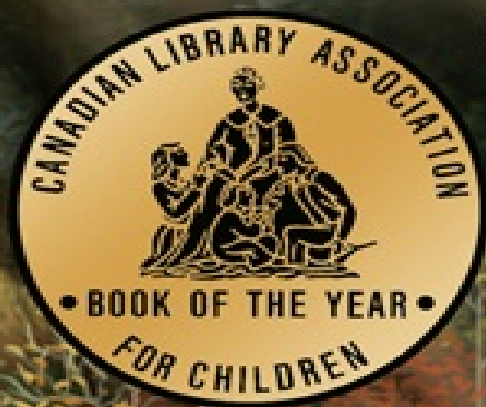


THE INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Sheila Burnford



 SCHOLASTIC

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*To My Parents I. P. and W. G. C. Every and to their grandchildren Peronelle, Jonquil and Juliet
who grew up under the despotic white paw of dear Bill*

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The Beasts

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God

Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,

Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.

— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, “Song of Myself,” 32.

This journey took place in a part of Canada which lies in the northwestern part of the great sprawling province of Ontario. It is a vast area of deeply wooded wilderness — of endless chains of lonely lakes and rushing rivers. Thousands of miles of country roads, rough timber lanes, overgrown tracks leading to abandoned mines, and unmapped trails snake across its length and breadth. It is a country of far-flung, lonely farms and a few widely scattered small towns and villages, of lonely trappers' shacks and logging camps. Most of its industry comes from the great pulp and paper companies who work their timber concessions deep in the very heart of the forests; and from the mines, for it is rich in minerals. Prospectors work throughout it; there are trappers and Indians; and sometimes hunters who fly into the virgin lakes in small amphibious aircraft; there are pioneers with visions beyond their own life span; and there are those who have left the bustle of civilization forever, to sink their identity in an unquestioning acceptance of the wilderness. But all these human beings together are as a handful of sand upon the ocean shores, and for the most part there is silence and solitude and an uninterrupted way of life for the wild animals that abound there: moose and deer, brown and black bears; lynx and fox; beaver, muskrat and otter; fishers, mink and marten. The wild duck rests there and the Canada goose, for this is a fringe of the central migratory flyway. The clear, tree-fringed lakes and rivers are filled with speckled trout and steelheads, pike and pickerel and whitefish.

Almost half the year the country is blanketed with snow; and for weeks at a time the temperature may stay many degrees below zero; there is no slow growth of spring, but a sudden short burst of summer when everything grows with wild abandon; and as suddenly it is the fall again. To many who live there, fall is the burnished crown of the year, with the crisp, sunny days and exhilarating air of the Northland; with clear blue skies, and drifting leaves, and, as far as the eye can see, the endless panorama of glorious, rich, flaming colors in the turning trees.

This is the country over which the three travellers passed, and it was in the fall that they travelled, in the days of Indian summer.

John Longridge lived several miles from one of the small towns in an old stone house that had been in his family for several generations. He was a tall, austere pleasant man of about forty, a bachelor, and a writer by profession, being the author of several historic biographies. He spent much of his time travelling and gathering material for his books, but always returned to the comfortable, old stone house for the actual writing. He liked the house to himself during these creative periods, and for many years had enjoyed an ideal arrangement whereby his domestic wants were cared for by a middle-aged couple, Mrs. Oakes and her husband Bert, who lived in a small cottage about half a mile away. Mrs. Oakes came in every day to look after the house and cook the main meals. Bert was in charge of the furnace, the garden and all the odd jobs. They came and went about their business without disturbing Longridge, and there was complete accord among them all.

On the eve of the incredible journey, towards the end of September, Longridge sat by a crackling log fire in his comfortable library. The curtains were drawn and the firelight

flickered and played on the bookshelves and danced on the ceiling. The only other light in the room came from a small, shaded lamp on a table by the deep armchair. It was a very peaceful room and the only sound was the occasional crackling from the logs or the rustling of a newspaper, the pages of which Longridge turned with some difficulty, for a slender, wheat-coloured Siamese cat was curled on his knee, chocolate-coloured front paws curved toward one another, sapphire eyes blinking occasionally as he stared into the fire.

On the floor, his scarred, bony head resting on one of the man's feet, lay an old, white English bull terrier. His slanted, almond-shaped eyes, sunk deep within their pinkish rims, were closed; one large, triangular ear caught the firelight, flushing the inside a delicate pink, so that it appeared almost translucent. Anyone unaccustomed to the rather peculiar points of bull terrier beauty would have thought him a strange if not downright ugly dog, with the naked, down-faced arc of his profile, his deep-chested, stocky body and whip-tapered tail. But the true lover of an ancient and honorable breed would have recognized the blood and bone of this elderly and rather battered body; would have known that in his prime this had been a magnificent specimen of compact sinew and muscle, bred to fight and endure; and would have loved him for his curious mixture of wicked, unyielding fighter yet devoted and docile family pet, and above all for the irrepressible air of sly merriment which gleamed in his little slant eyes.

He twitched and sighed often in his sleep, as old dogs will, and for once his shabby tail with the bare patch on the last joint was still.

By the door lay another dog, nose on paws, brown eyes open and watchful in contrast to the peacefulness radiated by the other occupants of the room. This was a large, red-gold Labrador retriever, a young dog with all the heritage of his sturdy working forebears in his powerful build, broad, noble head and deep, blunt, gentle mouth. He lifted his head as Longridge rose from the chair, depositing the cat, with an apologetic pat, on the floor, and carefully moving his foot from under the old dog's head before walking across the room to draw one of the heavy curtains and look out.

A huge orange moon was rising just above the trees at the far end of the garden, and a branch of an old lilac tree tap-tapped in the light wind against the window pane. It was bright enough outside to see the garden in clear detail, and he noticed how the leaves had drifted again across the lawn even in the short time since it had been raked that afternoon, and that only a few brave asters remained to colour the flower beds.

