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Author: Maud D. Haviland
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Lives of the Fur Folk



Lives of the Fur Folk

by

M. D. Haviland

illustrated by

E. CALDWELL

LONGMANS, GREEN & COMPANY
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TO
E. B. S.

PREFACE

The following, to a certain extent, are composite histories—at present our knowledge of the life of the individual wild animal is too limited to admit of anything else; but the incidents related are all founded on fact, and Redpad, Grimalkin, and the rest actually lived, although here they are sometimes credited with adventures which in reality befell others of their race.

It may be thought that I have gone too far in endowing wild animals with the primitive elements of superstition, self-sacrifice, &c.; but although the majority are certainly guided to a very great extent by pure instinct, here and there we find one whose actions cannot be altogether explained thus; and it must not be forgotten that it is from similar exceptions, who lived and died in long past ages, that our own powers of reason and reflection, our morality, sense of religion, our artists, heroes and saints have evolved.

For deciding some knotty points in the natural history of the badger, I am indebted to an excellent article on the animal by Mr. Douglas English. The rest of my information is entirely derived from personal observation, or from that of gamekeepers, 'earthstoppers,' huntsmen and others, whose calling has brought them into close contact with wild animals. To all these my thanks are due.

M. D. HAVILAND.

COURTOWN HARBOUR,
Co. Wexford.

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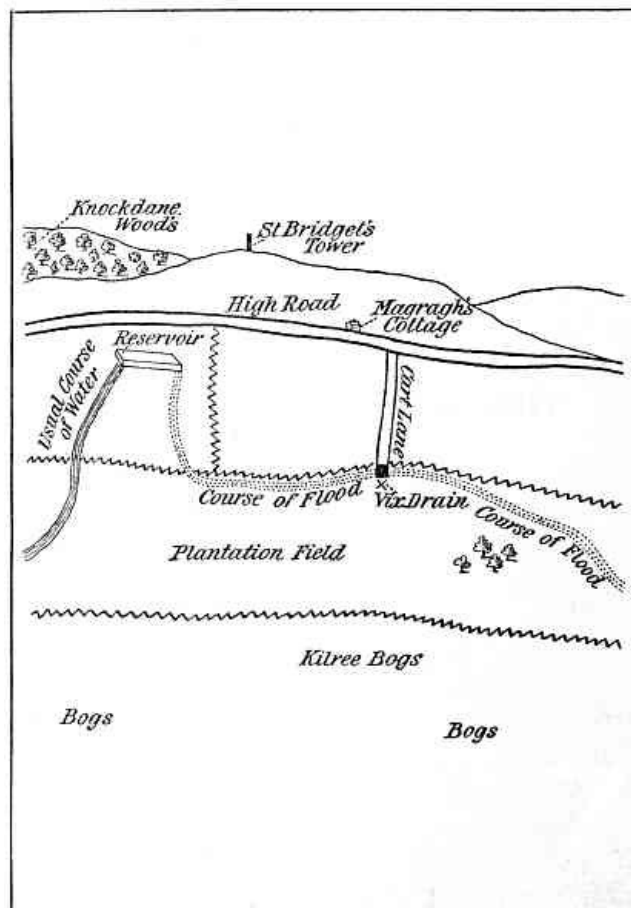
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THE STORY OF REDPAD THE FOX

