

## DOWN TO EARTH

By ALAN DEVOE

### *Lynx*

THE wild animals with which we share the earth — (if “share” be not too ironic a word for our resolute attempt at usurpation) — have reacted to our presence in a variety of ways. Certain of the defenseless ones, of course, have simply vanished in quick extirpation at our hands. The passenger pigeon

had no strength and no strategy with which to withstand our murderous acquisitiveness. Other wild things, more cunning or less shy or having in smaller degree the spirit of wild free independence, have gradually accommodated themselves to us, and let us make of them what we will: so that now the gen-



*Lynx*

*Frank Utpatel*

tle sparrow of the English hedges survives adaptedly as a dragged soot-stained parasite upon us, in the clattering canyons of New York and Chicago, and the gray squirrels are become beggarly petitioners for peanuts. A few of the animals we have been able wholly to enslave. We have broken the wild horse, and made him serve our commerce. We have made of the cow a witless machine to feed us.

Though many a wild animal has vanished forever, in our vigorous march toward domination, and though many another survives only on the terms of a dingy mendicancy, there remain wild and incorruptible ones which have in no degree surrendered. By tactical withdrawals into deeper wilderness, by the exercise of subtle cunning, and perhaps in a few cases by simply the power of their rebuking dignity, they have thus far outwitted or outfaced us. Foxes are subtly wiser in woods-ways than most of the hounds and hunters; and so they remain foxes, wild and free and persisting almost at the edges of our cities; and many a naturalist, who has seen a fox watching the deceived hounds rushing clamorously past his ingenious hiding-place, has been prepared to swear that a fox can grin. The great horned owls are fathomlessly subtle

in the darkness. Their squalling still sounds within earshot of the skyscrapers, and the newspapers still periodically chronicle how a citizen, walking a civilized street at night, has been suddenly and soundlessly beset by a buffeting of smothering wings and a raking of crooked talons . . . and has been left bleeding and terrified by an attacker who vanishes, still soundless and invisible, into the wilderness of the night. The great blue herons still wade our watercourses, even in the townships. They have survived, in a manner of speaking, by their massive obliviousness of us. They ignore that we are here. A heron stands motionless on its tall stilt legs in one of our brooks, wrapped in the grace and the withdrawn dignity of a being wholly impervious to the whole hot fuss of the human episode in planetary history; and this spirit is so communicated to even the least responsive of us, with such overmastering rebuke, that rarely is the gun raised to the shoulder.

However much of self-importance or aggressiveness or even ruthless rapacity we may have in us, there exists a part of us — a very old and deep part — which must feel a sympathy and admiration for those wild creatures that have kept their wildness and kept free. We have

hunted and hounded many a beast, and often been terrible in our uncaring. But still a part of our own hearts also belongs forever to the wilderness. We are animals ourselves. We have sold much of our freedom, traded away in a bad bargain much of our clean original animality. But a part of us (in the useful Christian symbolism) can still remember and look back to Eden. A portion of our spirit is comrade to the deer. There can scarcely live a man who, with a primal part of the psyche that can never be wholly lost however greatly it may be overlayered and obscured, is not stirred poignantly to hear a wolf-call, or to see a bounding white-tailed deer escape the hunters, or to hear in the midnight the long-drawn screaming of a lynx.

No cat is ever wholly tamed. None of the big cats is ever truly tamed at all. With that region in the depths of us which is cousinly to all feral things, we must on that account feel ever a certain admiring responsiveness to the great cat that still roams our own northern woods: the tuft-eared and silently padding lynx. The lynx has dwindled, yes. It has had to withdraw ever deeper and deeper into the lessening forests. But it has not been sent down to extinction by us. It has not

compromised with what is alien. The lynx remains — wary, quiet-footed, cat-immaculate, piercing the wilderness night with its tremendous cry — as symbol of all things wild and unadaptable and filled with savage pride.

## II

The kits of the Canada lynx are most often born in May or June, in a hidden wilderness den prepared by the mother in a hollow log or a natural opening amongst boulders. In late winter the male lynxes utter the caterwauling of their lust: a crescendo of yowls and shivering squallings that makes the partridges huddle closer in their evergreen cover and sends the rabbits scampering to crouch motionless in their snow-forms with flattened ears. About three months after the breeding, the kits are born. There are one to four of them. They are not much larger than the kittens of man's "domesticated" cat, but their eyes are open; and they can stand on their broad cushiony paws within a few hours after birth.

For some two or three months the young lynxes are sequestered in and around their secluded birth-place in the forest, suckling on rank cat-milk, later growing adept

in fastidiously tearing to pieces the fresh-killed chipmunks and woodsmice that their mother procures for them in her dozen daily miles of wary, forest-prowling and stealthy tracking. The kits' ears grow big and pointed, tipped with lynx-tufts. The faint spots and stripings of kittenhood fade. The kit lynxes become ready to be adult lynxes: great ripple-muscled cats that may attain to forty pounds, and that will be wise in running a fox across crusted snow, and will love the deep wilderness and the darkness, and hate humanity.