He turned and crossed the room, flicking on another light, and opened a narrow cupboard halfway up the wall. Inside were several guns on racks and he looked at them thoughtfully, running his fingers lovingly down the smooth grain of the hand-rubbed stocks, and finally lifted down a beautifully chased and engraved double-barrelled gun. He "broke" it and peered down the gleaming barrels; and as though at a signal the young dog sat up silently in the shadows, his ears pricked in interest. The gun fell back into place with a well-oiled click and the dog whined. The man replaced the gun in sudden contrition, and the dog lay down again, his head turned away, his eyes miserable.

Longridge walked over to make amends for his thoughtlessness, but as he bent down to pet the dog the telephone rang so suddenly and shrilly in the quiet room that the cat jumped indignantly off the chair and the bull terrier started clumsily to his feet.

Longridge picked up the receiver, and presently the breathless voice of Mrs. Oakes was heard, accompanied by a high-pitched, whining note in the distance.

“Speak up, Mrs. Oakes — I can hardly hear you.”

“I can hardly hear you either,” said the breathless voice distantly. “There, is that better? I’m shouting now! What time are you leaving in the morning, Mr. Longridge? What’s that? Could you talk louder?”

“About seven o’clock. I want to get to Heron Lake before nightfall,” he shouted, noticing with amusement the scandalized expression of the cat. “But there’s no need for you to be here at that time, Mrs. Oakes.”

“What’s that you said? Seven? Will it be all right if I don’t come in until about nine? My niece is coming on the early bus and I’d like to meet her. But I don’t like to leave the dog alone too long ...”

“Of course you must meet her,” he answered, shouting really loudly now as the humming noise increased. “The dogs will be fine. I’ll take them out first thing in the morning, and —”

“Oh, thanks, Mr. Longridge — I’ll be there around nine without fail. What’s that you said about the animals? (Oh, you pernicky, dratted old line!) Don’t you worry about them; Ben and me, we’ll see ... tell old Bodger ... bringing marrow bone. Oh, wait till I give the operator a piece of my mi ...”

But just as Longridge was gathering strength for a last bellow into the mouthpiece, the line went dead. He put the receiver back with relief and looked across the room at the old dog who had climbed stealthily into the armchair and sat lolling back against the cushions, his eyes half closed, awaiting the expected reproof. He addressed him with the proper degree of ferocity, telling him that he was a scoundrelly opportunist, a sybaritic barbarian, a disgrace to his upbringing and his ancestors, “AND” — and he paused in weighty emphasis — “a very *bad ... dog!*”

At these two dread words the terrier laid his ears flat against his skull, slanted his eyes back until they almost disappeared, then drew his lips back over his teeth in an apologetic grin, quivering the end of his disgraceful tail. His parody of sorrow brought its usual reprieve; the man laughed and patted the bony head, then enticed him down with the promise of a run.

So the old dog, who was a natural clown, slithered half off the chair and stood, with his hindquarters resting on the cushions, waving his tail and nudging the cat, who sat like an Egyptian statue, eyes half closed, head erect, then gave a throaty growl and patted at the pink and black bull-terrier nose. Then together they followed the man to the door, where the young dog waited to fall in behind the little procession. Longridge opened the door leading out to the garden, and the two dogs and the cat squeezed past his legs and into the cool night air. He stood under the trellised porch, quietly smoking his pipe, and watched them for a while. Their nightly routine never varied — first the few minutes of separate local investigation, then the indefinable moment when all met again and paused before setting off together through the gap in the hedge at the bottom of the garden and into the fields and woods that lay beyond. He watched until they disappeared into the darkness (the white shape of the bull-terrier showing up long after Longridge was unable to distinguish the other two), then re-entered the house. It would be half an hour or more before they returned.

Longridge and his brother owned a small cabin by the shores of remote Heron Lake, about two hundred miles away; and twice a year they spent two or three weeks there together leading the life they loved: spending many hours in companionable silence in their canoe fishing in spring and hunting in the autumn. Usually he had simply locked up and left, leaving the key with Mrs. Oakes so that she could come in once or twice a week and keep the house warm and aired. However, now he had the animals to consider. He had thought of taking them all to a boarding kennel in the town, but Mrs. Oakes, who loved the assorted trio, had protested vigorously and assented that she herself would look after them "rather than have those poor dumb animals fretting themselves into a state in some kennel, and probably have starved into the bargain." So it had been arranged that she and Bert would look after the three animals. Bert would be working around the garden, anyway, so that they could be outside most of the time, and Mrs. Oakes would feed them and keep her eye on them while she was working in the house.

When he had finished packing, Longridge went into the library to draw the curtains, and seeing the telephone he was reminded of Mrs. Oakes. He had forgotten to tell her to order some coffee and other things that he had taken from the store cupboard. He sat down at the desk and drew out a small memo pad.

Dear Mrs. Oakes, he wrote, Please order some more coffee and replace the canned food I've taken. I will be taking the dogs (and Tao too, of course!) ... Here he came to the end of the small square of paper, and taking another piece he continued: ... out for a run before I leave, and will give them something to eat, so don't let our greedy white friend tell you he is starving! Don't worry yourselves too much over them — I know they will be fine.

He wrote the last few words with a smile, for the bull terrier had Mrs. Oakes completely thrall and worked his advantage to the full. He left the pages on the desk under a glass paperweight; then opened the door in answer to a faint scratch. The old dog and the cat bounded in to greet him with their usual affection, bringing the fresh smell of the outdoors with them. The young dog followed more sedately and stood by, watching aloofly, as the other whipped his tail like a lash against the man's legs, while the cat pressed against him, purring in a deep rumble; but he wagged his tail briefly and politely when the man patted him.

The cat walked into the library to curl up on the warm hearth. Later, when the ashes grew cold, he would move to the top of the radiator, and then, sometime in the middle of the night, he would steal upstairs and curl up beside the old dog. It was useless shutting the bedroom door, or any other door of the house for that matter, for the cat could open them all, latches or doorknobs. The only doors that defeated him were those with porcelain handles, for he found it impossible to get a purchase on the shiny surface with his long monkeylike paws.

