

MOUNTAIN-LAND



ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

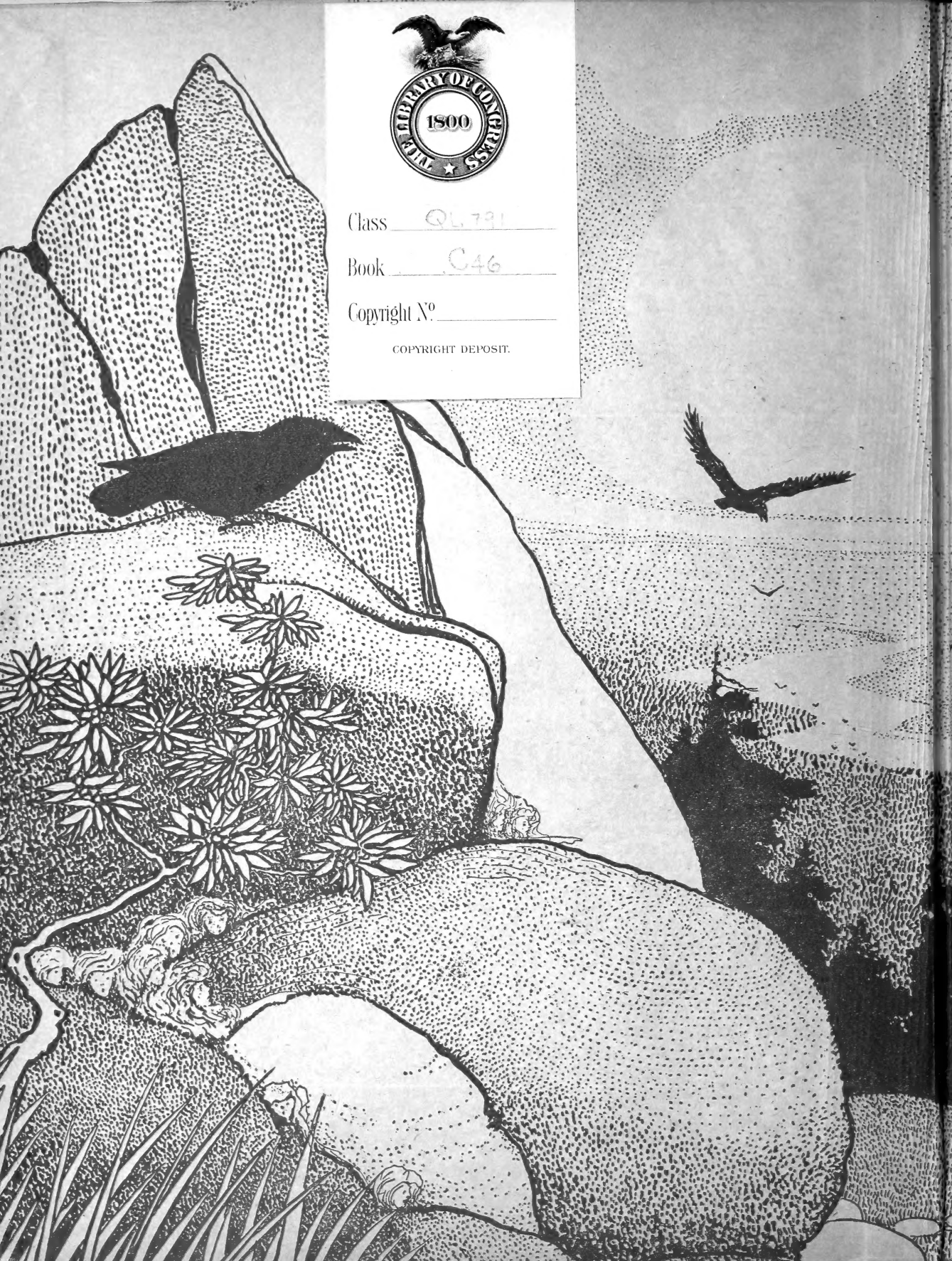


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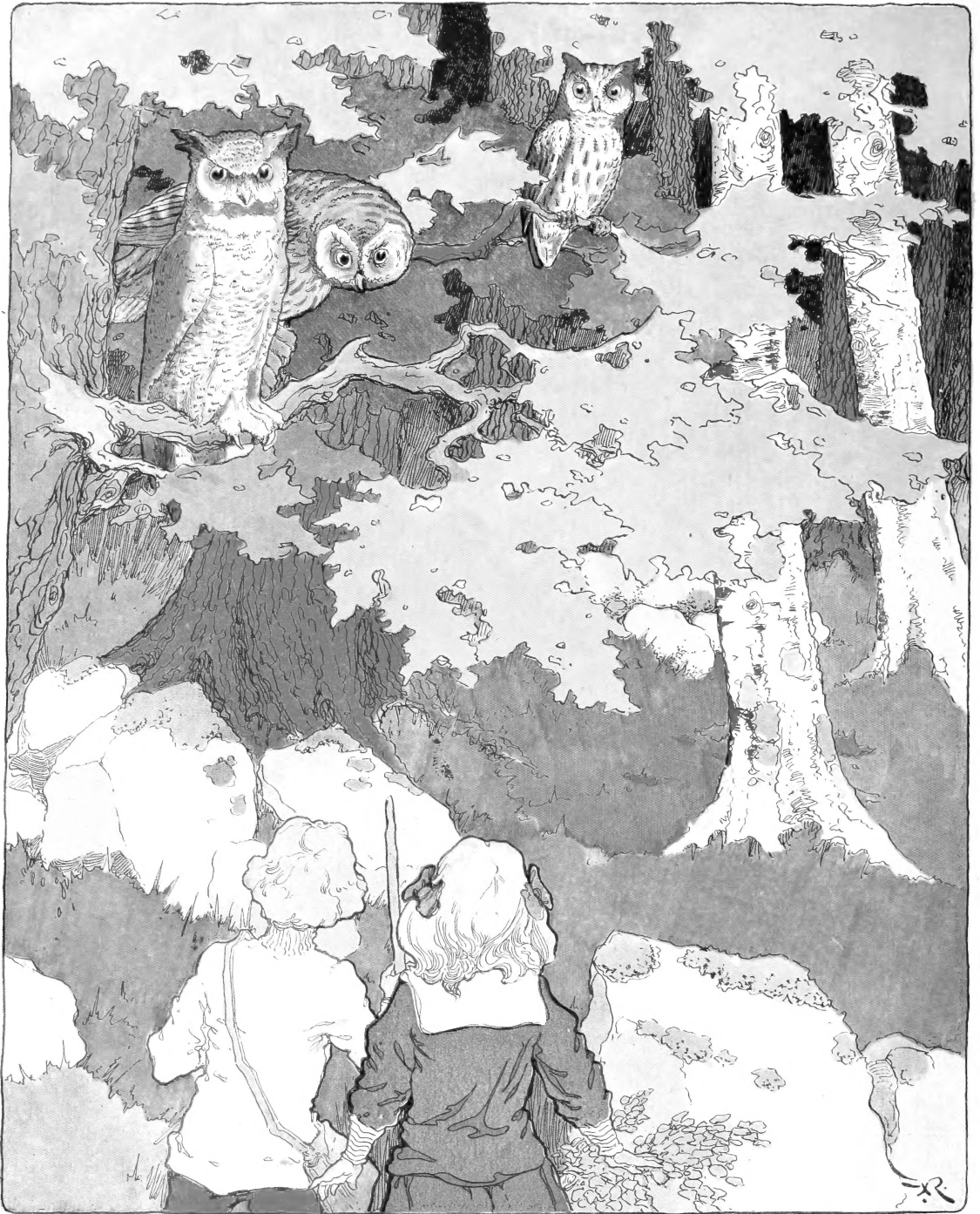
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MOUNTAIN-LAND



“‘G’wan!’ snapped the Big Cat-Owl.”

MOUNTAIN-LAND

By

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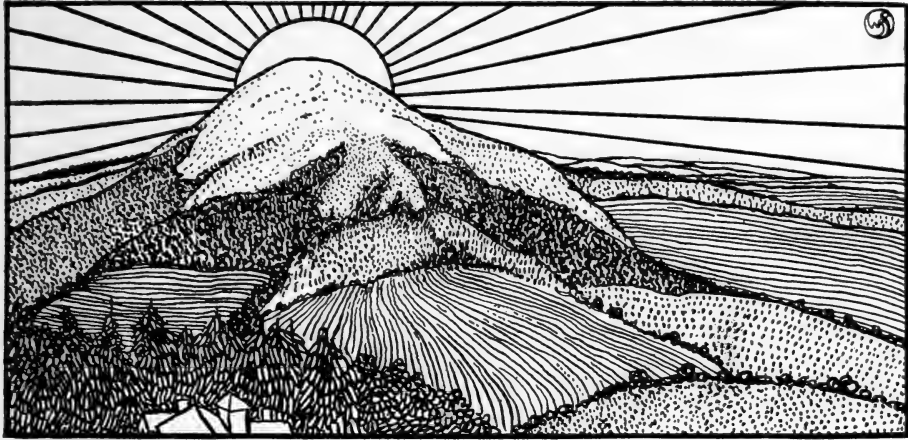
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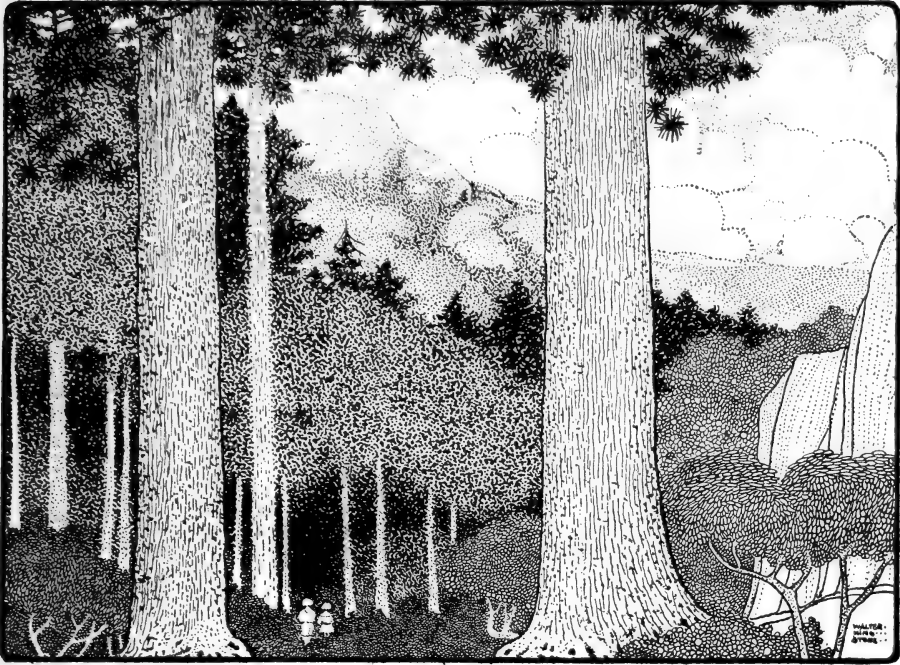


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MOUNTAIN-LAND

CHAPTER I

THE MOUNTAIN

UP through the forest and over the mountain flank the children climbed along narrow trails deep with matted layers of last year's leaves. Sprays of fern brushed their knees; clusters of tender June

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leaves swept their cheeks as they climbed; and all around them, from woodland and ravine, out of the forest stillness grew a sound—a low, confused stirring, deeply harmonious.

“Hark!” said Geraldine, one slim finger to her lips. “Is anybody calling us?”

“I hear it,” nodded Peter, plodding on; “it’s like a thousand whispering voices trying to tell us something. If you listen you can almost hear a word now and then. Part of it is the noise of water, and part the moving of millions and millions of leaves.”

“I can hear birds calling, very far off,” whispered Geraldine.

“They’re part of it all.”

“And the buzzing of forest flies?”

“That’s part of it, too. It’s all like one great, velvety voice breathing our names; I can hear it when the breeze begins, and the water, falling, echoes: ‘Geraldine! Geraldine!’

The Mountain

Geraldine!’ and then, far away, I hear birds repeating, ‘Peter! Peter! Pee-ter!’ It all makes a pleasant, whispering sound; but there is nobody calling to us.”

“Perhaps it’s the voice of the Mountain,” panted Geraldine, toiling upward.

Then the sweet, confused sound became deeper and more distinct; a distant rushing noise grew and died away like a great sigh among the trees.

“The sleepy old Mountain is yawning,” laughed Geraldine.

And a soft, drowsy voice answered out of the silence: “Children, I am sleepy—very, very sleepy. What time is it?” And the voice dwindled, dying to a rustling whisper; —“very sleepy—very, very sleepy—children. What time is it?”

Geraldine took hold of Peter’s hand and stood up very straight, staring all about her.

“It *is* the Mountain,” nodded Peter. “Such

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—such a tremendous whisper could come only from a mountain.”

“You’d better answer it,” breathed Geraldine. “It’s best to be very polite to such a large voice.”

“How does one address a mountain?” whispered Peter.

“I—I think it would be best to make a gesture as you do in school when you say, ‘The boy—oh—where—was—he?’ and begin, ‘O Mountain!’ You know the Mountain asked you what time it was.”

“Not what time it *was*, but what time it *is*,” sighed the drowsy voice. “I know all the kinds of times that ever have been—ever were—ever, ever were.”

“O Mountain!” said Peter, a trifle bewildered, and stiffly waving his hand and bringing his heels together, “it is now eleven o’clock in the morning by my new watch——”

“Bosh!” said the soft, sleepy voice; “I

The Mountain

asked you what sort of time it is, not what hour of the day. I know it isn't carboniferous time or primeval times or colonial times; I know that much. And what I want to know is, what kind of time it is now?"

"That doesn't sound quite right," muttered Peter to Geraldine. "Shouldn't it be 'What times are it?' But no! that is all wrong, too! And what time is it, means what o'clock."

"Oh, dear! you had better say something," urged Geraldine; "remember that children must always answer promptly whenever spoken to."

"O Mountain," began Peter, stepping forward and waving his hand at the woods and rocks around him, "please excuse me for not answering more promptly. I have heard my father say that times are good, and I think that is about all I know on the subject."

"Who is king?" asked the Mountain drowsily.

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“Oh, *that* was very, very long ago!” cried Geraldine.

“Long ago? No; it was just before my last nap. I don’t doze very long at a time, you know—a century, perhaps.”

“How long?” asked the awed children.

“Only a hundred years or so,” yawned the Mountain. “Who did you say is king? George the something-or-other—one of the Georges, I suppose.”

“There are no longer any kings here,” explained Peter eagerly; “there are presidents.”

“Are there?” said the Mountain indifferently. “What are they? What are presidents?”

“Oh, how long you must have slept!” said Geraldine pityingly; and, standing there in the dappled shade of the woods, and lifting one little finger, she gravely began to teach history to the aged and drowsy Mountain.



“‘O Mountain,’ began Peter, stepping forward and waving his hand at the woods and rocks.”

The Mountain

And Peter, clasping his hands behind his back, stood beside her listening, nodding at times, and peering about him at the great trees and rocks with a wise look on his sun-burned face.

“So that is what happened during my nap?” yawned the Mountain—“Bunker Hill and Bull Run?”

“All that,” nodded Geraldine solemnly. “Are you not sorry you missed them?”

But the aged Mountain was murmuring sleepily: “All rulers are alike to me—all wars, all peoples, all creatures, all nations, all times. Kings, presidents, chiefs, white men, black men, red men, furry men—all these I have heard of, drowsing here through the sunlight and moonlight and starlight of centuries. They come as the breezes come in the trees, and go as the winds go; and I slumber on, dreaming of the mighty times that shall never come again; ages of fire when I was born

Mountain-Land

a mountain while the whole earth crashed and rocked; ages of cold when grinding, straining continents of ice tore at my flanks for centuries, and could not uproot me.”

