

Scoville Samuel

Everyday Adventures



Samuel Scoville

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Everyday Adventures

I EVERYDAY ADVENTURES

All that May day long I had been trying to break my record of birds seen and heard between dawn and dark. Toward the end of the gray afternoon an accommodating Canadian warbler, wearing a black necklace across his yellow breast, carried me past my last year's mark, and I started for home in great contentment. My path wound in and out among the bare white boles of a beech wood all feathery with new green-sanguine-colored leaves. Always as I enter that wood I have a sense of a sudden silence, and I walk softly, that I may catch perhaps a last word or so of what They are saying.

That day, as I moved without a sound among the trees, suddenly, not fifty feet away, loping wearily down the opposite slope, came a gaunt red fox and a cub. With her head down, she looked like the picture of the wolf in Red Riding-Hood. The little cub was all woolly, like a lamb. His back was reddish-brown, and he had long stripes of gray across his breast and around his small belly, and his little sly face was so comical that I laughed at the very first sight of it. What wind there was blew from them to me, and my khaki clothes blended with the coloring around me.

As I watched them, another larger cub trotted down the hill. The first cub suddenly yapped at him, with a snarling little bark quite different from that of a dog; but the other paid no attention, but stalked sullenly into a burrow which for the first time I noticed among the roots of a white-oak tree. Back of the burrow lay a large chestnut log which evidently served as a watch-tower for the fox family. To this the mother fox went, and climbing up on top of it, lay down, with her head on her paws and her magnificent brush dangling down beside the log, and went to sleep.

The little cub that was left trotted to the entrance of the burrow and for a while played by himself, like a puppy or a kitten. First he snapped at some blades of grass and chewed them up fiercely. Then, seeing a leaf that had stuck in the wool on his back, he whirled around and around, snapping at it with his little jaws. Failing to catch it, he rolled over and over in the dirt until he had brushed it off. Then he proceeded to stalk the battered carcass of an old black crow that lay in front of the burrow. Crouching and creeping up on it inch by inch, he suddenly sprang and caught that unsuspecting corpse and worried it ferociously, with fierce little snarls. All the time his wrinkled-up, funny little face was so comical that I nearly laughed aloud every time he moved. At last he curled up in a round ball, with his chin on his forepaws like his mother.

There before me, at the end of the quiet spring afternoon, two of the wildest and shyest of all of our native animals lay asleep. Never before had I seen a fox in all that country, nor even suspected that one had a home within a scant mile of mine. As I watched them sleeping, I felt somehow that the wildwood had taken me into her confidence and was trusting her children to my care; and I would no more have harmed them, than I would my own.

As I watched the cub curled up in a woolly ball, I wanted to creep up and stroke his soft fur. Leaving the hard path, I started to cover as silently as possible the fifty feet that lay between us. Before I had gone far, a leaf rustled underfoot, and in a second the cub was on his feet, wide awake, and staring down at me. With one foot in the air, I waited and waited until he settled down to sleep again. A minute later the same thing happened once more, only to be repeated at every step or so. It took me something like half an hour to reach a point within twenty feet of where he lay, and I looked straight into his eyes each time that he stood up.

No wild animal can tell a man from a tree by sight alone if only he stands still. Suddenly, as the cub sprang up, perhaps for the tenth time, there about six feet to one side of him stood the old mother fox. I had not heard a sound or seen a movement, but there she was. I was so close that I dared not move my head to look at the cub, but turned only my eyes. When I looked back the mother fox was gone. With no sudden movement that I could detect, there almost before my eyes she had melted into the landscape.

I stood like a stone until the cub had lain down once more. This time evidently he was watching me out of his wrinkled-up little eyes, for at my very first forward movement he got up, and with no appearance of haste turned around and disappeared down in the burrow. The watch-tower log was vacant, although I have no doubt that the mother fox was watching me from some unseen spot.

When I came to examine the den, I found that there were three burrows in a line, perhaps fifteen feet in length, with a hard-worn path leading from one to the other. The watch-log behind them was rubbed smooth and shiny, with reddish fox-hairs caught in every crevice. Near the three burrows was a tiny one, which I think was probably dug as an air-hole; while in front I found the feathers of a flicker, a purple grackle, and a chicken, besides the remains of the crow aforesaid. How any fox outside of the fable could beguile a crow is a puzzle to me. All of these burrows were in plain sight, and I hunted a long time to find the concealed one which is a part of the home of every well-regulated fox family. For a while I could find no trace of it. Finally I saw on the side of a stump one reddish hair that gave me a clue. Examining the stump carefully, I found that it was hollow and formed the entrance to the secret exit from the three main burrows.

A week later I went again to look at the home of that fox family; but it was deserted by them and was now tenanted by a fat woodchuck, who would never have ventured near the den if the owners had not left it. Mrs. Fox had evidently feared the worst from my visit, and in the night had moved her whole family to some better-hidden home. This was three years ago, and, although I visit the place every winter, no tell-tale tracks ever show that she has moved back.



BR'ER FOX AND BR'ER POSSUM

It is not necessary to go to the forest for adventures: they lie in wait for us at our very doors. My home is in a built-up suburb of a large city, apparently hopelessly civilized. The other morning I was out early for some before-breakfast chopping, the best of all setting-up exercises. As I turned the corner of the garage, I suddenly came face to face with a black-and-white animal with a pointed nose, a bushy tail, and an air of justified confidence. I realized that I was on the brink of a meeting which demanded courage but not rashness. "Be brave, be brave, but not *too* brave," should always be the motto of the man who meets the skunk. From my past experience, however, I knew that the skunk is a good sportsman. Unless rushed, he always gives three warnings before he proceeds to extremities.

As I came near, he stopped and shook his head sadly, as if saying to himself, "I'm afraid there's going to be trouble, but it isn't my fault." As I still came on, he gave me danger signal number one by suddenly stamping his forepaws rapidly on the hard ground. Upon my further approach followed signal number two, to wit, the hoisting aloft of his aforesaid long,

bushy tail. As I came on more and more slowly, I received the third and last warning – the end of the erect tail moved quietly back and forth a few times.

It was enough. I stood stony still, for I knew that if, after that, I moved forward but by the fraction of an inch, I would meet an unerring barrage which would send a suit of clothes to an untimely grave. For perhaps half a minute we eyed each other. Like the man in the story, I made up my mind that one of us would have to run – and that I was that one. Without any false pride I backed slowly and cautiously out of range. Thereupon the threatening tail descended, and Mr. Skunk trotted away through a gap in the fence into the long grass of an unoccupied lot – probably seeking a breakfast of field-mice.

I felt a definite sense of relief, for it is usually more dangerous to meet a skunk than a bear. In fact, all the bears that I have ever come upon were disappearing with great rapidity across the landscape.

But there are times when a meeting with either Mr. or Mrs. Bruin is apt to be an unhappy one. Several years ago I was camping out in Maine one March, in a lumberman's shack. A few days before I came, two boys in a village near by decided to go into the woods hunting, with a muzzle-loading shot-gun and a long stick between them. One boy was ten years old, while the other was a patriarch of twelve. On a hillside under a great bush they noticed a small hole which seemed to have melted through the snow, and which had a gamy savor that made them suspect a coon. The boy with the stick poked it in as far as possible until he felt something soft.

"I think there's something here," he remarked, poking with all his might.

He was quite right. The next moment the whole bank of frozen snow suddenly caved out, and there stood a cross and hungry bear, prodded out of his winter sleep by that stick. The boys were up against a bad proposition. The snow was too deep for running, and when it came to climbing – that was Mr. Bear's pet specialty. So they did the only thing left for them to do: they waited. The little one with the stick got behind the big one with the gun, which weapon wavered unsteadily.

"Now, don't you miss," he said, "'cause this stick ain't very sharp."

Sometimes an attacking bear will run at a man like a biting dog. More often it rises on its haunches and depends on the smashing blows of its mighty arms and steel-shod paws. So it happened in this case. Just before the bear reached the boys, he lifted his head and started to rise. The first boy, not six feet away, aimed at the white spot which most black bears have under their chin, and pulled the trigger. At that close range the heavy charge of number six shot crashed through the animal's throat, making a single round hole like a big bullet, cutting the jugular vein, and piercing the neck vertebræ beyond. The great beast fell forward with hardly a struggle, so close to the boys that its blood splashed on their rubber boots. They got ten dollars for the skin and ten dollars for the bounty, and about one million dollars' worth of glory.

Hasting homeward for more peaceful adventures, I find, near the road which leads to the railway station over which scores and hundreds of my friends and neighbors, including myself, pass every day, a little patch of marshland. In the fall it is covered with a thick growth of goldenrod, purple asters, joe-pye-weed, wild sunflowers, white boneset, tear-thumb, black bindweed, dodder, and a score or more of other common fall flowers.

One night, at nine o'clock, I noticed that an ice-blue star shone from almost the very zenith of the heavens. Below her were two faint stars making a tiny triangle, the left-hand one showing as a beautiful double under an opera-glass. Below was a row of other dim points of light in the black sky. It was Vega of the Lyre, the great Harp Star. Then I knew that the time had come. We humans

think, arrogantly, that we are the only ones for whom the stars shine, and forget that flowers and birds, and all the wild folk are born each under its own special star.

The next morning I was up with the sun and visited that bit of unpromising marshland past which all of us had plodded year in and year out. In one corner, through the dim grass, I found flaming like deep-blue coals one of the most beautiful flowers in the world, the fringed gentian. The stalk and flower-stems looked like green candelabra, while the unopened blossoms showed sharp edges like beech-nuts. Above them glowed square fringed flowers of the richest, deepest blue that nature holds. It is bluer than the bluebird's back, and fades the violet, the aster, the great lobelia, and all the other blue flowers that grow. The four petals were fringed, and the flower seemed like a blue eye looking out of long lashes to the paler sky above. The calyx inside was of a veined purple or a silver-white, while four gold-tipped, light purple stamens clustered around a canary-yellow pistil. That morning I wore on the train one of the two flowers which I allowed myself to pick. Every friend I met spoke of it admiringly. Some had heard of it, others had seen it for themselves in places far distant. None of them knew that every day until frost they would pass unheedingly within ten feet of nearly thirty of these flowers.

