



**Charles George Douglas  
Roberts**

*The Heart  
of the Ancient  
Wood*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>Chapter I The Watchers of the Trail</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter II The Cabin in the Clearing</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter III The Exiles from the Settlement</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter IV Miranda and the Furtive Folk</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter V Kroof, the She-bear</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter VI The Initiation of Miranda</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter VII The Intimates</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter VIII Axe and Antler</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter IX The Pax Mirandæ</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter X The Routing of the Philistines</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XI Miranda and Young Dave</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XII Young Dave at the Clearing</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XIII Milking-time</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XIV Moonlight and Moose-call</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XV A Venison Steak</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XVI Death for a Little Life</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XVII In the Roar of the Rapids</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Chapter XVIII The Forfeit of the Alien</u></a>

# Chapter I

## The Watchers of the Trail

### Table of Contents

Not indolently soft, like that which sifts in green shadow through the leafage of a summer garden, but tense, alertly and mysteriously expectant, was the silence of the forest. It was somehow like a vast bubble of glass, blown to a fineness so tenuous that a small sound, were it but to strike the one preordained and mystic note, might shatter it down in loud ruin. Yet it had existed there flawless for generations, transmuting into its own quality all such infrequent and inconsequent disturbance as might arise from the far-off cry of the panther, or the thin chirp of the clambering nuthatch, the long, solemn calling of the taciturn moose, 2 twice or thrice repeated under the round October moon, or the noise of some great wind roaring heavily in the remote tops of pine and birch and hemlock. Few and slender were the rays of sun that pierced down through those high tops. The air that washed the endless vistas of brown-green shadow was of a marvellous clarity, not blurred by any stain of dust or vapour. Its magical transparency was confusing to an eye not born and bred to it, making the far branches seem near, and the near twigs unreal, disturbing the accustomed perspective, and hinting of some elvish deception in familiar and apparent things.

The trail through the forest was rough and long unused. In spots the mosses and ground vines had so overgrown it that only the broad scars on the tree trunks, where the lumberman's axe had blazed them for a sign, served to

distinguish it from a score of radiating vistas. But just here, where it climbed a long, gradual slope, the run of water down its slight hollow had sufficed to keep its worn stones partly bare. Moreover, though the furrowing steps of man had left it these many seasons untrodden, it was never wholly neglected. A path once fairly differentiated by the successive passings of feet will keep, almost forever, a spell for the persuasion of all that go afoot. The old trail served the flat, shuffling tread of Kroof, the great she-bear, as she led her half-grown cub to feast on the blueberry patches far up the mountain. It caught the whim of Ten-Tine, the caribou, as he convoyed his slim cows down to occasional pasturage in the alder swamps of the slow Quah-Davic.

On this September afternoon, when the stillness seemed to wait wide-eyed, suddenly a cock-partridge came whirring up the trail, alighted on a gnarled limb, turned his outstretched head twice from side to side as he peered with his round beads of eyes, and then stiffened into the moveless semblance of one of the fungoid excrescences with which the tree was studded. A moment more and the sound of footsteps, of the nails of heavy boots striking on the stones, grew conspicuous against the silence. Up the trail came slouching, with a strong but laborious stride, a large, grizzled man in grey home-spuns. His trousers were stuffed unevenly into the tops of his rusty boots; on his head was a drooping, much-battered hat of a felt that had been brown; from his belt hung a large knife in a fur-fringed leather sheath; and over his shoulder he carried an axe, from the head of which swung a large bundle. The bundle was tied up in a soiled patchwork quilt of gaudy colours, and

from time to time there came from it a flat clatter suggestive of tins. At one side protruded the black handle of a frying-pan, half wrapped up in newspaper.