The old Mountain sighed, breathing deeply.

“Forests uncounted have been born and have died along my shoulders; vast, living creatures, generation on generation, have passed away at my feet; nations lie under the sands blown from my crest. . . . Children, I am very, very old; I must sleep now, and dream of the mighty times that are no more.”

And, after a long while, Geraldine made a timid courtesy to the woods and rocks, whispering, “Good night, O aged Mountain!” And Peter made a bow and said: “O Mountain, we wish you pleasant dreams!”

Then, listening, they heard, very, very far away, the deep breathing of the ancient sleeper, which is the ceaseless pulsing of the winds and waters, and the endless concord of

The Mountain

moving leaves and branches, and the stirring of tiny, live creatures through sunshine and shadow in the pleasant month of June.

“How old he is!” said Geraldine, awed. “Is it not strange, Peter, to think that this mountain stood here when all of America was buried under ice?”

“I wonder,” mused Peter, “what sort of living creatures there were in those days.”

“*I* know,” said a sweet, cold little voice from among the rocks.

The children turned quickly, but saw nothing except gray, weather-battered rocks crusted with lichens and reindeer moss, snowy white in the sunlight.

“*Did* anybody speak to us?” inquired Peter politely.

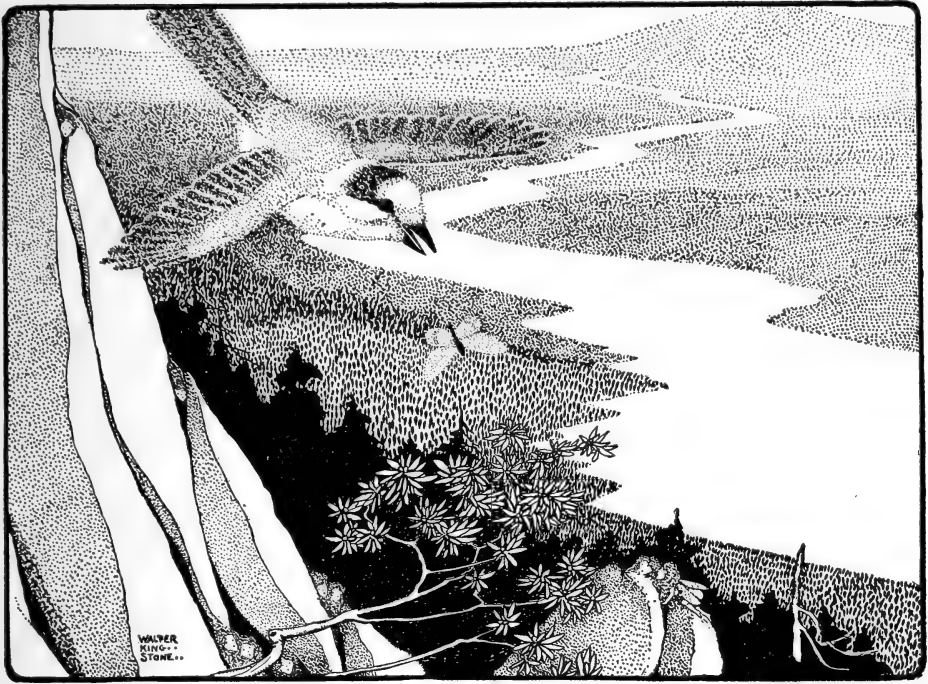
“I did,” said the sweet, chilly voice, “but I can’t stay here to talk to you. It’s too hot down here; I must go back to the summit where I can breathe freely.”

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“Oh, please tell us who you are!” exclaimed Geraldine, clasping her hands. “Your voice is so sweet—such a cool, crystalline icy little voice!”

Tinkling laughter broke out like the thin splash of water among rocks. “Follow me to the top of the mountain, then. I’ll go slowly. Follow! Follow!”





CHAPTER II

THE ICE FLY

A DELICATE butterfly, with wings like gray and brown tissue paper, fluttered up into the air and hovered for a moment around Geraldine's bright locks, which were flying like a cloud of spun gold in the sunshine.

Mountain-Land

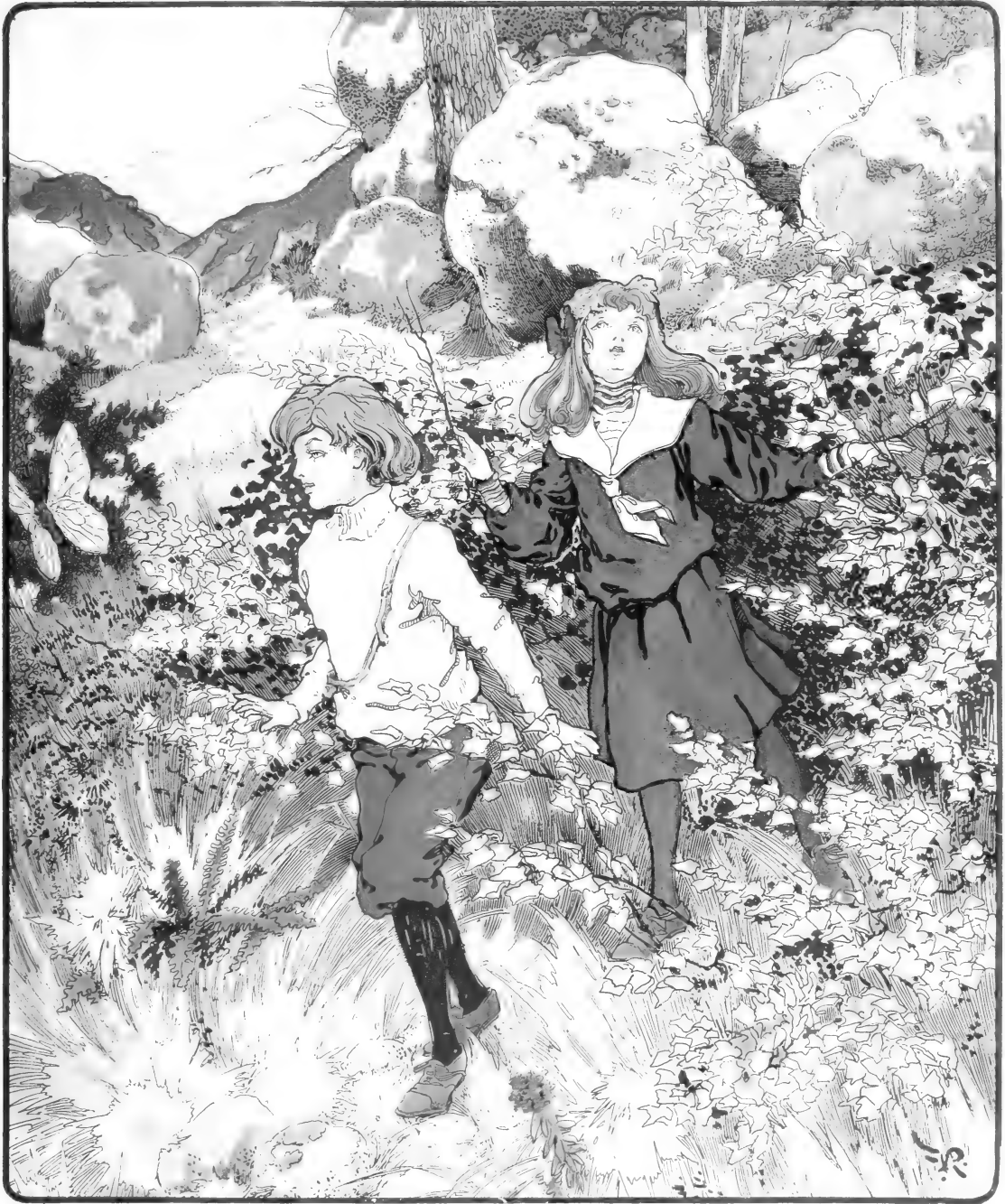
“If you will follow me I’ll tell you a wonderful story of a wonderful family, Geraldine,” cried the butterfly in its clear, precise voice.

“Oh, I will! I will!” said Geraldine, enraptured, stretching out both hands; but the butterfly carelessly avoided her fingers and flitted ahead, and the children scrambled hastily forward over the mossy rocks.

“We must be very near the top,” panted Peter, presently. “See how low the trees grow! It’s too windy and cold up here for our beautiful forest trees.”

“Oh, my!” gasped Geraldine, plodding upward over the summit slope; “nothing but rocks and moss and lichens and scrubby bushes. Where *is* that butterfly leading us?”

Peter, stumbling after the butterfly, which was flying leisurely just ahead, suddenly waved his hat. “The top! Here is the tip-top peak, Geraldine! Hurrah!”



“The children scrambled hastily forward over the mossy rocks.”

The Ice Fly

“Hurrah!” cried Geraldine, swinging her hat and standing, with flushed face and hair blowing, beside Peter.

“Hurrah!” echoed the tiny voice of the butterfly. “We are above the tree line again at last! And, goodness me! never, never again will I attempt to go down the mountain so far, no matter what that Silver Bow butterfly tells me! Children, is it not beautiful up here, so close to the splendid blue sky and the clouds?”

“Oh, it *is* beautiful! beautiful!” murmured Geraldine and Peter, enchanted. All around them, far as the eye could see, stretched a new country of tumbled hills and mountains piled up, mile after mile, like hillocks of green velvet—for the mantle of forests, the hills, the valleys set with lakes and rivers, were so far away that lakes looked like little glass mirrors, and rivers looked like threads of silver, and forests of great trees like carpets of greenest moss.

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“Could all that ever have been covered with ice?” muttered Peter to himself.

“Certainly,” replied the butterfly, “and my own family saw it.”

“*Your* family?”

“Not my grandfather,” said the butterfly, “nor even my grandfather’s grandfather’s great-great-grandfather. It was long before that. It was in the Ice Age.”

Geraldine sat down on a mound of soft, white reindeer moss; the butterfly settled on a patch of sulphur-tinted lichen beside her. Peter remained standing, fascinated by his first glimpse of Mountain-Land.

“I am,” began the butterfly, thoughtfully waving his delicate, translucent wings, “an Ice Fly. I can’t live in the warm, close air of valleys. Look down there, Geraldine, into those green sunny depths. Other butterflies may dare to explore there, but I do not dare. I could not live in such thick, warm air.”

The Ice Fly

“I should think,” said Peter, looking down at the delicate-winged creature, “that only a fat, furry moth could stand the cold nights on high mountains.”

“No,” said the butterfly, “big furry, fuzzy moths live in warm places; arctic butterflies and moths are usually frail, delicate creatures, often with thin, translucent wings.”

“Are they all gray and brown like you?”

“Oh, no! My friends, the big Parnassus butterflies, are gay creatures—snowy white, marked with scarlet and black; then there’s an acquaintance of mine, who lives in Labrador, a frivolous moth marked with light brown, peacock blue, and flame color; and when the sudden, early snows come whirling over the land it is wonderful to see him fluttering among the drifts like a living jewel. But he is not a real Ice Fly such as I am.”

“I had no idea there were such things as Ice Flies,” said Geraldine slowly. “I have

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always thought of butterflies and flowers and green leaves and hot sunlight together.”

“Nonsense!” said the Ice Butterfly; “why, even down in the valley some of the butterflies fly while the snow is still on the ground! Your friend the Camberwell Beauty flies in December sometimes; so does the little white and black Chain Moth. And, in March, while the snow still chokes the woods, on a sunny day you may sometimes see not only the Camberwell Beauty flitting over the snow, but also the Red Admiral stretching his rheumatic wings in a bar of warm sunlight, and feeding on fresh maple sap. But it isn’t the cold alone that I require, children; it’s the thin air of high mountain peaks. There’s only one mountain top in all the northeast where the air is thin and cold enough for me to live in comfort.”

“Is this the mountain?” asked the children curiously.

The Ice Fly

“No; I sometimes fly here and play about for a week or two, but neither I nor any of my family can ever make up our minds to settle here. No, children, we find even this peak too warm for us. Ever since the age of Ice, ever since the time when all the valleys were covered with glaciers, a colony of us has existed on the highest mountain peak in the White Mountains. So you see, we are very, very proud of our colony, and of our colonial descent. As a matter of fact, Geraldine, we are a little too proud to associate with butterflies whose families are not as old as ours.”

“Oh, dear!” said Geraldine, “that is snobbish, isn’t it?”

“Very,” said the Ice Fly coldly, “very snobbish. We Ice Flies are all snobs.”

“But are you not sometimes lonely? I should think,” ventured Peter, “that if you associate only with your own colonial family you would find it tiresome.”

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“We do, but we bear it proudly. Boredom is the magnificent penalty of true exclusiveness. I sometimes exchange a patronizing touch of the antennæ with Diana’s Butterfly, you know—that showy, handsome, blue-black fellow with the silvery bow bent across his wings; I do it only because he comes up on our mountains and tries his best to endure our frigid atmosphere. But he can’t stand it very long.”

The Ice Fly waved its delicate wings. “Atmosphere! that’s the test, you see. Any butterfly who can stand the chilly, isolated exclusiveness of high mountain peaks has a sort of a claim on us. The Silver Bow butterfly tries; and I am very kind and tolerant, though”—and the Ice Fly shuddered—“would you believe it, children, the family of the Silver Bow butterfly is so new that they have not yet decided on what colors to wear! We Ice Flies of my family never change; one Ice

The Ice Fly

Fly is exactly like another in color. Thousands and thousands of years ago we made up our minds what our family colors were to be, and we've kept them ever since."

"But why do the Silver Bow butterflies wear different colors? Is it because they're young?" asked Peter.

"They're such a young family that they haven't yet decided on any definite color pattern for all Silver Bow butterflies. Some wear the silver bow; some wear only a spot or two of white; some marry into the Purple Viceroy's family, and their children wear all kinds of colors, and a dozen different patterns on their wings. What singular taste!"

"I should think that would show good taste," said Geraldine timidly. "Our mother says that people should wear only what becomes them."

"It may be good taste," said the Ice Fly, "but we snobs have no taste at all, and

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we don't care whether our clothes become us or not."

"But that is stupid," said Peter.

"My dear Peter, we *are* stupid; we have lived so many thousand years in one little spot among the same sort of society, that we are densely, hopelessly stupid. Why, we are so stupid that our wives lay eggs on dead grasses, though when the eggs hatch the caterpillars can't eat dead grasses."

"What do the caterpillars do?" asked Geraldine.

"Oh, they wander around until they find some green grass somewhere, I suppose!" said the Butterfly carelessly. "I remember when I was a caterpillar I had a hard time crawling about among the barren rocks until I found a bit of green to feed on. But we old families care nothing for the material luxuries of life; it makes no difference to us what we eat, as long as we all eat the same thing—what we

The Ice Fly

wear, as long as we all dress alike—what we do, as long as we all do the same thing and stay by ourselves up here in the thin, chilly air, and refuse to exchange visits with other butterflies, and never, never forget that our family is the oldest in the land, and that our name is Oeneis Semidea!”

“Goodness!” exclaimed Geraldine, vastly impressed; “what a cold, old family you belong to!”

“Very old and very cold. Except for the Silver Bow butterfly, whom I encourage a little, I never recognize any butterflies except my big, golden-brown Cousin Iduna, from California; my homely Cousin Varuna, from Canada; Cousin Jutta, from Hudson Bay, the beauty of the family, and Cousin Chryxus, who wears magnificently embroidered underclothing but looks rather shabby otherwise. That’s a family characteristic—shabbiness—but, bless your hearts, a colonial family of the ice

Mountain-Land

age can afford to let the new families wear all the silks and purples and velvets and silver and crimson. All we care about is our icy mountain top, where we huddle in a circle, numbed with cold, and, touching our half-frozen antennæ, tell each other how great we are. It is our one consolation, children, to know that we Ice Flies are the greatest snobs in the insect world. We are not very pretty; we are usually dowdy, often shabby; our food is poor, our housekeeping neglected, and we haven't much sense; but, children, we are Ice Flies! And that is enough for us."