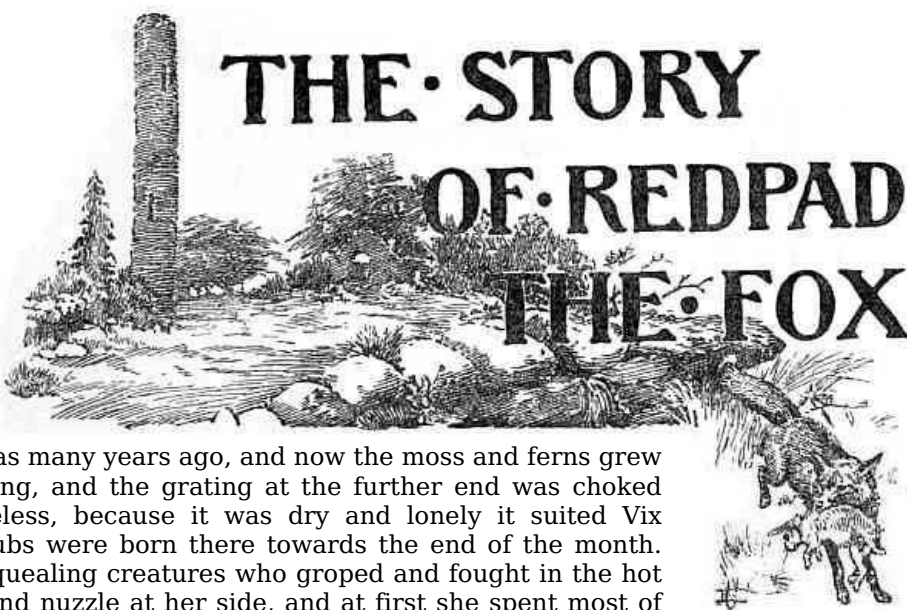


CHAPTER I

THE SPRING RAINS

Vix found the old drain at the beginning of March. It was warm and roomy, and ran under the gate of the Plantation Field. Once upon a time, before the reservoir was built further up the hill, the stream which rose under St. Bridget's Tower had emptied itself through this drain

into the bog; but that was many years ago, and now the moss and ferns grew thickly round the opening, and the grating at the further end was choked with rubbish. Nevertheless, because it was dry and lonely it suited Vix exactly, and the four cubs were born there towards the end of the month. They were blind, red, squealing creatures who groped and fought in the hot darkness to reach Vix and nuzzle at her side, and at first she spent most of the twenty-four hours among them; but as they grew bigger and needed more food she was forced to spend much time on hunting excursions. Fortunately, however, as rabbits were to be had for the picking up in Knockdane Woods over the hill, and mice and rats were plentiful in the bog, the neighbouring poultry yards were not too severely taxed and Vix's nursery remained undiscovered.



April was ushered in by a cool dark evening after heavy rain. The sunset was pale and stormy, blotted out by ragged clouds, and as Vix trotted home she heard the 'rail' singing up the river. The 'rail' is the name which the Fur Folk have given to the sound which is heard at night before a storm, and it is one of the most mysterious noises of the whole countryside. There may be no wind stirring at the time, but the Wild Folk hear the strange whining far away over the woods and

bogs, and know that there is a gale blowing up from the sea.

Vix's path lay by the reservoir, and here, startled perhaps by some night noise among the rushes, she paused. The reservoir had been built many years ago when Paddy Magrath's father had plenty of money, and much stock which required water. He caught the little brook which trickled through Vix's drain from St. Bridget's Tower to the bog, and turned its course into the big cement basin, leading off the water by a sluice into a new channel. But the farm had fallen on evil days at the hands of Paddy Magrath, and the reservoir was choked with cresses and duckweed. Much rain had fallen this spring, and the basin was dangerously full. The sluice was shut fast, but the brown water squirted through the chinks and danced down the hill. The stream, all wild with joy of the great rains, brought down leaves and twigs in its rush, and waltzed them round and round in the plaited current until it heaped them against the ever-growing scum and débris at the sluice. By and by the branch of a tree came rolling along, and stuck fast. The leaves were driven against it until a high barricade was raised, and the water could only trickle through the sluice. Then Vix went home to her cubs, but the stream still poured into the basin from which it could find no outlet. There was only one flaw in the cement, and that quite a little one, patched with clay and willow withies, but the water—the brown, treacherous water—found it out, and worked silently and steadily all night. O a mad, merry miner is the water!



Hard after the 'rail' came the wind and the rain. Safe and warm below ground, the foxes heard the howling of the gale in the Plantation, and the steady splash of rain drops on the sodden ground; but the brick walls of the drain were still strong and water-tight. Paddy Magrath in his cabin also heard the storm roaring outside, and remembered that he had left the sluice of the reservoir closed; but he dismissed the thought with a characteristic 'time enough to-morrow.'

Vix was astir at daybreak the next morning. The wind still moaned in fitful gusts and brief rain-storms drove across the sky. There was a watery gleam in the east which told of the sunrise to be, and the fields were flooded. Vix reached the reservoir. It was full of turbid water which lipped to the very brim, and the clay which dammed up the broken wall was sodden and dripping.