Sometimes the adventure, unlike good children, is to be heard, not seen. It was the end of a hot August day. I had been down for a late dip in the lake, and was coming back through the woods to the old farmhouse where I have spent so many of my summers. The path wound through a grove of slim birches, and the lights in the afterglow were all green and gold and white. From the nearby road a field sparrow, with a pink beak, sang his silver flute song; and I stopped to listen, and thought to myself, if he were only as rare as the nightingale, how people would crowd to hear him.

Suddenly from the depths of the twilight woods a thrush song began. At first I thought the singer was the wood thrush, which, besides the veery or Wilson thrush, was the only one that I had supposed could be found in that Connecticut township. The song, however, had a more ethereal quality, and I listened in vain for the drop to the harsh bass notes which always blemish the strain of the wood thrush. Instead, after three arpeggio notes, the singer's voice went up and up, with a sweep that no human voice or instrument could compass, and I suddenly realized that I was in the presence of one of the great singers of the world. For years I had read of the song of the hermit thrush, but in all my wanderings I had never chanced to hear it before.

Lafcadio Hearn writes of a Japanese bird whose song has the power to change a man's whole life. So it was with me that midsummer evening. Some thing had been added to the joy of living that could never be taken from me. Since that twilight I have heard the hermit thrush sing many times. Through the rain in the dawn-dusk on the top of Mount Pocono, he sang for me once, while all around a choir of veerys accompanied him with their strange minor harp-chords. One Sunday morning, at the edge of a little Canadian river, I heard five singing together on the farther side. "Ah-h-h, holy, holy, holy," their voices chimed across the still water. In the woods, in migration, I have heard their whisper-song, which the hermit sings only when traveling; and once on a May morning, in my back yard, near Philadelphia, one sang for me from the low limb of a bush as loudly as if he were in his mountain home.

No thrush song, however, will ever equal that first one which I heard among the birch trees. Creeping softly along the path that evening, I finally saw the little singer on a branch against the darkening sky. Again and again he sang, until at last I noticed that, when the highest notes were reached and the song ceased to my ears, the singer sang on still. Quivering in an ecstasy, with open beak and half-fluttering wings, the thrush sang a strain that went beyond my range. Like the love-song of the bat, perhaps the best part of the song of the hermit thrush can never be heard by any human ear.

It was the morning of June twentieth. I stood at the gate of the farm-house where three roads met, and the air was full of bird-songs. For a long time I stood there, and tried to note how many different songs I could hear. Nearby were the alto joy-notes of the Baltimore oriole. Up from the

meadow where the trout brook flowed, came the bubbling, gurgling notes of the bobolink. Robins, wood thrushes, song sparrows, chipping sparrows, blue-birds, vireos, goldfinches, chebecs, indigo birds, flickers, phoebes, scarlet tanagers, red-winged blackbirds, catbirds, house wrens – altogether, without moving from my place, I counted twenty-three different bird-songs and bird-notes.

Nearby I saw a robin's nest, curiously enough built directly on the ground on the side of the bank of one of the roads, and lined with white wool, evidently picked up in the neighboring sheep-pasture. This started me on another of the games of solitaire which I like to play out-of-doors, and I tried to see how many nests I could discover from the same vantage-point without moving. This is really a good way to find birds' nests, and the one who stands still and watches the birds will often find more than he who beats about. For a long time the robin's nest was the only one on my list. At last the flashing orange and black of a Baltimore oriole betrayed its gray swinging pouch of a nest in a nearby spruce tree – the only time that I have ever seen an oriole's nest in an evergreen tree. In a lilac bush I saw the deep nest of the catbird, with its four vivid blue eggs and the inevitable grapevine-bark lining around its edge.

In a high fork in a great maple tree at the corner of the road, the chebec, or least flycatcher, showed me her home. Sooner or later, if you watch any of the flycatchers long enough, they will generally show you their nests. This one was high up in a fork, and made of string and wool and down. Over in the adjoining orchard I saw a kingbird light on her nest in the very top of an apple tree; and I have no doubt that, if I had climbed up to it, I would have seen three beautiful cream-white eggs blotched with chocolate-brown.

The last nest of all was my treasure nest of the summer. I was about to give up the game and start off for a walk, when suddenly, right ahead of me, hanging on the limb of a sugar-maple, not five feet above the stone wall, I saw the swinging basket-nest of a vireo, with the woven white strips of birch-bark on the outside which all vireos use in that part of the country. It was as if a veil had suddenly dropped from my eyes, for I had been looking in that direction constantly, without seeing the nest directly in front of me. Probably, at last, I must have slightly turned my head and finally caught the light in a different direction. I supposed that the nest was that of the red-eyed vireo, the only one of the five vireos which would be likely to build in such a location. Climbing upon the wall to look at it, I saw that the mother bird was on the nest. Even when I took hold of the limb, she did not fly. Then I slowly pulled the limb down, and still the brave little bird stayed on her nest, although several times she started to her feet and, ruffling her feathers, made as if to fly. As the nest came nearer and nearer, I could see that she was quivering all over with fear, and that her heart was beating so rapidly as to shake her tiny body. Finally, as she came almost within reach of my outstretched hand, she gave me one long look and then suddenly cuddled down over her dearly loved eggs and hid her head inside of the nest. Reaching my hand out very carefully, I stroked her quivering little back. She raised her head and gave me another long look, as if to make sure whether I meant her any harm. Evidently I seemed friendly, for as I stroked her head she turned and gave my finger a little peck, then snuggled her head up against it in the most confiding, engaging way. As she did so, I noticed that a white line ran from the beak to the eye, and that she had a white eye-ring and a bluish-gray head. As I looked at her, suddenly from a nearby branch the father bird sang, and I recognized the song of the solitary or blue-headed vireo, who belongs in the deep woods and whose rare nest is usually found in their depths. As the male came nearer, I could see his pure white throat which, with the white line from eye to bill and the greenish-yellow markings on either flank, make good field-marks. The four eggs, which I saw afterwards when the mother bird was off the nest, were white with reddish markings all over instead of being blotched at one end as are those of the red-eyed vireo. Every day for the rest of that week I visited my little friend; and before I left she grew to know me so well that she would not even ruffle up her feathers when I pulled the limb down.

Children are of great help in the life adventurous. They have an inexhaustible fund of admiration for even the feeblest efforts of their parents in adventuring. Many a dull dog, who once heard nothing in all the world but the clank of business, has been changed into a confirmed adventurer by sheer appreciation. Moreover, children possess an energy and imagination which we grown-ups often lack. Only the other afternoon I started off for a walk with my four, to find myself suddenly dining in the New Forest with Robin Hood, Little John, Will Scarlet, and Allan a' Dale. Owing probably to a certain comfortable habit of person, I was elected to be Friar Tuck.

The forest itself is a wonderful wood of great trees hidden in a little valley between two round green hills. In its centre is a bubbling spring of clear water that never freezes in winter or dries up in summer. That afternoon we had explored the Haunted House at the edge of the wood, with its date-stone of 1809, ten-foot fireplace, and vast stone chimney, and had fearfully approached that door under which a dark stream of blood flowed a half-century ago, on the day when all humans stopped dwelling in that house forever.

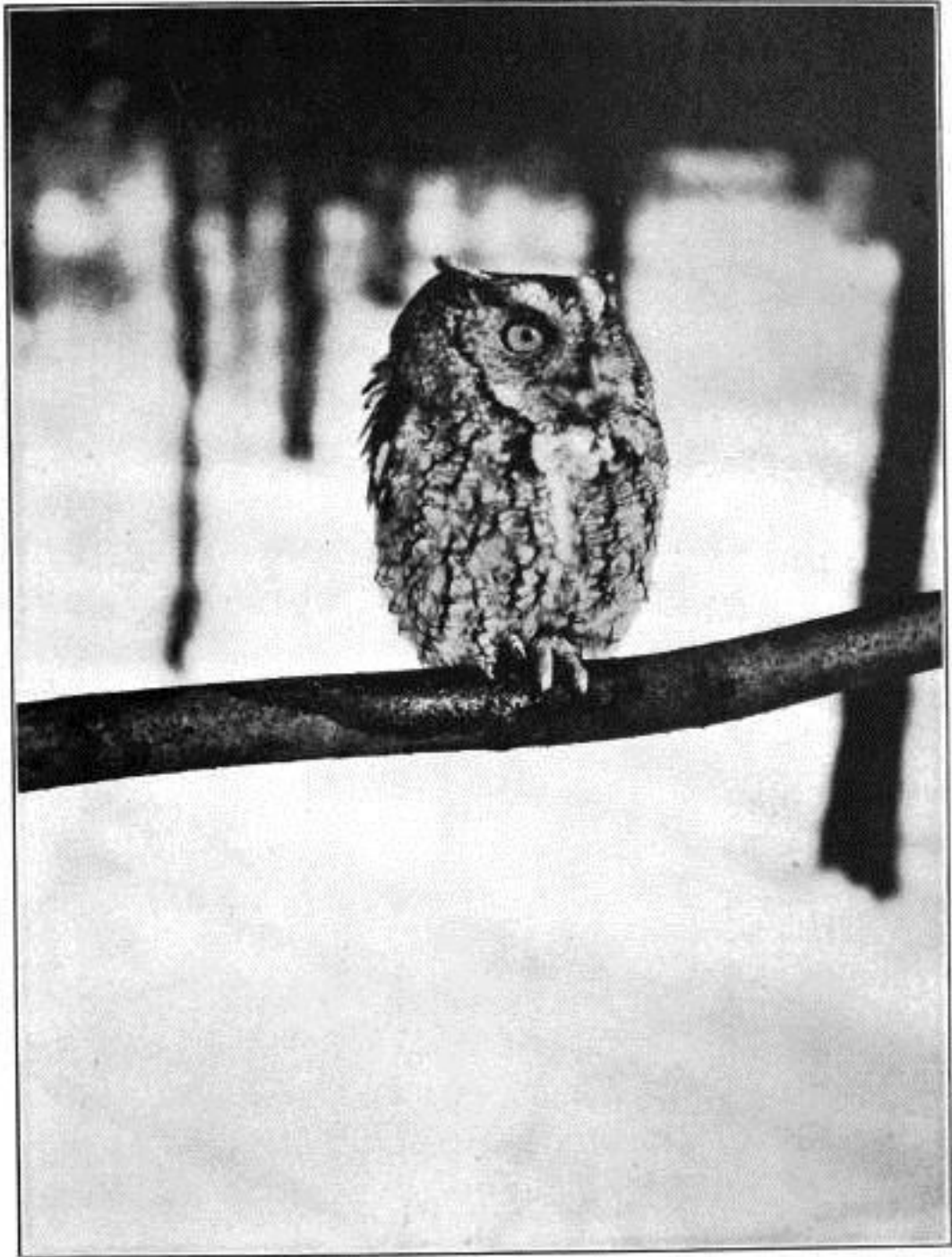
Little John climbed puffingly up through two sets of floor-beams, to where a few warped hemlock boards still make a patch of flooring in the attic. Under a rafter he found a cunningly concealed hidey-hole, drilled like a flicker's nest into one of the soft mica-schist stones of the chimney. Inside were a battered home-made top, whittled out of a solid block, and two flint Indian arrow-heads, ghosts of some long-dead boyhood which still lingered in the little attic chamber.