The dainty little butterfly left the patch of sulphur-tinted lichen, darted up into the air, and hung hovering a moment between the children.

"This has been a great day for you both," said the Ice Fly in a patronizing voice. "You have been entertained by a member of the oldest of old families. You will never forget

The Ice Fly

the memorable honor done you, and, no doubt, you will be better-mannered and better-bred children hereafter. So glad to have been kind to you. *Good-by*, Geraldine. *Good-by*, Peter. Perhaps some day when you come to the tip-top of Mount Washington, which is our old family place, we may condescend to ask you, for a day, to the Lake of the Clouds, where we——”

A harsh, cackling laugh broke out from among the barren rocks of the summit—and the startled children turned.

At first they could see nothing except gray boulders, crags, and patches of reindeer moss.

“Pay no attention, children,” said the Ice Fly coldly. “It’s only one of those mountain bandits mocking our polite conversation, which he cannot understand——”

“Ka-ka-ka!” cackled the jeering voice from the rocks. “Sew a patch on your wings and give your family history a rest!—or I’ll

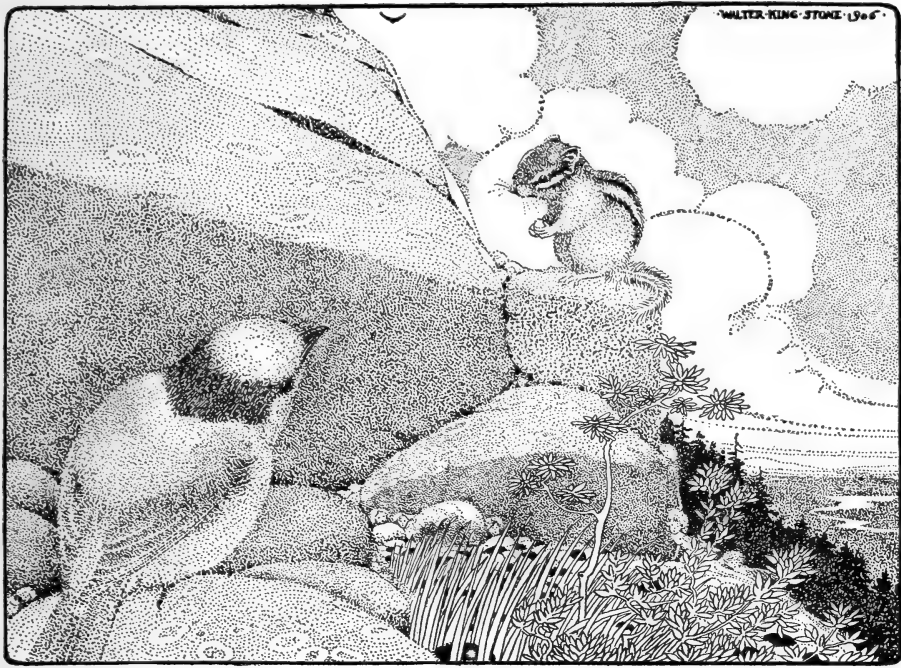
Mountain-Land

just perch on one of the branches of that family tree of yours!”

“Bandit! Robber!” cried the Ice Fly, trembling with either fright or fury. “I defy you! I——”

There was a silky whistle of wings, almost in the children’s faces; the butterfly dodged, darted, and dashed away amid the rocks, twisting and turning; and after him rushed a big bird, shrieking with unearthly laughter.





CHAPTER III

THE ROBBER

IT all happened so quickly that the astonished children had scarcely time to wink their eyes before the bird, circling in pursuit, snapped at the Ice Fly, missed, and came sailing back on soft blue-gray wings,

Mountain-Land

calmly alighting on a point of rock not six inches from Peter's nose.

“Well!” said Peter, amazed, as the bird cocked his handsome head on one side and coolly examined the children's features, “who in the world are you?”

“Who do you suppose I am?” asked the bird.

“You look like a giant chickadee—something like one,” ventured Geraldine. “Why did the Ice butterfly call you a robber? Surely, surely you are far too pretty to be a robber!”

“My dear,” said the bird, jauntily, “I am not what *I* call a robber. I simply take things I want.”

“What things?” asked Peter.

“Anything.”

“Do you take things that belong to others?”

“No,” said the bird, “because I do not believe that anything belongs to anybody until



“Who do you suppose I am?” asked the bird.”

The Robber

somebody has swallowed it. And, after a thing is once swallowed, nobody can steal it; therefore there is no such thing as stealing; therefore there are no such things as robbers; therefore I am not a robber. Do you understand, Geraldine?"

The children sat staring at the big, handsome, jaunty bird, who sat on a point of sun-warmed rock, returning their glances very amiably. He was bigger than a robin, blue-gray in color, throat and neck white, and breast a pretty gray; a graceful, fluffy, long-tailed creature, with bright, fearless eyes; not at all quick or nervous in movements, but a model of leisurely intelligent composure.

"What is your name?" asked Geraldine, venturing to stroke the smooth plumage with one pink finger tip.

"Which name?" asked the bird, taking a step sideways and calmly looking into Peter's pocket.

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“How many names have you?” inquired Peter, amused to see the bird deliberately try to pull a button from his jacket.

“How many names?” repeated the bird, letting go of the button and fastening his bright eyes on Geraldine’s shoe buckle. “Oh, I can’t remember! Some old gentlemen, who climbed up here and examined me through their glasses, told each other that I was a fine specimen of *Perioreus canadensis*. It may be true; I don’t know. Down in the forests the lumbermen call me Whisky Jack and throw chips at me. One Indian trapper called me Wiskatyon; but I forgive him. Then I’m saluted sometimes as Moose Bird, Venison Heron, Camp Robber, Snow Jay, Canada Jay—oh, I can’t remember all the names people call me!”

The Snow Jay had been working away at Geraldine’s bright shoe buckle, and his conversation had been jerky. Now he gave it

The Robber

up, saying, "It's nice and shiny, but I can't get it off. Please give it to me, Geraldine."

"But I need it to keep my shoe on," laughed Geraldine.

"And *I* need it to play with," explained the Snow Jay. "It's rather selfish of you to keep it when I want it."

"Isn't it a—a tiny bit selfish of you to want it when I need it?" asked Geraldine.

The Snow Jay, paying no attention to the question, tried once more to wrench off the silver buckle, then, finding it useless, returned to Peter's pocket and poked his head in.

"What is in there?" he asked.

"I don't suppose you know how rude you are, do you?" asked Peter.

"Nonsense! I'm only curious. What have you in that pouch slung across your shoulders?"

"Luncheon," said Peter, amused.

"Excellent!" cried the Snow Jay. "Let's begin! I invite you."

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“*You* invite *us!*” repeated Peter, astonished.

“Certainly. I’m hungry.”

“But nobody has invited *you* to luncheon!” cried Geraldine, laughing.

“What of that? *I* invite *you*. Come, Peter, I’m all ready!”

“Do you usually act this way?” inquired Peter, unslinging his pouch and beginning to open it.

“What a curious lot of creatures you Indoor people are!” exclaimed the Snow Jay impatiently. “When hunters camp in the winter woods I naturally invite myself to dinner, and they seem to think it funny at first, and everybody cries: ‘How wonderfully tame is this beautiful bird! See! He comes right into the tent!’ So, being a friendly bird myself, I suppose I am welcome, and I start in to eat everything I see. Then one man shouts, ‘He’s got my bacon!’ and another yells, ‘He’s

The Robber

got my last flapjack and he's swallowed the butter!' And the guide throws a teakettle at me and begins to call me all kinds of names— Hello! *Is that a hard-boiled egg?*”

And before Peter could reply the bird drove his long, sharp bill clean through the egg, shell and all, and, half-dragging, half-fluttering, carried it to a flat, sunny rock, where he broke it up with a dozen powerful blows of his beak and hastily swallowed the morsels.

“Such table manners!” sighed Geraldine, nibbling a lettuce sandwich and watching the greedy bird gulping great bits of the egg.

“Pooh!” retorted the Snow Jay. “If you had to use your wits every time you ate, you wouldn't have any table manners either. It's all very well for those selfish trappers to get angry and try to shoot me when I eat the bait from their traps, but I tell you what, children, there's not much to dine on in the winter forests when the nuts are buried under

Mountain-Land

the snow and the mountain-ash berries are gone."

"You poor little bird," began Geraldine, pitifully; but the Snow Jay coolly snatched a bit of chicken from her fingers, bolted it, dragged another hard-boiled egg from Peter's platter, and began gobbling and stuffing without a word.

"We had better eat faster, I think," said Geraldine anxiously, as Peter, scowling at the Snow Jay, picked out another egg and ate it rather hastily.

The Jay came back, looked into Geraldine's tin cup, tasted the milk, drank some, then helped himself to a chicken sandwich, breaking it into fragments and swallowing rapidly.

"Pretty good luncheon I've invited you to, isn't it?" said the Snow Jay.

"But it's *our* luncheon," explained Geraldine, smiling.

The Robber

“Didn’t I invite you to it?” asked the Jay.

“Y-es; but it’s ours——”

“What I’ve swallowed is luncheon, isn’t it? And what I’ve swallowed is mine. Therefore it is my luncheon as much as it is yours. And, if it’s mine, why can’t I invite you to it? It does no harm; you can’t get it away from me, you see.”

“Do you know,” said Geraldine, considering the bird thoughtfully, “that you ought to be told a great many things?”

“If you’ll tell me where I can lunch like this every day in the year, I’ll be much obliged,” said the Snow Jay.

“I will,” nodded Geraldine. “Come down in the valley to our house——”

“Sorry; can’t do it. I’m an ice bird; I can’t stand heat. Besides, when my wife starts to lay her five eggs in March, I’ve no time to dine out.”

“Does your wife lay her eggs in March?”

Mountain-Land

asked Peter. "I should think they'd freeze solid."

"They don't. I've seen her on her eggs when it was forty below zero. I've seen our children hatch before the ice melted on the lakes."

"Poor little babies!" exclaimed Geraldine. "How can they stand it—with no feathers to keep them warm?"

"Young Snow Jays are covered with a soft, warm, furry down, like chinchilla," said the bird, carefully cleaning up every crumb he could find, and peering into the empty wallet for more. Then he shook his handsome head, wiped his bill on the moss three or four times, ruffled, shook out his plumage, and stood on one leg, reflectively. "I hope you have enjoyed the luncheon," he said. "Come again, and I'll invite you to another."

"You are very kind," said the children, laughing.

The Robber

“If I had luncheons like this all the year,” said the Snow Jay thoughtfully, “I’d not be obliged to eat other birds’ eggs.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Geraldine, horrified, “do you do *that*?”

“Don’t *you*?” demanded the bird.

“I? Eat other birds’ eggs?”

“Certainly. I saw you eat a hen’s egg just now.”

“But—but hens’ eggs were intended to eat—I suppose,” faltered Geraldine. “Everybody eats hens’ eggs.”

“So are robins’ eggs and thrushes’ eggs intended to eat—I *suppose*,” mocked the Snow Jay. “Every bird of my family eats them—my cousin, the Crow; my cousin, the Blue Jay, old Uncle Raven, the entire family eat eggs—just as you do. Why should you be astonished?”

“I-I d-don’t know,” stammered Geraldine. “It doesn’t seem the same thing.”

Mountain-Land

“That’s always the way,” muttered the Snow Jay discontentedly; “blame us birds for what you do yourselves. You eat an egg; so do I. And you Indoor folk cry out: ‘Isn’t he wicked! Robber! Thief!’ You kill and eat a chicken or turkey or duck; we Snow Jays kill and eat a young robin or a thrush or a sparrow. And you Indoor folk set up a shriek: ‘Robber! Bandit! Assassin! Shoot him!’ You eat corn and potatoes; my cousin, the Crow, pulls up a kernel of sprouting corn or a youthful potato. Immediately you all get angry and begin the usual shout of ‘Robber! Thief!’ And *I* don’t think it fair.”

“It isn’t fair!” screeched a voice from somewhere high in the air. “We’re no more bandits than they are!”

The children and the Snow Jay looked up instantly; far aloft in the dazzling blue, turning in narrow circles on outspread wings which never quivered, floated a big bird.

The Robber

“That,” said the Snow Jay uneasily, “is a Goshawk. It’s all very well for him to join in the discussion, but, the fact is, that he *is* a robber.”

“Why do you call him a robber?” asked Peter.

“Because he is one,” repeated the Snow Jay, watching the circling bird above very intently. “I only take an egg or two or a young robin; but that blue Goshawk is capable of taking *me!* *That’s* what I call a robber!”

A little striped chipmunk, who had been sitting near, listening to the conversation and nibbling the remains of a biscuit, nodded rapidly, keeping his bright eyes on the circling hawk.

“They’re all robbers up here,” he observed, munching away. “Old Whisky Jack is only a good-humored thief, but down in the woods, I tell you, there’s a fine old band of robbers

Mountain-Land

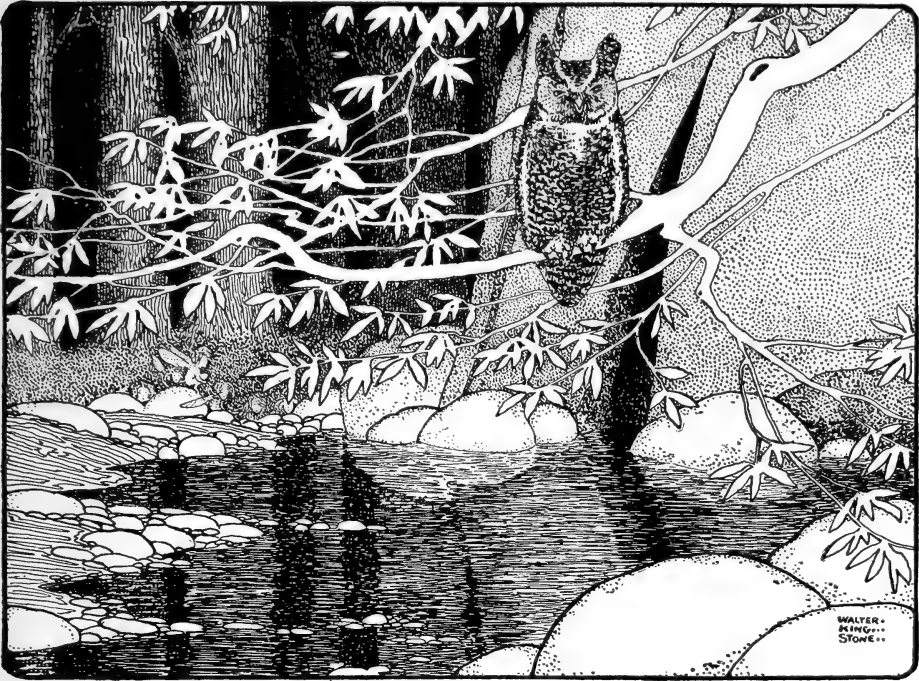
sitting around. Some of 'em work by day, some by night; don't they, Whisky?"

"You're too familiar," snapped the Snow Jay, keeping his eyes carefully on the hawk, who had dropped lower.

"You ought to be flattered to have an honest chipmunk talk to you—you old acorn thief," chattered the chipmunk. "If I ever——"

There was a rushing sound in the air; the chipmunk darted into a cleft of the rock; the Snow Jay, dodging the down-rushing hawk, sailed over the cliff and plunged head foremost into the tops of the scrubby hemlocks below.