The young dog padded off to his rug on the floor of the little back kitchen, and the bull terrier started up the steep stairs, and was already curled in his basket in the bedroom when Longridge himself came to bed. He opened one bright, slanted eye when he felt the old blanket being dropped over him, then pushed his head under the cover, awaiting the opportunity he knew would come later.

The man lay awake for a while, thinking about the days ahead and of the animals, for the

sheer misery in the young dog's eyes haunted him.

They had come to him, this odd and lovable trio, over eight months ago, from the home of an old and dear college friend. This friend, Jim Hunter, was an English professor in a small university about two hundred and fifty miles away. As the university owned one of the finest reference libraries in the province, Longridge often stayed with him and was, in fact, godfather to the Hunters' nine-year-old daughter, Elizabeth. He had been staying with them when the invitation came from an English university, asking the professor to deliver a series of lectures which would involve a stay in England of nearly nine months, and he had witnessed the tears of his goddaughter and the glum silence of her brother, Peter, when it was decided that their pets would have to be boarded out and the house rented to the reciprocal visiting professor.

Longridge was extremely fond of Elizabeth and Peter, and he could understand their feelings, remembering how much the companionship of a cocker spaniel had meant when he himself was a rather lonely child, and how he had grieved when he was first separated from it. Elizabeth was the self-appointed owner of the cat. She fed and brushed him, took him for walks, and he slept at the foot of her bed. Eleven-year-old Peter had been inseparable from the bull terrier ever since the small white puppy had arrived on Peter's first birthday. In fact the boy could not remember a day of his life when Bodger had not been part of it. The young dog belonged, in every sense of the word, heart and soul to their father, who had trained him since puppyhood for hunting.

Now they were faced with the realization of separation, and in the appalled silence that followed the decision Longridge watched Elizabeth's face screw up in the prelude to tears. Then he heard a voice, which he recognized with astonishment to be his own, telling everybody not to worry, not to worry at all — he would take care of everything! Were not he and the animals already well known to one another? And had he not plenty of room, and a large garden? ... Mrs. Oakes? Why, she would just love to have them! Everything would be simply wonderful! Before the family sailed they would bring the dogs and the cat over by car, see for themselves where they would sleep, write out a list of instructions, and he, personally, would love and cherish them until their return.

So one day the Hunter family had driven over and the pets had been left, with many tearful farewells from Elizabeth and last-minute instructions from Peter.

During the first few days Longridge had almost regretted his spontaneous offer: the terrier had languished in his basket, his long, arched nose buried in the comfort of his paws, and one despairing, martyred eye haunting his every movement; and the cat had nearly driven him crazy with the incessant goatlike bleating and yowling of a suffering Siamese; the young dog had moped by the door and refused all food. But after a few days, won over perhaps by Mrs. Oakes's sympathetic clucking and tempting morsels of food, they had seemed to resign themselves, and the cat and the old dog had settled in, very comfortably and happily, showing their adopted master a great deal of affection.

It was very apparent, however, how much the old dog missed children. Longridge at first had wondered where he disappeared to some afternoons; he eventually found out that the terrier went to the playground of the little rural school, where he was a great favourite with the children, timing his appearance for recess. Knowing that the road was forbidden to him

because of his poor sight and habit of walking stolidly in the middle, he had found a short cut across the intervening fields.

But the young dog was very different. He had obviously never stopped pining for his own home and master; although he ate well and his coat was glossy with health, he never maintained anything but a dignified, unyielding distance. The man respected him for this, but it worried him that the dog never seemed to relax, and always appeared to be listening - longing and waiting for something far beyond the walls of the house or the fields beyond Longridge was glad for the dog's sake that the Hunters would be returning in about three weeks, but he knew that he would miss his adopted family. They had amused and entertained him more than he would have thought possible over the months, and he realized tonight that the parting would be a real wrench. He did not like to think of the too-quiet house that would be his again.

He slept at last, and the dreaming, curious moon peeped in at the window to throw shafts of pale light into the rooms and over each of the sleeping occupants. They woke the cat downstairs, who stretched and yawned, then leaped without visible effort onto the window sill, his gleaming eyes, with their slight cast, wide open and enormous, and only the tip of his tail twitching as he sat motionless, staring into the garden. Presently he turned, and with a single, graceful bound crossed to the desk; but for once he was careless, and his hind leg knocked the glass paperweight to the floor. He shook the offending leg vigorously, scattering the pages of Longridge's note — sending one page off the desk into the air, where it caught the upward current of hot air from the wall register and sailed across the room to land in the fireplace. Here it slowly curled and browned, until nothing remained of the writing but the almost illegible signature at the bottom.

When the pale fingers of the moon reached over the young dog in the back kitchen, he stirred in his uneasy sleep, then sat upright, his ears pricked — listening and listening for the sound that never came: the high, piercing whistle of his master that would have brought him bounding across the world if only his straining ears could hear it.

And lastly the moon peered into the upstairs bedroom, where the man lay sleeping on his side in a great four-poster bed; and curled against his back, the elderly, comfort-loving, white bull terrier slept in blissful, warm content.

There was a slight mist when John Longridge rose early the following morning, having fought a losing battle for the middle of the bed with his uninvited bedfellow. He shaved and dressed quickly, watching the mist roll back over the fields and the early morning sun break through. It would be a perfect fall day, an Indian summer day, warm and mellow. Downstairs he found the animals waiting patiently by the door for their early morning run. He let them out, then cooked and ate his solitary breakfast. He was out in the driveway, loading up his car when the dogs and cat returned from the fields. He fetched some biscuits for them and they lay by the wall of the house in the early sun, watching him. He threw the last item into the back of the car, thankful that he had already packed the guns and hunting equipment before the Labrador had seen them, then walked over and patted the heads of his audience, one by one.

