



THE RAVEN CLIFF

SAMUEL SCOVILLE, JR.

Drawings by Herman Palmer

AS usual it was all the Collector's fault. Whenever I highly resolve to stop climbing and clambering and settle down to golf as befits a man of my age and weight, he comes along and persuades me to take just one more trip.

This time it was to visit the nest of a pair of duck hawks, those rare raptors who delight in setting up housekeeping on the side of the steepest cliffs which they can conveniently find.

The day before we were to start, on the fifteenth of April, a delayed snow-storm covered the country six inches deep. Likewise I had a cold and a temperature. Neither of these occurrences had any weight with the Collector. He produced alleged inside information from the weather bureau that the storm had not extended to the northern part of the state where we were to go. Then by false and flattering words, he convinced me that a day in the open would cure my cold. It did, it certainly did. Long before I got back I had forgotten that I ever had such a minor ailment as a cold.

Filled with forebodings and aspirin, I finally found myself on

a sleeper with the Collector and the Architect, another bird enthusiast, headed for a little station twelve hours to the north.

On the train the Collector's clanking set of climbing irons and the coil of rope which he carried aroused much interest on the part of the crew.

"I don't know who you gemmen are after but I sure hopes as you gets him," was the farewell of the porter, as in the gray dawn we stepped out into a foot of snow. The Collector only remarked that weather bureaus were notoriously unreliable, and hurried us towards the hills, — a misty-violet through the whirling flakes.

There was no sign of life as we passed through the little mountain village all dumb with snow. Through the fretted tracery of the trees we could see a gray-green stream whirling by, whose pallid water seemed in keeping with the bleak hillsides which stretched away tier upon tier up to Warrior's Mountain towering above them in the mist.

At the edge of the village we stopped for breakfast under an open shed by the side of the road. As we ate, a little flock of birds breakfasted with us, scratching among the chaff and litter in front of the shed. Among them were song-sparrows with black spots on their breasts, slate-colored juncos, tree-sparrows with their zig-zag wing bars and reddish crowns, and one chipping sparrow with his tawny top-knot, looking very lonely among his hardier brethren.

Overhead a pair of siskins with striped breasts and forked tails pecked head-downwards at the elm buds and beyond a golden-crowned kinglet gave his high, lisping notes from the top of a tree up which a brown creeper was spiralling his way.

Farther on we caught a glimpse of the white head and recurved wings of an osprey sailing through the falling flakes high above the river and once heard the rattling call of another brave fisherman, as a belted kingfisher flew heavily along the rushing stream.

Then, as we followed the river, came suddenly through the wintry woods a snatch of rollicking song.

"See-ee me, see me-ee, you, *you*," carolled a little, solitary vireo as if there were no such thing as snow. As if he had given the signal, there came from far across the river the wild, ringing, "whee-udle, whee-udle," of a Carolina wren, while a flicker shouted, "Quick, quick, quick," to Spring.

At last we reached the cliff where two years before a pair of duck hawks had nested. To-day the drifted snow had hidden the path which wound its way through the underbrush and up the slope. We found, however, an old watercourse, which although filled with rocks and fallen trees, was easier going than to break our way through the brush.

It was a hard climb. Every few steps we would break through the ice and snow and sink to our knees in freezing water while part of the way we had to pull ourselves up hand over hand by dangling branches. At last, however, we reached the top where a lone hemlock overhung the edge of the precipice and far below, the gray-green river foamed between its snow-covered banks. Beyond, as far as we could see, range after range of snow-covered hills stretched away towards the gray horizon.

The drooping boughs gave me a good hand-hold and I scrambled down the side of the cliff without much trouble until I reached the shelf beneath an arching rock where the nest of the fierce falcons had been located a few years before. To-day there were no signs of them save a few old flicker feathers and a small bone.

As I turned to climb back, from the face of the cliff came a curious squeaking, hissing noise, like the escape of gas from a leaking valve and looking closely I saw a small brown head thrust out through the snow. There, close to my hand, frozen to the rock as he hibernated, head-downward, was a little brown bat. I carefully pulled him loose from the cliff, while he squeaked and fizzed and ungratefully tried to bite my finger with a mouthful of tiny teeth and his eyes, set deep in a hobgoblin face, gleamed like pin-points of black glass. Frozen there ever since the snow-fall, that little atom of intense vitality had refused to yield to cold or starvation but cried out thinly to the unhearing hills of his desire to live. I was glad that I had arrived in time to save him, and buttoned him carefully up in one of my pockets and that evening hung him up by his long, re-curved thumb-nails in a quiet corner of a building where I hoped that he would finish out his interrupted nap and some evening, weeks later, join his clan flitting through the spring twilight.