CHAPTER IV

THE BANDIT BAND

THE children, excited and indignant, ran to the edge of the cliff, just in time to see the Snow Jay flying into the woods with the big hawk after him, flashing and twisting through the green tree tops.

Mountain-Land

“Let that Snow Jay alone!” cried Peter, picking up a dry stick and dashing down the trail, followed by Geraldine, skirts and hair flying.

The striped chipmunk, still munching his biscuit, peeped out after them with bright, moist eyes. Then, finishing his meal, and packing his pouched cheeks full, he called out to a red squirrel who sat, very attentive, under a stunted blueberry bush: “Come on and see the fun. The whole Bandit Band are down by the spring in the woods.”

“If I go,” muttered the red squirrel, “I’m sure to have a row with some gray squirrel before I get back.” But he followed the chipmunk, nevertheless, and they glided away among the rocks and scrubby growth until they came to the trees again. And after that they went racing and tearing through the swaying tree tops, traveling at tremendous speed until they overtook the

The Bandit Band

children, running along below, and looked down at them through the leaves.

“Peter! Peter!” called the squirrel. “The blue hawk missed your friend the Snow Jay, and he’s gone to the sweet spring below. I hope you’ll give that wicked old Goshawk a good banging with your stick.”

Peter and Geraldine, flushed and breathless, looked up through the branches from below.

“Are you sure that the poor Snow Jay escaped?” asked Geraldine.

“Oh, yes! I saw him dodge and double under the hemlocks. A Goshawk can’t catch a lively bird in a thicket. What sort of a stick is that you are carrying? Is it a bang stick?”

“A—what!” panted Peter.

“A bang stick.”

“What’s that?”

“Why, one of those sticks you Indoor people point at birds, and which say, Bang!”

Mountain-Land

“Oh, it isn’t a gun!” cried Geraldine, laughing, “if that is what you mean.”

“I’m sorry,” said the squirrel, “very sorry. With a bang stick you could punish the entire Bandit Band. They’re all sitting around the spring, roosting on limbs and watching for little birds and mice—that is, all are watching except the three owls.”

“Are there owls down there?” asked Peter, awed.

“Go ahead a little way. You’ll see the robbers all sitting around,” said the squirrel.

So the children walked on, very cautiously, searching the branches of the trees with anxious eyes. And Geraldine, not exactly afraid, but a trifle uncertain, took hold of Peter’s hand; and Peter, although he knew that the Bandit Band which lived in the forest was not composed of real robbers, but only of birds, grasped his stick very tightly and marched ahead as though about to encounter real danger.

The Bandit Band

“W-what is that big bunch up there on that branch?” whispered Geraldine, tightening her grasp on Peter’s hand.

“Ha!” said Peter, halting; “this must be the Bandits’ den! There is the spring. But *what* is that big bunch up there? Look! Oh, look! Geraldine!”

For the shadowy bunch had stirred; slowly a big yellow eye opened in the fluffy mass of spreading feathers, then another; and then two ears were lifted and a shrill hiss rang out in the forest silence.

“O Peter!” cried Geraldine, “it’s a bird that looks like a cat! It has eyes and ears like a pussy cat, and it hisses, too!”

“Cat yourself!” snapped a Great Horned Owl, ruffling and shaking his plumage in disgust. “G’way! I’m busy.”

“Busy!” said Peter, who spoke rather loudly because he was the least bit afraid. “Why, you are not doing anything at all up there!”

Mountain-Land

“I am, too,” said the Horned Owl sulkily.

“If you please,” inquired Geraldine timidly, “what are you busy about up there on that limb?”

“I am busy going to sleep,” snapped the Owl. “G’way! G’wan home!”

At that, on another branch just beyond, a smaller bunch of feathers ruffled up, and opened two yellow eyes.

“O Peter!” whispered Geraldine, “another bird-cat! Look! And there’s another still, without ears! Three big birds with faces like kitty cats!”

“G’wan! G’way! Scoot! Scoo-t!” said the big Horned Owl.

“Shoo! Shoo-o!” hooted the smaller-eared owl.

“Scat!” snapped the Barred Owl, wagging his yellow beak and blinking mildly down at the children out of two benevolent dusky-blue eyes.

The Bandit Band

“Pooh!” said Peter stoutly; “I’m not going to run away for *you*. You don’t look very wicked!”

“Who? Who-o? Whoo-o? Me?” inquired the Barred Owl in a mortified voice.

“Yes. I’m not afraid of any bird with such big, soft, dark eyes,” said Peter.

“That’s what I told you!” snapped the Great Horned Owl, turning to blink at the Barred Owl with his fierce yellow eyes. “Didn’t I tell you that you’d never make a real bandit? Even those Indoor children can see that you are harmless enough.”

The big, fluffy Barred Owl bent his head in shame. “It’s true, Peter,” he said; “I look fierce, and I’m bigger than the Great Cat-Owl, and much bigger than the Little Cat-Owl yonder, but somehow or other, though I have a sort of shy admiration for robber hawks and bandit owls, I can’t seem to be bad enough to be a bandit myself.”

Mountain-Land

“Don’t you catch chickens and partridges and poor little birds?” asked Geraldine earnestly.

“No,” said the mortified Barred Owl, “I don’t. In fact, I’m a beneficial bird in spite of myself. I help the farmers by catching all the rats and mice and moles and lizards and insects that harm his crops. Very, very seldom do I touch a bird. I—I can’t somehow or other make up my mind to lead a desperate life of crime like the Great Horned Owl there, or, as he is often called, the Big Cat-Owl. He *is* a terror and no mistake.”

“Are you?” asked Geraldine sorrowfully, looking up at the Big Cat-Owl.

But the great bird only blinked at her, cross-eyed, and snapped his black, curved beak and hissed, “G’way!”

“He’s mad,” observed the Little Cat-Owl, erecting its ear tufts and trying to look fierce.

The Bandit Band

“Are you a terrible robber, too?” asked Peter, smiling.

“Who-o? Me?” asked the Little Cat-Owl, becoming flustered.

“Yes, you. Are you a bandit?”

“Why—the—the fact is,” stammered the Little Cat-Owl, “I’m not much in the bandit line myself. I admire my big cousin here; *he’s* a terrible fellow.”

“But you don’t kill the dear little birds and chickens, do you?” asked Geraldine eagerly. “Oh, please say that you don’t!”

“N-no, I don’t kill birds. Fact is, I haven’t the making of a ruffian in me. I—it mortifies me to admit it, and I do try to look fierce, but I only catch mice and frogs, like my cousin the Barred Owl, here, whom you Indoor folk call the Hoot Owl.”

“I’m so glad!” cried Geraldine, “and I like you ever so much—you and your cousin

Mountain-Land

the Hoot Owl. Tell me, you pretty cat-eared creature, do you hoot, too?"

"No. I sometimes sing a whistling sort of song like: Twilly-willy-willy-willy-willy! And when I'm pleased I say whoo-unk! whoo-unk! several times in a low, pleasing voice. And sometimes I begin like this: Ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky——"

"Stop it!" snapped the Big Cat-Owl, glaring at the Little Cat-Owl. "How do you suppose I can catch a nap?"

"I'm only telling these Indoor children about my highly cultivated voice."

But the big owl only closed its eyes and muttered, "G'wan home!"

"You look like a dear little long-eared pussy cat, you know," said Geraldine. "I suppose that is why they call you the Little Cat-Owl."

"Partly that," said the bird, "and partly because I have a cry that I use very often in

The Bandit Band

hunting mice—me-ow! mee-ow! mee-e-e-ow!
Just like a cat, you see. I can screech, too.
Shall I do it for you?"

"Let me screech for the children," interposed the Hoot Owl. "You have shown off enough."

"But I can screech a worse screech than you."

"But mine is more terrifying!" insisted the big Hoot Owl.

"Oh, dear! We don't want to hear anybody screech!" protested Geraldine, her hands pressed to her ears. "Please don't try; and thank you very much just the same."

"But my screech is such a blood-curdling screech," ventured the Little Cat-Owl hopefully.

"And mine is *so* weirdly horrible!" insisted the Hoot Owl mildly.

"No! no! *no!*" repeated Geraldine firmly. "Peter and I once heard the Tyrolean Yodlers, and that is sufficient, if you please."

Mountain-Land

“Have you a wife?” asked Peter.

“One,” said the Little Cat-Owl.

“Children?” asked Peter with a business-like air.

“Six white eggs last April; six little Kitty Owls. Pretty good record, isn’t it?”

“He never builds his own nest,” remarked the Hoot Owl. “I do—sometimes.”

“You never do if you can find a messy old crow’s nest,” said the Little Cat-Owl.

“You steal crows’, hawks’, and squirrels’ nests,” retorted the Hoot Owl.

“I don’t steal them. They’re old ones that nobody owns. How can anybody steal anything that doesn’t belong to anybody?”

“Oh, don’t quarrel, please don’t!” said Geraldine as the two owls ruffled up and glared at one another. “You are such nice owls and you are not wicked, ruffianly robbers and bandits.”

“G’wan!” snapped the Big Cat-Owl,

The Bandit Band

unclosing his eyes. "How am I going to hunt and rob and kill to-night if I don't get my nap? *You* keep your beak shut!"—to the Little Cat-Owl; "and *you* keep *your* beak shut!"—to the big Hoot Owl. "Chatter! chatter! chatter! You're worse than a band of squirrels! *You*, bandits! Ha! A nice lot of banditti I've got in my band. There isn't one of you except the Great Spectral Owl and the Great White Owl that has enough sporting blood in him to kill a rabbit!" The huge bird glared suddenly at Peter with bent head: "And, by the way, you needn't call me the Big Cat-Owl or the Great Horned Owl either. My right name is the Tiger Owl. And of the dozen or less sorts of owls in this country, excepting the White Owl, I'm the only real rascal among them."

"Are you proud of it?" asked Geraldine sadly.

Mountain-Land

“Of course I am, you little ninny! I’m a murdering, hooting, bloodthirsty, ruffianly, rascally bandit! I sit on a dead tree under the stars and I listen and listen until I hear the soft stirring of some living creature. Then I drop like a thunderbolt and drive my huge claws into the thing—whatever it is. Sometimes I sit still and listen; and if nothing stirs I scream. Ha! *That* makes ’em jump. And my ears are so wonderfully keen that if a hidden creature stirs from fright at my terrible, yelping shriek I hear it and pounce.”

“Is there *anything* good in you?” asked Peter, disgusted.

“Good? In me? No. I don’t think so. I’m bad—all bad. I want to be bad; I want to be fierce. I kill because I like to kill, whether I am hungry or not. I kill everything I can; I kill more than I can eat. Why, I have slain half a dozen ducks and turkeys in a single night and only eaten their

The Bandit Band

heads. And *wasn't* that farmer furious? Hi! ho! ha! ha!"

Peter, speechless with wrath, could only stare back into the fierce yellow eyes; Geraldine hid her grieved and horrified face in her hands.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she said. "I didn't know any bird could be so cruel."

"Cruel!" snickered the Tiger Owl, snapping his polished beak. "Well, if you have any doubt of it, listen to this. The other night I caught an entire covey of twenty-two quail, asleep, and I killed them all. This season I've killed turkeys, geese, ducks, grouse, woodcock, snipe, wild ducks, hares, cotton-tailed rabbits, squirrels, song birds, a kitten, two puppies, a young fox——"

Peter, exasperated, sprang to his feet and shook his stick at the Tiger Owl.

"I wish it *were* a bang stick!" he cried. "I wish it were a gun!"

Mountain-Land

“But it isn’t,” snapped the Tiger Owl scornfully. “I saw that as soon as I saw you. I knew it all the time.”

“I don’t believe you,” retorted Peter. “I know perfectly well that owls can’t see in the daylight.”

“Pooh!” said the Tiger Owl. “That is what you Indoor people think. You suppose that we cannot see by day because we sleep during daylight and hunt at night. That’s all you know about it. I can see just as well by day as by night; better, in fact. All owls can. But what’s the use? The wild creatures we hunt move about by night, mostly. Rats, mice, moles, mink, wild ducks—all these are astir at night or twilight. And that is our hunting time. Then, too, it’s easy to catch a roosting grouse asleep on a limb; but a grouse running or flying in the thickets by day is hard to follow for a big winged bird such as I am.”

The Bandit Band

“What a villain you are, to be sure,” said Peter slowly.

“Nonsense!” retorted the Tiger Owl.
“Why?”

“You kill.”

“So does your big black-and-white cat, Ladysmith. She kills mice, and all you say is, ‘Poor pussy’!”

“But it’s her nature to catch mice.”

“It’s mine to catch partridges!”

“But partridges are not harmful.”

“Well, your father goes out into the woods with his white setter dog and his bang stick and kills partridges!”

“That’s different,” said Peter, turning red.
“And anyhow, my father doesn’t kill turkeys and ducks and chickens.”

“No; but the farmer does it for him, and your father and mother and you and Geraldine eat them. Yet I don’t call you a villain and wish I had a bang stick to point at you!”

Mountain-Land

The children were very silent. What the Tiger Owl had said was true; yet they knew that they were not villains. They didn't know exactly what reply to make. Finally Peter said: "But you don't kill only when you are hungry. You kill more than you can eat—just for the pleasure."

"So does your father! He doesn't need all the grouse and quail and wild ducks and woodcock that he shoots. He shoots more than he could possibly eat."

"He—he sends them to our friends," stammered Geraldine.

"And he shoots, not because he and his friends are hungry, but for the pleasure of it," added the Tiger Owl grimly. "I think it's up to you, Peter, to let nature alone and quit—quhit—qu-it! criticising the natural habits of wild creatures who do from necessity or ignorance what you Indoor folk do for pleasure."

The Bandit Band

“I suppose,” said Peter slowly, “that it is none of my business, after all.”

“Not in the slightest,” nodded the Tiger Owl. “We’re not accountable to a little prig like you.”

“I—I don’t mean to be a prig,” said Peter, flushing hotly.

“You’re coming close to it,” said the owl. “Look at that Goshawk up there.”

The children looked up to see a Goshawk on a limb over their heads, staring down at them with sharp, bright eyes.

“You ran after that poor hungry Goshawk,” resumed the Tiger Owl, “and you shouted at him and waved your stick at him, and all because he was hungry and was chasing his dinner. Let me tell you that if, every time you were hungry, you were obliged to chase a potato that rolled away from you faster than you could run, you’d go hungry as often as we do. And then, perhaps, you’d under-

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stand the world enough to let it attend to its own affairs without any advice from you."

"The child doesn't know any better," remarked the Goshawk. "He thinks he's been elected President of Mountain-Land."

"And Grand Duke of the Valley," chimed in a big blue hawk on a neighboring tree.

"And Emperor of all Outdoor-Land," snickered a little blue hawk beside him.

"Let me introduce to you, King Peter, three hunting, fighting bandits," said the Tiger Owl. "The terrible Goshawk—that handsome fellow with a blue bill, yellow feet, gray-lined white waistcoat, blue-gray tailed coat, and two white eyebrows. He loves his wife, who lays four green eggs every year, and kills more creatures than I do. Isn't he awful!"

"I don't know whether he's awful or not," said Peter. "I haven't made up my mind; and I don't care to be made fun of."

The Bandit Band

“It is a shame to make fun of him,” said the Hoot Owl.

After a moment Geraldine, looking up at the three hawks, said: “Are you bandits—all three of you?”

“I am,” said the Goshawk. “I kill every bird I can, and I can’t eat half of what I kill. They call me the Blue Hen Hawk or Partridge Falcon; but my right name is the American Goshawk. That fellow sitting next to me is the Big Blue Hawk or Chicken Hawk. He’s a terror, too; he and his cousin there, just beyond him, the Little Blue Darter, sometimes called the Pigeon Hawk or Sharp-Shinned Hawk. You can tell them always; they have no feathers on their legs—that is, only a few, like short trousers on a boy, you know—the sort you wear, Peter.”