“Be good,” he said. “Mrs. Oakes will be here soon. Goodbye, Luath,” he said to the Labrador, “I wish I could have taken you with me, but there wouldn’t be room in the canoe for three of us.” He put his hand under the young dog’s soft muzzle. The golden-brown eyes looked steadily into his, and then the dog did an unexpected thing: he lifted his right paw and placed it in the man’s hand. Longridge had seen him do this many a time to his own master, and he was curiously touched and affected by the trust it conveyed, almost wishing he did not have to leave immediately just after the dog had shown his first responsive gesture.

He looked at his watch and realized he was already late. He had no worries above leaving the animals alone outside, as they had never attempted to stray beyond the large garden and the adjacent fields; and they could return inside the house if they wished, for the kitchen door was the kind that closed slowly on a spring. All that he had to do was shoot the inside bolt while the door was open, and after that it did not close properly and could be pushed open from the outside. They looked contented enough too — the cat was washing methodically behind his ears — the old dog sat on his haunches, panting after his run, his long pink tongue lolling out of his grinning mouth; and the Labrador lay quietly by his side.

Longridge started the car and waved to them out of the window as he drove slowly down the drive, feeling rather foolish as he did so. “What do I expect them to do in return?” he asked himself with a smile. “Wave back? Or shout ‘Goodbye’? The trouble is I’ve lived too long alone with them and I’m becoming far too attached to them.”

The car turned around the bend at the end of the long, tree-lined drive and the animals heard the sound of the engine receding in the distance. The cat transferred his attention to his hind leg; the old dog stopped panting and lay down; the young dog remained stretched out, only his eyes moving and an occasional twitch of his nose.

Twenty minutes passed by and no move was made; then suddenly the young dog rose, stretched himself, and stood looking intently down the drive. He remained like this for several minutes, while the cat watched closely, one leg still pointing upwards; then slowly the Labrador walked down the driveway and stood at the curve, looking back as though inviting the others to come. The old dog rose too, now, somewhat stiffly, and followed. Together they turned the corner, out of sight.

The cat remained utterly still for a full minute, blue eyes blazing in the dark mask. Then with a curious hesitating run, he set off in pursuit. The dogs were waiting by the gate when he turned the corner, the old dog peering wistfully back, as though he hoped to see his friend Mrs. Oakes materialize with a juicy bone; but when the Labrador started up the road, he followed. The cat still paused by the gate, one paw lifted delicately in the air — undecided, questioning, hesitant; until suddenly, some inner decision reached, he followed the dog. Presently all three disappeared from sight down the dusty road, trotting briskly and with purpose.

About an hour later, Mrs. Oakes walked up the driveway from her cottage, carrying a string bag with her working shoes and apron, and a little parcel of tidbits for the animals. Her placid, gentle face wore a rather disappointed look, because the dogs usually spied her long before she got to the house and would rush to greet her.

“I expect Mr. Longridge left them shut inside the house if he was leaving early,” she consoled herself. But when she pushed open the kitchen door and walked inside, everything seemed very silent and still. She stood at the foot of the stairs and called them, but there was no answering patter of running feet, only the steady tick-tock of the old clock in the hallway. She walked through the silent house and out into the front garden and stood there, calling with a puzzled frown.

“Oh, well,” she spoke her thoughts aloud to the empty, sunny garden, “perhaps they’ve gone up to the school ...

“It’s a funny thing, though,” she continued, sitting on a kitchen chair a few minutes later and tying her shoelaces, “that Puss isn’t here — he’s usually sitting on the windowsill at this time of the day. Oh, well, he’s probably out hunting — I’ve never known a cat like that for hunting, doesn’t seem natural somehow!”

She washed and put away the few dishes, then took her cleaning materials into the sitting room. There her eye was caught by a sparkle on the floor by the desk, and she found the glass paperweight, and after that the remaining sheet of the note on the desk. She read through to where it said: *I will be taking the dogs (and Tao too of course!)* ... then looked for the remainder. That’s odd, she thought, now where would he take them? That cat must have knocked the paperweight off last night — the rest of the note must be somewhere in the room.

She searched the room, but it was not until she was emptying an ash tray into the fireplace that she noticed the charred curl of paper in the hearth. She bent down and picked it up carefully, for it was obviously very brittle, but even then most of it crumbled away and she was left with a fragment which bore the initials J. R. L.

“Now, isn’t that the queerest thing,” she said to the fireplace, rubbing vigorously at the black marks on the tile. “He must mean he’s taking them all to Heron Lake with him. But why would he suddenly do that, after all the arrangements we made? He never said a word about it on the telephone — but wait a minute, I remember now — he was just going to say something about them when the line went dead; perhaps he was just going to tell me.”

While Mrs. Oakes was amazed that Longridge would take the animals on his vacation, it did not occur to her to be astonished that a cat should go along too, for she was aware that

the cat loved the car and always went with the dogs when Longridge drove them anywhere or took them farther afield for walks. Like many Siamese cats, he was as obedient and trained to go on walks as most dogs, and would always return to a whistle.

Mrs. Oakes swept and dusted and talked to the house, locked it and returned home to her cottage. She would have been horrified to the depths of her kindly, well-ordered soul if she had known the truth. Far from sitting sedately in the back of a car travelling north with John Longridge, as she so fondly visualized, the animals were by now many miles away on a deserted country road that ran westward.

They had kept a fairly steady pace for the first hour or so, falling into an order which was not to vary for many miles or days; the Labrador ran always by the left shoulder of the old dog for the bull terrier was very nearly blind in the left eye, and they jogged along fairly steadily together — the bull terrier with his odd, rolling, sailorlike gait, and the Labrador in a slow lope. Some ten yards behind came the cat, whose attention was frequently distracted, where he would stop for a few minutes and then catch up again. But, in between these halts, he ran swiftly and steadily, his long, slim body and tail low to the ground.

