THE WENDIGO

Algernon Blackwood

1910

I

A considerable number of hunting parties were out that year without

finding so much as a fresh trail; for the moose were uncommonly shy, and

the various Nimrods returned to the bosoms of their respective families

with the best excuses the facts of their imaginations could suggest. Dr.

Cathcart, among others, came back without a trophy; but he brought

instead the memory of an experience which he declares was worth all the

bull moose that had ever been shot. But then Cathcart, of Aberdeen, was

interested in other things besides moose--amongst them the vagaries of

the human mind. This particular story, however, found no mention in his

book on Collective Hallucination for the simple reason (so he confided

once to a fellow colleague) that he himself played too intimate a part

in it to form a competent judgment of the affair as a whole....

Besides himself and his guide, Hank Davis, there was young Simpson, his

nephew, a divinity student destined for the "Wee Kirk" (then on his

first visit to Canadian backwoods), and the latter's guide, Défago.

Joseph Défago was a French "Canuck," who had strayed from his native

Province of Quebec years before, and had got caught in Rat Portage when

the Canadian Pacific Railway was a-building; a man who, in addition to

his unparalleled knowledge of wood-craft and bush-lore, could also sing

the old \_voyageur\_ songs and tell a capital hunting yarn into the

bargain. He was deeply susceptible, moreover, to that singular spell

which the wilderness lays upon certain lonely natures, and he loved the

wild solitudes with a kind of romantic passion that amounted almost to

an obsession. The life of the backwoods fascinated him--whence,

doubtless, his surpassing efficiency in dealing with their mysteries.

On this particular expedition he was Hank's choice. Hank knew him and

swore by him. He also swore at him, "jest as a pal might," and since he

had a vocabulary of picturesque, if utterly meaningless, oaths, the

conversation between the two stalwart and hardy woodsmen was often of a

rather lively description. This river of expletives, however, Hank

agreed to dam a little out of respect for his old "hunting boss," Dr.

Cathcart, whom of course he addressed after the fashion of the country

as "Doc," and also because he understood that young Simpson was already

a "bit of a parson." He had, however, one objection to Défago, and one

only--which was, that the French Canadian sometimes exhibited what Hank

described as "the output of a cursed and dismal mind," meaning

apparently that he sometimes was true to type, Latin type, and suffered

fits of a kind of silent moroseness when nothing could induce him to

utter speech. Défago, that is to say, was imaginative and melancholy.

And, as a rule, it was too long a spell of "civilization" that induced

the attacks, for a few days of the wilderness invariably cured them.

This, then, was the party of four that found themselves in camp the last

week in October of that "shy moose year" 'way up in the wilderness north

of Rat Portage--a forsaken and desolate country. There was also Punk, an

Indian, who had accompanied Dr. Cathcart and Hank on their hunting trips

in previous years, and who acted as cook. His duty was merely to stay in

camp, catch fish, and prepare venison steaks and coffee at a few

minutes' notice. He dressed in the worn-out clothes bequeathed to him by

former patrons, and, except for his coarse black hair and dark skin, he

looked in these city garments no more like a real redskin than a stage

Negro looks like a real African. For all that, however, Punk had in him

still the instincts of his dying race; his taciturn silence and his

endurance survived; also his superstition.

The party round the blazing fire that night were despondent, for a week

had passed without a single sign of recent moose discovering itself.

Défago had sung his song and plunged into a story, but Hank, in bad

humor, reminded him so often that "he kep' mussing-up the fac's so, that

it was 'most all nothin' but a petered-out lie," that the Frenchman had

finally subsided into a sulky silence which nothing seemed likely to

break. Dr. Cathcart and his nephew were fairly done after an exhausting

day. Punk was washing up the dishes, grunting to himself under the

lean-to of branches, where he later also slept. No one troubled to stir

the slowly dying fire. Overhead the stars were brilliant in a sky quite

wintry, and there was so little wind that ice was already forming

stealthily along the shores of the still lake behind them. The silence

of the vast listening forest stole forward and enveloped them.

Hank broke in suddenly with his nasal voice.

"I'm in favor of breaking new ground tomorrow, Doc," he observed with

energy, looking across at his employer. "We don't stand a dead Dago's

chance around here."

"Agreed," said Cathcart, always a man of few words. "Think the idea's

good."

"Sure pop, it's good," Hank resumed with confidence. "S'pose, now, you

and I strike west, up Garden Lake way for a change! None of us ain't

touched that quiet bit o' land yet--"

"I'm with you."

"And you, Défago, take Mr. Simpson along in the small canoe, skip across

the lake, portage over into Fifty Island Water, and take a good squint

down that thar southern shore. The moose 'yarded' there like hell last

year, and for all we know they may be doin' it agin this year jest to

spite us."

Défago, keeping his eyes on the fire, said nothing by way of reply. He

was still offended, possibly, about his interrupted story.

"No one's been up that way this year, an' I'll lay my bottom dollar on

\_that!\_" Hank added with emphasis, as though he had a reason for

knowing. He looked over at his partner sharply. "Better take the little

silk tent and stay away a couple o' nights," he concluded, as though the

matter were definitely settled. For Hank was recognized as general

organizer of the hunt, and in charge of the party.

It was obvious to anyone that Défago did not jump at the plan, but his

silence seemed to convey something more than ordinary disapproval, and

across his sensitive dark face there passed a curious expression like a

flash of firelight--not so quickly, however, that the three men had not

time to catch it.

"He funked for some reason, \_I\_ thought," Simpson said afterwards in the

tent he shared with his uncle. Dr. Cathcart made no immediate reply,

although the look had interested him enough at the time for him to make

a mental note of it. The expression had caused him a passing uneasiness

he could not quite account for at the moment.

But Hank, of course, had been the first to notice it, and the odd thing

was that instead of becoming explosive or angry over the other's

reluctance, he at once began to humor him a bit.

"But there ain't no \_speshul\_ reason why no one's been up there this

year," he said with a perceptible hush in his tone; "not the reason you

mean, anyway! Las' year it was the fires that kep' folks out, and this

year I guess--I guess it jest happened so, that's all!" His manner was

clearly meant to be encouraging.

Joseph Défago raised his eyes a moment, then dropped them again. A

breath of wind stole out of the forest and stirred the embers into a

passing blaze. Dr. Cathcart again noticed the expression in the guide's

face, and again he did not like it. But this time the nature of the look

betrayed itself. In those eyes, for an instant, he caught the gleam of a

man scared in his very soul. It disquieted him more than he cared to

admit.

"Bad Indians up that way?" he asked, with a laugh to ease matters a

little, while Simpson, too sleepy to notice this subtle by-play, moved

off to bed with a prodigious yawn; "or--or anything wrong with the

country?" he added, when his nephew was out of hearing.

Hank met his eye with something less than his usual frankness.

"He's jest skeered," he replied good-humouredly. "Skeered stiff about

some ole feery tale! That's all, ain't it, ole pard?" And he gave Défago

a friendly kick on the moccasined foot that lay nearest the fire.

Défago looked up quickly, as from an interrupted reverie, a reverie,

however, that had not prevented his seeing all that went on about him.

"Skeered--\_nuthin'!\_" he answered, with a flush of defiance. "There's

nuthin' in the Bush that can skeer Joseph Défago, and don't you forget

it!" And the natural energy with which he spoke made it impossible to

know whether he told the whole truth or only a part of it.

Hank turned towards the doctor. He was just going to add something when

he stopped abruptly and looked round. A sound close behind them in the

darkness made all three start. It was old Punk, who had moved up from

his lean-to while they talked and now stood there just beyond the circle

of firelight--listening.

"'Nother time, Doc!" Hank whispered, with a wink, "when the gallery

ain't stepped down into the stalls!" And, springing to his feet, he

slapped the Indian on the back and cried noisily, "Come up t' the fire

an' warm yer dirty red skin a bit." He dragged him towards the blaze and

threw more wood on. "That was a mighty good feed you give us an hour or

two back," he continued heartily, as though to set the man's thoughts on

another scent, "and it ain't Christian to let you stand out there

freezin' yer ole soul to hell while we're gettin' all good an' toasted!"

Punk moved in and warmed his feet, smiling darkly at the other's

volubility which he only half understood, but saying nothing. And

presently Dr. Cathcart, seeing that further conversation was impossible,

followed his nephew's example and moved off to the tent, leaving the

three men smoking over the now blazing fire.

It is not easy to undress in a small tent without waking one's

companion, and Cathcart, hardened and warm-blooded as he was in spite of

his fifty odd years, did what Hank would have described as "considerable

of his twilight" in the open. He noticed, during the process, that Punk

had meanwhile gone back to his lean-to, and that Hank and Défago were

at it hammer and tongs, or, rather, hammer and anvil, the little French

Canadian being the anvil. It was all very like the conventional stage

picture of Western melodrama: the fire lighting up their faces with

patches of alternate red and black; Défago, in slouch hat and moccasins

in the part of the "badlands" villain; Hank, open-faced and hatless,

with that reckless fling of his shoulders, the honest and deceived hero;

and old Punk, eavesdropping in the background, supplying the atmosphere

of mystery. The doctor smiled as he noticed the details; but at the same

time something deep within him--he hardly knew what--shrank a little, as

though an almost imperceptible breath of warning had touched the surface

of his soul and was gone again before he could seize it. Probably it was

traceable to that "scared expression" he had seen in the eyes of Défago;

"probably"--for this hint of fugitive emotion otherwise escaped his

usually so keen analysis. Défago, he was vaguely aware, might cause

trouble somehow ...He was not as steady a guide as Hank, for

instance ... Further than that he could not get ...

He watched the men a moment longer before diving into the stuffy tent

where Simpson already slept soundly. Hank, he saw, was swearing like a

mad African in a New York nigger saloon; but it was the swearing of

"affection." The ridiculous oaths flew freely now that the cause of

their obstruction was asleep. Presently he put his arm almost tenderly

upon his comrade's shoulder, and they moved off together into the

shadows where their tent stood faintly glimmering. Punk, too, a moment

later followed their example and disappeared between his odorous

blankets in the opposite direction.

Dr. Cathcart then likewise turned in, weariness and sleep still fighting

in his mind with an obscure curiosity to know what it was that had

scared Défago about the country up Fifty Island Water way,--wondering,

too, why Punk's presence had prevented the completion of what Hank had

to say. Then sleep overtook him. He would know tomorrow. Hank would tell

him the story while they trudged after the elusive moose.

Deep silence fell about the little camp, planted there so audaciously in

the jaws of the wilderness. The lake gleamed like a sheet of black glass

beneath the stars. The cold air pricked. In the draughts of night that

poured their silent tide from the depths of the forest, with messages

from distant ridges and from lakes just beginning to freeze, there lay

already the faint, bleak odors of coming winter. White men, with their

dull scent, might never have divined them; the fragrance of the wood

fire would have concealed from them these almost electrical hints of

moss and bark and hardening swamp a hundred miles away. Even Hank and

Défago, subtly in league with the soul of the woods as they were, would

probably have spread their delicate nostrils in vain....

