



# ***Swiftwater***

PAUL ANNIXTER

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Large Type Edition Complete and Unabridged

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A KEITH JENNISON BOOK

Franklin Watts, Inc., Publishers

*A Division of Grolier Incorporated*

575 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022

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Hill and Wang, Inc.

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Printed in the United States of America

***SWIFTWATER***





**F**OR THREE WEEKS THAT RAINY FALL THE WILD GEESE lay up in the marshes back of Swiftwater daytimes and moored out on the lake at night. The little backwoods settlement got out its shotguns and banged away at the flock going over, but during the first week not a feather dropped. The geese only flew a bit higher. They were used to this sort of enthusiasm the whole length of the continent. An evening came later, however, during the shooting, the sky full of the hazy red of an October sunset, when one of the geese broke formation directly over the General Store and started a rickety skate toward the beach.

Whit Turner, standing with a group of men and boys, had just opened his mouth to claim that his shot had done it when Bucky Calloway crashed his fist into it. Whit was older and taller, a lanky, raw-boned lad known to be tough. With his mouth bleeding, he dropped his shotgun and a fight began. Some of the men and boys had started toward the shore for the fallen goose, but the rest stopped to watch. Swiftwater was well represented, in fact—Postmaster Briscoe, Nat Stemline of the General Store, old Doc Waters, and Mr. Dell Fraser, a traveling hardware salesman, who called out with ringside relish: “Let ’em go to it. It’ll do ’em both good!”

Dusk thickened as Whit Turner took the beating of his life. He was fighting a young catamount, insensate to pain, and the time came when the best Whit could do was to sit up groggily. The other boy stood over him—white teeth showing, eyes under a shock of unkempt black hair gleaming like a young woods animal’s—waiting to make sure his job was finished. Meantime he kept jerking away from a girl now pulling at his bloody hand.

“Oh, Bucky! Why’d you do it? Whatall’s come over you?” she kept saying.

“Lemme ’lone, can’t you?” the winner gasped, abashed and angry. “I’m sick. I’m goin’ home.”

He turned and flung away into the dusk.

The interest of Dell Fraser, the hardware salesman, led to questions as the crowd broke up.

“Now that’s what I call a high-powered kid,” laughed Mr. Fraser. “Did I hear somebody call him Bucky?”

“His name’s Bucky Calloway,” offered Nat Stemline. “He

ain't from this town. He lives up in the woods a piece."

"And who was that slim, stringy-haired girl—his sister?"

"No, that's Bridie Mellott from up on the Shoulder. She and Bucky sort of hold together noticeable."

"What I can't figure is what made him so sore," said the hardware man. "He didn't even fire a shot."

No one seemed positively to know, but old Doc Waters had this to offer: "I believe it was that goose comin' down."

"What did he see in that to fight about? He didn't have a gun with him."

"Bucky's different; his father is, too," said Nat Stemline ponderously. "'Old Never-Stay-Put' we always call Cam Calloway and he's just about as transitory as them wild geese, feels kin to 'em too, they say. Bucky's a piece of the same. This country won't hold either of 'em long, I guess.

"It was the Indians made 'em both queer," elucidated the postmaster. "Father an' son—"

"Indian blood?" Mr. Fraser asked.

"No, but more at home, you might say, in the Indian village than here in town with respectable folk. That was before the Micmacs moved over to the Kennebec Reservation three years ago. Bucky was among 'em a lot as a kid. The Micmac totem, you know, is the wild goose."

"Indian blood nothing," snorted Doane Shattuck, the landman, who had come up. "Cam Calloway and his brood are just fiddle-footed squatters, if you ask me. Plain cracked, too. I ought to know. They're livin' on my land."

There were appreciative snorts from several quarters. "The woods had closed in on the Calloways" was the opinion of most of the townsfolk.

But old Doc Waters said quietly in the silence that followed: "If Cam Calloway's cracked, it's a rift that lets in a patch of sky. I'm here to say it's a pity more of us are not like that."

This was a bit technical perhaps. At any rate a silence followed as the doc moved away in the dark.

