodland setting under the spell of a glowing evening campfire—just had to be one of those rarest of human satisfactions."

Now, as I paused, Bill stood thoughtfully by while I stacked a handful of tin plates. "Gee, Cliff," he said, "What a terrific accomplishment. How come you haven't talked about it before?"

"Oh, I'm not sure how many people would actually want to hear about all that. Besides, as you can see, it's a long story anyway. But let me finish …"

"That's right. You started way back there on the farm! I'm guessing there's a connection?"

"There is," I continued. "Well, that fine evening of shared memories with Ray and Enock had a marvelous climax. We were sitting around the fire in the early darkness, chatting and joking happily about what unsung heroes we were, when all of a sudden there burst upon the quiet air a soul-stirring cry that filled the night with glory.

"'Who are *you?* Who are *you?* Who are *you?'* it called with a sort of haughty insistence. The sound startled me. It was my petulant mystery bird of long ago … calling across the years

and instantly transporting me back to those fascinating evening walks along the powdery country road. I was again standing barefooted before the darkening woods, and I could feel the soft warm dust oozing soothingly between my toes. The smell of fresh cut hay was heavy on the humid air, and far off in a pasture a cow bellowed. So real did this flashback seem, and so carried away was I that Ray's voice seemed strangely hollow as I heard him exclaim: 'By God, that's the first *whippoorwill* I've heard in a long time. He's right out there at the edge of the clearing!'

"And then the bird called again, this time jolting me back to reality. So that was it. A whippoorwill. As simple as that. I'd waited more than twenty-five years for a repeat performance and the identity of the performer. The whippoorwill had made me a child again, and it was with a childish excitement that I told my friends of that first encounter. Though I had forgotten the boyhood incident entirely, this evening's sonorous visitor had brought it all back, vividly, and with it yet *another* … Magnificent Moment.

"And that's the way it is. A little moment, a little event, suddenly assumes a significant meaning in your life. I think of the whippoorwill now as having parenthesized a most enriching chapter in my life: from a happy boyhood spent close to nature … to the successful culmination of a long, hard period of dedicated service to conservation.

"I can tell you that I brought my family and friends to the tree farm many times that summer to hear at twilight the haunting call of my mystery songster. And it was a keen disappointment to me when he failed to appear the following year. That was the end of it. I have never again heard the song of the whippoorwill, though I find myself wistfully listening for it whenever I chance to be near a likely woodsy habitat at twilight."

"Is the whippoorwill that rare a bird?" asked Bill.

"In some areas," I replied. "It's a ground dweller and requires the wild, undisturbed forest floor to nest on. There are few such undisturbed woods remaining in my part of the country. But soon there's going to be a big national wildlife refuge in the Sherburne area to restore the wetlands and natural oak savannah that once existed there, prior to agricultural development. Looks like we may even have to surrender our tree farm to become part of it. But maybe—one day—that will bring back the whippoorwill."

By this time the dishes were done, the kettles rinsed, and everything properly stacked away. Bill took out his pipe, filled it and lit up.

"Well," he said after a few puffs, "I must say, I enjoyed your story. Who knows? Maybe before this expedition is over we'll add a few more Magnificent Moments to our adventure here."

"I'm sure we will, Bill," I replied as I brought out my own pipe and joined it with his in the warm glow of our wilderness friendship.

Puffing contentedly, we walked over to where Gene, Will, and Tom—under the fascinated scrutiny of the boys—had been setting up Tom's "bear precautions." George and Al had also joined the assembly. The two large Duluth packs containing our food supplies had been bound securely together in a compact bundle and suspended by a long rope stretched between the high branches of two tall pines. The sight of our entire stock of provisions dangling in mid-air some fifteen feet above the ground bordered on the bizarre.

"Nothing short of a giraffe could reach that," chuckled Al, readying his camera (by now a pattern of habit that was nearly automatic).

"Well, there goes my gum for the night," lamented Mike.

"Oh, it'll keep," teased Tom.

"Jeez, that looks heavy," Mike observed. "What if the rope breaks?"

"Well," Tom replied jovially, "I guess the bears would have a real smorgasbord!"

"Just make sure you're not under it when it happens," cautioned Al as, with view finder to his eye, he maneuvered for angle and for what illumination remained in the fading twilight. "If that thing dropped on your head it would drive you knee-deep into the rock."

"Sure, Dad. Big chance of that!"

"Now comes the good part," announced Gene as he brought over one of the canoes and positioned it on its side directly beneath the hanging food supply. With help from Tom, another canoe was propped beside the first in such a way that the two craft would topple against each other with a loud bang at the slightest disturbance. On top of these Tom stacked an array of kettles and cook pans, so precariously balanced that, as Tom observed, "even a mosquito would send them crashing."

"That, my friends," announced Gene with professorial pomp as he made a final inspection of the device, "is what is known as a 'bear alarm.' If by chance you hear it in the middle of the night, you will know we have … *visitors."*

"Yep. Big shaggy visitors … with *big* appetites," added Tom, enunciating ominously through a mischievous grin.

"Now all we need are a couple paddles near the door of each tent," Gene declared. "You wanna take care of that, Will?"

"Sure, Dad," his son replied, turning promptly to the task.

"Paddles? What are they for?" asked Mark with a worried look.

"Weapons," Gene whispered in that same ominous manner; he and Tom were obviously teasing the tenderfeet.

"Gee," exclaimed Mike in a thin, squeaky voice that betrayed genuine anxiety, "what good are paddles against a bear?"

"Let's hope we never have to find out," his father replied, joining the fun.

"Aw, tell the truth," insisted Billy. "By *weapons* you mean, you don't actually use 'em, you just scare the bears away by banging 'em on a canoe or something, right?"

"Well. Okay. That's correct," surrendered Tom. "But … actually, in some cases, I wouldn't hesitate to give 'em a good slap on the behind."

"Why?"

"Just to send 'em a message. Just to let 'em know …" then he paused momentarily to drive home his point, "that you *don't mess with human beings!"*

"What do you mean?" inquired Billy's father, obviously a bit unnerved at this seeming incongruity in Tom's normally gentle nature.

"Well," said Tom, assuming once again that reverent tone which revealed his more sensitive side, "by my reckoning, it's sometimes the *best* thing you can do for a bear. Especially one that's becoming a nuisance. Because when a bear—especially a rogue bear—starts getting mixed up with humans … chances are he's signing his own death warrant. I've seen it a hundred times. He winds up getting killed."

"Boy," George interposed, "that sure says a lot for human beings, doesn't it?"

"That's just the way it is," said Tom. "A lot of people just don't realize that bears are going to act like bears, no matter what. Because that's how Nature made 'em. And all it takes is just one time for a bear to get it in his head that humans—in some way—are a source of food … then he's a goner. I know a good number of bears that actually got *shot* because some fool left his garbage where they could get at it, or put a bird feeder where they could get at it, or even left food out … even hand-*fed* the animal! … for their own amusement." Here Tom paused once

more, then his tone became more buoyant: "So! Are you young marauders ready to do these bears a favor tonight and let them know you're real human beings?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so," Billy replied.

"So we're really going to have to use those paddles then?" Mike asked, obviously still confused as to their actual purpose.

"Yep," his father teased, "you just swing that paddle right at 'em, keep 'em off those trees away from our food packs!"

"Just lay a good one right on the bear's behind," Gene rejoined robustly, "that's a good spot—one good *slap* with the paddle! Right, Tom?"

"Heh, heh, heh," Tom chortled. "Sure. In fact, the *instant* you hear that bear alarm, you kids scramble right outa your tents as *fast* as you can—and you go right after those bears!"

"You guys are sick," Mike said, obviously a little embarrassed for catching on too late to their joke. Everyone, with the exception of the three young lads, laughed.

"Actually … seriously," Gene cut in, "if they actually do show up, you boys just let us go after those bears. They can still be dangerous. If you really want to help, just shine your flashlights and make a lot of noise from your tents. In fact, wait until I yell the signal so we can catch 'em by surprise. Just stick close to Will," and then to his son, "okay, Will?"

"Okay, dad," his son replied. Then Will turned directly to the boys. "You with me, guys?"

All three of the youngsters suddenly puffed up confidently and answered their newly appointed leader unanimously in the affirmative.

"Okay, we're with you …"

"Count us in …"

"You can depend on us!"

"Well," said Gene, smiling proudly at his son, "that pretty much does it then. The safety of our camp is *guaranteed!* I'm going to hit the sack. Bears or not, let's all try to get some sleep tonight, eh. See you all in the morning." With that he left us and disappeared into his tent.

The boys, still apprehensive and perhaps a bit quieter than usual, followed Will to the tents and were not long in finding their own sleeping bags. The rest of us joined briefly by the fire, then one by one we all called it a day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Moments later I had zipped open the screen flap of my tent and stepped inside. I heard Gene mumble something as he twisted inside his sleeping bag, already sleep. Undressing quickly, I slipped into my own bag. As usual, I lay awake for some time, ruminating over the day's activities and conversations.

