

To Nature and Back Again

By Stephen Leacock

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It was probably owing to the fact that my place of lodgment in New York overlooked the waving trees of Central Park that I was consumed, all summer through, with a great longing for the woods. To me, as a lover of Nature, the waving of a tree conveys thoughts which are never conveyed to me except by



seeing a tree wave.

This longing grew upon me. I became restless with it. In the daytime I dreamed over my work. At night my sleep was broken and

restless. At times I would even wander forth at night into the park, and there, deep in the night shadow of the trees, imagine myself alone in the recesses of the dark woods remote from the toil and fret of our distracted civilization.

This increasing feeling culminated in the resolve which becomes the subject of this narrative. The thought came to me suddenly one night. I woke from my sleep with a plan fully matured in my mind. It was this: I would, for one month, cast off all the travail and cares of civilised life and become again the wild man of the woods that Nature made me. My plan was to go to the edge of the great woods, somewhere in New England, divest myself of my clothes-except only my union suit-crawl into the woods, stay there a month and then crawl out again. To a trained woodsman and crawler like myself the thing was simplicity itself. For food I knew that I could rely on berries, roots, shoots, mosses,

mushrooms, fungi, bungi-in fact the whole of Nature's ample storehouse; for my drink, the running brook and the quiet pool; and for my companions the twittering chipmunk, the chickadee, the chocktaw, the choo-choo, the chow-chow, and the hundred and one inhabitants of the forgotten glade and the tangled thicket.

Fortunately for me my resolve came to me upon the last day in August. The month of September was my vacation. My time was my own. I was free to go.

On my rising in the morning my preparations were soon made; or rather, there were practically no preparations to make. I had but to supply myself with a camera, my one necessity in the woods, and to say good-bye to my friends. Even this last ordeal I wished to make as brief as possible. I had no wish to arouse their anxiety over the dangerous, perhaps foolhardy, project that I had in mind. I

wished, as far as possible, to say good-bye in such a way as to allay the very natural fears which my undertaking would excite in the minds of my friends.

From myself, although trained in the craft of the woods, I could not conceal the danger that I incurred. Yet the danger was almost forgotten in the extraordinary and novel interest that attached to the experiment. Would it prove possible for a man, unaided by our civilised arts and industries, to maintain himself naked (except for his union suit) in the heart of the woods? Could he do it or could he not? And if he couldn't, what then?

But this last thought I put from me. Time alone could answer the question.

As in duty bound, I went first to the place of business where I am employed, to shake hands and say good-bye to my employer.

"I am going," I said, "to spend a month naked alone in the woods."

He looked up from his desk with genial kindness.

“That’s right,” he said, “get a good rest.”

“My plan is,” I added, “to live on berries and funguses.”

“Fine,” he answered. “Well, have a good time, old man-good-bye.”

Then I dropped in casually upon one of my friends. “Well,” I said, “I’m off to New England to spend a month naked.”

“Nantucket,” he said, “or Newport?” “No,” I answered, speaking as lightly as I could. “I’m going into the woods and stay there naked for a month.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I see. Well, good-bye, old chap-see you when you get back.”

After that I called upon two or three other men to say a brief work of farewell. I could not help feeling slightly nettled, I must confess, at the very casual way in which they seemed to take my announcement. “Oh, yes,” they said,

“naked in the woods, eh? Well, tata till you get back.”

Here was a man about to risk his life-for there was no denying the fact-in a great sociological experiment, yet they received the announcement with absolute unconcern. It offered one more assurance, had I needed it, of the degenerate state of the civilization upon which I was turning my back.

On my way to the train I happened to run into a newspaper reporter with whom I have some acquaintance.

“I’m just off,” I said, “to New England to spend a month naked (at least naked all but my union suit) in the woods; no doubt you’ll like a few details about it for your paper.”

“Thanks, old man,” he said, “we’ve pretty well given up running that nature stuff. We couldn’t do anything with it-unless, of course, anything happens to you. Then we’d be glad to give you some space.”

Several of my friends had at least the decency to see me off on the train. One, and one alone accompanied me on the long night-ride to New England in order that he might bring back my clothes, my watch, and other possessions from the point where I should enter the woods, together with such few messages of farewell as I might scribble at the last moment.

It was early morning when we arrived at the wayside station where we were to alight. From here we walked to the edge of the woods. Arrived at this point we halted. I took off my clothes, with the exception of my union suit. Then, taking a pot of brown stain from my valise, I proceeded to dye my face and hands and my union suit itself a deep butternut brown.

“What’s that for?” asked my friend.

“For protection,” I answered. “Don’t you know that all animals are protected by their peculiar markings that render them invisible? The caterpillar looks like the leaf it eats from;

the scales of the fish counterfeit the glistening water of the brook; the bear and the ‘possum are colored like the tree-trunks on which they climb. There!” I added, as I concluded my task, “I am now invisible.”