In the spring twilight we stole out by a side door, so that we might not cross that stained threshold. A lilac bush, which in a century of growth had become a thicket of purple, scented bloom, surrounded the whole side of the house; while beside a squat buttonwood tree of monstrous girth was the dome of a Dutch oven. We followed a dim path fringed with white-thorn and sprays of sweet viburnum blossoms.

From the distance, beyond the farther hill, came the crooning of the toads on their annual pilgrimage back to the marsh where they were born. In time we reached a bank all blue and white with enameled innocents. In front of this the camp-fire was always kindled. The Band scattered for fire-wood – but not far, for there were too many lurking shadows among those tree-trunks. At last the fire was laid and lighted. Five minutes later all the powers of darkness fled for their lives before the steady roaring column of smokeless flame that surged up in front of the Band. Followed wassail and feasting galore. Haunches of venison, tasting much like mutton-chops, broiled hissingly at the end of green beechwood spits. Flagons of Adam's ale were quaffed, and the loving-cup – it was of the folding variety – passed from hand to hand.

All at once the substantial Tuck heaved himself up to his feet beside the dying fire. There was not a sound in the sleeping forest. Night-folk, wood-folk, water-folk, all were still. Then from the pursed lips of the Friar sounded a long, wavering, mournful call. Again and again it shuddered away across the hills. Suddenly, so far away that at first it seemed an echo, it was answered. Once and twice more the call sounded, and each time the answer was nearer and louder. Something was coming. As the Band listened aghast, around the circle made by the firelight glided a dark shape with fiery eyes. It realized their worst fears, and with one accord they threw themselves on the Friar, who rocked under the impact.

“Send it back, Fathie, send it back!” they shouted in chorus.



THE SINGER OF THE NIGHT – THE SCREECH OWL

The good Friar unpuckered his lips.

“I am surprised, comrades,” he said severely. “You aren’t afraid of an old screech-owl, are you?”

“N-n-n-ooo,” quavered little Will Scarlet, “if you’re *sure* it’s a nowl.”

“Certain sure,” asserted the Friar reassuringly, and gave the call again.

On muffled, silent wings the dark form drifted around and around the light, but never across it, and then alighted on a nearby tree and gave an indescribable little crooning note which the Friar could only approximate. At last, disgusted with the clumsy attempts to continue a conversation so well begun, the owl melted away into the darkness and was gone.

After that, the Band decided that home was the one place for them. Water was poured on the blaze, and earth heaped over the hissing embers. Under the sullen flare of Arcturus and the glow of Algieba, Spica, and all the stars of spring, they started back by dim wood roads and flower-scented lanes. Will Scarlet, Little John, and Allan a' Dale frankly shared the hands of the Friar, and in the darkest places even the redoubtable Robin himself casually took possession of an unoccupied thumb.

II

ZERO BIRDS

It had been a strenuous night. All day the mercury had been flirting with the zero mark, and soon after sunset burrowed down into the bulb below all readings. My bed that night felt like a well-iced tomb. Probably daylight would have found me frozen to death if it had not been for a saving idea. Hurrying into the children's room, I selected two of the warmest and chubbiest. Banking them on either side of me in my bed, I just survived the night. Of course it was hard on them; but then, any round, warm child of proper sentiments should welcome an opportunity to save the life of an aged parent.

In spite of my patent heating-plant I woke up toward morning shivering, and remembered with a terrible depression that I had boasted to Mrs. Naturalist and to various and sundry scoffing friends that I would cut down and cut up and haul in one forty-foot hickory tree before the glad New Year. For a while I decided that there was nothing on earth worth exchanging for that warm bed. Finally, however, my better nature conquered, and the dusk before the dawn found me in the woods in front of a dead hickory tree some forty feet high and a couple of rods through – at least that was how its flinty girth impressed me after I had chopped a while. The air was like iced wine. Every axe-stroke drove it tingling through my blood.

Before attacking the hickory, however, I began to cut down the brush surrounding the doomed tree, so as to gain clear space for the axe-swing. Almost immediately a vindictive spice-bush in falling knocked off my glasses, and they fell into the snow somewhere ahead of me. Without them I am in the same condition as a mole or a shrew, my sense of sight being only rudimentary. Down I plumped on my knees in the snow and fumbled in the half light with numbed fingers through the cold whiteness ahead.

As I groped and grumbled in this lowly position, suddenly I heard the prelude to one of the most beautiful of winter dawn-songs. It was a liquid loud note full of rolling *r*'s. Perhaps it can be best represented in print somewhat as follows: "Chip'r'r'r'r." I forgot my lost glasses and my cold hands and my wet knees waiting for the song that I knew was coming. Another preliminary, rolling note or so, and there sounded from a low stump a wild, ringing song that could be heard for half a mile. "Wheedle-wheedle-wheedle," it began full of liquid bell-like overtones. Then the singer added another syllable to his strain and sang, "Whee-udel, whee-udel, whee-udel." Three times, with a short rest between, he sang the full double strain through, although it was so dark that only the ghostly, black tree-trunks could be seen against the white snow. I needed no sight of him, however, to recognize the singer. The song took me back to a bitter winter day in Philadelphia some seventeen years ago, when I was laboriously learning the birds. I was walking through a bit of waste-land encircled by trolley-tracks when I heard this same song. It was like nothing which I had ever heard in New England, where I had learned what little I knew about birds, and I searched everywhere for the singer, expecting to see a bird about the size of a robin.

Finally, in the underbrush just ahead of me, I saw an unmistakable wren singing so ecstatically that he shook and trembled all over with the outpouring of his song. It was my first sight and hearing of this southern bird, the Carolina wren, the largest of our five wrens, whose field-mark is a long white line over the eye. He is reddish-brown, while the house wren, which is half an inch shorter, is cinnamon-brown. The long-billed marsh wren also has a white line over the eye and is about the same size, but is never found away from the tall grass bordering on water, and has no such song as the Carolina. The winter wren and the short-billed marsh wren could neither of them be mistaken for the Carolina, as both are about an inch and a half shorter and lack the white line. The house wren and the long-billed marsh wren bubble when they sing, the Carolina wren and the

winter wren ring, and the short-billed marsh wren, the rarest of all, clicks. Of them all only the Carolina wren sings in the winter.

That day the wren-song brought me good luck. It was no more than finished when I heard someone passing along a nearby wood-road, who turned out to be an early-rising workman from whom I borrowed some matches with which I finally discovered my missing eyes half buried in the snow. I attacked the pignut hickory with great energy to make up for lost time. Little by little the axe bit through the tough wood, until the kerf was well past the heart of the tree. As I chopped I could hear the quick strokes of a far better wood-cutter than I shall ever be. Suddenly he gave a loud, rattling call, and I recognized the hairy woodpecker. He is much larger than the downy, being nearly the size of a robin, while his call is wilder and louder and lacks the downward run of the downy's note. We chopped on together, he at his tree and I at mine. Suddenly from my tree sounded a warning crack, and the trunk wavered for a moment. I stepped well off to one side, for it is dangerous to stand behind a falling tree. If it strikes anything as it falls the trunk may shoot backward. A venerable ancestor of mine, so the story runs, tried to celebrate his ninetieth birthday by chopping down a tree, and standing behind it, was killed by the back-lash of the falling trunk.

The tree swayed forward toward the crimson rim of the rising sun. One more stroke at its heart, and there was a loud series of cracks, followed by a roar like thunder as it crashed down. Almost immediately, as if awakened by the noise, I began to hear bird-notes. From over to my left sounded a series of sharp, irritating alarm-notes, and in the waxing light I caught a glimpse of a crested blood-red bird at the edge of a green-brier thicket. In that same place I had found his nest the spring before, made of twigs and strips of bark and lined with grass and roots and holding three speckled eggs. It was the cardinal grosbeak, another bird unknown to me in New England. No matter how often I meet this crimson-crested grosbeak, he will never become a common bird to me. Each time I see him I feel again something of the thrill which came over me when I first met this singer from the southland in a thicket on the edge of Philadelphia. With the Carolina wren and the tufted titmouse, the cardinal grosbeak completes a trio of birds that can never be commonplace to one born north of Central Park, New York, which is about the limit of their northern range.