“I understand,” said Peter.

“Well, then, just remember this, and tell your father and old Phelim and all those fool

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farmers who run after their guns every time they see a hawk: We three hawks—I, the Goshawk, that fellow, the Pigeon Hawk, and that Blue Hen Hawk over there—we three are the only kind of hawks that eat poultry and game birds. All the other hawks help the farmers by eating mice and insects. The big Red-Tailed Hawk, the Red-Shouldered Hawk, the Sparrow Hawk, the Broad-Winged Hawk, the White-Headed Eagle, the Osprey, the Buzzards, and Kites are all friends of the farmers. It is wrong and foolish to shoot them. Only one other bird of prey—the Duck Hawk—is a bandit. Him you may shoot; just as you may shoot us—if you can. Ha! ha!—if you *can*, Peter! But we robbers of the Bandit Band can take care of ourselves, can't we, Tiger?"

The great Tiger Owl opened one big yellow eye: "G'wan home, you Indoor kids!" he snapped; and went to sleep again.

The Bandit Band

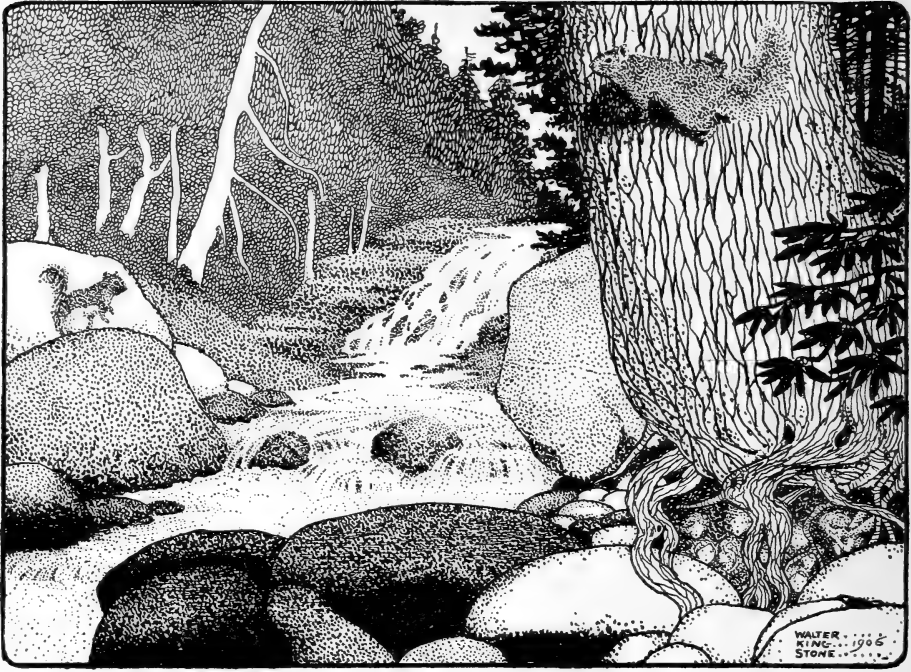
And all the Bandit birds, seated in a circle among the branches overhead, looked down at the children and began to croak and squeal and screech in a sort of raucous chorus:

“G’way, little kids, g’way!

We’ve told you all we know;
We’ve had no dinner this livelong day,
So lift your feet and toddle away!
Fair play, little kids, fair play!

You scare our food, you know.
We’re glad you’ve come, but sorry you stay—
G’way, little kids, g’way!”





CHAPTER V

SILVER STAIRS

AS the children, hand in hand, walked thoughtfully away down the leafy mountain trail, the Red Squirrel pattered over the leaves behind them, chattering and muttering discontentedly to himself. And

Silver Stairs

at length Peter turned around and asked the Red Squirrel why he was so fretful.

“Oh, there’s sure to be a fight!” said the Red Squirrel. “And I expect to have my ears bitten and bunches of my fur pulled out before I’m finished. It’s all the fault of Chips yonder,” whisking his tail in the direction of the little striped chipmunk who was keeping pace with them, bounding along the rocks and windfalls and mossy logs.

“But why do you fight if you don’t want to?” asked Geraldine.

“Oh, I like to fight well enough!” said the Red Squirrel carelessly. “It’s very delightful when it’s once begun; but I have such a lot to do to-day that I really can scarcely afford the time for fighting. It’s all Chip’s fault. He loves to see me get into a fight; and then he sits on a stump and folds his little hands and watches me pitch into one of those big, fat gray squirrels.”

Mountain-Land

“Gray squirrels! You don’t fight your own kind, do you?” exclaimed Peter.

“Certainly I do. I can’t endure the sight of a gray squirrel in my woods. We red squirrels draw the color line at gray.”

“Why?” asked the children.

“How do I know? You can’t always tell why you don’t like colored people, can you? I know why I don’t like hawks and weasels and wild cats; they try to eat me. But I don’t know why I can’t stand the sight of one of those fat, sleek, gray squirrels any more than a cottontail rabbit knows why he hates a big, white northern hare. But he does; and he won’t let a northern hare live in the same woods where he lives. And that’s why I won’t let any gray squirrel go swaggering around these woods if I can help it.”

“But *why*?” insisted Peter.

“Peter, did you ever see another Indoor

Silver Stairs

boy whose manners, speech, bearing, and features did not please you?"

"Y-es," admitted Peter, "once."

"What happened?" asked the Red Squirrel.

"He—he gave me a push—after I had given him a shove."

"And after that?"

"I gave him two more shoves."

"Then what?" inquired the Red Squirrel, much interested.

"We had a—a great deal of trouble," admitted Peter. "Our mothers were not very much pleased with us."

"Didn't you gain a glorious victory?"

"I can't tell you," said Peter gravely, "because we haven't had another battle—yet."

"Then why not give him another shove? That's the way great wars begin."

"Father objects," said Peter simply.

"Curious people, you Indoor folk," mut-

Mountain-Land

tered the Red Squirrel. "When I see a gray squirrel whose features and color do not please me, I begin to jump up and down and jerk my tail and dance and chatter and call him names."

"That is horridly common," said Geraldine.

"Oh, no! I don't call him common names; I think of all sorts of new names to call him," explained the Red Squirrel proudly.

"But it is very impolite to call names—any sort of names," insisted Geraldine.

"Of course it is. *I* don't want to be polite to him. That's why I dance at him and chatter at him and jerk my tail at him. 'Oh, you old rat-eared, mole-faced, barefooted, mouse-whiskered, moth-eaten, weasel-tailed rascal!' I shriek. And he doesn't like that, and he sits up and chatters at me. 'Redhead! redhead!' he jeers. 'Come here and I'll tie your whiskers under your chin!' And that

Silver Stairs

makes me very, very angry, because the cat-birds are listening and they're sure to jeer at me, and the blue jays hear it and they are sure to laugh.

“So I rush up and down a few trees and I run madly about over the dead leaves, and I chatter and jerk my tail until I begin to be so angry, that I begin to feel as if I were beginning to be brave.”

“What!” exclaimed the children, laughing.

“Certainly,” said the Red Squirrel gravely. “That’s the way all bravery begins. You rush about, chattering and screaming and scolding and making a great racket and scuffling over the leaves. Bravery is pretty sure to come if you only get angry enough to scare the other squirrel. And as soon as you see that he is getting frightened, then, before you know it, you suddenly find yourself a hero, and you run after the other fellow—that is, you run after him as soon as he begins to

Mountain-Land

run away. And the faster you run, the faster he runs, and by and by you've chased him out of your woods and you've won a glorious and never-to-be-forgotten but ever-to-be-remembered victory. *That's* the way wars are waged. I'm on my way to wage one now."

The laughter of the children did not seem to offend the Red Squirrel, who trotted along beside them. "You laugh," he said indulgently, "because you don't know what a terrible thing war is. Wait until we cross the Silver Stairs where that old fat gray lives."

"What are the Silver Stairs?" asked Geraldine.

"Why, the brook which comes tumbling down the steep face of the mountain. Haven't you seen that brook?"

"I think we must have heard it," said Peter. "We heard water falling among rocks and it sounded sometimes like voices calling

Silver Stairs

very far off, and sometimes like somebody laughing at us.”

“That brook does nothing but giggle and laugh at everything,” said the Red Squirrel. “You try to drink out of it and it slaps your face with spray and chuckles; you use a pool as a mirror and try to see how handsome you are, and the water crinkles and the reflection of your face is all lopsided and perfectly hideous; and the brook bursts into silly, shallow laughter. But we people of Mountain-Land are used to it. Hark! It hears us now; and it’s laughing at us!”

The children left the trail and followed the Red Squirrel a little way into the woods. And through the golden light of the foliage they saw water tumbling and flashing down a rocky slope which was like a great stairway of mossy rocks.

“The Silver Stairs,” said the Squirrel.

Mountain-Land

“War begins as soon as I cross. Like Cæsar at the Rubifoam, I pause——”

“Hello! Hello-o!” called the Brook from its silvery stairway set with wet mosses and dewy ferns. “Hello, Peter! Hello, Geraldine! Why don’t you ever come and drink out of me? No malaria in me! No illness in my waters! Why don’t you come and wade about in my icy cold pools and turn over flat stones to find crayfish, and bait your hooks for these little, speckled, fat trout of mine?”

A small, sturdy Trout sprang clean out of water, quivering with indignation, landing in the pool with a splash, and crying out angrily: “We’re not six inches long, Peter. The law forbids Indoor people to catch trout less than six inches long!”

“Only six inches? How young you must be,” said Geraldine. “Our friend the speckled trout, who lives in the Kennyetto near our

Silver Stairs

house, is twelve inches long and weighs nearly a pound and a half."

"That's because he lives in a big stream," said the Brook. "These trout of mine are as old as he is—some of 'em are older, too—but you see they live in a mountain brook where the water is not deep and the pools are very, very small. That's the reason they don't grow; it isn't because they are young or that they don't have enough to eat. No; they simply dare not grow too big for the tiny pools they live in. Why, if they did, their heads and tails would stick out of water."

"Would they grow if they went down to the big stream?" asked Peter.

"Certainly they would. But they won't go; they like it up here on the mountain. They are really the same sort of fish as the valley fish, only they are a race of little people—pygmies."

Mountain-Land

“Pygmy yourself!” cried an angry little trout, wriggling wrathfully out of water for an instant, only to fall back again, spattering the moss with spray.

“Pygmy! Of course I’m a pygmy,” said the Brook. “I’m not big; I’m not a river and I don’t want to be one, with a lot of steamboats bothering and splashing about on me. No; I’m contented to send enough water downstairs to keep the big, lazy rivers full; that’s all anybody can expect of me. You see, my business is to stay here and give these trout a home, and furnish free drinks for birds and deer and all the four-footed furry things that live in Mountain-Land. And what water they don’t need, and the trees don’t need, and I don’t need, I send tumbling down the Silver Stairs to keep the valley streams in good humor. They have more to do than they have water for, what with all those mills and sluiceways and canals and reservoirs and elec-

Silver Stairs

tric-power dams. So I don't mind helping them out; *I* have plenty of water, you know; and I shall always have it unless some idiot cuts down the forests of Mountain-Land and the sun shrivels the ferns and mosses and dries up the pure, cold, icy springs which feed me."

"I shall tell my father about that," said Peter seriously. "You are far too beautiful a brook to run dry."

"Thank you," laughed the Brook. "I try to be a decent sort of rivulet. I don't breed the harmful bacteria that give Indoor folk fevers; I don't breed mosquitoes. There is only one thing that I do which I ought not to do, children. I breed black flies."

"Those wicked little creatures which come in swarms to bite us?" asked Geraldine reproachfully. "Oh, how can you do it, little brook?"

"Fact is, I'm ashamed of it, but I can't

Mountain-Land

help it," said the Brook. "The black flies lay their eggs in my waters and I can't prevent them. Why, they have the impudence to lay millions of eggs just under the surface; and it's no use trying to sweep them downstream, for sometimes the edge of a pool, just above the falls, where the current runs swiftest, is black with these eggs, which float in masses, attached to sunken logs and rocks. . . . Then there's another thing I do which isn't very nice. There is a sort of worm which is found in one form on grasshoppers. If the grasshopper jumps into my waters and a silly fish swallows him, the worm changes to another form inside the fish. Then, if that fish is eaten by certain animals, the worm changes again into a third form and makes that animal very ill. It's a shame, isn't it? But how can I help it?"

"You can't," said Peter, kneeling down and stirring the bright sand in the bottom of

Silver Stairs

the pool with his fingers. "Oh, my! What is that? A lobster? Look, Geraldine! A creature just like a small lobster ran under that rock!"

"He'll nip you if you turn over that flat stone," said the Red Squirrel.

"I will, indeed," said a thin, watery voice. "Better let me alone, Peter?"

"But we want to see you," explained Geraldine. "We don't wish to hurt you, little lobster."

"In the first place, I'm not a lobster," returned the damp, muffled voice. "In the second place, I sleep by day and it's my bedtime now; in the third place, I'm good to eat, and that Red Squirrel knows it."

"Give you my word I won't try to eat you," said the Squirrel, flourishing his tail.

"Swear it, then," said the suspicious voice.

"I swear it by my matchlessly beautiful whiskers!" returned the Squirrel, sitting up

Mountain-Land

and smoothing out his whiskers with both forepaws.

Then, looking down into the crystal clear water, the children saw a curious yellowish-brown creature sidle out over the silvery bottom sand, waving at them a pair of long slender feelers.

“How-de-do, children!” said the creature in his watery, colorless voice. “You know, of course, to whom you have the honor of speaking, don’t you?”

“Are you a crayfish?” asked Peter, as the little creature swam to the surface, made a playful pinch at a trout which tried to nip his feelers, and then clambered out of water onto a flat wet rock in the center of the shallow pool.

“Crayfish, Crawfish, Astacus, Écrevisse—I’ve several titles,” said the Crayfish. “I’m a famous delicacy in France; they eat me in England too, but people don’t seem to care

Silver Stairs

much for me here in America. In fact, the country folk believe I am poisonous. Ha! ha! The big trout know better; the black bass and pickerel adore me, so do the squirrels and mink and raccoons and bears. So does Kit-Ki, the big, stubby-tailed wild cat. Children, there is no soup in all the world so delicate as crayfish soup—if you know how it's made; but I shan't tell you! Not I."

"Why do they call you Crayfish?" asked Peter. "You are not a fish, are you?"

"Fish! I should think not!"

"Are you an insect? You have antennæ," ventured Geraldine.

"Insect! No, I'm not an insect!" retorted the Crayfish irritably. "I have gills, but that doesn't make me a fish; I have feelers, but they don't make me an insect. I'm a crustacean of the order of Decapods—one of the most ancient of orders, dating from the times when this mountain was young."

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“I suppose your ancestors knew the ancestors of our friend the Ice Fly,” said Peter respectfully.

“Yes, and ate 'em, too.”

“Oh! Do you eat butterflies?” asked Geraldine.

“Butterflies, worms, beetles — certainly! And,” with a sly glance out of his protruding eyes, “I eat little fishes, too.”

“When you can catch them! Ha! ha!” jeered the fat little trout who had gathered in schools to listen.

“Children,” said the Crayfish solemnly, “look at me! Study me! It is well worth your while, because I am undoubtedly the most perfectly beautiful example of perfect symmetry existing.”

“I should call you interesting rather than beautiful,” said Geraldine timidly.

“I am both, child—both,” said the Crayfish indulgently. “You are probably slightly

Silver Stairs

bewildered by the more than marvelous magnificence of my personal appearance. You are doubtless slightly stunned by the sudden sight of such absolute perfection.”

“That’s it, of course,” sneered the Red Squirrel, winking at Geraldine. “Go on with your life’s history, you old water spider!”