Had he been hunter or trapper, Dave Titus would have carried a gun. Or had he been a townsman, a villager, or even an ordinary small country farmer, he would have taken care to be well armed before penetrating a day's journey into the heart of the ancient wood. But being a lumberman, he was neither quite of the forest nor quite of the open. His 5 winters he spent in the very deep of the wilderness, in a log camp crowded with his mates, eating salt pork, beans, hot bread; and too busy all day long with his unwearying axe to wage any war upon the furred and feathered people. His summers were passed with plough and hoe on a little half-tilled farm in the Settlements. He had, therefore, neither the desire to kill nor the impulse to fear, as he traversed, neutral and indifferent, these silent but not desolated territories. Not desolated; for the ancient wood was populous in its reserve. Observant, keen of vision, skilled in woodcraft though he was, the grave-faced old lumberman saw nothing in the tranquillity about him save tree trunks, and fallen, rotting remnants, and mossed hillocks, and thickets of tangled shrub. He noted the difference, not known to the general eye, between white spruce, black spruce, and fir, between grey birch and yellow birch, between withe-wood and viburnum; and he read instinctively, by the lichen growth about their edges, how many seasons had laid their disfiguring touch upon those old scars of the axe which marked the trail. But for all his

craft he thought himself alone. He guessed not of the many eyes that watched him.

In truth, his progress was the focus of an innumerable attention. The furtive eyes that followed his movements were some of them timorously hostile, some impotently vindictive, some indifferent; but all alien. All were at one in the will to remain unseen; so all kept an unwinking immobility, and were swallowed up, as it were, in the universal stillness.

The cock-partridge, a well-travelled bird who knew the Settlements and their violent perils, watched with indignant apprehension. Not without purpose had he come whirring so tumultuously up the trail, a warning to the ears of all the wood-folk. His fear was lest the coming of this grey man-figure should mean an invasion of those long, black sticks which went off with smoky bang when they were pointed. He effaced himself till his brown mottled feathers were fairly one with the mottled brown bark of his perch; but his liquid eyes lost not a least movement of the stranger.

The nuthatch, who had been walking straight up the perpendicular trunk of a pine when the sound of the alien footsteps froze him, peered fixedly around the tree. His eye, a black point of inquiry, had never before seen anything like this clumsy and slow-moving shape, but knew it for something dangerous. His little slaty head, jutting at an acute angle from the bark, looked like a mere caprice of knot or wood fungus; but it had the singular quality of moving smoothly around the trunk, as the lumberman advanced, so as to keep him always in view.

Equally curious, but quivering with fear, two wood-mice watched him intently, sitting under the broad leaf of a skunk-cabbage not three feet from the trail. Their whiskers touched each other's noses, conveying thrills and palpitations of terror as he drew near, drew nearer, came—and passed. But not unless that 8 blind, unheeding heel had been on the very point of crushing them would they have disobeyed the prime law of their tribe, which taught them that to sit still was to sit unseen.

A little farther back from the trail, under a spreading tangle of ironwood, on a bed of tawny moss crouched a hare. His ears lay quite flat along his back. His eyes watched with aversion, not unmixed with scorn, the heavy, tall creature that moved with such effort and such noise. "Never," thought the hare, disdainfully, "would he be able to escape from his enemies!" As the delicate current of air which pulses imperceptibly through the forest bore the scent of the man to the hare's hiding-place, the fine nostrils of the latter worked rapidly with dislike. On a sudden, however, came a waft of other scent; and the hare's form seemed to shrink to half its size, the nostrils rigidly dilating.

It was the scent of the weasel—to the hare it was the very essence of death. But it passed in an instant, and then the 9 hare's exact vision saw whence it came. For the weasel, unlike all the other folk of the wood, was moving. He was keeping pace with the man, at a distance of some ten feet from the trail. So fitted, however, was his colouring to his surrounding, so shadow-like in its soundless grace was his motion, that the man never discerned him. The weasel's eyes were fixed upon the intruder with a malignancy of hate



that might well have seared through his unconsciousness. Fortunately for the big lumberman, the weasel's strength, stupendous for its size, was in no way commensurate with its malice; or the journey would have come to an end just there, and the gaudy bundle would have rested on the trail to be a long wonder to the mice.

The weasel presently crossed the yet warm scent of a mink, whereupon he threw up his vain tracking of the woodman and turned off in disgust. He did not like the mink, and wondered what that fish-eater could be wanting so far back from the water. He was not afraid exactly,—few animals know fear so little as the 10 weasel,—but he kept a small shred of prudence in his savage little heart, and he knew that the mink was scarcely less ferocious than himself, while nearly thrice his size.