To-day, as I watched my flaming cardinal, he suddenly dived stiffly into the heart of the thicket. A moment later from its midst sounded a clear, loud whistle, "Whit, whit, whit." I answered him, for this is one of the few bird-calls I can imitate. Before long his dove-colored mate also appeared. Her wings and tail were of a duller red, while the upper-parts of her sleek body were of a brownish-ash tint. The throat and a patch by the base of the bill were black in both. As I watched, the singer in the thicket added to his whistle the word "Teu, teu, teu, teu" and then finally ran them together – "Whee-teu, whee-teu, whee-teu," so rapidly whistled that it sounded almost like a single note.

On the way back to breakfast, as the sun came up and warmed a slope of the woods, a flock of slate-colored juncos burst out altogether in a chorus of soft little trills, with now and then sharp alarm-notes like the clicking of pebbles together, interspersed with tiny half-whispered notes best expressed by the same letters as those used in writing the grosbeak music – "Teu, teu, teu, teu." Suddenly, from a farther corner of the sun-warmed slope, I heard a few tinkling notes followed by a tantalizing snatch of rich, sweet song shot through with canary-like trills and runs. I hurried over the snow and caught a glimpse of a little flock of birds with crowns of reddish-brown, and each wearing small black spots in the exact centre of their drab-colored waistcoats. They were tree-sparrows down from the far North, and I was fortunate to have heard the peculiarly gentle cadence of one of their rare winter songs.

Farther on, the caw of a passing crow drifted down from the cold sky, and before I left the woods I heard the pip of a downy woodpecker and the grunt of the white-breasted nuthatch, that tree-climber with the white cheeks which, unlike woodpeckers, can go both up and down trees head-foremost. In the early spring and sometimes on warm winter days, one may hear his

spring song, which is “Quee-quee-quee.” It is not much of a song, but Mr. Nuthatch is very proud of it and usually pauses admiringly between each two strains. In my early bird-days I used to mistake this spring song for the note of an early flicker, and would scandalize better-educated ornithologists by reporting flickers several weeks before their time. The last bird I heard before I left the woods remarked solemnly, “Too-wheedle, too-wheedle, too-wheedle, too-wheedle,” like a creaking wheelbarrow, and then suddenly broke out into the flat, harsh “Djay, djay, djay” which has given the silver-and-blue jay its name.

By the time I had reached home, I decided that it was too cold a day to practise law safely. The state legislature in their wisdom had already made the day a half-holiday. Not to be outdone in generosity, I decided to donate my half and make the holiday a whole one. Anent this matter of holidays, the trouble with most of us is that we are obsessed with the importance of our daily work. There are many pleasant byways which we plan to come back and explore when we have reached the end of the straight, steep, and intensely narrow road that leads to achievement. The trouble is that there is no returning. Men die rich, famous, or successful, who have never taken the time to companion their children or to find their way into the world of the wild-folk which lies at their very doors. It was not always so. Read in Evelyn’s Diary how for sixty years a great man played a great part under three kings and the grim Protector, and yet never lost an opportunity to refresh his life with bird-songs, hilltops, flower-fields, and sky-air. We reach our goal to-day in a few desperate years, stripped to the buff like a Marathon runner. One can arrive later and not miss a thousand little happinesses along the way.

With similar arguments I convinced myself on that day, that it was my duty as an amateur naturalist to discover how many birds I could meet between dawn and dark with the thermometer below zero. Certain gentlemen-adventurers of my acquaintance aided and abetted me in this plan. They all held high office in a military organization known for short as the Band. There was First Lieutenant Trottie, Second Lieutenant Honey, Sergeant Henny-Penny, and Corporal Alice-Palace, while I had been honored with a captain’s commission in this regiment. To be sure, there was something of a dearth of privates; but with such a gallant array of officers their absence was not felt. At any hour of day or night, to the last man, every member of the Band was ready for the most desperate adventures by field and flood.



A CROW CHORUS

As we left the house the thermometer stood at four below, while the sky was of a frozen blue, without a cloud, and had a hard glitter as if streaked with frost. In a low tree by the roadside, we heard the metallic note of a downy woodpecker scurrying up the trunk and backing stiffly down. Farther on sounded a loud cawing, and we saw four ruffianly crows assaulting a respectable female broad-winged hawk. One after the other they would flap over her as closely as possible, aiming vicious pecks as they passed. The broad-winged beat the air frantically with her short, wide, fringed wings, and seemed to make no effort to defend herself against her black, jeering pursuers. Once she alighted on an exposed limb. Instantly the crows settled near her and used language which no respectable female hawk could listen to for a moment. She spread her wings and soared away, and as she passed out of sight they were still cawing on her trail.

If the hawk had been one of the swift Accipiters, such as the gray goshawk or the Cooper's hawk, or any of the falcons, no crow would have ventured to take any liberties. One of my friends, who collects bird's eggs instead of bird-notes, was once attempting feloniously to break and enter the home of a duck-hawk which was highly regarded in the community – about two hundred feet highly in fact. As my friend was swinging back and forth on a rope in front of the perpendicular cliff, said duck-hawk dashed at him at the rate of some ninety miles per hour. Being scared off by a blank cartridge, the enraged falcon towered. A passing crow flapping through the air made a peck at the hawk as it shot past. That was one of the last and most unfortunate acts in that crow's whole life. The duck-hawk was fairly aching with the desire to attack someone or something which was not protected by thunder and lightning. With one flash of its wings it shot under that misguided crow, and, turning on its back in mid-air, slashed it with six talons like sharpened steel. The crow dropped, a dead mass of black and blood, to the brow of the cliff below.

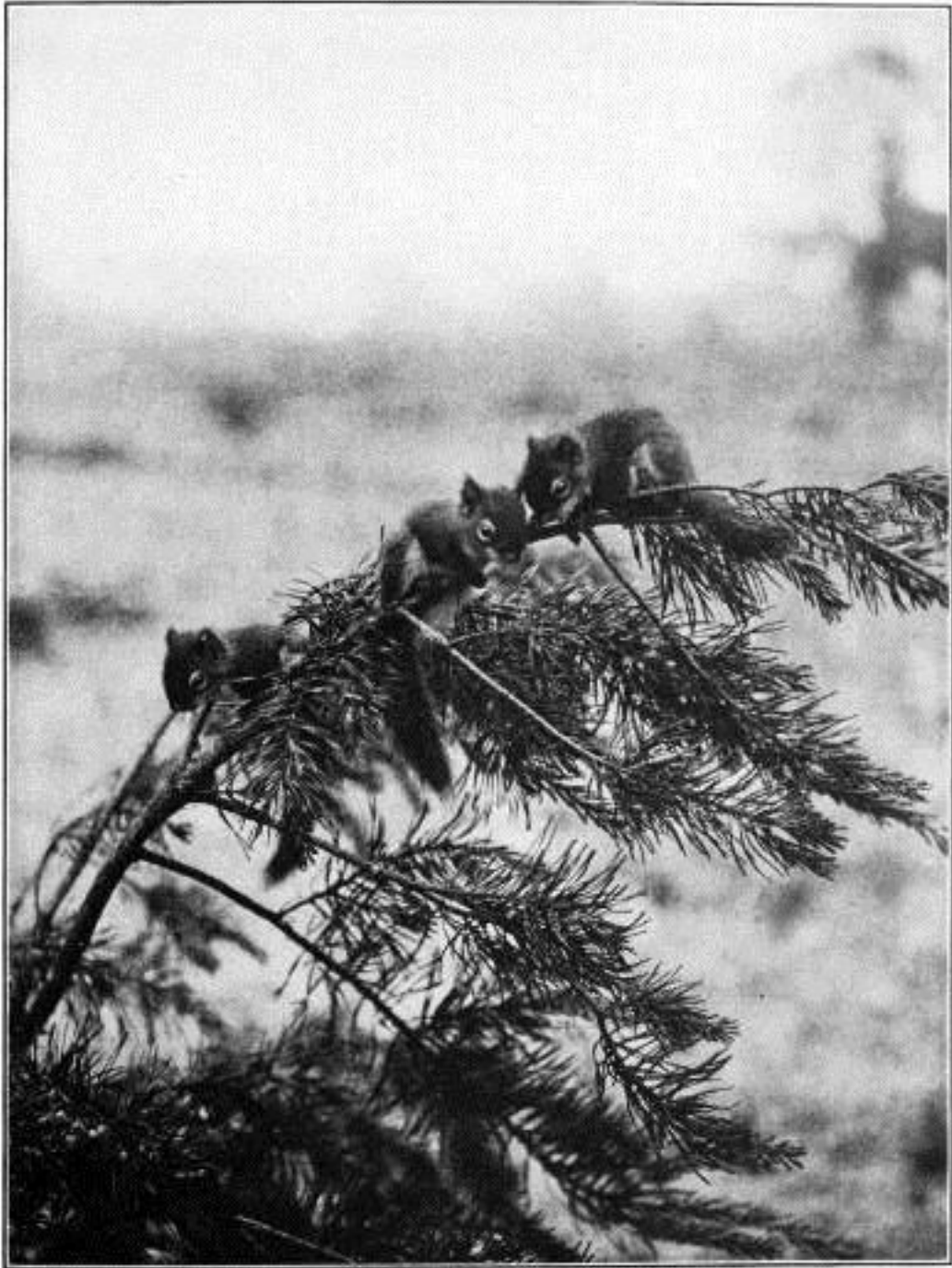
Finally we reached the tall, stone chimney – all that is left of some long-forgotten house, which marks the entrance to old Darby Road, which was opened in 1701. At that point Wild-Folk Land begins. The hurrying feet of more than two centuries have sunk the road some ten feet below its banks, and the wild-folk use its hidden bed like one of their own trails. Foxes pad along its rain-washed course, and rabbits and squirrels hop and scurry across its narrow width, while in spring

and summer wild ginger, ebony spleenwort, the blue-and-white porcelain petals of the hepatica, and a host of other flowers bloom on its banks. The birds too nest there, from the belted gray-blue and white kingfisher, which has bored a deep hole into the clay under an overhanging wild-cherry tree, down to the field sparrow, with its pink beak and flute-song, which watches four speckled eggs close-hidden in a tiny cup of woven grass.