I was just dozing off when I thought I heard what sounded like the soft shuffle of footsteps outside the tent. There was, too, the strong, eerie sensation of a large presence out there in the night just beyond the thin canvas wall. It could have been as near as an arm's length from my head. And yet, so slight was all this, and so close to sleep was I, that it seemed more like the vaporous impressions of a dream. Nevertheless, I was immediately wide awake and listening, or trying to listen above the sudden loud thumping in my chest. I caught myself wondering what I would do if a bear abruptly ripped its way into our tent. I thought about waking Gene who was snoring peacefully in the darkness, but, being not at all certain that my imagination hadn't been playing tricks, I decided not to disturb his rest. The moments wore on and on and, hearing nothing more, I finally fell asleep.

And then it came! With startling suddenness there burst within that black silence a resounding clatter that put the entire camp into wild panic. There was no need to shout an alarm, for I could hear excited voices in the other tents. Gene was out of his bag in a flash, fumbling about in the darkness and slipping into his boots.

"Just as we expected," he exclaimed hoarsely. "Those damned bears are after our grub!"

In the dark I could hear him slowly unzipping the tent flaps.

"Careful, Gene! Take it easy now!" I managed to stammer, groping for my flashlight and trying hard not to appear as flustered as I felt.

"You stay near the tent," cautioned Gene. "When I holler, Tom and I will rush 'em with our paddles. At my signal, you and the others shine your lights on 'em—and keep the beam in their eyes if you can. We'll take 'em by surprise."

I crawled out of the tent and crouched in front of it with flashlight ready. The thumping had returned to my chest. My mouth felt dry. My whole body was tense.

"All set, Tom?" Gene whispered.

"All set," came Tom's reply from nearby.

"Okay, guys," Gene commanded, "light 'em up!"

Several bright beams shot out simultaneously toward our dangling food supply, revealing at once our unwelcome visitors. Atop one of the overturned canoes one of the bears was rearing up on his hind legs and trying in vain to reach our high-hanging larder with his forepaws. The other, with its snout pointed upward, was lumbering in a circle beneath, a picture of baffled frustration. Distracted, the bears quickly turned and gazed bewilderedly into the lights.

"Charge 'em!" roared Gene, whereupon he and Tom, though keeping a safe distance, rushed part way toward the shaggy marauders, the while whooping like attacking savages and noisily banging the ground and the nearest canoe with the blades of their paddles, while the rest of us hooted and hollered from our tents. The racket seemed startlingly loud in the stygian stillness, especially Gene's booming harangue. I remember wondering, despite all the excitement, at how many decibels he was capable of generating. The bears may have wondered too. Utterly dismayed, at least for the time being, they dashed off in such haste we could hear them crashing through the underbrush moments after the forest had swallowed them up.

"Holy cow!" exclaimed Al after we had all gathered around the tipped canoes. "What a commotion! I wish I could have gotten a picture of it!"

"Yeah, and a tape recording," laughed Bill. "You could sell it to Hollywood for sound effects."

"I'll bet those bears are still running," giggled Mike.

"You *hope,"* corrected Billy uneasily.

"Good lord, Gene, where'd you get such a powerful set of pipes?" marveled George. "I'll bet you scared those buggers so bad you could track 'em by their droppings."

Gene chortled uproariously at that. "I hope you're right," he replied, "but if I know anything about bears, we haven't seen the last of 'em."

"Well, whether they come back or not," said Tom as he raised one of the canoes onto its side, "let's just reset this bear alarm and get back to bed."

"At least we know this contraption works," chuckled Al as he and George lifted the other canoe into its tottery place against the first.

"Doggone," Gene lamented as he set the pots and pans in place, "I wish there were some way to keep 'em out of here. We really need to get some sleep."

"How about a bonfire?" suggested Mark as he worriedly scanned his flashlight along the dark edge of the forest.

"Somebody would have to stay up to watch it," objected Gene. Then, jokingly, "Would you like to volunteer?"

"Forget it," replied mark, wincing at the thought.

"Actually," George cut in, "I wouldn't mind staying up for a spell—not all night, mind you, but long enough to keep a fire going for awhile."

"Well, what the heck," responded Gene, "that might actually help—go ahead, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." Then George turned toward me. "How 'bout you, Cliff … you're a night-owl like me. How about some of that good old 'campfire confabulation'?" he said, resurrecting a term we had used over the years to describe our late-night philosophical ramblings.

"You sure have me figured," I laughed. "Suits me fine. I was just hoping someone would ask. I couldn't sleep after all this commotion, even if I tried."

With that, everyone paraded back to their tents leaving George and me to our voluntary

vigil. We soon kindled a small fire on a bare rock some distance from the tents.

"Well, Cliff," George asked as he stirred the blaze with a stick, "are you as beat as I am?"

"I sure am, if you mean, do my muscles ache all over," I laughed as I stretched out before the fire.

"Gawd, I haven't even begun to ache yet. Right now, I'm just sort of numb all over. But that's the price you pay, I guess, for letting the ol' city life flab-up all your muscles!"

"Oh hell, that's to be expected. This is a drastic change for us."

"Don't you think Gene's been pushing us pretty hard?"

"Oh, maybe a little. Personally, I'd prefer a more leisurely pace, but I know he's anxious to get there … as I'm sure we all are."

"I wonder how many more days we'll have of this. I sure hope we aren't just chasing a rainbow." This hint of George's sagging confidence surprised me a little. But then I remembered his cigarette situation and realized he might be having some difficulty with that by now.

"I hope so too," I replied. "I'm really looking forward to finding Pungishemoo. It's been on my mind so much, it already seems terribly real to me—and I don't want to be disappointed. Yet somehow, I know we're going to find it. I just know it."

"I wish I could be as optimistic."

George stirred the fire again and fed it a gnarled piece of driftwood, which we watched awhile in pensive silence as the flames began to consume it. He seemed deep in thought. Finally he spoke.

"Cliff," he said, "do you believe it's possible to be both cynical and optimistic? I mean, do you believe cynicism can live in the same skull with optimism?"

"Why, do you think I'm that way?" I asked.

"Well, for the most part, you seem to be a terribly optimistic person, but I get the feeling you have a strong cynical outlook, too. You have to be exceedingly trusting of people to be a true optimist, but I know you aren't naive enough to trust everyone you meet. This mix in your personality puzzles me."

"Well, George, it puzzles me too. I know I want to look at life positively, but I find a lot to discourage my faith and confidence in anything involving human goals and motives."

"Like what?"

"Well, I know I have a very impatient, cynical attitude about certain things. I especially find repugnant the petty hypocrisy that permeates most levels of our national life, especially when it involves people I've known and trusted. And I certainly deplore the negative thinking I see in a lot of people around me and some of the damnable things they do, especially to each other; but I also see this as normal fallout … growing pains, if you will, which our slowly evolving species seems to be going through but out of which our smoldering intellect somehow, at some time, is going to flare up into greatness."

"You really believe that?"

"Sure. I believe we just simply will, by a natural process of gradual growth and improvement, overcome the flaws and weaknesses still inherent in human nature and actually transcend to a higher level of existence. I believe this is not only possible but that it will ultimately happen."

"I agree with you somewhat, Cliff—I feel the same about our basic human potential—but what dampens my own optimism is the fact that we could destroy ourselves before we ever even get a chance to improve ourselves."

"Well, I know what you mean. I'm very concerned about where humanity is going and whether we can check the stampede before we reach the edge of the cliff; but, then, I strongly suspect the existence of some grand creative power, or cosmic intelligence, running the universe according to some sort of creative design."

"Your concept of God?"

"In a way, yes."

"Well, *cosmic intelligence* doesn't exactly reflect the *Biblical* idea of God."

"I'm afraid I find the old Biblical concept much too limiting, hardly adequate to account for all the marvelous phenomena—the vast, mysterious interplay of mass, energy, space, time, and organic life—that seem to go on harmoniously throughout the universe. There has just got to be more to it than that … than, say, the "Book of Genesis" has to offer … much more."

"So, for want of a better term, you prefer these more cosmic terms instead of *God?"*

"No, I don't prefer them. God is still central to me—to me, God *is* these other things—but because of the blurry, indistinct personal notion a lot of people have of God, there is always the danger of falling back into old, restricted spiritual vaguities which seem to obscure a broader vision."

"A broader vision?"

"Yes. The vision of an Omnipotence that permeates the *natural* world as well as the supernatural. So much emphasis has been given to a God of the spirit that we tend to overlook the presence of God in the physical. When I consider that the basic unit of all the power and energy and matter in the universe is a very minute *physical* particle called an *atom*, it is no longer possible for me to accept the narrow concept of a purely spiritual or supernatural God. All of the known forces and materials which constitute a living organism are *physical*, working within fixed universal physical laws. Any God, or Creative Power, or Super-intellect, or … call it what you will … that has built such a fantastic physical universe would, to me, have to be somehow intrinsically involved *physically* in that creation."

"Well now, Cliff, I think I'm beginning to understand your deep love of nature," George smiled. "You really *do* see God in a termite, or a tarantula, or a stone, don't you?"

"Absolutely. But I also see God in the essence of a kindness, or the smile of a child, or a mother's love."

"Hmmm. In other words, you see this Super Being present in some way in absolutely everything, tangible or intangible—you think it's impossible to walk, to live, to think, or behave in any way outside its divine influence?"