Close to where the bat had been I found the green leaves of a wild gooseberry, while beneath the snow showed a single spray of

squirrel-corn (*dicentra canadensis*), with greenish heart-shaped flowers, short, rounded spurs, and serrated leaves. The blossoms had a faint, far fragrance of hyacinth and it seemed strange to find them in their crevice struggling up from under the whiteness. Of course, like all flowers found beneath the snow, they had bloomed before the storm came.

As we plunged wearily down the hillside through the thickets of moose-wood saplings with their dark-green, striped bark, the whole trip seemed a failure. When at last we reached the road we decided to build a fire and get dry and have lunch before making any plans for the rest of the day.

Near the river was a grove of small hemlocks, dense enough to break the wind. There we cleared a large log of snow and cushioned it with soft evergreen boughs for a seat. In front of that, in spite of the snow, we soon had a roaring fire going which dried our clothes and warmed us to the heart. As we sat eating our lunch a brave, silent hermit-thrush joined us, hopping around in the snow through the underbrush only a few feet away.

We had about decided to tramp through a stretch of dense woods to the north in the hope that we might find there the nest of a red-shouldered hawk, or of that death-in-the-dark, a great horned owl, when the Architect called our attention to what seemed to be a pair of crows flying around in a peculiar manner along the face of another cliff beyond the one which we had just

visited. When we focused our field-glasses on them they looked twice as large as any crows that we had ever seen and they seemed to glide rather than flap as they flew. As they were silhouetted against the snow-covered cliff we could see that the feathers of their necks were long and pointed and their tails like those of some enormous grackle.

"The Northern Raven!" exclaimed the Collector rev-



erently, as befitted one who looked at last on the second rarest resident-bird in Pennsylvania. Time was when that wise, inscrutable bird, the Northern raven, was common all through Eastern America. De Witt Clinton recorded in 1810 that ravens were abundant all around Seneca Lake, while crows were never found there. Coues, one of our earlier ornithologists, wrote in the seventies that, "the sable plume and the bleaching skeleton, the ominous croak and the Indian war-whoop are not yet things of the past." Now, half a century later, a raven and a war-whoop are equally rare. Neither of my friends had ever seen one of the birds before.

The best was yet to come. The Collector, after carefully studying the cliff through the largest pair of field-glasses in captivity, suddenly announced that he had discovered the ravens' nest itself in a niche on the face of the rock.

A moment later and we were hurrying towards this second cliff, and I gathered from the Collector's grunted remarks as we ploughed through the snow, that to him the eggs of a Northern raven were about as rare as those of a roc. Some years before it had been my privilege to clamber to a raven's nest but I had never seen the bird since.

As usual, I was unanimously elected to do the climbing. The Collector has no head for heights and the Architect claimed that he had a lame back. I tried to plead my cold as a defense, but was advised that a little more brisk exercise would undoubtedly complete the cure already begun.

It was a heartbreaking tug through tangled thickets and across slippery rocks, but at least we reached the foot of the cliff and could see above, a great mass of sticks showing dimly in the depths of a shallow cave in the cliff face. As the female raven circled around the nest giving her hoarse croak, "crruck, crruck, crruck," it was answered from across the river by the liquid, beautiful whistle of a cardinal grosbeak, a strange meeting-place for these birds of the North and the South.

As the raven circled about the cliff, she was joined by her mate and the two wheeled through the gray sky together with their long tails spread out like fans and the bristling feathers of their necks looking almost like black ruffs. They had thick, gull-like beaks and we could well believe that the old falconers were right

when they claimed that a full-grown raven was a match for any hawk that flew. Probably the presence of the ravens was responsible for the absence of the duck hawks, for the larger raptors will not tolerate any rival near their nests. I once had a calling acquaintance with a barred owl who found out that a red-shouldered hawk was nesting a full half-mile from her tree. Sallying out one night the fierce bird caught the hawk unawares and literally tore her to pieces.

