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Author: Dallas Lore Sharp
Illustrator: R. Bruce Horsfall

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Roof and Meadow

By Dallas Lore Sharp

Author of "A Watcher in the Woods"

With Illustrations By Bruce Horsfall

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TO

MY MOTHER

CONTENTS

[***Transcriber's Note***: *In this text, the spelling 'racoon' is used consistently instead of 'raccoon'. I have kept this and any other unusual spellings, retaining the character of the original.*]

ROOF AND MEADOW

BIRDS FROM A CITY ROOF

I laid down my book and listened. It was only the choking gurgle of a broken rain-pipe outside: then it was the ripple and swish of a meadow stream. To make out the voices of redwings and marsh-wrens in the rasping notes of the city sparrows behind the shutter required much more imagination. But I did it. I wanted to hear, and the splash of the water helped me.

The sounds of wind and water are the same everywhere. Here at the heart of the city I can forget the tarry pebbles and painted tin whenever my rain-pipes are flooded. I can never be wholly shut away from the open country and the trees so long as the winds draw hard down the alley past my window.

But I have more than a window and a broken rain-pipe. Along with my five flights goes a piece of roof, flat, with a wooden floor, a fence, and a million acres of sky. I couldn't possibly use another acre of sky, except along the eastern horizon, where the top floors of some twelve-story buildings intercept the dawn.

With such a roof and such a sky, when I must, I can, with effort, get well out of the city. I have never fished nor botanized here, but I have been a-birding many times.

> *Stone walls do not a prison make,*

nor city streets a cage—if one have a roof.

A roof is not an ideal spot for bird study. I would hardly, out of preference, have chosen this with its soot and its battlement of gaseous chimney-pots, even though it is a university roof with the great gilded dome of a state house shining down upon it. One whose feet have always been in the soil does not take kindly to tar and tin. But anything open to the sky is open to some of the birds, for the paths of many of the migrants lie close along the clouds.

Other birds than the passing migrants, however, sometimes come within range of my look-out. The year around there are English sparrows and pigeons; and all through the summer scarcely an evening passes when a few chimney-swallows are not in sight.

With the infinite number and variety of chimneys hedging me in, I naturally expected to find the sky alive with swallows. Indeed, I thought that some of the twenty-six pots at the corners of my roof would be inhabited by the birds. Not so. While I can nearly always find a pair of swallows in the air, they are surprisingly scarce, and, so far as I know, they rarely build in the heart of the city. There are more canaries in my block than chimney-swallows in all my sky.

The swallows are not urban birds. The gas, the smoke, the shrieking ventilators, and the ceaseless sullen roar of the city are hardly to their liking. Perhaps the flies and gnats which they feed upon cannot live in the air above the roofs. The swallows want a sleepy old town with big thunderful chimneys, where there are wide fields and a patch of quiet water.

Much more numerous than the swallows are the night-hawks. My roof, in fact, is the best place I have ever found to study their feeding habits. These that flit through my smoky dusk may not make city nests, though the finding of such nests would not surprise me. Of course a night-hawk's *nest*, here or anywhere else, would surprise me; for like her cousin, the whippoorwill, she never builds a nest, but stops in the grass, the gravel, the leaves, or on a bare rock, deposits her eggs without even scratching aside the sticks and stones that may share the bed, and in three days is brooding them—brooding the stones too.

It is likely that some of my hawks nest on the buildings in the neighborhood. Night-hawks' eggs have occasionally been found among the pebbles of city roofs. The high, flat house-tops are so quiet and remote, so far away from the noisy life in the narrow streets below, that the birds make their nests here as if in a world apart. The twelve-and fifteen-story buildings are as so many deserted mountain heads to them.

None of the birds build on my roof, however. But from early spring they haunt the region so constantly that their families, if they have families at all, must be somewhere in the vicinity. Should I see them like this about a field or thicket in the country it would certainly mean a nest.

The sparrows themselves do not seem more at home here than do these night-hawks. One evening, after a sultry July day, a wild wind-storm burst over the city. The sun was low, glaring through a narrow rift between the hill-crests and the clouds that spread green and heavy across the sky. I could see the lower fringes of the clouds working and writhing in the wind, but not a sound or a breath was in the air about me. Around me over my roof flew the night-hawks. They were crying peevishly and skimming close to the chimneys, not rising, as usual, to any height.

Suddenly the storm broke. The rain fell as if something had given way overhead. The wind tore across the stubble of roofs and spires; and through the wind, the rain, and the rolling clouds shot a weird, yellow-green sunlight.

I had never seen a storm like it. Nor had the night-hawks. They seemed to be terrified, and left

the sky immediately. One of them, alighting on the roof across the street, and creeping into the lee of a chimney, huddled there in sight of me until the wind was spent and a natural sunlight flooded the world of roofs and domes and spires.

Then they were all awing once more, hawking for supper. Along with the hawking they got in a great deal of play, doing their tumbling and cloud-coasting over the roofs just as they do above the fields.

Mounting by easy stages of half a dozen rapid strokes, catching flies by the way, and crying *peent-peent*, the acrobat climbs until I look a mere lump on the roof; then ceasing his whimpering *peent*, he turns on bowed wings and falls—shoots roofward with fearful speed. The chimneys! Quick!

Quick he is. Just short of the roofs the taut wings flash a reverse, there is a lightning swoop, a startling hollow wind-sound, and the rushing bird is beating skyward again, hawking deliberately as before, and uttering again his peevish nasal cry.

This single note, the only call he has besides a few squeaks, is far from a song; farther still is the empty-barrel-bung-hole sound made by the air in the rushing wings as the bird swoops in his fall. The night-hawk, alias "bull-bat," does not sing. What a name bull-bat would be for a singing bird! But a "voice" was never intended for the creature. Voice, beak, legs, head—everything but wings and maw was sacrificed for a mouth. What a mouth! The bird can almost swallow himself. Such a cleft in the head could never mean a song; it could never be utilized for anything but a fly-trap.

We have use for fly-traps. We need some birds just to sit around, look pretty, and warble. We will pay them for it in cherries or in whatever they ask. But there is also a great need for birds that kill insects. And first among these are the night-hawks. They seem to have been designed for this sole purpose. Their end is to kill insects. They are more like machines than any other birds I know. The enormous mouth feeds an enormous stomach, and this, like a fire-box, makes the power that works the enormous wings. From a single maw have been taken eighteen hundred winged ants, to say nothing of the smaller fry that could not be identified and counted.

But if he never caught an ant, never one of the fifth-story mosquitos that live and bite till Christmas, how greatly still my sky would need him! His flight is song enough. His cry and eery thunder are the very voice of the summer twilight to me. And as I watch him coasting in the evening dusk, that twilight often falls—over the roofs, as it used to fall for me over the fields and the quiet hollow woods.

There is always an English sparrow on my roof—which does not particularly commend the roof to bird-lovers, I know. I often wish the sparrow an entirely different bird, but I never wish him entirely away from the roof. When there is no other defense for him, I fall back upon his being a bird. Any kind of a bird in the city! Any but a parrot.

A pair of sparrows nest regularly in an eaves-trough, so close to the roof that I can overhear their family talk. Round, loquacious, familiar Cock Sparrow is a family man—so entirely a family man as to be nothing else at all. He is a success, too. It does me good to see him build. He tore the old nest all away in the early winter, so as to be ready. There came a warm springish day in February, and he began. A blizzard stopped him, but with the melting of the snow he went to work again, completing the nest by the middle of March.

He built for a big family, and he had it. Not "it" indeed, but *them*; for there were three batches of from six to ten youngsters each during the course of the season. He also did a father's share of work with the children. I think he hated hatching them. He would settle upon the roof above the nest, and chirp in a crabbed, imposed-upon tone until his wife came out. As she flew briskly away, he would look disconsolately around at the bright busy world, ruffle his feathers, scold to himself, and then crawl dutifully in upon the eggs.

I knew how he felt. It is not in a cock sparrow to enjoy hatching eggs. I respected him; for though he grumbled, as any normal husband might, still he was "drinking fair" with Mrs. Sparrow. He built and brooded and foraged for his family, if not as sweetly, yet as faithfully, as his wife. He deserved his blessed abundance of children.

Is he songless, sooty, uninteresting, vulgar? Not if you live on a roof. He may be all of this, a pest even, in the country. But upon my roof, for weeks at a stretch, his is the only bird voice I hear. Throughout the spring, and far into the summer, I watch the domestic affairs in the eaves-trough. During the winter, at nightfall, I see little bands and flurries of birds scudding over and dropping behind the high buildings to the east. They are sparrows on the way to their roost in the elms of an old mid-city burial-ground.

I not infrequently spy a hawk soaring calmly far away above the roof. Not only the small ones, like the sharp-shinned, but also the larger, wilder species come, and winding up close to the clouds, circle and circle there, trying apparently to see some meaning in the maze of moving, intersecting lines of dots below yonder in the cracks of that smoking, rumbling blur.

In the spring, from the trees of the Common, which are close, but, except for the crown of one noble English elm, are shut away from me, I hear an occasional robin and Baltimore oriole. Very rarely a woodpecker will go over. The great northern shrike is a frequent winter visitor, but by ill chance I have not been up when he has called at the roof.

One of these fiend birds haunts a small court only a block away, which is inclosed in a high board

fence, topped with nails. He likes the court because of these nails. They are sharp; they will stick clean through the body of a sparrow. Sometimes the fiend has a dozen sparrows run through with them, leaving the impaled bodies to flutter in the wind and finally fall away.

In sight from my roof are three tiny patches of the harbor; sometimes a fourth, when the big red-funneled liner is gone from her slip. Down to the water of the harbor in flocks from the north come other winter visitors, the herring and black-backed gulls. Often during the winter I find them in my sky.

One day they will cross silently over the city in a long straggling line. Again they will fly low, wheeling and screaming, their wild sea-voices shrill with the sound of storm. If it is thick and gray overhead, the snow-white bodies of the herring-gulls toss in the wind above the roofs like patches of foam. I hear the sea—the wind, the surf, the wild, fierce tumult of the shore—whenever the white gulls sail screaming into my winter sky.

I have never lived under a wider reach of sky than that above my roof. It offers a clear, straight, six-minute course to the swiftest wedge of wild geese. Spring and autumn the geese and ducks go over, and their passage is the most thrilling event in all my bird calendar.

It is because the ducks fly high and silent that I see them so rarely. They are always a surprise. You look, and there against the dull sky they move, strange dark forms that set your blood leaping. But I never see a string of them winging over that I do not think of a huge thousand-legger crawling the clouds.

My glimpses of the geese are largely chance, too. Several times, through the open window by my table, I have heard the faint, far-off honking, and have hurried to the roof in time to watch the travelers disappear. One spring day I was upon the roof when a large belated flock came over, headed north. It was the 20th of April, and the morning had broken very warm. I could see that the geese were hot and tired. They were barely clearing the church spires. On they came, their wedge wide and straggling, until almost over me, when something happened. The gander in the lead faltered and swerved, the wedge lines wavered, the flock rushed together in confusion, wheeled, dropped, then broke apart, and honking wildly, turned back toward the bay.

It was instant and complete demoralization. A stronger gander, I think, could have led the wedge unbroken over the city to some neighboring pond, where the weakest of the stragglers, however, must have fallen from sheer exhaustion.

Scaling lower and lower across the roofs, the flock had reached the center of the city and had driven suddenly into the roar and confusion of the streets. Weary from the heat, they were dismayed at the noise, their leader faltered, and, at a stroke, the great flying wedge went to pieces.

There is nothing in the life of birds quite so stirring to the imagination as their migration: the sight of gathering swallows, the sudden appearance of strange warblers, the call of passing plovers—all are suggestive of instincts, movements, and highways that are unseen, unaccountable, and full of mystery. Little wonder that the most thrilling poem ever written to a bird begins:

> *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?*

The question, the mystery in that "certain flight" I never felt so vividly as from my roof. Here I have often heard the reed-birds and the water-fowl passing. Sometimes I have heard them going over in the dark. One night I remember particularly, the sky and the air were so clear and the geese so high in the blue.

Over the fields and wide silent marshes such passing is strange enough. But here I stood above a sleeping city of men, and far above me, so far that I could only hear them, holding their northward way through the starlit sky, they passed—whither? and how guided? Was the shining dome of the State House a beacon? Did they mark the light at Marblehead?

THE HUNTING OF THE WOODCHUCK

... the chylde may Rue that ys vn-born, it wos the mor pitte.

There was murder in my heart. The woodchuck knew it. He never had had a thought before, but he had one now. It came hard and heavily, yet it arrived in time; and it was not a slow thought for a woodchuck, either—just a trifle better, indeed, than my own.

This was the first time I had caught the woodchuck away from his hole. He had left his old burrow in the huckleberry hillside, and dug a new hole under one of my young peach-trees. I had made no objection to his huckleberry hole. He used to come down the hillside and waddle into the orchard in broad day, free to do and go as he pleased; but not since he began to dig under the peach-tree.

I discovered this new hole when it was only a foot deep, and promptly filled it with stones. The next morning the stones were out and the cavity two feet deeper. I filled it up again, driving a large squarish piece of rock into the mouth, tight, certainly stopping all further work, as I thought.

There are woodchucks that you can discourage and there are those that you can't. Three days later the piece of rock and the stones were piled about the butt of the tree and covered with fresh earth, while the hole ran in out of sight, with the woodchuck, apparently, at the bottom of it.

I had tried shutting him out, now I would try shutting him in. It was cruel—it would have been to anything but a woodchuck; I was ashamed of myself for doing it, and went back the following day, really hoping to find the burrow open.

Never again would I worry over an imprisoned woodchuck; but then I should never again try to destroy a woodchuck by walling up his hole, any more than Br'er Fox would try to punish the rabbit by slinging him a second time into the brier-patch.

The burrow was wide open. I had stuffed and rammed the rocks into it, and buried deep in its mouth the body of another woodchuck that my neighbor's dog had killed. All was cleared away. The deceased relative was gone—where and how I know not; the stones were scattered on the farther side of the tree, and the passage neatly swept of all loose sand and pebbles.

