



STORIES OF
THE GOOD
GREEN WOOD
CLARENCE HAWKES

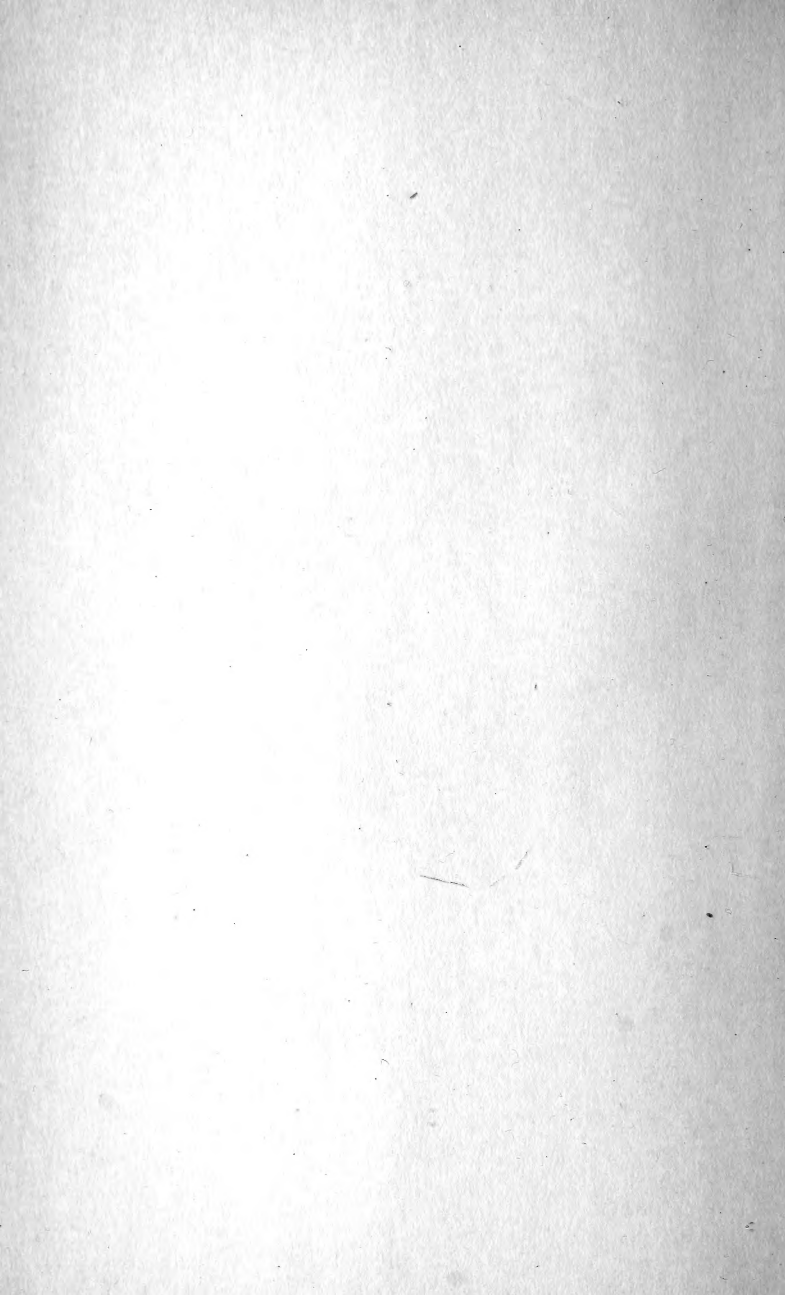


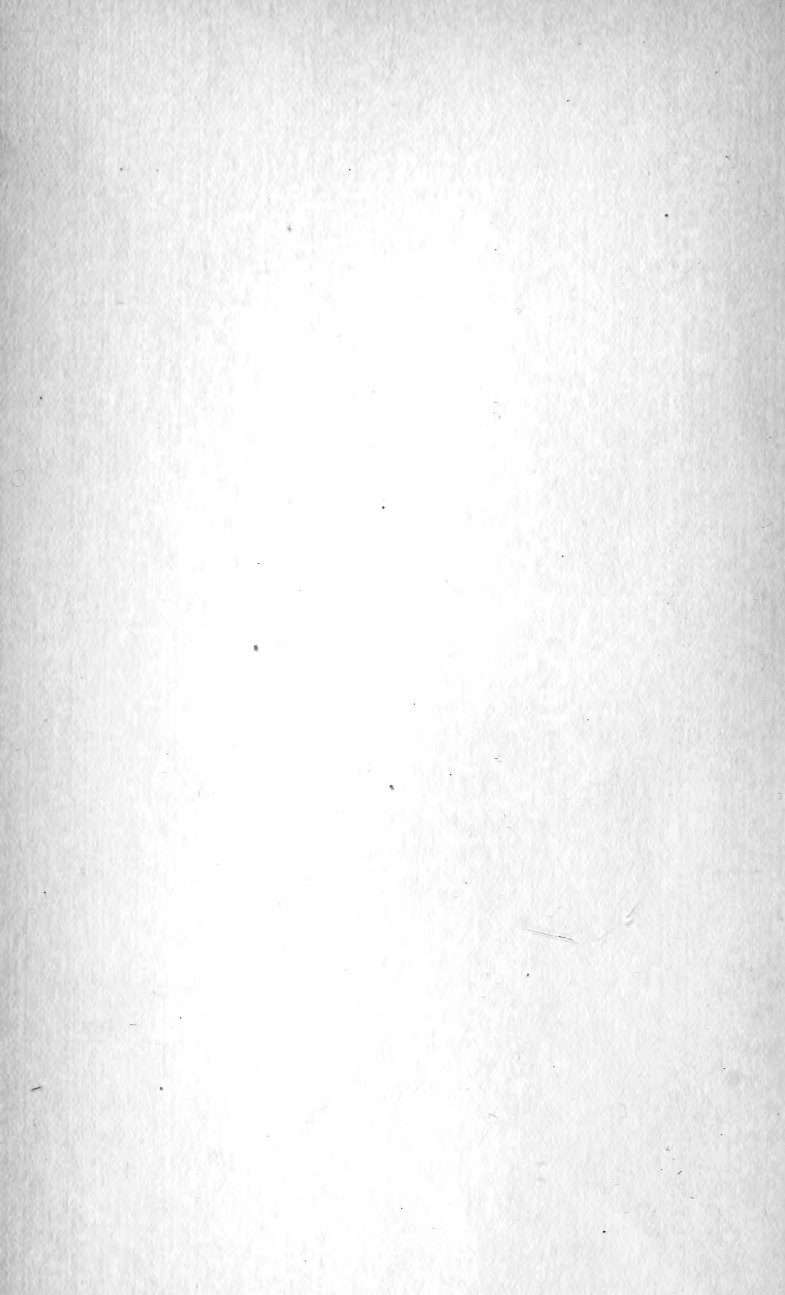
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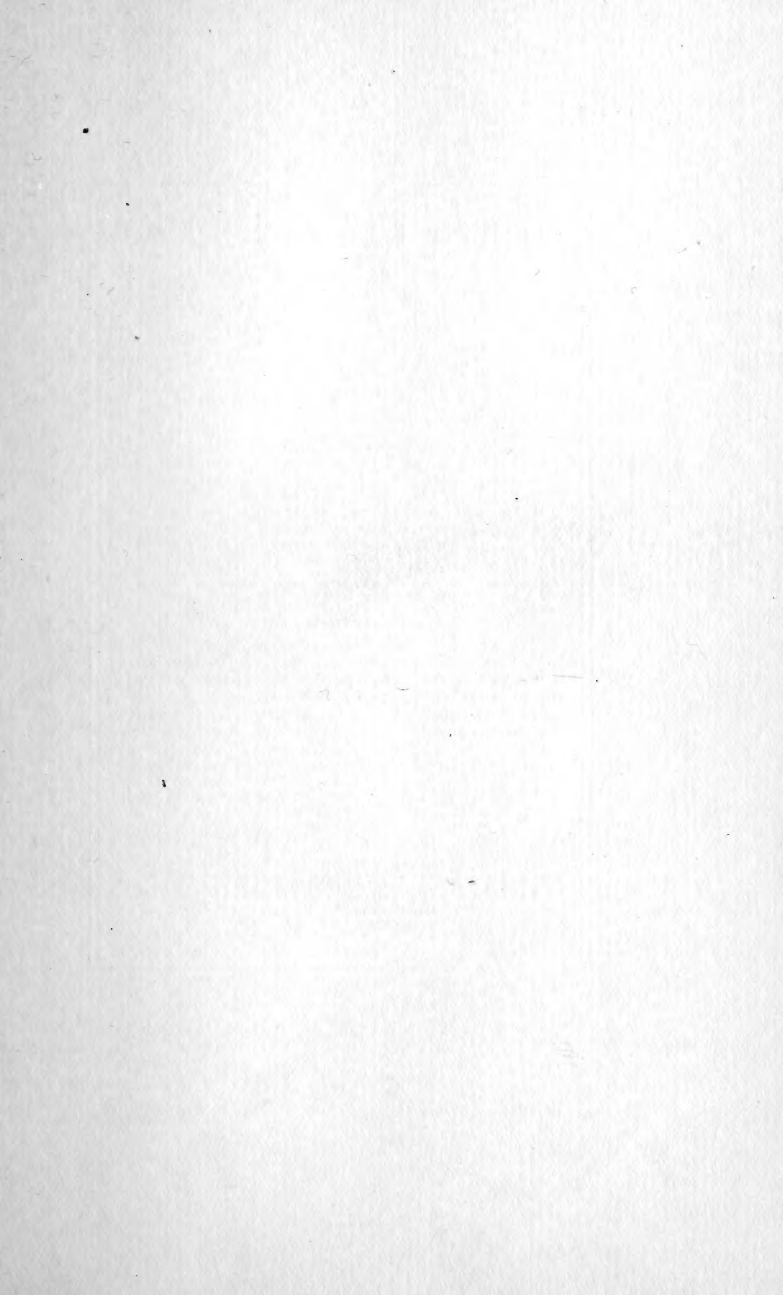
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STORIES OF THE GOOD GREEN WOOD



BY CLARENCE HAWKES

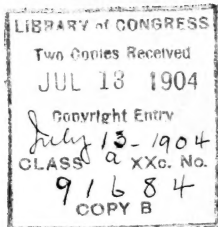
AUTHOR OF "THE LITTLE FORESTERS"

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES COPELAND

NEW
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1904



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STORIES OF THE GOOD GREENWOOD

CHAPTER I

A TEACHER OF WOODCRAFT

No day that I have spent roaming the woods with old Ben Wilson will ever be quite forgotten. Although, as he flourished nearly twenty years ago, some of those memories are rather dim. He was never known as Mr. Benjamin Wilson, for his full name did not fit him, so he was simply Old Ben to all the boys whom he fancied, for ten miles around.

He was not an important personage, either, so you may wonder just what his hold upon your affections was. If I remember rightly, he was not in favor with the elders in the prim little New England

town where we lived, for many of them called him "a lazy good-for-nothing," but never anything worse than that.

His great sin seemed to be that he loved nature and the wonders of the fields and woods, more than most of his prosaic neighbors, and so took more time to admire them.

It was a very common sight to see Old Ben walking home with one arm full of hickory saplings and the other filled with springy hemlock boughs. The hickories he would carefully peel, some rainy day, and then he would hang them up in the barn, with a weight on the end of each. There in the course of time they became the choicest kind of trout poles. It was considered as much of an honor, by us boys, to be the possessor of one of Old Ben's hickory rods, as it was in after years to own one of Spalding's best fly rods. The hemlock boughs were made into bows, strips of woodchuck hide being used for the strings. One of these bows made a boy of ten as near the counterpart of an Apache Indian as he was likely to ever get.

Then there was always an assortment of popguns made from the hollow elder, for boys who were too small to use the bows; so was it any wonder that we all loved Old Ben?

He did not like to take small boys with him into the woods. "They air allus hollerin' and skeerin' things," he would say. "A boy has gut ter be old enough ter hold his tongue before he can go with me." I was about ten years old when, one May afternoon, I made my first pilgrimage with Old Ben to the shrine of nature, and I saw more in that brief afternoon than I had ever seen before in my life.

"Eyes ain't good for nothin' in the woods, without you know how to use um," my guide would say. "Most folks go thunderin' through the woods, like it was Washington street, an' don't see nothin', while the rabbit sits under a bush a laughin' behind his paw, an' winkin' at the squirrel above him in the tree. There ain't one person in ten that can see anything in the woods, while really one can see more there than anywhere else."

On this particular afternoon we took the cow-path leading down through the lane to the pasture, after which we struck off into the deep woods.

We had scarcely turned from the path into the alder bushes that skirted the woods when a small brown bird fluttered out of the grass at our feet, and flew into a bush near by, where she fluttered about, twittering in an excited manner.

“Now, Harry,” said Old Ben seriously, “what do you think of that?”

“What?” I asked, for I had seen nothing unusual.

“Why is that ’ere brown bird floppin’ up out of the grass in that way and then perchin’ on that bush an’ not flyin’ off? Put your wits to work, boy, an’ tell me what you think on it.”

“I don’t think anything of it,” I said after a moment’s thought. “’Tain’t anything but just a brown bird, and they are always flying around in the bushes.”

“Eyes, yet they see not, ears, yet they

hear not," repeated Old Ben mournfully, "But I don't blame you, boy ; it's our first trip together, an' I'll teach you to see things, in time.

"Wal, that there brown bird came out from under that bit of a bush by the path an' ten ter one there is where her nest is."

"Why, what makes you think so?" I asked in astonishment.

"Wal," replied Old Ben, thoughtfully, "she warn't there for nuthin', birds and squirrels don't do things for nuthin'. She wouldn't be feedin' there this time o' day, for 'tain't neither breakfast time nor supper time, besides, don't you see she don't want to go away? She's waitin' to see what you an' I are goin' to do about her nest. Uv course I may be mistaken, for a feller ain't never quite sure in the woods, but let's see."

We knelt down by the bush and poked away the grass, and there, sure enough, was the nest with five speckled eggs in it. It was a very cosy house, lined with hair and

sheltered from the wind and rain by the bush.

“Ain’t it a pretty home for Mr. and Mrs. Brownny?” asked Old Ben, poking the grass back as it had been before.

“Let me take one of the eggs home to keep,” I said, reaching for it. But to my astonishment my companion caught me by the wrist. “No, you don’t,” he said decidedly. “This ain’t no nest robbin’ expedition, not ef I know it. If you hev come with me ter rob birds’ nests, I am goin’ home. Ef you take that egg home it means one less bird to sing to us and hop about an’ look pretty. Think uv that.”

I had never thought of it before in just that light, and the more I considered, the more I became sure that I had no right to take this little unhatched bird’s life in that way.

“Come on,” said my companion, “we hev disturbed Mrs. Brownny long enough; she is gettin’ nervous, let’s be movin’.” So we parted the alder bushes and walked on, leav-

ing the little house undisturbed and the heart of the brown bird glad that we had not taken any of her eggs.

Old Ben glided along as easily in the cover as I could go in the open, and he rarely made any noise. "Light-foot," we boys called him, but with me the case was quite different. Every dry twig that I stepped on, snapped like a parlor match, and I was always stepping on one end of a long stick and having the other end fly up with a big noise.

"Harry," said my companion severely, after one of these missteps, "you make as much racket in the woods as a rhinoceros would in a tin shop. Ennybody'd think your feet were pile drivers ; why don't you let them down easy, like the earth was eggs, an' you wuz afraid uv breakin' on um."

Presently a brown streak shot across the path and was lost to sight in the weeds and underbrush.

"What's that?" I asked excitedly.

"Rabbit," replied my guide in an under-

tone. "Allus when you see a brown streak an' can't quite make it out, it's a rabbit, that is, ef it is on the ground; but in winter it would be a white streak."

"What, the same rabbit?" I asked.

"Yes," said old Ben seriously. "He has got two coats. A brown one that he wears in the summer and a white one in winter."

"Where did he go to?" I asked.

"Are you a bat, that you can't see in the daytime?" Ben asked, looking scornfully down at me. "He is in just as plain sight at this very minute as I be. Use your eyes, boy."

I looked along the path where I had last seen the cottontail, while Ben grinned broadly.

"I can't see him," I said at last in a whisper. "I don't believe he is in sight."

"See that old log about twenty feet ahead? Wal, just let your eye run along it to where it runs into the bush." I did as I was told, and there, squatting under the bush, in plain sight, but as still as though he had

been made of brown marble instead of quivering nerves and muscles, was the cottontail. His color blended perfectly with that of some last year's dead leaves, and the gray brown of the rotten log. He kept so still that I almost thought he had turned to stone, but if you looked carefully, you could see his nose and ears twitch slightly.

“What makes him keep so still?” I asked. “That is the way he hides,” said Ben. “He knows better than we do that he is just the color of the ground, and if he does not catch your eye by some movement that ten to one you will not see him at all. There he goes.”