From the mossy crotch of an old ash tree, slanting over the trail, a pair of pale, yellow-green eyes, with fine black slits for pupils, watched the traveller's march. They were set in a round, furry head, which was pressed flat to the branch and partly overhung it. The pointed, tufted ears lay flat back upon the round brown head. Into the bark of the branch four sets of razor-edged claws dug themselves venomously; for the wild-cat knew, perhaps through some occult communication from its far-off domesticated kin of hearth and door-sill, that in man he saw the one unvanquishable enemy to all the folk of the wood. He itched fiercely to drop upon the man's bowed neck, just where it showed, red and defenceless, between the gaudy bundle and the rim of the brown hat. But the wild-cat, the lesser lynx, was heir to a ferocity well tempered with discretion, 11 and the old

lumberman slouched onward unharmed, all ignorant of that green gleam of hate playing upon his neck.

It was a very different gaze which followed him from the heart of a little colony of rotting stumps, in a dark hollow near the trail. Here, in the cool gloom, sat Kroof, the bear, rocking her huge body contemplatively from side to side on her haunches, and occasionally slapping off a mosquito from the sensitive tip of her nose. She had no cub running with her that season, to keep her busy and anxious. For an hour she had been comfortably rocking, untroubled by fear or desire or indignation; but when the whirring of the cock-partridge gave her warning, and the grating of the nailed boots caught her ear, she had stiffened instantly into one of the big brown stumps. Her little red eyes followed the stranger with something like a twinkle in them. She had seen men before, and she neither actively feared them nor actively disliked them. Only, averse to needless trouble, she cared not to intrude herself on their notice; and therefore she obeyed the custom of the wood, and kept still. But the bear is far the most human of all the furry wood-folk, the most versatile and largely tolerant, the least enslaved by its surroundings. It has an ample sense of humour, also, that most humane of gifts; and it was with a certain relish that Kroof recognized in the grey-clad stranger one of those loud axemen from whose camp, far down by the Quah-Davic, she had only last winter stolen certain comforting rations of pork. Her impulse was to rock again with satisfaction at the thought, but that would have been out of keeping with her present character as a decaying stump, and she restrained herself. She also restrained a whimsical impulse to knock

the gaudy bundle from the stranger's back with one sweep of her great paw, and see if it might not contain many curious and edifying things, if not even pork. It was not till she had watched him well up the trail and fairly over the crest of the slope that, with a deep, non-committal grunt, she again turned her attention to the mosquitoes, which had been learning all the tenderness of a bear's nose.

These were but a few of the watchers of the trail, whose eyes, themselves unseen, scrutinized the invader of the ancient wood. Each step of all his journey was well noted. Not so securely and unconsideringly would he have gone, however, had he known that only the year before there had come a pair of panthers to occupy a vacant lair on the neighbouring mountain side. No, his axe would have swung free, and his eyes would have scanned searchingly every overhanging branch; for none knew better than old Dave Titus how dangerous a foe was the tawny northern panther. But just now, as it chanced, the panther pair were hunting away over in the other valley, the low, dense-wooded valley of the Quah-Davic.

As matters stood, for all the watchers that marked him, the old lumberman walked amid no more imminent menace than that which glittered down upon him from four pairs of small bright eyes, high up among the forking limbs of an old pine. In a well-hidden hole, as in a nursery window, were bunched the smooth heads of four young squirrels, interested beyond measure in the strange animal plodding so heavily below them. Had they been Settlement squirrels they would, without doubt, have passed shrill comments, more or less uncomplimentary; for the squirrel loves free

speech. But when he dwells among the folk of the ancient wood he, even he, learns reticence; and, in that neighbourhood, if a young squirrel talks out loud in the nest, the consequences which follow have a tendency to be final. When the old lumberman had passed out of their range of view, the four little heads disappeared into the musky brown depths of the nest, and talked the event over in the smallest of whispers.