For some time we studied the different approaches to the raven's nest. The wise birds had chosen a shelf in a cave, the slippery floor of which sloped down at an angle of some forty-five degrees to a hundred-foot drop. At first sight there seemed to be a crevice from above, which led directly through the overhanging roof of the cave. This chimney, however, proved to be a cul-de-sac, as I found after an hour of hard climbing.

Then I came back to my starting point and attempted to reach the nest from the right-hand side, using a sturdy white oak tree, which grew from out of the ledges, as a ladder. Standing precariously on the topmost twigs of the swaying tree, I tried to negotiate the distance between myself and the entrance to the cave only to come up against an impasse of overhanging rock which it was impossible to cross.

Remained only the left-hand approach which involved a climb up a series of ladder-like ledges to one which lay just below and to the left of the cave. Every shelf and hand-hold was covered





with snow and slippery with ice, while frost-cracks added to the difficulty of the climb. Once I tested a ledge fully ten inches thick with one foot only to have it break off and go down with a roar a hundred feet or so, — an occurrence which so aggravated the Collector's symptoms of mountain-sickness that he retreated to the road far below where we could see him, a tiny figure, encouraging our efforts with uplifted

arms from time to time. At least he was an appreciative audience.

Finally I reached the last ledge of all which ran to within three feet of the opening of the cave. With my face to the cliff I sidled along this shelf until I came to the final foothold, a bit of jutting rock no wider than my hand. Beyond that only an outward bulge in the cliff perhaps a yard wide, lay between me and the cave. Shifting my feet, I could look around the overhanging rock and catch a glimpse of the nest in the cave not twenty feet away.

It might as well have been a mile away for although I could put my dangling foot around the jutting rock and even rest it firmly on a ledge beyond, yet it was impossible to take the one step necessary to land me in the cave. The instant that I took my left foot from the ledge on which it rested, the outward thrust of the bulging rock around which I must go would inevitably push me over the precipice.

As I clung there I remembered the coil of rope, about the size of a man's little finger, which the Collector always carried on his collecting-trips to lower egg-boxes, chisels, and the other paraphernalia of his nefarious calling.

Sending the Architect down for it, I had him go to the top of the cliff by a long circuit and fasten the rope securely around a sturdy little cedar-tree which grew there and then throw over the loose end. The rope was about a hundred feet long, and hung dangling close to where I stood. Under my directions, the Archi-

tect clambered down again to a wide ledge some fifty feet below the one on which I stood and held the rope tight for me.

The snow had stopped but there was no sign of sun in the lowering sky and the dimming light showed that the day was nearly over. The Architect from where he stood told me how easy it would be to reach the nest, now that I had the rope, and the Collector far below waved both arms reassuringly. As a matter of fact when I looked down the cliff and saw the jagged rocks far beneath showing like black fangs through the snow, I needed all the encouragement I could get.

Setting my teeth, I swung my right foot cautiously out into space until it reached a firm foot-hold beyond the bulge. Then, gripping the rope desperately with my left hand, I stepped out into space. Once started and there was no returning. For an awful fraction of a second it seemed as though the stubborn thrust of the out-cropping rock would hurl me off into mid-air in spite of the rope. Giving a last desperate tug with my left hand I threw myself forward and the next moment found myself on my hands and knees on the sloping floor of the cave, keeping myself from sliding down over the edge only by the pressure of my bare palms against the wet rock.

So close was I to the edge that I could see between my knees the sheer drop to the rocks below. My scalp prickled and tingled with the horror I had escaped, as with infinite care I edged my way up the ascent to the little inner shelf where the raven's nest showed dimly.

As I crept forward the light that came into the cave was cut off for an instant by the sweep of great black wings as with a hoarse croak the mother raven swooped toward me.

There is no record of a raven having ever attacked a man, but that one came so close that for a time I thought that she was intending to be the exception which proves the rule. So precarious was my hold that I really believe one peck from her massive beak would have toppled me down the cliff. Shaking all over with the strain, I crawled up towards the nest like a tree-toad, pressing the palms of my hands tightly against the wet rock.

At last I reached the shelf on which the nest was built. It had evidently been there for years as none of the sticks of which it was made showed any fresh breaks. It was some two feet across and

about a foot deep, lined with wool, white deer-hair, tufts of black skunk fur, and long strings of the inner bark of hemlock and beech trees hackled and pounded by the birds' strong beaks into a kind of matted felt.