The Crayfish, amazed and angry, ran at the Red Squirrel sideways, waving his two big lobsterlike claws, but the Red Squirrel began to dance and grit his long front teeth, and the Crayfish halted on the edge of the rock.

“Oh, please don’t let us quarrel!” cried Geraldine. “The Red Squirrel was only joking, you know. Besides, he is, like Cæsar, already engaged to fight a dreadful battle across the Rubicon.”

“Rubifoam,” corrected the Squirrel.

“If you call me that again, I’ll souse you!” cried the Brook.

Mountain-Land

“Come, come!” said Peter firmly. “The Crayfish is going to tell us the history of his life, if he can get a word in edgeways.”

“He does everything edgeways,” grumbled the Red Squirrel, folding his little hairless hands against his stomach. “Go on! Proceed with the soup.”

“Ah! Soup!” sighed the Crayfish, flattered. “Indeed there is no such soup as can be distilled from me. But, I digress. Whither was I at?”

“You claimed to be a Decapod,” muttered the Red Squirrel.

“So I did! So I do! I am a Decapod! Look at me! My head and neck are inclosed in a shield; my body is armored, too. I have eight armored walking legs, two pairs of armored pinching claws, big and little feelers, and little swimmerets under my big tail paddles.

“My eyes are placed on the end of a pair

Silver Stairs

of stalks, like short flower stems ; and the eyes are compound. My ears are sacs, and I hear through the fringe of hairs which surrounds them. Here they are, down here near my nose, at the base of my little feelers. I hear with some of the hairs and I smell with some of the hairs. In fact, my ears and my nose are nothing but hairs. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Perfectly wonderful!" said the children solemnly.

"There is something else about me more marvelous still," asserted the Crayfish. "I have a grinding mill in my inside, made of three teeth. When I swallow anything these teeth begin to clash, and the mill starts grinding away like fury. My heart is under my back ; I breathe through twenty pairs of gills, like little waving feathers, arranged along my side ; I breathe the air which I filter out from the water. When I'm tired of my armor, I cast it off and grow a new suit of mail."

Mountain-Land

“You mean that all that hard shell comes off?” asked Peter, amazed.

“That’s just what I mean. I molt twice a year. When I was young I molted my armor eight times a year.”

“What did you look like when you were a baby?” asked Geraldine softly.

“Oh, I was an egg! Mother laid a lot of us eggs all over herself one cold day in December, four years ago. I was one of those eggs. I hatched out in May—a tiny crayfish, shaped and colored just about as I am now. And how these miserable trout did hang around trying to gobble me!”

The little fat trout, who had gathered to listen, opened their mouths in silent grins.

“Oh, you can laugh!” said the Crayfish resentfully, “but I tell you life is no joke to a young crayfish. Every greedy trout, every furry animal is after him—especially when he changes his armor for a new suit.

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And it's a lucky crayfish who reaches my age without an accident. . . . What is the matter with that Red Squirrel?"

The children turned to look at the Red Squirrel, who had begun to twitch and chatter softly, displaying his long yellow teeth.

"War is declared!" muttered the Red Squirrel. "Look at that fat, gray villain across the brook!"

And sure enough, across the brook, seated on the ground, and displaying his long teeth, was another squirrel, a bigger, fatter squirrel than the little red one. But the squirrel was not gray; he was almost black.

"Why, that's a *black* squirrel!" exclaimed Geraldine quickly. "You have no quarrel with him, have you?"

"It's a gray!" cried the Red Squirrel angrily, "no matter what color fur he wears. Ho! ho! He can't deceive me with his black fur; I know that gray squirrels are

Mountain-Land

sometimes black; but it's the same old kind of squirrel! Look out! I am going to begin to dance!"

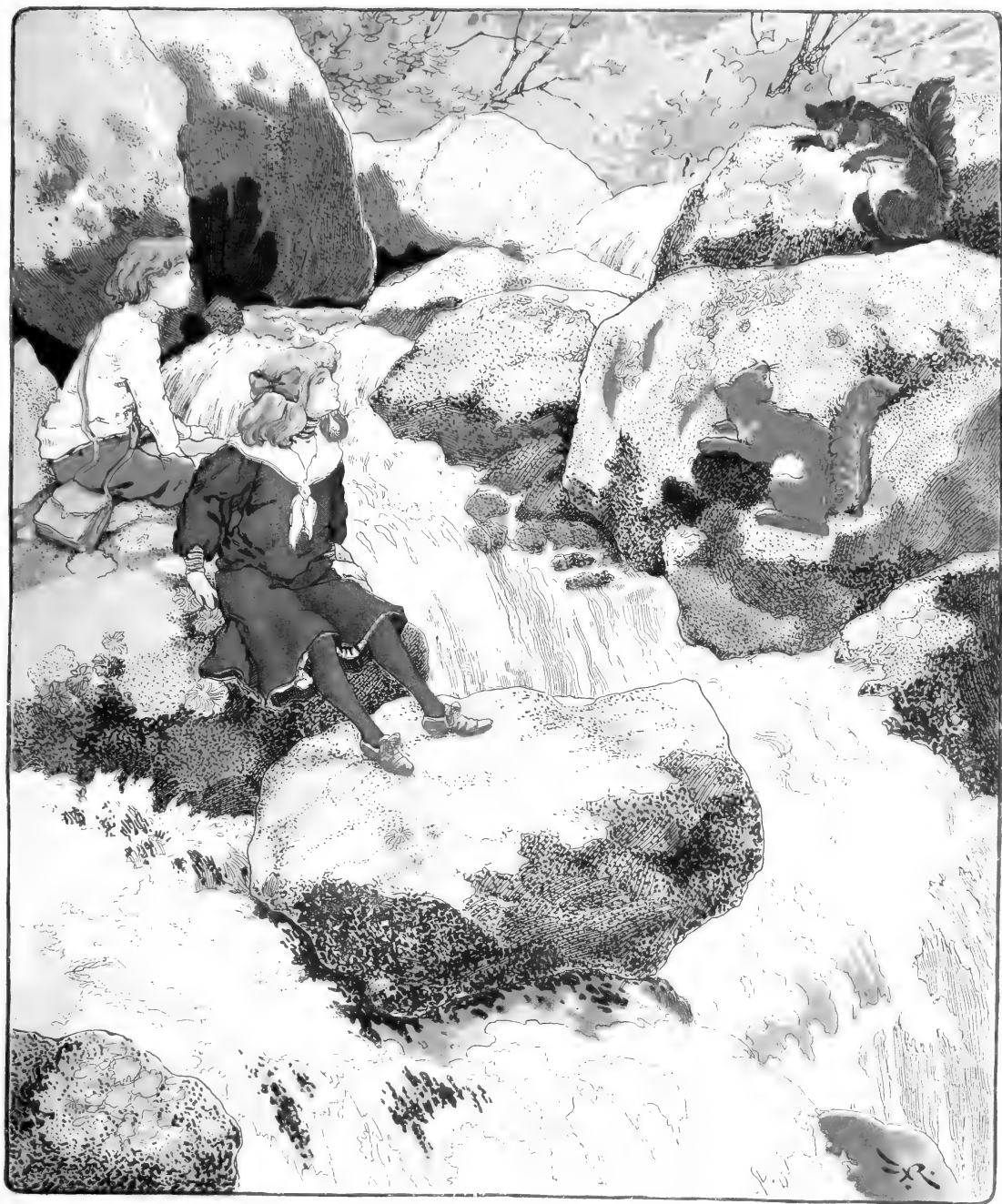
The little striped Chipmunk now appeared, sitting high on a pile of rocks and shrieking encouragement to the two warriors, who had begun to dance and chatter and jerk their tails at one another, and rush up and down trees, uttering piercing insults.

"Oh, it's going to be a terrible battle!" cried the Red Squirrel, running furiously half-way up a slender sapling and then running furiously down again.

"I dare you! I dare you!" screamed the Black Squirrel, whisking up and down a birch tree. "Come on! Come on!"

"I will as soon as you're frightened!" screeched the Red Squirrel. "Oh, won't I give it to you as soon as you start to run!"

"I am not going to run just yet! I defy you! Redhead! Redhead!" mocked the



“Black rat! Black rat! Weasel nose! Weasel nose!” shrieked the Red Squirrel.”

Silver Stairs

Black Squirrel, hopping furiously about and making a great racket among the dead leaves.

“Black rat! Black rat! Weasel nose! Weasel nose!” shrieked the Red Squirrel. “Look out for me the minute you get frightened!”

The Black Squirrel went on madly scuffling up the leaves, but his shrill, chattering defiance was not quite as loud as before; and presently, when the Red Squirrel sat up and chattered at him, he jumped back, startled.

“Go for him!” cried the Chipmunk, sitting up high on his pile of rocks.

At that the big Black Squirrel jumped back again; the Red Squirrel rushed to the edge of the stream, the Black turned and fled.

“Hurrah!” screamed the Red Squirrel, crossing the brook in one flying leap.

“He flies! He flies!” cried the Chipmunk.

Mountain-Land

“Who flies?” asked the Red Squirrel, halting.

“The enemy,” said the Chipmunk, waving his tail.

“Then I return contented,” said the Red Squirrel, coming back.

It was true that the Black Squirrel had fled. And now the Red Squirrel, tired out, came proudly back to the children.

“A great victory! A very great victory!” he panted. “With incredible fortitude I called him names; with reckless bravery I rushed up and down trees until my claws ached; with sublimely furious patriotism I scuffled among the leaves, jerking my tail almost out of its socket. But I do not complain of the dreadful hardships of this campaign; I do not boast of bravery perhaps never before equaled. Modestly I return victorious to my native nut tree where my wife awaits——”

Silver Stairs

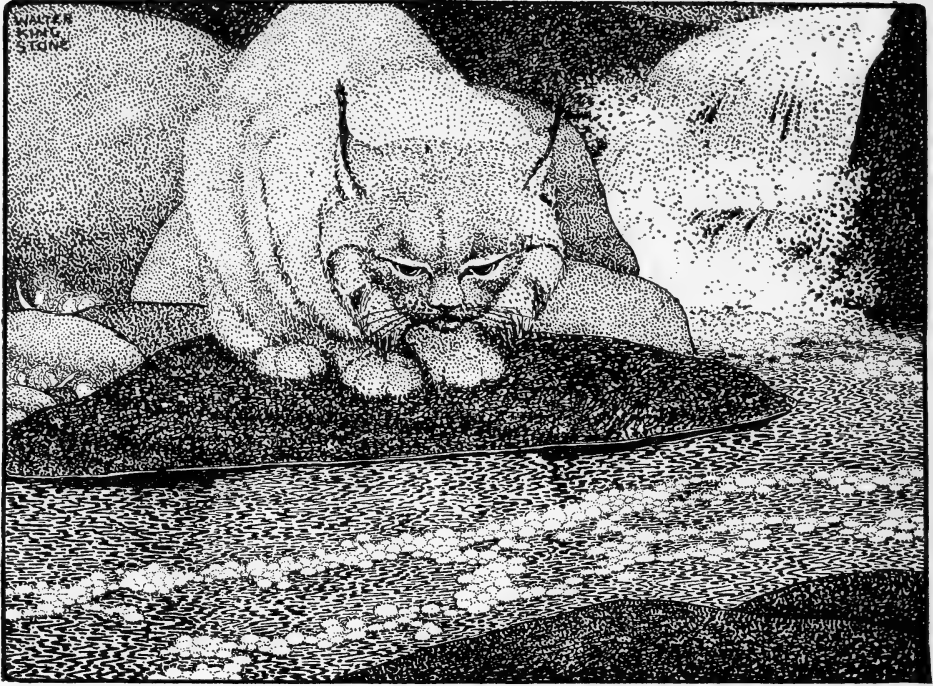
“Look out!” shrieked the Chipmunk, disappearing among the rocks like a flash.

And the next instant the Red Squirrel darted into a cleft among the roots of a great oak tree.

“Why in the world did he run away?” asked Peter, astonished.

“I think he saw *me*,” said a soft, purring voice behind him.





CHAPTER VI

KIT-KI

AT the sound of the soft, purring voice the children turned. And there, seated on a mossy log, was a huge cat as big as a big dog, blinking at them very peacefully out of two magnificent green eyes.

Kit-Ki

“P-pussy!” stammered Peter, amazed, “w-what a very large cat you are!”

“O Peter!” whispered Geraldine, taking hold of his hand, “I am perfectly sure that I ought to be frightened.”

“Not at all,” said the huge cat mildly. “I’m the one to be frightened. I’m terribly afraid of Indoor people.”

“W-we w-won’t hurt you,” faltered Peter.

“Thank you,” replied the cat, yawning, and displaying a very red throat and two rows of long, sharp, white teeth.

The children looked at the cat very hard. It was not much like a cat after all, for the animal before them had two long tufts of stiff, dark hair on the tips of its ears, long side whiskers, a fluffy, furry ruff around the cheeks, and enormous padded paws. Besides, it had scarcely any tail—only a short, fluffy stub, about four inches long, tipped with black.

Mountain-Land

“Are you a cat?” asked Geraldine timidly. “I never heard of a cat as big as a setter dog.”

“I’m a cat, all the same,” returned the animal, glancing casually at the tip of the Chipmunk’s nose, which was poking out from the cleft among the pile of rocks where he had taken refuge.

“Hello, Kit-Ki!” jeered the Chipmunk.

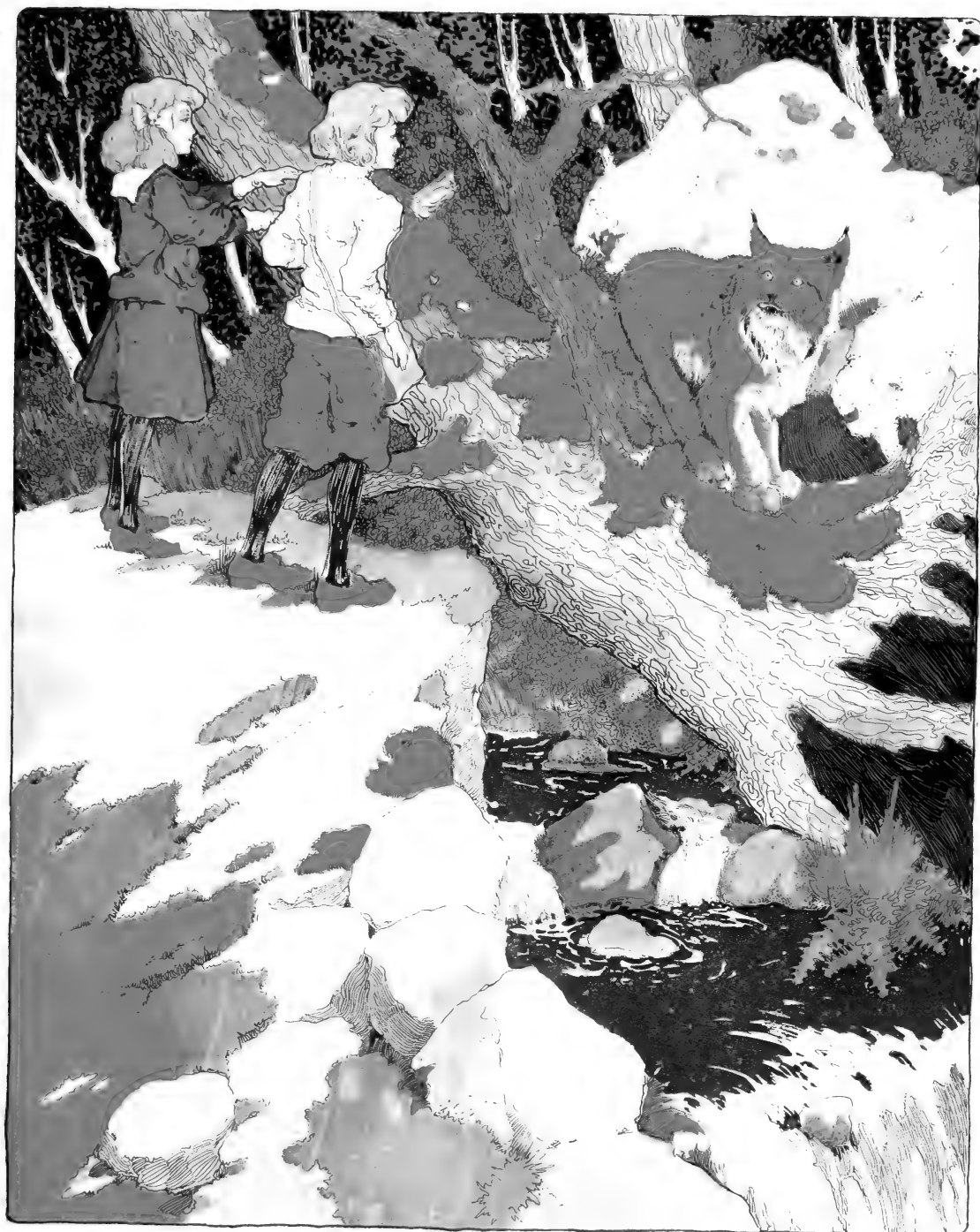
“Hello yourself,” purred the big cat. “What are you hiding for?”