As the lumberman journeyed, covering good ground with his long, slouching stride, the trail gradually descended through a tract where moss-grown boulders were strown thick among the trees. Presently the clear green brown of the 15 mid-forest twilight took a pallor ahead of him, and the air began to lose its pungency of bark and mould. Then came the flat, soft smell of sedge; and the trees fell away: and the traveller came out upon the shores of a lake. Its waters were outspread pearly-white from a fringe of pale green rushes, and the opposite shore looked black against the pale, hazy sky. A stone's throw beyond the sedge rose a little naked island of black rock, and in the sheen of water off its extremity there floated the black, solitary figure of a loon.

As the lumberman came out clear of the trees, and the gaudy colours of his bundle caught its eye, the bird sank itself lower in the water till only its erect neck and wedge-shaped head were in view. Then, opening wide its beak, it sent forth its wild peal of inexplicable and disconcerting laughter—an affront to the silence, but a note of monition to all the creatures of the lake. The loon had seen men before, and despised them, and found pleasure in proclaiming the

scorn. It despised even the long, black sticks that 16 went off with smoky bang when pointed; for had it not learned, in another lake near the Settlement, to dive at the flash and so elude the futile, spattering pellets that flew from the stick.

The lumberman gave neither a first nor a second thought to the loon at all, but quickened his pace in the cheerful open. The trail now led some way along the lake-side, till the shore became higher and rougher, and behind a cape of rock a bustling river emptied itself, carrying lines of foam and long ripples far out across the lake's placidity. From the cape of rock towered a bleak, storm-whitened rampike, which had been a pine tree before the lightning smote it. Its broken top was just now serving as the perch of a white-headed eagle. The great bird bent fierce yellow eyes upon the stranger,—eyes with a cruel-looking, straight overhang of brow,—and stretched its flat-crowned, snake-like head far out to regard him. It opened the rending sickle of its beak and yelped at him—three times at deliberated interval. Then the traveller 17 vanished again into the gloom of the wood, and the arrogant bird plumed himself upon a triumph.

The trail now touched the river, only to forsake it and plunge into the heart of a growth of young Canada balsam. This sweet-smelling region traversed, the soft roar of the stream was left behind, and the forest resumed its former monumental features. For another hour the man tramped steadily, growing more conscious of his load, more and more uninterested in his surroundings; and for another hour his every step was noted by intent, unwinking eyes from branch and thicket. Then again the woods fell apart with a spreading of daylight. He came out upon the spacious

solitude of a clearing; pushed through the harsh belt of blackberry and raspberry canes, which grew as a neutral zone between forest and open; picked his way between the burned stumps and crimson fireweeds of a long desolate pasture; and threw down his bundle at the door of the loneliest cabin he had ever chanced to see.

# Chapter II

## The Cabin in the Clearing

### Table of Contents

Though a spur of black, uncompromising spruce woods gave it near shelter on the north, the harshly naked clearing fell away from it on the other three sides, and left the cabin bleak. Not a shrub nor a sapling broke the bareness of the massive log walls, whence the peeling bark hung in strips that fluttered desolately to every wind. Only a few tall and ragged weeds, pale green, and with sparse, whitish grey seed-heads, straggled against the foundation logs. The rough deal door sagged on its hinges, half open. The door-sill gaped with a wide crack, rotted along the edges; and along the crack grew a little fringe of grass, ruthlessly crushed down by old Dave's gaudy bundle. The two small windows still held fragments of glass in their 19 sashes,—glass thick with spiders' webs, and captive dust, and the *débris* of withered insects. The wide-eaved roof, well built of split cedar-slabs, with a double overlay of bark, seemed to have turned a brave front to the assault of the seasons, and showed few casualties. Some thirty paces to one side stood another cabin, lower and more roughly built, whose roof had partly fallen in. This had been the barn,—this, with a battered lean-to of poles and interwoven spruce boughs against its southerly wall. The barn was set down at haphazard, in no calculated or contenting relation to the main building, but just as the lay of the hillocks had made it simplest to find a level for the foundations. All about it grew a tall, coarse grass, now grey and drily rustling, the brood of

seeds which in past years had sifted through the chinks from the hay stored in the loft. The space between the two buildings, and for many square yards about the cabin door, was strewn thick with decaying chips, through which the dock and plantain leaves, hardy 20 strangers from the Settlement, pushed up their broad, obtuse intrusion. Over toward the barn lay the bleached skeleton of a bob-sled, the rusted iron shoe partly twisted from one runner; and in the centre of the space, where the chips gathered thickest and the plantains had gained least ground, lay a split chopping-log, whose scars bore witness to the vigour of a vanished axe.