I looked, but was too late, for he had already disappeared.

“Did you ever hear how 'twas the rabbit lost his tail?” said my companion as we proceeded on our walk.

“No,” I replied. “How was it?”

“Wal,” said Ben in his queer drawl, “it was this 'ere way.

“Once, many years ago, a rabbit and a turtle lived in the same swamp. The rabbit

was terrible proud an' put on airs. He had a fine long tail in them days, an' he carried it over his back like a squirrel. It used to make the turtle awful jealous to see him an' so he thought he'd fix him. One mornin' when he met the rabbit he says, 'Hallo ! I wonder if you want to run a race with me to-day ?' At this the rabbit snickered and leaped over a bush, just to show what he could do.

“ ‘I run a race with you ?’ he said, scornfully, ‘why, if I didn't have but one leg I could beat you, you old snail.’

“ ‘I dare you to try it,’ said the turtle hotly.

“ ‘Name the distance, the starting place, and the forfeit,’ returned the rabbit, proudly, ‘and we will see about your fine boasting.’

“ ‘Well,’ said the turtle, ‘we will run through the pasture to the mowing, through the farmer's turnip patch, twice and back again.’

“ ‘Agreed,’ said the rabbit.

“ ‘ And this will be the forfeit,’ said the turtle. ‘ If you win, you may bite my tail off, and if I win I shall bite your tail off.’ ”

“ The rabbit laughed loudly at this. ‘ Why, friend Turtle,’ he cried, ‘ you can’t steer yourself in the water without a tail. How queer you will look,’ and without more ado, he was off, running like the wind.

“ The turtle waddled after him, smiling broadly, for he well knew if he lost the race that he could draw his tail into his shell and the rabbit could not bite it off, although he tried a week. But this was not the whole of his plan. It took him a long time to go through the pasture to the mowing and when he got there he saw the rabbit busily eating turnips in the farmer’s lot. This was what he had expected, so he went quietly on his way, taking care not to disturb the cotton-tail.

“ Well, Mr. Turtle just made his short legs wiggle, and before the rabbit knew it he had lost the race. He came flying back through the pasture as though the dogs were after

him, but it warn't no use, for there was the turtle waitin' for him at the brook.

“The rabbit teased terrible not to have his tail nipped off, but he had plagued the Turtle so much in the past that it warn't no use, so the Turtle nipped off his tail at one bite. And rabbits hain't ever had tails since.”

“Is that a real true story?” I asked when Old Ben had finished, for I had never heard anything of the kind, and was suspicious that Ben had made it up for the occasion.

“Mebbe it is, an' mebbe it ain't,” answered the old man. “There's lots uv lies that air true in this world, an' vicy verse. Mebbe it war an allegory, or mebbe more properly speaking, it wuz a tail.”

While Ben had been telling me the story of how the rabbit lost his tail, we had been sitting on an old moss-covered log, just such as abound in the forest, he whittling and I chewing gum, that he had previously dug for me with the large pocketknife that he always carried.

“Wal,” he said, when the story was finished, “I’ve got this cane done an’ I guess we had better be moving, for I have got several things to show you.”

The cane which Ben had made for me was cut from a maple sapling. He had cut rings about it on the lower end and peeled off the bark between the cuts so it gave it a striped effect, while at the top he had made a whistle.

“That cane ain’t good for much ter walk with, but it looks sort uv pretty, an’ you can blow the whistle when we git out of the woods.

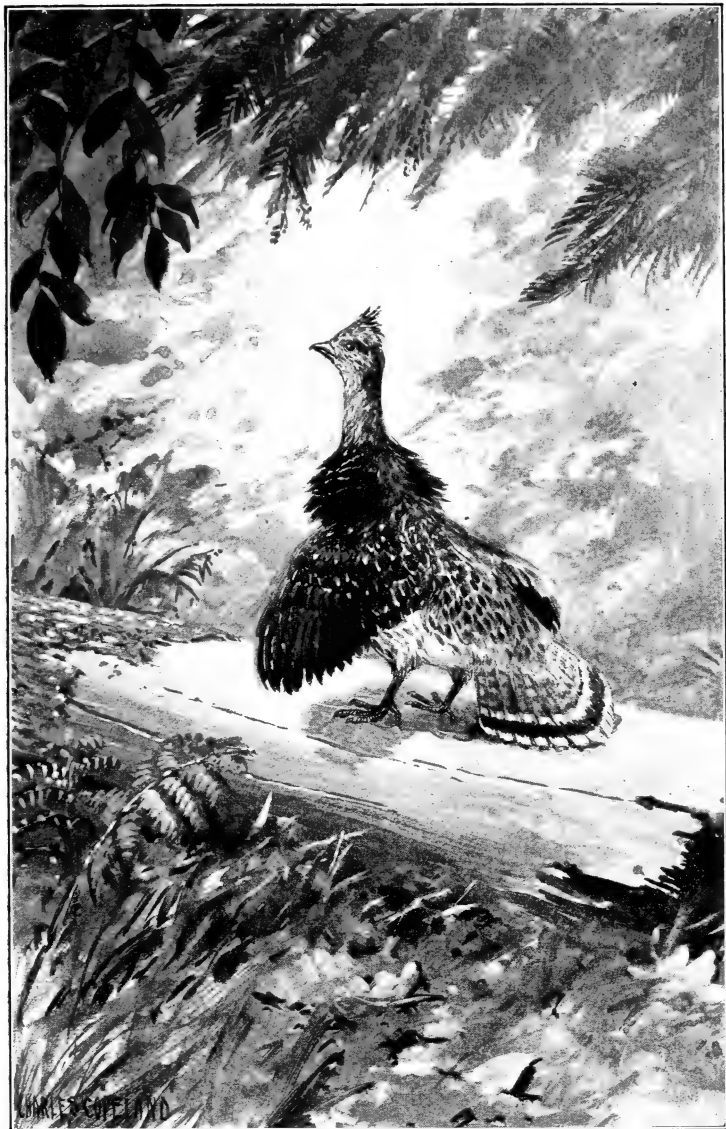
“Now, if I can, I am a goin’ to show you one of the sights uv these here woods, an’ that is a cock partridge, drummin’. But it is mighty hard to get near um, an’ you are such a heavy stepper maybe we can’t do it. I heared one a drummin’ a long ways off when we wuz a sittin’ on the log. I guess I know where his log is. Now you follow me. We can go along fast enough until we get within ten or fifteen rods uv the log, an’ then we will have to be careful.”

We trudged along for several moments before we heard anything that sounded to me like a cock partridge drumming, but finally I heard it: slow at first but soon growing faster and faster, until it was one long roll like thunder.

“I spose even you could hear that,” whispered Old Ben when it had ceased. “Now we’ll stop and stand perfectly still until he begins again, and then we will go as far as we can while he is drummin’. You see he is making so much noise then that he can’t hear us ; but he will listen between times, so be careful.”

We waited some time for the old cock to drum and I was afraid he had stopped, when he began again. The moment he started to drum we began to creep up on him, and had made twenty or thirty feet by the time he had ceased.

This we did several times, each time drawing nearer and nearer to the log, until the drumming sounded almost like thunder. Each time when the partridge stopped we



HE STOOD ERECT, LIKE A SOLDIER ON DRESS PARADE.

would crouch behind a tree trunk, and wait patiently for him to begin again.

As we got nearer to him, Old Ben kept motioning me to be quiet and not to step on dry twigs or rolling stones.

“ You see he is almost the same as on the ground, an’ gets the sound easy,” he whispered.

By this time I was all excitement, and my heart was beating like a trip-hammer.

When he began again, we hurried a few steps forward to the top of a little rise, and lay flat upon the ground, and hardly dared to draw breath until he began again.

At the first beat of the partridge’s wings Ben clutched me by the shoulder, and we both stood up and peered between two trees into a little ravine that the rising ground had hidden from us before.

There upon an old log in a little opening was Mr. Partridge, looking as proud as though he owned the whole woods. He stood erect, like a soldier on dress parade and his ruffs were distended. Slowly his wings rose,

until they were as high as his back, and then they descended like lightning, but faster and faster they fell until the eye could no longer see them and he looked like a great round bunch of feathers about the size of a half-bushel basket.

As the martial roll of the cock neared the close we dropped to the ground and lay still, not daring to move or breathe. It was a long time before he drummed again, and I began to fear that he had got tired of it and gone off. But presently there came the first loud thump of his wings.

We stood up again and had a splendid sight of this wary bird, sounding his drum call,—a sight which few people ever see.

As he neared the finish we again dropped to the ground.

“My,” I exclaimed, drawing a deep breath and speaking aloud in the excitement of the moment, “ain’t he a bouncer when he is drumming.” The words had scarcely died upon my lips, when there was a roar of wings beyond the old log, and we caught a glimpse

of the cock, speeding away like an express train.

“There, you hev done it,” said Ben in disgust. “You will hev ter learn not to go a shoutin’ around when you are in the woods with me or I’ll leave you to home,” and the old man looked grimly down at me.

“I didn’t mean ter,” I said, this time speaking in a whisper.

Ben laughed. “It won’t do no good ter be a whispering now, an’ you might as well talk out loud. He’s more’n a mile away by this time.”

“Won’t he come back?” I asked, greatly disappointed with the news.

“Come back? I guess not,” said Ben scornfully. “He is the shyest bird there is, an’ when he knows there are two great lubbers like us a snookin’ round his log he won’t come back until he knows the coast is clear. He won’t drum any more here to-day, an’ mebbe not to-morrow, for they are terrible suspicious.”

“What makes him?” I asked.

“Wal,” said Ben, “lots of things, includin’ you an’ me. Besides men, there are hawks, owls, weasels, cats, foxes, wildcats; them air a few of the things that make him wary.

“Now I hev gut just one thing more to show you an’ then we will go home. Mebbe I can’t find what I want. I discovered um the other day, an’ mebbe their ma has moved them.”

“Moved what?” I asked.

“Wait an’ you will see,” said Ben, and he led the way through the woods, going at his long lope that I could scarcely follow.

“We hain’t gut to be careful now, for we will hev ter skeer the ma away effore we can see um. See that old black stump ahead?” asked Ben when we had gone some distance.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Wal,” said my guide, “you keep your eyes on that an’ let me know if you see anything.”

I stumbled along, not looking where I was stepping, for my eyes were riveted on the stump.

Presently a rabbit hopped out from under the stump and along the path a few steps, and then stood still, just as the other had done. But as we came nearer the rabbit sprang into the bushes and was gone.

“That’s their ma,” said Ben; “ef she hain’t moved them they are under this stump.”

Ben put his arm in a hole near the ground, and after feeling about for a moment, brought out the cutest little white pink-nosed chap you ever saw. The only thing that would tell you it was a rabbit was its long ears. Its eyes were not open yet, and its little pink nose twitched as I held it, while it made a tiny noise, half way between a grunt and a squeak.

“My, ain’t he pretty,” I said, devouring the baby rabbit with my eyes; “let’s take him home.”

“Not much,” said Ben, giving me one of his severe looks. “How do you think you would like it when we get home to find that a big animal from one of the planets had been

at the house and carried off the baby? It's bad enough for us to be poking about scare-in' um without stealing the babies into the bargain. The mother will probably move um, now they have been disturbed the second time. I found um the other day and thought you would like to see um. But it won't do you any good to come here again, for the ma will move um to-night."

We fished out two more baby rabbits, and after admiring them to our hearts' content, put them back and started for home.

"I guess that is sights enough for one day," said Ben. "We hev been pretty fortunate. We might hev tried a whole season before we saw that partridge drum. I was more than forty years old before I ever saw one drumming. And that is only the second or third litter of rabbits that I have ever discovered, so you see you are lucky to-day."

I thanked Old Ben the best I knew how to, but he only said, "Tut, tut, I don't want no thanks, but I wanted you to know that these things aren't hangin' on every bush in the

woods. You hev to be patient and careful and love all the little animals and at last you may find out something of um and how they live. Some day we will go again an' mebbe see more strange things, who knows."

By this time we had got out into the pasture again, and we soon turned into a cow-path that led to the bars.

"Always makes me feel rested and good-natured to be out in the woods," continued Ben. "I think it is because we get nearer to God in the woods than anywhere-else. God is strength and rest for us all."

CHAPTER II

OLD RINGTAIL'S WATERLOO

WHEN Old Ben first brought Ringtail to me, he was a fuzzy bit of a coon kitten about the size of a chipmunk, or perhaps a little larger. He was of a dirty gray color, rotund in shape, and as near as we could estimate, about three weeks old. He probably had his eyes open to the bright light and the strange world some three or four days when I got him.

Ben said that coon kittens were slower in getting their eyes open than any other kind of kittens, as some of them were blind for nearly three weeks, while domestic kittens and puppies got their sight in about ten days. My new pet was not shapely, but resembled a ball of fuzz more than a would-be coon.

He did not make any sound when he was

small except to grunt contentedly when he was full, and to cry when hungry, very much as kittens or puppies would.

We had a hard time teaching him to drink milk, and in fact he nearly starved before he learned.

Several times we despaired of getting him to drink, and he might have gone the way of many a wild thing that man undertakes to domesticate, had we not hit upon the plan of giving him his milk from a small oil can, squirting it into his mouth.

Ben took me to the woods one day, and showed me where he had found the burrow of the coons. It was under the roots of a big birch that overhung a brook. The bank had shelved off into the water, leaving a small cave under the roots of the tree, and here the coons had made themselves a fine burrow, lining it with dry grass and leaves. It was sheltered, warm and dry, and near to the water, of which a coon is fond. He is a clumsy sort of a fisherman also, and this is one reason why he likes to be near a brook.

He is no match for the otter in this sport, and he does not live in the water as the otter does, but he likes to paddle in it and occasionally knock a sleepy sucker out of the water with his paw. This was to be seen from the fishbones that were scattered around the burrow. The burrow must have been an old one, for there were last year's corn-cobs and other evidences of long occupancy. But this snug home was now quite vacant, and had been for some time. "It was because I took one of the babies," explained Ben. "These wild critters will rarely stay in a burrow after it has been robbed, and birds do not like to build in a tree where they have had bad luck the year before. If they do they will change the position of the nest."

When Ringtail got large enough to enjoy the outside world, I made a wire-netting fence around the big maple in the yard, about twenty feet from the trunk, and let him play in the tree or run in his little yard, as best pleased him.

He soon made a burrow of his own under

the root of the tree, and was very much at home.

Even while small he would climb to great heights in the tree, and I fully expected to see him come tumbling down and dash his brains out on a root, for the coon is a clumsy fellow compared with a squirrel, and, while a good climber, he is not built for that exclusively, as the squirrel is. But I do not know that my new pet would have been hurt had he fallen, for he was very fat, and his fur would have acted as a cushion.

We did not call him Ringtail at first, as the rings about his tail and eyes were not plain enough then to suggest the name, but they came out early in the summer, and by the fall were very marked.

This history may, like ancient Gaul, be divided into three parts, that of Little Ringtail, the baby coon, Young Ringtail the mischief-maker, and old Ringtail, the renegade and thief.

It was on sweet corn that Ringtail first made his start towards being the monster

coon that he finally became. He would eat several ears in a day, gnawing the kernels off, and sucking out all the sweetness in the cob. He did not like the corn as well boiled as raw, so we threw his into the yard, when it came from the garden, usually with the husk on, for it was fun to see him husk it. He would hold the ear down with his paw, and starting the husk at the top would strip it off with a sudden jerk of his head.

Ringtail was also fond of fish. In fact fish was one of his passions, and we got a head for him as regularly as we bought fish.

I do not know whether he could distinguish between mackerel and shad heads, and trout, or whether he preferred trout as coming from his native brook, but I took it very hard of him, when one day he fished a fine string of brook trout out of a pail where I had left them in some water and carried them under the house. They were still on the string, and he held the end of the willow switch in his mouth, and of course the fish came along. No amount of coaxing would prevail upon

him to bring out the trout, but he did return the stringer after he had eaten them. Perhaps it was an invitation to go to the brook and get more for him. But this was when he got to be Ringtail the mischief-maker, and had the full run of the premises.

He was on good terms with most of the domestic animals. A dog, a cat, some kittens, some chickens, and a coon frequently took their breakfast from the same dish, without quarreling more than one would expect.

Ringtail always took pains to eat on the opposite side of the plate from the dog, and they occasionally exchanged snarls, and showed teeth, and once I rescued the coon, when he was still young, from a premature grave; but these things always happen, and on the whole he took very good care of himself. He was very jealous, though, of an old woodchuck that we had partly tamed, who used to come to the door for a crust of bread. If the coon was about when Chucky appeared he usually sent him back into his hole at the

top of his speed. The woodchuck always gave a whistle of defiance as he dove into his burrow, and once underground he wheeled about and invited Mr. Coon to come and see what a good set of teeth he had, but the coon always refused the invitation.

Early in August I cut a large hole in the wire netting that framed the coon's yard, and let him run where he pleased, at the same time leaving his yard and burrow to flee to in time of peril.