Clearly the woodchuck had come to stay. I meant that he should move. I could get him into a steel trap, for his wits are not abiding; they come only on occasion. Woodchuck lives too much in the ground and too constantly beside his own door to grow very wise. He can always be trapped. So can any one's enemy. You can always murder. But no gentleman strikes from behind. I hate the steel trap. I have set my last one. They would be bitter peaches on that tree if they cost the woodchuck what I have seen more than one woodchuck suffer in the horrible jaws of such a trap.

But is it not perfectly legitimate and gentlemanly to shoot such a woodchuck to save one's peaches? Certainly. So I got the gun and waited—and waited—and waited. Did you ever wait with a gun until a woodchuck came out of his hole? I never did. A woodchuck has just sense enough to go into his hole—and stay in.

There were too many woodchucks about and my days were too precious for me to spend any considerable part of my summer watching with a gun for this one. Besides, I have been known to fire and miss a woodchuck, anyway.

So I gave up the gun. It was while thinking what I could do next that I came down the row of young peach-trees and spied the woodchuck out in the orchard, fifty yards away from his hole. He spied me at the same instant, and rose upon his haunches.

At last we were face to face. The time had come. It would be a fight to the finish; and a fair fight, too, for all that I had about me in the way of weapons was a pair of heavy, knee-high hunting-boots, that I had put on against the dew of the early morning. All my thought and energy, all my hope, centered immediately in those boots.

The woodchuck kept his thoughts in his head. Into his heels he put what speed he had; and little as that was, it counted, pieced out with the head-work.

Back in my college days I ran a two-mile race—the greatest race of the day, the judges said—and just at the tape lost two gold medals and the glory of a new intercollegiate record because I didn't use my head. Two of us out of twenty finished, and we finished together, the other fellow twisting and falling forward, breaking the string with his side, while I, pace for pace with him—didn't think.

For a moment the woodchuck and I stood motionless, he studying the situation. I was at the very mouth of his burrow. It was coming to sure death for him to attempt to get in. Yet it was sure death if he did not get in, for I should run him down.

Had you been that woodchuck, gentle reader, I wonder if you would have taken account of the thick-strewn stones behind you, the dense tangle of dewberry-vines off on your left, the heavy boots of your enemy and his unthinking rage?

I was vastly mistaken in that woodchuck. A blanker, flabbier face never looked into mine. Only the sudden appearance of death could have brought the trace of intelligence across it that I caught as the creature dropped on all fours and began to wabble straight away from me over the area of rough, loose stones.

With a jump and a yell I was after him, making five yards to his one. He tumbled along the best he could, and, to my great surprise, directly away from his hole. It was steep downhill. I should land upon him in half a dozen bounds more.

On we went, reckless of the uneven ground, momentum increasing with every jump, until, accurately calculating his speed and the changing distance between us, I rose with a mighty leap, sailed into the air and came down—just an inch too far ahead—on a round stone, turned my ankle, and went sprawling over the woodchuck in a heap.

The woodchuck spilled himself from under me, slid short about, and tumbled off for home by way of the dewberry-patch.

He had made a good start before I was righted and again in motion. Now it was steep, very steep, uphill—which did not seem to matter much to the woodchuck, but made a great difference to me. Then, too, I had counted on a simple, straightaway dash, and had not saved myself for this lap and climbing home-stretch.

Still I was gaining,—more slowly this time,—with chances yet good of overtaking him short of the hole, when, in the thick of the dewberry-vines, I tripped, lunged forward three or four stumbling strides, and saw the woodchuck turn sharp to the right in a bee-line for his burrow.

I wheeled, jumped, cut after him, caught him on the toe of my boot, and lifting him, plopped him smoothly, softly into his hole.

It was gently done. And so beautifully! The whole feat had something of the poetic accuracy of an astronomical calculation. And the perfectly lovely dive I helped him make home!

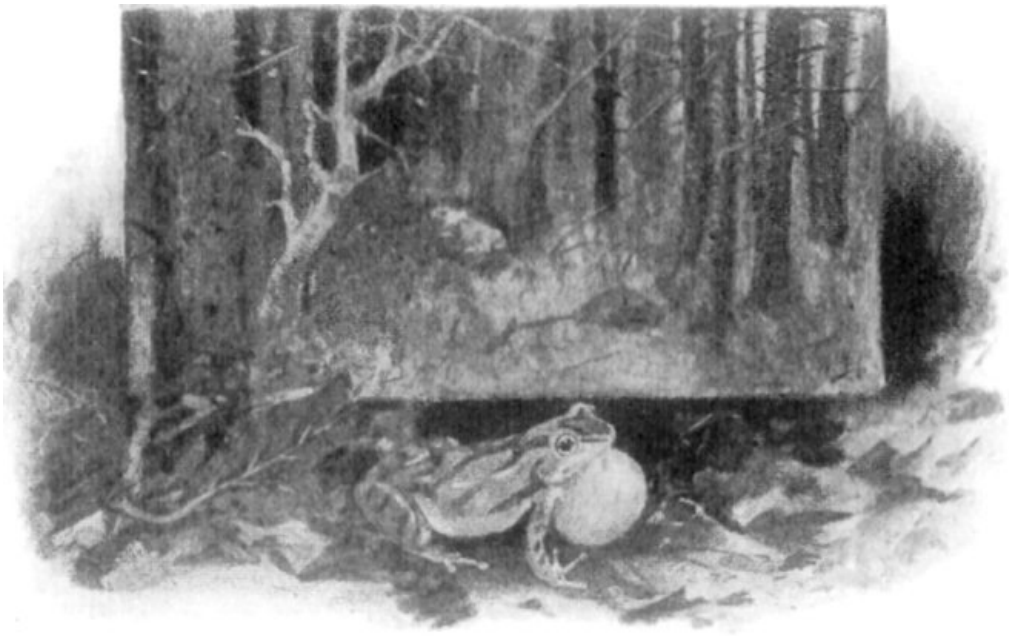
I sat down upon his mound of earth to get myself together and to enjoy it all. What a woodchuck! Perhaps he never could do the trick again; but, then, he won't need to. All the murder was gone from my heart. He had beaten the boots. He had beaten them so neatly, so absolutely, that simple decency compelled me then and there to turn over that Crawford peach-tree, root and stem, to the woodchuck, his heirs and assigns forever.

By way of celebration he has thrown out nearly a cart-load of sand from somewhere beneath the tree, deepening and enlarging his home. My Swedish neighbor, viewing the hole recently, exclaimed: "Dose vuudshuck, I t'ink him kill dem dree!" Perhaps so. As yet, however, the tree grows on without a sign of hurt.

But suppose the tree does die? Well, there is no certainty of its bearing good fruit. There was once a peddler of trees, a pious man and a Quaker, who made a mistake, selling the wrong tree. Besides, there are other trees in the orchard; and, if necessary, I can buy peaches.

Yes, but what if other woodchucks should seek other roof-trees in the peach row? They won't. There are no fashions, no such emulations, out-of-doors. Because one woodchuck moves from huckleberries to a peach-tree is no sign that all the woodchucks on the hillside are going to forsake the huckleberries with him. Only humans are silly enough for that.

If the woodchucks should come, all of them, it would be extremely interesting—an event worth many peaches.



THREE SERMONS

I

Thou shalt not preach.

The woods were as empty as some great empty house; they were hollow and silent and somber. I stood looking in among the leafless trees, heavy in spirit at the quiet and gloom, when close by my side spoke a tiny voice. I started, so suddenly, so unexpectedly it broke into the wide December silence, so far it echoed through the empty forest halls.

"What!" I exclaimed, turning in my tracks and addressing a small brown-leafed beech. "What! little Hyla, are you still out? You! with a snow-storm brewing and St. Nick due here to-morrow night?" And then from within the bush, or on it, or under it, or over it, came an answer, *Peep, peep, peep!* small and shrill, dropping into the silence of the woods and stirring it as three small pebbles might drop into the middle of a wide sleeping pond.

It was one of those gray, heavy days of the early winter—one of the vacant, spiritless days of portent that wait hushed and numb before a coming storm. Not a crow, nor a jay, nor a chickadee had heart enough to cheep. But little Hyla, the tree-frog, was nothing daunted. Since the last week in February, throughout the spring and the noisy summer on till this dreary time, he had been cheerfully, continuously piping. This was his last call.

Peep, peep, peep! he piped in February; *Peep, peep, peep!* in August; *Peep, peep, peep!* in December. But did he?

"He did just that," replies the scientist, "and that only."

"Not at all," I answer.

"What authority have you?" he asks. "You are not scientific. You are merely a dreaming, fooling hanger-on to the fields and woods; one of those who are forever hearing more than they hear, and seeing more than they see. We scientists hear with our ears, see with our eyes, feel with our fingers, and understand with our brains—"

"Just so, just so," I interrupt, "and you are a worthy but often a pretty stupid set. Little Hyla in February, August, and December cries *Peep, peep, peep!* to you. But his cry to me in February is *Spring, spring, spring!* And in December—it depends; for I cannot see with my eyes alone, nor hear with my ears, nor feel with my fingers only. You can, and so could Peter Bell. To-day I saw and heard and felt the world all gray and hushed and shrouded; and little Hyla, speaking out of the silence and death, called *Cheer, cheer, cheer!*"

II

It is not because the gate is strait and the way narrow that so few get into the kingdom of the Out-of-Doors. The gate is wide and the way is broad. The difficulty is that most persons go in too fast.

If I were asked what virtue, above all others, one must possess in order to be shown the mysteries of the kingdom of earth and sky, I should say, there are several; I should not know which to name first. There are, however, two virtues very essential and very hard to acquire, namely, the ability to keep quiet and to stand still.

Last summer a fox in two days took fifteen of my chickens. I saw the rascal in broad day come down the hill to the chicken-yard. I greatly enjoy the sight of a wild fox; but fifteen chickens a sight was too high a price. So I got the gun and chased about the woods half the summer for another glimpse of the sinner's red hide. I saw him one Sunday as we were driving into the wood road from church; but never a week-day sight for all my chasing.

Along in the early autumn I got home one evening shortly after sundown. I had left several cocks of hay spread out in the little meadow, and though it was already pretty damp, I took the fork, went down, and cocked it up.

Returning, I climbed by the narrow, winding path through the pines, out into the corner of my pasture. It was a bright moonlight night, and leaning back upon the short-handled fork, I stopped in the shadow of the pines to look out over the softly lighted field.

Off in the woods a mile away sounded the deep, mellow tones of two foxhounds. Day and night all summer long I had heard them, and all summer long I had hurried to this knoll and to that for a shot. But the fox always took the other knoll.

The echoing cries of the dogs through the silent woods were musical. Soon they sounded sharp and clear—the hounds were crossing an open stretch leading down to the meadow behind me. As I leaned, listening, I heard near by a low, uneasy murmuring from a covey of quails sleeping in the brush beside the path, and before I had time to think what it meant, a fox trotted up the path I had just climbed, and halted in the edge of the shadows directly at my feet.

I stood as stiff as a post. He sniffed at my dew-wet boots, backed away, and looked me over curiously. I could have touched him with my fork. Then he sat down with just his silver-tipped brush in the silver moonlight, to study me in earnest.

The loud baying of the hounds was coming nearer. How often I had heard it, and, in spite of my lost chickens, how often I had exclaimed, "Poor little tired fox!" But here sat "poor little tired fox" with his tongue in his head, calmly wondering what kind of stump he had run up against this time.

I could only dimly see his eyes, but his whole body said: "I can't make it out, for it doesn't move. But so long as it doesn't move I sha'n't be scared." Then he trotted to this side and to that for a better wind, somewhat afraid, but much more curious.

His time was up, however. The dogs were yelping across the meadow on his warm trail. Giving me a last unsatisfied look, he dropped down the path, directly toward the dogs, and sprang lightly off into the thicket.

The din of their own voices must have deafened the dogs, or they would have heard him. Round and round they circled, giving the fox ample time for the study of another "stump" before they discovered that he had doubled down the path, and still longer time before they crossed the wide scentless space of his side jump and once more fastened upon his trail.

III

Back in my knickerbocker days I once went off on a Sunday-school picnic, and soon, replete with "copenhagen," I sauntered into the woods alone in quest of less cloying sport. I had not gone far when I picked up a dainty little ribbon-snake, and having no bag or box along, I rolled him up in my handkerchief, and journeyed on with the wiggling reptile safely caged on top of my head under my tight-fitting hat.

After a time I began to feel a peculiar movement under the hat, not exactly the crawling of a normal snake, but more like that of a snake with legs. Those were the days when all my soul was bent on the discovery of a new species—of anything; when the whole of life meant a journey to the Academy of Natural Sciences with something to be named. For just an instant flashed the hope that I had found an uncursed snake, one of the original ones that went on legs. I reached for the hat, bent over, and pulled it off, and, lo! not a walking snake. Just an ordinary snake, but with it a live wood-frog!

This, at least, was interesting, the only real piece of magic I have ever done. Into my hat had

gone only a live snake, now I brought forth the snake and a live frog. This was a snake to conjure with; so I tied him up again and finally got him home.

The next Sunday the minister preached a temperance sermon, in which he said some dreadful things about snakes. The creatures do seem in some dark, horrible way to lurk in the dregs of strong drink: but the minister was not discriminating; he was too fierce and sweeping, saying, among other things, that there was a universal human hatred for snakes, and that one of the chief purposes of the human heel was to bruise their scaly heads.

I was not born of my Quaker mother to share this "universal human hatred for snakes"; but I did get from her a wild dislike for sweeping, general statements. After the sermon I ventured to tell the preacher that there was an exception to this "universal" rule; that all snakes were not adders and serpents, but some were just innocent snakes, and that I had a collection of tame ones which I wished he would come out to see.

He looked astonished, skeptical, then pained. It was during the days, I think, of my "probation," and into his anxious heart had come the thought, Was I "running well"? But he dismissed the doubt and promised to walk over in the morning.

His interest amazed me. But, then, preachers quite commonly are different on Monday. As we went from cage to cage, he said he had read how boa-constrictors eat, and wouldn't I show him how these snakes eat?

We had come to the cage of the little ribbon-snake from the picnic grove, and had arrived just in time to catch him crawling away out of a hole that he had worked in the rusty mosquito-netting wire of the cover. I caught him, put him back, and placed a brickbat over the hole.

I knew that this snake was hungry, because he had had nothing to eat for nearly a week, and the frog which appeared so mysteriously with him in my hat was the dinner that he had given up that day of his capture in his effort to escape.

