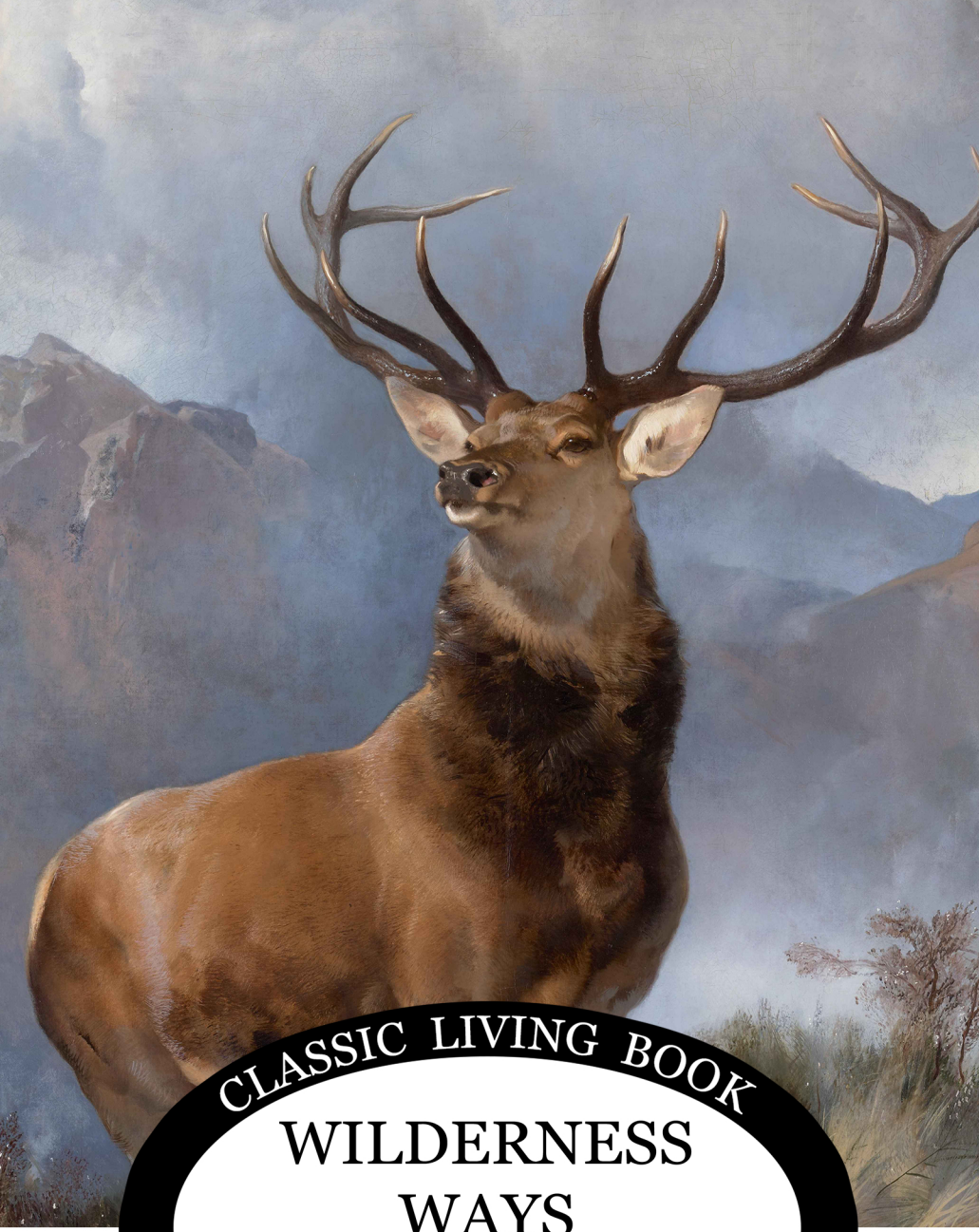

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

WILDERNESS WAYS

William J. Long

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

This edition published 2025
by Living Book Press

ISBN: 978-1-92297-436-5 (hardcover)
978-1-76153-980-0 (softcover)

First published in 1900.