But an hour later, when all slept like the dead, old Punk crept from his

blankets and went down to the shore of the lake like a shadow--silently,

as only Indian blood can move. He raised his head and looked about him.

The thick darkness rendered sight of small avail, but, like the animals,

he possessed other senses that darkness could not mute. He

listened--then sniffed the air. Motionless as a hemlock stem he stood

there. After five minutes again he lifted his head and sniffed, and yet

once again. A tingling of the wonderful nerves that betrayed itself by

no outer sign, ran through him as he tasted the keen air. Then, merging

his figure into the surrounding blackness in a way that only wild men

and animals understand, he turned, still moving like a shadow, and went

stealthily back to his lean-to and his bed.

And soon after he slept, the change of wind he had divined stirred

gently the reflection of the stars within the lake. Rising among the far

ridges of the country beyond Fifty Island Water, it came from the

direction in which he had stared, and it passed over the sleeping camp

with a faint and sighing murmur through the tops of the big trees that

was almost too delicate to be audible. With it, down the desert paths of

night, though too faint, too high even for the Indian's hair-like

nerves, there passed a curious, thin odor, strangely disquieting, an

odor of something that seemed unfamiliar--utterly unknown.

The French Canadian and the man of Indian blood each stirred uneasily in

his sleep just about this time, though neither of them woke. Then the

ghost of that unforgettably strange odor passed away and was lost among

the leagues of tenantless forest beyond.

II

In the morning the camp was astir before the sun. There had been a

light fall of snow during the night and the air was sharp. Punk had done

his duty betimes, for the odors of coffee and fried bacon reached every

tent. All were in good spirits.

"Wind's shifted!" cried Hank vigorously, watching Simpson and his guide

already loading the small canoe. "It's across the lake--dead right for

you fellers. And the snow'll make bully trails! If there's any moose

mussing around up thar, they'll not get so much as a tail-end scent of

you with the wind as it is. Good luck, Monsieur Défago!" he added,

facetiously giving the name its French pronunciation for once, "\_bonne

chance!\_"

Défago returned the good wishes, apparently in the best of spirits, the

silent mood gone. Before eight o'clock old Punk had the camp to

himself, Cathcart and Hank were far along the trail that led westwards,

while the canoe that carried Défago and Simpson, with silk tent and grub

for two days, was already a dark speck bobbing on the bosom of the lake,

going due east.

The wintry sharpness of the air was tempered now by a sun that topped

the wooded ridges and blazed with a luxurious warmth upon the world of

lake and forest below; loons flew skimming through the sparkling spray

that the wind lifted; divers shook their dripping heads to the sun and

popped smartly out of sight again; and as far as eye could reach rose

the leagues of endless, crowding Bush, desolate in its lonely sweep and

grandeur, untrodden by foot of man, and stretching its mighty and

unbroken carpet right up to the frozen shores of Hudson Bay.

Simpson, who saw it all for the first time as he paddled hard in the

bows of the dancing canoe, was enchanted by its austere beauty. His

heart drank in the sense of freedom and great spaces just as his lungs

drank in the cool and perfumed wind. Behind him in the stern seat,

singing fragments of his native chanties, Défago steered the craft of

birch bark like a thing of life, answering cheerfully all his

companion's questions. Both were gay and light-hearted. On such

occasions men lose the superficial, worldly distinctions; they become

human beings working together for a common end. Simpson, the employer,

and Défago the employed, among these primitive forces, were simply--two

men, the "guider" and the "guided." Superior knowledge, of course,

assumed control, and the younger man fell without a second thought into

the quasi-subordinate position. He never dreamed of objecting when

Défago dropped the "Mr.," and addressed him as "Say, Simpson," or

"Simpson, boss," which was invariably the case before they reached the

farther shore after a stiff paddle of twelve miles against a head wind.

He only laughed, and liked it; then ceased to notice it at all.

For this "divinity student" was a young man of parts and character,

though as yet, of course, untraveled; and on this trip--the first time

he had seen any country but his own and little Switzerland--the huge

scale of things somewhat bewildered him. It was one thing, he realized,

to hear about primeval forests, but quite another to see them. While to

dwell in them and seek acquaintance with their wild life was, again, an

initiation that no intelligent man could undergo without a certain

shifting of personal values hitherto held for permanent and sacred.

Simpson knew the first faint indication of this emotion when he held the

new. 303 rifle in his hands and looked along its pair of faultless,

gleaming barrels. The three days' journey to their headquarters, by lake

and portage, had carried the process a stage farther. And now that he

was about to plunge beyond even the fringe of wilderness where they were

camped into the virgin heart of uninhabited regions as vast as Europe

itself, the true nature of the situation stole upon him with an effect

of delight and awe that his imagination was fully capable of

appreciating. It was himself and Défago against a multitude--at least,

against a Titan!

The bleak splendors of these remote and lonely forests rather

overwhelmed him with the sense of his own littleness. That stern quality

of the tangled backwoods which can only be described as merciless and

terrible, rose out of these far blue woods swimming upon the horizon,

and revealed itself. He understood the silent warning. He realized his

own utter helplessness. Only Défago, as a symbol of a distant

civilization where man was master, stood between him and a pitiless

death by exhaustion and starvation.

It was thrilling to him, therefore, to watch Défago turn over the canoe

upon the shore, pack the paddles carefully underneath, and then proceed

to "blaze" the spruce stems for some distance on either side of an

almost invisible trail, with the careless remark thrown in, "Say,

Simpson, if anything happens to me, you'll find the canoe all correc' by

these marks;--then strike doo west into the sun to hit the home camp

agin, see?"

It was the most natural thing in the world to say, and he said it

without any noticeable inflexion of the voice, only it happened to

express the youth's emotions at the moment with an utterance that was

symbolic of the situation and of his own helplessness as a factor in it.

He was alone with Défago in a primitive world: that was all. The canoe,

another symbol of man's ascendancy, was now to be left behind. Those

small yellow patches, made on the trees by the axe, were the only

indications of its hiding place.

Meanwhile, shouldering the packs between them, each man carrying his own

rifle, they followed the slender trail over rocks and fallen trunks and

across half-frozen swamps; skirting numerous lakes that fairly gemmed

the forest, their borders fringed with mist; and towards five o'clock

found themselves suddenly on the edge of the woods, looking out across a

large sheet of water in front of them, dotted with pine-clad islands of

all describable shapes and sizes.

"Fifty Island Water," announced Défago wearily, "and the sun jest goin'

to dip his bald old head into it!" he added, with unconscious poetry;

and immediately they set about pitching camp for the night.

In a very few minutes, under those skilful hands that never made a

movement too much or a movement too little, the silk tent stood taut and

cozy, the beds of balsam boughs ready laid, and a brisk cooking fire

burned with the minimum of smoke. While the young Scotchman cleaned the

fish they had caught trolling behind the canoe, Défago "guessed" he

would "jest as soon" take a turn through the Bush for indications of

moose. "\_May\_ come across a trunk where they bin and rubbed horns," he

said, as he moved off, "or feedin' on the last of the maple leaves"--and

he was gone.

His small figure melted away like a shadow in the dusk, while Simpson

noted with a kind of admiration how easily the forest absorbed him into

herself. A few steps, it seemed, and he was no longer visible.

Yet there was little underbrush hereabouts; the trees stood somewhat

apart, well spaced; and in the clearings grew silver birch and maple,

spearlike and slender, against the immense stems of spruce and hemlock.

But for occasional prostrate monsters, and the boulders of grey rock

that thrust uncouth shoulders here and there out of the ground, it might

well have been a bit of park in the Old Country. Almost, one might have

seen in it the hand of man. A little to the right, however, began the

great burnt section, miles in extent, proclaiming its real

character--\_brulé\_, as it is called, where the fires of the previous

year had raged for weeks, and the blackened stumps now rose gaunt and

ugly, bereft of branches, like gigantic match heads stuck into the

ground, savage and desolate beyond words. The perfume of charcoal and

rain-soaked ashes still hung faintly about it.

The dusk rapidly deepened; the glades grew dark; the crackling of the

fire and the wash of little waves along the rocky lake shore were the

only sounds audible. The wind had dropped with the sun, and in all that

vast world of branches nothing stirred. Any moment, it seemed, the

woodland gods, who are to be worshipped in silence and loneliness, might

stretch their mighty and terrific outlines among the trees. In front,

through doorways pillared by huge straight stems, lay the stretch of

Fifty Island Water, a crescent-shaped lake some fifteen miles from tip

to tip, and perhaps five miles across where they were camped. A sky of

rose and saffron, more clear than any atmosphere Simpson had ever

known, still dropped its pale streaming fires across the waves, where

the islands--a hundred, surely, rather than fifty--floated like the

fairy barques of some enchanted fleet. Fringed with pines, whose crests

fingered most delicately the sky, they almost seemed to move upwards as

the light faded--about to weigh anchor and navigate the pathways of the

heavens instead of the currents of their native and desolate lake.

And strips of colored cloud, like flaunting pennons, signaled their

departure to the stars....

The beauty of the scene was strangely uplifting. Simpson smoked the fish

and burnt his fingers into the bargain in his efforts to enjoy it and at

the same time tend the frying pan and the fire. Yet, ever at the back of

his thoughts, lay that other aspect of the wilderness: the indifference

to human life, the merciless spirit of desolation which took no note of

man. The sense of his utter loneliness, now that even Défago had gone,

came close as he looked about him and listened for the sound of his

companion's returning footsteps.

There was pleasure in the sensation, yet with it a perfectly

comprehensible alarm. And instinctively the thought stirred in him:

"What should I--\_could\_ I, do--if anything happened and he did not come

back--?"

They enjoyed their well-earned supper, eating untold quantities of fish,

and drinking unmilked tea strong enough to kill men who had not covered

thirty miles of hard "going," eating little on the way. And when it was

over, they smoked and told stories round the blazing fire, laughing,

stretching weary limbs, and discussing plans for the morrow. Défago was

in excellent spirits, though disappointed at having no signs of moose to

report. But it was dark and he had not gone far. The \_brulé\_, too, was

bad. His clothes and hands were smeared with charcoal. Simpson, watching

him, realized with renewed vividness their position--alone together in

the wilderness.

"Défago," he said presently, "these woods, you know, are a bit too big

to feel quite at home in--to feel comfortable in, I mean!... Eh?" He

merely gave expression to the mood of the moment; he was hardly prepared

for the earnestness, the solemnity even, with which the guide took him

up.

"You've hit it right, Simpson, boss," he replied, fixing his searching

brown eyes on his face, "and that's the truth, sure. There's no end to

'em--no end at all." Then he added in a lowered tone as if to himself,

"There's lots found out \_that\_, and gone plumb to pieces!"

But the man's gravity of manner was not quite to the other's liking; it

was a little too suggestive for this scenery and setting; he was sorry

he had broached the subject. He remembered suddenly how his uncle had

told him that men were sometimes stricken with a strange fever of the

wilderness, when the seduction of the uninhabited wastes caught them so

fiercely that they went forth, half fascinated, half deluded, to their

death. And he had a shrewd idea that his companion held something in

sympathy with that queer type. He led the conversation on to other

topics, on to Hank and the doctor, for instance, and the natural rivalry

as to who should get the first sight of moose.