The minister looked on without a tremor. I took off the brick that he might see the better. The snake was very long and small around and the toad, which I had given him, was very short and big around, so that when it was all over there was a bunch in the middle of the snake comparable to the lump a prime watermelon would make in the middle of a small boy if swallowed whole.

While we were still watching, the snake, having comfortably (for a snake) breakfasted, saw the hole uncovered and stuck out his head. We made no move. Slowly, cautiously, with his eye upon us, he glided out, up to the big bunch of breakfast in his middle. This stuck. Frantically he squirmed, whirled, and lashed about, but in vain. He could not pull through. He had eaten too much.

There was just one thing for him to do if he would be free: give up the breakfast of toad (which is much better fare according to snake standards than pottage according to ours), as he had given up the dinner of frog. Would he sell his birthright?

Perhaps a snake cannot calculate; perhaps he knows no conflict of emotions. Yet something very like these processes seemed to go on within the scaly little reptile. He ceased all violent struggle, laid his length upon the netting, and *seemed* to think, to weigh the chances, to count the cost.

Soon he softly drew back into the cage. A series of severe contortions followed; the obstructing bunch began to move forward, up, farther and farther, until at last, dazed, squeezed, and half smothered, but entirely alive and unhurt, the toad appeared and once more opened his eyes to the blessed light.

The snake quickly put his head through the hole, slipped out again, and glided away into his freedom. He had earned it. The toad deserved his liberty too, and I took him into the strawberry-patch.

The minister looked on at it all. Perhaps he didn't learn anything. But I did.

THE MARSH

And breathe it free, and breathe it free,
By rangy marsh, in lone sea-liberty.

I

It was a late June day whose breaking found me upon the edge of the great salt-marshes which lie behind East Point Light, as the Delaware Bay lies in front of it, and which run in a wide, half-land, half-bay border down the cape.

I followed along the black sandy road which goes to the Light until close to the old Zane's Place,—the last farm-house of the uplands,—when I turned off into the marsh toward the river. The mosquitos rose from the damp grass at every step, swarming up around me in a cloud, and streaming off behind like a comet's tail, which hummed instead of glowed. I was the only male among them. It was a cloud of females, the nymphs of the salt-marsh; and all through that day the singing, stinging, smothering swarm danced about me, rested upon me, covered me whenever I paused, so that my black leggings turned instantly to a mosquito brown, and all my dress seemed dyed alike.

Only I did not pause—not often, nor long. The sun came up blisteringly hot, yet on I walked, and wore my coat, my hands deep down in the pockets and my head in a handkerchief. At noon I was still walking, and kept on walking till I reached the bay shore, when a breeze came up, and drove the singing, stinging fairies back into the grass, and saved me.

I left the road at a point where a low bank started across the marsh like a long protecting arm reaching out around the hay-meadows, dragging them away from the grasping river, and

gathering them out of the vast undrained tract of coarse sedges, to hold them to the upland. Passing along the bank until beyond the weeds and scrub of the higher borders, I stood with the sky-bound, bay-bound green beneath my feet. Far across, with sails gleaming white against the sea of sedge, was a schooner, beating slowly up the river. Laying my course by her, I began to beat slowly out into the marsh through the heavy sea of low, matted hay-grass.

There is no fresh-water meadow, no inland plain, no prairie with this rainy, misty, early morning freshness so constant on the marsh; no other reach of green so green, so a-glitter with seas of briny dew, so regularly, unfailingly fed:

Look how the grace of the sea doth go
About and about through the intricate channels that flow
Here and there,
Everywhere,
Till his waters have flooded the uttermost creeks and the low-lying lanes,
And the marsh is meshed with a million veins!

I imagine a Western wheat-field, half-way to head, could look, in the dew of morning, somewhat like a salt-marsh. It certainly would have at times the purple-distance haze, that atmosphere of the sea which hangs across the marsh. The two might resemble each other as two pictures of the same theme, upon the same scale, one framed and hung, the other not. It is the framing, the setting of the marsh that gives it character, variety, tone, and its touch of mystery.

For the marsh reaches back to the higher lands of fences, fields of corn, and ragged forest blurs against the hazy horizon; it reaches down to the river of the reedy flats, coiled like a serpent through the green; it reaches away to the sky where the clouds anchor, where the moon rises, where the stars, like far-off lighthouses, gleam along the edge; and it reaches out to the bay, and on, beyond the white surf-line of meeting, on, beyond the line where the bay's blue and the sky's blue touch, on, far on.

Here meet land and river, sky and sea; here they mingle and make the marsh.

A prairie rolls and billows; the marsh lies still, lies as even as a sleeping sea. Yet what moods! What changes! What constant variety of detail everywhere! In The Marshes of Glynn there was

A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high, broad in the blade,
Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or a shade,

but not in these Maurice River marshes. Here, to-day, the sun was blazing, kindling millions of tiny suns in the salt-wet blades; and instead of waist-high grass, there lay around me acres and acres of the fine rich hay-grass, full-grown, but without a blade wider than a knitting-needle or taller than my knee. It covered the marsh like a deep, thick fur, like a wonderland carpet into whose elastic, velvety pile my feet sank and sank, never quite feeling the floor. Here and there were patches of higher sedges, green, but of differing shades, which seemed spread upon the grass carpet like long-napped rugs.

Ahead of me the even green broke suddenly over a shoal of sand into tall, tufted grasses, into rose, mallow, and stunted persimmon bushes, foaming, on nearer view, with spreading dogbane blossoms. Off toward the bay another of these shoals, mole-hill high in the distance, ran across the marsh for half a mile, bearing a single broken file of trees—sentinels they seemed, some of them fallen, others gaunt and wind-beaten, watching against the sea.

These were the lookouts and the resting-places for passing birds. During the day, whenever I turned in their direction, a crow, a hawk, or some smaller bird was seen upon their dead branches.

Naturally the variety of bird life upon the marsh is limited; but there is by no means the scarcity here which is so often noted in the forests and wild prairies of corresponding extent. Indeed, the marsh was birdy—rich in numbers if not in species. Underfoot, in spots, sang the marsh-wrens; in larger patches the sharp-tailed sparrows; and almost as wide-spread and constant as the green was the singing of the seaside sparrows. Overhead the fish-hawks crossed frequently to their castle nest high on the top of a tall white oak along the land edge of the marsh; in the neighborhood of the sentinel trees a pair of crows were busy trying (it seemed to me) to find an oyster, a crab—something big enough to choke, for just one minute, the gobbling, gulping clamor of their infant brood. But the dear devouring monsters could not be choked, though once or twice I thought by their strangling cries that father crow, in sheer desperation, had brought them oysters with the shells on. Their awful gaggings died away at dusk. Besides the crows and fish-hawks, a harrier would now and then come skimming close along the grass. Higher up, the turkey-buzzards circled all day long; and once, setting my blood leaping and the fish-hawks screaming, there sailed over, far away in the blue, a bald-headed eagle, his snowy neck and tail flashing in the sunlight as he careened among the clouds.

In its blended greens the marsh that morning offered one of the most satisfying drinks of color my eyes ever tasted. The areas of different grasses were often acres in extent, so that the tints, shading from the lightest pea-green of the thinner sedges to the blue-green of the rushes, to the deep emerald-green of the hay-grass, merged across their broad bands into perfect harmony.

As fresh and vital as the color was the breath of the marsh. There is no bank of violets stealing and giving half so sweet an odor to my nostrils, outraged by a winter of city smells, as the salty,

spray-laden breath of the marsh. It seems fairly to line the lungs with ozone. I know how grass-fed cattle feel at the smell of salt. I have the concentrated thirst of a whole herd when I catch that first whiff of the marshes after a winter, a year it may be, of unsalted inland air. The smell of it stampedes me. I gallop to meet it, and drink, drink, drink deep of it, my blood running redder with every draught.

II

I had waded out into the meadow perhaps two hundred yards, leaving a dark bruised trail in the grass, when I came upon a nest of the long-billed marsh-wren. It was a bulky house, and so overburdened its frail sedge supports that it lay almost upon the ground, with its little round doorway wide open to the sun and rain. They must have been a young couple who built it, and quite inexperienced. I wonder they had not abandoned it; for a crack of light into a wren's nest would certainly addle the eggs. They are such tiny, dusky, tucked-away things, and their cradle is so deep and dark and hidden. There were no fatalities, I am sure, following my efforts to prop the leaning structure, though the wrens were just as sure that it was all a fatality—utterly misjudging my motives. As a rule, I have never been able to help much in such extremities. Either I arrive too late, or else I blunder.

I thought, for a moment, that it was the nest of the long-billed's cousin, the short-billed marsh-wren, that I had found—which would have been a gem indeed, with pearly eggs instead of chocolate ones. Though I was out for the mere joy of being out, I had really come with a hope of discovering this mousy mite of a wren, and of watching her ways. It was like hoping to watch the ways of the "wunk." Several times I have been near these little wrens; but what chance has a pair of human eyes with a skulking four inches of brownish streaks and bars in the middle of a marsh! Such birds are the everlasting despair of the naturalist, the salt of his earth. The belief that a pair of them dwelt somewhere in this green expanse, that I might at any step come upon them, made me often forget the mosquitos.

When I reached the ridge of rose and mallow bushes, two wrens began muttering in the grass with different notes and tones from those of the long-billed. I advanced cautiously. Soon one flashed out and whipped back among the thick stems again, exposing himself just long enough to show me *stellaris*, the little short-billed wren I was hunting.

I tried to stand still for a second glimpse and a clue to the nest; but the mosquitos! Things have come to a bad pass with the bird-hunter, whose only gun is an opera-glass, when he cannot stand stock-still for an hour. His success depends upon his ability to take root. He needs light feet, a divining mind, and many other things, but most of all he needs patience. There are few mortals, however, with mosquito-proof patience—one that would stand the test here. Remembering a meadow in New England where stellaris nested, I concluded to wait till chance took me thither, and passed on.

This ridge of higher ground proved to be a mosquito roost—a thousand here to one in the deeper, denser grass. As I hurried across I noted with great satisfaction that the pink-white blossoms of the spreading dogbane were covered with mosquito carcasses. It lessened my joy somewhat to find, upon examination, that all the victims were males. Either they had drunk poison from the flowers, or else, and more likely, they had been unable to free their long-haired antennæ from the sticky honey into which they had dipped their innocent beaks. Several single flowers had trapped three, and from one blossom I picked out five. If we could bring the dogbane to brew a cup which would be fatal to the females, it might be a good plant to raise in our gardens along with the eucalyptus and the castor-oil plants.

Everywhere as I went along, from every stake, every stout weed and topping bunch of grass, trilled the seaside sparrows—a weak, husky, monotonous song, of five or six notes, a little like the chippy's, more tuneful, perhaps, but not so strong. They are dark, dusky birds, of a grayish olive-green hue, with a conspicuous yellow line before the eye, and yellow upon the shoulder.

There seems to be a sparrow of some kind for every variety of land between the poles. Mountain-tops, seaside marshes, inland prairies, swamps, woods, pastures—everywhere, from Indian River to the Yukon, a sparrow nests. Yet one can hardly associate sparrows with marshes, for they seem out of place in houseless, treeless, half-submerged stretches. These are the haunts of the shyer, more secretive birds. Here the ducks, rails, bitterns, coots,—birds that can wade and swim, eat frogs and crabs,—seem naturally at home. The sparrows are perchers, grain-eaters, free-fliers, and singers; and they, of all birds, are the friends and neighbors of man. This is no place for them. The effect of this marsh life upon the flight and song of these two species was very marked. Both showed unmistakable vocal powers which long ago would have been developed under the stimulus of human listeners; and during all my stay (so long have they crept and skulked about through the low marsh paths) I did not see one rise a hundred feet into the air, nor fly straight away for a hundred yards. They would get up just above the grass, and flutter and drop—a puttering, short-winded, apoplectic struggle, very unbecoming and unworthy.

By noon I had completed a circle and recrossed the lighthouse road in the direction of the bay. A

thin sheet of lukewarm water lay over all this section. The high spring tides had been reinforced by unusually heavy rains during April and May, giving a great area of pasture and hay land back, for that season, to the sea. Descending a copsy dune from the road, I surprised a brood of young killdeers feeding along the drift at the edge of the wet meadow. They ran away screaming, leaving behind a pair of spotted sandpipers, "till-tops," that had been wading with them in the shallow water. The sandpipers teetered on for a few steps, then rose at my approach, scaled nervously out over the drowned grass, and, circling, alighted near where they had taken wing, continuing instantly with their hunt, and calling *Tweet-tweet, tweet-tweet*, and teetering, always teetering, as they tiptoed along.

If perpetual motion is still a dream of the physicist, he might get an idea by carefully examining the way the body of till-top is balanced on its needle legs. If till-tops have not been tilting forever, and shall not go on tilting forever, it is because something is wrong with the mechanism of the world outside their little spotted bodies. Surely the easiest, least willed motion in all the universe is this sandpiper's teeter, teeter, teeter, as it hurries peering and prying along the shore.

Killdeers and sandpipers are noisy birds; and one would know, after half a day upon the marsh, even if he had never seen these birds before, that they could not have been bred here. For however

candid and simple and nothing-withholding and free

the marsh may seem to one coming suddenly from the wooded uplands, it will not let one enter far without the consciousness that silence and secrecy lie deeper here than in the depths of the forest glooms. The true birds of the marsh, those that feed and nest in the grass, have the spirit of the great marsh-mother. The sandpiper is not her bird. It belongs to the shore, living almost exclusively along sandy, pebbly margins, the margins of any, of almost every water, from Delaware Bay to the tiny bubbling spring in some Minnesota pasture. Neither is the killdeer her bird. The upland claims it, plover though it be. A barren, stony hillside, or even a last year's corn-field left fallow, is a better-loved breast to the killdeer than the soft brooding breast of the marsh. There are no grass-birds so noisy as these two. Both of them lay their eggs in pebble nests; and both depend largely for protection upon the harmony of their colors with the general tone of their surroundings.