From the very first day that I gave him the run of the premises began the history of Ringtail the mischief-maker. When we went into the garden that forenoon to pick corn, we found that some one had been there before us, and helped himself in a peculiar manner. There were several stalks partly down, as though they had been recently bent to the ground. The ears on these stalks were either partly or wholly eaten. Besides this, a few stalks had been lopped over just for fun. At first we did not think who the marauder was, but the second day we

caught him in the act. He would rear on his hind legs, and, catching a stalk under his forearm, press it to the ground, and hold it down while he ate the ear, much as a boy would hold down a bush while picking the fruit.

After that nothing was quite safe from that prying, pointed nose and those inquisitive paws, and although he made all kinds of trouble, he was so ingenious, and so full of pranks and capers, that it afforded us considerable amusement, as well as annoyance.

Besides picking corn when he pleased, he poked about the roots of the beets to see how they grew, occasionally gnawing into one to discover if it was ripe. Some of the squashes he nipped from their stems just for fun, and later on in the season he gnawed holes in the sides of many pumpkins, and scooped out the seeds with his paw and ate them, leaving the entire pumpkin to rot or dry up. Occasionally he robbed a hen's nest, breaking a hole in the end of each egg, and sucking it as neatly as a boy could have

done. Once he investigated a beehive, and went away much wiser: he was not badly stung, for his thick fur made that impossible, but two or three bees got in their work on his nose, and for a day or two it was a sorry sight. But he seemed to know what to do for it as well as I would, for he went at once to the side of the road and stuck his nose into the mud, repeating the operation until it was daubed with a fine mud poultice. When the poultice got dry and crumbled off he renewed it, and soon had the fever reduced.

Ringtail was a genuine sport, his two kinds of game being fish and small birds, which he would sometimes eat up, nest and all.

It was about Thanksgiving time that he had his first taste of chicken. It was purely an accident, for we had feared letting him taste even chicken bones. But after the chickens were killed for the Thanksgiving pie, he found their heads near the chopping block, and ate them, and poked about in the chips for more heads.

A few days after Ringtail brought a hen and laid her on the front doorstep. Her head was nipped off as clean as one would have done it with an axe. By his manner he seemed to say, "here is another for the pot; I have fixed her just as you did the others."

We did not want any more of Ring's help, and so put a collar on him and tied him up. It was a hard trial for him being halter-broken, and he nearly strangled during several fits of pulling, but finally learned that it was useless.

About this time there came on a very cold snap and a hard snowstorm. The snow came in the night, and when we went to feed Ring the next morning he was gone, leaving an empty collar.

We saw nothing of him for two months, and thought he had returned to his native woods, and found shelter in a hollow tree, when one warm day on going into the cellar, who should we see sitting on the potato bin but Ring, looking sleepy and stupid. We let him alone, and the next day he was gone,

but investigation revealed him rolled up in a ball in a ditch leading from the cellar to the outside world. The cellar being on a side hill was drained by this ditch. Ring had slipped his collar and crawled into the outer end of the ditch the night of the cold spell and the snowstorm. In the morning he had probably found the entrance blocked by snow, and had concluded it was time to hibernate, and had gone to sleep. The warm winter thaw had awakened him and he had come into the cellar to investigate. When Ringtail appeared in the spring, about the middle of March, he was not the sleek, well-groomed coon that had curled up for his long nap in the autumn. He was lean and lank, and his coat was dull and rusty.

He was a little shy at first, and it took him a day or two to get fully waked up, but after a little he remembered that we were his friends and showed us the same confidence he had the year before.

There was no sweet corn or garden stuff for Ringtail in the early spring, but he did

very well on some sweet winter apples. He was also partial to turnips, and he remembered the fish-cart, and got his usual fish head. He also ate ground fish which we used for fertilizer, and its odor clung to him for days afterwards.

But the summer season, with new sweet corn and sweet apples, was his time for growth, and during the second summer he nearly doubled in size. He had also gotten to be quite a scrapper, and it was a good dog that cared to take a bout with him.

It was early in September of the second year that Ringtail made his first depredation on the henhouse, and it was his love for chicken together with his extravagant wastefulness in killing, that finally led to his downfall.

I am confident that he knew the chickens were not intended for him, and he had no right with them, for the night that he killed a rooster and two hens he took to the woods, and was never seen about the premises by day again. I occasionally saw him in the

fields, but he took good care not to let me get in reach, and paid little heed to my calling. He seemed always to be watching me out of one eye, and his countenance plainly said, "I know it would not be well for me to have you catch me, so we will live apart hereafter."

Two nights after his first thieving, he visited the henhouse again, this time killing four fowls, only one of which he carried away.

I had raised a fancy strain of Wyandottes, intending to show them at the fair, which was to be in a week or two. But this last stroke of Ringtail's spoiled my coop, as it left me only two or three ragged pullets and a rooster that was off color. If he had been content with killing ordinary hens, it would not have been so bad, but when he picked out thoroughbreds, it was too much to bear.

That noon Ben happened along, and I told him my grief.

"The ole rascal," he said, sympathetically,

“I thought it would come to this all along; you can't keep lambs and lions in the same cage, not without you keep puttin' in fresh lambs. I'll bring over a trap to-night and we'll catch him.”

Accordingly we set the trap, with all of Old Ben's trapper's ingenuity, but no coon could we catch. Nearly every morning we found evidences that the coon had been about; sometimes he killed a chicken, more frequently he was satisfied with less flagrant mischief, but he never got into our trap.

He was so used to the premises that anything out of the ordinary attracted his attention, and put him on his guard. It may be only my imagination, but it seemed to me that he purposely tormented us, and defied us to catch him.

We put up with being robbed and tormented in this way for about a month, then Ben went to a neighboring village for a celebrated coon dog, and we planned a hunt that should either end the career of this marauder, or else scare him out of the country.

The dog was a beautiful black and tan fox-hound, who was equally good as a coon dog, which is not usually the case. I remember well fondling his ears and petting him before we started out.

It was about the first of October. Corn was cut and in the shook. The apples were picked, and nearly all the fall work well along.

We went at once to the cornfield, as the most likely place in which to get track of the coon.

“If you want to know whether a coon has been in a cornfield or not,” said Ben, “just go round it with the dog, keep him on a string while you do it, and then you will be sure of it.”

At the further side of the field the hound got excited, and we let him go.

He at once took the trail and went off into the pasture, barking at every jump. Ben and I followed as fast as we could.

In less than three minutes the dog was barking up a tree in the pasture near by.

We went to the spot and found him at the foot of the big maple.

“Might as well have treed him up a meetin’ house steeple,” said Ben when he saw the tree. “We might climb the steeple or chop the church down, but this tree is out of the question. He has beat us to-night, and we might as well go home.”

The big maple, as it was called, was a landmark for half a mile around. It was five or six feet at the butt, and ran up sixty feet without a limb.

After considering for a moment, I saw the wisdom of Ben’s conclusions, and reluctantly turned my steps homeward. I had wanted to try a pair of climbers that Ben had gotten the year before from a lumberman, but this tree was too much for a beginner.

The next night we struck the trail as before, but after the dog had been running five minutes the wary coon holed in a ledge where it was impossible to get him.

“Done us again,” said Ben, after making a thorough examination of the ledge; “might

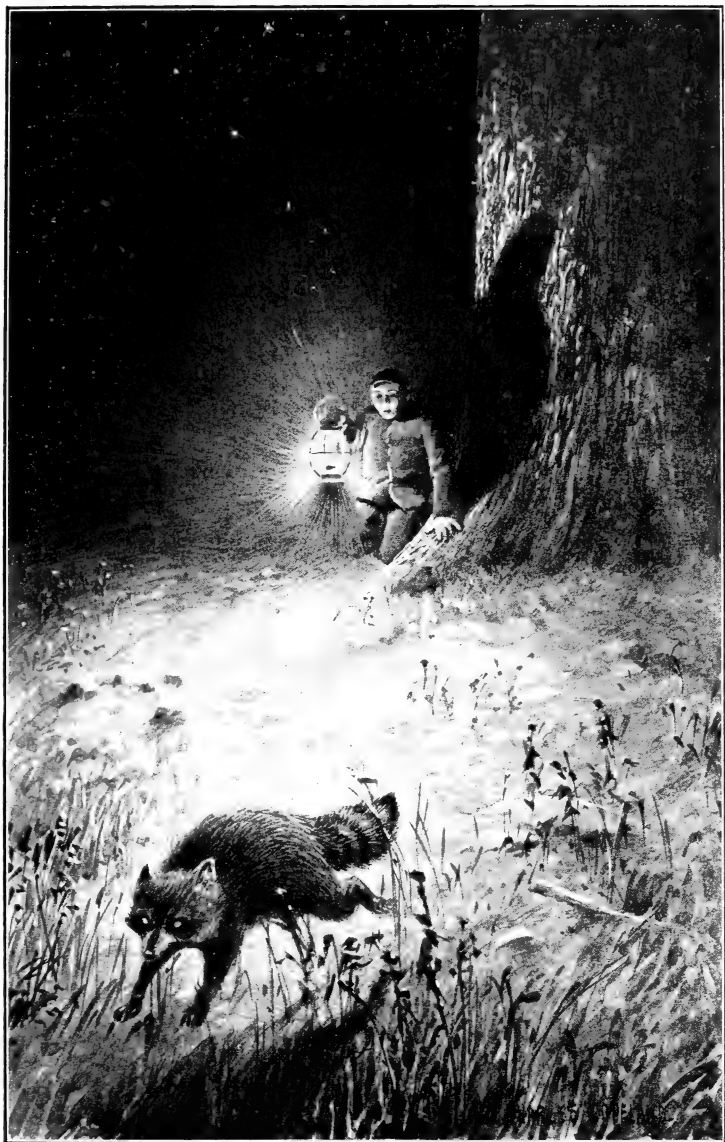
as well try to dig John Bull out of Giberalter."

The third night Ringtail was treed again in the big maple.

Ben said that we might possibly shoot him in the daytime if I would watch the tree for the rest of the night. So, lantern in hand, I took my position at the foot of the tree, and Ben went home, the dog soon following.

I was very sleepy, but was determined to stick it out, and not fall asleep. For a while the hooting and screeching of a large owl kept me awake, but presently I began to doze. Then I thought I heard something scratching, as though descending the tree.

I looked up and was horrified to see a monstrous black shape that I took to be a bear slowly descending. My first thought was of flight, but when I tried to rise my knees knocked together so that I could not stand. So there I sat while the bear descended on the further side of the tree. Then I awoke just in time to see the black-ringed brush of a coon disappearing on the outer



I SAW THE BLACK-RINGED BRUSH OF A COON.

edge of the light that my lantern shed into the gloom.

There was no use watching an empty tree, so I went home. Ben made all kind of fun of me the next day when he came to shoot the coon.

“I guess that old Ringtail has about sized us up,” he said. “I never see nothin’ like him for a coon. Might as well try to catch a firefly; but we will get him yet. You know the old sayin’, the deer that goes too often to the lick finally meets the hunter.”

By the time that we had treed and holed the coon half a dozen times, and always in some inaccessible place, Ringtail got tired of our little game, and took matters into his own hands, in a way that startled even so experienced a woodsman as Ben.

We had found the track in the cornfield as usual, and the dog had been running about five minutes, when we heard a terrific snarling down in the meadow.

We made all haste to the spot, feeling sure that the coon had at last been brought to bay.

The hound had evidently been at the ditch on the edge of the swamp, so we went along beside it, poking away the swale with a stick. "Mighty curus where that dog has gone so sudden," said Ben. "I should think we'd hear something of him." There was about a foot of water in the ditch, and some of the way it was completely covered with grass.

We had explored four or five rods, when we suddenly came upon the hound lying in the bottom of the ditch, kicking and gasping in the last agonies of drowning.

"Gosh all hemlock," ejaculated Ben, at the sight of the kicking dog, "ef that don't beat me! I'll bet that coon has done for the dog." We pulled the sleek hound out of the water, and a moment later he died before our very eyes.

There was a savage bite in the back of his neck, but it was not enough to cause death.

Of course we were not certain how it happened, but Ben said that the coon was probably hard pressed and jumped into the ditch and the hound after him.

The coon had then apparently caught the dog by the nape of the neck and thrust him under water. Or he might have fallen into the ditch with the coon on top of him. The only fact that we were sure of was the dead dog before us.

We made a sorry spectacle as we carried the hound home between us on a pole, which we stuck through his collar.

This ended our coon hunting for about a week, but Ben finally got Danny, a big coon dog owned by a neighbor, and we began again.

“Mebbe old Ringtail will eat up Danny,” said Ben the first night that we started out with the new dog, “but he will hev a big mouthful if he does.”

I do not know whether the coon thought he had gone too far and that we would make it hot for him, but for several nights he lay low, and we could not start him at all.

Night after night we tried, but could not get track of him. Danny soon got disgusted with the whole performance, and finally

concluded that we were merely taking some evening walks, and did not scour the country as thoroughly as he should have done.

To break the monotony of coon hunting without getting any coons, we built a camp-fire each night and roasted some sweet corn that had been sown for fodder and was just getting ripe. This and some fall apples made a very pleasant camp-fire supper.

One night when we had been hunting with Danny for about a week, we struck into the sugar orchard, where there was a fine growth of old maples and no underbrush.

We had gone but a few rods when we were startled by a furious onset from Danny, and answering snarls that were so fast and furious that my hair fairly stood on end with fright.

Ben hurried forward, and, fearing to be left in the dark, I followed.

Not five rods away we came upon the scene of the battle, and it made a spectral picture in the tall aisles of the maple forest.

There at the foot of a great tree, with his

back against the trunk, standing well forward on his toes, the fur raised, his teeth bared and gleaming white by the lantern light, was Ringtail, the renegade, taken unawares and at last brought to bay.

Over against him, but three or four feet away, was Danny, with hackles up and fangs bared. Every now and then he advanced on the coon and although he was twice the size of his wild antagonist, he dared not walk into that grinning muzzle.

I thought that Ringtail cast a reproachful look at me as he sat there on his guard, fighting his last fight, but it was probably only my conscience. But I could see the dog collar around his neck that I had placed there, and I could not help thinking how pretty he had been as a kitten, and a dozen of his comical pranks flashed through my mind in those brief seconds.

“Shake him up, Danny,” cried Ben, swinging the club in his hand to attract the coon’s attention, and Danny advanced a step nearer and the big coon slunk back closer to the tree.

Then suddenly the coon's head shot out and his teeth clicked like a steel trap. Danny drew back and licked his chops, from which the blood was trickling.

"Go it, Ringtail!" I shouted, forgetting for the moment which side I was on. "You can lick him, give him another."

But his star paled and went out almost as I spoke, for Danny suddenly sprang forward, and with a cleverness and intelligence that I have never seen equaled, caught the coon's long tail, that lay upon the ground, in his teeth. With a sudden spring backward he brought the coon sprawling on his back and off his guard, with his throat open to the attack. Even then the old renegade died game, for he left several long scratches on the hound's belly, and bit him in the cheek as he closed upon his throat.

But it had been Danny's stratagem rather than his pluck that won the battle.

Danny was jubilant, and danced about us as we walked home. Ben also was elated, for he was a philosopher and knew that we

could not keep our chickens if the coon was allowed to live, but my own feelings were a sorry mixture of triumph and regret.

I had hunted Ringtail relentlessly, but at the last moment would have been glad to have seen him escape up the tree.

If he had been some one's else pet, it would have been different. But I finally steeled my heart with the thought of the dead hound that Ringtail had killed, and of the coonskin cap and mittens that I would wear the coming winter.

CHAPTER III

BOOKS IN RUNNING BROOKS

ONE Saturday afternoon in midsummer, when the air was sweet with the breath of new-mown hay, and the roadways and lanes were gay with buttercups and golden-rod, Old Ben came strolling into the yard, carrying two of his famous ironwood fishing poles on his shoulder.

Each of these home-made rods was rigged with the celebrated horse-hair line that Old Ben alone knew how to make, and with hook and sinkers.

“Hello, Harry,” cried my friend cheerily, as soon as I appeared, “let’s go fishing.”

I needed no second invitation, and rushed to the shed for a fork with which to dig worms.

“Where are you goin’ to dig um?” asked Ben, when I returned with the fork.

“In the sink drain,” I replied ; “ there are lots of fine ones there.”

“ That’s not the place at all,” said the old fisherman promptly, “ worms from the drain will be soft and light colored. What we want is the black tough fellows that won’t break when you put them on.”

We soon found a place by the roadside where the worms were black and tough, and filled our boxes.

“ You hain’t got no breathing places in “ the top of your bait-box, Harry,” said Ben ; your worms will all smother.”

I had not thought of this, but he soon remedied the difficulty by punching holes in the tin box with a nail and a stone. He then made me the proudest boy in town by presenting me with the extra pole he had brought along, and we at once started for the sweet little meadow brook that had always been my delight.