The night was misty and unseasonably warm, the shell ice all gone from the lake margin. Alone, down on the beach, Bucky sat listening to the faint gabble of the geese. He'd been hunting for the wounded bird, which no one had found, knowing that even if it was only winged, it would drink itself to death, for that was the proud way of the wounded goose.

Those sounds out there stirred the boy's blood strangely. Always they brought his father close, as if Cam were sitting there right beside him. Goose talk dropping from high sky or riding the lap of the waves, thin and elfin as the voice of the fall wind, keen as heart hunger, haunting as grief or death. It was like Cam's symbol, his totem. His father had said once that a man's soul could vault straight to the high hereafter on a wild goose's call. Whatever could Cam be doing now, Bucky wondered . . . gone off again without a word on one of his strange outjourneys.

At moments a restless ardor flamed in the boy. The misty blackness was like looking down a sooty chimney. There would be intervals of complete silence, except for the lap of the water. He fancied the geese moored out there on the water, taking their long dives for rich tubers among the swaying reeds.

"Must be ten-fifteen foot of water out there where

they are," he thought. "Maybe this is their last night here."

Cam would have known about that to the day. Cam could tell just what years the geese would stop here. Bucky could hardly remember when he had first become aware that the wild geese were like the pattern of life—his and Cam's.

Lamed and sore from the fight, he eased his back against a rock. He was sorry about the fight now. There would be hot spots in his chest that wouldn't cool down all summer: one over the way the town would be laughing at him; one over Bridie Mellott's butting in that way. He knew what they'd all be thinking. It was something of that that had come over him at sight of that goose dropping, as if some precious and intimate thing had to be protected, with Cam away and all.

All day he'd been thinking of Cam. As always he felt suffocated in the fear that Cam was gone for good. The core of him seemed muffled in his father's absence. Cam with his magic knowledge of woods, and the weather, and the ways of beasts. Wherever his father was he'd be thinking back home, with the geese talking up like they were tonight.

Almost the first thing he could recall was being awakened in the night by the wild geese out on the lake and in that same night hearing his mother's tearful voice protesting against his father's going away. The sweetish smell of woods-stilled corn whisky was a part of it too. Cam's secret demon.

Another well-polished memory on the same theme . . . Nearly three years ago—he was just coming twelve then—a year before the old Indian village had been cleared out back

of Swiftwater. John Silvernail, one of the elderly Micmacs, just drinking enough to awaken the mournful spirit of his tribe, had called him apart from the other boys one day and said: "Bald eagle fly no more—great totem of great people—all come—all go. Big beaver come no more to make dam like no man can do. Big beaver, totem of great people—all come—all go. Wild goose, totem of great people too. Go pretty soon. Micmac go too. Your father, he know!"

Then Silvernail, holding the wide eyes of the listening boy, was inspired to dilate on the secret nature of the wild geese; what they meant in the exact economy of the creatures; what they stood for upon the swept floors of the sky; how they fasted before rising to their great continental flights; how the old leading drake always knew the exact time to lift, according to the weather; how they crossed the Great Barren Lands in a single night. As if intoning a dark tragedy, the Micmac revealed the one weakness of the wild geese: corn, the white man's corn. If weather prevented the farmers' getting their corn in and the country was not too crowded with houses, the geese would settle and stay with the corn, forgetting their call to the south, forgetting even their dead. They would become heavy, logy, and waddling, a fallen estate.

"You not believe word—look at barnyard goose!" said John Silvernail.

Bucky started up from his thoughts, numb, congealed from the growing chill. It was 'way past dark and he had a mile and a half to go. Ma would have worked up half a bender already. His legs were like a pair of boards, hard to get going as he started for home

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**T**WO WEEKS PASSED AND MID-OCTOBER CAME. A STILL and bittersweet melancholy lay over the pinewoods, but beneath that stillness was a tocsin of fierce unrest, for this was the mad time for most of the forest. The rutting time of the antlered tribes, courting and migration time of wildfowl; time of drumming on logs, of fierce battles in forest glades and erratic, aimless flights through the woods without regard for safety or direction. This was the month when a single old-man partridge would defy deer, bear, and even moose in the rashness of the courting fever. The wild cry of

loons sounded from the lake and the spruce groves echoed to the booming of grouse. Even the pheasants, who were a collected folk ordinarily, were a bit giddy and not quite themselves during this period when the hunter's moon was waxing.