I was still within sound of the bleating killdeers when a rather large, greenish-gray bird flapped heavily but noiselessly from a muddy spot in the grass to the top of a stake and faced me. Here was a child of the marsh. Its bolt-upright attitude spoke the watcher in the grass; then as it stretched its neck toward me, bringing its body parallel to the ground, how the shape of the skulker showed! This bird was not built to fly nor to perch, but to tread the low, narrow paths of the marsh jungle, silent, swift, and elusive as a shadow.

It was the clapper-rail, the "marsh-hen." One never finds such a combination of long legs, long toes, long neck and bill, with this long but heavy hen-like body, outside the meadows and marshes. The grass ought to have been alive with the birds: it was breeding-time. But I think the high tides must have delayed them or driven them elsewhere, for I did not find an egg, nor hear at nightfall their colony-cry, so common at dusk and dawn in the marshes just across on the coast about Townsend's Inlet. There at sunset in nesting-time one of the rails will begin to call—a loud, clapping roll; a neighbor takes it up, then another and another, the circle of cries widening and swelling until the whole marsh is a-clatter.

Heading my way with a slow, labored stroke came one of the fish-hawks. She was low down and some distance away, so that I got behind a post before she saw me. The marsh-hen spied her first, and dropped into the grass. On she came, her white breast and belly glistening, and in her talons a big glistening fish. It was a magnificent catch. "Bravo!" I should have shouted—rather I shouldn't; but here she was right over me, and the instinct of the boy, of the savage, had me before I knew, and leaping out, I whirled my cap and yelled to wake the marsh. The startled hawk jerked, keeled, lifted with a violent struggle, and let go her hold. Down fell the writhing, twisting fish at my feet. It was a splendid striped bass, weighing at least four pounds, and still live enough to flop.

I felt mean as I picked up the useless thing and looked far away to the great nest with its hungry young. I was no better than the bald eagle, the lazy robber-baron, who had stolen the dinner of these same young hawks the day before.

Their mother had been fishing up the river and had caught a tremendous eel. An eel can hold out to wriggle a very long time. He has no vitals. Even with talon-tipped claws he is slippery and more than a clawful; so the old hawk took a short cut home across the railroad-track and the corner of the woods where stands the eagle tree.

She could barely clear the tree-tops, and, with the squirming of the eel about her legs, had apparently forgotten that the eagle lived along this road, or else in her struggle to get the prize home she was risking the old dragon's being away. He was not away. I have no doubt that he had been watching her all the time from some high perch, and just as she reached the open of the railroad-track, where the booty would not fall among the trees, he appeared. His first call, mocking, threatening, commanding, shot the poor hawk through with terror. She screamed; she tried to rise and escape; but without a second's parley the great king drove down upon her. She dropped the fish, dived, and dodged the blow, and the robber, with a rushing swoop that was glorious in its sweep, in its speed and ease, caught the eel within a wing's reach of me and the

track.

I did not know what to do with my spoil. Somewhat relieved, upon looking around, to find that even the marsh-hen had not been an eye-witness to my knightly deed, I started with the fish and my conscience toward the distant nest, determined to climb into it and leave the catch with the helpless, dinnerless things for whom it was intended.

I am still carrying that fish. How seldom we are able to restore the bare exaction, to say nothing of the fourfold! My tree was harder to climb than Zacchæus's. Mine was an ancient white oak, with the nest set directly upon its dead top. I had stood within this very nest twelve years before; but even with the help of my conscience I could not get into it now. Not that I had grown older or larger. Twelve years do not count unless they carry one past forty. It was the nest that had grown. Gazing up at it, I readily believed the old farmer in the Zane's house who said it would take a pair of mules to haul it. He thought it larger than one that blew down in the marsh the previous winter, which made three cart-loads.

One thinks of Stirling and of the castles frowning down upon the Rhine as he comes out of the wide, flat marsh beneath this great nest, crowning this loftiest eminence in all the region. But no château of the Alps, no beetling crag-lodged castle of the Rhine, can match the fish-hawk's nest for sheer boldness and daring. Only the eagles' nests upon the fierce dizzy pinnacles in the Yosemite surpass the home of the fish-hawk in unawed boldness. The aery of the Yosemite eagle is the most sublimely defiant of things built by bird, or beast, or man.

A fish-hawk will make its nest upon the ground, or a hummock, a stump, a buoy, a chimney—upon anything near the water that offers an adequate platform; but its choice is the dead top of some lofty tree where the pathway for its wide wings is open and the vision range is free for miles around.

How dare the bird rear such a pile upon so slight and towering a support! How dare she defy the winds, which, loosened far out on the bay, come driving across the cowering, unresisting marsh! She is too bold sometimes. I have known more than one nest to fall in a wild May gale. Many a nest, built higher and wider year after year, while all the time its dead support has been rotting and weakening, gets heavy with the wet of winter, and some night, under the weight of an ice-storm, comes crashing to the earth.

Yet twelve years had gone since I scaled the walls and stood within this nest; and with patience and hardihood enough I could have done it again this time, no doubt. I remember one nest along Maurice River, perched so high above the gums of the swamp as to be visible from my home across a mile of trees, that has stood a landmark for the oystermen this score of years.

The sensations of my climb into this fish-hawk's nest of the marsh are vivid even now. Going up was comparatively easy. When I reached the forks holding the nest, I found I was under a bulk of sticks and corn-stalks which was about the size of an ordinary haycock or an unusually large wash-tub. By pulling out, pushing aside, and breaking off the sticks, I worked a precarious way through the four feet or more of debris and scrambled over the edge. There were two eggs. Taking them in my hands, so as not to crush them, I rose carefully to my feet.

Upright in a hawk's nest! Sixty feet in the air, on the top of a gaunt old white oak, high above the highest leaf, with the screaming hawks about my head, with marsh and river and bay lying far around! It was a moment of exultation; and the thrill of it has been transmitted through the years. My body has been drawn to higher places since; but my soul has never quite touched that altitude again, for I was a boy then.

Nor has it ever shot swifter, deeper into the abyss of mortal terror than followed with my turning to descend. I looked down into empty air. Feet foremost I backed over the rim, clutching the loose sticks and feeling for a foothold. They snapped with the least pressure; slipped and fell if I pushed them, or stuck out into my clothing. Suddenly the sticks in my hands pulled out, my feet broke through under me, and for an instant I hung at the side of the nest in the air, impaled on a stub that caught my blouse as I slipped.

There is a special Providence busy with the boy.

This huge nest of the fish-hawks was more than a nest; it was a castle in very truth, in the sheltering crevices of whose uneven walls a small community of purple grackles lived. Wedged in among the protruding sticks was nest above nest, plastering the great pile over, making it almost grassy with their loose flying ends. I remember that I counted more than twenty of these crow-blacks' nests the time I climbed the tree, and that I destroyed several in breaking my way up the face of the structure.

Do the blackbirds nest here for the protection afforded by the presence of the hawks? Do they come for the crumbs which fall from these great people's table? Or is it the excellent opportunity for social life offered by this convenient apartment-house that attracts?

The purple grackles are a garrulous, gossipy set, as every one knows. They are able-bodied, not particularly fond of fish, and inclined to seek the neighborhood of man, rather than to come out here away from him. They make very good American rooks. So I am led to think it is their love of "neighboring" that brings them about the hawk's nest. If this surmise is correct, then the presence of two families of English sparrows among them might account for there being only eight nests now, where a decade ago there were twenty.

I was amused—no longer amazed—at finding the sparrows here. The seed of these birds shall possess the earth. Is there even now a spot into which the bumptious, mannerless, ubiquitous little pleb has not pushed himself? If you look for him in the rain-pipes of the Fifth Avenue mansions, he is there; if you search for him in the middle of the wide, silent salt-marsh, he is there; if you take—but it is vain to take the wings of the morning, or of anything else, in the hope of flying to a spot where the stumpy little wings of the English sparrow have not already carried him.

There is something really admirable in the unqualified sense of ownership, the absolute want of diffidence, the abiding self-possession and coolness of these birds. One cannot measure it in the city streets, where everybody jostles and stares. It can be appreciated only in the marsh: here in the silence, the secrecy, the withdrawing, where even the formidable-looking fiddler-crabs shy and sidle into their holes as you pass; here, where the sparrows may perch upon the rim of a great hawk's nest, twist their necks, ogle you out of countenance, and demand what business brought you to the marsh.

I hunted round for a stone when one of them buttonholed me. He wasn't insolent, but he was impertinent. The two hawks and the blackbirds flew off as I came up; but the sparrows stayed. They were the only ones in possession as I moved away; and they will be the only ones in possession when I return. If that is next summer, then I shall find a colony of twenty sparrow families around the hawk's nest. The purple grackles will be gone. And the fish-hawks? Only the question of another year or so when they, too, shall be dispossessed and gone. But where will they go to escape the sparrows?

III

From a mile away I turned to look back at the "cripple" where towered the tall white oak of the hawks. Both birds were wheeling about the castle nest, their noble flight full of the freedom of the marsh, their piercing cries voicing its wildness. And how free, how wild, how untouched by human hands the wide plain seemed! Sea-like it lay about me, circled southward from east to west with the rim of the sky.

I moved on toward the bay. The sun had dropped to the edge of the marsh, its level-lined shafts splintering into golden fire against the curtained windows of the lighthouse. It would soon be sunset. For some time there had been a quiet gurgling and lisping down in the grass, but it had meant nothing, until, of a sudden, I heard the rush of a wave along the beach: the tide was coming in. And with it came a breeze, a moving, briny, bay-cooled breeze that stirred the grass with a whisper of night.

Once more I had worked round to the road. It ran on ahead of me, up a bushy dune, and forked, one branch leading off to the lighthouse, the other straight out to the beach, out against the white of the breaking waves.

The evening purple was deepening on the bay when I mounted the dune. Bands of pink and crimson clouded the west, a thin cold wash of blue veiled the east; and overhead, bayward, landward, everywhere, the misting and the shadowing of the twilight.

Between me and the white wave-bars at the end of the road gleamed a patch of silvery water—the returning tide. As I watched, a silvery streamlet broke away and came running down the wheel track. Another streamlet, lagging a little, ran shining down the other track, stopped, rose, and creeping slowly to the middle of the road, spread into a second gleaming patch. They grew, met—and the road for a hundred feet was covered with the bay.

As the crimson paled into smoky pearl, the blue changed green and gold, and big at the edge of the marsh showed the rim of the moon.

Weird hour! Sunset, moonrise, flood-tide, and twilight together weaving the spell of the night over the wide waking marsh. Mysterious, sinister almost, seemed the swift, stealthy creeping of the tide. It was surrounding and crawling in upon me. Already it stood ankle-deep in the road, and was reaching toward my knees, a warm thing, quick and moving. It slipped among the grasses and into the holes of the crabs with a smothered bubbling; it disturbed the seaside sparrows sleeping down in the sedge and kept them springing up to find new beds. How high would it rise? Behind me on the road it had crawled to the foot of the dune. Would it let me through to the mainland if I waited for the flood?

It would be high tide at nine o'clock. Finding a mound of sand on the shore that the water could hardly cover, I sat down to watch the tide-miracle; for here, surely, I should see the wonder worked, so wide was the open, so full, so frank the moon.

In the yellow light I could make out the line of sentinel trees across the marsh, and off on the bay a ship, looming dim in the distance, coming on with wind and tide. There were no sounds except the long regular wash of the waves, the stir of the breeze in the chafing sedges, and the creepy stepping of the water weaving everywhere through the hidden paths of the grass. Presently a

night-hawk began to flit about me, then another and another, skimming just above the marsh as silent as the shadows. What was that? Something moved across the moon. In a moment, bat-like and huge against the great yellow disk, appeared a marsh-owl. He was coming to look at me. What was I that dared remain abroad in the marsh after the rising of the moon? that dared invade this eery realm, this night-spread, tide-crept, half-sealand where he was king? How like a goblin he seemed! I thought of Grendel, and listened for the splash of the fen-monster's steps along the edge of the bay. But only the owl came. Down, down, down he bobbed, till I could almost feel the fanning of his wings. How silent! His long legs hung limp, his body dangled between those soft wide wings within reach of my face. Yet I heard no sound. Mysterious creature! I was glad when he ceased his ghostly dance about me and made off.

It was nine o'clock. The waves had ceased to wash against the sand, for the beach was gone; the breeze had died away; the stir of the water in the grass was still. Only a ripple broke now and then against my little island. The bay and the marsh were one.

How still the plains of the waters be!
The tide is in his ecstasy.
The tide is at his highest height:
And it is night.

CALICO AND THE KITTENS

One spring day I found myself the sole help of two blind, naked infants—as near a real predicament as a man could well get. What did it matter that they had long tails and were squirrels? They were infants just the same; and any kind of an infant on the hands of any mere man is a real tragedy.

As I looked at the two callow things in the grass, a dismay and weak helplessness quite overcame me. The way they squirmed and shivered and squeaked worked upon me down even to my knees. I felt sick and foolish. Both of their parents were dead. Their loose leaf-nest overhead had been riddled with shot. I had climbed up and found them; I had brought them down; I must—feed them! The other way of escape were heathen.

But how could I feed them? Nipples, quills, spoons—none of them would fit these mites of mouths. What a miserable mother I was! How poorly equipped for foundlings! They were dying for lack of food; and as they pawed about and whimpered in my hands I devoutly wished the shot had put them all out of misery together. I was tempted to turn heathen and despatch them.

Unhappy but resolute, I started homeward, determined to rear those squirrels, if it could be done. On my way I remembered—and it came to me with a shock—that one of my neighbor's cats had a new batch of kittens. They were only a few days old. Might not Calico, their mother, be induced to adopt the squirrels!

Nothing could be more absurd. The kittens were three times larger than the squirrels. Even had they been the same size, did I think the old three-colored cat could be fooled? that she might not know a kitten of hers from some other mother's—squirrel? I was desperate indeed. Calico was a hunter. She had eaten more gray squirrels, perhaps, than I had ever seen. She would think I had been foraging for her—the mother of seven green kittens!—and would take my charges as titbits. Still I was determined to try.

My neighbor's kittens were enough and to spare. One of Calico's last year's lot still waited a good

home; and here were seven more to be cared for. Might not two of these be spirited away, far away; the two squirrels substituted, and the old cat be none the wiser?