Old Ben went at a long lope and I trotted by his side.

“ There is a wise old chap named Shake-

speare," he said. "I dunno much about him, but I heared one thing that he said once, that They allus remembered: 'There's books in runnin' brooks, sermons in stones, an' good in everything.' Now, that's mighty true. Brooks are like people, they begin small and grow a little every day of their journey. Sometimes they run through the alder bushes where it is dark, and then they murmur like they were sorrowful. Then they run down pebbly slopes, where it is sunny, an' you can fairly hear um laugh."

My heart beat like a trip-hammer as we neared the brook, but Ben, as he would say, "was as cool as a cucumber." He showed me how to loop the worm on, so it would look natural, then told me to go ahead and he would follow behind an' ketch the little ones that I left.

I threw into the first likely hole, and was waiting for a bite when I heard old Ben talking. "Hello, you ole green-back, you had better let that hook alone or you'll be pricked, it ain't intended for you, any way."

“Who are you talking to?” I asked.

“An old green bull-frog,” he answered. “He looks so comical, settin’ under a lily-pad, winking and blinking. Know what becomes of frogs in the winter, Harry?”

“No,” I said, “what does?”

“Why they jest freeze up, stiff as pokers. I often find um under the mould when I am settin’ mink traps. Snakes does the same way. I found one once when I was choppin’. He was in a hollow birch, frozen stiff as a hickory. I carried him home and set him up in the corner, an’ in half an hour he was crawling round on the floor lively as you please. I didn’t want no snakes for ev’ry-day company, so I put him out doors and let him friz up again, an’ sleep until spring. Pull him in Harry, pull him in.”

I had been interested in Ben’s story of the snake and had not noticed that my line was zigzagging around the pool. I twitched upon the pole with all my might and the trout went several rods back into the meadow.

Ben laughed. "Any one would think you wuz throwin' apples on a stick by the way you twitch. Jest give your wrist a turn like this," and with an easy motion Ben hooked a fine trout and lifted him out upon the grass.

I went back into the meadow to look for my trout, but could not find it. "Right by that leetle willow bush," shouted Ben; "you allus want to mark a thing down by some bush or brake an' then you can find it."

I looked where he indicated and found my trout.

I wondered more and more as the afternoon went by how Old Ben could see so many things that were hidden from me. The woodcock borings and the mink tracks in the mud, the frogs and the lizards, and the beautiful bunches of lily-pads and water grass. Nothing escaped his notice, and in everything he found beauty.

"It's jest hev'in' on your woodsman's specks," he said. "You will hev a fine pair

in a few years if you keep on an' sorter take notice of things."

In the big pool by the old log I discovered a fine large trout, headed up stream, lazily fanning the water with his fins. Cautiously I approached him, but no allurements would cause him to bite.

Old Ben got several kinds of bait for me, including a grasshopper, a cricket, and a grub, but the old trout was wary. Finally Ben chuckled and said, "I guess we'll fix him now; I'll go up stream and rile the water, an' you stay here. When the muddy water floats down by you a spell, throw in your worm an' let it go down with it."

I did as instructed, and to my great astonishment the cunning fish took my bait with a suddenness that nearly twitched the pole away from me, and a second later I landed him fairly.

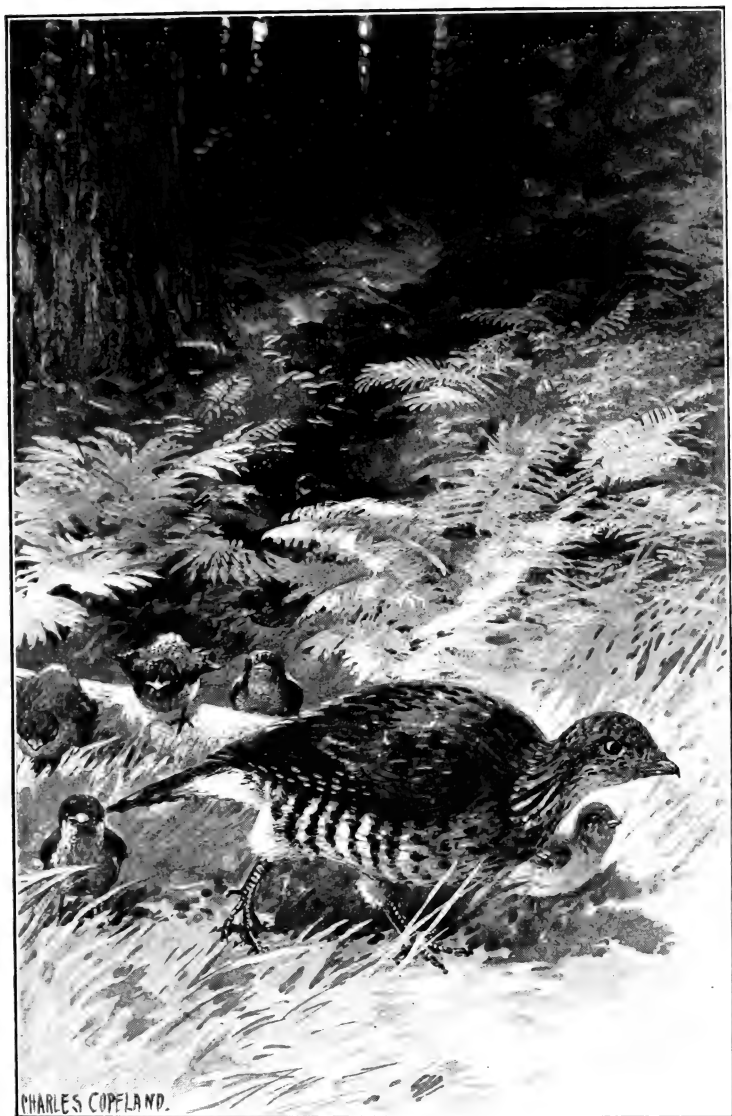
"Now, Harry," said my friend, when I had done dancing about, "why did he bite when I riled the water?" This question was too much for me and I had to give it up.

“Wal,” said Ben, “it is this way. That ole trout probably knew what a hook and line was as well as you or I, but when he saw the rife coming down stream he thought to himself, the bank has caved in, and here comes a fine worm that has fallen in with it. I’ll take it.”

“Don’t you see how natural that was? You can’t fool these little beauties very often, an’ the only way to do it is in one of nater’s own ways.”

Just where the little brook gurgled through the wall between the mowing and the pasture and then hid in the spruce woods we were treated to one of those pleasant surprises that makes the study of woodcraft so fascinating.

I was in the lead and was blundering along in my accustomed fashion, when, just as I mounted a stone wall, a mother partridge, closely followed by ten or a dozen chicks came scurrying out from under the spruces. The small partridges looked for all the world like brown Leghorn chickens just



A MOTHER PARTRIDGE CLOSELY FOLLOWED BY HER CHICKS.

hatched, and the old partridge ruffled her wings, very much as a hen would do. But instead of clucking she cried "quit, quit, quit," and seemed in great distress.

With the instincts of a young savage I gave chase, and then the mother partridge acted very strangely.

She fluttered down upon the ground in front of me almost within hand's reach, and then I saw that one of her legs was injured, for she limped and fluttered along in a painful manner. Again and again I reached for her, but in some unaccountable manner she would slip under a bush or into a brake and just elude my grasp.

As I dove under a low spruce after her I heard old Ben shout, "Go it, Harry, I will bet on the partridge."

He proved to be a good prophet, for the next time I reached for the wary mother she shot out from the underbrush with a roar of wings and the speed of a rifle bullet. Then there was a flash of fleeting wings and feathers, the friendly arms of the Forest closed

behind her and she was gone. I peered into the tree tops and under the low hanging branches, but no partridge was to be seen. Then I heard smothered laughter from Old Ben, and looking around saw him sitting upon a knoll, holding his sides and chuckling.

“You orter hed salt, Harry, you orter hed salt,” said the old man, when he had laughed sufficiently at my expense.

“What for?” I asked, considerably nettled that he should be laughing at me.

“Why, to put on her tail, then you could have caught her, Harry.”

“Well,” I replied, “I almost got her without any salt. Didn’t you see me nearly get my hand on her? Didn’t you notice how lame she was? One of her legs was almost broken.”

At this Ben laughed again, but I could see nothing to laugh at. “You are dead easy, Harry,” he said, when his mirth had subsided. “It reminds me of the old proverb, ‘Big head, little wit,’ but I chased a lame mother partridge myself once when I was a

boy, and I suppose I ought not to laugh at you."

"Why, wasn't she lame?" I asked, at last beginning to get a little light upon the mystery.

"Acted sorter done up when she lit out for unknown parts, didn't she?" asked my tormentor provokingly. "Went about sixty miles an hour, as near as I could cackerlate. All she wanted was to get you away from her chicks so they could hide, and that was why she fluttered along and made such a fuss." My eyes opened wide with astonishment. "You see," continued my tormentor, "there was more brains in her little butter-nut head than there was in your great curly pate, an' she fooled you completely, and that's the way 'tis half the time in the woods. When man, who thinks that God gave him all the brains there was on hand at the time, undertakes to outwit a fox, or a partridge, or even a crow, he finds out his mistake, an' gits some of the conceit taken out of him."

“Where do you suppose all the young partridges have gone?” I asked as we made our way back to the spot where we had first seen them.

“They hev hid,” said Ben. “When the mother went away she said, ‘Now you hide and stay hid until I come back,’ and they would if she was gone half a day.”

We poked about in the grass and weeds, but could see nothing of them. Just as we had given up the search old Ben pointed to a yellow brake near my feet. I looked down and saw one of the chicks with his head tucked under the brake, but with his body in plain sight. I reached down quickly and closed my hand over him, but only pressed my own empty palm, for at the same instant there was a rustle in the grass and the young partridge had gone as though the ground had opened and swallowed him.

Ben answered my look of astonishment with a chuckle. “Might as well try to catch a humming-bird,” he said. “They are quick as greased lightning, and the cunningest bird

in the forest. They are one of the things you cannot tame. Wild they are born and wild they die.”

We went back to the meadow and hid behind the wall where there was a convenient peep-hole that permitted us to see without being seen.

After about fifteen minutes the old partridge came sailing back over the tree-tops and alighted on the ground near where we had last seen her brood.

She had departed with a roar of wings, but she came back as noiseless as a swallow.

After reconnoitering for a moment, seeing that the coast was clear, she began calling in a low cr-re-kk, cr-re-ekk. Then one by one the chicks came up out of the grass and brakes, but from just where I could not tell. I saw the exact hiding-place of only one, and he came from a bunch of grass. When she had satisfied herself that all were there, she led them away into the deep woods, bristling and calling to them as she went.

When the purple shadows began to steal

from bush and brake, and the swallows flew low o'er the meadow lands, we wound up our fishing tackle and started for home, which by this time was nearly a mile away.

I had nine small brook trout on a willow switch, while the count revealed nineteen upon old Ben's forked stick.

"I don't see what made them bite your hook so much better than they did mine," I said ruefully, feasting my eyes upon Ben's fine string of speckled beauties.

"Wal, Harry," he said soothingly, "I reckon it is this way. You see the big fellers are wary and don't bite in a hurry. When you come along they sorter think it over, and by the time I get along, they are ready to bite.

"Here is something I found in the brook," and Ben took a small object about the size of a silver dollar from his pocket and placed it in my hand.

It was a cute little baby turtle, with a beautifully marked shell and an inquisitive head which he poked out at me.

“Where did you find him?” I asked. “I didn’t see anything that looked like a turtle.”

“No, probably not,” said Ben. “You would have thought he was a small stone, or a brown leaf, anything but a turtle. But just where I found him there was the print of one of your bare feet, an’ I reckon you nearly stepped on him. Did you ever hear how the turtle got his shell, Harry?”

“No,” I said, all excitement, for I thought I scented one of Old Ben’s home-made woodcraft stories; “tell me.”

“It ain’t much of a story,” said my companion, “but it was this way. Once, years and years ago, long before Christopher Columbus discovered America, or George chopped down the cherry tree, there lived a turtle, way off in the island of Madagascar, or some such place, I don’t remember just where, it was so long ago.

“The turtle didn’t have any shell then, only a sorter tough hide, and he was a terrible awkward lookin’ feller, all legs an’ tail an’ loose jinted.

“He used to like to bask in the sunshine on the bank, just as he does now, but sometimes the flies would bite him, or his back would get blistered by the heat.

“He got to thinkin’ it over one day, an’ thought what a fine thing it would be to have a little house that one could carry around all the time to keep the sun and the flies off, and to go into when an enemy came along. The more he thought about it the better he liked it. But he couldn’t seem ter find anything that would do for a house.

“Wal, one day Mr. Turtle was under a cocoanut tree taking a nap, when down fell a large cocoanut that struck on a rock an’ broke in two.

“The turtle woke up and looked around, and there was his house all ready for him.

“Why, he nearly laughed out loud when he saw it. He set to work and gnawed out the meat and made holes in the sides of the cocoanut shell for his legs, head and tail, and the house was ready. But how in the world was he to keep it on, especially the

lower half? The roof would stay on all right, if he was careful, but the under side was another matter.

“Wal, the turtle thought very hard, and then he remembered the gum-stickum tree. So he went and nipped off some bark and got some gum stickum and smeared both parts of the shell over inside and the house was ready for him.

“First he laid on his back in the top part of the house and it stuck nicely, then he laid on his belly in the bottom part, and the shell fitted together fine, and after a few weeks it grew together and you could not see where it had been cracked.

“Then he polished it up by rubbing on rocks in the river, and the water helped to make it smooth and get off the fuzz, ’til you would not know that it had been made out of a cooanut shell at all.

“Finally he got his friend, the lobster, who was a kind of artist, to paint the shell over green and mottled, and the house was done.

“Here we are at the gate, Harry. Keep

the little turtle a few days in a tub of water and watch him, but take him back to the brook in a week or so, for that is his home, and we all love our home.”

CHAPTER IV

THE MISCHIEF-MAKER.

THE Mischief-Maker sat on the limb of an old apple-tree barking and scolding away as though the whole world had been turned upside down, and there was no one in the world to right it but himself. It was little he could do to put things right, for he was a mischief-maker, and more than likely to turn things wrong side out himself.

If I were to enumerate all the wicked pranks that he had done since the daffodils awoke from their winter sleep, the mere mention of each would fill the entire length of this story, and tire you to death. A few of the most flagrant of his pranks will serve to show you the turn of his mind and his ingenuity in small deviltry.

The first bluebird had barely got here,

“shifting his light load of song from post to post,” as Lowell says, when the Mischief-Maker discovered a pair of gray squirrels living in an isolated first-growth maple, that was old and hollow, and afforded them a fine shelter. Their winter’s store was nearly gone, but there were still some choice hickory nuts left, and a good supply of chestnuts ; not to mention three ears of corn which were tucked away at the bottom of the store in the autumn, and had not yet been eaten.

Usually the Mischief-Maker would have set up a terrible barking and scolding on discovering a pair of gray squirrels, but thinking that this would alarm them and set them on their guard he stole quietly away, and with more forethought than he usually showed, thought out a plan for their undoing.

Every day thereafter he took up a position in the top of a butternut tree near the house, where he could watch the maple. One day when he saw the two gray-coated cousins go away for a day’s visit in the deep woods, he called two of his red imps, and the three red

squirrels proceeded to the big maple. Then the Mischief-Maker scurried up to the hole in the maple, which was the home of the grayers, and dropped down the remainder of their winter store, while his two companions proceeded to hide it in every conceivable crack and cranny. There was no system in their mischief either, and a great deal of the hard-earned store they were never able to find again, so that it did no one any good.

When the grayers returned, late in the afternoon, they were heartbroken to find their store entirely gone, but there was great glee in the apple orchard, where three red squirrels made merry over their joke.

The arbutus had pushed up through the dead leaves and grass and was gladdening the pasture land with its sweet, shy beauty when the Mischief-Maker discovered the remains of Chippy's winter store at the root of an old beech. Then this heartless freebooter robbed him just as cruelly as he had done the grayers.

For a while after this he could rob no more, as the winter store was all gone, and bird-nesting time had not yet come. But as soon as the birds began their building his sharp eyes were upon them. You must not imagine though that he had been unemployed during these two or three weeks.

He had been carrying corn from the garret and scattering it about in the near-by fields, that he might dine on it when hungry.

He did not really need the corn, as there were plenty of last year's butternuts under the tree near the house, and up in the orchard were rotten apples, from which he delighted in gnawing the seeds. But the corn was carefully hung up in the garret, being kept for seed, and thus gave an added relish to steal it. The people who lived in the large farmhouse were always good to the red Mischief-Maker, but that made no difference, as he had no conscience to which one could appeal.

Although he kept rather quiet during nest-building time, yet his bright eyes were tak-

ing in all that was going on in the trees, and many a nest he marked for his own.