"You might put it that way. But we're getting into some semantic problems here again. That word *divine* has some strong archaic connotations I try to avoid. I always seem to envision seraphic angels hovering on heavenly wings above a bearded, patriarchal God seated on a celestial throne! … a sublime but rather meaningless picture, to me, which came to us from Isaiah's vision. It's a picture which has repeated itself many times throughout history, too. Look how similar Isaiah's notion was to the deific visions of the ancients, the Greeks and Romans especially. All their gods and goddesses were given familiar *human* characteristics. But in their limited knowledge of the universe, they had little but superstition—and, I suppose, a fear of nature's own mysterious forces—by which to interpret the unknown. It was only natural that they would populate their Olympian and Elysian worlds with humanized figures."

"But these human gods served a beneficial purpose at the time," George averred.

"Oh, that may very well be. But I'm talking about civilization *now*. This humanization of God is precisely what I believe led humankind up a blind alley and ultimately closed many

human minds to a much broader vision. The Hebrews and then the Christians did settle for one single, all-encompassing God; but they fell into the same habit of visualizing God in human terms: concerned mainly with human values and human conduct, dealing out immortality to deserving mortals, demanding the same deference and worship and blind obedience which serve the mortal conceits of kings. Can you see such a God having any meaning … or *use* … in the Space Age?"

"Well, I agree, it really does seem rather ridiculous." George paused and thought for awhile. "But then, Cliff," he continued, "if we're looking for a more fitting concept of God—a broader vision, as you say—what are we actually after? Is it anything we can actually identify with?"

"Maybe not, George. Maybe we haven't yet developed to that level of consciousness. But the God that makes sense to me would exist in a dimension, as a sort of quintessence, that's probably not within our capacity to comprehend intellectually, anyway. I'm satisfied that the evidence is there, that there is a creative intelligence at work, and that creation is unfolding in an orderly manner according to some grand universal design."

"And therein lies your optimism?"

"I would guess so. Surely, the architect of the universe and all that is in it must be capable of achieving a state of ultimate cosmic perfection … despite anything we blundering humans may do to impede the forward movement. Anything as marvelously complex as life—and especially the human brain—would not seem to have been established in the first place without a purpose. So, regardless of what humanity may do in its folly to try to destroy itself, I simply believe the Creator will not—if you'll pardon the *human* expression, please—'let it happen.'"

"Despite the present nuclear concern?"

"Yes, I think so. Somehow, I believe, we will stop short of total self-annihilation. That doesn't mean that humanity as we see it today could not greatly retrogress for a time, even to the point of decimating its populations through some huge self-inflicted calamity. But there would be survivors, I'm sure, and there would be the process of starting all over again until there would finally emerge at some time in the distant future the full, glorious creature intended in the creative design."

"You really believe there is such a design?" George used his sticks to rearrange the glowing embers of the fire then threw another piece of wood on.

"Yes, George. I do. I believe that the origin of life on this planet, itself, could not have happened by chance alone. Modern mathematicians have even demonstrated that it's statistically impossible. There almost has to be something behind it … some intelligence, some plan, some inexplicable force which underlies the whole process involving the origin and evolution of life on earth."

"Well, alright," mused George as he shifted slightly to avoid a flow of smoke from the fire, suddenly fanned his way by the breeze. "Suppose there is a design. Then why wouldn't the Creator give human beings a more powerful and effective mind with which to comprehend the true nature of things?"

"That's just it, George. The way I look at it, that act of 'giving' is very much in progress. Just consider that time means nothing in the unfolding universe. Then you might say that what seems to us an extended period of trial and error, of slow, gradual growth through evolution, may be but a split second in cosmic terms. Despite the growth we've observed in human intelligence over the past several thousand years, we could, still, theoretically, be in an embryonic stage of

development."

"You believe then that this slow, on-going evolutionary process is the primary *method* of creation?"

"For want of a better interpretation, I guess I'd say, yes. The evidence of such a process is too impressive for me to ignore. Here we are, sitting in front of one of humankind's oldest inventions, a campfire—the discovery of which helped launch the human animal on its grand upward march from primitive obscurity to dominion over all other living things. Yet for all our achievements, we are only beginning to unravel some of the great mysteries which have perplexed us through the centuries. Note that I said: *we are only beginning.* I cannot believe that this is the place in time or space for humankind to be bowing out. Before us lies a great adventure, a great destination, a great Age of Triumph … the fulfillment of the Creator's master plan. I think we are part of that plan. We are here for a purpose. We have a mission, a rendezvous with destiny. And, falter though we may along the way, that's a date we're going to keep."

"Sounds great, Cliff. But it also sounds a bit romantic. I think you're dreaming a bit. It's like … like our journey to Pungishemoo. We just can't be sure of anything until we get there."

"Hmmm."

"To me," he continued, "until we have more meat on the skeleton, we're only looking at bones."

"Well, you always were a bit punctilious, George," I laughed. "Nevertheless, I'll stick to my dream until something better comes along. It helps me see beyond myself, and it really does brighten the prospect of the future."

"Nothing wrong with that," George smiled wryly. "I only wish I had your kind of faith. In my case, I've just about written off the human race as being little more than a rash on the skin of our beautiful planet."

"How so?"

"Oh, maybe I just let people get to me; but while you're looking at future human betterment, I'm looking at the present reality … which, to me, isn't encouraging at all. Doesn't the bad side of the human picture bother you, Cliff? Like … people's ignorance and indifference—the corruption and greed and exploitation going on all around us? Just think how much more pleasant and satisfying life could be if people had just a little more kindness and decency … just a little more consideration toward one another. What we actually have is a jungle of half-civilized creatures struggling and conniving and abusing each other for all the dubious advantages the jungle has to offer. It's a bloody botch, if you ask me! And it's pretty hard to look at without becoming anything *but* cynical and pessimistic."

"I'm painfully aware of what's going on in the human swarm, George," I began. But George, with a sudden flare of anger in his voice was off and running.

"Hell, you know damn well it's a cruel, crappy world. I don't mean to sound like a complainer, but sometimes you just reach your limit. I just can't stomach much of what I see in the world today. It makes me feel uneasy. And grubby, like a guy who visits a leper colony and wonders if he's caught anything. There's so much negativism in our society that it simply sucks away all the good things that make life worth living."

"I know, George, but you can't let it get you down. You've just got to believe that there are some people … maybe not many, but some … who are above mediocrity, who have a real concern for others, and who are more interested in raising their standard of *life* than their standard of living. In spite of our failures, we've still come pretty far."

"Not nearly far enough, and not in the right direction! We're only fooling ourselves if we think otherwise. We can't just close our eyes and imagine that we have no problems. My God, our world is in a crisis!"

"Aw hell, George. So what else is new? Crisis is just another name for challenge … and we've never been without it."

"Okay, so how do we meet it? We're like the gifted actor who can't stop giving a lousy performance. I mean, we're nowhere even near living up to our full potential as a so-called 'advanced civilization.' We're squandering our resources and poisoning our environment. We're in a massive onrush of greed and exploitation. But what really vexes me is the *moral* deterioration—it's spreading through our national life like the Black Plague."

"Well, I should say, it's certainly got you riled up tonight," I laughed.

"Look, Cliff, let's just take the expression, 'nice guys finish last'. It's not just a stupid meaningless saying anymore … it's a widely accepted way of thinking. It's a shock for any decent man to learn that this attitude practically eliminates him from any fair chance to succeed."

"But do you really accept that, George? Do you actually believe it yourself?"

"It's not whether it's true or not, Cliff. It's what that kind of thinking signifies, what's in the attitude. It suggests a horrible moral sickness running rampant in our society today. It's evil, it's deadly … and it could strangle us."

"Aren't you overstating the situation a bit, George?"

"God, man, take a good look at it. *Nice* guys finish last? *Nice* guys? Why is that? It's as much as to say that if you aren't some kind of a dirty, crooked son-of-a-bitch who has no compunction about screwing your brother or your neighbor, you have no chance of succeeding in any field or in any endeavor. I guess you just have to be prepared to literally 'kill off' any person, or group, or business, or government that stands in your way. How can a civilization hope to survive on a principle like that? Whatever happened to simple honesty, moral integrity, mutual trust, consideration for others … just plain, ordinary human dignity?"

"There's still a lot of good in the world, George. Aren't you stretching the bad side a little bit out of proportion?"

"Hell, no. If we are to assume that this kind of moral deterioration underlies the successes of so many people and so many businesses and professions, we can only conclude that the foundations of our society are ready for major collapse. That, according to overwhelming historical testimony, is one lesson in human experience we can rely on. History—which sure as hell *does* repeat itself—tells us that the collapse of every great civilization has been the result of an insidious internal moral deterioration which weakened the minds and corrupted the behavior of its people."

"But do you believe our society could actually be where it is today if most of our thinking was based on such negative influences?"

"It's possible that's precisely why we are where we are. The question is: just where are we? Are you honestly satisfied with where we are? Do you think our achievement are really that great? Here, let me run down the list for you: we've got crime, drugs, ghettos, poverty, government corruption, prejudice and discrimination, high taxes, unemployment, wasteful government spending, anxiety, depression, unrest … I could go on and on. You just show me where all that *good* is you'd like to think is blooming all around us!"