I went home by way of my neighbor's, and found Calico in the basement curled up asleep with her babies. She roused and purred questioningly as we bent over the basket, and watched with concern, but with no anxiety, as two of her seven were lifted out and put inside a hat upon a table. She was perfectly used to having her kittens handled. True, strange things had happened to them. But that was long ago; and there had been so very many kittens that no one mother could remember about them all. She trusted us—with an ear pricked and eyes watchful. But they were safe, and in a prideful, self-conscious, young-mother way she began to wash the five.

Some one stood between her and the hat when the kittens were lifted out and the squirrels were put in their place. Calico did not see. For a time she thought no more about them; she was busy washing and showing the others. By and by it began to look as though she had forgotten that there were more than five. She could not count. But most mothers can *number* their children, even if they cannot count, and soon Calico began to fidget, looking up at the hat which the hungry, motherless squirrels kept rocking. Then she leaped out upon the floor, purring, and bounded upon the table, going straight to the young squirrels.

There certainly was an expression of surprise and mystification on her face as she saw the change that had come over those kittens. They had shrunk and faded from two or three bright colors to a single pale pink. She looked again and sniffed them. Their odor had changed, too. She turned to the watchers about the table, but they said nothing. She hardly knew what to think. She was half inclined to leave them and go back to the basket, when one of the squirrels whimpered—a genuine, universal baby whimper. That settled it. She was a mother, and whatever else these things in the hat might be, they were babies. That was enough, especially as she needed just this much baby here in the hat to make good what was lacking in the basket.

With a soft, caressing purr she stepped gently into the hat, took one of the squirrels by the neck, brought it to the edge of the table, and laid it down for a firmer hold; then sprang lightly to the floor. Over to the basket she walked and dropped it tenderly among her other babies. Then, having brought the remaining one and deposited that with the same mother-care, she got into the basket herself and curled down contentedly—her heart all whole.

And this is how strange a thing mother-love is! The performance was scarcely believable. Could she be so love-blind as not to see what they were and not eat them? But when she began to lick the little interlopers and cuddle them down to their dinner as if they were her own genuine kittens, there could be no more doubt or fear.

The squirrels do not know to this day that Calico is not their real mother. From the first they took her mother's milk and mother's love as rightfully and thanklessly as the kittens, growing, not like the kittens at all, but into the most normal of squirrels, round and fat and splendid-tailed.

Calico clearly recognized some difference between the two kinds of kittens, but *what* difference always puzzled her. She would clean up a kitten and comb it slick, then turn to one of the squirrels and wash it, but rarely, if ever, completing the work because of some disconcerting un-catlike antic. As the squirrels grew older they also grew friskier, and soon took the washing as the signal for a frolic. As well try to wash a bubble. They were bundles of live springs, twisting out of her paws, dancing over her back, leaping, kicking, tumbling as she had never seen a kitten do in all her richly kittened experience.

I don't know why, but Calico was certainly fonder of these two freaks than of her own normal children. Long after the latter were weaned she nursed and mothered the squirrels. I have frequently seen them let into the kitchen when the old cat was there, and the moment they got through the door they would rush toward her, dropping chestnuts or cookies by the way. She in turn would hurry to meet them with a little purr of greeting full of joy and affection. They were shamefully big for such doings. The kittens had quit it long ago. Calico herself, after a while, came to feel the impropriety of mothering these strapping young ones, and in a weak, indulgent way tried to stop it. But the squirrels were persistent and would not go about their business at all with an ordinary cuff. She would put them off, run away from them, slap them, and make believe to bite; but not until she did bite, and sharply too, would they be off. All this seemed very strange and unnatural; yet a stranger thing happened one day, when Calico brought in to her family a full-grown gray squirrel which she had caught in the woods. She laid it down on the floor and called the kittens and squirrels to gather around. They came, and as the squirrels sniffed at the dead one on the floor there was hardly a mark of difference in their appearance. It might have been one of Calico's own nursing that lay there dead, so far as any one save Calico could see. And with her the difference, I think, was more of smell than of sight. But she knew her own; and though she often found her two out among the trees of the yard, she never was mistaken, nor for an instant made as if to hurt them.

Yet they could not have been more entirely squirrel had their own squirrel mother nurtured them. Calico's milk and love went all to cat in her own kittens, and all to squirrel in these that she adopted. No single hair of theirs turned from its squirrel-gray to any one of Calico's three colors; no single squirrel trait became the least bit catlike.

Indeed, as soon as the squirrels could run about they forsook the clumsy-footed kittens under the stove and scampered up back of the hot-water tank, where they built a nest. Whenever Calico entered the kitchen purring, out would pop their heads, and down they would come,

understanding the mother language as well as the kittens, and usually beating the kittens to the mother's side.

So far from teaching them to climb and build nests behind water-tanks, their foster-mother never got over her astonishment at it. All they needed from her, all they needed and would have received from their own squirrel mother, was nourishment and protection until their teeth and legs grew strong. Wits were born with them; experience was sure to come to them; and with wits and experience there is nothing known among squirrels of their kind that these two would not learn for themselves.

And there was not much known to squirrels that these two did not know, apparently without even learning. As they grew in size they increased exceedingly in naughtiness, and were banished shortly from the kitchen to an ell or back woodshed. They celebrated this distinction by dropping some hickory-nuts into a rubber boot hanging on the wall, and then gnawing a hole through the toe of the boot in order to extract the hidden nuts. Was it mischief that led them to gnaw through rather than go down the top? Or did something get stuffed into the top of the boot after the nuts were dropped in? And did the squirrels *remember* that the nuts were in there, or did they *smell* them through the rubber?

One woodshed is big enough only for two squirrels. The family moved everything out but the wood, and the squirrels took possession for the winter. Their first nest had been built behind the hot-water tank. They knew *how* to build without any teaching. But knowing how is not all there is to know about building; knowing *where* is very important, and this they had to learn.

Immediately on coming to the woodshed the squirrels began their winter nest, a big, bulky, newspaper affair, which they placed up in the northwest corner of the shed directly under the shingles. Here they slept till late in the fall. This was the shaded side and the most exposed corner of the whole house; but all went well until one night when the weather suddenly turned very cold. A strong wind blew from the northwest hard upon the squirrels' nest.

The next day there was great activity in the woodshed—a scampering of lively feet, that began early in the morning and continued far toward noon. The squirrels were moving. They gathered up their newspaper nest and carried it—diagonally—across the shed from the shaded northwest to the sunny southeast corner, where they rebuilt and slept snug throughout the winter.

Calico did not teach them this; neither would their own squirrel mother have taught them. They knew how, to begin with. They knew *where* after one night of experience, which in this case had to be a night of shivers.

THE SPARROW ROOST

An early December twilight was settling over Boston, a thick foggy murk that soaked down full of smoke and smell and chill. The streets were oozy with a wet snow which had fallen through the

afternoon and had been trodden into mud; and draughty with an east wind, that would have passed unnoticed across the open fields, but which drew up these narrow flues and sent a shiver down one's back in spite of coats. It was half-past five. The stores were closing, their clerks everywhere eddying into the noisy streams of wheels and hoofs still pouring up and down. The traffic tide had turned, but had not yet ebbed away.

And this was evening! the coming night! I moved along with the crowd, homesick for the wideness and quiet of the country, for the soughing of the pines, the distant bang of a barn door, the night cry of guineas from some neighboring farm, when, in the hurry and din, I caught the cry of bird voices, and looking up, found that I had stumbled upon a bird roost—at the very heart of the city! I was in front of King's Chapel Burial Ground, whose half-dozen leafless trees were alive with noisy sparrows.

The crowd swept on. I halted behind a waste-barrel by the iron fence and forgot the soughing pines and clacking guineas.

Bird roosts of this size are no common find. I remember a huge fireplace chimney that stood near my home, into which a cloud of swallows used to swarm for a few nights preceding the fall migration; I lived some years close to the pines at the head of Cubby Hollow, where great flocks of crows slept nightly throughout the winter; but these, besides now and again a temporary resting-place, a mere caravansary along the route of the migrants, were all I had happened upon. Here was another, bordering a city street, overhanging the street, with a blazing electric light to get into bed by!

Protected by the barrel from the jostle on the sidewalk, I waited by the ancient graveyard until the electric lights grew bright, until every fussing sparrow was quiet, until I could see only little gray balls and blurs in the trees through the misty drizzle that came down with the night. Then I turned toward my own snug roost, five flights up, next the roof, and just a block away, as the sparrows fly, from this roost of theirs. I was glad to have them so near me.

The windows of my roost look out over roofs of slate, painted tin, and tarry pebbles, into a chimney-fenced plot of sky. Occasionally, during the winter, a herring-gull from the harbor swims into this bit of smoky blue; frequently a pigeon, sometimes a flock, sails past; and in the summer dusk, after the swallows quit it, a city-haunting night-hawk climbs out of the forest of chimney-pots, up, up above the smoke for his booming roofward swoop. But winter and summer, save along through June, the sparrows, as evening falls, cut across the sky field on their way to the roost in the old burial-ground. There go two, there twoscore in a whirling, scudding flurry, like a swift-blown bunch of autumn leaves. For more than an hour they keep passing—till the dusk turns to darkness, till all are tucked away in bed.

One would scarcely recognize the birds as they sweep past in these flurries, their flight is so unlike their usual clumsy scuttle as they get out of one's way along the street. They are lumpish and short-winged on the street; they labor and lumber off with a sidewise twist to their bodies that reminds one of a rheumatic old dog upon the trot. What suggestion of grace or swiftness about them upon the ground? But watch them in their evening flight. It is a revelation. They rise above the houses and shoot across my sky like a charge of canister. I can almost hear them whizz. Down by the cemetery I have seen them dash into view high up in the slit of sky, dive for the trees, dart zigzag like a madly plunging kite, and hurl themselves, as soft as breaths, among the branches.

This is going to bed with a vengeance. I never saw any other birds get to roost with such velocity. It is characteristic, however; the sparrow never does anything by halves. The hurry is not caused by any mite of anxiety or fear, rather from pure excess of spirit; for after rearing three broods during the summer, he has such a superabundance of vim that a winter of foraging and fighting is welcome exercise. The strenuous life is his kind of life. When the day's hunt is over and he turns back to his bed, why not race it out with his neighbors? And so they come—chasing, dodging, tagging neck and neck, all spurting to finish first at the roost.

We may not love him; but he has constitution and snap. And these things do count.

One April morning, the 6th, I went down to the roost at three o'clock. The sparrows were sleeping soundly. It was yet night. Had the dawn been reaching up above the dark walls that shut the east away from the high tree-tops, the garish street light would have kept it dim. The trees were silent and stirless, as quiet as the graves beneath them—more quiet; in fact; for there issued from a grated hole among the tombs the sound of an anvil, deep down and muffled, but unmistakably ringing, as if Governor Winthrop were forging chains in his vault. Then came a rush, a deadened roar, and an emanation of dank gaseous breath, such as the dead alone breathe.

It was only the passing of a tool-car in the subway underneath the cemetery, and the hammering of a workman at a forge in a niche of the tunnel. But, rising out of the tombs, it was gruesome and unearthly in the night-quiet.

The sparrows did not mind the sound. Maybe it ascended as a pleasant murmur to them and shaped their dreams, as dream-stuff drifts to their sweet-voiced cousins in the meadows with the lap and lave of the streams. A carriage rolled by. The clank of hoofs disturbed none of them. Some one slammed the door of an apothecary-shop across the street, and hurried off. Not a sparrow stirred.

I was trying to see whether the birds slept with their heads beneath their wings. Apparently they did, for I could not make out a head, though some of the sleepers hung over the street within ten feet of the lamp-post. But they were all above the light, with only their breasts out of the shadows, and to be certain I must make a bird move. Finding that the noises were not likely to arouse them, I threw a stick against one of the laden limbs. There were heads then, plenty of them, and every one, evidently, had been turned back and buried in the warm wing-coverts.

My stick hit very near the toes of one of the sparrows, and he flew. There was a twitter, then a stir all over the tree; but nothing further happening, they tucked in their heads again and went back to bed.

I waited. At four o'clock they still slept. The moon had swung out from behind the high buildings and now hung just above the slender spire of Park Street Church, looking down into the deep, narrow street gulch. A cat picked her way among the graves, sprang noiselessly to the top of a flat tomb beneath the sparrows, and watched with me. The creature brought the wilderness with her. After all, this was not so far removed from the woods. In the empty street, beneath the silent, shuttered walls, with something still of the mystery of the night winds in the bare trees, the scene, for an instant, was touched with the spell of the dark and the untamed.

After a swift warming walk of fifteen minutes I returned to the roost. There were signs of waking now: a flutter here, a twitter there, then quiet again, with no general movement until half-past four, when the city lights were shut off. Then, instantly, from a dozen branches sounded loud, clear chirps, and every sparrow opened his eyes. The incandescent bulbs about the border of the roost were moon and stars to them, lights in the firmament of their heaven to divide the night from the day. When they blazed forth, it was evening—bedtime; when they went out, it was morning—the time to wake up.

The softness of dusk, how unknown to these city dwellers! and the fresh sweet beauty of the dawn!

Morning must have begun to break along near four o'clock, for the cold gray across the sky was already passing into pearl. The country birds had been up half an hour, I am sure. However, the old cemetery was wide enough awake now. There was chirping everywhere. It grew louder and more general every moment, till shortly the six thousand voices, and more, were raised in the cheerful din—the matin, if you please, for as yet only a few of the birds were fighting.

But the fight quickly spread. It is the English sparrow's way of waking up; his way of whetting his appetite for breakfast; his way of digesting his dinner; his way of settling his supper—his normal waking way.

To the clatter of voices was added the flutter of wings; for the birds had begun to shift perches, and to exchange slaps as well as to call names—the movement setting toward the tree-tops. None of the sparrows had left the roost. The storm of chatter increased and the buzz of wings quickened into a steady whir, the noise holding its own with that of the ice-wagons pounding past. The birds were filling the top-most branches, a gathering of the clans, evidently, for the day's start. The clock in Scollay Square station pointed to five minutes to five, and just before the hour struck, two birds launched out and spun away.

The exodus had commenced. The rest of Boston was not stirring yet. It was still early; hardly a flush of warmth had washed the pearl. But the sparrows had many matters to attend to before all the milkmen and bakers got abroad: they must take their morning dust-bath, for one thing, in the worn places between the cobble-stones, before the street-sprinkler began its sloppy rounds.