A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

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by

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PREFACE.

THE FOLLOWING sketches, like the "Ways of Wood Folk", are the result of many years of personal observation in the woods and fields. They are studies of animals, pure and simple, not of animals with human motives and imaginations.

Indeed, it is hardly necessary for genuine interest to give human traits to the beasts. Any animal is interesting enough as an animal, and has character enough of his own, without borrowing anything from man—as one may easily find out by watching long enough.

Most wild creatures have but small measure of gentleness in them, and that only by instinct and at short stated seasons. Hence I have given both sides and both kinds, the shadows and lights, the savagery as well as the gentleness of the wilderness creatures.

It were pleasanter, to be sure, especially when you have been deeply touched by some exquisite bit of animal devotion, to let it go at that, and to carry with you henceforth an ideal creature.

But the whole truth is better—better for you, better for children—else personality becomes confused with mere animal individuality, and love turns to instinct, and sentiment vaporizes into sentimentality.

This mother fox or fish-hawk here, this strong mother loon or lynx that to-day brings the quick moisture to your eyes by her utter devotion to the little helpless things which great Mother Nature gave her to care for, will to-morrow, when they are grown, drive those same little ones with savage treatment into the world to face its dangers alone, and will turn away from their sufferings thereafter with astounding indifference.

It is well to remember this, and to give proper weight

to the word, when we speak of the *love* of animals for their little ones.

I met a bear once—but this foolish thing is not to be imitated—with two small cubs following at her heels. The mother fled into the brush; the cubs took to a tree. After some timorous watching I climbed after the cubs, and shook them off, and put them into a bag, and carried them to my canoe, squealing and appealing to the one thing in the woods that could easily have helped them. I was ready enough to quit all claims and to take to the brush myself upon inducement. But the mother had found a blueberry patch and was stuffing herself industriously.

And I have seen other mother bears since then, and foxes and deer and ducks and sparrows, and almost all the wild creatures between, driving their own offspring savagely away. Generally the young go of their own accord as early as possible, knowing no affection but only dependence, and preferring liberty to authority; but more than once I have been touched by the sight of a little one begging piteously to be fed or just to stay, while the mother drove him away impatiently. Moreover, they all kill their weaklings, as a rule, and the burdensome members of too large a family. This is not poetry or idealization, but just plain animal nature.

As for the male animals, little can be said truthfully for their devotion. Father fox and wolf, instead of caring for their mates and their offspring, as we fondly imagine, live apart by themselves in utter selfishness. They do nothing whatever for the support or instruction of the young, and are never suffered by the mothers to come into the den, lest they destroy their own little ones. One need not go to the woods to see this; his own stable or kennel, his own dog or cat will be likely to reveal the startling brutality at the first good opportunity.

An indiscriminate love for all animals, likewise, is not the best sentiment to cultivate toward creation. Black snakes in a land of birds, sharks in the bluefish rips, rabbits in Australia, and weasels everywhere are out of place in the present economy of nature. Big owls and hawks, representing a yearly destruction of thousands of good game birds and of untold innocent songsters, may also be profitably studied with a gun sometimes instead of an opera-glass. A mink is good for nothing but his skin; a red squirrel—I hesitate to tell his true character lest I spoil too many tender but false ideals about him all at once.

The point is this, that sympathy is too true a thing to be aroused falsely, and that a wise discrimination, which recognizes good and evil in the woods, as everywhere else in the world, and which loves the one and hates the other, is vastly better for children, young and old, than the blind sentimentality aroused by ideal animals with exquisite human propensities. Therefore I wrote the story of Kagax, simply to show him as he is, and so to make you hate him.