When it was obvious that the old dog was flagging, the Labrador turned off the quiet gravelled road and into the shade of a pine wood beside a clear, fast-running creek. The old dog drank deeply, standing up to his chest in the cold water; the cat picked his way delicately to the edge of an overhanging rock. Afterwards they rested in the deep pine needles under the trees, the terrier panting heavily with his eyes half closed, and the cat busy with his eternal washing. They lay there for nearly an hour, until the sun struck through the branches above them. The young dog rose and stretched, then walked towards the road. The old dog rose too, stiff-legged, his head low. He walked toward the waiting Labrador, limping slightly and wagging his tail at the cat, who suddenly danced into a patch of sunlight, struck at a drifting leaf, then ran straight at the dogs, swerving at the last moment, and as suddenly sitting down again.

They trotted steadily on, all that afternoon — mostly travelling on the grassy verge at the side of the quiet country road; sometimes in the low, overgrown ditch that ran alongside, and the acute hearing of the young dog warned them of an approaching car.

By the time the afternoon sun lay in long, barred shadows across the road, the cat was still travelling in smooth, swift bursts, and the young dog was comparatively fresh. But the old dog was very weary, and his pace had dropped to a limping walk. They turned off the road into the bush at the side, and walked slowly through a clearing in the trees, pushing their way through the tangled undergrowth at the far end. They came out upon a small open place where a giant spruce had crashed to the ground and left a hollow where the roots had been filled now with drifted dry leaves and spruce needles.

The late afternoon sun slanted through the branches overhead, and it looked invitingly snug and secure. The old dog stood for a minute, his heavy head hanging, and his tired body swaying slightly, then lay down on his side in the hollow. The cat, after a good deal of wary observation, made a little hollow among the spruce needles and curled around in it, purring softly. The young dog disappeared into the undergrowth and reappeared presently, his smooth coat dripping water, to lie down a little away apart from the others.

The old dog continued to pant exhaustedly for a long time, one hind leg shaking badly, until his eyes closed at last, the laboured breaths came further and further apart, and he was sleeping — still, save for an occasional long shudder.

Later on, when darkness fell, the young dog moved over and stretched out closely at his side and the cat stalked over to lie between his paws; and so, warmed and comforted by the closeness, the old dog slept, momentarily unconscious of his aching, tired body or his hunger.

In the nearby hills a timber wolf howled mournfully; owls called and answered and glided silently by with great outspread wings; and there were faint whispers of movement and small rustling noises around all through the night. Once an eerie wail like a baby's crying woke the old dog and brought him shivering and whining to his feet; but it was only a porcupine, who scrambled noisily and clumsily down a nearby tree trunk and waddled away, still crying softly. When he lay down again the cat was gone from his side — another small night hunter slipping through the unquiet shadows that froze to stillness at his passing.

The young dog slept in fitful, uneasy starts, his muscles twitching, constantly lifting his head and growling softly. Once he sprang to his feet with a full-throated roar which brought a sudden splash in the distance, then silence — and who knows what else unknown, unseen or unheard passed through his mind to disturb him further? Only one thing was clear and certain — that at all costs he was going home, home to his own beloved master. Home lay to the west, his instinct told him; but he could not leave the other two — so somehow he must take them with him, all the way.

In the cold hour before dawn, the bull terrier woke, then staggered painfully to his feet. He was trembling with cold and was extremely hungry and thirsty. He walked stiffly in the direction of the pool nearby, passing on his way the cat, who was crouched over something held between his paws. The terrier heard a crunching sound as the cat's jaws moved, and wagging his tail in interest, moved over to investigate. The cat regarded him distantly, then stalked away, leaving the carcass; but to the terrier it was a disappointing mess of feathers only. He drank long and deeply at the pool and on his return tried the feathers again, for he was ravenous; but they stuck in his gullet and he retched them out. He nibbled at some stalks of grass, then, delicately, his lips rolled back over his teeth, picked a few overripe raspberries from a low bush. He had always liked to eat domestic raspberries this way, and although the taste was reassuringly familiar, it did nothing to appease his hunger. He was pleased to see the young dog appear presently; he wagged his tail and licked the other's face, then followed resignedly when a move was made towards the direction of the road. They were followed a few moments later by the cat, who was still licking his lips after his feathery breakfast.

In the grey light of dawn the trio continued down the side of the road until they reached a point where it took a right-angled turn. Here they hesitated before a disused logging trail that led westward from the side of the road, its entrance almost concealed by overhanging branches. The leader lifted his head and appeared almost as though he were searching for the scent of something, some reassurance; and apparently he found it, for he led his companions up the trail between the overhanging trees. The going here was softer; the middle was overgrown with grass and the ruts on either side were full of dead leaves. The close-growing trees which almost met overhead would afford more shade when the sun rose higher. These were all considerations that the old dog needed, for he had been tired today even before he started, and his pace was already considerably slower.

Both dogs were very hungry and watched enviously when the cat caught and killed a chipmunk while they were resting by a stream in the middle of the day. But when the old dog advanced with a hopeful wag of his tail, the cat, growling, retreated into the bushes with his prey. Puzzled and disappointed, the terrier sat listening to the crunching sounds inside the bushes, saliva running from his mouth.

A few minutes later the cat emerged and sat down, daintily cleaning his whiskers. The old dog licked the black Siamese face with his panting tongue and was affectionately patted on the nose in return. Restless with hunger, he wandered up the banks of the creek, investigating every rock and hollow, pushing his hopeful nose through tunnels of withered sedge and into the yielding earth of molehills. Sadly he lay down by an unrewarding blueberry bush, drew his paws down tightly over his blackened face, then licked the dirt off them.

The young dog, too, was hungry; but he would have to be on the verge of starvation before the barriers of deep-rooted Labrador heredity would be broken down. For generations his ancestors had been bred to retrieve without harming, and there was nothing of the hunter in his makeup; as yet, any killing was abhorrent to him. He drank deeply at the stream and urged his companions on.

The trail ran high over the crest of this hilly, wooded country, and the surrounding countryside below was filled with an overwhelming beauty of colour; the reds and vermilion of the occasional maples; pale birch, and yellow poplar, and here and there the scarlet clusters of mountain ash berries against a rich, dark green background of spruce and pine and cedar.