"If they went doo west," observed Défago carelessly, "there's sixty

miles between us now--with ole Punk at halfway house eatin' himself full

to bustin' with fish and coffee." They laughed together over the

picture. But the casual mention of those sixty miles again made Simpson

realize the prodigious scale of this land where they hunted; sixty miles

was a mere step; two hundred little more than a step. Stories of lost

hunters rose persistently before his memory. The passion and mystery of

homeless and wandering men, seduced by the beauty of great forests,

swept his soul in a way too vivid to be quite pleasant. He wondered

vaguely whether it was the mood of his companion that invited the

unwelcome suggestion with such persistence.

"Sing us a song, Défago, if you're not too tired," he asked; "one of

those old \_voyageur\_ songs you sang the other night." He handed his

tobacco pouch to the guide and then filled his own pipe, while the

Canadian, nothing loth, sent his light voice across the lake in one of

those plaintive, almost melancholy chanties with which lumbermen and

trappers lessen the burden of their labor. There was an appealing and

romantic flavor about it, something that recalled the atmosphere of the

old pioneer days when Indians and wilderness were leagued together,

battles frequent, and the Old Country farther off than it is today. The

sound traveled pleasantly over the water, but the forest at their backs

seemed to swallow it down with a single gulp that permitted neither echo

nor resonance.

It was in the middle of the third verse that Simpson noticed something

unusual--something that brought his thoughts back with a rush from

faraway scenes. A curious change had come into the man's voice. Even

before he knew what it was, uneasiness caught him, and looking up

quickly, he saw that Défago, though still singing, was peering about him

into the Bush, as though he heard or saw something. His voice grew

fainter--dropped to a hush--then ceased altogether. The same instant,

with a movement amazingly alert, he started to his feet and stood

upright--\_sniffing the air\_. Like a dog scenting game, he drew the air

into his nostrils in short, sharp breaths, turning quickly as he did so

in all directions, and finally "pointing" down the lake shore,

eastwards. It was a performance unpleasantly suggestive and at the same

time singularly dramatic. Simpson's heart fluttered disagreeably as he

watched it.

"Lord, man! How you made me jump!" he exclaimed, on his feet beside him

the same instant, and peering over his shoulder into the sea of

darkness. "What's up? Are you frightened--?"

Even before the question was out of his mouth he knew it was foolish,

for any man with a pair of eyes in his head could see that the Canadian

had turned white down to his very gills. Not even sunburn and the glare

of the fire could hide that.

The student felt himself trembling a little, weakish in the knees.

"What's up?" he repeated quickly. "D'you smell moose? Or anything queer,

anything--wrong?" He lowered his voice instinctively.

The forest pressed round them with its encircling wall; the nearer tree

stems gleamed like bronze in the firelight; beyond that--blackness, and,

so far as he could tell, a silence of death. Just behind them a passing

puff of wind lifted a single leaf, looked at it, then laid it softly

down again without disturbing the rest of the covey. It seemed as if a

million invisible causes had combined just to produce that single

visible effect. \_Other\_ life pulsed about them--and was gone.

Défago turned abruptly; the livid hue of his face had turned to a dirty

grey.

"I never said I heered--or smelt--nuthin'," he said slowly and

emphatically, in an oddly altered voice that conveyed somehow a touch of

defiance. "I was only--takin' a look round--so to speak. It's always a

mistake to be too previous with yer questions." Then he added suddenly

with obvious effort, in his more natural voice, "Have you got the

matches, Boss Simpson?" and proceeded to light the pipe he had half

filled just before he began to sing.

Without speaking another word they sat down again by the fire. Défago

changing his side so that he could face the direction the wind came

from. For even a tenderfoot could tell that. Défago changed his position

in order to hear and smell--all there was to be heard and smelt. And,

since he now faced the lake with his back to the trees it was evidently

nothing in the forest that had sent so strange and sudden a warning to

his marvelously trained nerves.

"Guess now I don't feel like singing any," he explained presently of his

own accord. "That song kinder brings back memories that's troublesome to

me; I never oughter've begun it. It sets me on t' imagining things,

see?"

Clearly the man was still fighting with some profoundly moving emotion.

He wished to excuse himself in the eyes of the other. But the

explanation, in that it was only a part of the truth, was a lie, and he

knew perfectly well that Simpson was not deceived by it. For nothing

could explain away the livid terror that had dropped over his face while

he stood there sniffing the air. And nothing--no amount of blazing fire,

or chatting on ordinary subjects--could make that camp exactly as it had

been before. The shadow of an unknown horror, naked if unguessed, that

had flashed for an instant in the face and gestures of the guide, had

also communicated itself, vaguely and therefore more potently, to his

companion. The guide's visible efforts to dissemble the truth only made

things worse. Moreover, to add to the younger man's uneasiness, was the

difficulty, nay, the impossibility he felt of asking questions, and also

his complete ignorance as to the cause ...Indians, wild animals, forest

fires--all these, he knew, were wholly out of the question. His

imagination searched vigorously, but in vain....

\* \* \* \* \*

Yet, somehow or other, after another long spell of smoking, talking and

roasting themselves before the great fire, the shadow that had so

suddenly invaded their peaceful camp began to shift. Perhaps Défago's

efforts, or the return of his quiet and normal attitude accomplished

this; perhaps Simpson himself had exaggerated the affair out of all

proportion to the truth; or possibly the vigorous air of the wilderness

brought its own powers of healing. Whatever the cause, the feeling of

immediate horror seemed to have passed away as mysteriously as it had

come, for nothing occurred to feed it. Simpson began to feel that he had

permitted himself the unreasoning terror of a child. He put it down

partly to a certain subconscious excitement that this wild and immense

scenery generated in his blood, partly to the spell of solitude, and

partly to overfatigue. That pallor in the guide's face was, of course,

uncommonly hard to explain, yet it \_might\_ have been due in some way to

an effect of firelight, or his own imagination ...He gave it the benefit

of the doubt; he was Scotch.

When a somewhat unordinary emotion has disappeared, the mind always

finds a dozen ways of explaining away its causes ...Simpson lit a last

pipe and tried to laugh to himself. On getting home to Scotland it would

make quite a good story. He did not realize that this laughter was a

sign that terror still lurked in the recesses of his soul--that, in

fact, it was merely one of the conventional signs by which a man,

seriously alarmed, tries to persuade himself that he is \_not\_ so.

Défago, however, heard that low laughter and looked up with surprise on

his face. The two men stood, side by side, kicking the embers about

before going to bed. It was ten o'clock--a late hour for hunters to be

still awake.

"What's ticklin' yer?" he asked in his ordinary tone, yet gravely.

"I--I was thinking of our little toy woods at home, just at that

moment," stammered Simpson, coming back to what really dominated his

mind, and startled by the question, "and comparing them to--to all

this," and he swept his arm round to indicate the Bush.

A pause followed in which neither of them said anything.

"All the same I wouldn't laugh about it, if I was you," Défago added,

looking over Simpson's shoulder into the shadows. "There's places in

there nobody won't never see into--nobody knows what lives in there

either."

"Too big--too far off?" The suggestion in the guide's manner was immense

and horrible.

Défago nodded. The expression on his face was dark. He, too, felt

uneasy. The younger man understood that in a \_hinterland\_ of this size

there might well be depths of wood that would never in the life of the

world be known or trodden. The thought was not exactly the sort he

welcomed. In a loud voice, cheerfully, he suggested that it was time for

bed. But the guide lingered, tinkering with the fire, arranging the

stones needlessly, doing a dozen things that did not really need doing.

Evidently there was something he wanted to say, yet found it difficult

to "get at."

"Say, you, Boss Simpson," he began suddenly, as the last shower of

sparks went up into the air, "you don't--smell nothing, do you--nothing

pertickler, I mean?" The commonplace question, Simpson realized, veiled

a dreadfully serious thought in his mind. A shiver ran down his back.

"Nothing but burning wood," he replied firmly, kicking again at the

embers. The sound of his own foot made him start.

"And all the evenin' you ain't smelt--nothing?" persisted the guide,

peering at him through the gloom; "nothing extrordiny, and different to

anything else you ever smelt before?"

"No, no, man; nothing at all!" he replied aggressively, half angrily.

Défago's face cleared. "That's good!" he exclaimed with evident relief.

"That's good to hear."

"Have \_you?\_" asked Simpson sharply, and the same instant regretted the

question.

The Canadian came closer in the darkness. He shook his head. "I guess

not," he said, though without overwhelming conviction. "It must've been

just that song of mine that did it. It's the song they sing in lumber

camps and godforsaken places like that, when they're skeered the

Wendigo's somewhere around, doin' a bit of swift traveling.--"

"And what's the Wendigo, pray?" Simpson asked quickly, irritated because

again he could not prevent that sudden shiver of the nerves. He knew

that he was close upon the man's terror and the cause of it. Yet a

rushing passionate curiosity overcame his better judgment, and his fear.

Défago turned swiftly and looked at him as though he were suddenly about

to shriek. His eyes shone, but his mouth was wide open. Yet all he said,

or whispered rather, for his voice sank very low, was: "It's

nuthin'--nuthin' but what those lousy fellers believe when they've bin

hittin' the bottle too long--a sort of great animal that lives up

yonder," he jerked his head northwards, "quick as lightning in its

tracks, an' bigger'n anything else in the Bush, an' ain't supposed to be

very good to look at--that's all!"

"A backwoods superstition--" began Simpson, moving hastily toward the

tent in order to shake off the hand of the guide that clutched his arm.

"Come, come, hurry up for God's sake, and get the lantern going! It's

time we were in bed and asleep if we're going to be up with the sun

tomorrow...."

The guide was close on his heels. "I'm coming," he answered out of the

darkness, "I'm coming." And after a slight delay he appeared with the

lantern and hung it from a nail in the front pole of the tent. The

shadows of a hundred trees shifted their places quickly as he did so,

and when he stumbled over the rope, diving swiftly inside, the whole

tent trembled as though a gust of wind struck it.

The two men lay down, without undressing, upon their beds of soft balsam

boughs, cunningly arranged. Inside, all was warm and cozy, but outside

the world of crowding trees pressed close about them, marshalling their

million shadows, and smothering the little tent that stood there like a

wee white shell facing the ocean of tremendous forest.

Between the two lonely figures within, however, there pressed another

shadow that was \_not\_ a shadow from the night. It was the Shadow cast by

the strange Fear, never wholly exorcised, that had leaped suddenly upon

Défago in the middle of his singing. And Simpson, as he lay there,

watching the darkness through the open flap of the tent, ready to plunge

into the fragrant abyss of sleep, knew first that unique and profound

stillness of a primeval forest when no wind stirs ... and when the night

has weight and substance that enters into the soul to bind a veil about

it.... Then sleep took him....

III

Thus, it seemed to him, at least. Yet it was true that the lap of the

water, just beyond the tent door, still beat time with his lessening

pulses when he realized that he was lying with his eyes open and that

another sound had recently introduced itself with cunning softness

between the splash and murmur of the little waves.

