



## Alone in the Wilderness (1913)

*Joseph Knowles*

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“Joe” Knowles' story needs no introduction to New England readers. Knowles (1869-1942), the famous Boston artist, entered the wilderness of Maine on August 4, 1913, naked, without firearms, matches, or even a knife, and lived for two months as a primitive man, relying wholly on his own resources. In this book he tells what he did and how he did it.

He describes why he undertook the experiment, and tells in detail how he lived: how he made his fires, what he ate and how he got it, how he caught fish and killed animals with his hands alone, how he sheltered and clothed himself; he narrates his wanderings and adventures, describes his physical and mental sensations, shows the scientific value of the primitive life, and outlines his plans for the future along primitive lines.

At last the dream of a thoroughgoing return to nature has been realized. A self-tutored artist (formerly a wilderness guide), Mr. Knowles went into the woods of northern Maine in August, 1913, naked, without so much as a match or a knife, and, after living for the stipulated two months in total independence of the advantages of civilization, emerged tanned and bearded, clad in bearskin and deerskin, carrying bow and arrows and a deer-horn knife.

His life in the woods the author habitually views in two aspects, the physical and the mental. He entered the woods on a rainy day, and, being unable to make a fire, he spent two nights resting and running alternately at short intervals in order to keep warm. Afterwards he enjoyed the warmth of a fire and the shelter of a lean-to, save for one miserable night which resulted in a fever. His food consisted of berries, bark, fish, partridges, squirrels, and some venison and bear meat. The bear he trapped, and killed by clubbing him on the nose; the deer he killed by breaking his neck by main force. Mr. Knowles apparently did not suffer through the absence of salt from his diet, nor from the extreme irregularity of his eating. As regards both quantity and time. Nor was he rendered uncomfortable through giving up suddenly the habit of smoking cigarettes. His physical life, in brief, though not without tribulations, seemed to him of almost trifling importance in comparison with his mental life.

“My suffering,” he writes, “was purely mental and a hundredfold worse than any physical suffering I experienced.” It had never occurred to him that he might be lonely, but the thought of his isolation and of his friends and his past life tortured him so relentlessly, especially at twilight, that he vowed again and again that he would return next day to the camp whence he had entered upon his wanderings.

Seeking diversion from his thoughts of civilized life, he drew, on birch bark, with burnt sticks from his fires, a number of sketches, first-rate examples of which illustrate his book; and he found further diversion in cultivating the friendship of a chipmunk, a flock of partridges, and a deer and fawn, to all of whom he spoke as to human beings.

His story was an “exclusive” for one newspaper, but all New Englanders followed his adventure with amused interest which has not yet lagged, because another paper has made a promising attempt to discredit his story. But it seems to have failed, and Mr. Knowles continued appearing before the public describing the delights of primitive life. Whatever the extent of his influence, he certainly attracted in New England a considerable public attention of a cap-flinging kind, which is well illustrated by a photograph showing “a portion of the crowd that greeted Joseph Knowles on his arrival in Boston.”

Originally published in 1913; reformatted for Kindle; may contain occasional imperfection; original spellings have been kept in place.

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