Several times they passed log ramps built into the side of the hill, picking their way across the deep ruts left by the timber sleighs below; and sometimes they passed derelict buildings in rank, overgrown clearings, old stables for the bush horses and living quarters for the men who had worked there a generation ago. The windows were broken and sagging and weeds were growing up between the floorboards, and even one old, rusted cookstove had fireweed springing from the firebox. The animals, strangely enough, did not like these evidences of human occupation and skirted them as far as possible, hair raised along their backs.

Late in the afternoon the old dog's pace had slowed down to a stumbling walk, and he seemed as if only sheer determination were keeping him on his feet at all. He was dizzy and swaying, and his heart was pounding. The cat must have sensed this general failing, for he now walked steadily beside the dogs, very close to his tottering old friend, and uttered plaintive worried bleats. Finally, the old dog came to a standstill by a deep rut half-filled with muddy water. He stood there as if he had not even the strength to step around it; his head sagged, and his whole body was trembling. Then, as he tried to lap the water, his legs seemed to crumple under him and he collapsed, half in and half out of the rut. His eyes were closed, and his body moved only to the long, shallow, shuddering breaths that came in widening intervals. Soon he lay completely limp and still. The young dog became frantic now; he whined, as he stretched at the edge of the rut, then nudged and pushed with his nose, doing everything in his power to rouse the huddled, unresponsive body. Again and again he barked, and the cat growled softly and continuously, walking back and forth and rubbing his whole length against the dirty, muddied head. There was no response to their attention. The old dog lay unconscious and remote.

The two animals grew silent, and sat by his side, disturbed and uneasy, until at last the Labrador turned and left him, neither looking back — the Labrador disappearing into the bushes where the crack of broken branches marked his progress farther and farther away; the cat stalking a partridge which had appeared at the side of the trail some hundred yards away and was pecking unconcernedly at the sandy dirt. But at the shrill warning of a squirrel, it flew off across the trail with a sudden whirr into the trees, while the cat was still some distance away. Undaunted, still licking his lips in anticipation, the cat continued around a bend in the trail in search of another, and was lost to sight.

The shadows lengthened across the deserted track, and the evening wind sighed down it to sweep a flurry of whispering leaves across the rut, their brown brittleness light as a benediction as they drifted across the unheeding white form. The curious squirrel peered in bright-eyed wonder from a nearby tree, clucking softly to itself. A shrew ran halfway across, paused and ran back; and there was a soft sound of wings as a whisky-jack landed and swayed to and fro on a birch branch, tilting his head to one side as he looked down and called to his mate to come and join him. The wind died away — a sudden hush descended.

Suddenly, there was a sound of a heavy body pushing through the underbrush

accompanied by a sharp cracking of branches, and the spell was broken. Chattering shrilly in alarm and excitement, the squirrel ran up the trunk of the tree and the whisky-jacks flew off. Now onto the trail on all fours scampered a half-grown bear cub, round furry ears pricked and small, deep-set eyes alight with curiosity in the sharp little face as he beheld the old dog. There was a grunting, snuffling sound in the bush behind the cub: his mother was investigating a rotten tree stump. The cub stood for a moment and then hesitantly advanced toward the rut where the terrier lay. He sniffed around, wrinkling his facile nose at the unfamiliar smell, then reached out a long, curved black paw and tapped the white head. For a moment the mists of unconsciousness cleared and the old dog opened his eyes, aware of danger. The cub sprang back in alarm and watched from a safe distance. Seeing that there was no further movement, he loped back and cuffed again with his paw, this time harder, and watched for a response. Only enough strength was left in the old dog for a valiant baring of his teeth. He snarled faintly with pain and hatred when his shoulder was raked by the wicked claws of the excited cub, and made an attempt to struggle to his feet. The smell of the drawn blood excited the cub further; he straddled the dog's body and started to play with the long white tail, nibbling at the end like a child with a new toy. But there was no response: a conscious effort drained, the old dog no longer felt any pain or indignity. He lay as though asleep, his eyes veiled and unseeing, his lip still curled in a snarl.

Around the bend in the trail, dragging a large dead partridge by the wing, came the cat. The wing sprang back softly from his mouth as he gazed transfixed at the scene before him. In one split second a terrible transformation took place; his blue eyes glittered hugely and evilly in the black masked face, and every hair on the wheat-coloured body stood upright so that he appeared twice his real size; even the chocolate-coloured tail puffed up as it switched from side to side. He crouched low to the ground, tensed and ready, and uttered a high, ear-splitting scream; and, as the startled cub turned, the cat sprang.

He landed on the back of the dark furred neck, clinging with his monkeylike hind legs while he raked his claws across the cub's eyes. Again and again he raked with the terrible talons, hissing and spitting in murderous devilry until the cub was screaming in pain and fear, blinded with blood, making ineffectual brushing movements with his paws to dislodge the unseen horror on his back. His screams were answered by a thunderous roar as the huge black she-bear crashed through the bushes and rushed to the cub. She swiped at the clinging cat with a tremendous paw; but the cat was too quick for her and with a hiss of fury leaped to the ground and disappeared behind a tree. The unfortunate cub's head received the full force of the blow and he was sent spinning across the track into the bushes. In a blind, frustrated rage, maddened by the cries of her cub, the mother turned for something on which to vent her fury, and saw the still figure of the old dog. Even as she lumbered snarling toward him, the cat distracted her attention with a sudden leap to the side of the track. The bear halted, then reared up to full height for attack, red eyes glinting savagely, neck upstretched and head weaving from side to side in a menacing, snakelike way. The cat uttered another banshee scream and stepped forward with a stiff-legged, sideways movement, his squinting, terrible eyes fixed on his enormous adversary. Something like fear or indecision crept into the bear's eyes as the cat advanced; she shuffled back a step with lowered head. Slowly and deliberate, purposeful, the cat came on — again the bear retreated, bewildered by the tactics of this terrible small animal, distraught by her cub's whimpering, slowly falling back before

the relentless inch-by-inch advance. Now the cat stopped and crouched low, lashing his tail from side to side — the bear stopped too, shifting her weight uneasily before the spring that must follow, longing to decamp but afraid to turn her back. A sudden crackle of undergrowth turned the huge animal into a statue, rigid with apprehension — and when a great dog sprang out of the bush and stood beside the cat, teeth bared and snarling, every hair on his russet back and ruff erect, she dropped to all fours, turned swiftly and fled towards her cub. There was a last growl of desperate bravado from the bush and a whimpering cry; then the sound of the bears' escape receded in the distance. Finally all was quiet again; the curious squirrel leaped from his ringside seat and scrambled farther down the trunk of the tree.