He never disturbed a nest while the male bird was about, for he was afraid of having his eyes pecked out. Secretly he was a great coward, which fact he well concealed by making a loud noise on all occasions. When the female bird had been left alone he would steal quietly up, and frighten her from the nest, then he would eat the eggs and beat a hasty retreat, so when the male bird came flying swiftly back, alarmed by the cries of his mate, he could find no one to charge with robbing his nest. Or if he did see the Mischief-Maker the next day sitting on the wall, scolding as usual, that small scalawag had such an innocent look, and was so abused when Robin accused him of the theft, that he concluded it was some other thief, and begged the Mischief-Maker's pardon, while that rogue snickered behind his paw.

Best of all, the red squirrel loved quietly to slip up when both birds were away from the nest and do his wicked work. If he was

not hungry, he would merely bite into the eggs, or drop them down to the ground to break them.

Once he had stolen up very quietly to investigate a large, strange-looking nest that his prying eyes had discovered in the top of a hemlock. It was not until he was almost at the brim of the nest that he discovered two big winking, blinking eyes looking at him. These eyes reminded him of those of the cat into whose paws he had rushed one day while fleeing from a boy with a sling shot. He had escaped from the cat by dodging and twisting, but he never forgot the look of those eyes.

This time he was too frightened to run. So he merely loosed his hold on the limb, and fell to the ground. This alone saved his life, for the owl came flopping after him, almost as soon as he struck the ground. But the fall aroused him, and he escaped under the roots of the tree, where he stayed for half a day.

The Mischief-Maker had been thinking

while he had been sitting in the old sweet-apple tree.

It had been a long time since his teeth had cracked a nut, and they fairly ached for something hard to crunch. The old nuts had been softened by the wet, until they no longer had that hard, crisp feel that he loved. He must have something to crack.

Then a very wicked thought, probably the worst one that he had ever entertained, came into his head, and he made the orchard fairly ring with scolding and barking. It would be such sport. His tail twitched, his head bobbed, and his bright eyes snapped. But the old birds might peck him, for they would be terribly angry. "Chatter—chee—chirrr-r—" "Let them," and with a whisk of his tail and a flash of red along the trunk of the apple tree, he was gone on his wicked errand.

A moment later he might have been seen running along the stone wall, by the highway. Directly opposite a big maple, a few rods down the road, he stopped and peered

up into its branches, cocking his head on one side and then on the other. He could see the nest plainly from where he sat. The male bird was not at home, for he would have been singing at this time of day, had he been there. He did not think the female was at home either, for he could usually see her head above the top of the nest from his perch on the wall.

A moment the Mischief-Maker hesitated, and then flashed across the road in a series of quick jumps and scurried up the tree. "Was it this limb or the one above?" A tree never looks the same up in the branches as it does from the ground. "O yes, there it is!" And in another second he was standing over the nest, looking straight down into the open mouths of four small robins, who heard the noise, and thought that their parents had returned with worms or grubs.

The Mischief-Maker singled out the largest of the young robins, and dragged him over the edge of the nest. The poor little fellow

wriggled and squirmed but made no sound. Then this hard-hearted marauder cracked his skull with his sharp teeth, just as he would crack a nut, and ate his brain. He dropped the little, brainless, dead robin to the ground, and reached for another.

Where were the old birds? Would nothing stay this wanton murderer?

Away up in the sky, almost in the sun it seemed, was a motionless silver speck. It was so high up that it looked like a speck of dust, and one would have to gaze long to see it.

The second fledgling was dragged to the side of the nest and brained like the first, and then dropped quivering to the ground.

The silver speck in the sky was growing larger, though it seemed to be motionless. But it was not motionless. The fact that it grew steadily larger should tell you that. It was coming straight down for the tree, and no runaway train ever coasted down the side of a mountain on gleaming rails as swiftly as these silver-gray wings bore this

wild coaster down through space to its quarry.

Like the fall of a meteor, making a beautiful oblique line against the warm summer sky it came.

It was no avenging power, or spurred knight, that was coming to the rescue. It was merely an accident that the hawk saw the squirrel cross the road, and later located him on the limb by the nest.

Just as the third fledgling was dragged to the edge of the nest to be butchered, there was a rush of air like a sudden gust of wind. Then two broad wings struck the maple leaves like the fall of hailstones. The twigs parted obedient to the terrible rush, and steely talons were wrapped about the murderer caught in the act.

There was a frightened chirp and a squeak or two, and the Mischief-Maker hung limp in the strong claws of the hawk. His red coat dripped blood as he was borne away to a maple stub in the pasture, where the same fate was meted out to him that a

moment before he was inflicting upon the fledglings.

Thus goes the life in the busy fields and woods.

If a snake or a squirrel rob the bird's nest, yet the eyes of the hawk or the owl are upon them. There is nothing so small or insignificant that something else does not prey upon it, and nothing so strong or fleet of foot, that it does not have its enemies, and live eternally upon guard.

CHAPTER V

A TENDER MOTHER

OLD BEN discovered it. He always discovered everything that was going on in the field and woods, and never seemed to be looking for anything out of the ordinary either. But somehow his eyes could single out fur and feathers among the brakes and bushes, when mine saw nothing but the bare leaves.

Sometimes I would think I had stolen a march on him, and would whisper excitedly, "Ben, see that chipmunk."

Then he would look ruefully down at me, and, pursing up his mouth, would say in his quizzical manner :

"Harry, I can't make out whether you are first cousin to the bat or the owl, but it is certin' one of um. Why that chippy and I



THERE WAS A FRIGHTENED CHIRP AND A SQUEAK OR TWO



hev been winking back and forth to each other for half an hour. Mor'n five minutes ago he asked me, with a little jerk of his head, is he stone blind, an' I replied with a shake, only partly."

It was just so when we were on the mill pond. Ben could see fish down in the pickerel grass and lily-pads, when I saw only green stuff and dancing ripples.

"Don't see any bull-frogs do you, over in that bunch of lily-pads?" he would sometimes say, just to try me.

Then I would strain my eyes, and perhaps after five minutes would discover a couple of old green fathers of the pond, tucked in under the pads, but Ben had seen them at the first glance.

The particular thing that Ben discovered this time interested me more than anything we had ever seen together before, for it was nothing more or less than a litter of foxes.

He had seen one of the old foxes go into the burrow on the side of a hill, late in March, and had guessed the truth.

He said nothing to me about it, though, until about the first of May, when he had seen the mother fox with three little ones playing about the hole on a sunny afternoon. When he had made sure that his first surmise was correct, he took me to watch this most interesting family.

We had to be very careful, for the fox is wary, and his powers of perception are of the keenest ; there are few wild things that can scent man further than a fox. Many a pleasant afternoon we had to give up a visit to the burrow because the wind was in the wrong direction. If the old fox should scent us too often she would either move her family, or else not bring them out except by moonlight.

The burrow was on a sidehill, and we used to observe it from across a little valley. We would come out on the top of the opposite hill, keeping in the spruces as long as we could, then crawl on our hands and knees to a pyramid-shaped spruce that stood alone out in the pasture, a few rods nearer the

burrow. We always kept this spruce between us and the burrow, and so got a very good position, where we could see and not be seen. Then if the wind was all right, there was little danger of our being discovered.

Another thing that helped us was a good sized brook that ran through the valley between us and the foxes, and its murmuring covered up any noise we might accidentally make.

We had an old army field-glass, that I usually used, but Ben said he could see well enough with his naked eye. The little foxes could just waddle about when we first saw them, and Ben said their mother brought them out more to get a sun-bath and a whiff of fresh air than to exercise, for they were too small to do much but roll and tumble about. But it was surprising how their activity grew from day to day. In a month after our first visit to them, they would play like kittens. They were lighter colored than the mother, being a sort of reddish yellow, and having no black, not even on the tip of the tail.

When they were hungry their wild mother would lie down upon the grass and the three lively youngsters would stretch out in a row, and get their dinner or supper.

One day the mother went down to the river and caught a frog which she carried back to the mouth of the burrow. Soon the three imps appeared, and she gave them the frog to play with.

Then they rolled and tumbled over each other, all scrambling for the poor frog. When he got away from them, the mother went after him and brought him back, and they tossed and tumbled and mauled him about until life left him, but after that he had no attraction for them.

Later on she brought them more frogs, mice, small snakes, and occasionally a bird, all of whom fared hard in the clutches of the young foxes. After a week or two at this fierce play they became veritable little savages, and would tear anything that came in their way to bits in short order.

About this time began a sort of lesson or



CHARLES COPELAND.

SHE GAVE THEM THE FROG TO PLAY WITH.

drill in getting into the hole in a hurry at any suspicious noise, or at least that was what we supposed it meant. The old fox would leave the youngsters playing about the burrow and go off into the bushes. They would be tumbling about, frisking and frolicking like kittens, when suddenly the old fox would appear. Then these young reynards would put for the hole as though all the hounds in the county were after them. Again and again they repeated this operation, until the slightest rustle in the grass caused them to disappear as though by magic.

After this the mother would leave them for an hour at a time and go away to hunt. We rarely saw the male fox. Only once or twice he came around towards dark and entered the burrow.

He was a large fellow, of a deeper and richer red than usual, with dark markings. Ben said he was probably a cross-fox. One afternoon about the first of June, when the small foxes had got to be quite scrappers, we

heard the mother coughing and sneezing, at which Ben said "Distemper. It is rather late in the spring to have it, but that is what is the matter." We had been having a long rainy spell, and the month was cold, which probably accounted for it.

The next time we saw them the old fox looked quite sick. Her brush was down and she had a dejected air, and came several times to the river to drink, which Ben said meant that she had fever, but the small foxes were nowhere to be seen.

"They are probably sick too," said Ben, which proved to be the case.

We were quite anxious to know how it fared with the fox family, so we went the next afternoon. For half an hour we could see nothing of either the small foxes or their mother, but finally she came out, bringing one of the little ones in her mouth.

She placed him on the pile of dirt at the mouth of the burrow. He did not seem inclined to run about, but curled up in a small bunch and lay quiet. Then she began lick-

ing him, and walking uneasily about him, and finally laid down in front of him, and tried to get him to nurse, but he did not care for any dinner, at which the mother seemed worried. Then she took him in her mouth, and paced up and down, much as a mother would walk about with a child, trying to hush it to sleep. Every now and again she would lay the little fox down and lick it, and mother it.

When she had mothered it for half an hour in this way she took it back into the hole, and we saw no more of her that day.

The next day we went to the fox family again, in whose fortunes we now felt a deep concern.

Again the mother fox brought out a sick little one, but we could not tell whether it was the one we had seen the day before or not. This time it hung limp from her jaws, and when she laid it on the ground it remained quiet, a pathetic little bunch of fur.

The distress of this wild mother over the

sickness of its little one was pitiful to see, and, thoughtless boy that I was, it made a deep impression on me.

She would trot around it, and lick it, and poke it gently with her nose. Then she would go off a short distance and stand and watch it, as though she thought it was feigning sickness, and would be all right if she was not so anxious. But she could not remain long away, and each time she would return and fall to caressing it. Finally as a last resort she shook it gently in her mouth, and then fearing that she had been too rough, licked and mothered it, as though asking forgiveness.

But seeing that all these remedies did no good she brought it to the brook and laying it down on the grass, dipped her paw in the water and gently sprinkled its head. Not getting water fast enough this way, she filled her mouth, and let it drip upon the little fox.

Finally, seeing that all effort was useless, she lifted it gently and dropped it into the

brook. This we took to mean that she at last understood it was dead.

The next afternoon she brought out another little kit-fox and went through the same operations with him that she had done with the first, for he too was dead. This time it did not take so long for her to satisfy herself about it. This baby she did not put in the brook, but hid it in a hole between two stones, where she probably thought it would be safer than out in plain sight.

We stayed later than usual that afternoon, and so, by a mere accident, saw the departure of the fox family from their ill-fated burrow.

It was just getting dusk, and a star or two had pricked through the sky to see what we were doing so late under the spreading spruce.

I had put up the field-glass when Ben called my attention to the burrow. The male fox was coming out, carrying the remaining little fox in his mouth.

It was alive, for it kicked and squirmed,

protesting violently against being carried in that way.

The old fox evidently had a good plan in his head, for he looked cautiously about, then he trotted off into the bushes, still carrying the youngster, and we never saw either again.

A few minutes after the mother fox came out, and trotted dejectedly after her lord.

“Wal, I guess that is the end of this story,” said Ben as she disappeared in the bushes. “They wouldn’t have taken the little fox without they were going somewhere to stay. They probably know of another burrow that they are going to for a change. Perhaps they think this one is hoodooed.”

As we tramped home in the pleasant twilight, Ben regaled me with many incidents of fox-hunting, which he had been very fond of when a young man. Some of these experiences I have remembered and will record for you, but many of them I have forgotten.

“Foxes is mighty interesting,” said the old man, talking in his usual quiet vein.

“They are more interesting, and harder to find out about than almost any other animal in New England.

“There ain’t no other animal in these parts that does as much hard thinking and planning as a fox. Why, the didos that a fox will go through to throw a dog off his track would do credit to a Sioux Injun. Sometimes he will make several small circles and snarl the track up, and then give a big jump on to a rock, or an old log. While the dog is trying to unravel the snarl in the track, the scent on the rock gets cold and the dog can’t follow it at all.

“Then he will keep crossing a brook, or if it is winter he will run in a sled road, and step in the horses’ tracks. When he sees a convenient stone wall by the roadside he will run upon it for a few rods and then jump off at some unexpected angle.

“Sometimes he will back-track until he gets within twenty or thirty rods of the dog. Then he will give a big jump, to one side, and the dog will follow the double track until

it suddenly ends. After searching a while he finally concludes that the fox has taken wings and flown away over the tree-tops.

“Cutest thing I ever saw in my life, though, an’ one I wouldn’t have believed if I hadn’t seen it, happened before my own dog, Bugle. (Called him that because he had such a fine ringing voice.)

“One day he started a fox and ran him into a cow pasture. I see the fox a comin’ with the dog a good long piece behind.

“In about the middle of the pasture there was a sheep feedin’, a sort of cosset that ran with the cows. Wal, when that fox saw the sheep, he just put for her. I thought he was mad. They goes mad sometimes, but he had no intention of harmin’ the cosset. When he got alongside he just jumped on her back, and rode across the pasture. Then he hopped off and went on his way, rejoicing that he had made a break in his track of fifty rods.

“The perplexed howls that old Bugle gave when he came out into the pasture and found

the fox track suddenly turned into a sheep track was enough to make a horse laugh.

“I could have taken him over to the other side of the lot and put him on the track, but I says to myself, ‘That fox deserves to live. He is smart as folks. And even if we did start him agin, he would play some new dido on us. We had better let him alone.’

“Speakin’ of foxes reminds me, Harry. Did you ever hear how ’twas, the fox got his brush?”

“No,” I replied. “How was it?”

“Wal,” said Ben, “it was this ’ere way :

“Years and years ago——”

“How many years ago?” I interrupted, in my eagerness to be sure of the time.

“Wal,” replied my companion, “I wasn’t never much of a hand for dates, but I should say about halfway between Noah and George Washington, maybe a leetle nearer George’s time, but right along there somewhere, there lived an Englishman, or maybe he was a Frenchman, or perhaps a German living in Patagonia, I don’t just recollect which, but

this man had a dog—a mighty intelligent, reddish-yaller purp, he was, with a pointed nose and a long slim tail.

“The man was a chimbley-sweep, and the dog finally got so he used to help his master sweep chimbleys. He would take a short brush in his mouth, and climb up the chimbley—there was a sorter steps in the chimbley in them days—and he would sweep it as slick as a pin. Besides that, he used to do lots of other things, like watering the flowers in the garden, and dust the furniture in the house holdin’ the brush in his mouth.”

“How did he water the flowers?” I asked.

“Why,” replied Ben, “his master would fill the waterin’ pot and he would take the handle in his mouth and go about with the pot just like folks.

“Finally the dog got to thinking one day that it would be a great saving if he had a brush hitched to himself, he had to use one so much. He couldn’t very well have it hitched to his paw, so finally he thought of his tail.

“So he went to the upholsterer, and had him soak his tail in the glue-pot, and then stick it full of hairs until he had the finest kind of a brush.

“Wal, when it got dry he went to sweeping a chimbley and was surprised to see how fine it worked. He would just start and go up the chimbley and wag his tail all the way, and when he got to the top the chimbley was swept. It worked just as well in the garden, for all he had to do was to dip his brush in the watering-pot and go between two rows wagging his tail, and they were both watered. In the house it was just as convenient, for he would back up to a chair and wag his tail a spell and it was dusted better than his mistress would have done it; but there was one drawback,—the poor dog’s tail got awful tired, wagging all the time, and when night came it was nearly ready to drop off.

“Wal, things went from bad to worse, until finally they told him to go and stand by the cradle and keep the flies off the baby with his fine brush. He did as he was told,

but he was gettin' mighty mad. That night he tried to pull out the hairs in his tail, but it wasn't no use, that upholsterer had done a good job. So when all the family was asleep the dog ran away and became a fox and lived in the woods all the rest of his days.