And, long before he understood what this sound was, it had stirred in

him the centers of pity and alarm. He listened intently, though at first

in vain, for the running blood beat all its drums too noisily in his

ears. Did it come, he wondered, from the lake, or from the woods?...

Then, suddenly, with a rush and a flutter of the heart, he knew that it

was close beside him in the tent; and, when he turned over for a better

hearing, it focused itself unmistakably not two feet away. It was a

sound of weeping; Défago upon his bed of branches was sobbing in the

darkness as though his heart would break, the blankets evidently stuffed

against his mouth to stifle it.

And his first feeling, before he could think or reflect, was the rush of

a poignant and searching tenderness. This intimate, human sound, heard

amid the desolation about them, woke pity. It was so incongruous, so

pitifully incongruous--and so vain! Tears--in this vast and cruel

wilderness: of what avail? He thought of a little child crying in

mid-Atlantic.... Then, of course, with fuller realization, and the

memory of what had gone before, came the descent of the terror upon him,

and his blood ran cold.

Nice

"Défago," he whispered quickly, "what's the matter?" He tried to make

his voice very gentle. "Are you in pain--unhappy--?" There was no reply,

but the sounds ceased abruptly. He stretched his hand out and touched

him. The body did not stir.

"Are you awake?" for it occurred to him that the man was crying in his

sleep. "Are you cold?" He noticed that his feet, which were uncovered,

projected beyond the mouth of the tent. He spread an extra fold of his

own blankets over them. The guide had slipped down in his bed, and the

branches seemed to have been dragged with him. He was afraid to pull the

body back again, for fear of waking him.

One or two tentative questions he ventured softly, but though he waited

for several minutes there came no reply, nor any sign of movement.

Presently he heard his regular and quiet breathing, and putting his hand

again gently on the breast, felt the steady rise and fall beneath.

"Let me know if anything's wrong," he whispered, "or if I can do

anything. Wake me at once if you feel--queer."

He hardly knew what to say. He lay down again, thinking and wondering

what it all meant. Défago, of course, had been crying in his sleep. Some

dream or other had afflicted him. Yet never in his life would he forget

that pitiful sound of sobbing, and the feeling that the whole awful

wilderness of woods listened....

His own mind busied itself for a long time with the recent events, of

which \_this\_ took its mysterious place as one, and though his reason

successfully argued away all unwelcome suggestions, a sensation of

uneasiness remained, resisting ejection, very deep-seated--peculiar

beyond ordinary.

IV

But sleep, in the long run, proves greater than all emotions. His

thoughts soon wandered again; he lay there, warm as toast, exceedingly

weary; the night soothed and comforted, blunting the edges of memory and

alarm. Half an hour later he was oblivious of everything in the outer

world about him.

Yet sleep, in this case, was his great enemy, concealing all approaches,

smothering the warning of his nerves.

As, sometimes, in a nightmare events crowd upon each other's heels with

a conviction of dreadfulest reality, yet some inconsistent detail

accuses the whole display of incompleteness and disguise, so the events

that now followed, though they actually happened, persuaded the mind

somehow that the detail which could explain them had been overlooked in

the confusion, and that therefore they were but partly true, the rest

delusion. At the back of the sleeper's mind something remains awake,

ready to let slip the judgment. "All this is not \_quite\_ real; when you

wake up you'll understand."

And thus, in a way, it was with Simpson. The events, not wholly

inexplicable or incredible in themselves, yet remain for the man who saw

and heard them a sequence of separate facts of cold horror, because the

little piece that might have made the puzzle clear lay concealed or

overlooked.

So far as he can recall, it was a violent movement, running downwards

through the tent towards the door, that first woke him and made him

aware that his companion was sitting bolt upright beside him--quivering.

Hours must have passed, for it was the pale gleam of the dawn that

revealed his outline against the canvas. This time the man was not

crying; he was quaking like a leaf; the trembling he felt plainly

through the blankets down the entire length of his own body. Défago had

huddled down against him for protection, shrinking away from something

that apparently concealed itself near the door flaps of the little tent.

Simpson thereupon called out in a loud voice some question or other--in

the first bewilderment of waking he does not remember exactly what--and

the man made no reply. The atmosphere and feeling of true nightmare lay

horribly about him, making movement and speech both difficult. At first,

indeed, he was not sure where he was--whether in one of the earlier

camps, or at home in his bed at Aberdeen. The sense of confusion was

very troubling.

And next--almost simultaneous with his waking, it seemed--the profound

stillness of the dawn outside was shattered by a most uncommon sound. It

came without warning, or audible approach; and it was unspeakably

dreadful. It was a voice, Simpson declares, possibly a human voice;

hoarse yet plaintive--a soft, roaring voice close outside the tent,

overhead rather than upon the ground, of immense volume, while in some

strange way most penetratingly and seductively sweet. It rang out, too,

in three separate and distinct notes, or cries, that bore in some odd

fashion a resemblance, farfetched yet recognizable, to the name of the

guide: "\_Dé-fa-go!\_"

The student admits he is unable to describe it quite intelligently, for

it was unlike any sound he had ever heard in his life, and combined a

blending of such contrary qualities. "A sort of windy, crying voice," he

calls it, "as of something lonely and untamed, wild and of abominable

power...."

And, even before it ceased, dropping back into the great gulfs of

silence, the guide beside him had sprung to his feet with an answering

though unintelligible cry. He blundered against the tent pole with

violence, shaking the whole structure, spreading his arms out

frantically for more room, and kicking his legs impetuously free of the

clinging blankets. For a second, perhaps two, he stood upright by the

door, his outline dark against the pallor of the dawn; then, with a

furious, rushing speed, before his companion could move a hand to stop

him, he shot with a plunge through the flaps of canvas--and was gone.

And as he went--so astonishingly fast that the voice could actually be

heard dying in the distance--he called aloud in tones of anguished

terror that at the same time held something strangely like the frenzied

exultation of delight--

"Oh! oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of fire! Oh! oh! This height

and fiery speed!"

And then the distance quickly buried it, and the deep silence of very

early morning descended upon the forest as before.

It had all come about with such rapidity that, but for the evidence of

the empty bed beside him, Simpson could almost have believed it to have

been the memory of a nightmare carried over from sleep. He still felt

the warm pressure of that vanished body against his side; there lay the

twisted blankets in a heap; the very tent yet trembled with the

vehemence of the impetuous departure. The strange words rang in his

ears, as though he still heard them in the distance--wild language of a

suddenly stricken mind. Moreover, it was not only the senses of sight

and hearing that reported uncommon things to his brain, for even while

the man cried and ran, he had become aware that a strange perfume, faint

yet pungent, pervaded the interior of the tent. And it was at this

point, it seems, brought to himself by the consciousness that his

nostrils were taking this distressing odor down into his throat, that he

found his courage, sprang quickly to his feet--and went out.

The grey light of dawn that dropped, cold and glimmering, between the

trees revealed the scene tolerably well. There stood the tent behind

him, soaked with dew; the dark ashes of the fire, still warm; the lake,

white beneath a coating of mist, the islands rising darkly out of it

like objects packed in wool; and patches of snow beyond among the

clearer spaces of the Bush--everything cold, still, waiting for the sun.

But nowhere a sign of the vanished guide--still, doubtless, flying at

frantic speed through the frozen woods. There was not even the sound of

disappearing footsteps, nor the echoes of the dying voice. He had

gone--utterly.

There was nothing; nothing but the sense of his recent presence, so

strongly left behind about the camp; \_and\_--this penetrating,

all-pervading odor.

And even this was now rapidly disappearing in its turn. In spite of his

exceeding mental perturbation, Simpson struggled hard to detect its

nature, and define it, but the ascertaining of an elusive scent, not

recognized subconsciously and at once, is a very subtle operation of

the mind. And he failed. It was gone before he could properly seize or

name it. Approximate description, even, seems to have been difficult,

for it was unlike any smell he knew. Acrid rather, not unlike the odor

of a lion, he thinks, yet softer and not wholly unpleasing, with

something almost sweet in it that reminded him of the scent of decaying

garden leaves, earth, and the myriad, nameless perfumes that make up the

odor of a big forest. Yet the "odor of lions" is the phrase with which

he usually sums it all up.

Then--it was wholly gone, and he found himself standing by the ashes of

the fire in a state of amazement and stupid terror that left him the

helpless prey of anything that chose to happen. Had a muskrat poked its

pointed muzzle over a rock, or a squirrel scuttled in that instant down

the bark of a tree, he would most likely have collapsed without more ado

and fainted. For he felt about the whole affair the touch somewhere of a

great Outer Horror ... and his scattered powers had not as yet had time

to collect themselves into a definite attitude of fighting self-control.

Nothing did happen, however. A great kiss of wind ran softly through the

awakening forest, and a few maple leaves here and there rustled

tremblingly to earth. The sky seemed to grow suddenly much lighter.

Simpson felt the cool air upon his cheek and uncovered head; realized

that he was shivering with the cold; and, making a great effort,

realized next that he was alone in the Bush--\_and\_ that he was called

upon to take immediate steps to find and succor his vanished companion.

Make an effort, accordingly, he did, though an ill-calculated and futile

one. With that wilderness of trees about him, the sheet of water cutting

him off behind, and the horror of that wild cry in his blood, he did

what any other inexperienced man would have done in similar

bewilderment: he ran about, without any sense of direction, like a

frantic child, and called loudly without ceasing the name of the guide:

"Défago! Défago! Défago!" he yelled, and the trees gave him back the

name as often as he shouted, only a little softened--"Défago! Défago!

Défago!"

He followed the trail that lay a short distance across the patches of

snow, and then lost it again where the trees grew too thickly for snow

to lie. He shouted till he was hoarse, and till the sound of his own

voice in all that unanswering and listening world began to frighten him.

His confusion increased in direct ratio to the violence of his efforts.

His distress became formidably acute, till at length his exertions

defeated their own object, and from sheer exhaustion he headed back to

the camp again. It remains a wonder that he ever found his way. It was

with great difficulty, and only after numberless false clues, that he at

last saw the white tent between the trees, and so reached safety.

Exhaustion then applied its own remedy, and he grew calmer. He made the

fire and breakfasted. Hot coffee and bacon put a little sense and

judgment into him again, and he realized that he had been behaving like

a boy. He now made another, and more successful attempt to face the

situation collectedly, and, a nature naturally plucky coming to his

assistance, he decided that he must first make as thorough a search as

possible, failing success in which, he must find his way into the home

camp as best he could and bring help.

And this was what he did. Taking food, matches and rifle with him, and a

small axe to blaze the trees against his return journey, he set forth.

It was eight o'clock when he started, the sun shining over the tops of

the trees in a sky without clouds. Pinned to a stake by the fire he left

a note in case Défago returned while he was away.