In this one chapter, the story of Kagax the Weasel, I have gathered into a single animal the tricks and cruelties of a score of vicious little brutes that I have caught red-handed at their work. In the other chapters I have, for the most part, again searched my old notebooks and the records of wilderness camps, and put the individual animals down just as I found them.

Wm. J. Long.

Stamford, September, 1900.

I. MEGALEEP THE WANDERER.

MEGALEEP IS THE BIG woodland caribou of the northern wilderness. His Milicete name means The Wandering One, but it ought to mean the Mysterious and the Changeful as well. If you hear that he is bold and fearless, that is true; and if you are told that he is shy and wary and inapproachable, that is also true. For he is never the same two days in succession. At once shy and bold, solitary and gregarious; restless as a cloud, yet clinging to his feeding grounds, spite of wolves and hunters, till he leaves them of his own free will; wild as Kakagos the raven, but inquisitive as a blue jay,—he is the most fascinating and the least known of all the deer.

One thing is quite sure, before you begin your study: he is never where his tracks are, nor anywhere near it. And if after a season's watching and following you catch one good glimpse of him, that is a good beginning.

I had always heard and read of Megaleep as an awkward, ungainly animal, but almost my first glimpse of him scattered all that to the winds and set my nerves a-tingling in a way that they still remember. It was on a great chain of barrens in the New Brunswick wilderness. I was following the trail of a herd of caribou one day, when far ahead a strange clacking sound came ringing across the snow in the crisp winter air. I ran ahead to a point of woods that cut off my view from a five-mile barren, only to catch breath

in astonishment and drop to cover behind a scrub spruce. Away up the barren my caribou, a big herd of them, were coming like an express train straight towards me. At first I could make out only a great cloud of steam, a whirl of flying snow, and here and there the angry shake of wide antlers or the gleam of a black muzzle. The loud clacking of their hoofs, sweeping nearer and nearer, gave a snap, a tingle, a wild exhilaration to their rush which made one want to shout and swing his hat. Presently I could make out the individual animals through the cloud of vapor that drove down the wind before them. They were going at a splendid trot, rocking easily from side to side like pacing colts, power, grace, tirelessness in every stride. Their heads were high, their muzzles up, the antlers well back on heaving shoulders. Jets of steam burst from their nostrils at every bound; for the thermometer was twenty below zero, and the air snapping. A cloud of snow whirled out and up behind them; through it the antlers waved like bare oak boughs in the wind; the sound of their hoofs was like the clicking of mighty castanets—"Oh for a sledge and bells!" I thought; for Santa Claus never had such a team.

So they came on swiftly, magnificently, straight on to the cover behind which I crouched with nerves thrilling as at a cavalry charge,—till I sprang to my feet with a shout and swung my hat; for, as there was meat enough in camp, I had small wish to use my rifle, and no desire whatever to stand that rush at close quarters and be run down. There was a moment of wild confusion out on the barren just in front of me. The long swinging trot, that caribou never change if they can help it, was broken into an awkward jumping gallop. The front rank reared, plunged, snorted a warning, but were forced onward by the pressure behind. Then the leading bulls gave a few mighty bounds which brought them close up to me, but left a clear space for the

frightened, crowding animals behind. The swiftest shot ahead to the lead; the great herd lengthened out from its compact mass; swerved easily to the left, as at a word of command; crashed through the fringe of evergreen in which I had been hiding,—out into the open again with a wild plunge and a loud cracking of hoofs, where they all settled into their wonderful trot again, and kept on steadily across the barren below.

That was the sight of a lifetime. One who saw it could never again think of caribou as ungainly animals.

Megaleep belongs to the tribe of Ishmael. Indeed, his Latin name, as well as his Indian one, signifies The Wanderer; and if you watch him a little while you will understand perfectly why he is called so. The first time I ever met him in summer, in strong contrast to the winter herd, made his name clear in a moment. It was twilight on a wilderness lake. I was sitting in my canoe by the inlet, wondering what kind of bait to use for a big trout which lived in an eddy behind a rock, and which disdained everything I offered him. The swallows were busy, skimming low, and taking the young mosquitoes as they rose from the water. One dipped to the surface near the eddy. As he came down I saw a swift gleam in the depths below. He touched the water; there was a swirl, a splash—and the swallow was gone. The trout had him.