“Here is your doorstep, Harry, an' supper is waiting. Good-night.”

“Is that a true story, Ben?” I shouted after him, as he disappeared down the walk. He was too far away to hear my question, but the stars were all winking at me, and the moon fairly grinned as she looked over the eastern hills ; so I concluded that it was just one of old Ben's quaint stories of the Wood Folks.

CHAPTER VI

AN AUTUMN RAMBLE

ON the bright day in November when old Ben and I took our autumn ramble, the gay garments of the trees were trailing in the dust, brought low by frost and rain. There was occasionally a rock maple that was more hardy or better sheltered than its fellows that still wore the crimson robes, but most of the garb of the woods rustled under our feet with a pleasant sound. It was great fun to scuff one's feet as we sauntered along, and hear the pleasant rustle, like turning the tissue paper pages of nature's great book.

Down in this gray-brown carpet there were still leaves of the most flaming crimson, or of the brightest yellow, and their brilliancy was even more noticeable for the somberness of their fellows.

But you must not imagine that the day was gloomy, for nature had poured out a draught of summer sun that had been overlooked in the fulness of summertime, and the yellow golden sunbeams were full of life and warmth.

The blue-jay in his dazzling livery was flying from the cornfield to the deep woods and back again, all the time keeping up his noisy call. Squirrels were chattering as though this had been the one day in all the year, as indeed it was for them. They had chipped gleefully when the warm spring winds melted the snow so they could get at last year's beechnuts, and they had chattered like magpies when the summer brought sweet apples and a score of other dainties, but now the golden autumn had brought nuts, and they fairly shouted their joy from the tree-tops. When they were not busy with the nuts, either getting their breakfast or laying in a store for winter, they chased each other to and fro in the trees like boys playing tag.

“Let's see if we can discover a grayer,”

said Ben as we struck into a tall first-growth sugar orchard ; “ this is just the country for them. They are about as fond of maple seeds as they are of nuts.”

We seated ourselves at the foot of a large maple, and made what Old Ben called a still hunt for a grayer.

“ Now, listen,” said the old woodsman, “ an’ let me know if you hear anything suspicious.”

I listened with all my ears and heard many things, but did not know what they all meant. There was always the soft falling of the leaves, and the gentle stirring of the nearly naked branches, as they responded to the light touch of the wind. Then there was the distant calling of crows. There were no red squirrels here in the tall maples, and Ben told me that if we saw a red squirrel we might as well stop looking for the grayer. He does not like to inhabit the same grove that the noisy, mischievous redder does, for that mischief-maker is always playing pranks upon him.

After a few moments of quiet, listening to the many tongues of the woods, Ben said, "Harry, there is a grayer in that big spreading maple with the birch near by it."

"Have you seen him?" I asked excitedly.

"No," replied Ben, "but I know he is there."

"I don't see how you know it if you haven't seen him," I replied.

"Wal, he just sent down a letter sayin' he wuz up there in the top of the maple. I guess you don't know how to read squirrel letters.

"Now you just watch where the sunlight falls through that big crotch and tell me what you see."

I did as told, and, in a few seconds, saw a maple seed float down at the identical spot Ben had indicated.

"See it, Harry," said my friend excitedly. "That maple seed didn't hev enny seed in it, it was nothin' only the husk or pod, or whatever you call it. Let's see if we can get a glimpse of him."

So we crept forward like Indians, all the time watching the falling maple seeds, and after considerable shifting of our position we discovered him away in the tip top of the tree, nicely balanced upon the end of a branch, with his gray brush waving to and fro in the breeze.

“How would you like to be getting an early supper in the top of a maple ninety feet from the ground?” asked Ben, poking me in the ribs. “Wouldn’t you want feet like a fly so you could hold on?”

After we had seen the grayers get their afternoon meal in the tops of the first-growth maple, we struck off through the woods, and soon came out on a sunny south slope where there were chestnut and beech with occasional scrub spruces in the underbrush, while out in the open pasture there were two big walnut trees which were known to the boys and the squirrels for miles around.

“I never see nuts uv enny kind,” said Ben as we began poking under the dead leaves for beechnuts, “but it reminds me uv one time

when I went beechnuttin' when I wuz a boy. Me an' Zeek went, and the nuts wuz awful plenty that fall, I never see no such time for nuttin'. They were as thick as spatter on the ground, and besides the wind had blown down a large limb that was chuck full on um, an' we gut our bags and baskets full, an' there wuz plenty more to pick. We hated to go home as long as it was light an' there was still nuts to pick, but we didn't hev nuthin' to put them in. Finally, Zeek, who was older than I, said, 'Ben, I'll tell you what we'll do. You just take off your shirt, an' we'll tie up the end of the sleeves an' the neck, and it will make a fine bag?'

“‘Let's take yours, Zeek,’ I said, ‘it will hold more than mine.’

“‘No,’ said Zeek, ‘mine is new ; besides we don't want one that will hold more than a peck or two, an' yours is just right.’

“I thought I would be cold, but Zeek poohed at me and said I would never do for an Injun scout, or a pirate, so I finally consented. That about the Injun scout an' the

pirate had great weight with me for that was what I had my mind on, them days. Wal, I stripped off my shirt, an' we tied up the sleeves and the neck with string, and it made a fine bag. It was terrible cold, an' my teeth chattered as though I had the ague, but Zeek said I never could bear torture if the Injuns ever got me, if I was so silly about bein' cold, so I tried not to mind, an' hurried around pickin' up nuts to keep warm.

“Wal, we picked my shirt full, an' just as it was gettin' dark, we stole into the garret with our nuts, not wishin' the folks to see the nuts in my shirt, but I was half froze by that time.

“We found a bag an' emptied the shirt as soon as possible, an' I put it on, but such a shirt as it was I never want to put on agin. You see them beechnut burrs had stuck in the woolen until it was completely lined with pricklers as sharp as needles, that scratched me like nettles, particularly when I moved.

“‘My shirt is all full of pricklers, Zeek,’ I said ; ‘it will kill me if I don't take it off.’

“ ‘Keep it on, Bennie,’ he said, ‘an’ don’t say nothin’ for the world ; if you do we both get a good lickin’.’

“ ‘Several times during the evening I was tempted to make a confession and take a licking rather than wear the shirt another minute, but every few minutes I caught Zeek’s eye, and it always said, ‘Don’t you do it, Ben, don’t you do it!’

“ ‘You better believe I was glad when it came bed-time, an’ I got off that shirt. It irritated my skin so that mother thought I had the chicken-pox, but Zeek and I knew better.’”

Old Ben and I filled the salt bags that we had brought along for the purpose, with beechnuts, and some sacks with chestnuts, in the burr.

The woods were full of squirrels that afternoon, redders, grayers, and chipmunks, and the redders and chippies chattered away in a merry manner, but the grayers went soberly about their work, keeping as much out of the way as possible.

“Squirrels is like folks,” said Old Ben as we plodded home. “There is the redder. He is a noisy scatterbrain, never laying up anything in a systematic way. Sometimes you will find an apple in the crotch of a tree, or a few nuts under a stone, but he does not lay up any regular store, and the consequence is that he often nearly starves in the winter. On the other hand the grayner and the chipmunk lay up a regular store, just as a thrifty man does, and then in the winter, when the wind howls and the snow falls, the grayner can sit in his hole in the tree and eat his nuts and read the paper.”

“Squirrels don’t have papers, Ben,” I said, in surprise.

“That’s so, they don’t, Harry, excuse me,” said the old man, “I forgot; but they hev all gone to school though. They all learn in the school uv life, where they learn to take care of themselves, and not be eaten up by larger creatures, or killed by man.

“It is sorter queer, but there ain’t no other critter so universally feared by all animals

as man. He is worse than hawks, an' weasels and foxes all put together.

“When I wuz a boy, I was jest like all boys, a sort uv wild Injun : wanted to kill ev'rything that I saw, but as I git older I don't care so much about killin', but I like ter let things live an' watch um, an' see what they are thinkin' about. If you kill an animal that is the end on it, an' you can't find out anything more about it.

“There are only four things that I make a pint of killin' when I get a chance, an' those are weasels, hawks, rats, and snakes.

“I spose the Almighty has got some use for them too, although I hain't found it out yet.

“A hawk ain't so bad either, if you get on the right side on him. I had one when I was a boy, kept him for a pet. I got him out of the top of a beech when he was little, an' brought him up by hand. He thought as much of me as he would have of his own mother if he had known her. You hev heern tell of falconers. Why that hawk was a dandy falcon. He would sit upon my

shoulder when I went after the cows, an' when he spied something, you ought to see him put after it. He went after snakes an' mice mostly. Why, that hawk would skin a snake quicker than you could say Jack Robinson. He'd hold his head down an' start the skin at his neck, an' then keep rippin' with his claw until the snake was skinned neat as a pin, an' wouldn't hev knowed hisself if he had looked in a lookin'-glass.

“But finally my hawk went bad. He got to catching chickens, an' my brother Zeek shot him.

“I was sorry to lose him, but we had to keep the chickens.”

CHAPTER VII

THE PLOVERS' FIELD-DAY

ONE afternoon late in November, when the fall winds blew fresh over the fields, and the wind-clouds played tag across the blue-gray sky, old Ben took me to see what he styled the "plovers' field-day."

The gaiety that we had noted in the attire of nature, when we took our autumn ramble, had been replaced by a sober gray garb. The leaves danced a hornpipe along each pathway. All nature seemed to mourn the gay dead summer.

Ben and I drove three or four miles with my father's team, and then walked about a mile "'cross lots," to a great barren stretch of June grass mowing, known as the plains. This sterile land, which only grew June grass and brakes, was cut up like a checker-board,

with stone walls, dividing it into lots of five or ten acres. These lots were dotted with stone heaps, but even then there were plenty of stones left scattered about.

We had hardly arrived at the plains when a plover rose from the nearest stone-heap, and flew away to a distant leafless maple. "He is just a sentry," said Ben, "but the plover don't pay much attention to men during their field-day, for all they are so shy the rest of the time. He'll tell them that we are coming, but they will not mind us if we are careful. Wiggle-wings, I call um, see how his wings wiggle, especially when he rises."

We could now see plover flying over the fields, in small companies of three, five or seven, while some groups were even larger. They would fly steadily across the field, and when they reached the limit of the plains would turn in a broad sweep and fly back again. They flew as regularly and steadily as a flock of geese, until they reached the turning point. They usually flew abreast or

nearly so, and never straggled along, Indian file, as crows are fond of doing. When they reached the turning point, one end of the line would slow up, slightly, while the outside plover struck a bit faster, and the line would turn, as cleverly as the maneuvers of a squadron.

Sometimes they would fly fast, as though trying their wings, but usually the pace was slow and measured, and their turns were in broad sweeps, for there was plenty of room in the upper air.

“Near as I can make out,” said Ben, “an’ I hev watched um here for several years, this performance is a sorter annual muster, or parade, partly to renew old acquaintance, but more especially to learn the young birds to fly properly, and to gee and haw, a sort of getting ready for the long flight south. See those three plover coming this way. See how much stronger the bird in the middle flies. The other two don’t half know how to use their wings. That is an old bird in the middle, and he is teaching the others to fly.

Sorter putting them through their paces. We walked nearly across the plains, and as far as the eye could reach in every direction there were plover going through the same maneuvers. It was for all the world like a large body of soldiers, broken up into small squads, with a captain or experienced private breaking in the raw recruits.

Later on in the afternoon, the small squads seemed to be combining, for fifteen or twenty would fly across the fields in a company, but with the same regularity and in the same measured manner. "That's probably a whole regiment," said Ben, as a large flock came in sight. "Looks kinder as though they were gettin' ready to break camp." We soon saw other large companies, wheeling and circling in the same manner, and it was certain that the formation of regiments had begun.

When the sun was about half an hour high, with a continuous whistling of wings, a regiment rose in unison, to about the same height. We did not hear any one say "Fall

in," but there were the ranks, a little ragged, but symmetrical.

Then probably some old plover who had led the van before, gave the command, "Forward, fly," for with a steady, even stroke they swept away into the blue-gray distance. The space where they had formed had barely cleared, when a second company rose in the same manner, formed, wheeled and swept after the first. So it went on for fifteen minutes. There seemed to be millions of them, and our eyes ached with watching.

At last the solid ranks passed, and then came a few stragglers, bringing up the rear, and the parade was over.

"Due southeast," said Ben, as we saw the last company fade away. "They are headed straight for New York city, but it probably means Jersey or Delaware.

"Mighty cur'us, though, how well they know the heavens. I wonder whether it is because they are up so high, that they can see everything for half a State and can keep their course by the lakes and rivers. That



PLOVER FLYING OVER THE FIELDS IN SMALL COMPANIES.

would look reasonable, only lots of birds fly by night, and hit it just as well. Seems to be a sort of instinct, or maybe every one of them has got a compass in his head, or his gizzard.

“Geese fly in a harrow shape, with one strong-winged old gander to fly at the point and break the wind. When he gets tired, he says ‘next gent,’ and some other gander takes his place. It is a great sight, though, to see a large flock of geese swing through the sky. They do it so strong and steady.

“Speakin’ of flocks reminds me of a time when I was a boy an’ we hed a great flight of pigeons. One morning we got up and found something was the matter with the sun. Just shining sorter dimmed, a good deal of the time it was dark enough for candles. Looked as though the sun was a goin’ out. But there wan’t nothin’ the matter with the sun. It was just a flight of pigeons, that completely covered the heavens as far as we could see. It was just so off an’ on for hours, and when they had all gone, we

felt as relieved as though it had been a two-day's rain, and the sun had just appeared. That was a flight worth seein', but it hain't never happened since, and that was sixty years ago."

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT CIRCUS CAT

THE fitful gleam of two score lanterns, following at regular intervals, a few rods apart, was trailing along a country road. The moon and stars were hidden by a soft spring haze, that enveloped the travelers, wrapping all things in its gray mantle.

By the light of each lantern one could see revolving wheels, and the massive outlines of circus vans. Here and there a light, stronger than the rest, revealed the outline of the driver sitting wrapped in his great oilskin coat, guiding the team through the dense darkness.

Even had it not been for the lanterns, one would have guessed that a large caravan was passing, from the snapping and creaking of the axles, and a score of other small sounds

that always attend the moving of heavy freight.

Most of the drivers were alert, watching the bushes by the roadside that they might guide their teams as near between the two dark outlines as possible.

Others in the middle of the procession dozed, feeling quite sure that the horses, so long accustomed to the life, would trail after the lantern in front of them, and keep the road.

Two or three of the drivers neither watched the team which they were supposed to drive, or the road, but were wholly engrossed with black bottles on the seat beside them.

Such was the condition of Big Ireland, as he was called by the hands, the driver of the great van, containing the panther and jaguar.

Presently the teams in the distance began rumbling over a short iron bridge. One could have guessed this, for the sounds of the heavy wheels on the plank came nearer and nearer, giving the impression that the bridge was traveling towards one, for there

was nothing in this dense darkness by which to gauge the movements of the team.

When the van carrying the big cats struck the bridge, which was narrow, the team had hauled over to the left, and the shutters of the cage barely cleared the strong iron pillar that stood guard at the corner of the bridge.

Although his faculties were numbed by drink, Big Ireland felt that something was wrong, and instinctively pulled upon the right rein, or what would have been the right rein had they not been crossed. At the same time he spoke sharply to the horses. Then there was a grating, grinding sound, and the drunken driver reached for his whip. Twice it fell upon the frightened horses, and the grating and grinding gave place to cracking and breaking. Then there was a hideous din, in which the squealing and kicking of horses, the breaking of strong wood and ripping of bars, and the snarling of frightened, infuriated cats could be distinctly heard.

When the drivers from the teams ahead and behind hurried to the scene, they found

one horse down, his legs through the lattice-work in the side of the bridge. The two left wheels of the wagon had gone through an opening between the railing and the floor of the bridge, and were wedged in clear to the hub, while the forward side of the van had been literally gutted.

Their first thought was of Chieftain, the great circus cat, but the flash of their lanterns into the cage showed that he was gone.

When the van driven by Big Ireland struck the bridge, Chieftain the panther was lying curled up in one corner of the cage asleep. His first instinct on being so rudely awakened was to slink away into the furthest corner from the commotion. But when he heard the tearing of the bars that had so long stifled him, he raised his head and sniffed the air eagerly. He could not see that the side of the cage had been ripped open, but something told him that it was so. For a breath of freedom blew through the open bars that only a wild creature, for years held captive, could have discerned.

He stretched his great paw forward and felt the opening. Then cautiously slipped through to the railing of the bridge, where one great spring carried him into the darkness, and night folded her arms about him, as though to protect this wild creature from pursuit, while the fields and the meadows cried "Come, you are ours, we will feed and water you."