“Gee!” said my friend. I handed him back the valise and the empty paintpot, dropped to my hands and knees (my camera slung about my neck) and proceeded to crawl into the bush. My friend stood watching me.

“Why don’t you stand up and walk?” I heard him call.

I turned half round and growled at him. Then I plunged deeper into the brush, growling as I went.

After ten minutes” active crawling I found myself in the heart of the forest. It reached all about me on every side for hundreds of miles. All around me was the unbroken stillness of the woods. Not a sound reached my ear save the twittering of a squirrel, or squirl, in the

branches high above my head, or the far-distant call of a loon hovering over some woodland lake.

I judged that I had reached a spot suitable for my habitation.

My first care was to make a fire. Difficult though it might appear to the degenerate dweller of the city to do this, to the trained woodsman, such as I had now become, it is nothing. I selected a dry stick, rubbed it vigorously against my hind leg, and in a few moments it broke into a generous blaze. Half an hour latter I was sitting besides a glowing fire of twigs discussing with great gusto an appetizing mess of boiled grass and fungi cooked in a hollow stone.

I ate my fill, not pausing till I was full, careless, as the natural man ever is, of the morrow. Then, stretched out upon the pine-needles at the foot of a great tree, I lay in drowsy contentment listening to the song of the

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birds, the hum of the myriad insects and the strident note of the squirrel high above me. At times I would give utterance to the soft answering call, know to every woodsman, that is part of the freemasonry of animal speech. As I lay thus I would not have exchanged places with the pale dweller in the city for all the wealth in the world. Here I lay remote from the world, happy, full of grass, listening to the crooning of the birds.

But the mood of inaction and reflection cannot last, even with the lover of Nature. It was time to be up and doing. Much lay before me to be done before the setting of the sun should bring with it, as I fully expected it would, darkness. Before night fell I must build a house, make myself a suit of clothes, lay in a store of nuts, and in short prepare myself for the oncoming of winter, which, in the bush, may come on at any time in the summer.

I rose briskly from the ground to my hands and knees and set myself to the building of my house. The method that I intended to follow here was merely that which Nature has long since taught to the beaver and which, moreover, is known and practiced by the gauchos of the pampas, by the googoos of Rhodesia and by many other tribes. I had but to select a suitable growth of trees and gnaw them down with my teeth, taking care so to gnaw them that each should fall into the place appointed for it in the building. The sides, once erected in this fashion, another row of trees, properly situated, is gnawed down to fall crosswise as the roof.

I set myself briskly to work and in half an hour had already the satisfaction of seeing my habitation rising into shape. I was still gnawing with unabated energy when I was interrupted by a low growling in the underbrush. With animal caution I shrank behind a tree, growling in return. I could see something moving in the

bushes, evidently an animal of large size. From its snarl I judged it to be a bear. I could hear it moving nearer to me. It was about to attack me. A savage joy thrilled through me at the thought, while my union suit bristled with rage from head to foot as I emitted growl after growl of defiance. I bared my teeth to the gums, snarling, and lashed my flank with my hind foot. Eagerly I watched for the onrush of the bear. In savage combat who strikes first wins. It was my idea, as soon as the bear should appear, to bite off its front legs one after the other. This initial advantage once gained I had no doubt of ultimate victory.

The bushes parted. I caught a glimpse of along brown body and a hairy head. Then the creature reared up, breasting itself against a log, full in front of me. Great heavens! It was not a bear at all. It was a man.

He was dressed, as I was, in a union suit, and his face and hands, like mine, were stained

a butternut brown. His hair was long and matted and two weeks' stubble of beard was on his face.

For a minute we both glared at one another, still growling. Then the man rose up to a standing position with a muttered exclamation of disgust.

"Ah, cut it out," he said. "Let's talk English."

He walked over toward me and sat down upon a log in an attitude that seemed to convey the same disgust as the expression of his features. Then he looked round about him.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"Building a house," I answered.

"I know," he said with a nod. "What are you here for?"

"Why," I explained, "my plan is this: I want to see whether a man can come out here in the woods, naked, with no aid but that of his own hands and his own ingenuity and --"

“Yes, yes, I know,” interrupted the disconsolate man—“earn himself a livelihood in the wilderness, live as the cave-man lived, care-free and far from the curse of civilisation!”

“That’s it. That was my idea,” I said, my enthusiasm rekindling as I spoke. “That’s what I’m doing; my food is to be the rude grass and the roots that Nature furnishes for her children, and for my drink—“

“Yes, yes,” he interrupted again with impatience, “for your drink the running rill, for your bed the sweet couch of hemlock, and for your canopy the open sky lit with the soft stars in the deep-purple vault of the dewy night. I know.”