As Vix watched, a strange thing happened. A lump crumbled outwards and a ripple of water ran down the slope towards the fence. It swelled a little as the hole grew larger, until it became quite a broad stream. It sang a merry little song to itself as it ran—so merry that a number of brother ripples hastened to join it. They crowded into the hole in such numbers, struggling to pass through, that suddenly the whole earthwork tottered and crumbled away, and the coffee-coloured

flood leaped through the gap down the hill in the wake of the first ripple. Brawling, tumbling, spreading into shallow pools and splashing cascades, it raced down the field. The hedge barred its way for a moment, but urged by the rush behind, it rose, and crept between the hawthorns into the ditch on the further side. It was many a year since the stream had found its way down that ditch. It poured into its old bed joyously, and kissed the primroses with foam kisses before it drowned them in its cold ripples.

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Not until the flood had entered the Plantation Field did Vix realise what it meant. Then she ran, faster than when the hounds were at her brush, straight to the drain where her four ruddy cubs lay in the torrent's path. The stream was perilously near them. It had carved a way for itself among the grass and brambles which choked the ditch, and sang to itself lustily on the way to the bog. Vix dashed underground, and, seizing the first of the warm whining creatures which she stumbled over in the darkness, she turned to fly. Too late! She was caught in a trap. The water burst into the drain, and surging to and fro to find an exit, it filled the tunnel to the roof. Vix, half drowned but still clinging to the cub, was battered to and fro. Something which was not driftwood was driven against her in the darkness; but though her mother-love was great she could not hold two, and it slipped past her. Twice she fought her head above water, and twice she was washed off her feet. The third time, gasping and choking, she gained the opening, struggled to land, and laid the dripping cub on the bank. But there were three more down there. Vix looked at the flood which plunged through the drain and into the field through the further opening, and that good instinct which bids the Wild Folk care first for that which is nearest conquered. She picked up the half-drowned cub, and galloped up the hill towards Knockdane.



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When, three hours later, Paddy Magragh strolled by, the flood had subsided, and only a trickle filtered through the drain, which was half choked with rubbish. On the bank lay three little red bodies, and there were marks on the wet earth where strong frenzied pads had striven to dig down to the treasures hidden below.

That was all that Paddy Magragh ever knew, but that spring an old fox cared for her one remaining cub in the woods of Knockdane. And that cub was Redpad.

When, three hours later, Paddy Magragh strolled by, the flood had subsided, and only a trickle filtered through the drain, which was half choked with rubbish. On the bank lay three little red bodies, and there were marks on the wet earth where strong frenzied pads had striven to dig down to the treasures hidden below.



CHAPTER II

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THE HUNTERS

So this was the coming of Redpad to Knockdane. A whole book might be written about his early adventures, but as this is to be his history, I must pass them by to speak of those things which befell him as he grew older. It is sufficient to say that he entered on his career in the woods with two important assets—a good nose and a good mother; and these two will carry one of the Fur Folk far.



Vix kept her cub in an old rabbit burrow until he was old enough to hunt for himself. The first blood which Redpad ever drew was, strange to say, his own. One May evening he was playing by the mouth of the hole, when all at once a rustle in a bluebell bed attracted him. His instinct, which until now had lain dormant, awoke. He bunched his woolly legs together and bared his little milk teeth. The flower bells waved to and fro again—and Redpad cleared the intervening space with one bound, to land, pads extended, upon a sulky hedgehog. He crept whimpering back to his mother to lick his sore toes and meditate on one of the oldest saws of the Fox Folk, which runs: 'Never spring until your nose confirms your eyes and ears.'

The woods are at their loveliest in May, when the chestnut leaves spread out their cool fingers,

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and a filmy green veil of foliage is flung over the beeches' naked branches. In the long light evenings scores of rabbits grazed along the woodsides, and it was upon these that Redpad took his first lessons in hunting. He obeyed Vix and her signals implicitly, and therefore learned by imitation, which is the only form of pedagogy known in the woods.