I laughed then, perhaps a bit uneasily, for, as fired up as George was at the moment, I knew him to be a person of extremely high integrity. And I respected his keen mind. I wanted to think that he was just blowing off steam with the typical bluntness and overstatement that such

spontaneous eruptions tend to generate—and, perhaps, that he believed only a fraction of what he was saying. Yet I knew I would be hard pressed to counter his "bads" with an equal amount of "goods." Not that there weren't a lot of good things about our way of life, but there was the question of degree … of whether even the good things were as good as they could or ought to be. And so, rather feebly, I nodded assent and then replied:

"All I can say, George, is that I do have a job, a home, and a family that's eating regularly and getting an education … and we all enjoy more personal freedom and more comforts and conveniences than similar families in any other country in the world. That doesn't eliminate the bad things, of course, nor should we let it blind us to what's happening to our country or what we ought to be doing about it. We will lose all the blessings we have if we ever make the mistake of taking them for granted. I know that. I know that the bad things could quickly reduce or even destroy the good things … if we are foolish enough, or unconcerned enough, to let it happen."

"Well, we *are* foolish and unconcerned and dead on our butts … and it *is* happening," George responded gravely. "I have a theory about the good and bad in people. Lord knows we all have some of both. But, in my opinion, the common people are generally a lot more honest and friendly and uncomplicated than those in higher levels of society. They have less to hide, less to protect, and are less concerned about making a big impression. Most people, I think, want—and try—to be good. But the more involved they get in the big game of Take or Be Taken, the more they forget their manners and their good intentions. The pressures of getting ahead, or simply 'keeping up with the Joneses', bring out our aggressive and acquisitive instincts. This sets up a whole chain reaction of moral decay. Right and wrong become matters of rationalization and compromise, and wrong-doing is all right as long as one can get by with it. So … the way I see it, our humanitarian qualities tend to diminish in proportion to the amount of power, wealth, and influence we accumulate."

"George, you've got to be kidding!" I exclaimed, not merely surprised but perhaps puzzled by such a loaded statement out of this friend whose mind I so admired. "Are you saying that success is corruption … that leadership and achievement are somehow evil?"

"Now wait, Cliff." George had a very disarming way about him; he could react to his own bombs with such sincere, boyish innocence that it made you wonder if you weren't terribly stupid or unkind to question what he said. "I did not," he continued, "use the words 'success, leadership, and achievement.' There's a world of difference between your choice of words and mine. And I'm not talking about evil, either. I'm talking about the loss of human sensitivity in those who strive to obtain wealth and power. If you consider the amount of hanky-panky and outright barbarism that usually go along with the struggle for high position in this society, I would say that there are very few people at the top who have any true humanism left in them."

"Okay, suppose I agree, so how do you account for it?"

"It's obviously a by-product of the struggle for supremacy. I'm sure there are exceptions; but the aspiring climber is usually forced to discard one-by-one all the humanistic qualities he may have started out with: humility, compassion, empathy, understanding … and with these out of the way, avarice, ambition, and the lust for power take over. Because he must compete with other climbers—and he knows they will strike him down if he doesn't strike first—he grows a thick armor-plate of hard, callous insensitivity and develops whatever aggressive weaponry he needs to muscle his way to the top. Once at the top, the strong use their advantages to subdue and manipulate the weak, and they perpetuate their power by controlling the political and economic life within their spheres of influence. Obviously, where the public interest conflicts with their own *private* interest, you know who's interest those in power are most likely to favor.

No, you don't just find the enemies of our society in the underworld, you find them in the *overworld,* as well. They're hiding in high places behind masks of respectability and trust—in government, in business, in the professions—and you might even say they're more dangerous, because their damaging, erosive influence mostly goes unnoticed … like termites in the woodwork!"

"That's very interesting, George. I can see where this would apply in the world of politics, especially, but …"

"You aren't kidding … in *politics.* And I'll tell you one reason why. Our wisest and most competent people simply refuse to have anything to do with it. They recognize its dehumanizing effect. Politics has become such a corrupt game that even those good, honest people who do become involved must constantly resist pressure to compromise their personal integrity in order to survive in the political arena. When you consider all the favoritism, pork barreling, name smearing, and dishonesty—all the trading of favors, bribery, threats, and coercion—that go on, you can see why a lot of good, decent men and women are reluctant to expose themselves to the moral wear and tear of political competition. They must simply say, 'I don't know how to play dirty, and I can't make false promises just to get votes, therefore I could not hope to win.' These are potentially the good guys who finish last. They intuitively fear what the struggle for office would demand of them, and they want no part of it. So who loses?"

"We all do," I answered abruptly. "But George. You can't say that everyone who runs for office, particularly those who win, have lost all their humanistic qualities."

"Of course not, Cliff. But too many come close. You don't have to look very far—in politics, business, even in education and the professions—to find leaders who subscribe to the good-guys-last philosophy. But that's not the worst of it. This attitude has at its roots something far more sinister: it puts personal wealth and power before the security and welfare of our nation's people. To me, those who embrace it are essentially traitors."

"That's pretty strong language, George," I cut in. "So how do you distinguish who they are?"

"Oh, come on, Cliff. They're the ones who won't hesitate to drag society down if it serves their own selfish purpose. They're the ones who exploit their fellow human beings, who build power and fortunes on the unrewarded efforts of others, who connive and manipulate to create despotic economic monopolies under the sacred banner of free enterprise. They're the ones who appropriate unto themselves our precious natural and human resources, who are masters at circumventing law and justice, and who influence more things with payola than the people do with votes!"

"You seem pretty intense about this, George. Has it affected you personally."

"Sure it has—in my job, among other things—but who hasn't been affected by it? That's just my point. There's no escaping it. Any person or group that operates on such an insidious notion as 'nice guys finish last' is working against all the fundamental aims and principles that made this country a haven of hope for many people. Don't slight it. They are the assassins of our national dream … and if that doesn't make them guilty of high treason, by God, I don't know what the hell else it does!"

Though much impressed with what George was saying, I was nevertheless aware that he was touching on something far more complicated, something that tied in somehow with all those deep, mysterious inner forces which determine the nature and behaviors of people. Wondering about this, I said: "George, what you're saying may have some validity. But I'm concerned about your choice of words. 'Treason' is a willful, premeditated act. You can't ascribe it to something

that just happens because human nature is the way it is."

"Greed is treason. It betrays us all."

"Greed betrays no one so much as its possessor, George. We can condemn it until our lungs burst, but that won't make it go away any more than denouncing an ulcer will oust it from the stomach. Besides, if greed were treason, then in varying degrees we would all be traitors, wouldn't we? But don't get me wrong. I'm not justifying it, I'm just trying to determine what we're up against. I think greed somehow springs from the baser instincts, and if we could somehow establish that—that it is actually inherent in the nature of all human beings—we might begin to understand how it dominates so much of our lives. If we could expose it somehow—see it for what it really is—perhaps we could begin to treat it as the deadly spiritual disease it is. And maybe then we might better control it. Perhaps we could change some of our basic thinking and sharpen our moral awareness to the point where we could actually fully trust and respect one another. Maybe that evasive blessedness we call *love* could finally emerge as a dominant force in all the affairs of human beings."

For a few moments George sat quietly, flicking wood chips into the orange embers and watching them pop and sputter into little flames. Finally he looked at me and said:

"If, as you suggest, greed is rooted in the instincts, then we have a contradiction. Because greed is not found in other animals—it is strictly a human thing."

"Yes, George, *human* because it rises from a mind that thinks. But I think it is instinctive, nevertheless, and all the more dangerous because the power of the human mind extends and strengthens its influence. Perhaps greed is simply the result of us yielding thinking power to instinct … or, perhaps more likely, the result of our thinking power not having evolved enough yet to be able to subdue the instincts."

"But I still can't see how it is that those who prey upon each other are merely responding to instinctual forces which are beyond their comprehension and control. Are we animals first and humans second?"

"Good question."

"Isn't our humanity—our intellect—enough to offset our instinctive drives?"

"You'd think it should be enough, George. But is it really?"

"Well, I suppose not. But it's a strange paradox. All forms of life must feed off some other form of life to survive … and humans are no exception. But there is a startling difference: *Homo sapiens*—the *thinking being* that ought to know better—also feeds off its own kind! Not that humans devour each other for food … but they damn well use each other for everything else. No other living creature has our capacity for doing-in others of *our own kind* in order to get what we want. Look what the Spaniards did to the Aztecs and the Incas … and what other 'civilized' white people did to the native Americans and to many African people. Of course, these are the large-scale classic examples. Individual human beings are no better. And in this society, we can prey upon each other freely and openly—often under the very protection of the law—then pass it off under such high-sounding terms as *freedom of enterprise!"*

"Well," I interrupted, "what greater proof do we need of the powerful hold our instincts still have on us? We're fully aware of the evils of greed and aggression, yet we still let them dominate much of our thinking and behavior."

"Ah, but Cliff, how are we supposed to deal with it? Do we just shrug our shoulders and accept it, or do we try to find a way out?"

"Oh, I think we're making some progress, however slowly and painfully."

"I wonder. Most of the things we've relied on in the past have failed—like religion and

some of the archaic forms of education which have evolved from it. And if religion and education can't do the job—if they can't climb aboard the Twentieth Century—maybe it's time we replace them with something else. It's tragic that so much ungodly charlatanism is foisted on the mentality of the world in the guise of truth, while the real truth has been avoided, ignored, or suppressed."

"What do you mean the *real* truth? Aren't you stepping on dangerous ground a bit, yourself, when you say that?"