Then a cow caribou came out of the woods onto the grassy point above me to drink. First she wandered all over the point, making it look afterwards as if a herd had passed. Then she took a sip of water by a rock, crossed to my side of the point, and took a sip there; then to the end of the point, and another sip; then back to the first place. A nibble of grass, and she waded far out from shore to sip there; then back, with a nod to a lily pad, and a sip nearer the brook. Finally she meandered a long way up the shore

out of sight, and when I picked up the paddle to go, she came back again. Truly a *Wandergeist* of the woods, like the plover of the coast, who never knows what he wants, nor why he circles about so, nor where he is going next.

If you follow the herds over the barrens and through the forest in winter, you find the same wandering, unsatisfied creature. And if you are a sportsman and a keen hunter, with well established ways of trailing and stalking, you will be driven to desperation a score of times before you get acquainted with Megaleep. He travels enormous distances without any known object. His trail is everywhere; he is himself nowhere. You scour the country for a week, crossing innumerable trails, thinking the surrounding woods must be full of caribou; then a man in a lumber camp, where you are overtaken by night, tells you that he saw the herd you are after 'way down on the Renous barrens, thirty miles below. You go there, and have the same experience,—signs everywhere, old signs, new signs, but never a caribou. And, ten to one, while you are there, the caribou are sniffing your snowshoe track suspiciously back on the barrens that you have just left.

Even in feeding, when you are hot on their trail and steal forward expecting to see them every moment, it is the same exasperating story. They dig a hole through four feet of packed snow to nibble the reindeer lichen that grows everywhere on the barrens. Before it is half eaten they wander off to the next barren and dig a larger hole; then away to the woods for the gray-green hanging moss that grows on the spruces. Here is a fallen tree half covered with the rich food. Megaleep nibbles a bite or two, then wanders away and away in search of another tree like the one he has just left.

And when you find him at last, the chances are still against you. You are stealing forward cautiously when

a fresh sign attracts attention. You stop to examine it a moment. Something gray, dim, misty, seems to drift like a cloud through the trees ahead. You scarcely notice it till, on your right, a stir, and another cloud, and another—The caribou, quick, a score of them! But before your rifle is up and you have found the sights, the gray things melt into the gray woods and drift away; and the stalk begins all over again.

The reason for this restlessness is not far to seek. Megaleep's ancestors followed regular migrations in spring and autumn, like the birds, on the unwooded plains beyond the Arctic Circle. Megaleep never migrates; but the old instinct is in him and will not let him rest. So he wanders through the year, and is never satisfied.

Fortunately nature has been kind to Megaleep in providing him with means to gratify his wandering disposition. In winter, moose and red deer must gather into yards and stay there. With the first heavy storm of December, they gather in small bands here and there on the hardwood ridges, and begin to make paths in the snow,—long, twisted, crooked paths, running for miles in every direction, crossing and recrossing in a tangle utterly hopeless to any head save that of a deer or moose. These paths they keep tramped down and more or less open all winter, so as to feed on the twigs and bark growing on either side. Were it not for this curious provision, a single severe winter would leave hardly a moose or a deer alive in the woods; for their hoofs are sharp and sink deep, and with six feet of snow on a level they can scarcely run half a mile outside their paths without becoming hopelessly stalled or exhausted.

It is this great tangle of paths, by the way, which makes a deer or a moose yard; and not the stupid hole in the snow which is pictured in the geographies and most natural history books.