I was wondering how I could release the pressure of my hands long enough to get out the egg-box which was tucked inside of my flannel shirt, but one look over the edge of the nest showed me that I would not need it. There, cuddled close together for warmth, lay four newly-hatched ravens, bare, blind, and of a pale golden color, each with a beak which seemed as large as its head. I studied them as long as I dared and deciding privately that they were the homeliest set of fledglings that I had ever seen, I started to leave, moving backwards as in the presence of royalty.

Alas, the raven-cave, like that of Polyphemus, was easier to enter than to leave. The rope which had helped me coming in was now out of reach and without it I dared not even stand upright. At last I found a tiny crack in the side of the cave into which I could sink two of my finger-nails and with this as a hand-hold managed at last with infinite care to struggle to my feet. Looking over one shoulder, I could see far below the face of the Architect looking up and called to him to swing the rope to me. Several times he tried to do this without success. At last, using the greatest care not to slip, I succeeded in thrusting my left hand out behind me, palm up. Again and again my friend failed to whirl the rope within reach. Finally, just as I was beginning to stiffen from my cramped position, I felt a loop of its length fall across my hand and gripped it desperately.

Then, holding to the rope, I was able to come close to the edge of the cliff and study the ledge from which I had come. It was at once plain to me that it was impossible to go back that way, as I would have to overcome not only the thrust of the rock but the pull of gravity in stepping up. The only way left was to go down the rope some sixty feet to a broad ledge below, just above where the Architect stood, and I decided with Lady Macbeth, that "'twere best done quickly".

Winding the rope tightly around one arm and leg, in spite of the protests of the Architect, who was afraid that I would fall on him if the rope broke, I stepped out into space. Once, many years before, I had dropped ten stories in a runaway ele-

vator before the safety clutches worked. The sensation was identical. There was a blur, the rope smoked through my hands, — I still carry the scar, — and I struck the snow-covered ledge sixty feet below with a thump that popped my glasses off into space. Since then I have been assured by gymnasts that there is a perfectly safe way to come down a small rope. Some day I am going to learn it. The Collector, who had been watching me with amazement through his field-glasses, met us as we came out of the woods, and nearly burst into tears when he heard of the raven's dishonorable conduct in hatching the eggs which he had counted upon for his collection.

Going back to our log, we started up the fire and brewed vast quantities of tea in a tin cup until it was time to leave. My last view of the raven cliff, as we started for the station, was the sight of the two birds soaring black against the rock in the twilight. As I watched them, the larger of the two swerved into the cave and a moment later I heard her give a soft note quite different from her usual hoarse croak.

"Ga-gl-gli," she crooned, and I know that the mother-raven was brooding again her blind, bare babies, and I wished them well as we moved off down the darkening road.



FORETELLING THE FUTURE

SIR OLIVER LODGE

CAN the future be foretold? The unexpected is, after all, only what we do not expect; comets and eclipses which we can foretell would be unexpected by savages. Are we then driven to the depressing conclusions of fatalism, that everything has been prearranged and events are merely "going through with it"? An occurrence may be foreseen, argues Sir Oliver Lodge, without being inevitably fated to occur. And in proof of the reality of premonitions the famous physicist gives us examples in which he himself believes.

THE whole question of foretelling the future involves us in difficulties, and at first sight such foretelling seems impossible. Yet it has to be admitted that in some cases predictions are actually made, and are duly confirmed by events; so that the outstanding question is what sort of prediction is possible and what is not. The type of predictions which are at present accepted without surprise are those made by astronomers. The type of predictions which seem incredible or absurd are those made by fortune-tellers. Between these two extremes there must be many grades, and it is not easy to draw a hard and fast line. Some philosophers have thought that "Time" was but a human abstraction, that its objective reality was doubtful, and that everything both present and future was in some sort prearranged. So far as the mechanical or inorganic universe is concerned that might very well be true. The present is the outcome of the past, and the future flows as a consequence from the present.

To most of us it seems that free will is a direct apprehension, that we are aware by experience of possessing the power of choice, the power of determining our own actions; so that in accordance with our own volition, that is by planning and designing and executing, we achieve results which would not otherwise have occurred, and which could not be predicted on mechanical principles.

On the other hand it has been argued that we and other animals always act under the influence of some "motive"; that these motives determine our actions, which are therefore inevitable; that a completely motiveless action is unthinkable; and that accordingly really free will is an illusion. The idea is that we are so controlled by motives, that not only the inorganic world, but the