To-day we followed the windings of the road, until we came to the vast black oak tree which marks the place where Darby Road, after running for nearly ten miles, stops to rest. Beyond stretched the unbroken expanse of Blacksnake Swamp, bounded by the windings of Darby Creek. The Band seated themselves on one of their favorite resting-places, a great log which lay under the trees. Above us a white-breasted nuthatch, with its white cheeks and black head, was rat-tat-tatting up and around a half-dead limb, picking out every insect egg in sight from the bark. As the bird came near the broken top of the bough, out of a hole popped a very angry red squirrel exactly like a jack-in-the-box. The red squirrel is the fastest of all the tree-folk among the animals, but a nuthatch on a limb is not afraid of anything that flies or crawls or climbs. He can run up and down around a branch, forward and backward, unlike the woodpeckers, which must always back down, or the brown creepers, which can go up a tree in long spirals but have to fly down.

A red streak flashed down the limb on which the nuthatch was working. That was the squirrel. A fraction of a second ahead of the squirrel there was a wink of gray and white. That was the nuthatch. Before the squirrel could even recover his balance, there was a cheerful rat-tat-tat just behind him on the other side of the limb. As the squirrel turned, the rapping sounded on the other side of the branch. His bushy tail quivered, and using some strong squirrel-language, he dived back into his hole. He was hardly out of sight when the nuthatch was tapping again at his door. Once more the squirrel rushed out chattering and sputtering. Once more the nuthatch was not there. Then he tried chasing the bird around the limb, but there was nothing in that. The nuthatch could turn in half the time and space, and moreover did not have to be afraid of falling, for a drop of fifty feet to frozen ground is no joke even for a red squirrel. The aggravating thing about the nuthatch was that, no matter how hard the squirrel chased him, he never stopped for a second, tapping away at the branch, feeding even as he ran. Finally Mr. Squirrel went back to his house and stayed there, while the nuthatch tapped in triumph all around his hole, although muffled chatterings from within expressed the squirrel's unvarnished opinion of that nuthatch.

When the nuthatch finally flew to another tree, we got up and followed a path that twisted through a barren field full of grassy tussocks and clumps of mockernut hickories and black-walnut trees, until it at last lost itself in the depths of Blacksnake Swamp. This swamp had taken its name from the day that we caught a black snake skimming along over the tops of the bushes like a bird. In summer it is full of impassable quagmires, and to-day we hoped to explore the hidden places which we had never yet seen. We had scarcely passed through the outer fringe of tall grasses and cat-tails, when we heard everywhere through the cold air little tinkling notes, and caught glimpses of dark sparrow-like birds with forked tails, striped breasts, and streaked rich brown backs, each one showing a fine zigzag whitish line at the bend of the wing. Another field-mark was a light patch over each eye, and we identified the first and largest flock of pine siskin of the year. These siskin are strange birds. One never knows when and where they will appear. The last flock that I had seen was in my back-yard in May. Usually too they are in trees, and this was the first time that I had ever met with them on the ground. The birds gave little canary-like notes, like goldfinches, which are often found with them, but can always be recognized by their unstreaked breasts and double wing-bars.



JUST OUT OF THE NEST – YOUNG RED SQUIRRELS

For a long time we studied the flock through our field-glasses, until every last one of the Band had learned this new bird. As we watched them, a white-throated sparrow lisped from a nearby bush, and a little later we met a flock of tree sparrows, a bird which is never by any chance found in a tree. In the distance a woodpecker flew through the air in a labored up-and-down flight, and, as he disappeared, he gave the wild cry of the hairy woodpecker, a bird nearly twice the size of his smaller brother, the downy. Close by the side of the creek, we heard a tiny note like “pheep, pheep, pheep,” and, even as we looked for the bird, it flew past and lit on a tree on the other side of the path, not two feet away. We all stood stony still, and in a minute a brown creeper circled the tree, climbing it in tiny hops in a wide spiral. He was so close that we could see his stiff, spiny

tail with a little row of spots at its base, and the brown and gray speckles on his back, and his long curiously curved bill.

We pressed on into the very heart of the great, treacherous marsh, to-day frozen hard and safe, and explored all of its secret places. In a tangle of wild-grape vine, we found the round nest, rimmed with grape-vine bark, of the cardinal grosbeak; while over in a thicket of elderberry bushes, all rusty-gold with the clinging stems of that parasite, the dodder, showed the close sheath of the fine branches of a swamp maple. In a fork at the end of one of the branches, all silver-gray, was the empty nest of a goldfinch, the last of all the birds to nest. It was made of twisted strands of the silk of the milkweed pods hackled by the bird's beak. In the snow, we came across a strange track almost like the trail of a snake. It was a wide trough, with little close-set, zigzag paw-marks running all through it. The Captain told the Band that this was the trail of the fierce blarina shrew, one of the killers. Without eyes or ears, this strange little blind death eats its weight in flesh every twenty-four hours, and slays under ground, above ground, and even under the water. The Band regarded the strange tracks with enormous interest.

"How big do they grow?" anxiously inquired Henny-Penny, the littlest but one of the Band.

"Just a little longer than my middle finger," the Captain reassured him.

Suddenly, in the very midst of this zoölogical bric-a-brac, a great thought came to each and every of the Band simultaneously.

"Lunch-time!" they shouted with one accord.

Then occurred the tragedy of the trip. In a pocket of his shooting-jacket the Captain had a package of sandwiches containing just one apiece, no more, no less. The rest of the lunch, thick scones, raisins, chocolate, saveloy sausage, bacon, and other necessities and luxuries, had been wrapped up in another package and intrusted to Honey as head of the commissary department for the day – and Honey had left the package on the hall table! It was a grief almost too great to be borne. The Band regarded their guilty comrade reproachfully. Two large tears ran down Honey's cheeks. Alice-Palace, the littlest of them all, gave way to unrestrained emotions which bade fair to frighten away the most blood-thirsty of blarinas within the radius of a mile.

Then it was that the Captain rose to the emergency. "Comrades," said he, placing one hand over Alice-Palace's widely-opened mouth, "all is not lost. Old woodsmen like ourselves can find food anywhere. Follow me. Hist!"

Like Hawk-Eye and Chingachgook and other well-known scouts, the Captain was apt to employ that mysterious word when beginning a desperate adventure. The Band followed him with entire confidence, albeit with certain sniffings on the part of Corporal Alice-Palace. They crossed a tiny brook, and found themselves in a little grove of swamp maples which had grown up around the fallen trunk of the parent tree. The Captain scanned the trees carefully. Everywhere were trails in the snow which he told them were the tracks of gray squirrels. Suddenly he reached up and picked out from between a little twig and the smooth trunk of a swamp-maple sapling, a big, dry, beautifully-seasoned black walnut. That started the Band to looking, and they found that the little trees were filled with walnuts, each one wedged in between twigs or branches so that it would not blow down. Up and down and about the low trees climbed and scrambled the Band. Some of the nuts were hidden and some were in plain sight, but altogether there was nearly half a peck of them, each one containing a dry, crisp, golden kernel which tasted as rich and delicious as it looked. They had come upon the winter storehouse of a gray-squirrel family.

Piling the nuts in the lee of a big oak tree where the camp-fire was to be made, they followed the Captain to a broken-down rail fence, where grew a thicket of tiny trees with smooth trunks, whose gray twigs were laden down with bunches of what looked like tiny purple plums. Each one had a layer of pulp over a flat stone, and this pulp, what there was of it, had a curious attractive spicy sugary taste. The Captain told the Band that these were nanny-plums, sometimes known as

sweet viburnum. Further on, they found clusters of little purple fox-grapes, fiercely sour in the fall, but now sweetened enough, under the bite of the frost, to be swallowed.

Still the Captain was not ready to stop. Up the hillside he led them, by a winding path through tangled thickets, until in a level place he brought them to a group of curious trees. The bark of these was deeply grooved and in places nearly three inches thick, while the branches were covered with scores and scores of golden-red globes. Some were wrinkled and frost-bitten until they had turned brown, but others still hung plump and bright in the winter air. It was a grove of persimmon trees. Before he could be stopped, Henny-Penny had picked one of the best-looking of the lot and took a deep bite out of the soft pulp. Immediately thereafter he spat out his first taste of persimmon with great emphasis, his mouth so puckered that it was with difficulty that he could express his unfavorable opinion of the new fruit.

“Handsome is as handsome does,” warned the Captain. “Try some of the frost-bitten ones.”

The Band accordingly did so, and found that the worst-looking and most wrinkled specimens were sweet as honey and without a trace of pucker. On their way back, they passed through a thicket of tangled bushes, whose branches were all matted together in bunches which looked like birds’ nests. The twigs were laden down with round, purple berries about the size of a wild cherry, and the Captain told the Band that these were hackberries, otherwise known as sugar-berries. They picked handfuls of them, and found that the berry had a sweet spicy pulp over a fragile stone that could be crushed like the stones of a raisin, while the fruit when eaten resembled a raisin in taste.