There was a constant whirl out of the tree-tops now. Occasionally a bird flew off alone, but most of them left in small flocks, just as I should see them return in the evening. Doubtless the members of these flocks were the birds belonging to certain neighborhoods, those that nested and fed about certain squares, large door-yards, and leafy courts. They may indeed have been families that were hatched last summer.

The birds that left singly went away, as a rule, over the roofs toward the denser business sections of the city, while the bands, as I had noticed them come in at night, took the opposite course, toward Cambridge and Charlestown. Not more than one in a hundred flew south across the city.

Of course there are sparrows all over Boston. There is no street too narrow, too noisy, too dank with the smell of leather for them. They seem as numerous where the rush of drays is thickest as in the open breathing-places where the fountains play. They are in every quarter, yet those to the east and south of the old burial-ground do not belong to the roost. Perhaps they have graveyards of their own in their sections, though I have been unable to find them. So far as I know, this is the only roost in or about Boston. And this is the stranger since so few of the total number of the Boston sparrows sleep here. A careful estimate showed me that there could not have been more than six or seven thousand in the roost. One would almost say there were as many millions in Boston. And where do these millions sleep? For the most part, each one alone behind his sign-board or shutter near his local feeding-grounds.

Now, why should the sparrows of the roost prefer King's Chapel Burial Ground to the Old Granary, a stone's throw up the street? I passed the Old Granary yard on my way to the roost and found the trees empty. I searched the limbs with my glass; there was not a sparrow to be seen. Still, the Granary is the less exposed of the two. It may not formerly have been so; but at present high sheltering walls bend about the trees like a well. Years ago, perhaps, when the sparrows

began to roost in the trees at King's Chapel, the Old Granary elms were more open to the winds, and now force of habit and example keep the birds returning to the first lodge.

Back they come, no matter what the weather. There are a thousand cozy corners into which a sparrow might creep on a stormy night, where even the winds that know their way through Boston streets could not search him out. But the instinct to do as he always has done is as strong in the sparrow, in spite of his love for pioneering, as it is in the rest of us. He was brought here to roost as soon as he could fly, when the leaves were on and the nights delicious. If the leaves go and the nights change, what of that? Here he began, here he will continue to sleep. Let it rain, blow, snow; let the sleet, like a slimy serpent, creep up the trunk and wrap around the twigs: still he will hold on. Many a night I have seen them sleeping through a driving winter rain, their breasts to the storm, their tails hanging straight down, shedding every drop. If a gale is blowing, and it is cold, they get to the leeward of the tree, as close to the trunk as possible, and anchor fast, every bill pointing into the wind, every feather reefed, every tail lying out on the flat of the storm.

As I watched the bands starting from the tree-tops of the roost I wondered if they really crossed the river into Cambridge and Charlestown. A few mornings later I was again up early, hastening down to the West Boston Bridge to see if I could discover the birds going over. As I started out I saw bunches moving toward the river with a free and easy flight, but whether I reached the bridge too late, or whether they scattered and went over singly, I do not know. Only now and then did a bird cross, and he seemed to come from along the shore rather than from above the house-tops.

I concluded that the birds of the roost were strictly Bostonians. One evening, however, about a week later, as I was upon this bridge coming from Cambridge, a flock of sparrows whizzed past me, dipped over the rail to the water, swung up above the wall of houses, and disappeared toward the roost. They were on their way from Cambridge, from the classic elms of Harvard campus, who knows, to the elms of the ancient burial-ground.

It was five that April morning when the first sparrow left the roost. By half-past five the trees were empty, except for the few birds whose hunting-ground included the cemetery. By this time the city, too, had yawned, and rubbed its eyes, and tumbled out of bed.

"MUX"

No, "Mux" is not an elegant name—not to to be compared with Ronald or Claudia, for instance; and I want to say it is not the name of one of my children, though its owner was once a member of my household. Mux was a tame half-grown coon, with just the ordinary number of rings around his tail, but with the most extraordinary amount of mischief in his little coon soul. Perhaps he had no real soul, and I should have located his mischief somewhere else. If so, then I should say in his feet. I never saw any other feet so expressive. The essence of the little beast seemed concentrated in his lore paws. If they made trouble, whose fault was it? They were designed for trouble. You could see this purpose in them as plainly as you could see the purpose in a swallow's wings. Whenever Mux ran across the yard these paws picked up trouble out of the turf, just as if the grass were trouble-filings, and Mux a kind of four-footed magnet. He never went far before they clogged and stopped him.

One day, the first day that Mux was given the liberty of the yard, who should he run foul of but Tom! The struggle had to come sometime, and it was just as well that it came thus early, while Tom and Mux were on an equal footing as to size, for Mux was young and growing.

Tom was boss of the yard. Every farmer's dog that went to town by our gate knew enough to pass by on the other side. Tom had grown a little lordly and opinionated. He was sleeping in the sun on the shed-step as Mux ambled up. At sight of the coon Tom rose in more than his usual feline mightiness and cast such a look of surprise, scorn, and annihilating intent upon the interloper as ought to have struck terror to the stoutest heart. But Mux hardly seemed to understand. On he came, right into certain destruction, a very lamb of innocence and meekness. O you unsuspecting little stranger! Don't you see this awful monster swelling, swelling into this hideous hump? No, Mux did not see him. Tom was raging. His teeth gleamed; his eyes blazed green; his claws worked in a nervous way that made my flesh creep. He was vanishing, not, like the Cheshire Cat, into a long lovely grin, but vanishing from a four-legged cat into a yellow, one-legged hump. All that was left of him now was hump.

Mux was only a few feet away. Tom began to advance, not directly, but just a trifle on the bias, across Mux's bows so to speak, as if to give him a broadside. They were within range. Tom was heaving to. I trembled for the young coon. Suddenly there was a hiss, a flash of yellow in the air, and—a very big surprise awaiting Thomas! That little coon was no stupid after all. He had not rolled up his sleeves, nor doubled up his fists, nor put a chip upon his shoulder; but he knew what was expected of him, just the same. He snapped instantly upon his back, received the cat with all four of his feet, and gave Mr. Tom such a combing down that his golden fur went flying off like thistle-down in autumn.

It was all over in less than half a minute. I think Tom must have made a new record for himself in the running high jump when he broke away from his ring-tailed antagonist. He struck out across the yard and landed midway up the clothes-post with a single bound. And Mux? He ambled on around the yard, as calm and unconcerned as if he had only stopped to scratch himself.

Much of this unconcern, however, was a quiet kind of swagger. When he thought no one fiercer than a chicken or the humbled Mr. Tom was looking, he would shuffle across the yard with his coat collar turned up, his hat over his eye, his elbows angled—just as if he had been born and bred on the Bowery instead of in the Bear Swamp. He was king of the yard, but I could see that he wore his crown uneasily. He kept a bold front, accepted every challenge, and even went out of his way to pick a quarrel; yet he quaked at heart continually. He feared and hated the noises of the yard, particularly the crowing of our big buff cochin rooster and the screaming of the guineas. This was one of the swamp-fears that he had brought with him and could not outlive. It haunted him. If he had a conscience, its only warnings were of coming noises great and terrible.

But Mux had no conscience, unless it was one that troubled him only when he was out of mischief. His face was never so long and so solemn as when I had caught him in some questionable act or spoiled some wayward plan.

Mux, however, was possessed by a much stubborner spirit than this interesting mischief-devil. Upon one point he was positively demented—the only four-footed maniac I ever knew. He had gone crazy on the subject of dirt, mad to wash things, especially his victuals.

He was not particular about what he ate; almost anything that could be swallowed would do, provided that it could be washed, and washed by himself, after his own approved fashion.

If I gave him half of my apple, he would squat down by his wash-tub and begin to hunt for dirt. He would look the apple over and over, pick around the blossom end, inspect carefully, then pull out the stem, if there happened to be a stem, dig out the seeds and peek into the core, then douse it into the water and begin to wash. He would rub with might and main for a second or two, then rinse it, take a bite, and douse it back again for more scrubbing, until it was scrubbed and chewed away.

Even when the water was thick with mud, this crazy coon persisted in washing his clean cake and cabbage therein. Indeed, the muddier the water, the more vigorously would he wash. The habit was a part of him, as real a thing in his constitution as the black ring in his fur. It was a very dirty habit, here in captivity, even if it went by the name of washing. Of course Mux could not be blamed for his soiled wash-water. That was my fault; only I couldn't be changing it every time he soaked up a fistful of earth in his endeavor to wash something to eat out of it. No; he was not at fault, altogether, for the mud in his tub. Out in the Bear Swamp, the streams that wandered about under the great high-spreading gums, and lost their way in the shadows, were crystal-clear and pure; and out there it was intended that he should dwell, and in those sweet streams that he should wash. But what a modicum of wit, of originality the little beast had, that, because he was born a washer, wash he must, though he washed in mud, nay, though he washed upon the upturned bottom of his empty tub!—for this is what Mux did sometimes.

I never blamed Aunt Milly for insisting upon this rather ill-sounding name of "Mux" for the little coon. She was standing by his cage, shortly after his arrival, watching him eat cabbage. He washed every clean white piece of it in his oozy tub before tasting it, coating the bits over with mud as you do the lumps of fondant with chocolate in making "chocolate creams." Aunt Milly looked at him for some time with scornful face and finally exclaimed:

"Umph! Dat animile am a dumb beast shu'! Rubbin' dirt right inter clean cabbage! Sich muxin'! mux, mux, mux! Dat a coon? Dat ain't no coon. Dat's a mux!" And she scuffed off to the house,

mumbling, "De muxinest thing I done evah seen." Hence his name.

If there is one sweetmeat sweeter than all others to a coon, it is a frog. It was not mere chance that Mux was born in the edge of the Bear Swamp, close to the wide marshes that ran out to the river. This was the great country of the frogs—the milk-and-honey country to the ring-tailed family in the hollow gum. But Mux had never tasted frog. He had not been weaned when I kidnapped him. One day, wishing to see if he knew what a frog was, I carelessly offered him a big spotted fellow that I had caught in the meadow.

Did he know a frog? He fairly snatched the poor thing from me, killed it, and started around the cage with it in his mouth, dancing like a cannibal. His long, serious face was more thoughtful and solemn, however, than usual. I was puzzled. I had heard of dancing at funerals. Either this was such a dance, or else some wild orgy to propitiate the spirits that preside over the destiny of coons.

Throughout this gruesome rite Mux held the frog in his mouth, and I watched, expecting, hoping every moment that he would swallow it. Suddenly he stopped, sat down by his tub, pulled some dead grass out of it, plunged the frog in, and began to scrub it—began to scrub the frog in the oozy contents of that tub, when the poor amphibian had been soaking in spring-water ever since it was a tadpole!

No matter. The frog must be washed. And washed it was. It was scoured first with all his might, then placed in the bottom of the tub, under water, held down by one fore paw, until the maniac could get in with his hind feet upon it, and then danced upon; from here it was laid upon the floor of the cage and kneaded until as limp as a lump of dough; then lifted daintily, it was shaken round and round in the water, rinsed and wrung, and minutely inspected, and—swallowed.

I felt justified in keeping this animal caged. He was not fit to run loose even in the Bear Swamp. Perhaps I have done him wrong in this story of the frog. Frogs may need washing, after all, despite the fact that they are never out of the bath-tub long enough to dry off once in their whole lives. Mux knew more about frogs than I, doubtless. But Mux insisted upon washing oysters.

Now there are few people clothed in sane minds who do not like raw oysters. Mark this, however: when you see a person wash raw oysters, keep out of his way; he has lost either his wits or his morals. The only two creatures I ever knew to wash raw oysters were Mux and an oyster-dealer in Cambridge Street, Boston. I saw this dealer take up a two-gallon can that had just arrived at his store, and dump the dark salty shell-fish into a great colander, stick the end of a piece of rubber hose in among them, turn the water on? and stir and soak them. How white they got! How fat they got! How their ghastly corpses swelled!

Mux did not wash his to see them swell, but simply that he might take no chances with dirt—or poison, for I used to think sometimes that he thought I was trying to poison him. He was desperately fond of oysters. But who could cast his pearls, or, to be scientifically and literally correct, his mothers of pearls, before such a swine? Mux had just one plateful of oysters while I was his keeper. They were nice plump fellows, and when I saw the maniac soak one all stringy and tasteless I poured his wash-water out. Was he to be balked that way! No, no. He took oyster number two, flopped it into the empty tub, scoured it around on the muddy bottom, looked it over as carefully as he had done stringy number one, and swallowed sandy, muddy number two with just as much relish.

This was too much. I cuffed him and took away the tub. This I suppose was wrong, for I understand you must never oppose crazy persons. Well, Mux helped himself to oyster number three. There was no water, no tub. But what were oysters for if not to be washed? And who was he but *Procyon lotor*—*Procyon* "the washer"? Can the leopard change his spots or the racoon his habits? Can he? Shall he? I could almost hear him muttering under his breath, "To be, or not to be: that is the question." Then he darted a triumphantly malicious glance at me, retreated to the back of his cage, thrust his oyster out of sight beneath the straw of his bed, and washed it—washed the oyster in the straw, washed it into a fistful of sticks and chaff, and gloated as he swallowed it.

RACOON CREEK

Into the wode to her the briddes sing.

I

Over the creek, and clearing it by a little, hung a snow-white, stirless mist, its under surface even and parallel with the face of the water, its upper surface peaked and billowed half-way to the tops of the shore-skirting trees.

As I dipped along, my head was enveloped in the cloud; but bending over the skiff, I could see far up the stream between a mist-ceiling and a water-floor, as through a long, low room. How deep and dark seemed the water! And the trees how remote, aërial, and floating! as if growing in the skies, with no roots' fast hold of the earth. Filling the valley, conforming to every bend and stretch of the creek, lay the breath of the water, motionless and sheeted, a spirit stream, hovering over the sluggish current a moment, before it should float upward and melt away. It was cold, too, as a wraith might be, colder than the water, for the June sun had not yet risen over the swamp.