"I am talking about what is *actually* real—outside ourselves—not what is simply *perceived* as real. It is that which exists whether we are here to perceive it or not. And, in my opinion, it is science, not religion, which has uncovered most of it in the past. Religion hasn't contributed a great deal to human knowledge. If anything, it has actually encumbered it!"

"That's a pretty bold proclamation, George."

"Well, look how religion has stifled or distorted scientific discovery in the past. It seems like every great new advance in human knowledge has had to be sneaked in through the back door … while religious bigotry or political oppression kept a heavy guard at the front. Human knowledge has had one hell of a time gaining a foothold in the presence of religion."

"Well, George, I still believe humanity will eventually stumble out of its many dilemmas. Certainly some great changes are needed, and I do believe we need to reassess our whole way of thinking—and of learning. I think this need actually underlies some of the widespread unrest among today's youth. They seem to sense that they're being short-changed, and they're suspicious of some of our outmoded customs and traditions. I think they're fed up with this soulless, dog-eat-dog system based on 'nice guys finish last' and 'your loss is my gain.' They're sick of our stifling, over-hyped world of materialism, and they don't want a life dominated by meaningless values. They want a life that transcends the physical, one that enriches the mind and spirit."

"One thing's for sure, Cliff. If humanity is going to stumble out of its dilemma, as you say, it won't be *our* foolish generation that will do it. The great improvements will be made by these enlightened youth who are obviously starting to realize that the world we gave them is not the world they want. When they learn—as our generation did not!—that it's more important to live *fully* than to merely live *well,* they may fashion a far better way of life. And I hope they do."

"So do I," I replied, "but it falls on those of us who are capable of some kind of broader vision to pass it on to our youth. We must show them, if we can, that their disenchantment with our bourgeois values—and the consumer society that we've bequeathed to them—is wholly justified. Because it has not only separated them from *nature* but has insulated them against its edifying influence."

By now the fire had dwindled to a few tired red coals already half slumbering beneath a little mound of powdery ashes.

"Well," said George as he slowly rose to his feet, "That's going to have to do it for tonight. I've really enjoyed this—it's been an interesting talk—but I think I'm ready for some shut-eye. How 'bout you?"

"I guess we've kept those bears away long enough," I laughed.

"Should we stoke the fire one more time?"

"No, I don't think we should leave it unattended," I replied

We lingered for a few moments longer then tiredly bid each other good night and retired to our tents.

Once more the vast silence of the northern night settled over the camp. For a while, as

tired as I was, I lay awake reflecting on my conversation with George. Then I found myself listening again with bated breath for that electrifying clangor which might at any moment pitch us all into another slumber-spoiling encounter with our impetuous prowlers. Silence. Not a sound out there. And then I slept.

But not for long. This time just one sharp, loud crash of falling utensils announced the return of the bears, followed by immediate quiet. By the time we were out of our tents with our lights playing over the area, the raiders had vanished.

"Well, by golly—they're gone!" shouted Gene, glancing about in surprise. "Just like that!"

"Probably didn't want to hang around for the sermon," chuckled Al.

"You mean another one of Tomlinson's taunting tirades?" laughed Tom. "You can't blame those poor beasts for not wanting to go through all that again."

From the casual laughter which followed, it was evident that the suspense of the bear threat had eased considerably. Much relieved at the effectiveness of our bear alarm, we could now take a more relaxed view of the situation and perhaps even salvage a little more precious rest before the coming day forced its new exertions upon us. After drowsily assembling our warning device for the third time, we were able to return quickly to the important business of sleeping.

The bears made one more try. They came as the first gray light of dawn filtered dimly into the clearing. This time the initial clatter failed to frighten them off. Instead, perhaps out of sheer anger and frustration, they launched a noisy attack on the pans and kettles which had thwarted them. They rushed about tossing and battering and rolling our cookware over the rock in a confused frenzy. When Gene and Tom cautiously undertook another roaring, canoe-banging assault against them, that was enough to send the bears scurrying into the woods.

"This time I think we convinced 'em," grinned Tom when the noise died down. "I don't think we'll see those beggars again."

Just the same, they gathered the scattered utensils and reset the alarm. Fortunately only two of the kettles had suffered damage. Both were dented and one was bent enough to require some pounding with the heel of the ax to straighten it out.

"Maybe you're right," declared Gene, glancing at the slowly brightening sky. "Maybe they'll leave us alone now. Let's try for another hour or two of sleep.."

We did so, and the bears did not again disturb our slumber.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sunlight was gilding the upper fringe of the forest's face across the bay when Gene and I, carrying in our hands the cups of steaming coffee with which Tom without fail had awakened us, emerged from our tent. In the pit a lively fire chattered merrily. The food packs, which Tom had already lowered from their "sky ride," sat nearby. Leaning over a griddle loaded with sizzling bacon and browning flapjacks, our cook was singing "Dixie" to a flashy little chipmunk that scooted about, crumb hunting at his feet.

A mingling of pleasant aromas—of conifer, wood smoke, and bacon—titillated the nostrils. Somewhere a fish splashed offshore. From the shrubbery behind us a white-throated sparrow whistled a loud, cheery greeting. Far out on the lake beyond the bay a few plumes of mist lingered. Such a lovely morning had dawned—blending into the tranquil scene such a magical cast of delicate green-gold light and captivating woodland sounds and fragrances—that I found it difficult to believe the night just passed had been anything more than a fitful dream. This was going to be, I felt strangely certain, a day of joy and beauty to be long remembered.

Nevertheless, the night of the bears had taken its toll, and it was a tired and sleepy crew that finally gathered for breakfast. The boys, usually among the first in line for the morning meal, were the last to drag themselves out of their tents. Even after a quick cool dip, most of us felt sluggish and only partially rested. Also, there were the familiar complaints of constipation, a common difficulty for some (including myself) during the first two or three days of a canoe trip, brought on quite probably by the abrupt change in diet, drinking water, and type of physical activity. Tom's standard solution for this problem—and usually a very effective one—was a potent portion of stewed prunes served with the rest of breakfast.

Gene, eager to resume travel, ate his meal hurriedly; then, leaving us to strike the camp, he took his chart and compass and hiked a short distance up shore in search of the portage to the next lake. By the time he returned, we had the tents down, everything packed—and we were ready to move.

"By golly. You know something?" he said in a somewhat concerned tone as he strode across the camp clearing toward the edge of the forest. "I haven't spotted any kind of trail anywhere nearby. Do you suppose our portage is right under our nose?"

"You mean right here near camp?" asked Tom, tagging behind him. "Wouldn't we have

noticed it?"

"Not necessarily … especially with those blamed bears pinning us down! It didn't occur to me that this very spot might be the portage landing. There just aren't any signs of traffic on this bare rock. I thought it was further up shore; but we're already near the extreme north end of the lake, and our next lake is just over the hump."

"What does the map show for a portage?"

"Another dotted line, but this map doesn't even show this little bay … only a slight curve in the shoreline. These blasted maps!"

By now we were all stamping about in the surrounding thicket looking for that thin thread of pathway we needed to proceed on our way. Once again I felt a twinge of anxiety. So intent was I upon our reaching Pungishemoo that any indication of uncertainty on Gene's part filled me with misgivings that we might fall short of our goal. Not that the alternatives were all that bad. Anywhere at all within this wild wonderful region would be paradise enough for anyone. But Pungishemoo had become something terribly special, a goal in itself, and nothing short of an encampment on the enchanted island in the fabled Lake of Echoes would satisfy me now.

What a relief it was, therefore, when suddenly the three younger boys, who had worked their way some thirty paces down the shore, could be heard all shouting at once:

"Here it is!"

"We've found it!"

"Here's the trail!"

Upon reaching them we saw that they had indeed stumbled upon the portage. We also saw why we hadn't noticed it before. Instead of entering the forest directly from where we had pitched our camp at the landing, the trail led off through a narrow glen along the far side of a rugged hogback that was just high enough to conceal it from view. From the landing it had to be reached by climbing a slight rocky incline very close along the shore.

"Nice work, guys," commended Gene after a careful inspection. "It's our trail alright … I say, let's load up and see where it takes us."

"Okay!" came the youngsters' unanimous response.

Thus began the third day of our wilderness journey. With Tom, Gene, and Will in the lead as usual, we were soon trudging up and over a low, densely forested hill. Though partially obstructed by some patches of underbrush and an occasional windfall, the trail gave us little difficulty and brought us presently to the edge of a new body of water. Before us lay a long narrow cove which widened at its far end onto a fairly large lake. "Ah," observed Al in anticipation of a long easy stint ahead, "looks like we'll be paddling for a while."

"Enjoy it while you can," chuckled Gene. "There's no use kidding ourselves. We're still in for a tough haul ahead … and last night's interruptions didn't help any, if you know what I mean."

"Boy, you got that right," commiserated George who, like me, was perhaps feeling a bit groggy after our late-night campfire vigil.

Soon we were afloat and heading out of the cove onto a broad open lake. Already the humid air, hanging heavy with little more than the slightest breath of a breeze, was so warm and sticky that shirts and trousers quickly darkened into patches of sweat. Almost at once, a plodding sluggishness attended our efforts. And yet, though our paddle strokes had lost some of their crispness, we managed to maintain a constant pace that kept us moving closer and closer … we hoped … to our goal.