Hurrying back to the camp-fire tree, the Captain dug a round circle a couple of feet in diameter in the snow, and spread down a layer of dry leaves. Over these he built a little tepee of tiny, dry, black-oak twigs. Underneath this he placed a fragment of birch-bark which he had peeled off one of the aspen birches which grew on the fringe of the swamp. This burned like paper, and in a minute the little ball of dry twigs was crackling away with a steady flame. Over this he piled dry sassafras and hickory boughs, and in a few moments the Band was seated around a column of flame which roared up fully four feet high. With their backs against the great oak tree, they cracked and cracked and cracked black walnuts and crunched sugar-berries and nibbled nanny-plums and tasted frost-grapes – saving the single sandwich until next to the last; while for desert they had handfuls and handfuls of honey-sweet, wrinkled persimmons.



THE DEAR DEER MICE

Near the fire Lieutenant Trottie found an old box-cover bedded in the snow. As he lifted it up, there was a rush and a scurry, and from a round, warm nest underneath the cover, made of thistle-down, fur, feathers, and tiny bits of woodfibre all matted together into a sort of felt, dashed six reddish-brown, pink-pawed mice. They burrowed in the snow, crept under the leaves, and in a minute were out of sight, all except one, which tried to climb the box-cover and which Trottie caught before he could scurry over the top of it. His fur was like plush, with the hair a warm reddish-brown at the ends and gray at the roots. Underneath he was snowy-white, although there, too, the fur showed mouse-gray under the surface. He had little brown claws and six tiny pink disks on each paw, which enabled him to run up and down perpendicular surfaces. His eyes were big and brown

and lustrous, and he had flappy, pinky-gray, velvet ears, each one of which was half the size of his funny little face and thin as gossamer. His paws were pink and his long tail was covered with the finest of hairs. When he found he was fairly caught, he snuggled down into Trottie's hand, making a queer little whimpering noise, while his nose wrinkled and quivered. When Trottie brought him to the fire, Henny-Penny offered him a half-kernel of one of his walnuts. Instantly the little nose stopped quivering, and Mousy sat up like a squirrel on the back of Trottie's hand and nibbled away until the piece was all gone. Each one of the Band took turns in feeding him until he could eat no more. Then Trottie put him back in the deserted nest and replaced the box-cover.

The last adventure of all was on the way home. We were walking along an abandoned railroad track, when suddenly a flock of light grayish birds flew up all together out of the dry grass and lighted in a small elm tree nearby. As we watched them, they turned and all flew down together. Instantly it was as if a mass of peach-blossoms had been spilled on the withered grass and white snow. Fully a third of the flock had crimson crowns and rose-colored breasts, while at the base of the streaked gray-and-brown backs showed a tinge of pink. It was our first flock of the lesser redpolls all the way down from the Arctic Circle. They were restless but not shy, and sometimes we were able to get within six feet of them. They would continually fly back and forth from the tree to the ground, keeping up a soft chattering interspersed with little tinkling notes, somewhat resembling the goldfinch or the siskin which we had left behind us in the swamp. Always, when they flew, they gave a little piping call, and their field-mark was a black patch under the throat which could be seen even farther than their red polls or their rosy breasts. Their beaks were light and very pointed, and they had forked tails like the siskin.

It was nearly twilight when we left them and at last started home. As we followed a fox-trail in and out through the thickets of Fern Valley, we caught a glimpse of a large brown bird on the ground. At first I thought that it was some belated fox sparrow; but when it hopped to a low twig and then raised its tail stiffly as I watched, I recognized the hermit thrush, which always betrays itself by this curious mannerism. The last one I had seen was singing like Israfel, in the twilight of a Canadian forest. To-day the little singer was silent, and I wondered what had kept him back from the southland, and hoped that he would be able to win through the bitter days still ahead of him. I have no doubt that he did, for the hermit thrush is a brave-hearted, hardy, self-reliant bird.

The sun had gone down before we finally reached the road. Above the after-glow showed a patch of apple-green sky against which was etched the faintest, finest, and newest of crescent moons. It almost seemed as if a puff of wind would blow her like a cobweb out of the sky. Above gleamed Venus, the evening star, all silver-gold; while over toward the other side of the sky, great golden Jupiter echoed back her rays. Below the green, the sky was a mass of dusky gold which deepened into amber and then slowly faded. As we walked home through the twilight, we heard the last, sweetest, and saddest singer of that winter day. Through the air shuddered a soft tremolo call, like the whistling of swift, unseen wings or the wail of a little lost child. It was the eerie call of the little screech-owl – and never was a bird worse named. Answering, I brought him so close to us that we could see his ear-tufts showing in the half-light. All the way home he followed us, calling and calling for some one who will never come.

III

SNOW STORIES

The sun went down in a spindrift of pale gold and gray, which faded into a bank of lead-colored cloud. The next morning the woods and fields were dumb with snow. No blue jays squalled, nor white-skirted juncos clicked; neither were there any nuthatches running gruntingly up and down the tree-trunks. There was not even the caw of a passing crow from the cold sky. As I followed an unbroken wood-road, it seemed as if all the wild-folk were gone.

The snow told another story. On its smooth surface were records of the lives that had throbbed and passed and ebbed beneath the silent trees. Just ahead of me the road crossed a circle where, a half-century ago, the charcoal-burners had set the round stamp of one of their pits. On the level snow there was a curious trail of zigzag tracks. They were deep and close-set, and made by some animal that walked flat-footed. I recognized the trail of the unhasting skunk. Other animals may jump and run and skurry through life, but the motto of the skunk is, "Don't hurry, others will." The tracks of the fore-paw, when examined closely, showed long claw-marks which were absent from the print of the hind feet. Occasionally the trail changed into a series of groups of four tracks arranged in a diagonal straight line, which marked where the skunk had broken into the clumsy gallop which is its fastest gait. Most of the time this particular skunk had walked in a slow and dignified manner. By the edge of the woods he had stopped and dug deeply into a rotten log, evidently looking for winter-bound crickets and grubs.

At this point another character was added to the plot of this snow story. Approaching at right angles to the trail of the skunk were the tracks of a red fox. I knew he was red, because that is the only kind of fox found in that part of New England. I knew them to be the tracks of a fox, because they ran straight instead of spraddling like a dog, and never showed any mark of a dragging foot. The trail told what had happened. The first tracks were the far-apart ones of a hunting fox. When he reached the skunk's trail, the foot-prints became close together and ran parallel to the trail and some distance away from it. The fox was evidently following the tracks in a thoughtful mood. He was a young fox, or he would not have followed them at all. At the edge of the clearing he had sighted the skunk and stopped, for the prints were melted deep into the snow. Sometimes an old and hungry fox will kill a skunk. In order to do this safely, the spine of the skunk must be broken instantly by a single pounce, thus paralyzing the muscles on which the skunk depends for his defense; for the skunk invented the gas-attack a million years before the Boche. No living animal can stay within range of the choking fumes of the liquid musk which the skunk can throw for a distance of several feet. The snow told me what happened next. It was a sad story. The fox had sprung and landed beside the skunk, intending to snap it up like a rabbit. The skunk snapped first. Around the log was a tangle of fox-tracks, with flurries and ridges and holes in the snow where the fox had rolled and burrowed. Out of the farther side a series of tremendous bounds showed where a wiser and a smellier fox had departed from that skunk with an initial velocity of close to one mile per minute. Finally, out of the confused circle came the neat, methodical trail of the unruffled skunk as he moved sedately away. Probably to the end of his life the device of a black-and-white tail rampant will always be associated in that fox's mind with the useful maxim, "Mind your own business."

Beyond the instructive fable of the fox and the skunk showed lace-work patterns and traceries in the snow where scores and hundreds of the mice-folk had come up from their tunnels beneath the whiteness, and had frolicked and feasted the long night through. Some of these tracks were in little clumps of fours. Each group had a five-fingered pair of large prints in front and a pair of four-fingered tracks just behind. Down the middle ran a tail-mark. They were the tracks of the white-footed or deer-mice. These were the same little robbers which swarmed into my winter camp and

gnawed everything in sight. Even a flitch of bacon hung on a cord was riddled with their tiny teeth-marks. Only things hung on wires were safe, for their clinging little feet cannot find a footing on the naked iron. One night they gnawed a ring of round holes through the crown of a cherished felt hat belonging to a friend of mine. The language he used when he looked at that hat the next morning was unfit for the ears of any young deer-mouse. Another time the deer-mice carried off about a peck of expensive stuffing from a white horse-hair mattress, which I had imported for the personal repose of my aged frame. Although I ransacked that cabin from turret to foundation-stone I could never find a trace of that horse-hair. In spite of their evil ways one cannot help liking the little rascals. They have such bright, black eyes, and wear such snowy, silky waistcoats and stockings.

The other evening I sat reading alone in my cabin in the heart of the pine-barrens before a roaring fire. Suddenly I felt something tickle my knee. When I moved there was a sudden jump and a deer-mouse sprang out from my trouser-leg to the floor. Then I put a piece of bread on the edge of the wood-box. Although I saw the bread disappear, I could catch no glimpse of what took it. Finally I put a piece on my shoe, and after running back and forth from the wood-box several times, Mr. Mouse at last became brave enough to take it. When he found that I did not move, he sat up on my shoe like a little squirrel and nibbled away at his crumb, watching me all the time out of a corner of his black eyes. I forgave him my friend's hat, and was almost ready to overlook the horse-hair episode. When I moved, like a flash he dashed up the wall by the fireplace, and hid behind a row of books that stood on the red-oak plank which I had put in as a mantel-piece. Unfortunately he had forgotten to hide his long silky tail. It hung down through the crack between the plank and the rough stone of the chimney. I tiptoed over and gave it a pinch to remind him to meddle no more with other people's mattresses.

