

The Wendigo

Theodore Roosevelt

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FRONTIERSMEN are not, as a rule, apt to be very superstitious. They lead lives too hard and practical, and have too little imagination in things spiritual and supernatural. I have heard but few ghost stories while living on the frontier, and these few were of a perfectly commonplace and conventional type.

But I once listened to a goblin story which rather impressed me. It was told by a grizzled, weather-beaten old mountain hunter, named Bauman, who was born and had passed all his life on the frontier. He must have believed what he said, for he could hardly repress a shudder at certain points of the tale; but he was of German ancestry, and in childhood had doubtless been saturated with all kinds of ghost and goblin lore, so that many fearsome superstitions were latent in his mind; besides, he knew well the stories told by the Indian medicine men in their winter camps, of the snow-walkers, and the spectres, and the formless evil beings that haunt the forest depths, and dog and waylay the lonely wanderer who after nightfall passes through the regions where they lurk....

When the event occurred, Bauman was still a young man, and was trapping with a partner among the mountains dividing the forks of Salmon from the head of Wisdom River. Not having had much luck he and his partner determined to go up into a particularly wild and lonely pass through which ran a small stream said to contain many Beaver. The pass had an evil reputation, because the year before a solitary hunter who had wandered into it was there slain, seemingly by a wild beast, the half-eaten remains being afterwards found by some mining prospectors who had passed his camp only the night before.

The memory of this event, however, weighed very lightly with the two trappers, who were as adventurous and hardy as others of their kind. They took their two lean mountain Ponies to the foot of the pass, where they left them in an open Beaver meadow, the rocky timberclad ground being from thence onwards impracticable for Horses. They then struck out on foot through the vast, gloomy forest, and in about four hours, reached a little open glade where they concluded to camp, as signs of game were plenty.

There was still an hour or two of daylight left; and after building brush lean-to and throwing down and opening their packs, they started up stream. The country was very dense and hard to travel through, as there was much down timber, although here and there the sombre woodland was broken by small glades of mountain grass.

At dusk, they again reached camp. The glade in which it was pitched was not many yards wide, the tall, close-set pines and firs rising round it like a wall. On one side, was a little stream, beyond which rose the steep mountain-slopes, covered with the unbroken growth of the evergreen forest.

They were surprised to find that during their short absence, something, apparently a Bear, had visited camp, and had rummaged about among their things, scattering the contents of their packs, and in sheer wantonness destroying their lean-to. The footprints of the beast were quite plain but at first they paid no particular heed to them, busying themselves with rebuilding the lean-to, laying out their beds and stores, and lighting the fire.

While Bauman was making ready supper, it being already dark, his companion began to examine the tracks more closely, and soon took a brand from the fire to follow them up, where the intruder had walked along a game trail after leaving the camp. When the brand flickered out, he returned and took another, repeating his inspection of the

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footprints very closely. Coming back to the fire, he stood by it a minute or two, peering out into the darkness, and suddenly remarked: "Bauman, that Bear has been walking on two legs." Bauman laughed at this, but his partner insisted that he was right; and upon again examining the tracks with a torch, they certainly did seem to be made by but two paws, or feet. However, it was too dark to make sure. After discussing whether the footprints could possibly be those of a human being, and coming to the conclusion that they could not be, the two men rolled up in their blankets, and went to sleep under the lean-to.

At midnight, Bauman was awakened by some noise, and sat up in his blankets. As he did so, his nostrils were struck by a strong, wild-beast odor, and he caught the loom of a great body in the darkness at the mouth of the lean-to. Grasping his rifle, he fired at the vague, threatening shadow, but must have missed; for immediately afterwards he heard the smashing of the underwood as the thing, whatever it was, rushed off into the impenetrable blackness of the forest and the night.

After this the two men slept but little, sitting up by the rekindled fire, but they heard nothing more. In the morning, they started out to look at the few traps they had set the previous evening, and to put out new ones. By an unspoken agreement, they kept together all day, and returned to camp towards evening.