By habit I watched the shore, for I had found that the wooded fringes which hedge these

wilderness lakes, though they seem at first glance to have a general sameness of appearance, will upon occasion reveal some interesting new aspect of the forest's character. And now I suddenly noticed that along one stretch of low shoreline extended a lengthy stand of cedars bearing the distinctive "browse line" which marks a well-grazed feeding ground for deer. The lower limbs of the trees had been cropped away up to a height of from six to eight feet, the approximate extent to which the animals are able to reach for food. The resulting dark opening between the ground and where the foliage resumed its normal density created a conspicuous shadowy band parallel with the ground, running for perhaps a half mile, which could be seen clearly from some distance out on the lake. Here, I thought, was an example—along with the dams of the beaver—of how nature's own creatures can significantly modify an entire wilderness landscape.

The five canoes, gliding along on gently rippling water with their staunch crews paddling steadily, presented by their forward motion the only reminder of time's unceasing flow. All else about us—the massive, weathered rock of the shoreline, the brooding green ridges of pine and spruce enclosing the lake on all sides, and, overhead, the huge blue sky and blazing sun—seemed locked in a timeless mold. An eternity of mass and matter, organic and inorganic, surrounded us, appearing little changed from what it must have looked like eons ago. It was a strange feeling to realize that here it mattered not at all what century we were in, so completely detached were we from the measured pace of civilized living. I had experienced this weird sensation of timelessness in nature before, during previous wilderness trips, and I had long suspected that time—or, rather, humankind's civilized concept of time—has much to do with the deep-set anxieties which plague our highly developed society. Our utter subjection to the tyranny of time makes bondsmen of us all. We are creatures of the clock, programmed and scheduled in tight capsules of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Our time is our life, no more no less. It begins with the microscopic union of a sperm and an ovum and ends with the final throb of a mortal heart. Between these two extreme events, for each of us, lies all the time we shall ever measure or know. We can waste it, use it, sell it, enjoy it; but mostly we will be bound to it, regulated by it, restricted by it, dominated by it, frustrated by it, dependent upon it.

Does not, then, the desire for an escape from this tyrant—an escape which can never be anything but temporary—underlie the powerful attraction of the wilderness? Does not the timelessness we sense in nature explain that grand feeling of freedom which is so much a part of the wilderness experience? Is not freedom from worldly concerns mostly freedom from time?

Across the immensity of the sky not a single fleck of cloud was to be seen. Yet something in all that searing, shimmering blue—perhaps it was the heaviness of the air and the general haziness—hinted ominously of a weather change. To be caught in a rainstorm in the wilderness with your tents down is one of the most dismal of all camping calamities. I'd experienced just such a predicament enough times in the past to be keenly sensitive to the slightest indication of a storm's imminence, and now I found myself worrying that a sudden tempest might delay us, pin us down, send us ashore seeking shelter. Often through this toilsome day I scanned the horizon expecting at any moment to see the swift, black, angrily seething frontal wall of a thunderstorm swooping down on us. Fortunately, it did not immediately materialize; but the possibility filled me with a lingering uneasiness.

Our next portage led at once through a charming glade shaded by a high leafy canopy of birch and aspen. These trees, forced by competing conifers to stretch upward for sunlight, had grown inordinately tall and spindly. As we passed among them, sunbeams filtering through the high foliage mottled the scene with such an enchanting lacework of shifting gleams and shadows that it was difficult not to stop and linger and simply become involved in the pleasantness of it

all. However, we moved quickly through the grove and beyond it, broke into the open sunlight … and the humid heat.

A steamy swamp lay directly in our path. The dim trail led down into it, to an odd little stream with a narrow, shallow, twisting channel. Then a hungry squadron of black flies discovered us. The pests were for some reason uncommonly numerous and they attacked us mercilessly as we struggled through the swamp. The small waterway, which at first seemed promising, proved to be of so little help that we might have fared better without it.

"It's what you call a two-by-two," remarked Gene.

"What's a two-by-two?" queried Mark.

"Two feet wide and two inches deep," explained Gene with a grunt of disgust.

"I get it," responded Mark, squinting in the heat. "There's too little water for canoeing and too much for walking."

"You got it … and we're in for some real heavy work."

So we were. We had no alternative but to skid the loaded canoes along the small channel as best we could by pushing, and pulling, and lifting, and dragging as we sloshed along the soggy streambed on foot. We were often up to our knees in muck, which sucked us down at every step. The deer flies kept us in a hand-slapping frenzy and—despite our repellents, which were quickly diluted and washed away by our own perspiration—they succeeded all too frequently in drawing blood from our exposed skins. Occasionally boulders and deadheads blocked the way. At one point we literally had to hack our way through a patch of twisted alders that straddled our course. It was slow inch-by-inch progress, requiring the most strenuous physical effort. The sticky mire held back the canoes, pulling at their bottoms with suction-cup tenacity. For one fleeting moment I had a heavy, desperate sensation of being hopelessly trapped. That was when George, happening to choose the worst of all possible occasions, revealed that he had been sharing some of my apprehensions about the weather.

"All we need now," he mumbled between gasps, "is a sudden rainstorm."

"Come on, guys," came a cajoling note from Tom some distance ahead of us. "It's kinda oozy, but it ain't quicksand. Just remember … every step is a step closer to Pungishemoo."

"Where every trouble becomes a bubble!" shouted Mike with playful sarcasm, mimicking our song.

"And cares are *lighter!"* added Billy with a sudden giggle.

We all had to laugh in spite of the strain. The spirit was still there, still strong. But the flesh, that was something else. We huffed and puffed and tugged until our backs ached and our legs wobbled. We would rest, struggle some more, and rest again. It got so we even gave in to the flies, ignoring their torturous onslaught, too tired to fight them off. Not one of us escaped their bites, as was later confirmed by the welts we all wore.

After what had begun to seem like an eternity of misery, we suddenly found relief. The channel abruptly deepened and widened just enough to float the canoes above the mud. A short distance further, solid ground was under us once again. We were out of the swamp.

"I guess now we know why nobody comes this way," groaned Gene as he dropped wearily to his knees and then sprawled out full length on a patch of grass. "Let's take a little siesta."

Surrounded as we were by the very wildest, remotest, most unfrequented region of the Quetico, and having for two days seen no signs of any recent travelers, it was beginning to dawn on us how truly separated we were from the rest of humanity. But if further proof of our wilderness isolation were needed, it came while we rested there on the green sward where the

forest met the swamp. Billy, Mike, and Mark, never satisfied to stay put for even ten minutes and seemingly possessed of inexhaustible boyish energy, were soon searching the forest fringe for blueberries. It was then that, in scanning back over the swamp, they sighted the massive bulk of an enormous brown-black animal grazing in a pool of lily pads at its upper edge. And it was Billy's startled, high-pitched shout which brought the rest of us scrambling to our feet.

"Look! Look, it's a moose!" he stammered.

"Ho! God, look at that monster!" gulped Mark.

"Ha! You boys have just hit the jackpot," congratulated Tom as we joined them. "A moose it is, by golly … and the biggest one in the Quetico, I'll betcha. Look at those antlers!"

"Better keep it down, guys," Gene cautioned. "We don't want to scare him."

Strange how quickly fatigue can be forgotten in the jubilation of a thrilling discovery. It's one thing to see a moose in a photo, or even near the crowded highway of a national park; but to see this magnificent creature, wild and alive, in its own native habitat—monarch to an entire wilderness domain—is one of the most uplifting, heart-warming experiences yet to be found in nature's secret hideaways.

"Ohhh … this is great!" Bill exclaimed, his usually calm voice tense with emotion. "I've seen moose before … but not like this. Are we ever privileged to see one in such a rare and beautiful place."

"And to share it with our boys … now that makes it real special," murmured Al with an uncharacteristic softness of tone. "But you know, I've just got to go over there and capture that big ol' beast for the family album." He already had his camera in hand and moments later was working his way along the boggy rim of the marsh toward where he might get some good shots with his telephoto lens.

"Isn't that kind of dangerous?" asked Billy as we watched Al slowly sneaking up on the moose.

"A moose is a plant eater, if that's what you mean," George answered with a reassuring smile.

"My hunch is the big fella will completely ignore him … unless he gets *too* close," opined Gene with the knowing confidence of one who has been through it before.

"Whadda ya mean? What if he gets too close?" asked Mike, suddenly concerned for his dad.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it, Mike. I reckon this time of year that moose would simply hit for cover," replied Tom.

"Whadda ya mean this time of year?"

"He's pretty peaceful now," Gene responded. "It's during mating time in the fall … that's when you want to stay clear of these big bulls. That's when they can be dangerous."

"Anyway," added Tom, "he's down in the marsh where he can't move too quick, and your dad is on solid ground. Pretty safe odds, at any rate."

We watched, fascinated, as Al reached a slight outcrop dominating the marsh some thirty yards from the animal. There, from behind a clump of sweet gale, he carefully aimed his camera and clicked away. If the moose saw him—and I'm sure it did—it simply ignored him as Gene had predicted and went right on with its feeding, making frequent thrusts of its great antlered head beneath the water's surface in search of water lilies and other aquatic plants. The head would come up with a cluster of dripping stems held by the big overhanging snout and, after a casual devouring of the plants, would plunge again for another helping.

"Boy, is he big," commented Gene. "I'll bet that old bull is seven feet tall if he's an inch."