At first the panther, so long cramped in his cage, crept cautiously through the darkness. His eyes so long used to artificial light, winked and blinked strangely. But by degrees the pupils dilated to their utmost and drank in whatever light the gloom contained, and with cat-like stealth he crept along the pasture.

Now and then the great cat would stop to roll like a kitten upon the grass, or stretch its limbs. Once it gave two or three great bounds, just to feel those sturdy limbs spurn the green earth.

After about two hours, a gray streak appeared in the east, and birds began to twitter

in the tree-tops. Then the panther entered a wood. As it had been captured when a kitten, it had never seen anything like this before, but it was fresh and cool, and besides it was dark and there were plenty of places to hide, so the great cat was well pleased with his new discovery, and thereafter kept to the woods.

It was about a week after the accident on the bridge, and the escape of Chieftain from the van, that Stubby Daggit was going for the cows, just as he had done for the last six or seven years.

There would seem to be little relation between Stubby and the cows, and the great circus cat, for that dread animal had escaped some twenty-five miles from the village where Stubby lived. Though the woods had been scoured for days, nothing could be found of him. So every one had concluded that the panther by some inborn instinct was working his way northward toward the wilderness that its kind had frequented ever since the days of the red man.

Stubby was not handsome. You will

guess this when I tell you that his other nickname was "Freckles"; but he had an honest countenance, and any boy in the village would tell you that he was clear grit, from the top of his tow-head, to the bottom of his bare brown feet.

The cows gave him considerable trouble this night, for he had to go to the further end of the pasture, into a maple grove for them. They acted rather strangely, too, he thought; for they started uneasily every time he struck at the weeds by the side of the path with his birch rod.

Just at the edge of the woods was a spreading maple that overhung the path, and here they jammed up in a bunch, refusing to go under the tree.

"Whey, there, what are you doing?" cried Stubby, switching the hind cows with his birch. These pressed forward, and the cows ahead broke into a trot, going under the maple at a good pace.

Then a long, lithe figure dropped from the tree, like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky,

and with a snarl that froze the blood in Stubby's veins, dug its claws in the sides of the foremost cow, while its teeth were buried in her neck. Stubby's first thought was of the escaped panther.

With a frenzied bellow of pain and fright, the old cow broke into a keen gallop, and almost before Stubby knew what had happened the herd was ten rods away, going for the barn like stampeded steers.

Then Stubby thought of his own safety, and he started for the barn as though the panther had been upon his trail instead of the old cow's back. He was taking a short cut home, parallel to the path the cows were following, so he could still hear their wild bellows and rapid hoof-beats, all of which lent energy to his sturdy legs. Over knolls and stones he bounded, as though running the race for life.

Half-way to the barn he mounted a stone wall, and gave one frightened glance backwards, to see if the panther had left the cows, for his own trail.

Then he saw a very strange thing, that both amazed and delighted him. The cows, in their headlong rush for the barn, had reached the same stone wall that he stood upon, and were about to pass through a pair of bars, which had been left down, with the exception of the top bar, that the cows passed under easily.

As they swept through the barway like a whirlwind, the top bar caught the great cat under the chin, and brushed him off the old cow's back as though he had been a fly, while the herd galloped on with new energy.

Stubby waited to see no more, but jumping from the wall, made the sprint of his life to the house.

A moment later he burst into the dining-room, where the family were at supper, and, wild-eyed and speechless sank exhausted on the floor.

As soon as he could speak, he gasped out his story to an amazed family circle.

Stubby's father at once went to the barn, where the lacerated sides of old Crinklehorn

told plainly that his story was only too true.

There was great excitement in the village that evening when Stubby's adventure was related at the country store, and a hunt was planned for the next day that should rid the neighborhood of this furious beast.

Old shot guns that had not been fired for years were pressed into service, heavily loaded with buckshot or slugs.

To his father's astonishment, Stubby declared his intention to go with the hunting party.

"Gracious, boy!" exclaimed his father. "Didn't you get panther enough last night to last you twenty-four hours?" But secretly he was pleased with his son's pluck.

"Don't go, Herbert," pleaded his mother; "you will be eaten alive."

"I guess there won't nothin' happen to him if he sticks close to me," put in the boy's father. "I've got the old shot-gun loaded with four slugs in each barrel, and I guess there won't no panther eat us up."

Better let him go, mother." So Herbert's mother gave her unwilling consent.

"Guess I'll take along my pocket rifle," said Stubby, "I'll feel safer with it."

"Might as well try to shoot a rhinoceros with a popgun, as a panther with that thing," said his father. But the boy slipped the little .22-caliber rifle under his coat and went with the hunting party.

They had planned to beat the woods where the panther had appeared the night before, just as they do in India for tigers. So the party was strung out in a long line, each man two or three rods from his neighbor, and in this way they swept the woods from end to end. It was a new experience for most of them, and each man went with his gun cocked, and his heart in his mouth. The timid hunters insisted in making a great shouting, and the courageous said it was to frighten the panther away, for fear that they would see him.

As for Stubby, his nerves tingled so that he doubted if he could even hit the tree con-

taining the panther, let alone hitting the beast if he should see him.

The forenoon was very hot, and it was hard work beating through the underbrush, so by noon they were a tired and disgusted lot.

A council was then held, and it was decided to divide the party into two parts and one beat the neighboring woods while the remainder worked the maple grove still more.

A hasty lunch was eaten, and they set to work again.

By the middle of the afternoon the maple grove had been beaten from end to end, and the panther certainly was not there. So while others of the party went into a little swampy run near by, Stubby sat under a big hemlock resting.

They had barely gotten out of sight when the boy noticed a movement in the branches of another large hemlock near the one under which he sat. Then one of the green tufted boughs sprung down as though a heavy

weight were upon it, opening a gap between it and the branch above, and what Stubby saw in the opening made his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth, and his heart pound away at his ribs as though it would break through them. For there, upon a large limb of the hemlock, with his hind legs well under him and resting against the trunk of the tree, was the great circus cat.

His tail was switching horribly, his fangs were bared as though for a snarl, and his eyes seemed to be measuring the distance between him and the boy.

The moment his eyes met those of the panther, Stubby's gaze was held as though by some will stronger than his own. He could not move, he could not cry out, all he could do was to sit there and wait until the panther should spring.

Cold sweat stood upon his brow, and he felt sick and faint. He thought of his mother's prophecy, that he would be eaten alive. It looked as though it would be fulfilled.

He felt that his only safety lay in looking directly at the panther ; perhaps some one would discover them before it was too late.

Seconds seemed like minutes, and the quarter of a minute that elapsed an hour.

Then Stubby thought of his little pocket rifle that lay upon the grass beside him, and felt for it with one hand, still keeping his eye on the panther.

But as his arm went down for the rifle, the panther bent lower on the limb. He was going to spring.

Then with a quick motion Stubby raised the rifle to the level of his eye, and pressed the trigger. Then in a frenzy of fright he pitched the little rifle into the bush, and sprang to his feet. His nimble legs had saved him the night before, and might now.

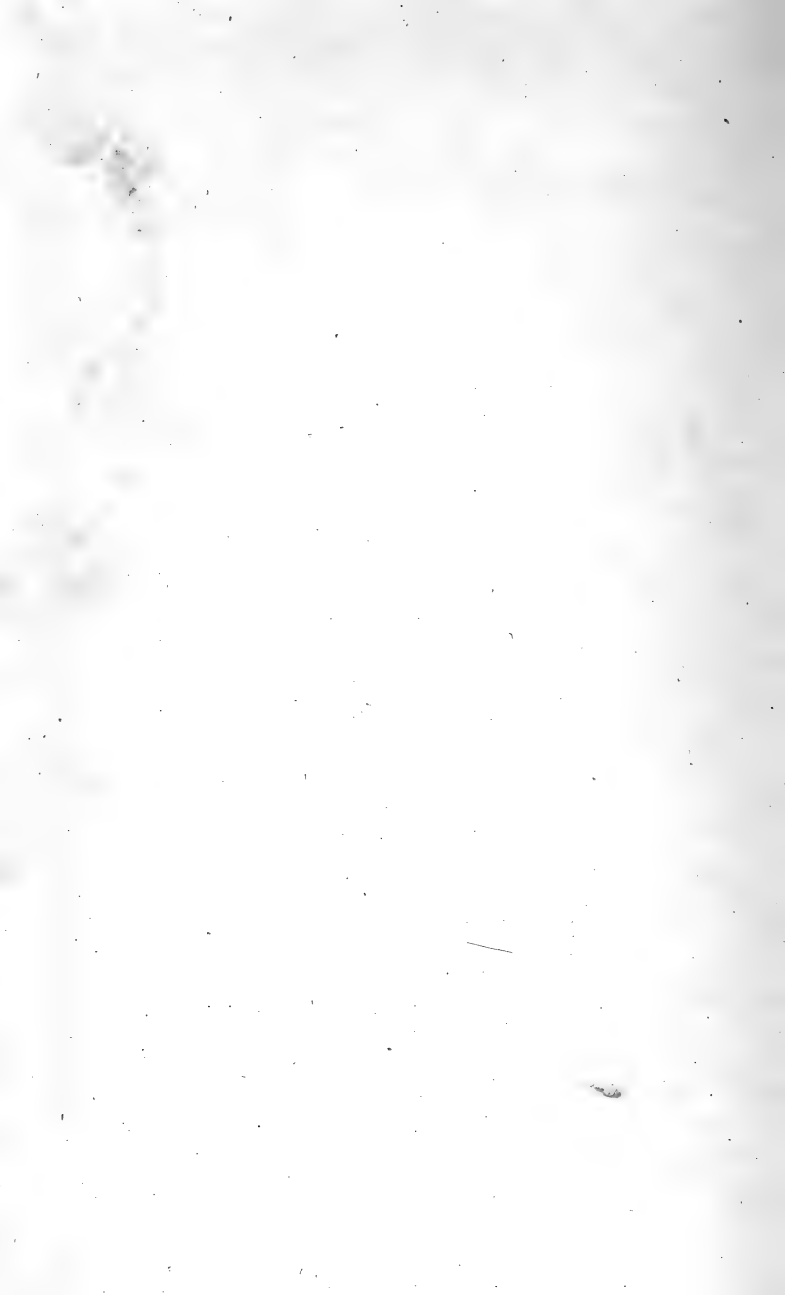
Then the body of the great cat shot like a black streak through the air, and fell heavily at his feet.

Stubby's legs sank under his weight, and it grew very dark.

The next thing he remembered, his father



THE PANTHER BENT LOWER ON THE LIMB.



was bending over him, fanning him with his palm-leaf hat, while some one else was sprinkling brook-water in his face, from a wet handkerchief. He was not mortally wounded, as he at first thought, or even scratched, only his head was light, and things looked strange.

After a few moments he was able to sit up and tell his story.

“You say you fired at him with the pop-gun, did you?” asked Stubby’s father.

“Yes,” replied the boy, “I aimed right between his eyes, just as I have read about in books.”

“Made a mighty big sight of noise for a twenty-two,” remarked some one in the crowd.

“Wal, the panther’s dead,” said Stubby’s father, “and I don’t see but the boy’s bullet did it.”

“Look at this here wound,” said another. “Bullet went in just behind the shoulder, square through the heart, and came out the other side. Don’t look like a twenty-two

either. That warn't no popgun that did that."

"Where is old Ben Wilson, from over to Edgewood?" asked some one in the party. "He knows all about such things, he can tell what kind of a bullet made the hole."

A shout went around for Ben, but he was nowhere to be found.

Then one of the Basset boys said, "I vum!" and slapped his side.

"I have it," he cried. "I just saw Ben myself, sorter skulking off through the woods towards home, and if I ain't mightily mistaken Ole Kentucky was still a smokin'. Anyhow I saw Ben lift the hammer, and throw away the cap, an' he wouldn't have done that if it had been a good one."

Here then was the secret of the mystery. Ben had happened along just in time to see Stubby's plight, and had rescued him by a lucky shot with his famous hunting rifle that he called "Ole Kentuck."

To make sure that this was the case, a committee was at once sent to interview Ben.

But, to their great astonishment, that quiet old man would say nothing about it, either one way or the other.

“We want to give you a vote of thanks and the skin,” said the chairman. “Now tells us, did you kill the panther?”

“Can’t say as I did,” replied Ben. “I hain’t seen no dead panther. ’Twould be mighty hard to say. There ain’t nothin’ sure in this world, ceptin’ death and taxes. But you folks just go back an’ ask Stubby about it. He got the panther’s eye and I didn’t.

“Mebbe he winked at him. You just ask Stubby.”

CHAPTER IX

SIGNS IN THE SNOW

OLD BEN and I were tramping along in the deep snow, "going Injun file," as he expressed it, on our way to the woods.

He was ahead, and as he was a sort of pathfinder, and prophet of the woods, in my eyes, I was stepping in his tracks, although they were rather too far apart for comfort. I wished to be considered a pathfinder and a woodsman myself, so I would not have admitted that the steps were too long for me, if I had fallen by the way. Even though the stride was long, it was easier going in this way because Ben's big boot made a good track in which I could follow lightly.

"When there is snow on the ground," said Ben, as we crunched along, "there ain't a four-footed creature in the woods or out of

it, for that matter, but tells you all his business whenever he goes anywhere.

“It is as interestin’ to poke around the woods in the winter and see what our four-footed friends are doin’, as it is to stay at home and read stories about them, and rather more so. For out here in the woods you can see for yourself, and besides, a great many things that you read in books are not more than half true. But a track never lies, and the best way is to see for yourself.

“Now, Harry,” continued Ben in his accustomed way of drawing me out, “what would you say could be learned from tracks?”

“Why, that something had been along,” I replied.

Ben whistled. “Is that all? Scratch your head, boy, and try again.”

“If you knew the different kinds of tracks, you could tell whether it was a fox or a rabbit, but I should think that was all,” I said.

“I am afeered you will hev to rub up

them woodsman's specks a bit," said Ben, "if you are going to get on in finding out about the wild things. There are four or five things that every track tells you as soon as you clap eyes on it. If you know how to read tracks, it doesn't matter whether it's a rabbit's tracks or a fox's, it is all the same.

"You can tell which way the animal was going, how long ago he passed, if he was in a hurry, if he was a large or small creature of the kind, and many times you will detect peculiarities in the particular animal that others of his kind don't have."

I opened my eyes wide with astonishment. I had not believed it was possible to learn so many things merely from a track, but *I knew it must be true*, for Ben had said so, and it made me all eagerness to find out about it so that I might confound the rest of the boys with my knowledge.

"Wal, we don't want to be in a hurry," continued my companion. "There ain't ever anything gained by being in a hurry in the woods. Ten to one you won't see what you

are after if you are in a hurry. I suppose the science of tracks was carried further by the Indians than any other people. They depended upon it to find out all about their enemies, as well as the animals they hunted. The tracks of folks are harder to read than those of animals, because they are shod alike, while the wild creatures leave their naked footprints. Besides, men all travel something alike, while the wild things have a different way of traveling. The rabbit hops, the fox trots when he is not in a hurry, and the cat tribe jump.

“I think we had better begin by learning the different tracks, and then we will observe each particularly.

“See that T shaped track under this laurel bush, with four paw-prints in a bunch. That is a rabbit track, and there ain't no other animal in the woods that makes that kind of a track. The gray rabbits and the white ones make the same kind of a track, only the gray rabbit's track is smaller. He usually lives in the spruces at the edge of the woods,

while the white rabbit likes the laurel swamp and lives near it. You see when the rabbit hops, and one fore paw comes just behind the other, just as a horse's forward hoofs go when he gallops, that gives us the two paw-prints that make the shank of the T. Then his hind paws he spreads out, making the top of the T. So you see the shank of the T always points in the direction the rabbit is going. If the jumps are far apart the rabbit is in a hurry, or if the hind paw-prints are well up to the forward ones that means the same thing, but the track usually is a perfect T.

“The track of a fox is even and measured without he is in a hurry, and even then it is about the same, for he is an easy-going fellow, and particular about his gait. His track is often taken for that of a small dog or a large cat, but there are certain signs about it that a woodsman always knows. The footprint is depressed more at the front than that of a dog or cat, showing that the fox stands well up, on his toes, and touches the ground

lightly. The pads of the paw are not as noticeable as in the track of a dog, the foot being furred; and last of all, the track usually makes off straight across the country, as though the fox was goin' somewhere, which is the case. A young fox will play like a kitten, but an old fox goes methodically about his business with a good plan in his crafty head.

“Occasionally you will see a scraggly track, near some bush or stone. Each footprint has four strokes leading out from a center. It looks so much like the tracks the hens make about the yard after the first snow that you will readily guess what made it. It is a partridge. Maybe there is a blur in the snow where his wings struck when he started to fly.

“There are also the prints of small mischievous feet on the tops of the walls and fences, where some red squirrel has warmed himself, by taking a morning run.

“The grayher is scarcely ever seen in the winter, but Chippy occasionally comes out

of his hole to see how the winter is gettin' along, and if there are any signs of spring.

