

Demon of the North

by PETER KROTT

Translated from the German by Edward Fitzgerald



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The Lakeside Castle

"And what are we going to live on when we get there?" she wanted to know. "Who, if anyone, is going to let us have any money while we watch the tupus killing and eating the Lapps' reindeer? And then, what about the long, winter nights?"

"We'll find out what we're going to live on when we get there," I said soothingly. "We'll track down tupus to their lairs, take the young ones, bring them up, and then sell them to zoos. We can live on that. And for food there'll be salmon, reindeer, and moose galore."

It all looked quite simple to me, but my wife had only very recently left Central-European civilization, and she couldn't quite see how our new existence based on tupus was going to work out.

"We're neither Lapps nor Indians," my wife objected. "And then, do you really think the Lapps will leave our tupus alone? They'll kill Rolf and Rosa and burn down our hut. And what about the baby? You're a fine father, I must say."

We had got to the coffee by this time.

"The Lapps aren't as bad as all that, and I'd keep my eyes open anyway," I assured her. "And as for the baby; she'll grow up with tupus from the start." I was quite convinced that it was going to be a girl. "She'll grow up like you, including, I expect, your aversion to the cold."

And with this the conversation took a turn for the better, because nothing pleases a woman more than to be told that her child is going to grow up exactly like her.

Incidentally, this year we had not had much luck with our tupus. In March we had received two very small tupu babies from Lapland. They were only a few weeks old when we got them, and they were still blind and covered with whitish yellow hair. Only their dark broad heads were there to remind you that one day they would be

proper tupus—or perhaps “ought to be” is the better expression, for these two never were. Despite careful feeding and attention they died after we had had them only a few days. They suddenly couldn’t pass their water and they refused all food. The bigger of the two, the male, died first, and a small drop of blood appeared on his little black nose. The little female fought on for a few hours, but then she died too. I feel fairly sure that they had suffered some internal injury on the long journey from Lapland, and, in any case, they had certainly had to do without that most important massage. In a state of nature a tupu mother would never leave her young alone for a moment at that age.

A few weeks later we received another couple of tupus, proper children this time, with their baby fur and their black glistening pin-head eyes. They were both female, and we called them Sonia and Natasha. They got on well and were soon allowed to wander all over the house. There was great excitement on one occasion when we went out to meet Rolf and Rosa wearing the clothes we had worn when feeding the two young tupus. They both started to sniff as soon as we came near their cage, and as soon as we opened the door Rosa sniffed us all over. Her maternal feelings had obviously been aroused, and, unlike her usual behavior, she didn’t want to leave us for one moment—or, at least, not the smell in our clothing, and when for a joke my wife and I walked off in different directions Rosa was almost in despair. She didn’t know which of her children to stay with and she ran backwards and forwards between us in great excitement.

And Rolf had a lesson in what it means to be a tupu mother, for whenever he innocently came anywhere near us, Rosa went for him furiously. Usually Rolf, being the male and the stronger of the two, played first fiddle in

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need anything you can always go back to the blockhouse and get it."

I knew that man was an optimist the moment I set eyes on him: to go back twenty or thirty miles on skis to pick up a pound or two of sugar or a spare camera was nothing to him. After all, time and space are relative conceptions. Sven and I grinned at each other.

"Well, we'll go and get something to eat now," I said, "and buy some supplies. Then we'll come to your place."

That evening we went to Ville's house, and as soon as the door was opened I caught a familiar whiff. There were two small tupus in a case in the tiny entrance hall you went through into the very comfortable kitchen. Ville and his friend Alpo had caught them a few weeks previously. Alpo was there now.

"It was about twelve miles to the east," he began. "We came across a fresh wolverine spoor. The size indicated that it was a female; and at this time of the year a female usually has young ones. After a few hours we came to the lair, which was hidden under a fallen pine trunk. We knew the female must be at home, because when the youngsters are very small she hardly leaves them at all. Ville here cut himself a branch and began to poke around in the lair while I waited with my gun. It didn't take long before the mother came out growling, went for me and caught hold of my gun barrel before I could fire. Ville shot her. That's her pelt hanging up there," and he pointed to a skin on the wall. "Then we got the two young ones out. It was difficult to keep them alive, because they were so small."

I had a look at the tupus. They certainly were small, and thin and poorly developed too. It was a wonder they had survived. We sat down to coffee, while Ville's wife, a

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the Dalälven now. I had learned by experience, and I fixed my sleeping and eating times according to those of the tupus—not that I really had any alternative. They were awake and active for three or four hours, and then they would sleep for another three or four. In the afternoon Rosa left us, and we didn't see her again on that particular outing. That evening I determined to have a full night's rest, so when we got to the next blockhouse many miles farther north I locked the tupus out from the start.

The next morning when I got up there was no sign of them, but I was not disturbed, for I had heard them at the door from time to time during the night. Tupus have a fine scent and when they came back and found the blockhouse empty they would just follow my trail until they came up with me; which is just what they did do. By about nine o'clock I came to a marshy forest where there were large numbers of yellow marsh berries. Such berries are usually rather scarce, so I picked as many as I could carry, putting them into jars and cooking utensils, and even into my pockets. I hadn't been picking for long when Lomo and Elsa arrived. When the lively greetings were over they joined in the picking too—but not with a view to taking any home!

We got back to Mosseberg late that afternoon. It was a hot and sunny day, and the last two or three miles were through a wood of fir trees. A good many of the trees had been felled and the ground was covered with warm, dry bracken—although generally speaking the summer had been wet. Lomo and Elsa were getting tired, but they kept up with me, although we had plugged on pretty well half way through what would normally have been a sleeping period for them. But they knew exactly where they were now, and the thought of the house not far away

The Great Höktanden

by night, never came across him? It isn't easy to find an answer to such questions, for they take you into the sphere of animal psychology, and so far we don't know very much about that.

The natural order is remarkable for its wisdom. For example, if reindeer moss were poisonous it couldn't be eaten by reindeer, and they would starve. But if the reindeer could no longer exist their hard hoofs would no longer trample down the heather and make room for the moss. And if the reindeer were sufficiently watchful and swift the tupu would never be able to catch up with them and bring them down, not even in winter—and therefore the tupu would starve. But then there would be too many reindeer and many of them would starve and none of them would get enough to eat. And so it goes on. If all forms of life were sufficiently protected against all the dangers that threaten them then none of them would be able to exist at all. And even the tupu is not perfectly adapted to defy all its enemies, though he is reasonably well equipped for living in the barren territories in which he has his habitat. Except when he is asleep he is never still, and it is this ceaseless activity which represents the greatest difficulty in bagging a tupu. He is alert all the time and he therefore notices practically everything, including many things that other animals would not notice. He has some means of telling the difference between a moose carcass with a sportsman lying up with his gun, and a moose carcass which is just that and nothing more. And, needless to say, a tupu feeds only on the latter. Other beasts of prey seem less capable of making the distinction, and the result is that whereas the fox loses its skin, the tupu keeps his whole.

A tupu is very intelligent and quick to learn. In certain circumstances he can even learn that a moose carcass