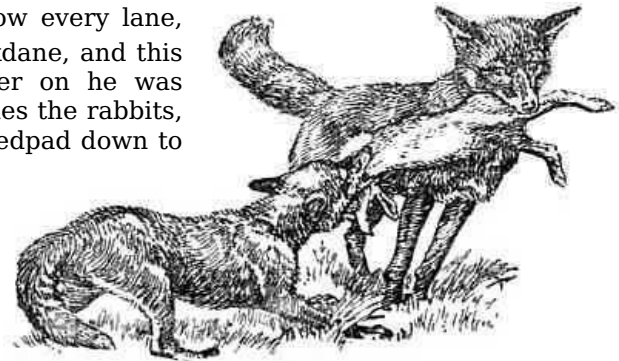


One evening when the sun shot long slanting shadows across Knockdane, the foxes stole out to hunt. Between the woods and the river lies a flat meadow, and thither Vix led Redpad, the latter aping the carriage of his mother's brush to the best of his ability. She made him crouch down in the thicket twenty yards from the fence, but she herself crept forward. Although the bushes were too thick to allow her to see into the field, yet the air was full of that peculiar silence which means that many hearts are beating and many ears listening close at hand. But the senses of a fox are very keen, and above the murmur of the river over its pebbles, Vix could hear eager lips snatching and nibbling at the coarse grass, and many feet splashing in the dew. She crept forward until she could peep into the field, and saw a dozen rabbits feeding there. A fox has two methods of completing a 'stalk'—the spring and the rush. Vix preferred to spring Thug-like upon her victim, but in this case the prey was too far away, and she resolved to rush it. Cramping her limbs together she dashed through the fence and leaped at the bunny she had marked. She might as well have pursued a shadow. A dozen pairs of feet stamped a warning, and a dozen scuts scuttled into the bushes. There was a twang as some reckless rabbit stubbed his nose against the wire, and then the patter of feet darting in every direction.

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Had Vix been hunting alone that evening she would have gone supperless, but as it happened, one rabbit chose that runway where Redpad crouched. It saw its danger too late and swerved—but the cub darted forward and rolled it over, almost turning a somersault in the vehemence of his rush. Vix came leaping through the bushes and tugged the kill away from him. He yielded it growling, but ultimately was permitted to demolish by far the largest share.

By such expeditions Vix taught her cub to know every lane, bank, and 'shore'^[1] in the country round Knockdane, and this knowledge was very useful to him when later on he was obliged to hunt and be hunted by himself. Besides the rabbits, there were rats and mice to be had. Vix took Redpad down to Kilree Bog, where there are deep ditches choked with furze and bramble, and banks tunnelled through by burrows. Sometimes they went rat hunting by Paddy Magragh's farmstead at moonrise; but this was dangerous country, for in the yard dwelt a certain long-legged yellow dog with a keen nose and ready tongue.



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[1] Shore = A covered drain.

September came, and in the fine warm weather the foxes spent most of their time above ground. Golden ragweed blazed in all the fields, and the swallows began to assemble for their journey south. Yellow sprays appeared among the dark leaves of the beeches, and Redpad attained proportions more in keeping with the size of his head. His white tagged brush was his great pride, his coat was shining with health, and he was remarkable for his forepads, which were many shades lighter than those of his mother; in fact, they were not black at all, but deep bay—hence his name. Not until he was full grown did his mother teach him how to hunt that swiftest and wariest of game—the hare. The stoat and the cat claim equal rights with the fox over rabbit, squirrel, and rat, but only the fox is strong enough to pull down the grown hare.

One hot dark night the foxes awoke just before moonrise. Vix stretched herself and whined, and Redpad raised his muzzle, which was curled round into his brush. The burrow was pitch dark, but he felt his mother glide past him, and he rose and followed her. Outside they paused and sniffed the west wind appreciatively—the scent was good.

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Vix turned down the hill, picking her way daintily through the fern and brambles, and Redpad followed. Fox language must consist of signs of the ears and whiskers, for it is noiseless. Nevertheless she conveyed to him whither they were bound. They trotted through Knockdane, scaled the high boundary wall, and gained the open country, which lay placid under the twilight of moonrise.

They hunted far afield that night. Two hours before daybreak they crossed the Killeen road and came to a wide brook. The moon was high in the sky, and every tree and bulrush on the bank was plainly visible. The sleepy cattle, chewing the cud under a willow, heaved themselves up with a grunt and herded together as the foxes loped past. They trotted up-wind in silence some hundred yards apart, ears alert to catch the least sound, brushes drooping. Then Vix suddenly put down her nose and broke into a canter, and as Redpad galloped after her, the warm wind bore the scent of hare to his nostrils.

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The meadows were dotted with tall thistles and ragweed, so that, running close to the ground, the foxes could not see far ahead, but one of the axioms of the Wild Folk is: hunt with your nose, kill with your teeth, and let your eyes take care of themselves. The scent led them across the road into a bog. Here Redpad, who led the chase, lost the trail at the edge of a dyke and was thrown out, but Vix leaped over and picked it up on the other side. They crossed the bog at full speed, scaring a silent heron, who was fishing knee-deep in a pool, almost out of his wits. On the other

side the trail led over a furze-clad hill, and here there were many other scents—fox, rabbit, badger and other hares—and the foxes separated. But Redpad, hunting to and fro like a beagle, worked out the line into the grass-lands again, and they crossed some stubbles where the sheep rushed together into a jostling stamping flock at their approach.