Returning to the wood-road – on that morning, among the trails of the deer-mice were the more numerous tracks of the meadow- or field-mouse. They show no tail-mark, and the smaller footprints were not side by side as with the deer-mice, but almost always one behind the other. These smaller paw-marks among all jumping-animals, such as rabbits, squirrels, and mice, are always the marks of the fore-paws. The larger far-apart tracks mark where the hind feet of the jumper come down in front and outside of the fore-paws as he jumps.

On that day, among the mouse-tracks on the snow there showed another faint trail, which looked like a string of tiny exclamation marks with a tail-mark between them. It was the track of the masked shrew, the smallest mammal of the Eastern states. This tiny fierce fragment of flesh and blood is only about the length of a man's little finger. So swift are the functions of its wee body that, deprived of food for six hours, the shrew starves and dies. Many of them are found starved to death on the melting snow, having crept up from their underground burrows through the shafts made by grass and weed-stems. Wandering over the white waste, they lose their way and, failing to find food, starve before the sun is half way down the sky. As the shrew does not hibernate, his whole life is a swift hunt for food; for every day this apparently eyeless, earless animal must eat its own weight in flesh. The weasels kill from blood-lust, but the shrews kill for their very life's sake. It is a fearsome sight to see a shrew attack a mouse. The mouse bites. The shrew eats. Boring in, the shrew secures a grip with its long, crooked, crocodile jaws filled with fierce teeth, and devours its way like fire through skin and flesh and bone, worrying out and swallowing mouthfuls of blood and flesh until the mouse falls over dead. This tiny beastling, the masked shrew, must be weighed by troy weight, and tips a jeweler's scale at less than forty-five grains.

To-day the snow said the shrew had been an unbidden and unwelcome guest at the mice-dinner. At first the mice-trails were massed together in a maze of tracks. Where the trail of the shrew touched the circle, there shot out separate lines of mice-tracks, like the spokes of a wheel, with the paw-marks far apart, showing that the guests had all sprung up from the laden table of the snow and dashed off in different directions. The shrew-track circled faintly here and there, ran for some distance in a long straight trail, and – stopped. The Sword of Damocles, which hangs forever

over the head of all the little wild-folk, had fallen. The shrew was gone. A tiny fleck of blood and a single track like a great X on the snow told the tale of his passing. All his fierceness and courage availed nothing when the great talons of the flying death clamped through his soft fur. X is the signature of the owl-folk just as K is of the hawk-kind. The size of the mark in this case showed that the killer was one of the larger owls. Later in the winter it might have been the grim white Arctic owl, which sometimes comes down from the frozen North in very cold weather. So early in the season, however, it would be either the barred or the great horned owl.

I had hunted and camped and fished and tramped all through this hill-country, and although I had often heard at night the “Whoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo” of the great horned owl, which keeps always the same pitch, I had never heard the call of the barred owl, which ends in a falling cadence with a peculiar deep, hollow note. So I decided that the maker of the track was that fierce king of the deep woods, whose head, with its ear-tufts or horns, may be seen peering from his nest of sticks on the mountainside in a high tree-top as early as February. On wings so muffled by soft downy feathers as to be absolutely noiseless, he had swooped down in the darkness, and the tiny bubble of the shrew’s life had broken into the void.

Beyond this point the road wound upward toward the slope of the Cobble, a steep, sharp-pointed little hill which suddenly thrust itself up from a circle of broad meadows and flat woodlands. Time was when all the Cobble was owned and ploughed clear to its peak by Great-great-uncle Samuel, who had a hasty disposition and a tremendous voice, and ploughed with two yoke of oxen which required a considerable amount of conversation. Tradition has it that, when discoursing to them, he could be heard in four different towns. That was more than one hundred years ago, and the Cobble has been untouched by plough or harrow since, and to-day is wooded to the very top.



DEATH-IN-THE-DARK – THE GREAT HORNED OWL

Just ahead of me on the wood-road showed a deep track which only in recent years has been seen in Connecticut. In my boyhood a deer-track was as unknown as that of a wolf, and the wolves have been gone for at least a century. Within the last ten years the deer have come back. Last summer I met two on the roads with the cows, and later saw seven make an unappreciated visit to my neighbor's garden, where they seemed to approve highly of her lettuce. Straight up the hillside ran the line of deeply stamped little hoof-marks. The trail looks like a sheep's; but the front of each track ends in two beautifully curved sharp points, while the track of a sheep is straighter and blunter. Nor could any sheep negotiate that magnificent bound over the five-foot rail fence. From take-off to where the four small hoofs landed together on the other side was a good twenty feet.

On the other side of the fence the snow had drifted over a patch of sweet fern by the edge of the wood-road in a low hummock. As I plodded along, I happened to strike this with my foot. There was a tremendous whirring noise, the snow exploded all over me, and out burst a magnificent cock partridge, as we call the ruffed grouse in New England, and whizzed away among the laurels like a lyddite shell.

When the snowstorm began, he had selected a cozy spot in the lee of the sweet-fern patch, and had let himself be snowed over. The warmth of his body had made a round, warm room, and with plenty of rich fern-seeds within easy reach, he was prepared to stay in winter quarters a week, if necessary.

The stories of the snow, although often difficult to read, are always interesting. After the winter fairly sets in, we read nothing about the Seven Sleepers who have put themselves in cold storage until spring. The bear, the raccoon, the woodchuck, the skunk, the chipmunk, and the jumping-mouse are all fast asleep underground. The last sleeper never touches the ground when awake, and sleeps swinging up-side-down by the long, recurved nails on his hind feet. He is the bat, who lives and hunts in the air, and can out-fly any bird of his own size.

Perhaps the most unexpected of the snow stories was one which I read one winter day when out for a walk with the Botanist. Although the snow was on the ground, the sky was as blue as in June, as the Botanist and I swung into an old road that the forgotten feet of more than two centuries had worn deep below its banks. It was opened in 1691, when William and Mary were king and queen, and Boston Tea Parties and Liberty Bells and Declarations of Independence were not yet even dreamed of in the land.

We always keep a bird-record of every walk, and note down the names of the sky-folk whom we meet and any interesting bit of news that they may have for us. In the migration season there is great rivalry as to who shall meet the greatest number from the crowd of travelers going north. Last year my best day's record was eighty-four different kinds of birds, which beat the Botanist by two. A black duck and a late bay-breasted warbler were the cause of his undoing. To a birdist every walk is full of possibilities. Any day, anywhere, some bird may flash into sight for the first time.

The Botanist has pointed out to me not fewer than twenty times the sacred field where, one bitter winter day, he saw his first (and last) flock of horned larks. For my part, I never fail to show him the pignut hickory where my first golden-winged warbler spoke to me one May morning.

To-day, however, our walk was almost a birdless one. We heard the caw of the crow, the only bird-note that can be certainly counted on for every day of the year. We saw the flutter of the white skirts of the juncos. From a blighted chestnut tree we saw a bird flash down into the dry grass from his perch on a dead limb. As we came nearer, he glided off like a little aeroplane, and we recognized the flight and the spotted buff waistcoat of the sparrow-hawk hunting meadow-mice.

Later in the morning we heard the "Pip, pip," of the song sparrow, and marked the black spot on his breast. Far ahead, across a snow-covered meadow, a bird flew dippingly up and down. He had laid aside his canary-yellow and black suit, but his flight bewrayed the goldfinch.

Passing through a beechwood, we heard a sharp call, and saw a black-and-white bird back down a tree. This cautious procedure stamped him as the downy woodpecker. Of all the tree-climbers only the woodpeckers back down.

Strangely enough, a short distance farther on we heard another cry like that of the downy woodpecker, only harsher and wilder, and caught a glimpse of the hairy woodpecker, the big brother of the downy, a rarer, larger bird of the deep woods. That ended our bird list – a paltry seven when we should have had a score.

We passed the swamp meadow close to the road, where the blue, blind gentian grows not twenty-five yards from the unseeing eyes of the travelers, who pass there every October day and never suspect what a miracle of color lies hidden in the tangle of marsh-grass beside their path. The

Botanist with many misgivings had shown me the secret. For three years we had tramped together before he held me to be worthy to share it.

Farther on we crossed a plateau where a series of stumps showed where a grove of chestnut trees had grown in the days before the Blight. Suddenly from under our very feet dashed a brown rabbit, his white powder-puff gleaming at every jump. The lithe, lean, springing body seemed the very embodiment of speed. There are few animals that can pass a rabbit in a hundred yards, even our cottontail, the slowest of his family. He is, however, only a sprinter. In a long-distance event the fox, the dog, and even the dogged, devilish little weasel can run him down.

We looked at the form where he had been lying. It was a wet little hollow made in the dank grass, with only a few dripping leaves for a mattress – a forlorn bed. Yet Runny-Bunny, as some children I know have named him, seems to rest well in his open-air sleeping porch, and even lies abed there.

One far-away snowy day in February two of us stole a few moments from the bedside of a sick child – how long, long ago it all seems now! – and walked out among the wild-folk to forget. In a bleak meadow, right at our feet, we saw a rabbit crouched, nearly covered by the snow. He had been snowed under days before, but had slept out the storm until half of his fleecy coverlet had melted away.

He lay so still that at first we thought he was dead; but on looking closely, we could see the quick throbbing of his frightened little heart. There was not a quiver from his taut body, or a blink from his wide-open eyes. He lay motionless until my hand stroked gently his wet fur. Then, indeed, he exploded like a brown bomb-shell from the snow, and we laughed and laughed, the first and last time for many a weary week.

Years later, I was coasting down the meadow-hill with one of my boys; and, as the sled came to a stop, a rabbit burst out of the snow, almost between the runners. The astonished boy rolled into a drift as if blown clear off his sled by the force of the explosion.