The cat shrank back to his normal size. His eyes regained their usual cool, detached look. He shook each paw distastefully in turn, glanced briefly at the limp, muddied bundle by his feet, blood oozing from four deep, parallel gashes on the shoulder, then turned and sauntered slowly down the track towards his partridge.

The young dog nosed his friend all over, his lips wrinkling at the rank bear smell, then attempted to staunch the wounds with his rough tongue. He scratched fresh leaves over the bloodstained ones, then barked by the old dog's head; but there was no response, and at last he lay down panting on the grass. His eyes were uneasy and watchful, the hairs still stood upright in a ridge on his back, and from time to time he whined in perplexity. He watched the cat drag a large grey bird almost up to the nose of the unconscious dog, then slowly and deliberately begin to tear at the bird's flesh. He growled softly, but the cat ignored him and continued his tearing and eating. Presently, the enticing smell of raw, warm meat filtered through into the old dog's senses. He opened one eye and gave an appreciative sniff. The effect was galvanizing: his muddied half-chewed tail stirred and he raised his shoulders, then his forelegs, with a convulsive effort, like an old workhorse getting up after a fall.

He was a pitiful sight — the half of his body that had lain in the rut was black and soaking while the other was streaked and stained with blood. He looked like some grotesque harlequin. He trembled violently and uncontrollably throughout the length of his body, but in the sunken depths of the slanted blackcurrant eyes there was a faint gleam of interest — which increased as he pushed his nose into the still-warm bundle of soft grey feathers. The time there was no growling rebuff over the prey: instead, the cat sat down a few yards away, studiously aloof and indifferent, then painstakingly washed down the length of his tail. When the end twitched he pinned it down with a paw.

The old dog ate, crunching the bones ravenously with his blunt teeth. Even as his companions watched him, a miraculous strength slowly seeped back into his body. He dozed for a while, a feather hanging from his mouth, then woke again to finish the last morsel. By nightfall he was able to walk over to the soft grass at the side of the track, where he lay down and blinked happily at his companions, wagging his pitiful tail. The Labrador lay down beside him, and licked the wounded shoulder.

An hour or two later the purring cat joined them, carelessly dropping another succulent morsel by his old friend's nose. This was a deer mouse, a little creature with big eyes and long hind legs like a miniature kangaroo. It was swallowed with a satisfying gulp, and soon the old dog slept.

But the cat purring against his chest and the young dog curled at his back were wakeful and

alert most of the remaining night; neither moved from his side.

Hunger was now the ruling instinct in the Labrador and it drove him out to forage in the early dawn. He was desperate enough to try some deer droppings, but spat them out immediately in disgust. While he was drinking from a marsh pool still covered with lily pads he saw a frog staring at him with goggle eyes from a small stone: measuring the distance carefully, he sprang and caught it in the air as it leaped to safety. It disappeared down his throat in one crunch and he looked around happily for more. But an hour's patient search rewarded him with only two, so he returned to his companions. They had apparently eaten for there were feathers and fur scattered around and both were licking their lips. But something warned him not to urge his old companion on.

The terrier was still utterly exhausted, and in addition had lost a lot of blood from the gashes suffered at the cub's claws the day before. These were stiff and black with blood, and had a tendency to open and bleed slightly with any movement, so all that day he lay peacefully in the warm fall sunshine on the grass, sleeping, eating what the cat provided, and wagging his tail whenever one of the others came near.

The young dog spent most of the day still occupied with his ceaseless foraging for food. By evening he was desperate, but his luck turned when a rabbit, already changing to its winter coat, suddenly started up from the long grass and swerved across his path. Head down, tail flying, the young dog gave chase, swerving and turning in pursuit, but always the rabbit was just out of reach of his hungry jaws. At last, he put all his strength into one violent lunge and felt the warm, pulsating prize in his mouth. The generations fell away, and the years of training never to sink teeth into feathers or fur; for a moment the Labrador looked almost wolflike as he tore at the warm flesh and bolted it down in ravenous gulps.

They slept in the same place that night and most of the following day, and the weather mercifully continued warm and sunny. By the third day the old dog seemed almost recovered and the wounds were closed. He had spent most of the day ambling around and sleeping, so that by now he seemed almost frisky and quite eager to walk a little.

So, in the late afternoon, they left the place which had been their home for three days and trotted slowly along the track together again. By the time the moon rose they had travelled several miles, and they had come to the edge of a small lake which the track skirted.

A moose was standing in the water among the lily pads on the far shore, his great antlered head and humped neck silhouetted clearly against the pale moon. He took no notice of the strange animals across the water but thrust his head again and again under the water, raising it high in the air after each immersion, and arching his neck. Two or three water hens swam out from the reeds, a little crested grebe popped up like a jack-in-the-box in the water beside them, and the spreading ripples of their wake caught the light of the moon. As the three saunters ears pricked, they watched the moose squelch slowly out of the muddy water, shake himself, and turn, cantering up the bank out of sight.

The young dog turned his head suddenly, his nose twitching, for his keen scent had caught a distant whiff of wood smoke, and of something else — something unidentifiable ... Seconds later, the old dog caught the scent too, and started to his feet, snuffing and questioning with

his nose. His thin whippy tail began to sweep to and fro and a bright gleam appeared in the slanted blackcurrant eyes. Somewhere, not too far away, were human beings — his world: he could not mistake their message — or refuse their invitation — they were undoubtedly cooking something. He trotted off determinedly in the direction of the tantalizing smell. The young dog followed somewhat reluctantly, and for once the cat passed them both; a little moon-mad perhaps, for he lay in wait to dart and strike, then streaked back into the shadows only to reappear a second later in an elaborate stalk of their tails. Both dogs ignored him.