At the bridge where the road crossed was a dam which backed the creek out into an acre or more of pond. Not a particle of mud discolored the water; but it was dark, and as it came tumbling, foaming over the moss-edged gates it lighted up a rich amber color, the color of strong tea. In the half chill of the dawn the old bridge lay veiled in smoking spray, in a thin, rising vapor of spicy odors, clean, medicinal odors, as of the brewing of many roots, the fragrance of shores of sedges, ferns, and aromatic herbs steeped in the slow, soft tide. And faint across the creek, the road, and the fields lay the pondy smell of spatter-docks.

I pushed out from the sandy cove and lay with a reach of the lusty docks between me and either shore. It was early morning. The yellow, dew-laid road down which I came still slumbered undisturbed; the village cows had not been milked, and the pasture slope, rounding with a feminine grace of curve and form, lay asleep, with its sedgy fingers trailing in the water; even the locomotive in the little terminal round-house over the hill was not awake and wheezing. But the creek people were stirring—except the frogs. They were growing sleepy. The long June night they had improved, soberly, philosophically; and now, seeing nothing worth while in the dawn of this wonder day, they had begun to doze. But the birds were alive, full of the crisp June morning, of its overflow of gladness, and were telling their joy in chorus up and down both banks of the creek.

Hearkneth thise blisful briddes how they singe.

Do you mean out in Finsbury Moor, Father Chaucer? They were sweet along the banks of the Walbrook, I know, for among them "maken melodye" were the skylark, ethereal minstrel! and the nightingale. But, Father Chaucer, you should have heard the wood-thrushes, the orchard-orioles —this whole morning chorus singing along the creek! No one may know how blissful, how wide, how thrilling the singing of birds can be unless he has listened when the summer mists are rising over Racoon Creek.

There is no song-hour after sun rise to compare with this for spirit and volume of sound. The difference between the singing in the dusk and in the dawn is the difference between the slow,

sweet melody of a dirge and the triumphant, full-voiced peal of a wedding march. Even one who has always lived in the country can scarcely believe his ears the first time he is afield in June at the birds' awaking-hour.

Robins led the singing along the creek. They always do. In New Jersey, Massachusetts, Michigan, —everywhere it is the same,—they out-number all rivals three to one. It is necessary to listen closely in order to distinguish the other voices. This particular morning, however, the wood-thrushes were all arranged up the copsy hillside at my back, and so reinforced each other that their part was not overborne by robin song. One of the thrushes was perched upon a willow stub along the edge of the water, so near that I could see every flirt of his wings, could almost count the big spots in his sides. Softly, calmly, with the purest joy he sang, pausing at the end of every few bars to preen and call. His song was the soul of serenity, of all that is spiritual. Accompanied by the lower, more continuous notes from among the trees, it rose, a clear, pure, wonderful soprano, lifting the whole wide chorus nearer heaven.

Farther along the creek, on the border of the swamp, the red-shouldered blackbirds were massed; chiming in everywhere sang the catbirds, white-eyed vireos, yellow warblers, orchard-orioles, and Maryland yellowthroats; and at short intervals, soaring for a moment high over the other voices, sounded the thrilling, throbbing notes of the cardinal, broken suddenly and drowned by the roll of the flicker, the wild, weird cry of the great-crested flycatcher, or the rapid, hay-rake rattle of the belted kingfisher.

All at once a narrow breeze cut a swath through the mist just across my bows, turned, spread, caught the severed cloud in which I was drifting, and whirled it up and away. The head of the pond and the upper creek were still shrouded, while around me only breaths of the white flecked the water and the spatter-docks. The breeze had not stirred a ripple; the current here in the broad of the pond was imperceptible; and I lay becalmed on the edge of the open channel, among the rank leaves and golden knobs of the docks.

A crowd of chimney-swallows gathered over the pond for a morning bath. Half a hundred of them were wheeling, looping, and cutting about me in a perfect maze of orbits, as if so many little black shuttles had borrowed wings and gone crazy with freedom. They had come to wash—a very proper thing to do, for there are few birds or beasts that need it more. It was highly fitting for sooty little Tom, seeing he had to turn into something, to become a Water Baby. And if these smaller, winged sweeps of our American chimneys are contemplating a metamorphosis, it ought to be toward a similar life of soaking.

They must have been particularly sooty this morning. One plunge apiece, so far from sufficing, seemed hardly a beginning. They kept diving in over and over, continuing so long that finally I grew curious to know how many dips they were taking, and so, in order to count his dives, I singled one out, after most of the flock had done and gone off to hawk. How many he had taken before I marked him, and how many more he took after I lost him among the other birds, I cannot say; but, standing up in the skiff, I followed him around and around until he made his nineteenth splash,—in less than half as many minutes,—when I got so groggy that his twentieth splash I came near taking with him.

The pond narrows toward the head, and just before it becomes a creek again the channel turns abruptly through the docks in against the right shore, where the current curls and dimples darkly under the drooping branches of great red maple; then it horseshoes into the middle, coming down through small bush-islands and tangled brush which deepen into an extensive swamp.

June seemed a little tardy here, but the elder, the rose, and the panicled cornel were almost ready, the button-bushes were showing ivory, while the arrow-wood, fully open, was glistening snowily everywhere, its tiny flower crowns falling and floating in patches down-stream, its over-sweet breath hanging heavy in the morning mist. My nose was in the air all the way for magnolias and water-lilies, yet never a whiff from either shore, so particular, so unaccountably notional are some of the high-caste flowers with regard to their homes.

The skiff edged slowly past the first of the islands, a mere hummock about a yard square, and was turning a sharp bend farther up, when I thought I had a glimpse of yellowish wings, a mere guess of a bird shadow, dropping among the dense maple saplings and elder of the islet.

Had I seen or simply imagined something? If I had seen wings, then they were not those of the thrasher,—the first bird that came to mind,—for they slipped, sank, dropped through the bushes, with just a hint of dodging in their movement, not exactly as a thrasher would have moved.

Drifting noiselessly back, I searched the tangle and must have been looking directly at the bird several seconds before cutting it out from the stalks and branches. It was a least bittern, a female. She was clinging to a perpendicular stem of elder, hand over hand, wren fashion, her long neck thrust straight into the air, absolutely stiff and statuesque.

We were less than a skiff's length apart, each trying to outpose and outstare the other. I won. Human eyes are none the strongest, neither is human patience, yet I have rarely seen a creature that could outwait a man. The only steady, straightforward eye in the Jungle was Mowgli's—because it was the only one with a steady mind behind it. As soon as the bird let herself look me squarely in the eye, she knew she was discovered, that her little trick of turning into a stub was seen through; and immediately, ruffling her feathers, she lowered her head, poked out her neck at me, and swaying from side to side like a caged bear, tried to scare me, glaring and softly growling.

Off she flopped as I landed. The nest might be upon the ground or lodged among the bushes; but the only ground space large enough was covered layer over layer with pearly clam-shells, the kitchen-midden of some muskrat; and the bushes were empty. I went to the other islets, searched bog and tangle, and finally pulled away disappointed, giving the least bittern credit for considerable mother-wit and woodcraft. How little wit she really had appeared on my return down-creek that afternoon.

I had now entered the high, overhanging swamp, where the shaggy trees, the looping vines, and the rank, pulpous undergrowth grew thick on both sides, reaching far back, a wet, heavy wilderness without a path, except for the silent feet of the mink and the otter, and the more silent feet of the creek, here a narrow stream winding darkly down through the shadows.

Every little while along the rooty, hummocky banks of the creek I would pass a muskrat's slide. Here was one at the butt of a tulip-poplar, its platform wet and freshly trodden, its "dive" shooting sheer over a root into the stream. Farther on stood a large tussock whose top was trampled flat and covered with sedge-roots. I could not resist putting my nose down for a sniff, so good is the smell of a fresh trail, so close are we to the rest of the pack. In the thick of the swamp I stopped a moment to examine the footprints of an otter at a shallow, shelving place along the bank, where, opening through the skunk-cabbage and Indian turnip, and covered almost ankle-deep with water, was the creature's runway.

I had moved leisurely along, yet not aimlessly. The whole June day was mine to waste; but it would not be well wasted if nothing more purposeful than wasting were in mind.

One does not often drift to a port. Going into the woods to see anything is a very sure way of seeing little or nothing; and taking the path to anywhere is certain to lead one nowhere in particular. Many interested, nature-loving people fail to enjoy the out-of-doors simply because they have no definite spot to reach, no flower, bird, or bug to find when they enter the fields and woods. Going forth "to commune with nature" sounds very fine, but it is much more difficult work than conversing with the Sphinx. In order to draw near to nature I require a pole with a hook and line on the end of it. While I watch the float and wait, if there is any communion, it is nature who holds it with me through the medium of the pole. I need to have an errand to do; some berries to pick, a patch of potatoes to hoe (a very small patch); an engagement to keep, like Thoreau, with a tree, if I hope to squander with profit even the laziest summer day.

I was heading up-stream toward a deep sandy-sided pool that was bottomed, or rather unbottomed, by the shadows of overhanging beeches. The pool was alive with racoon-perch. A few mornings before this, a boy from a neighboring farm had come to fish here and had found a fisher ahead of him. He was just about to cast, when back under the limbs of the beeches the water broke, and a mink rose to the surface with a fine perch twisting in her jaws. Straight toward the boy she swam till within reach of his rod, when she recognized the human in him, turned a back-dive somersault, and vanished.

Would she be fishing again this morning? I hoped so. It was her hour—the hour of the rising mist; visitors rarely found their way to the pool; and I knew the appearance of the boy had given her no lasting alarm.

Floating around the bend, I pulled in among the shore bushes by a bit of grape-vine, and sitting down upon it, made my boat fast. I had planned the trip with the hope of seeing this mink; so I waited, quite hidden, though having the pool in full view. An hour passed, but no mink appeared. Another hour, and the sun was breaking upon the beeches, and the mist was gone; yet no mink came to fish. And what mink would? Of course you must have it in mind to see a mink fish if you wish to see anything; but the day you really catch the mink fishing will likely be the day you went out to watch for muskrats.

So an hour's waiting is rarely fruitless. The mink did not come, but another and quite as expert a fisher did. All the way up the creek I had been hearing the throaty *ghouw-bhouw* of a great blue heron off in the swamp. It was he that came for perch.

The flapping of the great blue heron is a sight good for the soul—an unheard-of motion these days, so moderate, unhurried, and time-contemning! The wing-beats of this one, as he came dangling down upon the meadow opposite me, have often given me pause since. If I could have the wings of the great blue heron and flap to my fishing now and again!

On alighting, however, he was instantly all nerve and tension. With the utmost caution he came over the high sedges on his stilt-like legs to the brink of the creek and posed. I doubt if a frog or a minnow could have told he was a thing of life. Stiff as a stub, every muscle taut, all alert, he stood, till—flash! and the long pointed bill pinned a perch, a foot and a half beneath the water. He had quite made out a breakfast, when, stepping upon a tall tussock, he stood face to face with me—a human spectator! It was only for a moment that I could keep motionless enough to puzzle him. Some muscle must have twitched, for he understood and leaped into the air with a croak of mortal fright.

II

The creek was roped off by the sagging fox grape-vines, and barred, from this point on, by the alders, so that I gave up all attempt at farther ascent. I had already given up the mink; yet I waited under the beeches.

It was blazing overhead, growing hotter and closer all the time, with hardly breeze enough to disturb the sleep of the leaf shadows on the sleepy stream. A rusty, red-bellied water-snake, in a mat of briers near by, relaxed and straightened slowly out,—and softly, that I might not be attracted,—stretching himself to the warmth. I could have broken his back with my paddle, and perhaps, by so doing, saved the nestlings of a pair of Maryland yellowthroats fidgeting about near him. He had eaten many a young bird of these bushes, I was sure—yet only circumstantially sure. Catching him in the act of robbing a nest would have been different; I should have felt justified then in despatching him. But to strike him asleep in the sun simply because he was a snake would have robbed the spot of part of its life and spirit and robbed me of serenity for the rest of the day. I should not have been, able to enjoy the quiet again until I had said my prayers and slept.

And as between the hawks and other wild birds, we need not interfere. While the water-snake was spreading himself, a small hawk, a sharp-shinned, I think, came beating over the meadow and was met by a vigilance committee of red-shouldered blackbirds. He did not stop to eat any of them, but darted up, and they after him. On up he went, round and round in a rapid, mounting spiral, till only one of the daring redwings followed. I watched. Up they went, higher than I had ever seen a blackbird venture before. And against such unequal odds! But the hawk was scared and had not stopped to look back. He circled; the blackbird cut across inside and caught him on almost every round. And still higher in pure bravado the redwing forced him. I began to tremble for the plucky bird, when I saw him turn, half fold his shining wings, and shoot straight down—a meteor of jet with fire flying from its opposite sides—down, down, while I held my breath. Suddenly the wings flashed, and he was scaling a steep incline; another flash, a turn, and he was upon a slower plane—had thrown himself against the air and settled upon the swaying top of a brown cattail.

A quiet had been creeping over the swamp and meadow. The dry rasp of a dragon-fly's wings was loud in the grass. The stream beneath the beeches darkened and grew moody as the light neared its noon intensity; the beech-leaves hung limp and silent; a catbird settled near me with dropped tail and head drawn in between her shoulders, as mute as the leaves; the Maryland yellowthroat broke into a sharp gallop of song at intervals,—he would have to clatter a little on doomsday, if that day fell in June,—but the intervals were far apart. The meadow shimmered. No part of the horizon was in sight—only the sky overhanging the little open of grass, and this was cloudless, though far from blue.

Perhaps there was not a real sign of uneasiness anywhere except in my boat; yet I felt something ominous in this silent, stifled noon. After all, I ought to have scotched the rusty, red-bellied water-snake leering at me now. The croak of the great blue heron sounded again; then far away, mysterious and spirit-like, floated a soft *qua, qua, qua*—the cry of the least bittern out of the heart of the swamp.

I loosed the grape-vine, put in my paddle, and turned down-stream, with an urgent desire to get out of the swamp, out where I could see about me. I made no haste, lest the stream, the swamp, the something that made me uneasy, should know. Not that I am superstitious, though I should have been had I lived when the land was all swamp and wood and prairie; and I should be now were I a sailor. My boat slipped swiftly along under the thick-shadowing trees, and rounding a sharp bend, brought me to the open pond, to the sky, and to a sight that explained my disquietude. The west, half-way to the zenith, was green—the black-and-blue green of bruised flesh. Out of it shot a fork of lightning, and behind it rumbled muffled thunder.