“Ha! ha! ha!” tittered the Chipmunk. “You didn’t pounce on me that time, did you?”

“Not *that* time,” said the cat, softly licking its lips.

“Is your name Kit-Ki?” asked Peter respectfully.

“Oh, these little furry creatures call me Kit-Ki!” said the cat carelessly. “Some people call me Tree cat, some Bobcat, some



“‘Is your name Kit-Ki?’ asked Peter, respectfully.”

Kit-Ki

Catamount, some Lynx. As a matter of scientific interest, I'm the Canada Lynx; but you may call me Kit-Ki."

"I am very glad that you are not savage," said Geraldine. "May I stroke you and whisper, 'Poor kitty'?"

"I shouldn't advise you to do that," said the Lynx gravely. "I have a very bad temper. I'd probably bite."

"But you said you were afraid of Indoor people," began Peter.

"So I am. That's why I bite if they touch me. I can't get it out of my head that they might hurt me. So, when I hear Indoor folk moving about in the woods, I slink away and lie perfectly still on a log, flat, motionless, until they pass, or I climb a tree and watch them in silence. But I don't attack them; remember that, children. No Lynx attacks Indoor people unless they corner him."

"Never?" asked Geraldine solemnly.

Mountain-Land

“Never. I sometimes screech at them. Sometimes, out of curiosity, I follow them. But I would never dream of attacking any Indoor people. Neither would my cousin, the Bay Lynx, who lives across the mountain.”

“You are not a panther, are you?” asked Peter.

“No, I’m not. Panthers are all gray and are long, flat-flanked cats, with very long tails. But even panthers don’t attack Indoor folk in this country. They, like us, run away if they can.”

“I do wish I could pet you—just a little,” said Geraldine wistfully. “Your fur looks so soft and thick and long, and you have such a pleasant smile—like my pet cat Ladysmith.”

“It won’t do,” said the Lynx, yawning and blinking at the children. Then it settled down comfortably on the log, folding its huge padded paws under its breast, and glancing about lazily.

Kit-Ki

“Any rabbits or squirrels or grouse around here, children?” asked the Lynx innocently. “I thought I heard a squirrel or two quarreling down by the Silver Stairs a few minutes ago.”

“You did,” said Peter, “but the Black Squirrel ran away from the Red Squirrel, and the Red Squirrel ran away from you.”

“From *me*?” asked the Lynx in surprise. “Why should he run from me?”

“I suspect you might have eaten him,” said Geraldine gravely. “Do you eat squirrels, Kit-Ki?”

“Well,” said Kit-Ki reflectively, “if a squirrel or a rabbit should try to run into my mouth while I lie here, yawning in the sun, I suppose the only thing to do would be to swallow them and make the best of it. I remember once——”

“Oh, good! Kit-Ki is going to tell us a story,” cried the children, clapping their hands.

Mountain-Land

At the sound of the applause the cat's ears flattened and its green eyes blazed.

"Don't do anything sudden like that," growled Kit-Ki, "because I don't like it."

"We won't," said the children, rather scared.

For a minute the big cat continued to glare blankly through the sunshine that poured down from spaces in the green roof of leaves overhead; then, gradually, the bristling fur subsided, the flattened ears rose, the stubby tail ceased its spasmodic twitching, and the mild, bored look returned to the animal's face.

"Once," said Kit-Ki, resuming the interrupted story, "I was lying, spread out flat on the limb of a great tree. I was not hungry—having met a big rabbit of my acquaintance——"

"You dined with your friend the rabbit?" asked Geraldine.

"Ah—yes! I dined with him—that is,

Kit-Ki

with his aid and assistance. In fact, we dined together, very close together—that is to say, *I* dined.”

“Wasn’t the rabbit hungry?” asked Peter.

“No,” said the cat softly.

“You—you are quite sure you didn’t eat him?” ventured Geraldine.

“Well, now I think of it, perhaps I may have eaten him,” said the cat thoughtfully. “Yes, perhaps that’s what became of him, because I remember at that dinner my friend the rabbit and I were very close to one another—so close that he might have got on to the table before I noticed it in time to prevent myself from swallowing him as part of the dinner.”

“How perfectly dreadful,” murmured Geraldine, shuddering, “to make such a mistake while dining!”

The cat yawned. “To resume,” continued Kit-Ki, “I was not hungry as I lay

Mountain-Land

basking, stretched out flat on the great limb. And, as I lay there, I saw one of those fool spruce grouse fly on to the limb about six inches from my nose. Oh, those spruce grouse are such fools up here in Mountain-Land! You know what they look like—a dark bird, smaller than the ruffed grouse, and wearing a scarlet patch over the eyes. Why, they are so silly that I have seen Indoor folk walk up to them and catch them in their hands, just for the joke of it—not to eat them, because these spruce grouse in Mountain-Land feed on the bitter tips of spruce trees, and that makes their flesh taste like spruce gum, which spoils them for you Indoor folk. But I—ahem!—am not so particular.”

The children looked hard at the Lynx.

“*Did* you eat that poor spruce grouse?” demanded Geraldine.

“Why, it was a curious thing,” said Kit-Ki, “that just as I grew tired of watch-

Kit-Ki

ing the fool bird, and opened my mouth to yawn, that idiot of a spruce grouse managed to get inside, somehow or other, and when I closed my jaws, in surprise, to my intense astonishment I found myself swallowing something that tasted of spruce tips. Do you suppose it could have been that spruce grouse? I ask for information; I never knew exactly just where that bird went.”

“O Kit-Ki! Kit-Ki!” said Geraldine. “I fear you are worse than Ladysmith, my black and white cat. She ate my canary.”

“What is a canary?” asked Kit-Ki curiously.

“A dear little yellow bird that sang beautifully. I punished Ladysmith by drenching her with water.”

“Don't the cats that live with Indoor people like water?”

“Oh, no! they don't like it at all—except to drink.”

Mountain-Land

“Don't they ever swim?” asked the Lynx.

“No. Do you?”

“Oh, yes! I swim very well. I can swim clear across the lake between the Noon Peak and the Gilded Dome. Besides, I sometimes fish when I am hungry. I lie out on a rock, one paw hanging just over the water; and when a fish comes swimming along by the rock I plunge my paw into the water and clutch him with—*these!*” And the Lynx lazily thrust out a set of great curved claws from beneath the velvety gray paws.

“What terrible claws!” said Peter.

“Like curved blades,” whispered Geraldine.

“They need sharpening,” said the Lynx, rising, humping up its short, thick body, yawning and stretching its long legs. Then it fell to clawing the trunk of an ash tree, licking its claws occasionally as though liking the flavor of the salty ash bark that clung to them.

Kit-Ki

“You never killed a deer, did you?” asked Geraldine.

“A deer? Let me see. Seems to me I had dinner with a young fawn once——”

“Oh,” cried Peter indignantly, “what a shame!”

“Don’t *you* eat venison?” asked the Lynx, surprised.

“Y-yes,” stammered Peter.

“Then why is it a shame for me to eat it?”

“Anyhow,” said Geraldine hastily, “you don’t eat sheep and cows, do you?”

“If I am not mistaken,” replied the Lynx, “I once had luncheon with a young lamb——”

“A lamb! One of *ours*?”

“I believe so. What is there wrong about that? Don’t you and Geraldine eat lamb?”

The children were silent.

“As a matter of fact,” said the big cat,

Mountain-Land

“I have taken breakfast and luncheon and dinner with several of our mutual friends—once with a nice little pink pig who came up here to hunt for acorns. He was delightful as a—companion. We lunched—er—together. And on several occasions I have had the pleasure of meeting some of your lady turkeys and breakfasting with them. . . . By the way, are there any crayfish in this pool?”

“I don’t think we ought to tell,” said Geraldine.

The Lynx walked to the edge of the sparkling water and crouched. Then it began to lap up the water exactly as a cat laps milk from a saucer.

After it had finished drinking it sat there, silent, licking its whiskers, big green eyes intent on the water. And suddenly, like lightning, its great paw was plunged into the brook and withdrawn. Something wet and

Kit-Ki

shiny flopped about on the moss, but the cat snapped it up.

“What was that?” asked the children, astonished.

“It tasted something like a trout,” replied the Lynx, smacking its lips reflectively. Then it settled down by the pool’s edge once more, watching the water, which now was tinted pink under the reddening rays of the level sun.

The children watched the great cat at its fishing for a while. Sometimes it missed its stroke, and, withdrawing a great dripping paw, shook it daintily. Sometimes it jerked a crayfish into the air and crunched it, luxuriously, with a comfortable purring sound in its throat.

“It is a long while since I have invited a trout or a crayfish to dine with me,” observed the Lynx, licking its chops and sitting up. “But I never entirely neglect old friends, you see; and now we are having a delightful

Mountain-Land

reunion by the Silver Stairs. Such soup! Such fish! My! What a banquet we are having!”

The children looked at the Lynx uncertainly.

“The sun,” said the Lynx, “is getting low. You children had better start down the mountain, because when the moon rises I may do considerable squalling and screeching and caterwauling, and it’s sure to scare any Indoor people who are out in the woods at night.”

“Is—is there another Kitty in these woods?” asked Peter.

“Yes, there is; a very beautiful lady Kitty—young and charming. And I may do a little courting to-night; and I may do a few war songs if any other Lynx comes around. Of course, my music is *good* music—good classical music; but it’s something like Richard Strauss’s music which I heard your mother playing on the piano when I went

Kit-Ki

down to the valley to invite one of your big, fat, white ducks to dinner; it requires much courage and experience to enjoy it. However, you may stay and listen if you like."

"I—I don't think we will stay for the music, then," said Geraldine—"and thank you very much for asking us. Shall we shake hands with you before we go?"

"It won't do," said the Lynx. "I'd be sure to scratch and bite. Good-by! Give my love to that large fat goose of yours which I saw out at the farm. I hope some day that goose will accept an invitation to dinner with me and my sweetheart. I'm sure it would be a good dinner. Good-by, children. As long as you are polite and mind your own business your friend Kit-Ki won't bother you."

"Good-by!" said the children, backing off toward the trail. "We will try to mind our own business whenever we come to Mountain-Land."

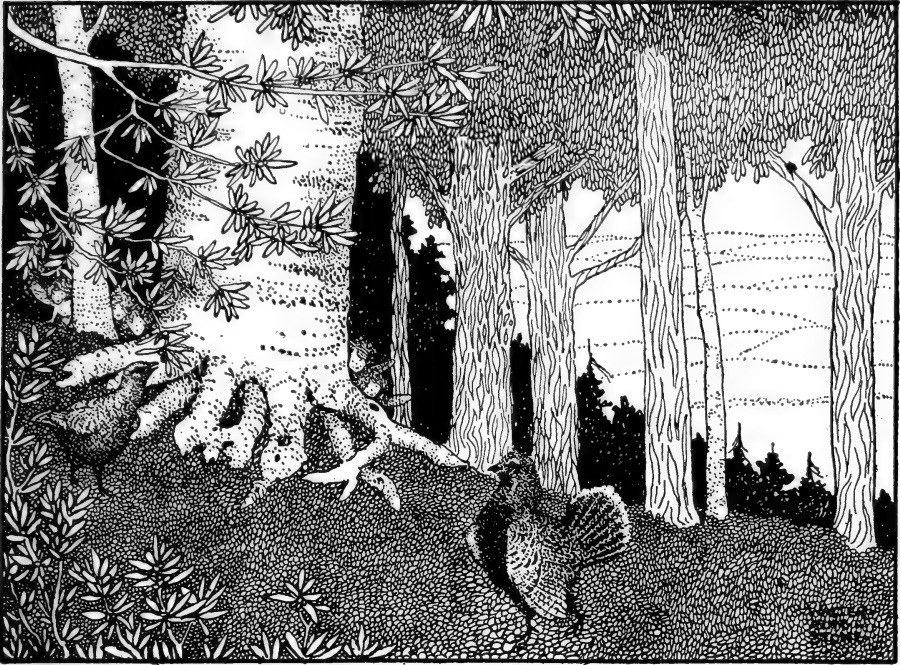
Mountain-Land

“That’s right! That’s good children. Trot along, now; for if you don’t hurry your shadows will beat you in your race down the mountain.”

“But I’ve chased my own shadow many a time and I can never catch it,” said Geraldine, laughing.

“You can’t catch it,” said the Lynx, “but you can step on its feet; and, where the trail turns to the west, you can beat it running. Take my word for it—if you run fast enough, you’ll pass your own shadow just where the trail turns westward! Now, scoot!”





CHAPTER VII

THE SHADOW CHASE

KIT-KI is right," panted Peter as, rounding a turn in the trail, they came out, flushed and breathless, along a cleared spur of the mountain and saw the sun glittering low in front of them.