“Sometimes you will see a wee bit of a track running out from under a stone, going a few feet, and returnin' to the hole it came from. Some inquisitive mouse has been forth, to see what was doin' in the world outside.

“But most of the wild things keep as close as possible in the winter, staying in sheltered places, among spruces or pines, while some come to the house and share the outbuildings with man. If you encourage them to come you can have a fine little menagerie all winter long.”

“I should think lots of them would freeze, and starve in the winter,” I said. “Do they all get through safely?”

“More than you would think, Harry,” replied my friend; “but it ain't all pie an' cake in the woods either, for if the rabbit is hungry, so is the fox and the owl, and they both have their eye on the cottontail. Mebbe it happens when he and a score of his friends are playing tag in the moonlight. I hev

often seen um, racin' an' chasin', hevin' the finest kind of games. Then a swift lithe figure would flash through the underbrush, and before they knew, it was right among them. Then there was a race for blood. Out an' in they would rush, pell-mell, till them wicked jaws closed upon the soft fur, then a cry for all the world like that of a baby would startle the woods with heart-breaking pathos, an' then all would be quiet, without you heard the crunchin' of bones in the thicket near by.

“It is mighty strange how much the cry of a rabbit sounds like that of a baby. Fust time I heard it I spent more'n half an hour lookin' for the baby that I thought some one had been mean enough to leave in the woods.”

“What was it that got the rabbit that time?” I asked.

“Why, Reynard. He hunts all winter long, and many a bloody trail he leaves in the woods. Sometimes it is strewn with partridge feathers, or mebbe it is the white fur

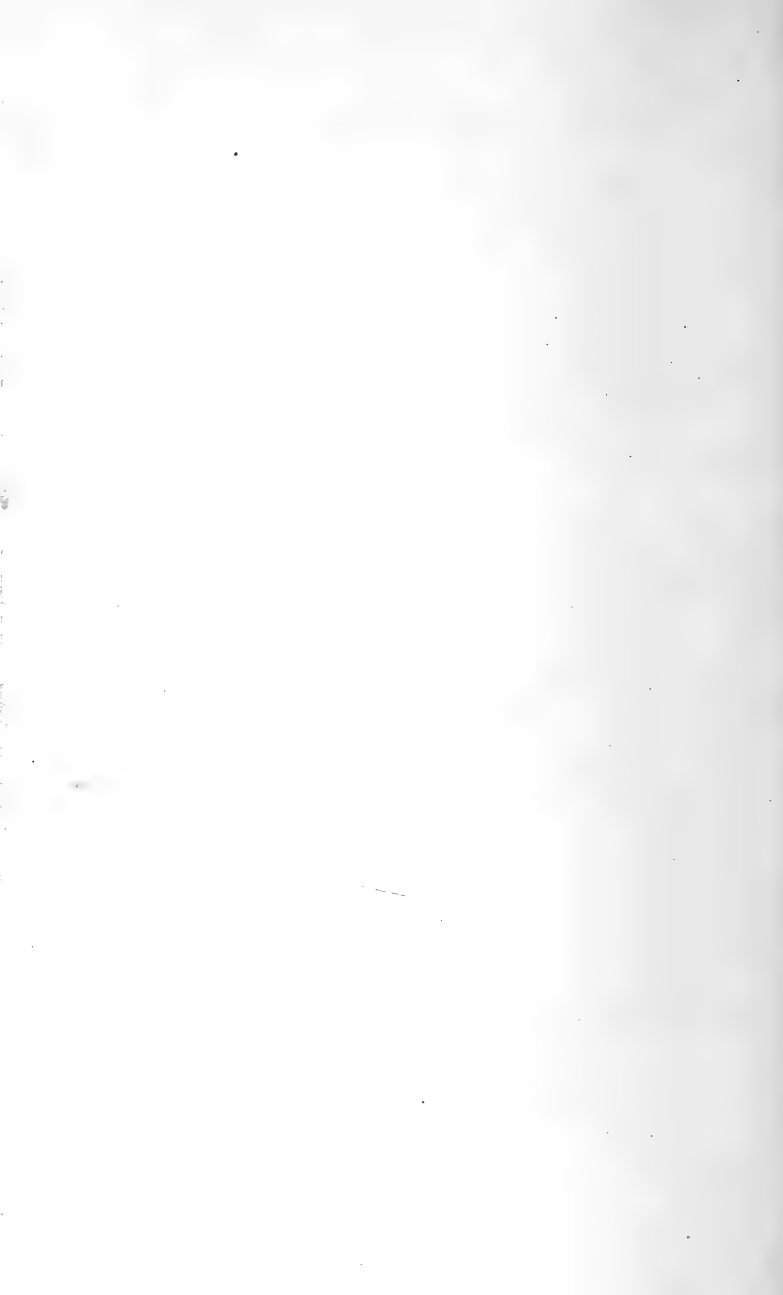
of the cottontail. Mebbe he is sittin' by his own doorway, under a bunch of laurel, watchin' the moonlight on the snow and thinking what he would do if it was gone.

“The wind sings a weird song in the leafless forest and the snow and the silver moonlight give things a sickly, ghastly look, but the rabbit does not mind that, for the laurel swamp is his home. Then a feathered form, swift and silent as death, swoops down out of the top of a spruce, where it had been completely hidden by the dark plumes. Before the rabbit has time to even look up and see what makes the shadow on the snow, the talons of an owl are buried in his neck. Then the night woods are again startled by that piteous cry. The struggle is short and desperate, but the owl has too good a hold, and he is too hungry to let his prey off easily, so in a few seconds he flies away with his supper.

“Perhaps the next night, when the stars prick through the steely sky, to see what man is about, there is a tawny gray bunch



A WILDCAT LOOKING FOR HIS SUPPER.



on the upper side of a fallen tree trunk. The tree does not lie upon the ground but is held up some six or eight feet, by the limbs on the under side of the trunk. What is it, do you suppose? It matches so well with the gray of the tree trunk, and the general sober tint of the leafless brown woods, that it attracts little attention; it is probably a burl, or almost anything without life.

“But don't be too sure that this motionless bunch has not got life. If you look carefully you will see two square-topped ears lying close to the head, and two burning eyes, that devour the rabbit path which runs under the fallen tree trunk. It is a wildcat and he too is looking for supper.

“Now he crouches lower to the log if possible, and his eyes burn even more fiercely. You did not hear anything, but he did; it is coming this way. Underneath that gray bunch of soft fur are quivering muscles, and cushioned in those velvet paws are the worst set of claws in the woods. As slight as the forearm is, one blow of that paw would kill

the strongest fox-hound that ever followed scent.

“There is a patter in the snow, and Mr. Cottontail comes hopping along, his ears erect. He is on his way to visit a neighbor. Then the muscles in the gray bunch tighten, and the cat springs.

“There is no outcry this time, for the rabbit’s back is broken at the first bite.”

We had stopped to rest at a pile of cordwood, which made a convenient seat, while Ben told me of what was doing in the woods of a winter’s night. Presently he caught my expression, which must have been solemn, and began laughing.

“Sorter hard life, ain’t it, Harry?” he said cheerfully, “but that ain’t all. For some fine morning men will come with hounds, and then the woods will be filled with the baying of dogs and the roar of shot-guns.

“But don’t you think for a moment, boy, that the rabbit don’t hev a good time in his way, but it ain’t the way of folks. I hain’t

a doubt but what he takes as much sport playing tag in the woods as you do in the schoolyard, while as for being gobbled up by a cat or an owl only a few of them go that way, when we think of all there are in the woods. Besides, it is their life. They are born to it. It is as much their game to match their cunning agin that of the fox or the hawk, as it is man's to battle for bread, or boy's to play football. Life is a battle whatever way you consider it. It ain't allus strength that wins either, but wit goes a mighty long ways. Why, there is the partridge, he ain't no match for hawks or owls in a fight, but he has got wits, and they keep him out of the way of his enemies, and I rather imagine that he enjoys slipping out of one side of a cover when the owl comes flopping in at the other.

“ Then there is the fox, swift and sly as he is, yet many a time he goes without his supper, because his prey has either wings or wits.

“ So after all, Harry, you see the Maker of

the sparrow and the hawk has given each powers that the other does not possess, and in the struggle for existence, that always has raged in the woods, and always will, they are pretty evenly matched, for the race is not always to the swift or the battle to the strong."

CHAPTER X

SIGNS OF THE SEASONS

A HAPPY, barefooted boy was spanking along a country road, doing what Old Ben called, observing the signs of the times.

“Allus be a lookin’ out for what’s coming,” that wise old man had told him. “If spring is here, summer is coming. If autumn is with us, look out for winter. An’ I don’t mean by that not to enjoy the season that we have to the full, for this particular season will never come again. There will never be another summer or winter just like this one, so enjoy it while it lasts. But what I mean is, be on the lookout for the changes. Learn to forestall the wind and the weather, and let no season steal a march on you. If some morning winter comes howling down upon you, be able to tell him : ‘ You didn’t fool me,

old chap, I have seen you coming for days, and you made yesterday so fine just to try and fool me.' ”

So this barefooted boy, as he scampered along the country road, was observing the oncoming spring.

Spring always made him feel glad. Just as the flowers under the sod felt its touch, so did the boy's heart. Something of the bird-song that thrilled the woods was in his voice.

The particular thing that he was enjoying now was the delicious fragrance of swamp pink, that came stealing mysteriously out of the woods. He never could understand how it was that a plant could give away so much of itself in odor, and still seem to have just as much left, but Ben had told him that it was just so with folks. That the more kindness any one gave the more he had to give.

This boy would not have believed it if you had told him a year before that there was so much to enjoy in simply walking to school, but his walks and talks with Ben had taught

him many things, some of them more valuable than the lessons he learned in the school-house.

Now, if he saw a robin flying across the road with a worm in his mouth, he at once pictured the nest and the little ones with mouths outstretched, ready for breakfast, and somehow the nest-robbing instinct had gone out of him. He had always remembered what Ben had told him. "For every egg that you take from the nest there will be one less bird to sing to you the coming summer."

This morning he had seen some queer little tracks by the brookside, and had followed them down into the swale, to be rewarded by finding a muskrat's house. On the way back to the road he had snapped a pebble into a ripple, and a beauty of a trout had jumped for it as he had hoped.

By the roadside he had stopped for checkerberries and partridge berries, while a spruce had yielded up gum enough for both him and his fellows.

A squirrel had winked at him as he passed

under the tree on which it sat, and this had made him feel like one of the Wood Folks.

A flicker had been sounding his lively rat-atat-tat on a dead limb and it was always pleasant to hear this merry woodchopper.

So you see this morning walk was full of wonders, and the boy had been able to enjoy them because of Old Ben's training.

Presently he left the woods behind and came out into open mowings, where there was an apple orchard on one side of the road, and corn stubble on the other. They were ploughing the stubble to-day, and the earth looked mellow and inviting. A score of birds had taken the ploughman at his word, and were helping themselves in a bounteous manner. Prominent among them were robins and purple grackles.

Then high and clear above all the other sounds of oncoming spring that filled the morning the boy heard a sound new to his ears.

Strong, steady, and full.



"HONK, HONK, HONK!"

“Honk, honk, honk !”

He looked in the tree-tops and across the fields, first in this direction and then in that, but nothing could he see that should make such a strange sound.

But still the sound went on, steady and measured as before, “Honk, honk, honk !”

It seemed to be coming nearer. Then he got upon the wall, and his eager eyes swept the sky in every direction. Away to the south, he saw a long procession of something that looked about the size of a flock of sparrows. They were up very high, and coming directly towards him.

But while he watched, the birds grew steadily larger, and he saw that the procession was wedge-shaped, the two sides of the wedge trailing out far behind.

On, on the flock came, flying strong and steady. Their flight was as straight as an arrow, and reminded one of the furrow that an ocean liner might leave on the deep. They were probably steering by some lake or river miles away, and did not care to make even

slight turns. When they cared to change their course they would haul a point to the east or west, and the casual observer on the green earth below would not notice the difference.

On, on they came, like the wind, sweeping the heavens in matchless flight, all the time pealing the slogan of lake or river. "Honk, honk, honk!" Their heads were thrust forward like race horses, and their legs were held well back under them to escape the rush of wind. "Ninety miles an hour!" thought the boy. Why, the first hoarse cry that signaled the start upon this flight might have been given last evening, upon the banks of the Chattahoochee, or along the marshy sedges of some lagoon in the Everglades of Florida. The fastest express train would have barely reached Washington, while this tireless squadron was swinging over the hills and valleys of Massachusetts at a rate that would cross the entire State from south to north, in less than an hour. The express train would puff, roar, and hiss, and every

few score miles, would stop to rest its heated bearings and oil its joints. But this magnificent machine neither puffed nor paused. There was no hissing or snorting, only that steady stroke of tireless wings, and the wild cry of "Honk, honk, honk!"

The slogan of the waterfowls grew fainter and fainter as they swept on, until it was lost in the distance. But the boy still watched the threadlike line that hung for a few seconds on the northern horizon, and then vanished altogether. When it had entirely disappeared, he heaved a deep sigh and rubbed his eyes, which were tired with straining after the flying harrow. Then he slowly got down from the wall, and trudged on to school, but there was a serious look on his face, and he felt something almost akin to reverence for the beauties and mysteries of nature; something of that awe which the mariner feels as he guides his bark under the starless sky, across black waters, merely by the chart and compass.

Fragments of the beautiful poem that he

had learned to recite the last day of the term before came unbidden to his lips :

Whither 'midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way ?

Vainly the fowler's eye
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong,
As, darkly painted on the crimson sky,
Thy figure floats along.

* * * * *

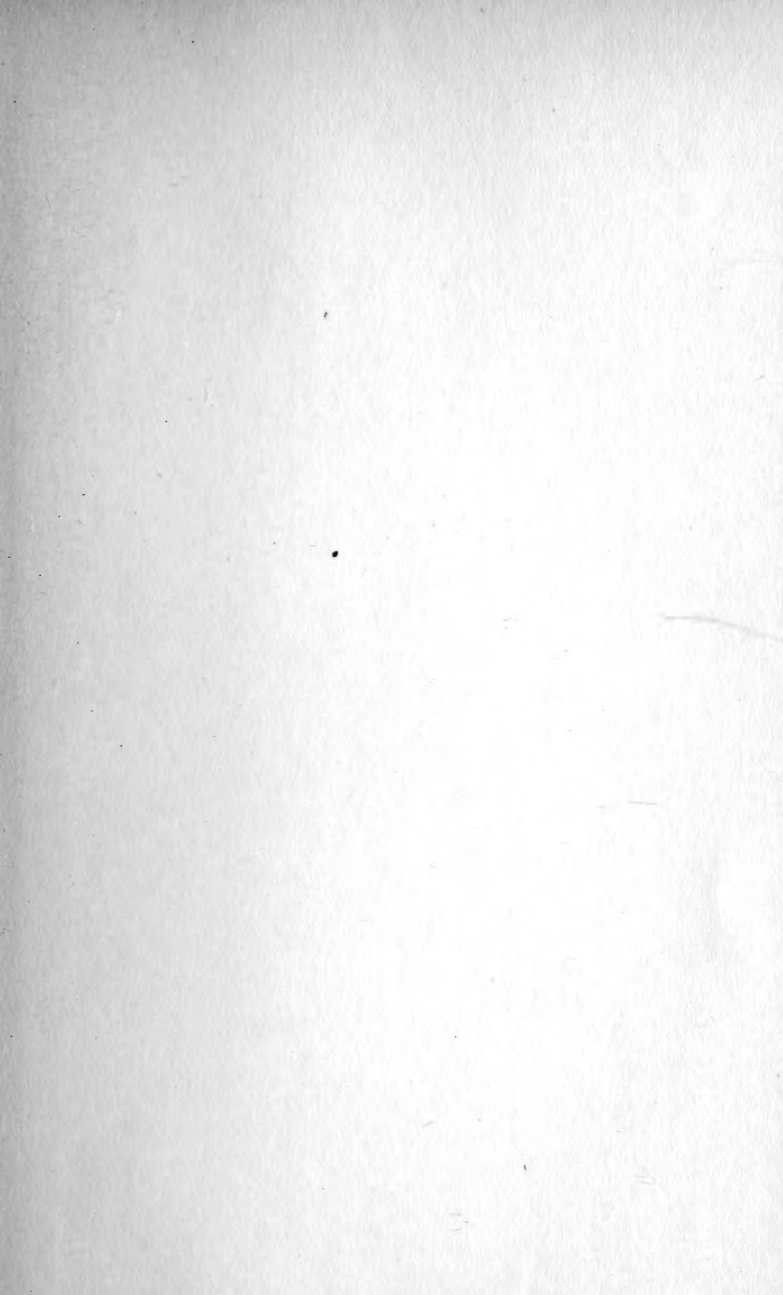
All day thy wings have fanned,
At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere,
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,
Though the dark night is near.

* * * * *

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone
Will lead my steps aright.

THE END.







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