This time, according to a careful plan, he took a new direction,

intending to make a wide sweep that must sooner or later cut into

indications of the guide's trail; and, before he had gone a quarter of a

mile he came across the tracks of a large animal in the snow, and beside

it the light and smaller tracks of what were beyond question human

feet--the feet of Défago. The relief he at once experienced was natural,

though brief; for at first sight he saw in these tracks a simple

explanation of the whole matter: these big marks had surely been left by

a bull moose that, wind against it, had blundered upon the camp, and

uttered its singular cry of warning and alarm the moment its mistake was

apparent. Défago, in whom the hunting instinct was developed to the

point of uncanny perfection, had scented the brute coming down the wind

hours before. His excitement and disappearance were due, of course,

to--to his--

Then the impossible explanation at which he grasped faded, as common

sense showed him mercilessly that none of this was true. No guide, much

less a guide like Défago, could have acted in so irrational a way, going

off even without his rifle ...! The whole affair demanded a far more

complicated elucidation, when he remembered the details of it all--the

cry of terror, the amazing language, the grey face of horror when his

nostrils first caught the new odor; that muffled sobbing in the

darkness, and--for this, too, now came back to him dimly--the man's

original aversion for this particular bit of country....

Besides, now that he examined them closer, these were not the tracks of

a bull moose at all! Hank had explained to him the outline of a bull's

hoofs, of a cow's or calf's, too, for that matter; he had drawn them

clearly on a strip of birch bark. And these were wholly different. They

were big, round, ample, and with no pointed outline as of sharp hoofs.

He wondered for a moment whether bear tracks were like that. There was

no other animal he could think of, for caribou did not come so far

south at this season, and, even if they did, would leave hoof marks.

They were ominous signs--these mysterious writings left in the snow by

the unknown creature that had lured a human being away from safety--and

when he coupled them in his imagination with that haunting sound that

broke the stillness of the dawn, a momentary dizziness shook his mind,

distressing him again beyond belief. He felt the \_threatening\_ aspect of

it all. And, stooping down to examine the marks more closely, he caught

a faint whiff of that sweet yet pungent odor that made him instantly

straighten up again, fighting a sensation almost of nausea.

Then his memory played him another evil trick. He suddenly recalled

those uncovered feet projecting beyond the edge of the tent, and the

body's appearance of having been dragged towards the opening; the man's

shrinking from something by the door when he woke later. The details now

beat against his trembling mind with concerted attack. They seemed to

gather in those deep spaces of the silent forest about him, where the

host of trees stood waiting, listening, watching to see what he would

do. The woods were closing round him.

With the persistence of true pluck, however, Simpson went forward,

following the tracks as best he could, smothering these ugly emotions

that sought to weaken his will. He blazed innumerable trees as he went,

ever fearful of being unable to find the way back, and calling aloud at

intervals of a few seconds the name of the guide. The dull tapping of

the axe upon the massive trunks, and the unnatural accents of his own

voice became at length sounds that he even dreaded to make, dreaded to

hear. For they drew attention without ceasing to his presence and exact

whereabouts, and if it were really the case that something was hunting

himself down in the same way that he was hunting down another--

With a strong effort, he crushed the thought out the instant it rose.

It was the beginning, he realized, of a bewilderment utterly diabolical

in kind that would speedily destroy him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although the snow was not continuous, lying merely in shallow flurries

over the more open spaces, he found no difficulty in following the

tracks for the first few miles. They went straight as a ruled line

wherever the trees permitted. The stride soon began to increase in

length, till it finally assumed proportions that seemed absolutely

impossible for any ordinary animal to have made. Like huge flying leaps

they became. One of these he measured, and though he knew that "stretch"

of eighteen feet must be somehow wrong, he was at a complete loss to

understand why he found no signs on the snow between the extreme points.

But what perplexed him even more, making him feel his vision had gone

utterly awry, was that Défago's stride increased in the same manner, and

finally covered the same incredible distances. It looked as if the great

beast had lifted him with it and carried him across these astonishing

intervals. Simpson, who was much longer in the limb, found that he could

not compass even half the stretch by taking a running jump.

And the sight of these huge tracks, running side by side, silent

evidence of a dreadful journey in which terror or madness had urged to

impossible results, was profoundly moving. It shocked him in the secret

depths of his soul. It was the most horrible thing his eyes had ever

looked upon. He began to follow them mechanically, absentmindedly

almost, ever peering over his shoulder to see if he, too, were being

followed by something with a gigantic tread.... And soon it came about

that he no longer quite realized what it was they signified--these

impressions left upon the snow by something nameless and untamed, always

accompanied by the footmarks of the little French Canadian, his guide,

his comrade, the man who had shared his tent a few hours before,

chatting, laughing, even singing by his side....

V

For a man of his years and inexperience, only a canny Scot, perhaps,

grounded in common sense and established in logic, could have preserved

even that measure of balance that this youth somehow or other did manage

to preserve through the whole adventure. Otherwise, two things he

presently noticed, while forging pluckily ahead, must have sent him

headlong back to the comparative safety of his tent, instead of only

making his hands close more tightly upon the rifle stock, while his

heart, trained for the Wee Kirk, sent a wordless prayer winging its way

to heaven. Both tracks, he saw, had undergone a change, and this change,

so far as it concerned the footsteps of the man, was in some

undecipherable manner--appalling.

It was in the bigger tracks he first noticed this, and for a long time

he could not quite believe his eyes. Was it the blown leaves that

produced odd effects of light and shade, or that the dry snow, drifting

like finely ground rice about the edges, cast shadows and high lights?

Or was it actually the fact that the great marks had become faintly

colored? For round about the deep, plunging holes of the animal there

now appeared a mysterious, reddish tinge that was more like an effect of

light than of anything that dyed the substance of the snow itself. Every

mark had it, and had it increasingly--this indistinct fiery tinge that

painted a new touch of ghastliness into the picture.

But when, wholly unable to explain or to credit it, he turned his

attention to the other tracks to discover if they, too, bore similar

witness, he noticed that these had meanwhile undergone a change that was

infinitely worse, and charged with far more horrible suggestion. For, in

the last hundred yards or so, he saw that they had grown gradually into

the semblance of the parent tread. Imperceptibly the change had come

about, yet unmistakably. It was hard to see where the change first

began. The result, however, was beyond question. Smaller, neater, more

cleanly modeled, they formed now an exact and careful duplicate of the

larger tracks beside them. The feet that produced them had, therefore,

also changed. And something in his mind reared up with loathing and with

terror as he saw it.

Simpson, for the first time, hesitated; then, ashamed of his alarm and

indecision, took a few hurried steps ahead; the next instant stopped

dead in his tracks. Immediately in front of him all signs of the trail

ceased; both tracks came to an abrupt end. On all sides, for a hundred

yards and more, he searched in vain for the least indication of their

continuance. There was--nothing.

The trees were very thick just there, big trees all of them, spruce,

cedar, hemlock; there was no underbrush. He stood, looking about him,

all distraught; bereft of any power of judgment. Then he set to work to

search again, and again, and yet again, but always with the same result:

\_nothing\_. The feet that printed the surface of the snow thus far had

now, apparently, left the ground!

And it was in that moment of distress and confusion that the whip of

terror laid its most nicely calculated lash about his heart. It dropped

with deadly effect upon the sorest spot of all, completely unnerving

him. He had been secretly dreading all the time that it would come--and

come it did.

Far overhead, muted by great height and distance, strangely thinned and

wailing, he heard the crying voice of Défago, the guide.

The sound dropped upon him out of that still, wintry sky with an effect

of dismay and terror unsurpassed. The rifle fell to his feet. He stood

motionless an instant, listening as it were with his whole body, then

staggered back against the nearest tree for support, disorganized

hopelessly in mind and spirit. To him, in that moment, it seemed the

most shattering and dislocating experience he had ever known, so that

his heart emptied itself of all feeling whatsoever as by a sudden

draught.

"Oh! oh! This fiery height! Oh, my feet of fire! My burning feet of

fire ...!" ran in far, beseeching accents of indescribable appeal this

voice of anguish down the sky. Once it called--then silence through all

the listening wilderness of trees.

And Simpson, scarcely knowing what he did, presently found himself

running wildly to and fro, searching, calling, tripping over roots and

boulders, and flinging himself in a frenzy of undirected pursuit after

the Caller. Behind the screen of memory and emotion with which

experience veils events, he plunged, distracted and half-deranged,

picking up false lights like a ship at sea, terror in his eyes and

heart and soul. For the Panic of the Wilderness had called to him in

that far voice--the Power of untamed Distance--the Enticement of the

Desolation that destroys. He knew in that moment all the pains of

someone hopelessly and irretrievably lost, suffering the lust and

travail of a soul in the final Loneliness. A vision of Défago, eternally

hunted, driven and pursued across the skiey vastness of those ancient

forests fled like a flame across the dark ruin of his thoughts ...

It seemed ages before he could find anything in the chaos of his

disorganized sensations to which he could anchor himself steady for a

moment, and think ...

The cry was not repeated; his own hoarse calling brought no response;

the inscrutable forces of the Wild had summoned their victim beyond

recall--and held him fast.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yet he searched and called, it seems, for hours afterwards, for it was

late in the afternoon when at length he decided to abandon a useless

pursuit and return to his camp on the shores of Fifty Island Water. Even

then he went with reluctance, that crying voice still echoing in his

ears. With difficulty he found his rifle and the homeward trail. The

concentration necessary to follow the badly blazed trees, and a biting

hunger that gnawed, helped to keep his mind steady. Otherwise, he

admits, the temporary aberration he had suffered might have been

prolonged to the point of positive disaster. Gradually the ballast

shifted back again, and he regained something that approached his normal

equilibrium.

But for all that the journey through the gathering dusk was miserably

haunted. He heard innumerable following footsteps; voices that laughed

and whispered; and saw figures crouching behind trees and boulders,

making signs to one another for a concerted attack the moment he had

passed. The creeping murmur of the wind made him start and listen. He

went stealthily, trying to hide where possible, and making as little

sound as he could. The shadows of the woods, hitherto protective or

covering merely, had now become menacing, challenging; and the pageantry

in his frightened mind masked a host of possibilities that were all the

more ominous for being obscure. The presentiment of a nameless doom

lurked ill-concealed behind every detail of what had happened.

It was really admirable how he emerged victor in the end; men of riper

powers and experience might have come through the ordeal with less

success. He had himself tolerably well in hand, all things considered,

and his plan of action proves it. Sleep being absolutely out of the

question and traveling an unknown trail in the darkness equally

impracticable, he sat up the whole of that night, rifle in hand, before

a fire he never for a single moment allowed to die down. The severity of

the haunted vigil marked his soul for life; but it was successfully

accomplished; and with the very first signs of dawn he set forth upon

the long return journey to the home camp to get help. As before, he left

a written note to explain his absence, and to indicate where he had left

a plentiful \_cache\_ of food and matches--though he had no expectation

that any human hands would find them!

How Simpson found his way alone by the lake and forest might well make a

story in itself, for to hear him tell it is to \_know\_ the passionate

loneliness of soul that a man can feel when the Wilderness holds him in

the hollow of its illimitable hand--and laughs. It is also to admire his

indomitable pluck.