The young lynxes go forth into the woods with their mother (and sometimes their father), and for nearly a year they may travel as a band. There is much that a maturing lynx needs learn. No wild animal, of course, receives education in the human sense of a planned instruction, for it is the essence of animalness that action occurs by instincts, spontaneities and intuitive impulses that lie below conscious mind; but native skills are educed and perfected by parental example. The life of such a hunter as a lynx demands sure cunning.

How take a fox? Snow-time is the season for it; for then, as a young lynx finds, his great broad paws support him on the crust through which a fox's small feet

penetrate. It is possible to take a fox by the throat and rip his life out. It is serviceable to rake at his belly with cat-cunning hind legs, and disembowel him. In the winter it is even possible to take a deer. The way of a lynx is to pad after the deer in the deep-lying snow, leap for the neck, and hang on relentlessly to the floundering animal until death comes from exhaustion and the loss of blood. A caribou can be so killed. Apart from the techniques that a lynx must learn for making his rare kills of such big beasts as this, he must grow proficient in the getting of his daily staples: grouse and particularly rabbits. The latter are his commonest food . . . the relationship of preyer and preyed-upon so established that when the populace of rabbits is decimated by plague the lynxes commonly wander away from the territory to seek out new hunting-grounds. But they learn resources, too, for these times of famine: that frogs and snakes are edible, that grasshoppers will nourish for a time even the body of a great cat. A lynx, like all wholly feral things, takes on a competent self-sufficiency. It can swim a stream better than a dog can. It acquires the wisdom, when a big kill has been made, of caching part of the food against the future. To

avoid skunks, to interpret the twitching of another lynx's tail or the snarling in another lynx's throat, to leave porcupines alone except in a time of gravest famine, and then to tackle them by the subtle insertion of a paw under their bellies so that with a quick gesture they can be flipped over and their unprotected undersides exposed . . . all these things and a hundred others become as much a part of lynx-personality, by the end of the subconscious process of education, as is the lynx's ingrained and immaculate cat-habit of scratching up leaves and earth-mould to cover voided droppings.

A lynx-band breaks up when the spring comes. By then, the kits know what they must know; and early in March the family is infected by the restlessness of the breeding fever, so that brotherly and sisterly relationships cease and the lynxes are become only individual males and females. Thenceforth each goes its own way, solitary, to live a life of prowling padding through the forest for as much as fifty miles between sun and sun, screaming and miaowing to express lust or fury in the lonely night, crouching and creeping and pouncing where hare or partridge or ground-squirrel relaxes its vigilance. These things, and of course

(for it is true of all wild animals) a degree of playing. A solitary lynx, padding across the snow in the winter moonlight, has been known to stop and give a great frisking leap. In all wild hearts resides a certain primal gaiety.

Curious is the relationship of lynx to man. As the grouse are by instinct terrified of the lynx, fleeing the drifting scent of that enemy as they flee few other creatures, so does the lynx recognize us for what we are: a foe to the wilderness, boding no good for any wild cat whose home it is. To the lynx-heart, we mean the steel trap. We mean the noose-snare, evilly concealed. This being so, it were not strange if lynxes made attack upon us. But if they do, it is so rare a happening that there is hardly a record. There are, however, many records of a queerer happening:

A man travels a wilderness trail in the dark, and a lynx gets wind of him. With infinite stealth the great cat draws close, watching. It lopes along parallel to the man's trail, close to him, soundless, invisible, hour by hour, mile by mile. The lynx does not attack, no. Attack, as trappers and northern Indians have often said, would come as a blessed relief. It would dispel the fancy that the great cat is filled with a terrible amusement.

# THE LIBRARY

## *Santayana, Poet of Dissolution*

BY JOHN LAND

I FIRST heard the name of George Santayana when I was a very baffled student at a big eastern university. Our campus, for youths like me, represented less a concentration than a suspension of the mind's forces. There was one little tow-headed philosophy instructor with pale blue eyes. We called him *Il Porvello*, the Poor Little One, like St. Francis; or more often, the Poor Little White Thing.<sup>1</sup> Now I know him as a bachelor of certified charm and intelligence, the author of some carefully contrived verse and criticism. But then, to my cruelly youthful mind, he seemed an epitome of all that was wrong with higher education. He was co-author of a textbook which was required reading for all freshmen, and which was supposed to purge young minds of the dross of the real world and initiate the pliant into the mystique of culture.

This pale instructor was also the priest of Santayana, whose cult included occasional afternoon teas for those who shared the enthusiasm.

As I strove against the flatulent liberalism around me, resenting its ability to undermine my conservative values which it had nothing to replace but which I was too immature to know how to defend, George Santayana became to me, in the persons of his disciples, the symbol of the characterless American intellectual — arrogant, parochial and ineffectual.

Of course, I did not bother to read Santayana. Later, when I found the strength to repudiate the university and strike out for myself, I felt a certain kinship for Santayana because I heard that he had given up teaching as soon as he was able and that he took a rather dim view of American colleges and curricula. Much later, when I began to read Santayana, I was puzzled that a mind whose basic tensile strength was unmistakable should express itself in a prose lightly sprinkled with sugar. Even *The Last Puritan* failed to win me as completely as it won many others.

Therefore it was in a very per-