Hitherto the hare had kept her lead well, but now before dawn the scent clung persistently to the dewy grass, and the hunters began to gain ground. The chase bent round towards Knockdane once more, but the trail curved and twisted in turnings as intricate as those of a swallow. The 'false dawn' appeared over the mountains, and the air grew cooler. The foxes' tongues were out, and their flanks heaved, but they pressed on as keenly as ever, as first one and then the other picked up the failing scent.

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Several times the hare had doubled back a short way and then leaped aside to baffle her pursuers; but Vix was cunning, and by casting to right or left, never failed to nose out the line.

At last they came to a field not very far from their starting point, and here they checked at fault. Redpad turned to the right, but Vix snuffled her way down the loosely built stone wall which bounded the field. Suddenly a hare leaped up almost under her feet, and hurled itself at the wall. It clung to the top for an instant and then, slowly stiffening, dropped back into Vix's jaws. The chase was over.

Redpad galloped back across the field, his coat wet with dew and his tongue flopping out. Vix was already crouched over her kill. At his approach she glanced at him suspiciously, and for the first time in his life she growled at him—not the low lazy growl of an old vixen to her riotous cub, but the deep menacing rumble of one grown fox to another. For this, Redpad's first long chase and kill, was, so to speak, the day of his coming of age. Vix's instinct told her that the change had come. He was no longer the red, woolly cub who had tugged at her side, but a full-grown fox able to fend for himself, and also able to snatch the kill from her had he so chosen. Hence she snarled at him; and it was another proof that Redpad had passed the days of cubhood that he did not fly at her throat, as he assuredly would have done had any other fox used him so, but only hovered near to devour such morsels as she rejected. For it is one of the laws of the Fox Folk that a he-fox shall never attack a vixen to snatch her kill from her. It is a wise and good law, as are all those which are observed in the woods.

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When Vix had eaten her fill she rose and quenched her great thirst in a stream. But only a little remained for Redpad, and his hunger was scarcely appeased when they trotted back to Knockdane on the hill in the grey dawn.



CHAPTER III

[17]

FIRST BLOOD

Vix lay under a bush with her brush curled round her nose and eyes. Only her ears, ever wakeful and alert, kept watch while she slept. It was six o'clock, and a still misty morning with a heavy dew over everything. Close by lay Redpad with his nose on his pads; but he slept more lightly

than Vix, for he had eaten less than she had done after their hunting. Thus he was the first to wake at the sound of a yelp in the valley. He sat up with a whimper and looked at his mother. He expected her to leap up, but she only stretched out her forelegs lazily and closed her eyes again. Perhaps her heavy meal at dawn had blunted the senses which as a rule gave her such timely warning of danger. Redpad could neither see nor smell anything suspicious, but those noises had convinced him that all was not right. He cast a last look at Vix, and then trotted away among the bushes.



Presently he met an old badger plodding along. The badger was glancing back every now and then at the sound of a 'yow-yow-yow' in the valley; and by and by a hare scudded past in a panic. All the while the clamour was drawing nearer, and was interspersed with whip-cracking and shouts. It all sounded very loud and alarming to Redpad, who was accustomed to the stillness of the woods, and he decided to move on. He was cantering along a ride when suddenly, on turning a corner, he came full upon a horseman. The man stared at Redpad, and Redpad stared at the man for a few seconds, and then the former leaped into the bushes; but as he fled he heard a view-halloa behind him.

He galloped through thickets and crashed through briars, and as he ran he heard the pack give tongue on his line. Up till now he had not realised that the presence of the strangers in the wood boded anything evil to the Foxkind, but had simply avoided them because they were new to him and noisy. At last it dawned on him that he was pursued, and he experienced all the fears of the hunted. In his extremity he ran back to the thicket where he had slept, to seek his cunning mother's help. Several times he was obliged to go out of his way to evade hounds who were hunting up and down the wood; for it was the first time that many of the puppies had been out, and the experience had proved too much for their wits. Some four couple were unpleasantly close to Redpad's brush as he entered the thicket, but he dodged them, and ran straight to his mother's lair. It was still warm, but empty. Redpad made up his mind quickly. To his right the wood was less thick. Here and there grew an isolated oak or pine, and the hillside was covered with rocks and fern. A little way off there was a crag some forty feet high at whose foot rose a little stream. Redpad pattered up this to its source; and about six feet from the ground, half hidden by polypody ferns, found a cleft in the limestone. A rush and a scramble carried him into this retreat, which was just large enough to contain him; and the ferns had scarcely ceased to wave before the hounds broke out of the covert.