But Megaleep the Wanderer makes no such provision he depends upon Mother Nature to take care of him. In summer he is brown, like the great tree trunks among which he moves unseen. Then the frog of his foot expands and grows spongy, so that he can cling to the mountain-side like a goat, or move silently over the dead leaves. In winter he becomes a soft gray, the better to fade into a snowstorm, or to stand concealed in plain sight on the edges of the gray, desolate barrens that he loves. Then the frog of his foot arches up out of the way; the edges of his hoof grow sharp and shell-like, so that he can travel over glare ice without slipping, and cut the crust to dig down for the moss upon which he feeds. The hoofs, moreover, are very large and deeply cleft, so as to spread widely when his weight is on them. When you first find his track in the snow, you rub your eyes, thinking that a huge ox must have passed that way. The dew-claws are also large, and the ankle joint so flexible that it lets them down upon the snow. So Megaleep has a kind of natural snowshoe with which he moves easily over the crust, and, except in very deep, soft snows, wanders at will, while other deer are prisoners in their yards. It is the snapping of these loose hoofs and ankle joints that makes the merry clacking sound as caribou run.

Sometimes, however, they overestimate their abilities, and their wandering disposition brings them into trouble. Once I found a herd of seven up to their backs in soft snow, and tired out,—a strange condition for a caribou to be in. They were taking the affair philosophically, resting till they should gather strength to flounder to some spruce tops where moss was plenty. When I approached gently on snowshoes (I had been hunting them diligently the week before to kill them; but this put a different face on the matter) they gave a bound or two, then settled deep in the snow, and turned their heads and said with

their great soft eyes: "You have hunted us. Here we are, at your mercy."

They were very much frightened at first; then I thought they grew a bit curious, as I sat down peaceably in the snow to watch them. One—a doe, more exhausted than the others, and famished—even nibbled a bit of moss that I pushed near her with a stick. I had picked it with gloves, so that the smell of my hand was not on it. After an hour or so, if I moved softly, they let me approach quite up to them without shaking their antlers or renewing their desperate attempts to flounder away. But I did not touch them. That is a degradation which no wild creature will permit when he is free; and I would not take advantage of their helplessness.

Did they starve in the snow? you ask. Oh, no! I went to the place next day and found that they had gained the spruce tops, ploughing through the snow in great bounds, following the track of the strongest, which went ahead to break the way. There they fed and rested, then went to some dense thickets where they passed the night. In a day or two the snow settled and hardened, and they took to their wandering again.

Later, in hunting, I crossed their tracks several times, and once I saw them across a barren; but I left them undisturbed, to follow other trails. We had eaten together; they had fed from my hand; and there is no older truce on earth than that, not even in the unchanging East, where it originated.

Megaleep in a storm is a most curious creature, the nearest thing to a ghost to be found in the woods. More than other animals he feels the falling barometer. His movements at such times drive you to desperation, if you are following him; for he wanders unceasingly. When the storm breaks he has a way of appearing suddenly, as if

he were seeking you, when by his trail you thought him miles ahead. And the way he disappears—just melts into the thick driving flakes and the shrouded trees—is most uncanny. Six or seven caribou once played hide-and-seek with me that way, giving me vague glimpses here and there, drawing near to get my scent, yet keeping me looking up wind into the driving snow where I could see nothing distinctly. And all the while they drifted about like so many huge flakes of the storm, watching my every movement, seeing me perfectly.

At such times they fear little, and even lay aside their usual caution. I remember trailing a large herd one day from early morning, keeping near them all the time, and jumping them half a dozen times, yet never getting a glimpse because of their extreme watchfulness. For some reason they were unwilling to leave a small chain of barrens. Perhaps they knew the storm was coming, when they would be safe; and so, instead of swinging off into a ten-mile straightaway trot at the first alarm, they kept dodging back and forth within a two-mile circle. At last, late in the afternoon, I followed the trail to the edge of dense evergreen thickets. Caribou generally rest in open woods or on the windward edge of a barren. Eyes for the open, nose for the cover, is their motto. And I thought, "They know perfectly well I am following them, and so have lain down in that tangle. If I go in, they will hear me; a wood mouse could hardly keep quiet in such a place. If I go round, they will catch my scent; if I wait, so will they; if I jump them, the scrub will cover their retreat perfectly."