"How many steaks you think you could get out of him?" interrupted Mike.

"Ahh, now you've made me hungry," Gene chuckled. Then, with typical abruptness, he lifted a backpack and slipped his shoulders through the straps. "Come on, it's time to move. We'll have lunch at the end of the portage." Adding a canoe to his burden, he hesitated for a moment, let his eye pick up the vague trail where it angled up into the forest, then quickly followed it out of sight.

Not far behind him plodded Tom with another pack and canoe. By the time Al returned, his moose "neatly stored" in his camera, only Mark and I remained. We quickly loaded ourselves with the remaining duffle and headed in the direction of the others.

For a welcome change, the trail was firm and fairly level underfoot. It wound gradually around a low scarp, then sloped gently downward among tall columnar pines over a thick, brown carpet of fallen needles. This was covered with small ferns, clintonia, bunchberry, bluebells, and other delicate flora of the forest floor. A short distance ahead, the bright shimmer of blue water beckoned through the trees.

There is no describing the joyous sense of relief which climaxes the completion of a particularly difficult portage. I especially remember our arrival at this landing for it provided at once a marvelous dividend: A broad, smooth expanse of shining clean granite slanted gently from the forest opening downward into the lake at just the right angle to provide an ideal swimming place. The water seemed so clear and inviting that within the brief time required to get ten sets of shirts, pants, and boots off, it contained ten laughing, shouting, splashing nudists whose wild antics might well have caused an observer to wonder about their sanity.

It was such an utter relief to be rid of our sweat-soaked clothing and to feel the soothing wash of liquid coolant against our reeking skins that we could not restrain our exuberance. A strong sense of freedom and renewal was being magically imparted to our weary bodies. Happily we swam, and splashed, and dived, and dunked each other—the fathers no less boyishly frisky than the sons—and we sensed beneath it all the vast goodness and purity of nature as its friendly waters caressed and refreshed us.

Swimming out over deeper water, the boys found a huge submerged boulder. It was clearly visible in that bright crystalline world beneath the surface where, as we dived and played about it, sunlight filtered through and dappled the gray marl bottom with shimmering gleams. I found it a strange, silent, weightless world—cold at the lower depths, yet beautiful in its brown-gray austerity. We made great sport of springing with our feet from atop the boulder and shooting up to the surface. Tiring of this at length, I switched over to what I most enjoy in the water, simply floating about on my back, completely relaxed, with my eyes closed and the sun in my face.

Ahh … this was better, softer than lying in a bed or a sleeping bag, and so much less confining. If I wondered why since my earliest boyhood I had always found swimming in the nude something special—so much more satisfying than when hampered, if only slightly, by the accustomed habiliment—the answer was suddenly quite obvious. It had to do with *freedom* … that rare, pure freedom which is entirely without restriction or inhibition and is yet without ugliness … a gusty, lusty freedom that is at once as spiritual as it is physical, and throbbing with its own dynamic vitality.

I already had enjoyed in this wild environment an extraordinary sense of disengagement from time and worldly concerns. And now the feeling of freedom came in still another form as I drifted nakedly, effortlessly in liquid suspension: an exhilarating sensation of freedom from *gravity* … that inveterate counter-force which demands so much of our daily energy. It occurred

to me that the experiencing of so many seldom-realized freedoms in such a singular concentration had required nothing more profound than the mere immersion of my total raw self in a raw, remote wilderness lake. It would be difficult to imagine a closer, more intimate involvement with nature than this.

And then that vague sensation I have often had before of having previously been here intruded once more upon my consciousness … and this time it took shape in a hazy, fleeting recognition of another watery medium which once had surrounded my nakedness. Was it the primordial sea, or the amniotic sea of my prebirth? Was I, in this strangely blissful moment, being reminded of long-forgotten origins? Or of beginnings yet to come?

Listening to my boisterous companions, who so lately had been on the verge of exhaustion, now disporting themselves with surprising vigor and vivacity, I wondered. We were receiving *something* out of this bathing binge which somehow had put the spirit back in command and brought to the surface an amazing reserve of hidden strength not normally utilized. Revived and renewed as we surely were in this brief immersion, were we not—whether we realized it or not—tapping into some great regenerative power source which nature seems to have ready for our use if we but know the combination for its release? As I floated thus, contentedly preoccupied with a stream of such random thoughts, I failed to realize I had drifted out beyond a reasonably safe distance from shore.

Suddenly Mark was swimming beside me.

"You're out pretty far, Dad," he cautioned. "You better get closer to shore."

"I guess you're right," I replied, immediately alert and pleased at his concern. Here was an interesting reversal of our roles. Son taking care of father, warning him of danger. "But how about yourself? You shouldn't have followed me out here. You're stretching the safety rules a little bit, aren't you?"

"So are you, Dad."

"I admit I am … but not quite as much."

"How come?"

"Well, with my buoyancy I can lie back and rest if I need to. But with your young unpadded skin and bones you've got to be paddling every second to stay afloat. You could get tired all of a sudden … and you couldn't rest like I can."

"Aw, I feel okay. I'm not an old man, you know."

Ouch! Such a thing to imply. Somewhat haughtily I replied, "Well, we're both heading for the beach … right now."

"Okay. I'll race ya!"

"Oh, no you don't. Just keep it slow and easy. I don't want to have to tow you in."

"Hah!" Mark laughed, a bit cockily. "Just make sure it's not the other way around!"

There were many times on this trip, as on others, when I felt marvelously close to my son, but never more so than now as we leisurely swam side by side toward the shore. I had to smile when I noticed that Mark maintained a position from which he could keep a protective eye on his reckless old dad. I could sense his concern and it gave me a warm wonderful feeling. Actually he was more right than I cared to admit. Our recent exertions had made extra-heavy demands—and the distance, which ordinarily would have required no great effort of any good swimmer, *was* suddenly more than my tired muscles could handle on a sustained basis. If it hadn't been for my unusual buoyancy, which permitted me to roll over on my back and rest my limbs several times, I might have been in real trouble. Mark did not, as I had pointed out to him, have this advantage, and he did begin to show signs of weariness just before we reached shallow

water. However, I pretended not to notice it. With a good second effort he made it on his own, and I was proud of him. That little guy I'd coddled in my arms a few years back was growing up fast. Soon he'd be big enough to coddle … or throttle … me! The thought gave a strange, gratifying lift to my fatherly ego.

Ravenous appetites put quite a dent into Tom's lunch supplies after the swim. While the meal consisted mainly of the usual plain peanut butter-and-jelly and cheese sandwiches, raisins, beef jerky, cookies, and "bug juice," it evoked all the happy chatter and enthusiasm of a full-course banquet. The boys, especially Mike, seemed to have bottomless pits to fill, and Tom jokingly warned them to leave some room in their insides for proper breathing.

Mike was a delight to watch at mealtime. His bright freckled face, seeming to glow under a shaggy mop of red hair, wore such a contented cherubic expression as his lower jaw chomped away between his two puffed cheeks that it gave every repast an air of special importance and had the contagious effect of causing the entire crew to more thoroughly enjoy their eating. He still kept a wary eye on the bug juice, but that did not prevent him from gulping down his share with typical zest.

He was, of course, along with Billy and Mark, an interesting contrast to the older Will who—in his strong, wise, quiet way—was extremely mature for his age. As I was to note later in the trip, the youngsters looked up to Will, respected his leadership and, in their boyish affinity with him, relied upon him more than the adults for information, explanations, and instructions. He enjoyed the role and spent much of his time showing the boys all the endless "tricks of the trade" about camping and woodsmanship; he was later to become their guide on various separate fishing and exploring expeditions. Just now, Will had eaten quickly and was already loading the canoes, readying everything for embarkation. By the time lunch was over, we needed but to find our seats and our paddles and to shove off. Everyone seemed noticeably revived and in good cheer, eager to resume travel.

Once afloat, we moved steadily up a long lake, not very wide, which soon narrowed between high lichen-spattered, pine-crowned palisades to form a picturesque canyon that extended about half a mile. The grays, greens, and weathered rusts of the walls repeated their varying hues on the mirrory water surface, creating the illusion of a deep gorge between the steep sides, where we drifted as if in some magic state of suspension. Quickly we slipped past the palisades and onto a wider expanse of water. As we headed for the upper shore, still a mile or so away, I felt again a fleeting intuitive premonition of rain on the way, and I thought it must be only a matter of hours before that bright open sky would be filled with the sound and fury of a storm. Even in the canoes, where the proximity of water normally tends to mitigate the heat, the air was heavy, sultry, and uncomfortably hot.

We paddled along, sometimes talking, sometimes singing, but more often just thoughtfully enjoying the scenery and listening to the rhythmic dipping of paddles and melodious rippling of water along the gunwales of the canoes. I often marveled at the contrast between our present situation and the city life we had so recently left behind. Certainly very few of us would so willingly undertake back home the kind of physical exertions demanded here. Neither the steady paddling nor the toting of heavy packs and canoes over rough portages is an easy labor for muscles seldom called upon back home. I recalled how much I had to "persuade" Mark sometimes to do even such routine tasks as mowing the lawn or shoveling snow from the driveway. Yet here, under a sustained physical effort that was as strenuous as it was necessary, Mark and the other boys toiled away with such cheerful enthusiasm one wondered where they'd suddenly got all that ambition and energy. It was an amazing transformation. And the reason for

it, of course, was obvious.