On nearing it they saw, hardly to their astonishment, that the lean-to had been again torn down. The visitor of the preceding day had returned; and in wanton malice had tossed about their camp kit and bedding, and destroyed the shanty. The ground was marked up by its tracks; and on leaving the camp, it had gone along the soft earth by the brook, where the footprints were as plain as if on snow, and, after a careful scrutiny of the trail, it certainly did seem as if, whatever the thing was, it had walked off on but two legs.

The men, thoroughly uneasy, gathered a great heap of dead logs, and kept up a roaring fire throughout the night, one or the other sitting on guard most of the time. About midnight, the thing came down through the forest opposite, across the brook, and stayed there on the hillside for nearly an hour. They could hear the branches crackle as it moved about, and several times it uttered a harsh, grating, long-drawn moan, a peculiarly sinister sound. Yet it did not venture near the fire.

In the morning, the two trappers, after discussing the strange events of the last thirty-six hours, decided that they would shoulder their packs and leave the valley that afternoon. They were the more ready to do this because, in spite of seeing a good deal of game sign, they had caught very little fur. However, it was necessary first to go along the line of their traps and gather them, and this they started out to do.

All the morning, they kept together, picking up trap after trap, each one empty. On first leaving camp, they had the disagreeable sensation of being followed. In the dense spruce thickets, they occasionally heard a branch snap after they had passed; and now and then, there were slight rustling noises among the small pines to one side of them.

At noon, they were back within a couple of miles of camp. In the high bright sunlight, their fears seemed absurd to the two armed men, accustomed as they were, through long years of lonely wandering in the wilderness, to face every kind of danger from man, brute, or element. There were still three Beaver traps to collect from a little pond in a wide ravine nearby. Bauman volunteered to gather these, and bring them in, while his companion went ahead to camp and made ready the packs.

On reaching the pond, Bauman found three Beaver in the traps, one of which had been pulled loose and carried into a Beaver house. He took several hours in securing and preparing the Beaver, and when he started homewards he marked with some uneasiness how low the sun was getting. As he hurried towards camp, under the tall trees, the silence and desolation of the forest weighed on him. His feet made no sound on the pine needles, and the slanting sun rays, striking through among the straight trunks, made a gray twilight in which objects at a distance glimmer indistinctly. There was nothing to break the ghostly stillness which, when there is no breeze, always

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broods over these sombre primeval forests.

At last, he came to the edge of the little glade where the camp lay, and shouted as he approached it, but got no answer. The camp fire had gone out, though the thin blue smoke was still curling upwards. Near it lay the packs wrapped and arranged. At first, Bauman could see nobody; nor did he receive an answer to his call. Stepping forward he again shouted; and as he did so, his eye fell on the body of his friend, stretched beside the trunk of a great fallen spruce. Rushing towards it, the horrified trapper found that the body was still warm, but that the neck was broken, while there were four great fang marks in the throat.

The footprints of the unknown beast-creature, printed deep in the soil, told the whole story.

The unfortunate man, having finished his packing, had sat down on the spruce log with his face to the fire, and his back to the dense woods, to wait for his companion. While thus waiting, his monstrous assailant, which must have been lurking nearby in the woods, waiting for a chance to catch one of the adventurers unprepared, came silently up from behind, walking with long, noiseless steps, and seemingly still on two legs. Evidently unheard, it reached the man, and broke his neck by wrenching his head back with its forepaws, while it buried its teeth in his throat. It had not eaten the body, but apparently had romped and gambolled round it in uncouth, ferocious glee, occasionally rolling over and over it; and had then fled back into the soundless depths of the woods.

Bauman, utterly unnerved, and believing that the creature with which he had to deal was something either half-human or half-devil, some great goblin-beast, abandoned everything but his rifle, and struck off at speed down the pass, not halting until he reached the Beaver meadows where the hobbled Ponies were still grazing. Mounting, he rode onwards through the night, until far beyond the reach of pursuit.