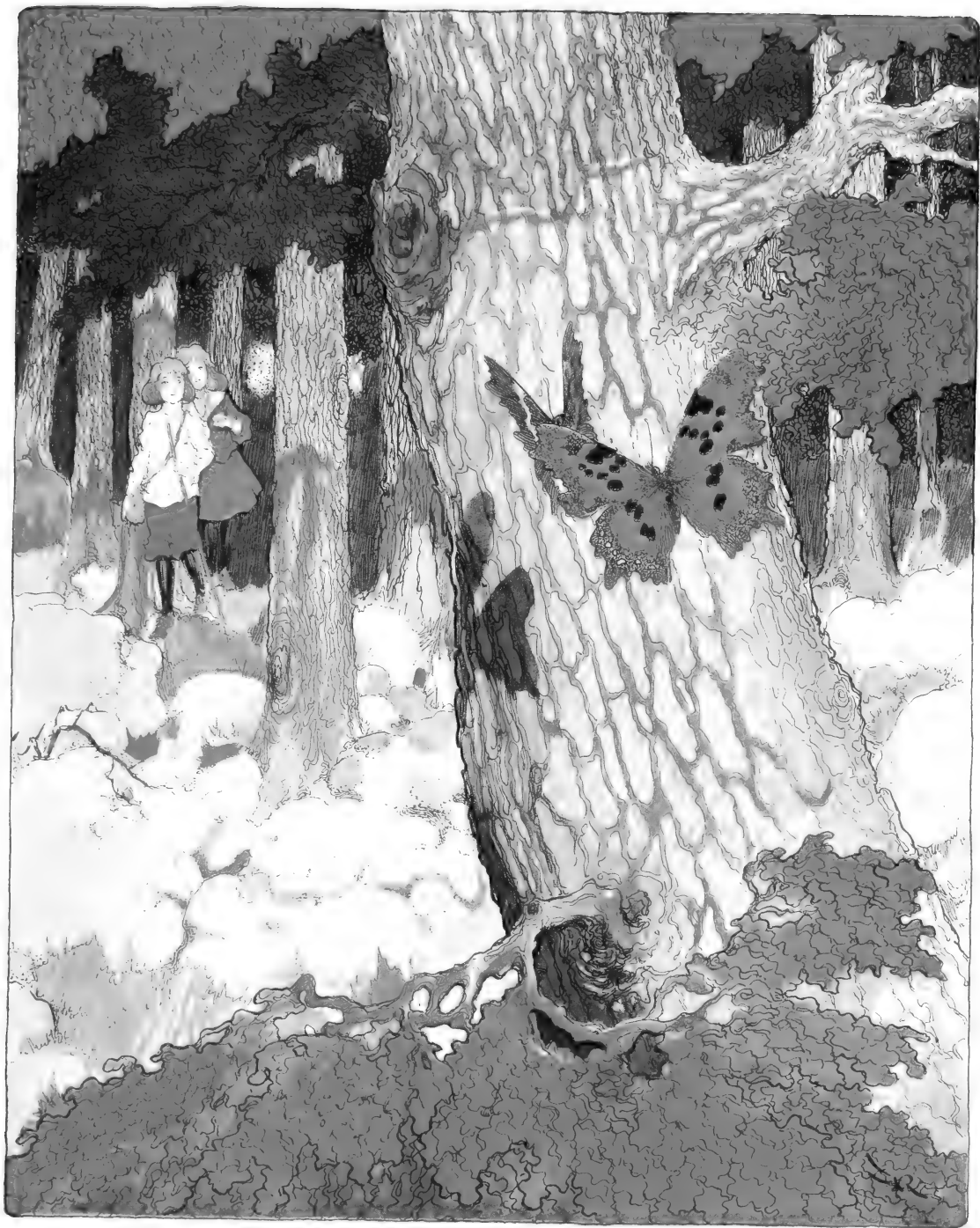
Mountain-Land

“Kit-Ki is perfectly right, Geraldine. We have outrun our own shadows. There they are behind us on the ground now; we’ve passed them after chasing them halfway to the valley.”

“How warm the sun is on my face!” breathed Geraldine, flinging the clustering curls from her hot cheeks. “It is getting redder and redder. Oh, look at the way it is painting the tree trunks crimson and gold, and how it streaks the whole mountain with blue shadows!”

“Patches of red and gold and shadow everywhere,” murmured Peter. “See those two butterflies in the sun’s rays! They are dancing with their own shadows, I believe.”

“Of course we are,” cried the ruddy-golden butterflies, whirling about in the red sunbeams while their shadows danced over leaf and rock and tree trunk. “Our names are Gracilis and Faunus; we are forest crea-



“‘We are a giddy pair,’ cried the lovely Gracilis.”

The Shadow Chase

tures who come out in the rays of the setting sun to dance the old-time dances of the nymphs and fauns.”

“I never saw butterflies out so late,” said Geraldine.

“We are a giddy pair,” cried the lovely Gracilis, whirling 'round and 'round an oak tree which glimmered fiery red on trunk and foliage under the level splendor of the sun. “We two, Faunus and I, stay out until it is dark. We stay up later than any other butterflies! Hi! Ohé! Faunus, come and dance with me! Come and help me catch my shadow!”

And the two golden-brown butterflies dashed madly 'round and 'round the oak tree, over the bark of which their shadows fluttered and dodged and fled.

“O Peter!” whispered Geraldine, “listen! look! See that beautiful bird chasing his own shadow over that big silver-beech tree!”

A soft, rumbling noise broke out in the

Mountain-Land

forest stillness; a big, blackish bird, wearing white shoulder tips and a scarlet patch over both eyes, sailed out of a slanting beech tree, alighted, puffed up its feathers, spread its tail, and began bowing to its own shadow on the ground.

“It’s a hen—a beautiful wild hen!” whispered Geraldine.

“It’s a sort of partridge—a grouse, I think,” said Peter.

The bird was very handsome; its ashy black plumage was encircled at the neck by a gray and white collar, white marks glimmered on shoulders; the dull orange legs were heavily feathered to the toes, the bill was black as ebony. And over each eye was an orange spot which, as the bird continued to strut and bow and dance to its own shadow, became brighter and more fiery until it glowed like a live coal.

“Oh, you wonderful, wonderful bird!”

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cried Geraldine softly. "Please, please tell us what you are!"

The bird made a last grand bow to his shadow, turned, and with wings trailing over the dead leaves making a silken, rustling sound, came strutting toward the children.

"Have you a candle burning inside you?" asked Peter. "Those fiery spots over your eyes look like tiny jack-o'-lanterns lighted up."

"They're scarlet combs," said the bird. "When I strut and throw out my chest and trail my wings and ruffle my feathers and bow and dance to my own shadow, those combs grow bigger and bigger, and brighter and brighter, and redder and redder, until they look like real coals of fire. I do it to please my sweetheart, you know."

"Is *she* here?" exclaimed Geraldine, clasping her hands in delight.

"Well, I suppose she is—somewhere," said the bird, looking around. "She is no

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doubt watching my shadow-dance and listening to my drumming.”

“Are you a grouse?” asked Peter.

“Yes, of course. I am the Black Heath Grouse. Some call me the Spruce Grouse, some the Canada Grouse. Then I’m also called the Spotted Grouse, Heath Cock, Swamp Partridge, Wood Grouse—and a dozen other names. Do you see that tall silver-beech tree—the big one that leans to the east yonder? That is my drumming tree. The bark is all worn off where I’ve drummed on it.”

“But why do you drum on it?” asked Geraldine. “Does it please your sweetheart to hear you drum?”

“She likes it—at least, she appears to. Besides, I must have music of course for my sunset shadow dance; so, as I can’t make music and dance on the ground at the same time, I make my music first and dance along up the tree, beginning at the roots and flut-

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tering upward. Then I come sailing down to the ground and I bob my head and bow to my shadow and light up my comb till it glows. Shall I show you?"

"Oh, please!" cried the children.

The Black Grouse ran nimbly to the base of the beech tree, then, hammering the bark rapidly with his ebony bill, which made a sharp drumming sound, he spread his handsome wings and, beating the trunk of the tree, began slowly to flutter upward along the stem, his wings going so fast that they seemed but a gray blur.

When the bird had arrived nearly at the top of the tree, he hung against the trunk for a moment, beating the bark madly, then, floating out and away from the foliage, sailed earthward on stiffly bowed wings, alighted, and began to bow to his shadow.

"Look!" whispered Geraldine, laying one hand on Peter's shoulder.

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A slim, graceful shape was stealing noiselessly out from the velvety shadows of the hemlocks—another beautiful Black Grouse, not as brightly tipped with white and orange as the first one—a modest, lovely, demure creature who moved over the leaves without a sound, glancing brightly about at the children, at the shadow dance, at the glowing sun's rays, streaking the brown leaves with fire.

“It must be his sweetheart!” whispered Geraldine with a little thrill of delight. “Oh, look, Peter! He's bowing to her now. See him nod and bow and pirouette!”

The little maiden Grouse pretended not to see her lover, paying no attention to his beautiful salutations, but strolled on demurely, pecking at a tiny beetle here, at a berry there, peering brightly about her as she wandered off into the crimson light of the forest edge.

And after her marched her lover, combs glowing like two living coals of fire, chest

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puffed out, wings atrail, tail spread upright like a fan, every quill rustling with a sound like the crinkle of stiff black satin.

And so they disappeared into the sombre glow of the woods edge, leaving the children alone with the whirling butterflies, *Gracilis* and *Faunus*, still racing 'round and 'round the oak-tree trunk after their flying shadows.

And now, out of the red west, as the children started on down the mountain, crows came flying in twos and threes, flapping heavily above their shadows which sped before them across rock and hillside.

“If you fly the other way you can beat your shadows!” called Peter, looking up. “We chased our shadows until the path turned west, and now we’ve beaten them and our shadows are chasing us!”

The crows looked down wonderingly.

“How fast those Indoor children must have run,” they said, one to another; “they’ve

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beaten their own shadows in a race down the mountain. We've never done *that!* And all our lives we've been chasing our shadows, following them west at sunrise and east at sunset; but we never seem to overtake them."

"Fly the other way! That's how it's done!" cried the children.

"But we don't live in that direction!" cawed the crows, winging slowly overhead.

"Then you'll never, never catch your shadows!" the children called up to them.

"Who knows? You can catch anything if you only fly fast enough!" cawed the crows, passing overhead; and the children saw their shadows gliding swiftly across moss and stubble and rock and tree trunk with the crows in slow pursuit.

Down, down the mountain side sped the children, racing along through the rosy evening glow. The round sun, dipping low through

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the mountain's cleft, glowed like a cherry-red ball pulsating with carmine fire; their shadows, thinner and vaguer now, streamed away behind them up the rocky slope.

"Where do our shadows go when the sun sets?" panted Geraldine as they came out on the level, flat, gravel reaches, where willow and alder clumps marked the course of the valley stream.

"I suppose they go to bed, as we do."

"But we can see our shadows by moonlight and by candlelight."

"Probably," said Peter, steadying Geraldine by the hand as they started across the stepping-stones, "probably our shadows stay up as long as we do and go to bed when we do. Look, Geraldine! See all those midges dancing in the pink light over the water. Everything seems to be dancing shadow dances at sunset. And see those cherry birds fluttering out over the stream, hovering around

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the midges and gnats as though they were joining in the evening dance. Look! Quick! What is that? A bat?"

"O Peter! It's a huge moth! There's another, too! And another! They are all fluttering and soaring and dipping and dancing over the bushes!"

"They must be bats," said Peter. "They are too big for moths."

"We *are* moths!" cried a soft, silky voice as one enormous moth came flapping around Geraldine. "We are the Giant Silkworm moths who come out at sundown to dance bat-dances in the last red gleam of daylight. That great fawn-colored fellow who wears a pair of peacock eyes on his lower wings is Cousin Polyphemus; that dusky fellow edged with gray is Cousin Promethea. Then there is Cousin Cynthia in olive-green and old-rose, with her wings set with transparent silvery moons; and I am old Brother Cecropia, the



"*We are moths!*" cried a soft, silky voice."

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biggest of all, the giant of my family, with dark wings embroidered in brick-red and crimson and pearl.”

“Oh, please, please don’t flutter about so!” pleaded Geraldine. “We can scarcely catch a glimpse of your beautiful colors. Why do you come out only at dusk when nobody can see the tints on your lovely wings?”

“Our sweethearts can see,” said a huge green Luna moth, battling softly with a gay little breeze which tried to blow him back into the forest from which he had just floated.

“Do you wear such lovely silken clothes only for your sweethearts?” asked Geraldine.

“Only for them. We hide in the forests by day.”

“But, suppose on a very dark night your sweethearts could not find you?” ventured Geraldine.

“Why, we are all deliciously scented. We can find one another by the perfume we

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wear. Sniff hard, Peter. Can you not detect a delicious odor about me as I hover around your nose?" said the big Cecropia moth.

"Yes, I can. It smells something like green butternuts," said Peter.

"That's it! Isn't it delightful?" said the great moth, whirling upward in a spiral course—up, up, higher and higher, until the children, heads thrown back, could scarcely see the tiny speck mounting into the zenith.

"It's gone!" said Geraldine, looking at Peter. "I never, never supposed a moth could fly as high as a bird."

"Whiz-z-z!" whispered a great pink and olive-green hawk-moth, whirring up to a shadowy blossom and hanging there, hovering on misty wings which vibrated so fast that they seemed only a silvery blur in the twilight; "whizz! whirr-r! Talking about birds, look at me, children! I can beat a humming-bird, if I try. Gee-whiz! How I

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can fly! Z-zip!" And the moth was gone as by magic, leaving the rifled blossom trembling.

"Peter," whispered Geraldine, when they had safely crossed the dusky water on the flat stepping-stones, "do you see that curious red star shining above the bank?"

"Yes. How red it is! Oh, look, Geraldine! It is moving! I—I never saw a star that wobbled in the sky like that!"

Then they heard their father laughing as he removed the cigar from his mouth, the glowing tip of which, shining in the dark, they had taken for a red star in the darkness. And a moment later a big white setter came splashing and wagging through the water to thrust a cold nose into their hands and leap back, circling around them barking.

"Your mother was growing anxious," said their father, taking them by their hands and walking between them. "Somebody has been

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telling her about a wild cat being seen on the mountain last week."

"There *is* one," said Peter simply, "named Kit-Ki."

"Oh, that's one of old Phelim's stories," said their father. "Every time a fox catches a turkey up on the farm, old Phelim thinks he hears a wild cat. But I wish he wouldn't talk about it to your mother. Did you have a good time?"

"Splendid!" said Geraldine sleepily, clasping her father's hand tighter, her slim legs wavering a little as she trudged up the path. And after a while her father stooped and swung her up, carrying her in his arms.

"I—I'm not tired," she said drowsily, as her curly head fell back on his shoulder and her eyes slowly closed.

"There *was* a cat," began Peter with a yawn, as they came out on the great dim stretches of lawn across which the lights of

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home twinkled through the darkness—"there was a cat, with a stubby tail and whiskers on his ears, named Kit-Ki."

"So Phelim says," said their father absently. "He says there are fairies up on the mountain, too, doesn't he?"

Peter yawned and yawned. "Yes," he managed to say, "and we saw a butterfly named Gracilis and another named Faunus; and they *may* have been fairies disguised as gold and brown butterflies—" Here he yawned again and steadied his tired legs by holding tight to the sleeve of his father's coat. "Butterflies—hawks, owls, crayfish, and Giant—Giant moths," he murmured drowsily. "They've all talked and talked until I'm sleepy."

"I should think so," murmured their father, smiling, as a white slender figure came across the dusky lawn and held out two strong, young arms for the sleeping Geraldine.

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“I’ll take her, dear,” said the figure in white. “You pick up Peter and carry him in.”

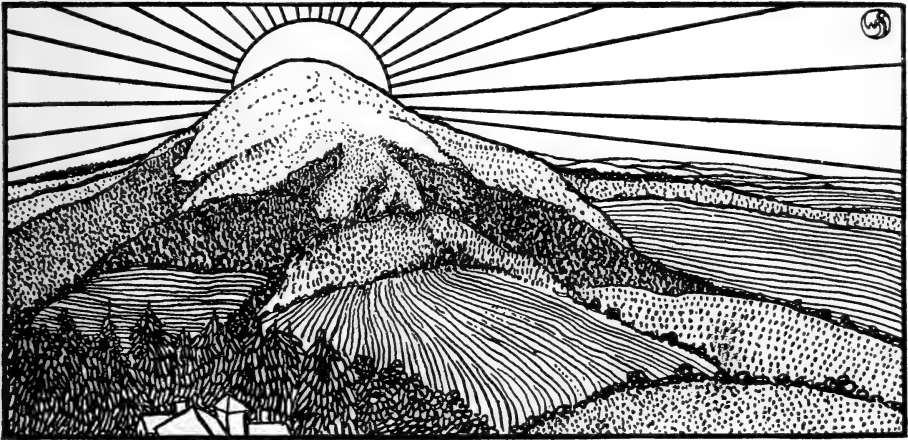
“But, mother,” said Peter, “I am not tired.”

“I’m not tired, either,” murmured Geraldine, unclosing her eyes and putting both arms around her mother’s neck.

But, when their father and mother entered the great hall, they stood a moment, smiling, silent, looking at each other. For the children lay fast asleep in their arms, dreaming the dreams of Mountain-Land.



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