As I sat down in the snow to think it over, a heavy rush deep within the thicket told me that something, not I certainly, had again started them. Suddenly the air darkened, and above the excitement of the hunt I felt the storm coming. A storm in the woods is no joke when you are six

miles from camp without axe or blanket. I broke away from the trail and started for the head of the second barren on the run. If I could make that, I was safe; for there was a stream near, which led near to camp; and one cannot very well lose a stream, even in a snowstorm. But before I was halfway the flakes were driving thick and soft in my face. Another half-mile, and one could not see fifty feet in any direction. Still I kept on, holding my course by the wind and my compass. Then, at the foot of the second barren, my snowshoes stumbled into great depressions in the snow, and I found myself on the fresh trail of my caribou again. "If I am lost, I will at least have a caribou steak, and a skin to wrap me up in," I said, and plunged after them. As I went, the old Mother Goose rhyme of nursery days came back and set itself to hunting music:

> Bye, baby bunting,
> Daddy's gone a hunting,
> For to catch a rabbit skin
> To wrap the baby bunting in.

Presently I began to sing it aloud. It cheered one up in the storm, and the lilt of it kept time to the leaping kind of gallop which is the easiest way to run on snowshoes: "Bye, baby bunting; bye, baby bunting—Hello!"

A dark mass loomed suddenly up before me on the open barren. The storm lightened a bit, before setting in heavier; and there were the caribou just in front of me, standing in a compact mass, the weaker ones in the middle. They had no thought nor fear of me apparently; they showed no sign of anger or uneasiness. Indeed, they barely moved aside as I snowshoed up, in plain sight, without any precaution whatever. And these were the same animals that had fled upon my approach at daylight, and that had escaped me all day with marvelous cunning.

As with other deer, the storm is Megaleep's natural

protector. When it comes he thinks that he is safe; that nobody can see him; that the falling snow will fill his tracks and kill his scent; and that whatever follows must speedily seek cover for itself. So he gives up watching, and lies down where he will. So far as his natural enemies are concerned, he is safe in this; for lynx and wolf and panther, seek shelter with a falling barometer. They can neither see nor smell; and they are all afraid. I have often noticed that among all animals and birds, from the least to the greatest, there is always a truce when the storms are out.

But the most curious thing I ever stumbled into was a caribou school. That sounds queer; but it is more common in the wilderness than one thinks. All gregarious animals have perfectly well defined social regulations, which the young must learn and respect. To learn them, they go to school in their own interesting way.

The caribou I am speaking of now are all woodland caribou—larger, finer animals every way than the barren-ground caribou of the desolate unwooded regions farther north. In summer they live singly, rearing their young in deep forest seclusions. There each one does as he pleases. So when you meet a caribou in summer, he is a different creature, and has more unknown and curious ways than when he runs with the herd in midwinter. I remember a solitary old bull that lived on the mountain-side opposite my camp one summer, a most interesting mixture of fear and boldness, of reserve and intense curiosity. After I had hunted him a few times, and he found that my purpose was wholly peaceable, he took to hunting me in the same way, just to find out who I was, and what queer thing I was doing. Sometimes I would see him at sunset on a dizzy cliff across the lake, watching for the curl of smoke or the coming of a canoe. And when I dove in for a swim and went splashing, dog-paddle way, about the island where my tent was,

he would walk about in the greatest excitement, and start a dozen times to come down; but always he ran back for another look, as if fascinated. Again he would come down on a burned point near the deep hole where I was fishing, and, hiding his body in the underbrush, would push his horns up into the bare branches of a withered shrub, so as to make them inconspicuous, and stand watching me. As long as he was quiet, it was impossible to see him there; but I could always make him start nervously by flashing a looking-glass, or flopping a fish in the water, or whistling a jolly Irish jig. And when I tied a bright tomato can to a string and set it whirling round my head, or set my handkerchief for a flag on the end of my trout rod, then he could not stand it another minute, but came running down to the shore, to stamp, and fidget, and stare nervously, and scare himself with twenty alarms while trying to make up his mind to swim out and satisfy his burning desire to know all about it. But I am forgetting the caribou schools.

