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Opening extract from

The Trumpet of the Swan

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Published by

Puffin Books an imprint of Penguin Books Ltd

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CHAPTER ONE

Sam

WALKING back to camp through the swamp, Sam wondered whether to tell his father what he had seen.

'I know *one* thing,' he said to himself. 'I'm going back to that little pond again tomorrow. And I'd like to go alone. If I tell my father what I saw today, he will want to go with me. I'm not sure that's a very good idea.'

Sam was eleven. His last name was Beaver. He was strong for his age and had black hair and dark eyes like an Indian. Sam walked like an Indian, too, putting one foot straight in

front of the other and making very little noise. The swamp through which he was travelling was a wild place – there was no trail, and it was boggy underfoot, which made walking difficult. Every four or five minutes Sam took his compass out of his pocket and checked his course to make sure he was headed in a westerly direction. Canada is a big place. Much of it is wilderness. To get lost in the woods and swamps of western Canada would be a serious matter.

As he trudged on, the boy's mind was full of the wonder of what he had seen. Not many people in the world have seen the nest of a Trumpeter Swan. Sam had found one on the lonely pond on this day in spring. He had seen the two great white birds with their long white necks and black bills. Nothing he had ever seen before in all his life had made him feel quite the way he felt, on that wild little pond, in the presence of those two enormous swans. They were so much bigger than any bird he

had ever seen before. The nest was big, too – a mound of sticks and grasses. The female was sitting on eggs; the male glided slowly back and forth, guarding her.

When Sam reached camp, tired and hungry, he found his father frying a couple of fish for lunch.

'Where have *you* been?' asked Mr Beaver.

'Exploring,' replied Sam. 'I walked over to a pond about a mile and a half from here. It's the one we see from the air as we're coming in. It isn't much of a place – nowhere near as big as this lake we're on.'

'Did you see anything over there?' asked his father.

'Well,' said Sam, 'it's a swampy pond with a lot of reeds and cattails. I don't think it would be any good for fishing. And it's hard to get to – you have to cross a swamp.'

'See anything?' repeated Mr Beaver.

'I saw a muskrat,' said Sam, 'and a few red-winged blackbirds.'

Mr Beaver looked up from the wood stove, where the fish were sizzling in a pan.

'Sam,' he said, 'I know you like to go exploring. But don't forget – these woods and marshes are not like the country around home in Montana. If you ever go over to that pond again, be careful you don't get lost. I don't like you crossing swamps. They're treacherous. You could step into a soggy place and get bogged down, and there wouldn't be anybody to pull you out.'

'I'll be careful,' said Sam. He knew perfectly well he would be going back to the pond where the swans were. And he had no intention of getting lost in the woods. He felt relieved that he had not told his father about seeing the swans, but he felt queer about it, too. Sam was not a sly boy, but he was odd in one respect: he liked to keep things to himself. And he liked being alone, particularly when he was in the woods. He enjoyed the life on his father's cattle ranch in the Sweet Grass

country in Montana. He loved his mother. He loved Duke, his cow pony. He loved riding the range. He loved watching the guests who came to board at the Beavers' ranch every summer.

But the thing he enjoyed most in life was these camping trips in Canada with his father. Mrs Beaver didn't care for the woods, so she seldom went along – it was usually just Sam and Mr Beaver. They would motor to the border and cross into Canada. There Mr Beaver would hire a bush pilot to fly them to the lake where his camp was, for a few days of fishing and loafing and exploring. Mr Beaver did most of the fishing and loafing. Sam did the exploring. And then the pilot would return to take them out. His name was Shorty. They would hear the sound of his motor and run out and wave and watch him glide down on to the lake and taxi his plane in to the dock. These were the pleasantest days of Sam's life, these days in the woods, far, far

from everywhere – no automobiles, no roads, no people, no noise, no school, no homework, no problems, except the problem of getting lost. And, of course, the problem of what to be when he grew up. Every boy has *that* problem.

After supper that evening, Sam and his father sat for a while on the porch. Sam was reading a bird book.

'Pop,' said Sam, 'do you think we'll be coming back to camp again about a month from now – I mean, in about thirty-five days or something like that?'

'I guess so,' replied Mr Beaver. 'I certainly hope so. But why thirty-five days? What's so special about thirty-five days?'

'Oh, nothing,' said Sam. 'I just thought it might be very nice around here in thirty-five days.'

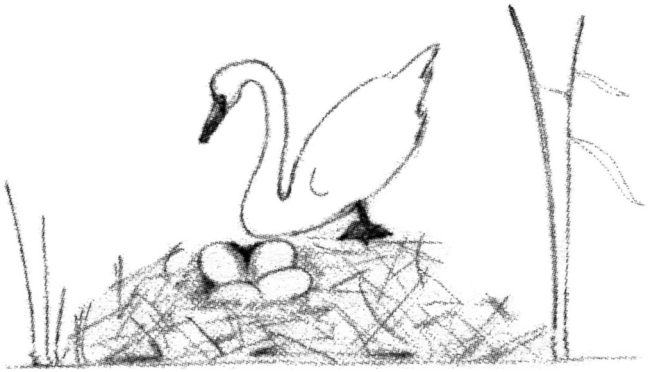
'That's the craziest thing I ever heard of,' said Mr Beaver. 'It's nice here *all* the time.'

Sam went indoors. He knew a lot about

birds, and he knew it would take a swan about thirty-five days to hatch her eggs. He hoped he could be at the pond to see the young ones when they came out of the eggs.

Sam kept a diary – a daybook about his life. It was just a cheap notebook that was always by his bed. Every night, before he turned in, he would write in the book. He wrote about things he had done, things he had seen, and thoughts he had had. Sometimes he drew a picture. He always ended by asking himself a question so he would have something to think about while falling asleep. On the day he found the swan's nest, this is what Sam wrote in his diary:

> I saw a pair of trumpeter swans today on a small pond east of camp. The female has a nest with eggs in it. I saw three, but I'm going to put four in the picture – I think she was laying another one. This is the greatest discovery I ever made in my entire life. I did



not tell Pop. My bird book says baby swans are called cygnets. I am going back tomorrow to visit the great swans again. I heard a fox bark today. Why does a fox bark? Is it because he is mad, or worried, or hungry, or because he is sending a message to another fox? *Why does a fox bark?*

Sam closed his notebook, undressed, crawled into his bunk, and lay there with his eyes closed, wondering why a fox barks. In a few minutes he was asleep.