Redpad watched the huntsman put them into the patch of bracken. One worked one way, and one another, but they had no leader, for the old hounds were mostly down in the valley. And the longer they lingered, the staler grew the scent.

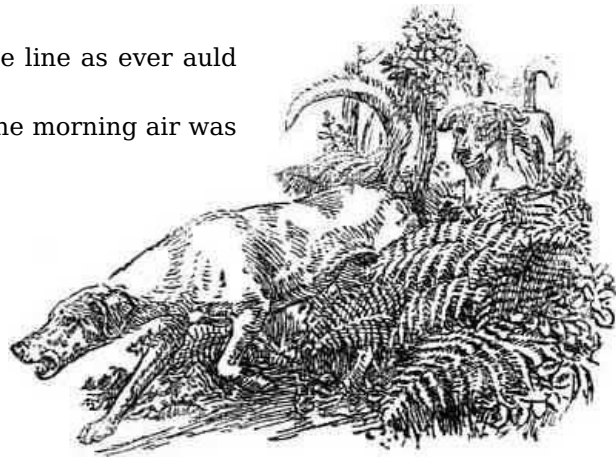
Suddenly a lemon-and-white hound on the bank of the stream lifted up his voice and announced that a fox had passed that way, and the rest rushed after him. Two men rode behind the hounds, and one said to the other, pointing out the pale one who had picked up the scent:

'That's a grand houn' in the makin'.'

'Ay,' said the other, 'an' he's as swate on a stale line as ever auld Pirate was before him. Hike! Hike to Ravager!'

The hounds hunted almost up to the crag, but the morning air was merciful, and drew the scent above their heads. However, the yellow puppy was not to be balked. There was a narrow ledge which ran obliquely from the ground to the cleft where Redpad lay hidden, and up this he climbed. Redpad was watching the rest of the pack from between the fern fronds, when a joyous bay above his head proclaimed that he was discovered.

Redpad leaped from his hiding-place and darted away with the leading hound not a dozen yards from his brush. There was no time to turn or try any tricks—he ran for his life. He led his pursuers right across Knockdane, but it seemed as though there was a galloping horse in every path and ride, and a hound in every brake. In his extremity he turned to the moor. He raced up the steep hillside through clumps of solemn fir trees, where the tits twittered as though there were no such thing as man, and through beds of ivy and fern.



At last the long slope of the Big Meadow lay before him, and he gathered all his remaining strength for the dash over this danger zone. By the hedge stood a horse and rider who halloaed as he passed, but to fox ideas a man was far less dangerous than the hounds behind, and he took no notice. He galloped across the field and entered the clump of trees in the middle. Suddenly another fox leaped up and went away in front of him. It was Vix. She knew well who were following their line, and cantered at her top speed; but she was still heavy and drowsy after her full meal at dawn, and presently Redpad, tired as he was, overtook and passed her.

The pack was very close behind as they entered the narrow belt of woodland at the top of the field; but the hounds were all alone, for the thick hedge had stopped the horses at the bottom of the hill, and they had been obliged to go a long way round. Redpad's tongue was out, for he had run far through the wood that morning, and, besides, he was very frightened. Just in front of him loomed the high demesne wall. Redpad had leaped upon it, when he suddenly noticed a thick

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bush of ivy which overhung the coping to his right, and instead of leaping down the other side he crept into the ivy and lay there panting.

A second later Vix came up. Twice she leaped and twice she fell back, but the third time she gained the coping just as the hounds came up. They crowded over the wall on the scent, Ravager leading, and poured down the hill on the other side after the little red figure half a field's length in front. They were so close to him that one spring would have landed Redpad in their midst, but he lay like a stone, and they passed him by.

'Head them off if ye can, Mike,' yelled the huntsman, galloping up. "'Tis an auld fox!'

'It was not, then! Didn't I see him cross the path below, an' he a cub?'

'Don't stand there arguin', ye fool! Nip round to the gate above, for she's bet, an' we've none too many in this country.'

They galloped away, and the 'yowl-yowl' of the pack died away over the moor.