The old lumberman fetched a deep breath, depressed by the immeasurable desolation. His eye wandered over the weedy fields, long fallow, and the rugged stump lots aflame here and there with patches of golden-rod and crimson fire-weed. To him these misplaced flares of colour seemed only to make the loneliness more forlorn, perhaps by their association with homelier and kindlier scenes. He leaned on his axe, and pointed indefinitely with his thumb.

“Squat here! an’ farm yon!” said he, with contemplative disapproval. “I’d see myself funder first! But Kirstie Craig’s got grit for ten men!”

Then he pushed the door open, lifting it to ease the hinge, and stepped peeringly inside. As he did so, a barn-swallow flickered out through a broken pane.

The cabin contained two rooms, one much smaller than the other. The ceiling of the smaller room was formed by a loft at the level of the eaves, open toward the main room, which had no ceiling but the roof of slabs and bark. Here,



running up through the east gable, was a chimney of rough stone, arched at the base to contain a roomy hearth, with swinging crane and rusted andirons. A settle of plank was fixed along the wall under the window. Down the middle of the room, its flank toward the hearth, ran a narrow table of two planks, supported by unsmoothed stakes driven into the floor. In the corner farthest from the chimney, over against the partition, was a shallow sleeping bunk, a mere oblong box partly filled with dry red pickings of spruce and hemlock. The floor was littered with dead leaves and with ashes wind-drifted from the hearth.

Old Dave went over and glanced into the bunk. He found the spruce pickings scratched up toward one end, and arranged as they would be for no human occupant.

“Critters been sleepin’ here!” he muttered. Then laying down his bundle, he turned his attention to the hearth, and soon the old chimney tasted once more, after its long solitude, the cheer of the familiar heat.

It was now close upon sundown, and the lumberman was hungry. He untied the grimy, many-coloured quilt. Kroof, the she-bear, had been right in her surmise as to that bundle. It did contain pork,—a small, well-salted chunk of it; and presently the red-and-white-streaked slices were sputtering crisply in the pan, while the walls and roof saturated themselves once more in old-remembered savours.

By the time the woodman had made his meal of fried pork and bread, and had smoked out his little pipe of blackened clay, a lonely twilight had settled about the cabin in the clearing. He went to the door and looked out. A white mist, rising along the forest edges, seemed to cut him

off from all the world of men; and a few large stars, at vast intervals, came out solemnly upon the round of sky. He shut the door, dropped the wooden latch into its slot, and threw a dry sliver upon the hearth to give him light for turning in. He was sparing of the firewood, remembering that Kirstie, when she came, would need it all. Then he took his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes, wiped the stump on his sleeve, and put it in his pocket; took off his heavy boots, rolled himself in the coloured quilt, and tumbled comfortably into the bunk, untroubled by any thought of its previous tenants. No sooner was he still than the mice came out and began scampering across the loft. He felt the sound homely and companionable, and so fell asleep. As he slept the deep undreaming sleep of the wholesomely tired, the meagre fire burned low, sank into pulsating coals, and faded into blackness.

It was, perhaps, an hour later that Old Dave sat up, suddenly wide awake. He had no idea why he did it. He had heard no noise. He was certainly not afraid. There was no tremor in his seasoned nerves. Nevertheless, he was all at once absolutely awake, every sense alert. He felt almost as if there were some unkindred presence in the cabin. His first impulse was to spring from the bunk, and investigate. But, doubtless because he had spent so great a portion of his life in the forest, and because he had all that day been subtly played upon by its influences, another instinct triumphed. He followed the immemorial fashion of the folk of the wood, and just kept still, waiting to learn by watching.

He saw the two dim squares of the windows, and once imagined that one of them was for an instant shadowed. At