Wherever there are barrens—treeless plains in the midst of dense forest—the caribou collect in small herds as winter comes on, following the old gregarious instinct. Then each one cannot do as he pleases any more; and it is for this winter and spring life together, when laws must be known, and the rights of the individual be laid aside for the good of the herd, that the young are trained.

One afternoon in late summer I was drifting down the Toledi River, casting for trout, when a movement in the bushes ahead caught my attention. A great swampy tract of ground, covered with grass and low brush, spread out on either side the stream. From the canoe I made out two or three waving lines of bushes where some animals were making their way through the swamp towards a strip of big timber which formed a kind of island in the middle.

Pushing my canoe into the grass, I made for a point just

astern of the nearest quivering line of bushes. A glance at a bit of soft ground showed me the trail of a mother caribou with her calf. I followed cautiously, the wind being ahead in my favor. They were not hurrying, and I took good pains not to alarm them.

When I reached the timber and crept like a snake through the underbrush, there were the caribou, five or six mother animals, and nearly twice as many little ones, well grown, which had evidently just come in from all directions. They were gathered in a natural opening, fairly clear of bushes, with a fallen tree or two, which served a good purpose later. The sunlight fell across it in great golden bars, making light and shadow to play in; all around was the great marsh, giving protection from enemies; dense underbrush screened them from prying eyes—and this was their schoolroom.

The little ones were pushed out into the middle, away from the mothers to whom they clung instinctively, and were left to get acquainted with each other, which they did very shyly at first, like so many strange children. It was all new and curious, this meeting of their kind; for till now they had lived in dense solitudes, each one knowing no living creature save its own mother. Some were timid, and backed away as far as possible into the shadow, looking with wild, wide eyes from one to another of the little caribou, and bolting to their mothers' sides at every unusual movement. Others were bold, and took to butting at the first encounter. But careful, kindly eyes watched over them. Now and then a mother caribou would come from the shadows and push a little one gently from his retreat under a bush out into the company. Another would push her way between two heads that lowered at each other threateningly, and say with a warning shake of her head that butting was no good way to get along together. I had

once thought, watching a herd on the barrens through my glasses, that they are the gentlest of animals with each other. Here in the little school in the heart of the swamp I found the explanation of things.

For over an hour I lay there and watched, my curiosity growing more eager every moment; for most of what I saw I could not comprehend, having no key, nor understanding why certain youngsters, who needed reproof according to my standards, were let alone, and others kept moving constantly, and still others led aside often to be talked to by their mothers. But at last came a lesson in which all joined, and which could not be misunderstood, not even by a man. It was the jumping lesson.

Caribou are naturally poor jumpers. Beside a deer, who often goes out of his way to jump a fallen tree just for the fun of it, they have no show whatever; though they can travel much farther in a day and much easier. Their gait is a swinging trot, from which it is impossible to jump; and if you frighten them out of their trot into a gallop and keep them at it, they soon grow exhausted. Countless generations on the northern wastes, where there is no need of jumping, have bred this habit, and modified their muscles accordingly. But now a race of caribou has moved south into the woods, where great trees lie fallen across the way, and where, if Megaleep is in a hurry or there is anybody behind him, jumping is a necessity. Still he doesn't like it, and avoids it whenever possible. The little ones, left to themselves, would always crawl under a tree, or trot round it. And this is another thing to overcome, and another lesson to be taught in the caribou school.

As I watched them the mothers all came out from the shadows and began trotting round the opening, the little ones keeping close as possible, each one to its mother's side. Then the old ones went faster; the calves were left in a long