“Great heavens, man!” I exclaimed. “That’s my idea exactly. In fact, those are my very phrases. How could you have guessed it!”

He made a gesture with his hand to indicate weariness and disillusionment.

“Pshaw!” he said, “I know it because I’ve been doing it. I’ve been here a fortnight now on this open-air, life-in-the-woods game. Well, I’m sick of it! This last lets me out.”

“What last?” I asked.

“Why, meeting you. Do you realize that you are the nineteenth man that I’ve met in the last three days running about naked in the woods? They’re all doing it. The woods are full of them.”

“You don’t say so!” I gasped.

“Fact. Wherever you go in the bush you find naked men all working out this same blasted old experiment. Why, when you get a little further in you’ll see signs up, **NAKED MEN NOT ALLOWED IN THIS BUSH**, and **NAKED MEN KEEP OFF**, and **GENTLEMEN WHO ARE NAKED WILL KINDLY KEEP TO THE HIGH ROAD**, and a lot of things like that. You must have come in at a wrong place or you’d have noticed the little shanties that

they have now at the edge of the New England bush with signs up: UNION SUITS BOUGHT AND SOLD, CAMERAS FOR SALE OR TO RENT, HIGHEST PRICE FOR CAST-OFF CLOTHING, and all that sort of thing.”

“No,” I said. “I saw nothing.”

“Well, you look when you go back. As for me, I’m done with it. The thing’s worked out. I’m going back to the city to see whether I can’t, right there in the heart of the city, earn myself a livelihood with my unaided hands and brains. That’s the real problem; no more bumming on the animals for me. This bush business is too easy. Well, good-bye; I’m off.”

“But stop a minute,” I said. “How is it that if what you say is true, I haven’t seen or heard anybody in the bush, and I’ve been here sin the middle of the morning?”

“Nonsense,” the man answered. “They were probably all round you but you didn’t recognize them.”

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“No, no, it’s not possible. I lay here dreaming beneath a tree and there wasn’t a



sound, except the twittering of a squirrel and, far away, the cry of a lake-loon, nothing else.”

“Exactly, the twittering of a squirrel! That was some feller up the tree twittering to beat the band to let on that he was a squirrel, and no doubt some other feller calling out like a loon over near the lake. I suppose you gave them the answering cry?”

“I did,” I said. “I gave that low guttural note which—“

“Precisely—which is the universal greeting in the freemasonry of animal speech. I see you’ve

got it all down pat. Well, good-bye again. I'm off. Oh, don't bother to growl, please. I'm sick of that line of stuff."

:Good-bye," I said. He slid through the bushes and disappeared. I sat where I was, musing, my work interrupted, a mood of bitter disillusionment heavy upon me. So I sat, it may have been for hours.

In the far distance I could hear the faint cry of a bittern in some lonely marsh.

"Now, who the deuce is making that noise," I muttered; "some silly fool, I suppose, trying to think he's a waterfowl. Cut it out!"

Long I lay, my dream of the woods shattered, wondering what to do.

Then suddenly there came to my ear the loud sound of voices, human voices, strident and eager, with nothing of the animal growl in them.

"He's in there. I seen him!" I heard some one call.

Rapidly I dived sideways into the underbrush, my animal instinct strong upon me again, growling as I went. Instinctively I know that it was I that they were after. All the animal joy of being hunted came over me. My union suit stood up on end with mingled fear and rage.

As fast as I could I retreated into the wood. Yet somehow, as I moved, the wood, instead of growing denser seemed to thin out. I crouched low, still growling and endeavouring to bury myself in the thicket. I was filled with a wild sense of exhilaration such as any lover of the wild life would feel at the knowledge that he is being chased, that some one is after him, that some one is perhaps just a few feet behind him, waiting to stick a pitchfork into him as he runs. There is no ecstasy like this.

Then I realized that my pursuers had closed in on me. I was surrounded on all sides.

The woods had somehow grown thin. They were like the mere shrubbery of a park-it might

be of Central Park itself. I could hear among the deeper tones of men the shrill voices of boys. "There he is," one cried, "going through them bushes! Look at him humping himself!" "What is it, what's the sport?" another called. "Some crazy guy loose in the park in his underclothes and the cops after him."

Then they closed in on me. I recognized the blue suits of the police force and their short clubs. In a few minutes I was dragged out of the shrubbery and stood in the open park in my pajamas, wide awake, shivering in the chilly air of early morning.

Fortunately for me it was decided at the police-court that sleepwalking is not an offense against the law. I was dismissed with a caution.

My vacation is still before me, and I still propose to spend it naked. But I shall do so at Atlantic City.