There was no time to descend the pond. I could already hear the wind across the silence and suspense. It was one of the supreme moments of the summer. The very trees seemed breathless and awe-struck. Pushing quickly to the wooded shore, I drew out the boat, turned it over, and crawled under it just as the leaves stirred with the first cool, wet breath.

There was an instant's lull, a tremor through the ground; then the rending and crunching of the wind monster in the oaks, the shriek of the forest victim—and the wind was gone. The rain followed with fearful violence, the lightning sizzled and cracked among the trees, and the thunder burst just above the boat—all holding on to finish the wind's work.

It was soon over. The leaves were dripping when I crept out of my shell; the afternoon sun was blinking through a million gleaming tears, and the storm was rumbling far away, behind the swamp. A robin lighted upon a branch over me, and set off its load of drops, which rattled down on my boat's bottom like a charge of shot. I glided into the stream. Down the pond where I had seen the sullen clouds was now an indescribable freshness and glory of shining hills and shining sky. The air had been washed and was still hanging across the heavens undried. The maple-leaves showed silver; the flock of chimney-swifts had returned, and among them, twinkling white and blue and brown, were tree-swallows and barn-swallows squeaking in their flight like new harness; a pair of night-hawks played back and forth across the water, too, awakened, probably, by the thunder, or else mistaken in the green darkness of the storm, thinking it the twilight; and the creek up and down as far as I could hear was ringing with bird-calls.

There had been a perceptible rise and quickening of the current. It was slightly roiled and carried a floatage of broken twigs, torn leaves, with here and there a golden-green tulip-petal, like the broken wings of butterflies.

I was in no hurry now, in no disquietude. The swamp and the storm were at my back. Before me lay the pond, the pastures, and the roofs of a human village—all bathed in the splendor of the year's divinest hour. It had not been a perfect day, but these closing hours were perfect, so perfect that they redeemed the whole, and not that day only: they were perfect enough to have redeemed the whole of creation travailing till then in pain.

Because I turned from all this sunset glory to find out what little bird was making the very big fuss near by, and because, parting the foliage of an arrow-wood bush, I looked with exquisite pleasure into the nest of a white-eyed vireo, does it mean that I am still unborn as to soul? For some reason it was a relief to look away from that west of vast and burning color to the delicately dotted eggs in the tiny cradle—the same relief felt in descending from a mountain-top to the valley; in turning from the sweep of the sea to watch beach-fleas hopping over the sand; in giving over the wisdom of men for the gabble of my little boys.

How the vireo scolded! and her mate! He half sang his threat and defiance. "Come, get out of this! Come; do you hear?" he cried over and over, as I peeked into the nest. It was a thick-walled, exquisite bit of a basket, rimmed round with green, growing moss, worked over with shredded bark and fragments of yellow wood from a punky stump across the stream, and suspended by spider-webs upon two parallel twigs about three feet above the water. It was not consciously worked out by the birds, of course, but the patch of yellow-wood fragments on the side of the nest exactly matched the size and color of the fading cymes of arrow-wood blossoms all over the bush, so that I mistook the little domicile utterly on first parting the leaves. A crow or a snake would never have discovered it from that side.

Paddling down, I was soon out of earshot of the scolding vireos, but the little cock's vigorous, ringing song followed me to the head of the pond. Flying heavily over from the meadows with folded neck and dangling legs came a little green heron—the "poke." I spun round behind a big clump of elder to watch him; but he saw me, veered, gulped aloud, and pulled off with a rapid stroke up the creek.

As I turned, my eye fell upon a soft, yellowish something in the rose-bushes across the docks. I was slow to believe. It was too good to be credited all at once. Within three paddle-lengths of my boat, in a patch of dark that must be a nest, stood my least bittern.

I sat still for several seconds, tasting the joy of my discovery and anticipating the look into the nest. Then, upon my knees in the bow of the skiff, I pulled up by means of the stout dock-leaves until almost able to touch the bird, when she walked off down a dead stalk to the ground, clucking and growling at me.

It wasn't a nest to boast of; but she might boast of her eggs, for there was more of eggs than of nest—a great deal more. A few sticks had been laid upon the ends of the bending rose-bushes, and this flimsy, inadequate platform was literally covered by the five dirty-white eggs. The hen had to stand on the bushes straddling the nest in order to brood. How she ever got as close to the nest as that without spilling its contents was hard to see; for I took an egg out and had the greatest difficulty in putting it back, so little room was there, so near to nothing for it to rest upon.

Working back into the channel, I gave the skiff to the easy current and drew slowly along toward the foot of the pond.

The sun had gone down behind the hill; the flame had faded from the sky, and over the rim of the circling slopes poured the soft, cool twilight, with a breeze as soft and cool, and a spirit that was prayer. Drifting across the pond as gently as the gray half-light fell a shower of lint from the willow catkins. The swallows had left; but from the leafy darkness of the copse in front of me, piercing the dreamy, foamy roar of the distant dam, came the notes of a wood-thrush, pure, sweet, and peaceful, speaking the soul of the quiet time. My boat grated softly on the sandy bottom of the cove and swung in. Out from the deep shadow of the wooded shore, out over the pond, a thin white veil was creeping—the mist, the breath of the sleeping water, the spirit of the stream. And away up the creek a distorted, inarticulate sound—the hoarse, guttural croak of the great blue heron, the weird, uncanny cry of the night, the mock, the menace of the tangled, untamed swamp!

THE DRAGON OF THE SWALE

My path to Cubby Hollow ran along a tumbling worm-fence, down a gravelly slope, and across a strip of swale, through which flowed the stream that farther on widened into the Hollow. A small jungle of dog-roses, elder, and blackberry tangled the banks of the stream, spreading into flanks of cinnamon-fern that crept well up the hillsides.

As I descended the gravelly slope, my path led through the ferns into a tunnel of vines, to a rail over the water, and on up to the woods. By the middle of June the tangle, except by the half-broken path, was almost rabbit-proof. The rank ferns waved to my chin, and were so thick that they left little trace of my passing until late in the summer.

This bit of the swale from the lower edge of the gravelly slope to the edge of the woods on the opposite slope was the lair of a dragon. My path cut directly across it.

Perhaps the dragon had been there ever since I had known the swale, and summer after summer had allowed me to cross unchallenged. I do not know. I only know that one day he rose out of the ferns before me—the longest, ugliest, boldest beast that ever withstood me in the quiet walks about home.

It was a day in early July, hot and very close. I was wading the sunken trail, much as one "treads water," my head not always above the surface of the fronds, when, suddenly, close to my side the ferns in a single spot were violently shaken. Instantly ahead of me they whirled again' and before I could think, off across the path was another rush and whirl—then stirless silence.

I knew what it meant. These were not the sudden, startled leaps of three animals, but the lightning movements of one. I had crossed the path of a swamp black-snake, and judging from the speed and whirl, it was a snake of uncommon size.

The path, a few paces farther on, opened into a small patch of low grass. Just as I was getting through the brake to this spot I stopped short with a chill. In the ferns near me shrilled a hissing whistle, a weird, creepy whistle that made me cold—a fierce, menacing sound, all edge, and so thin that it slivered every nerve in me. And then, without a stir in the brake, up out of the low grass in front of me rose a blue-black, glittering head.

I have little faith in the spell of a snake's eye, yet for a moment I was held by the subtle, masterful face that had risen so unexpectedly, so coolly before me. It was lifted a foot out of the grass. The head upon its lithe, round neck was poised motionless, but set as with a hair-spring. The flat, pointed face was turned upon me, so that I could see a patch of white upon the throat. Evidently the snake had just sloughed an old skin, for the sunlight gleamed iridescent on the shining jet scales. It was not a large head; it lacked the shovel-nose and the heavy, horrid jaws of the rattle-snake. But it was clean-cut, with power in every line of jaw and neck; with power and speed and certainty in the pose, so easy, ready, and erect. There was no fear in the creature's eye, something rather of aggressiveness, and of such evil cunning that I stood on guard.

Afraid of a snake? of a black-snake! No. I think, indeed, there are few persons who really do fear snakes. It is not fear, but nerves. I have tamed more black-snakes than I have killed. I should not care a straw if one bit me. Yet, for all of that, the meeting with any black-snake is so unlocked for as always to be unnerving. But let a huge one whip about you in the brake, chill you with an unearthly hissing whistle, then suddenly rise in front of you, glittering, challenging, sinister! You will be abashed. I was; and I shall never outgrow the weakness.

It was a big snake. I had not been mistaken in its size. There is nothing on earth that shrinks as a *dead* snake; and this one, so far as I know, is still alive; yet, allowing generously for my imagination, I am sure the creature measured six feet. His neck, just behind the jaws, was nearly

the size of a broom-handle, which meant a long, hard length curved out in the ferns behind. It was a male; I could tell by the peculiar musk on the air, an odor like cut cucumbers.

Fully a minute we eyed each other. Then I took a step forward. The glittering head rose higher. Off in the ferns there beat a warning tattoo—the loud whir of the snake's tail against a skunk-cabbage leaf.

In my hand was a slender dogwood switch that I had been poking into the holes of the digger-wasps up the hillside. If one thing more than another will turn a snake tail to in a hurry it is the song of a switch. Expecting to see this overbold fellow jump out of his new skin and lunge off into the swale, I leaned forward and made the stick sing under his nose. But he did not jump or budge. He only bent back out of range, swayed from side to side, and drew more of his black length out into the low grass to better his position.

The lidless eyes and scale-cased face of a snake might seem incapable of more than one set expression. Can hate and fear show there? They certainly can, at least to my imagination. If ever hate and fear mantled a face, they did this one in the grass. The sound of the switch only maddened the creature. He had too long dictated terms in this part of the swale to crawl aside for me.

Nor would I give way to him. But I ceased switching, drew back a step, and looked at him with more respect than I ever before showed a snake.

The curved neck straightened at that, the glinting head swayed forward, and shivering through me as the swish of a stick never shivered through a snake, sounded that unearthly hissing whistle. For a second—for just the fraction of a second that it takes to jump—I was, not scared, but shocked; and I slipped on something underfoot. In three directions I wallowed the ferns before I got to my feet to watch the snake again, and by that time the snake was gone.

I found myself somewhat muddy and breathing a little hard; but I was not wholly chagrined. I had heard and seen a black-snake whistle. I had never even known of the habit before.

Since then I have seen one other snake do it, and I think I have heard the sound three or four times. It is almost indescribable. The jaws were closed as it was made, not even the throat moving, that I could see. The air seemed to be blown violently through the nostrils, though sounding as if driven through the teeth—a shrilling hiss, fine and piercing, which one not so much hears as feels, crisping cold along his nerves.

It may seem strange, but I believe this whistle is a mating-call. Even the forked tongue (or maybe the nose) of a snake grows vocal with love. If only the Sphinx had not possessed a heart of stone! No matter about its lips; with a heart to know the "spring running" we should have heard its story long ago. Perhaps, after all, the college sophomore was not mixing his observations and Sunday-school memories when he wrote, describing the dawn of a spring morning (I quote from his essay): "Beneath in the water the little fishes darted about the boat; above the little birds twittered in the branches; while off on a sunny log in the pond the soft, sibilant croak of the mud-turtle was heard on the shore." If we could happen upon the mud-turtle mad with love, I am sure we should find that he had a voice—a "soft, sibilant croak," who knows?

I had long known the tradition among the farmers of the black-snake's trailing its mate, following her by scent through grass and brush, persistent and sure as a sleuth-hound, until at last she is won. I had been told of this by eyewitnesses over and over, but I had always put it down as a snake story, for these same witnesses would also tell me the hoop-snake story, only it was their grandfathers, always, who had seen this creature take its tail in its mouth and roll, and hit and kill a fifty-dollar apple-tree (the tree was invariably worth fifty dollars). I had small faith in the trailing tale.

One day, the summer after my encounter in the ferns, I was sitting upon a harrow at the edge of the gravelly field that slopes to the swale, when a large black-snake glided swiftly across the lane and disappeared in the grass beyond. It had been gone perhaps a minute, when I heard another stir behind me, and turning, saw high above the weeds and dewberry-vines the neck and head of a second black-snake.

He was coming swiftly, evenly, carrying his gleaming head over a foot from the ground, and following hard upon the trail of the first snake. He hit very near the smooth, flowing mark in the dust of the lane. Here she had crossed. Here he was about to cross when he caught sight of me.

For a startled instant he stiffened, threw himself on the defensive, and showed a white patch under his chin, an ugly, blazing light in his eye, and a peculiarly aggressive attitude that there was no mistaking. I had seen this snake before. I knew him. He was the dragon of the swale.

Only pausing, he whirled, struck the track, and sped on, his round black body stretching from rut to rut of the lane. A hundred feet beyond in the grass I saw his glittering head rise and sway with a swimming motion as he trailed the long, lithe beauty that was leading him this lightning race across the fields.

This was not the last time he crossed my path. He never withstood me again; but he thwarted me several times. Once as I was descending the slope I saw him gliding down from a low cedar. The distressing cries of two chippies told me what he had been doing in the tree; I did not need to look at the half-dislodged nest. Then and there I vowed to kill him, but from that moment I never set eyes on him again. His evil work, however, went on. In a clump of briers across the stream

was the nest of a pair of redbirds that I was watching. One day just before the young could fly they were carried off. I knew who did it. On the same side, up under the fence by the woods, a litter of rabbits was destroyed. The snake killed them. It was he, too, who ate the eggs of the bluebirds in the old apple-tree along the fence in the adjoining field.

There must be a dragon in the way, I suppose—in the way even of nature study. There are unpleasant, perhaps unnecessary, and evil creatures—snakes!—in the fields and woods, which we must be willing to meet and tolerate for the love within us. Tick-seeds, beggar-needles, mud, mosquitos, rain, heat, hawks, and snakes haunt all our paths, hindering us sometimes, though never really blocking the way.

But the dragon in the swale—ought I to tolerate him? No. There are moments when I should be glad to kill him, yet I doubt if the swale would be quite so wild and thrilling a spot if I knew there was no dragon to meet me as I crossed. But the redbirds, bluebirds, rabbits? I see no shrinking in their numbers because of the snake. A few of them breed as they always have along the swale. There are worse enemies than the dragon, though he is bad enough.

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