The scent on the evening breeze was a fragrant compound of roasting rice, wild duck steamed in wood smoke. When the animals looked down from a hill, tantalized and hungry, they saw six or seven fires in the clearing below — their flames lighting up a semicircle of ten and conical birchbark shelters against a dark background of trees; flickering over the canoes drawn up on the edge of a wild rice marsh and dying redly in the black waters beyond; and throwing into ruddy relief the high, flat planes of brown Ojibway faces gathered around the centres of warmth and brightness.

The men were a colourful lot in jeans and bright plaid shirts, but the women were dressed in sombre colours. Two young boys, the only children there, were going from fire to fire, shaking grain in shallow pans and stirring it with paddles as it parched. One man in long, soft moccasins stood in a shallow pit trampling husks, half his weight supported on a log frame. Some of the band lay back from the fires, smoking and watching idly, talking softly among themselves; while others still ate, ladling the fragrant contents of a black iron pot onto tin plates. Every now and then one of them would throw a bone back over a shoulder into the bush, and the watching animals gazed hungrily after. A woman stood at the edge of the clearing pouring grain from one bark platter to another, and the loose chaff drifted off on the slight wind like smoke.

The old dog saw nothing of this, but his ears and nose supplied all that he needed to know. He could contain himself no longer and picked his way carefully down the hillside, for his shoulder still pained him. Halfway down he sneezed violently in an eddy of chaff. One of the boys by the fire looked up at the sound, his hand closing on a stone, but the woman nearby spoke sharply, and he waited, watching intently.

The old dog limped out of the shadows and into the ring of firelight, confident, friendly, and sure of his welcome; his tail wagging his whole stern ingratiatingly, ears and lips laid back in his nightmarish grimace. There was a stunned silence — broken by a wail of terror from the smaller boy, who flung himself at his mother — and then a quick, excited chatter from the Indians. The old dog was rather offended and uncertain for a moment, but he made a dash hopefully for the nearest boy, who retreated, nervously clutching his stone. But again the woman rebuked her son, and at the sharpness of her tone the old dog stopped, crestfallen. She laid down her basket then, and walked quickly across the ring of firelight, stooping down to look more closely. She spoke some soft words of reassurance, then patted his head gently and smiled at him. The old dog leaned against her and whipped his tail against her black stockings, happy to be in contact with a human being again. She crouched down beside him and ran her fingers lightly over his ears and back, and when he licked her face appreciatively, she laughed. At this, the two little boys drew nearer to the dog and the rest of the band gathered around. Soon the old dog was where he most loved to be — the centre of attention among

some human beings. He made the most of it and played to an appreciative audience; when one of the men tossed him a chunk of meat he sat up painfully on his hindquarters and begged for more, waving one paw in the air. This sent the Indians into paroxysms of laughter and he had to repeat his performance time and time again, until he was tired and lay down panting but happy.

The Indian woman stroked him gently in reward, then ladled some of the meat from the pot onto the grass. The old dog limped towards it; but before he ate he looked up in the direction of the hillside where he had left his two companions.

A small stone rebounded from rock to rock, then rolled into the sudden silence that followed.

When a long-legged, blue-eyed cat appeared out of the darkness, paused, then filled the clearing with a strident, plaintive voice before walking up to the dog and calmly taking a piece of meat from him, the Indians laughed until they were speechless and hiccupping. The two little boys rolled on the ground, kicking their heels in an abandonment of mirth, while the cat chewed his meat unmoved; but this was the kind of behaviour the bull terrier understood, and he joined in the fun. But he rolled so enthusiastically that the wound reopened: when he got to his feet again his white coat was stained with blood.

All this time the young dog crouched on the hillside, motionless and watchful, although every driving, urgent nerve in his body fretted and strained at the delay. He watched the cat well-fed and content, curl himself on the lap of one of the sleepy children by the fire; he heard the faint note of derision in some of the Indians' voices as a little, bent, ancient crow addressed them in earnest and impassioned tones before hobbling over to the dog to examine his shoulder as he lay peacefully before the fire. She threw some cattail roots into a boiling pot of water, soaked some moss in the liquid, and pressed it against the dark gashes. The old dog did not move; only his tail beat slowly. When she had finished, she scooped some more meat onto a piece of birchbark and set it on the grass before the dog; and the silent watcher above licked his lips and sat up, but still he did not move from his place.

But when the fires began to burn low and the Indians made preparations for the night, and still his companions showed no signs of moving, the young dog grew restless. He skirted the camp, moving like a shadow through the trees on the hill behind, until he came out upon the lake's shore a quarter of a mile upwind of the camp. Then he barked sharply and imperatively several times.

The effect was like an alarm bell on the other two. The cat sprang from the arms of the sleepy little Indian boy and ran towards the old dog, who was already on his feet, blinking and peering around rather confusedly. The cat gave a guttural yowl, then deliberately ran ahead, looking back as he paused beyond the range of firelight. The old dog shook himself resignedly and walked slowly after — reluctant to leave the warmth of the fire. The Indian watched impassively and silently and made no move to stop him. Only the woman who had first befriended him called out softly, in the tongue of her people, a farewell to the traveller.

The dog halted at the treeline beside the cat and looked back, but the commanding summoning bark was heard again, and together the two passed out of sight and into the blackness of the night.

That night they became immortal, had they known or cared, for the ancient woman had recognized the old dog at once by his colour and companion: he was the White Dog of the Ojibways, the virtuous White Dog of Omen, whose appearance heralds either disaster or good fortune. The Spirits had sent him, hungry and wounded, to test tribal hospitality; and for benevolent proof to the skeptical they had chosen a cat as his companion — for what mortal dog would suffer a cat to rob him of his meat? He had been made welcome, fed and succoured: the omen would prove fortunate.

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