He claims no skill, declaring that he followed the almost invisible

trail mechanically, and without thinking. And this, doubtless, is the

truth. He relied upon the guiding of the unconscious mind, which is

instinct. Perhaps, too, some sense of orientation, known to animals and

primitive men, may have helped as well, for through all that tangled

region he succeeded in reaching the exact spot where Défago had hidden

the canoe nearly three days before with the remark, "Strike doo west

across the lake into the sun to find the camp."

There was not much sun left to guide him, but he used his compass to the

best of his ability, embarking in the frail craft for the last twelve

miles of his journey with a sensation of immense relief that the forest

was at last behind him. And, fortunately, the water was calm; he took

his line across the center of the lake instead of coasting round the

shores for another twenty miles. Fortunately, too, the other hunters

were back. The light of their fires furnished a steering point without

which he might have searched all night long for the actual position of

the camp.

It was close upon midnight all the same when his canoe grated on the

sandy cove, and Hank, Punk and his uncle, disturbed in their sleep by

his cries, ran quickly down and helped a very exhausted and broken

specimen of Scotch humanity over the rocks toward a dying fire.

VI

The sudden entrance of his prosaic uncle into this world of wizardry

and horror that had haunted him without interruption now for two days

and two nights, had the immediate effect of giving to the affair an

entirely new aspect. The sound of that crisp "Hulloa, my boy! And what's

up \_now\_?" and the grasp of that dry and vigorous hand introduced

another standard of judgment. A revulsion of feeling washed through him.

He realized that he had let himself "go" rather badly. He even felt

vaguely ashamed of himself. The native hard-headedness of his race

reclaimed him.

And this doubtless explains why he found it so hard to tell that group

round the fire--everything. He told enough, however, for the immediate

decision to be arrived at that a relief party must start at the earliest

possible moment, and that Simpson, in order to guide it capably, must

first have food and, above all, sleep. Dr. Cathcart observing the lad's

condition more shrewdly than his patient knew, gave him a very slight

injection of morphine. For six hours he slept like the dead.

From the description carefully written out afterwards by this student of

divinity, it appears that the account he gave to the astonished group

omitted sundry vital and important details. He declares that, with his

uncle's wholesome, matter-of-fact countenance staring him in the face,

he simply had not the courage to mention them. Thus, all the search

party gathered, it would seem, was that Défago had suffered in the night

an acute and inexplicable attack of mania, had imagined himself "called"

by someone or something, and had plunged into the bush after it without

food or rifle, where he must die a horrible and lingering death by cold

and starvation unless he could be found and rescued in time. "In time,"

moreover, meant \_at once\_.

In the course of the following day, however--they were off by seven,

leaving Punk in charge with instructions to have food and fire always

ready--Simpson found it possible to tell his uncle a good deal more of

the story's true inwardness, without divining that it was drawn out of

him as a matter of fact by a very subtle form of cross examination. By

the time they reached the beginning of the trail, where the canoe was

laid up against the return journey, he had mentioned how Défago spoke

vaguely of "something he called a 'Wendigo'"; how he cried in his sleep;

how he imagined an unusual scent about the camp; and had betrayed other

symptoms of mental excitement. He also admitted the bewildering effect

of "that extraordinary odor" upon himself, "pungent and acrid like the

odor of lions." And by the time they were within an easy hour of Fifty

Island Water he had let slip the further fact--a foolish avowal of his

own hysterical condition, as he felt afterwards--that he had heard the

vanished guide call "for help." He omitted the singular phrases used,

for he simply could not bring himself to repeat the preposterous

language. Also, while describing how the man's footsteps in the snow had

gradually assumed an exact miniature likeness of the animal's plunging

tracks, he left out the fact that they measured a \_wholly\_ incredible

distance. It seemed a question, nicely balanced between individual pride

and honesty, what he should reveal and what suppress. He mentioned the

fiery tinge in the snow, for instance, yet shrank from telling that body

and bed had been partly dragged out of the tent....

With the net result that Dr. Cathcart, adroit psychologist that he

fancied himself to be, had assured him clearly enough exactly where his

mind, influenced by loneliness, bewilderment and terror, had yielded to

the strain and invited delusion. While praising his conduct, he managed

at the same time to point out where, when, and how his mind had gone

astray. He made his nephew think himself finer than he was by judicious

praise, yet more foolish than he was by minimizing the value of the

evidence. Like many another materialist, that is, he lied cleverly on

the basis of insufficient knowledge, \_because\_ the knowledge supplied

seemed to his own particular intelligence inadmissible.

"The spell of these terrible solitudes," he said, "cannot leave any mind

untouched, any mind, that is, possessed of the higher imaginative

qualities. It has worked upon yours exactly as it worked upon my own

when I was your age. The animal that haunted your little camp was

undoubtedly a moose, for the 'belling' of a moose may have, sometimes, a

very peculiar quality of sound. The colored appearance of the big tracks

was obviously a defect of vision in your own eyes produced by

excitement. The size and stretch of the tracks we shall prove when we

come to them. But the hallucination of an audible voice, of course, is

one of the commonest forms of delusion due to mental excitement--an

excitement, my dear boy, perfectly excusable, and, let me add,

wonderfully controlled by you under the circumstances. For the rest, I

am bound to say, you have acted with a splendid courage, for the terror

of feeling oneself lost in this wilderness is nothing short of awful,

and, had I been in your place, I don't for a moment believe I could have

behaved with one quarter of your wisdom and decision. The only thing I

find it uncommonly difficult to explain is--that--damned odor."

"It made me feel sick, I assure you," declared his nephew, "positively

dizzy!" His uncle's attitude of calm omniscience, merely because he knew

more psychological formulae, made him slightly defiant. It was so easy

to be wise in the explanation of an experience one has not personally

witnessed. "A kind of desolate and terrible odor is the only way I can

describe it," he concluded, glancing at the features of the quiet,

unemotional man beside him.

"I can only marvel," was the reply, "that under the circumstances it did

not seem to you even worse." The dry words, Simpson knew, hovered

between the truth, and his uncle's interpretation of "the truth."

\* \* \* \* \*

And so at last they came to the little camp and found the tent still

standing, the remains of the fire, and the piece of paper pinned to a

stake beside it--untouched. The cache, poorly contrived by inexperienced

hands, however, had been discovered and opened--by musk rats, mink and

squirrel. The matches lay scattered about the opening, but the food had

been taken to the last crumb.

"Well, fellers, he ain't here," exclaimed Hank loudly after his fashion.

"And that's as sartain as the coal supply down below! But whar he's got

to by this time is 'bout as unsartain as the trade in crowns in t'other

place." The presence of a divinity student was no barrier to his

language at such a time, though for the reader's sake it may be severely

edited. "I propose," he added, "that we start out at once an' hunt for'm

like hell!"

The gloom of Défago's probable fate oppressed the whole party with a

sense of dreadful gravity the moment they saw the familiar signs of

recent occupancy. Especially the tent, with the bed of balsam branches

still smoothed and flattened by the pressure of his body, seemed to

bring his presence near to them. Simpson, feeling vaguely as if his

world were somehow at stake, went about explaining particulars in a

hushed tone. He was much calmer now, though overwearied with the strain

of his many journeys. His uncle's method of explaining--"explaining

away," rather--the details still fresh in his haunted memory helped,

too, to put ice upon his emotions.

"And that's the direction he ran off in," he said to his two companions,

pointing in the direction where the guide had vanished that morning in

the grey dawn. "Straight down there he ran like a deer, in between the

birch and the hemlock...."

Hank and Dr. Cathcart exchanged glances.

"And it was about two miles down there, in a straight line," continued

the other, speaking with something of the former terror in his voice,

"that I followed his trail to the place where--it stopped--dead!"

"And where you heered him callin' an' caught the stench, an' all the

rest of the wicked entertainment," cried Hank, with a volubility that

betrayed his keen distress.

"And where your excitement overcame you to the point of producing

illusions," added Dr. Cathcart under his breath, yet not so low that his

nephew did not hear it.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was early in the afternoon, for they had traveled quickly, and there

were still a good two hours of daylight left. Dr. Cathcart and Hank lost

no time in beginning the search, but Simpson was too exhausted to

accompany them. They would follow the blazed marks on the trees, and

where possible, his footsteps. Meanwhile the best thing he could do was

to keep a good fire going, and rest.

But after something like three hours' search, the darkness already down,

the two men returned to camp with nothing to report. Fresh snow had

covered all signs, and though they had followed the blazed trees to the

spot where Simpson had turned back, they had not discovered the smallest

indication of a human being--or for that matter, of an animal. There

were no fresh tracks of any kind; the snow lay undisturbed.

It was difficult to know what was best to do, though in reality there

was nothing more they \_could\_ do. They might stay and search for weeks

without much chance of success. The fresh snow destroyed their only

hope, and they gathered round the fire for supper, a gloomy and

despondent party. The facts, indeed, were sad enough, for Défago had a

wife at Rat Portage, and his earnings were the family's sole means of

support.

Now that the whole truth in all its ugliness was out, it seemed useless

to deal in further disguise or pretense. They talked openly of the facts

and probabilities. It was not the first time, even in the experience of

Dr. Cathcart, that a man had yielded to the singular seduction of the

Solitudes and gone out of his mind; Défago, moreover, was predisposed to

something of the sort, for he already had a touch of melancholia in his

blood, and his fiber was weakened by bouts of drinking that often lasted

for weeks at a time. Something on this trip--one might never know

precisely what--had sufficed to push him over the line, that was all.

And he had gone, gone off into the great wilderness of trees and lakes

to die by starvation and exhaustion. The chances against his finding

camp again were overwhelming; the delirium that was upon him would also

doubtless have increased, and it was quite likely he might do violence

to himself and so hasten his cruel fate. Even while they talked, indeed,

the end had probably come. On the suggestion of Hank, his old pal,

however, they proposed to wait a little longer and devote the whole of

the following day, from dawn to darkness, to the most systematic search

they could devise. They would divide the territory between them. They

discussed their plan in great detail. All that men could do they would

do. And, meanwhile, they talked about the particular form in which the

singular Panic of the Wilderness had made its attack upon the mind of

the unfortunate guide. Hank, though familiar with the legend in its

general outline, obviously did not welcome the turn the conversation had

taken. He contributed little, though that little was illuminating. For

he admitted that a story ran over all this section of country to the

effect that several Indians had "seen the Wendigo" along the shores of

Fifty Island Water in the "fall" of last year, and that this was the

true reason of Défago's disinclination to hunt there. Hank doubtless

felt that he had in a sense helped his old pal to death by

overpersuading him. "When an Indian goes crazy," he explained, talking

to himself more than to the others, it seemed, "it's always put that

he's 'seen the Wendigo.' An' pore old Défaygo was superstitious down to

he very heels ...!"

And then Simpson, feeling the atmosphere more sympathetic, told over

again the full story of his astonishing tale; he left out no details

this time; he mentioned his own sensations and gripping fears. He only

omitted the strange language used.

"But Défago surely had already told you all these details of the Wendigo

legend, my dear fellow," insisted the doctor. "I mean, he had talked

about it, and thus put into your mind the ideas which your own

excitement afterwards developed?"