To-day, as the Brownie sped over the soft snow, we could see how its tracks in series of fours were made. At every jump the long hind-legs thrust themselves far in front. They made the two far-apart tracks in the snow, while the close-set fore-paws made the nearby tracks. Accordingly a rabbit is always traveling in the direction of the far-apart tracks, quite contrary to what most of us would suppose.

It is the same way with celestial rabbits. Look any clear winter night down below the belt of Orion, and you will see a great rabbit-track in the sky – the constellation of *Lepus*, the Hare, whose track leads away from the Great Dog with baleful *Sirius* gleaming green in his fell jaw.

From the rabbit-meadow we followed devious paths down through Fern Valley, which in summertime is a green mass of cinnamon fern, interrupted fern, Christmas fern, brake, regal fern, and half a score of others. In the midst of the marsh were rows of the fruit-stems of the sensitive fern, which is the first to blacken before the frost. These were heavy with rich wine-brown seed-pods, filled with seeds like fine dust. They had an oily, nutty taste; and it would seem as if some hungry mouse or bird would find them good eating during famine times. Yet so far as I have observed they are never fed upon.

Along the side of the path were thickets of spice-bush, whose crushed leaves in summer have an incense sweeter than burns in any censer of man's making. To-day I broke one of the brittle branches, to nibble the perfumed bark, and found at the end of a twig, pretending to be a withered leaf, a cocoon of the prometheus moth. The leaf had been folded together, lined with spun silk, and lashed so strongly that the twig would break before the silken cable.

We passed through a clump of staghorn sumac with branches like antlers, bearing at their ends heavy masses of fruit-clusters made up of hundreds of dark, velvety crimson berries, each containing a brown seed. The pulp of these berries is intensely sour, its flavor giving the sumac its other name of "vinegar plant." These red clusters crushed in sweetened water make a very good

imitation of the red circus-lemonade of our childhood. The staghorn is not to be confounded with its treacherous sister, the poison sumac, with her corpse-colored berries. She is a vitriol-thrower, and with her death-pale bark and arsenic-green leaves, always makes me think of one of those haggard, horrible women of the Terror.

It was in Fern Valley that the Botanist made his discovery for the day. It was only a tree, and moreover a tree that he must have passed many times before. Only to-day, however, did it catch his eye. The bark was that of an oak, but the leaves, which clung thick and brown to the limb, were long, with a straight edge something like the leaves of the willow-oak, only broader and larger. It was no other than the laurel-oak, a tree which by all rights belonged hundreds of miles to the south of us.

He walked gloatingly around his discovery, and it was some time before I could drag him on. Thereafter he gave me a masterly discourse, some forty minutes in duration, on the life-history of the oaks, and propounded several ingenious theories to account for the presence of this strange species. This discourse continued until we reached the historic white oak near the end of the valley, where the Botanist once found a flock of bay-breasted warblers in the middle of a rainstorm; and again I heard the story of that day.

Through the valley flowed a little stream, and the snow along its banks told of the goings and comings of the wild-folk. Gray squirrels, red squirrels, muskrats, rabbits, mice, foxes, weasels, all had passed and repassed along these banks.

To me the most interesting trail was that of a blarina shrew. His track in the snow is a strange one. It is a round, tunnel-like trail, like that of some large caterpillar, with the trough made by the wallowing little body filled with tiny alternate tracks – one of the strangest of all the winter trails.

I could obtain very little enthusiasm from the Botanist over blarinas. He still babbled of laurel-leafed oaks and similar frivolities. Even the crowning event of the walk left him cold. It came on the home-stretch. We were passing through the last pasture before reaching the humdrum turnpike which led to the tame-folk. Suddenly in the snow I saw a strange trail. It was evidently made by a jumper, but not one whose track I knew. I followed it, until among the leaves in a bank something moved. Before my astonished eyes hopped falteringly, but bravely, a speckled toad.

The winter sun shone palely on his brown back still crusted with the earth of his chill home. Down under the leaves and the frozen ground he had heard the call, and struggled to the surface, expecting to find spring awaiting him. Two jumps, however, had landed him in a snowbank. It was a disillusion, and Mr. Toad winked his mild brown eyes piteously. He struggled bravely to get out, but every jump plunged him deeper into the snow. His movements became feebler as the little warmth his cold blood contained oozed out.



FLYER, THE SQUIRREL

Just as he was settling despairingly back into the crystallized cold, I rescued him. He was too far gone even to move, for cold spells quick death to the reptile folk. Only his blinking beautiful eyes, like lignite flecked with gold, and the slow throbbing of his mottled breast, showed that life was still in him. He nestled close in my hand, willing to occupy it until warm weather.

I back-tracked him from his faltering efforts, and where his first lusty jump showed on the thawing ground I found his hibernaculum. It was only a little hollow, scarcely three inches deep, under sodden leaves and wet earth, and cheerless enough, according to mammalian ideas. It was evidently home for Mr. Toad, and when I set him therein, he scrambled relievedly under some of the loose wet leaves which had fallen back into his nest. I piled a generous measure of dripping

leaves and moist earth over his warted back. It may have been imagination, but I fancied that the last look I had from his bright eyes was one of gratitude. The Botanist scoffed at the

idea, for toads, like pine-snakes, convey absolutely no appeal to his narrow, flower-bound nature.

I have erected a monument in the shape of a chestnut stake beside Mr. Toad's winter residence, and I strongly suspect that he will be the last of his family to get up when the spring rising-bell finally rings.

"There's positively nothing to this early-rising business," I can hear him telling his friends at the Puddle Club in April. "Look at what happened to me. If it hadn't been for a well-meaning giant, I would have caught my death of cold from getting out of bed too soon. Never again!"

Our calendar-makers use red letters to mark special days. Personally, I prefer orchids and birds and sunrises and nests and snakes and similar markers. I have in my diary "The Day of the Prothonotary Warbler," "The Day of the Henslow's Sparrow's Nest" (that was a day!), "The Day of the Fringed Gentian," and many, many others. But always and forever that snowy 21st of December is marked in my memory as "The Day of the Early Toad."

Once more I was climbing the Cobble. The wood-road on which I started had narrowed to a path. Overhead masses of rock showed through the snow, and above them were the dark depths of the Bear-Hole where Great-great-uncle Jake had once shot with his flintlock musket the largest bear ever killed in that part of the state. It was here at the cliff side that Shahrazad snow told me another story.

Along the edge of the slope ran a track made up of four holes in the snow. The front ones were far apart and the back ones near apart. Occasionally, instead of four holes, five would show in the snow, and the position of the marks was reversed. A little farther on, and the trail changed. The two near-apart tracks were now in a perpendicular line instead of side by side. To Chingachgook, or Deerslayer, or Daniel Boone, or any other well-known tracker, the trail would have, of course, been an open book. But it had taken an amateur trailer like myself some years to be able to read that snow record aright. The trail was that of a cottontail rabbit. At first he had been hopping contentedly along, with an eye open for anything eatable in the line of winter vegetables. The far-apart tracks were the paw-marks of the big hind-legs, which came in front of the marks made by the fore-paws as they touched the ground at every hop. The five marks were where he had sat down to look around. The fifth mark was the mark of his stubby tail, and when he stopped, the little fore-paws made the near-apart marks in front of the far-apart marks of his hind-feet, instead of behind them as when he hopped.

Suddenly the rabbit detected something alarming coming from behind, for the sedate hops changed into startled bounds. A little farther on the trail said that the rabbit had caught sight of its pursuer as it ran; for a rabbit by the position of its eyes sees backward and forward equally well. The tracks showed a frantic burst of speed. In an effort to get every possible bit of leverage, the fore-legs were twisted so that they struck the ground one behind the other, which accounted for the last set of marks perpendicular to those in front. A line of tracks which came from a pile of stones, and paralleled the rabbit's trail, told the whole story. The paw-marks were small and dainty, but beyond each pad-print were the marks of fierce claws. No wonder the rabbit ran wild when it first scented its enemy, and then saw its long slim body bounding along behind, white as snow except for the black tip of its tail.

It was the weasel, whose long body moves like the uncoiling of a steel spring. A weasel running looks like a gigantic inch-worm that bounds instead of crawls. Speed, however, is not what the little white killer depends on for its prey. It can follow a trail by scent better than any hound, climb trees nearly as well as a squirrel; and if the animal it is chasing goes into a burrow, it has gone to certain death. The rabbit's only chance would have been a straight-away run at full speed for miles and hours. In this way it could probably have tired out the weasel, which is a killer, not

a runner, by profession. A rabbit, however, like the fox, never runs straight. Round and round in great circles it runs about its feeding-ground, of which it knows all the paths and runways and burrows. Against a dog or fox these are safer tactics than exploring new territory. Against a weasel they are usually fatal.

It was easy to see on the snow what had happened. At first, when the rabbit saw the weasel looping along its trail like a hunting snake, it had started off with a sprint that in a minute carried it out of sight. Then a strange thing happened. Although a rabbit can run for an hour at nearly top speed, and in this case had every reason to run, after a half-mile of rapid circling and doubling, the trail changed and showed that the rabbit was plodding along as if paralyzed.

One of the weird and unexplained facts in nature is the strange power that a weasel appears to have over all the smaller animals. Many of them simply give up and wait for death when they find that a weasel is on their trail. A red squirrel, which could easily escape through the tree-tops, sometimes becomes almost hysterical with fright, and has been known to fall out of a tree-top in a perfect ecstasy of terror. Even the rat, which is a cynical, practical animal, with no nerves, and a bitter, brave fighter when fight it must, loses its head when up against a weasel. A friend of mine once saw a grim, gray old fellow run squealing aloud across a road from a woodpile and plunge into a stone wall. A moment later a weasel in its reddish summer coat came sniffing along the rat's trail and passed within a yard of him.

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