What else but the wilderness could turn them on like that? What else but the wilderness, with its haunting secrets and its promise of adventure and discovery, could so magically convert the most wearying toil into fascinating play? And there was ever before us, of course, the prospect of Pungishemoo. That very name seemed to put special power and purpose into our endeavors. As for myself, I was constantly spurred by that hope of finding some deeper insight into the mystery of nature's attraction to us all. My mind seethed with speculation, my senses were alert and expectant, and Pungishemoo continued to be an obsessive symbol of my quest.

Gene had said it would be a long way and difficult to reach, which meant not only more paddling and portaging than usual but even a chance that we might not get there. Already we had traveled very far, along a little-used and difficult route through the Quetico interior, determined to explore even the farthest byways to find it.

So we plunged on hopefully as heat and fatigue continued to slow our exertions, if not our spirits. As often happens when patience begins to wear thin under continued stress, some of us may have begun to wonder if the place we sought were truly real or whether, like so many explorers' dreams, it was but an illusion luring us perhaps to disappointment and defeat.

Still we went on, over yet another difficult portage and across another lake—then another and another—until at last we drew close to a shore that was nothing but boulders and thick vegetation.

"Hold up, guys," shouted Gene. "There's a landing here somewhere." He was studying his map—a bit worriedly, it seemed to me—and watching the shoreline as Will, in the stern seat, paddled their canoe close along the rocks. They had gone about a hundred yards when we saw Gene point shoreward and then grab his paddle. They quickly disappeared behind two great boulders standing in the water just off shore, and we saw nothing more for several long, anxious minutes.

Then Gene's voice boomed, "I think we found it! Come over this way!"

We all hurried over, but before we even had our packs and canoes high and dry, Gene gave us an indication that he wasn't sure he had brought us to the right place.

"You know," he said, "I hate to tell you, but I can't be absolutely sure we're on the right track yet."

"What do you mean?" asked Bill.

"Well, Crottin's party went into where we're going from the northeast, and his sketch of *our* route is just hard to figure out. Either this map is inaccurate or I'm just a lousy navigator."

"What about the portage?" I asked.

"That's just it." He wiped the sweat off his brow. "There isn't one. Blasted maps!"

"There isn't one?" I replied incredulously. What do you mean?"

"Crottin just marked it … 'natural trail.' That probably means—by the looks of the country around here, anyway—a moose trail. There's no sign of any portage here, that's for sure."

"What if we can't find any trail?" inquired Bill in a concerned tone.

"Well," Gene replied thoughtfully, "I guess we'll just have to get our compasses out and crash some brush."

"Aw, Gene," Al interjected, "I know we've come through some awfully nasty stuff already, but are you really sure we're up to something like that? What about these kids?"

Gene paused. "Well, we already talked about that. It's up to you. You'll all have to decide at this point if you want to go on." Then he smiled directly at the boys. "Remember, this

is a democracy."

"Just how far," Mark boldly questioned, "is Pungishemoo from here? I can't even tell where we are on the map anymore."

"No kidding," George added with obvious frustration. "I lost track of where we were way back there in the loon shit somewhere—*hours* ago!"

"Pretty close," Gene replied, with what I perceived to be a faint, mischievous twinkle in his eye. "We're getting close. "So," then he glanced toward Tom, "I think we really ought to find that trail."

"Well," Tom spoke up, "no sense hangin' around here then. Let's go look for it."

With that he and Gene disappeared into the forest, leaving the rest of us to wonder what the outcome of our present predicament might turn out to be. Before anyone could vocalize their concerns, which by the silence in the group, were obviously on the minds of everyone, Gene and Tom returned through the dense underbrush.

"Well," Gene smiled, "I think we may have found something. There's a game trail back there with a lot of fresh moose tracks in it. I think it's worth a try."

"Anyone want to go?" Tom addressed the group.

"If that is the trail," Al inquired, "just how far do you think it is to the next lake?"

"Hmm. Maybe two miles," answered Gene.

"Two *miles?* We're going to crash through *two miles* of swamp and timber with ninety-nine tons of gear on our backs?"

"Oh no, Al," Tom replied. "We'll leave all the gear behind and just scout it out for now."

"My, isn't *that* a relief," George interjected sarcastically, to which we all chuckled a bit nervously.

"Somebody should stay behind with the gear, though," said Tom, politely leaving the option open to anyone who would rather stay behind. "Any volunteers?"

"I guess I could stay," volunteered Al. "How 'bout you, Mike?"

"I guess I could stay too, dad," Mike answered. "I can do some fishing from shore till everyone gets back."

"Well, good," beamed Gene, "that's settled. Everyone else wants to go then, huh?"

"Guess so," Tom confirmed after a silent, slightly tense moment.

"Let's go then!" blared Gene. Then, as we all filed behind him into the woods, he yelled back to Mike and Al, "Keep an eye on the food packs, guys!" Nobody had to ask what he meant by that.

It was indeed anything but a portage trail. At times Tom had to stop and study the ground. Dense foliage crowded in on every side; yet there did seem to be a kind of obscure pathway where a series of large depressions in the ground revealed the recent passing of moose. But the moose tracks soon disappeared where the faint trail suddenly led sharply upward along an ascending fissure in the face of a high, bare rock outcrop. Loose boulders and damp thick moss made the going difficult, and I wondered how we would ever get our gear up here.

On top of the outcrop, which must have jutted upward nearly a hundred feet, we found a flat stretch of exposed rock forming a clearing beyond which the silent forest again presented its green facade.

"Doggonnit!" exclaimed Manko. "How do you follow a trail over bare granite?" He moved to the edge of the clearing and, stooping low, examined every little opening in the thick vegetation.

It was now mid-afternoon, hotter than ever, humid, with not the slightest breeze stirring.

Our clothes were soggy with perspiration. Bright sunshine made the outcrop so uncomfortably "sizzly" that we all took advantage of as much shade as we could find. Even in the cooler shadows, the black flies found us and zoomed at our heads incessantly. I knew Gene was becoming concerned about the time, for we still had to find a campsite of some sort, get our tents up, and cook supper before darkness brought on the mosquitoes. I'd noticed there was not a proper camping space on the shores of the lake we had just crossed, and this meant we simply *had* to find something suitable ahead. I thought I detected a real note of relief in Tom's voice when he finally announced: "Oh, ho! Here it is. We have a trail again, gentlemen!"

The boys hardly seemed like gentlemen as they charged excitedly into the thicket in the direction of his voice. We were off again, trudging this time back down through the forest into a long expanse of spruce-tamarack bog, following a new set of moose tracks. Gene and Tom checked their compasses frequently as we made our way across the spongy sphagnum for what seemed nearly a mile. The trail was quite prominent where the moose had, through years of use, beaten a single path across the mossy carpet. Here and there, pink bog cranberries—not nearly ripe yet—festooned the crowning green tussocks of sphagnum amidst a plethora of shining, multi-colored fungi. Oddly, it was cooler and much more comfortable in the dark shadows of the bog.

"Are we getting anywhere yet?" asked Mark, who had been paying particularly close attention to the way Gene and Tom conducted themselves with map and compass.

"The way I figure," explained Gene, "a moose—or any other animal, for that matter—will travel the easiest path between two points. In our case, the two points are lakes. I *think* we're getting somewhere, but we'll just have to see."

Now the spruce and the tamaracks yielded to a magnificent stand of red pines where the forest once again took hold in a gentle but steady rise ahead of us. These were perhaps the largest Norways I had ever seen! They were easily five feet in diameter at the base and rose to a height of perhaps one-hundred-fifty feet.

"Wow!" exclaimed George. "Look at the size of those trees."

"Aren't they beauties!" I rejoined, harboring a special appreciation for their immense stature since I raised Norway pines to a 'full maturity' of only seven feet on my own Christmas tree plantation back home.

"I didn't know you were leading us all the way to California, Gene!" joked Bill.

"I hadn't exactly counted on making the Redwood Forest by tonight, myself," Gene laughed in return.

Now, with Tom in the lead, we moved steadily upward through the stand over the gradually rising forest floor, the rest of us trudging single file in his wake. He was walking faster now, more sure of himself.

"The trail's better here," he announced. "But it's still climbing. This certainly is a high ridge."

"Well, you know," Gene exclaimed, as though he wanted us all to hear, "that's a good sign."

"How's that, Gene?" Tom said, cocking his head back in the exaggerated manner of a rehearsed routine.

"Pungishemoo is in high country. If this ridge is the high ridge I think it is …"

Just then we broke into another clearing. And *this* was a clearing I shall remember to the end of my days! For it opened abruptly onto a high rounded knob of gleaming granite and, out beyond it, a sight which stopped us all in our tracks. There it was! … cradled in quiet saphirine

splendor, like the blue sky inverted, hidden in a deep green basin surrounded by sharply rising high forested ridges, the loveliest lake I had ever laid eyes upon, and, toward its far end, stately and serene, a green jewel of an island, pine-crested and seeming by some strange illusion suspended between sky and water.

We were spellbound. We could but stare speechless at the view. It was Gene who finally broke the spell, and his voice shook with mingled triumph and relief.

"There it is, boys! There it is! You're looking at the place of the legend. We've found the Lake of Echoes and the Isle of Pungishemoo!"