Whereupon Simpson again repeated the facts. Défago, he declared, had

barely mentioned the beast. He, Simpson, knew nothing of the story, and,

so far as he remembered, had never even read about it. Even the word was

unfamiliar.

Of course he was telling the truth, and Dr. Cathcart was reluctantly

compelled to admit the singular character of the whole affair. He did

not do this in words so much as in manner, however. He kept his back

against a good, stout tree; he poked the fire into a blaze the moment it

showed signs of dying down; he was quicker than any of them to notice

the least sound in the night about them--a fish jumping in the lake, a

twig snapping in the bush, the dropping of occasional fragments of

frozen snow from the branches overhead where the heat loosened them. His

voice, too, changed a little in quality, becoming a shade less

confident, lower also in tone. Fear, to put it plainly, hovered close

about that little camp, and though all three would have been glad to

speak of other matters, the only thing they seemed able to discuss was

this--the source of their fear. They tried other subjects in vain; there

was nothing to say about them. Hank was the most honest of the group; he

said next to nothing. He never once, however, turned his back to the

darkness. His face was always to the forest, and when wood was needed he

didn't go farther than was necessary to get it.

VII

A wall of silence wrapped them in, for the snow, though not thick, was

sufficient to deaden any noise, and the frost held things pretty tight

besides. No sound but their voices and the soft roar of the flames made

itself heard. Only, from time to time, something soft as the flutter of

a pine moth's wings went past them through the air. No one seemed

anxious to go to bed. The hours slipped towards midnight.

"The legend is picturesque enough," observed the doctor after one of the

longer pauses, speaking to break it rather than because he had anything

to say, "for the Wendigo is simply the Call of the Wild personified,

which some natures hear to their own destruction."

"That's about it," Hank said presently. "An' there's no misunderstandin'

when you hear it. It calls you by name right 'nough."

Another pause followed. Then Dr. Cathcart came back to the forbidden

subject with a rush that made the others jump.

"The allegory \_is\_ significant," he remarked, looking about him into the

darkness, "for the Voice, they say, resembles all the minor sounds of

the Bush--wind, falling water, cries of the animals, and so forth. And,

once the victim hears \_that\_--he's off for good, of course! His most

vulnerable points, moreover, are said to be the feet and the eyes; the

feet, you see, for the lust of wandering, and the eyes for the lust of

beauty. The poor beggar goes at such a dreadful speed that he bleeds

beneath the eyes, and his feet burn."

Dr. Cathcart, as he spoke, continued to peer uneasily into the

surrounding gloom. His voice sank to a hushed tone.

"The Wendigo," he added, "is said to burn his feet--owing to the

friction, apparently caused by its tremendous velocity--till they drop

off, and new ones form exactly like its own."

Simpson listened in horrified amazement; but it was the pallor on Hank's

face that fascinated him most. He would willingly have stopped his ears

and closed his eyes, had he dared.

"It don't always keep to the ground neither," came in Hank's slow, heavy

drawl, "for it goes so high that he thinks the stars have set him all

a-fire. An' it'll take great thumpin' jumps sometimes, an' run along the

tops of the trees, carrying its partner with it, an' then droppin' him

jest as a fish hawk'll drop a pickerel to kill it before eatin'. An' its

food, of all the muck in the whole Bush is--moss!" And he laughed a

short, unnatural laugh. "It's a moss-eater, is the Wendigo," he added,

looking up excitedly into the faces of his companions. "Moss-eater," he

repeated, with a string of the most outlandish oaths he could invent.

But Simpson now understood the true purpose of all this talk. What

these two men, each strong and "experienced" in his own way, dreaded

more than anything else was--silence. They were talking against time.

They were also talking against darkness, against the invasion of panic,

against the admission reflection might bring that they were in an

enemy's country--against anything, in fact, rather than allow their

inmost thoughts to assume control. He himself, already initiated by the

awful vigil with terror, was beyond both of them in this respect. He had

reached the stage where he was immune. But these two, the scoffing,

analytical doctor, and the honest, dogged backwoodsman, each sat

trembling in the depths of his being.

Thus the hours passed; and thus, with lowered voices and a kind of taut

inner resistance of spirit, this little group of humanity sat in the

jaws of the wilderness and talked foolishly of the terrible and haunting

legend. It was an unequal contest, all things considered, for the

wilderness had already the advantage of first attack--and of a hostage.

The fate of their comrade hung over them with a steadily increasing

weight of oppression that finally became insupportable.

It was Hank, after a pause longer than the preceding ones that no one

seemed able to break, who first let loose all this pent-up emotion in

very unexpected fashion, by springing suddenly to his feet and letting

out the most ear-shattering yell imaginable into the night. He could not

contain himself any longer, it seemed. To make it carry even beyond an

ordinary cry he interrupted its rhythm by shaking the palm of his hand

before his mouth.

"That's for Défago," he said, looking down at the other two with a

queer, defiant laugh, "for it's my belief"--the sandwiched oaths may be

omitted--"that my ole partner's not far from us at this very minute."

There was a vehemence and recklessness about his performance that made

Simpson, too, start to his feet in amazement, and betrayed even the

doctor into letting the pipe slip from between his lips. Hank's face was

ghastly, but Cathcart's showed a sudden weakness--a loosening of all his

faculties, as it were. Then a momentary anger blazed into his eyes, and

he too, though with deliberation born of habitual self-control, got upon

his feet and faced the excited guide. For this was unpermissible,

foolish, dangerous, and he meant to stop it in the bud.

What might have happened in the next minute or two one may speculate

about, yet never definitely know, for in the instant of profound silence

that followed Hank's roaring voice, and as though in answer to it,

something went past through the darkness of the sky overhead at terrific

speed--something of necessity very large, for it displaced much air,

while down between the trees there fell a faint and windy cry of a human

voice, calling in tones of indescribable anguish and appeal--

"Oh, oh! This fiery height! Oh, oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of

fire!"

White to the very edge of his shirt, Hank looked stupidly about him like

a child. Dr. Cathcart uttered some kind of unintelligible cry, turning

as he did so with an instinctive movement of blind terror towards the

protection of the tent, then halting in the act as though frozen.

Simpson, alone of the three, retained his presence of mind a little. His

own horror was too deep to allow of any immediate reaction. He had heard

that cry before.

Turning to his stricken companions, he said almost calmly--

"That's exactly the cry I heard--the very words he used!"

Then, lifting his face to the sky, he cried aloud, "Défago, Défago! Come

down here to us! Come down--!"

And before there was time for anybody to take definite action one way or

another, there came the sound of something dropping heavily between the

trees, striking the branches on the way down, and landing with a

dreadful thud upon the frozen earth below. The crash and thunder of it

was really terrific.

"That's him, s'help me the good Gawd!" came from Hank in a whispering

cry half choked, his hand going automatically toward the hunting knife

in his belt. "And he's coming! He's coming!" he added, with an

irrational laugh of horror, as the sounds of heavy footsteps crunching

over the snow became distinctly audible, approaching through the

blackness towards the circle of light.

And while the steps, with their stumbling motion, moved nearer and

nearer upon them, the three men stood round that fire, motionless and

dumb. Dr. Cathcart had the appearance of a man suddenly withered; even

his eyes did not move. Hank, suffering shockingly, seemed on the verge

again of violent action; yet did nothing. He, too, was hewn of stone.

Like stricken children they seemed. The picture was hideous. And,

meanwhile, their owner still invisible, the footsteps came closer,

crunching the frozen snow. It was endless--too prolonged to be quite

real--this measured and pitiless approach. It was accursed.

VIII

Then at length the darkness, having thus laboriously conceived, brought

forth--a figure. It drew forward into the zone of uncertain light where

fire and shadows mingled, not ten feet away; then halted, staring at

them fixedly. The same instant it started forward again with the

spasmodic motion as of a thing moved by wires, and coming up closer to

them, full into the glare of the fire, they perceived then that--it was

a man; and apparently that this man was--Défago.

Something like a skin of horror almost perceptibly drew down in that

moment over every face, and three pairs of eyes shone through it as

though they saw across the frontiers of normal vision into the Unknown.

Défago advanced, his tread faltering and uncertain; he made his way

straight up to them as a group first, then turned sharply and peered

close into the face of Simpson. The sound of a voice issued from his

lips--

"Here I am, Boss Simpson. I heered someone calling me." It was a faint,

dried up voice, made wheezy and breathless as by immense exertion. "I'm

havin' a reg'lar hellfire kind of a trip, I am." And he laughed,

thrusting his head forward into the other's face.

But that laugh started the machinery of the group of waxwork figures

with the wax-white skins. Hank immediately sprang forward with a stream

of oaths so farfetched that Simpson did not recognize them as English at

all, but thought he had lapsed into Indian or some other lingo. He only

realized that Hank's presence, thrust thus between them, was

welcome--uncommonly welcome. Dr. Cathcart, though more calmly and

leisurely, advanced behind him, heavily stumbling.

Simpson seems hazy as to what was actually said and done in those next

few seconds, for the eyes of that detestable and blasted visage peering

at such close quarters into his own utterly bewildered his senses at

first. He merely stood still. He said nothing. He had not the trained

will of the older men that forced them into action in defiance of all

emotional stress. He watched them moving as behind a glass that half

destroyed their reality; it was dreamlike; perverted. Yet, through the

torrent of Hank's meaningless phrases, he remembers hearing his uncle's

tone of authority--hard and forced--saying several things about food and

warmth, blankets, whisky and the rest ... and, further, that whiffs of

that penetrating, unaccustomed odor, vile yet sweetly bewildering,

assailed his nostrils during all that followed.

It was no less a person than himself, however--less experienced and

adroit than the others though he was--who gave instinctive utterance to

the sentence that brought a measure of relief into the ghastly situation

by expressing the doubt and thought in each one's heart.

"It \_is\_--YOU, isn't it, Défago?" he asked under his breath, horror

breaking his speech.

And at once Cathcart burst out with the loud answer before the other had

time to move his lips. "Of course it is! Of course it is! Only--can't

you see--he's nearly dead with exhaustion, cold and terror! Isn't \_that\_

enough to change a man beyond all recognition?" It was said in order to

convince himself as much as to convince the others. The overemphasis

alone proved that. And continually, while he spoke and acted, he held a

handkerchief to his nose. That odor pervaded the whole camp.

For the "Défago" who sat huddled by the big fire, wrapped in blankets,

drinking hot whisky and holding food in wasted hands, was no more like

the guide they had last seen alive than the picture of a man of sixty is

like a daguerreotype of his early youth in the costume of another

generation. Nothing really can describe that ghastly caricature, that

parody, masquerading there in the firelight as Défago. From the ruins of

the dark and awful memories he still retains, Simpson declares that the

face was more animal than human, the features drawn about into wrong

proportions, the skin loose and hanging, as though he had been subjected

to extraordinary pressures and tensions. It made him think vaguely of

those bladder faces blown up by the hawkers on Ludgate Hill, that change

their expression as they swell, and as they collapse emit a faint and

wailing imitation of a voice. Both face and voice suggested some such

abominable resemblance. But Cathcart long afterwards, seeking to

describe the indescribable, asserts that thus might have looked a face

and body that had been in air so rarified that, the weight of atmosphere

being removed, the entire structure threatened to fly asunder and

become--\_incoherent\_....