The wild-geese flock didn't pass on because of one fallen bird, but continued to linger. And the rains held on intermittently. A backwoods farmer coming in to town bewailed the fact that mud was hub-deep in his fields, that his corn was not in, that most of what the weather hadn't ruined had been eaten by the geese at night. This had a particular and private significance for Bucky Calloway.

These lake woods lay directly under one of the game birds' sky paths between Hudson's Bay and the Everglades. In small gaggles and mighty V's the geese went down every fall before the first snows and up again in March with the first thaws. Occasionally, but not every year, they stopped on the lake for a time, as in this particular fall. They couldn't be counted on to stop, but when they did, they stayed a fortnight at least, passing over the Calloway clearing night and morning from the lake.

On the last day the geese stayed, Bucky went alone back among the marshes, passing the site of the old Indian village, away up the lake shore where the wasteland ended, to the hundred acres of swamp and pine that Cam had always wanted to file on as a timber claim. His idea was to learn what the geese did all day and where they concealed themselves, but no sight or sound rewarded him. He found signs though, many webbed tracks in the mud, enough to prove that this was where the geese had their secret place, as Cam

had guessed. His father loved it out here. Bucky had a certain dream about this place.

Early dusk was falling when he turned homeward, just as the geese came over on their way back to the lake, but he could still see clearly through the gray—one line of the great V trailing out longer than the other, the mighty gander stretched out ahead, then the second in command, then the point of the wedge. They seemed hurrying tonight and flying carelessly low, Bucky told himself tensely, as faint shots began to sound from the direction of the town. When his eyes came down to earth again, he saw that Bridie Mellott had stopped her father's horse and buggy on the muddy road close by.

"Always hanging around," Bucky thought.

Bridie had the Mellott mare in the shafts today—old Agatha, who could manipulate the back-country roads in mud where no truck or flivver could move a yard.

"C'mon an' get in, Bucky," Bridie called. "I'm going around by your place."

The boy kicked the heavy balls of mud from his boots and climbed up beside her. Bridie was a slim, freckled half boy, Bucky's age and almost as tall. Always there had been a bond between these two. Bridie and her pa held out against the town's ridicule of Cam Calloway and his brood. There were times when these two—Bridie in blue jeans like any boy—had had wonderful days together in the woods, hunting, fishing, even trapping. Bridie was almost as good as Bucky himself on the trail and at such times he could forget she was nothing but a girl. But there were other times, particularly of late—Bridie in dresses just hanging around and

evincing a tiresome interest in Bucky's affairs—that made him wish he'd never known her. Getting sort of pretty, she was, too; pretty and silly.

Bridie was in jeans today, but working in the dresses phase.

“Bet I know where you've been,” she said. “Out trying to find where the wild geese are nesting.”

“Supposin' I have,” Bucky said sullenly.

“What makes you care so, Bucky?”

He didn't answer.

“I mean, what makes you take 'em on like they're your special business?”

“The wild goose is my totem,” Bucky said with heat. “I'm goin' to have one tattooed on my chest when I get money enough.”

“Yes indeedy, and I expect you'll be goin' off with 'em sometime when they go, same as Cam does.”

“Who told you that?”

“They all think you won't be long here.”

“When the time comes I'll go an' not before. Let 'em laugh at me. I don't care. I got no use for them either. I'll—”

“They don't laugh at you when we're around,” Bridie said.

“I could tell 'em all a lot about the geese, though, an' why they're staying on this fall an' why they don't always—”

“Tell me, Bucky.”

“Might as well tell the whole town as tell you an' I ain't goin' to, not yet. You couldn't keep anything overnight.”