It was Hank, though all distraught and shaking with a tearing volume of

emotion he could neither handle nor understand, who brought things to a

head without much ado. He went off to a little distance from the fire,

apparently so that the light should not dazzle him too much, and shading

his eyes for a moment with both hands, shouted in a loud voice that held

anger and affection dreadfully mingled:

"You ain't Défaygo! You ain't Défaygo at all! I don't give a--damn, but

that ain't you, my ole pal of twenty years!" He glared upon the huddled

figure as though he would destroy him with his eyes. "An' if it is I'll

swab the floor of hell with a wad of cotton wool on a toothpick, s'help

me the good Gawd!" he added, with a violent fling of horror and disgust.

It was impossible to silence him. He stood there shouting like one

possessed, horrible to see, horrible to hear--\_because it was the

truth\_. He repeated himself in fifty different ways, each more

outlandish than the last. The woods rang with echoes. At one time it

looked as if he meant to fling himself upon "the intruder," for his hand

continually jerked towards the long hunting knife in his belt.

But in the end he did nothing, and the whole tempest completed itself

very shortly with tears. Hank's voice suddenly broke, he collapsed on

the ground, and Cathcart somehow or other persuaded him at last to go

into the tent and lie quiet. The remainder of the affair, indeed, was

witnessed by him from behind the canvas, his white and terrified face

peeping through the crack of the tent door flap.

Then Dr. Cathcart, closely followed by his nephew who so far had kept

his courage better than all of them, went up with a determined air and

stood opposite to the figure of Défago huddled over the fire. He looked

him squarely in the face and spoke. At first his voice was firm.

"Défago, tell us what's happened--just a little, so that we can know

how best to help you?" he asked in a tone of authority, almost of

command. And at that point, it \_was\_ command. At once afterwards,

however, it changed in quality, for the figure turned up to him a face

so piteous, so terrible and so little like humanity, that the doctor

shrank back from him as from something spiritually unclean. Simpson,

watching close behind him, says he got the impression of a mask that was

on the verge of dropping off, and that underneath they would discover

something black and diabolical, revealed in utter nakedness. "Out with

it, man, out with it!" Cathcart cried, terror running neck and neck with

entreaty. "None of us can stand this much longer ...!" It was the cry of

instinct over reason.

And then "Défago," smiling \_whitely\_, answered in that thin and fading

voice that already seemed passing over into a sound of quite another

character--

"I seen that great Wendigo thing," he whispered, sniffing the air about

him exactly like an animal. "I been with it too--"

Whether the poor devil would have said more, or whether Dr. Cathcart

would have continued the impossible cross examination cannot be known,

for at that moment the voice of Hank was heard yelling at the top of his

voice from behind the canvas that concealed all but his terrified eyes.

Such a howling was never heard.

"His feet! Oh, Gawd, his feet! Look at his great changed--feet!"

Défago, shuffling where he sat, had moved in such a way that for the

first time his legs were in full light and his feet were visible. Yet

Simpson had no time, himself, to see properly what Hank had seen. And

Hank has never seen fit to tell. That same instant, with a leap like

that of a frightened tiger, Cathcart was upon him, bundling the folds of

blanket about his legs with such speed that the young student caught

little more than a passing glimpse of something dark and oddly massed

where moccasined feet ought to have been, and saw even that but with

uncertain vision.

Then, before the doctor had time to do more, or Simpson time to even

think a question, much less ask it, Défago was standing upright in front

of them, balancing with pain and difficulty, and upon his shapeless and

twisted visage an expression so dark and so malicious that it was, in

the true sense, monstrous.

"Now \_you\_ seen it too," he wheezed, "you seen my fiery, burning feet!

And now--that is, unless you kin save me an' prevent--it's 'bout time

for--"

His piteous and beseeching voice was interrupted by a sound that was

like the roar of wind coming across the lake. The trees overhead shook

their tangled branches. The blazing fire bent its flames as before a

blast. And something swept with a terrific, rushing noise about the

little camp and seemed to surround it entirely in a single moment of

time. Défago shook the clinging blankets from his body, turned towards

the woods behind, and with the same stumbling motion that had brought

him--was gone: gone, before anyone could move muscle to prevent him,

gone with an amazing, blundering swiftness that left no time to act. The

darkness positively swallowed him; and less than a dozen seconds later,

above the roar of the swaying trees and the shout of the sudden wind,

all three men, watching and listening with stricken hearts, heard a cry

that seemed to drop down upon them from a great height of sky and

distance--

"Oh, oh! This fiery height! Oh, oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of

fire ...!" then died away, into untold space and silence.

Dr. Cathcart--suddenly master of himself, and therefore of the

others--was just able to seize Hank violently by the arm as he tried to

dash headlong into the Bush.

"But I want ter know,--you!" shrieked the guide. "I want ter see! That

ain't him at all, but some--devil that's shunted into his place ...!"

Somehow or other--he admits he never quite knew how he accomplished

it--he managed to keep him in the tent and pacify him. The doctor,

apparently, had reached the stage where reaction had set in and allowed

his own innate force to conquer. Certainly he "managed" Hank admirably.

It was his nephew, however, hitherto so wonderfully controlled, who gave

him most cause for anxiety, for the cumulative strain had now produced a

condition of lachrymose hysteria which made it necessary to isolate him

upon a bed of boughs and blankets as far removed from Hank as was

possible under the circumstances.

And there he lay, as the watches of that haunted night passed over the

lonely camp, crying startled sentences, and fragments of sentences, into

the folds of his blanket. A quantity of gibberish about speed and height

and fire mingled oddly with biblical memories of the classroom. "People

with broken faces all on fire are coming at a most awful, awful, pace

towards the camp!" he would moan one minute; and the next would sit up

and stare into the woods, intently listening, and whisper, "How terrible

in the wilderness are--are the feet of them that--" until his uncle came

across to change the direction of his thoughts and comfort him.

The hysteria, fortunately, proved but temporary. Sleep cured him, just

as it cured Hank.

Till the first signs of daylight came, soon after five o'clock, Dr.

Cathcart kept his vigil. His face was the color of chalk, and there were

strange flushes beneath the eyes. An appalling terror of the soul

battled with his will all through those silent hours. These were some of

the outer signs ...

At dawn he lit the fire himself, made breakfast, and woke the others,

and by seven they were well on their way back to the home camp--three

perplexed and afflicted men, but each in his own way having reduced his

inner turmoil to a condition of more or less systematized order again.

IX

They talked little, and then only of the most wholesome and common

things, for their minds were charged with painful thoughts that

clamoured for explanation, though no one dared refer to them. Hank,

being nearest to primitive conditions, was the first to find himself,

for he was also less complex. In Dr. Cathcart "civilization" championed

his forces against an attack singular enough. To this day, perhaps, he

is not \_quite\_ sure of certain things. Anyhow, he took longer to "find

himself."

Simpson, the student of divinity, it was who arranged his conclusions

probably with the best, though not most scientific, appearance of order.

Out there, in the heart of unreclaimed wilderness, they had surely

witnessed something crudely and essentially primitive. Something that

had survived somehow the advance of humanity had emerged terrifically,

betraying a scale of life still monstrous and immature. He envisaged it

rather as a glimpse into prehistoric ages, when superstitions, gigantic

and uncouth, still oppressed the hearts of men; when the forces of nature

were still untamed, the Powers that may have haunted a primeval universe

not yet withdrawn. To this day he thinks of what he termed years later

in a sermon "savage and formidable Potencies lurking behind the souls of

men, not evil perhaps in themselves, yet instinctively hostile to humanity

as it exists."

With his uncle he never discussed the matter in detail, for the barrier

between the two types of mind made it difficult. Only once, years later,

something led them to the frontier of the subject--of a single detail of

the subject, rather--

"Can't you even tell me what--\_they\_ were like?" he asked; and the reply,

though conceived in wisdom, was not encouraging, "It is far better you

should not try to know, or to find out."

"Well--that odour...?" persisted the nephew. "What do you make of that?"

Dr. Cathcart looked at him and raised his eyebrows.

"Odours," he replied, "are not so easy as sounds and sights of telepathic

communication. I make as much, or as little, probably, as you do

yourself."

He was not quite so glib as usual with his explanations. That was all.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the fall of day, cold, exhausted, famished, the party came to the

end of the long portage and dragged themselves into a camp that at

first glimpse seemed empty. Fire there was none, and no Punk came

forward to welcome them. The emotional capacity of all three was too

over-spent to recognize either surprise or annoyance; but the cry of

spontaneous affection that burst from the lips of Hank, as he rushed

ahead of them towards the fire-place, came probably as a warning that

the end of the amazing affair was not quite yet. And both Cathcart and

his nephew confessed afterwards that when they saw him kneel down in

his excitement and embrace something that reclined, gently moving,

beside the extinguished ashes, they felt in their very bones that this

"something" would prove to be Défago--the true Défago, returned.

And so, indeed, it was.

It is soon told. Exhausted to the point of emaciation, the French

Canadian--what was left of him, that is--fumbled among the ashes, trying

to make a fire. His body crouched there, the weak fingers obeying feebly

the instinctive habit of a lifetime with twigs and matches. But there

was no longer any mind to direct the simple operation. The mind had

fled beyond recall. And with it, too, had fled memory. Not only recent

events, but all previous life was a blank.

This time it was the real man, though incredibly and horribly shrunken.

On his face was no expression of any kind whatever--fear, welcome, or

recognition. He did not seem to know who it was that embraced him, or

who it was that fed, warmed and spoke to him the words of comfort and

relief. Forlorn and broken beyond all reach of human aid, the little man

did meekly as he was bidden. The "something" that had constituted him

"individual" had vanished for ever.

In some ways it was more terribly moving than anything they had yet

seen--that idiot smile as he drew wads of coarse moss from his swollen

cheeks and told them that he was "a damned moss-eater"; the continued

vomiting of even the simplest food; and, worst of all, the piteous

and childish voice of complaint in which he told them that his feet

pained him--"burn like fire"--which was natural enough when Dr. Cathcart

examined them and found that both were dreadfully frozen. Beneath the

eyes there were faint indications of recent bleeding.

The details of how he survived the prolonged exposure, of where he had

been, or of how he covered the great distance from one camp to the

other, including an immense detour of the lake on foot since he had

no canoe--all this remains unknown. His memory had vanished completely.

And before the end of the winter whose beginning witnessed this strange

occurrence, Défago, bereft of mind, memory and soul, had gone with it.

He lingered only a few weeks.

And what Punk was able to contribute to the story throws no further

light upon it. He was cleaning fish by the lake shore about five o'clock

in the evening--an hour, that is, before the search party returned--when

he saw this shadow of the guide picking its way weakly into camp. In

advance of him, he declares, came the faint whiff of a certain singular

odour.

That same instant old Punk started for home. He covered the entire

journey of three days as only Indian blood could have covered it. The

terror of a whole race drove him. He knew what it all meant. Défago

had "seen the Wendigo."