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Redpad lay among the ivy until the morning mists cleared away; and the croon of the woodpigeons was the only sound which broke the stillness. Then he leaped from his sanctuary and crept down the hill. He sought for his mother high and low, through thickets and rocks, but he could not find her; and when the autumn moon rose he wandered to and fro and yelped for her, but she never came back again to Knockdane.

Nevertheless woodland grief is as short-lived as it is poignant, and before September had given place to October, Redpad hunted in Knockdane and robbed the Ballygallon hen-roosts contentedly alone.



CHAPTER IV

[23]

HOW THE DEBT WAS PAID

All the following winter Redpad hunted in Knockdane. Several times the hounds came and he had to run for his brush, but it takes a great deal to catch a hardy Irish fox who is sound in wind and limb. When summer came he picked up plenty of young rabbits and grew fat. Paddy Magrath learned to recognise him, and designated him 'the big red felly.' Although he had been deprived of his mother so early, yet he learned by experience and instinct, those best of teachers, how to overcome or circumvent the wiliest of the wood creatures for his own ends. He established himself in the upper gallery of a badger's 'set.' The badger had cleaned it out for his own winter use, but Redpad discovered it one day, and adopted it. The badger was seriously annoyed and endeavoured to oust the intruder by every means in his power, but Redpad went on the principle of bowing to the storm. When the badger offered to fight him he discreetly sought quarters elsewhere; but no sooner had the rightful owner triumphantly freed the burrow from the hated taint of fox, than he returned. At last the badger grew weary of the contest. He took up his residence at the bottom of the earth, and left Redpad in undisputed possession of the upper gallery.

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Winter came round for the second time, and by now Redpad had come to his full strength. Knockdane seldom sees hard frost or snow, but as a rule the south wind blows up a warm mist, and a steady rain drips through the leafless trees.

In December rabbit-traps were set in Knockdane, and Redpad was not long in finding them out. It was against regulations to set traps in the open, but Paddy Magrath, who was in charge of the trapping, was not particular; and Redpad's first introduction to a rabbit-trap was the snap of steel jaws on his toe. He wrenched himself free, but he walked lame for many a day afterwards, and he had learned his lesson. He soon found out that the trapper made his morning and evening rounds with fair regularity, and he arranged that

his own excursions should be made accordingly. He trotted round the traps just in front of Magragh, and when the latter arrived, more than half of them contained nothing but a severed rabbit's head. This happened two or three times, and then Magragh, who knew nearly as much about wood ways as Redpad himself, reversed the order in which he visited the traps, and presently caught the thief red-handed.

'Every dog has his day, me fine lad,' muttered Magragh, hurling a fir cone after the white-tagged brush; 'but I'm thinking the hounds will have theirs before so long.'

After that Magragh lifted his traps to the other side of Knockdane, for which Redpad had no great liking, as there were more farmsteads in the neighbourhood, and consequently more cur dogs.

During the fine weather about Christmas time Redpad left the main woods, and hunted and slept in the thick hedgerows by the river below Knockdane. They were full of rats and rabbits, but were not a very safe resort, for it is one of the Sabbath amusements of the youth of those parts to go out with dogs, and hunt any outlying fox in the hedges. Redpad could outrun any dog in the country, but his slender limbs were no match for the more sturdily built terriers and sheep-dogs at close grips, so perhaps it was just as well that a cold snap drove him back to the woods again.

While the frost was on the ground Redpad was hungry and robbed hen-roosts recklessly. One night twelve hens roosted in an outhouse with a defective latch at John Skehan's farm. The next morning when the owner went his rounds, three corpses lay on the floor, and the rest of the fowls had disappeared; all but one broody biddy under a basket.

'Ye may go afther the rest, ye divil,' said John Skehan to this survivor bitterly, and dismissed her with a kick. His words were fulfilled more literally than he expected. She alighted cackling beyond the farmyard wall—a red shadow sprang up silently, and John Skehan had a glimpse of a white-tagged brush heading towards Knockdane along a path strewn with feathers.

This was more than flesh and blood could stand, and Skehan set his dog after the thief. At first the dog gained on Redpad, who was weighted with the fowl, but presently the fox dropped his burden, and John Skehan chuckled at the thought that the robber would not profit by his raid. But Redpad increased his lead again, and then picked up another hen from behind a hedge. This happened twice, and every time he had to leave his booty to escape from his pursuer; but the third time he succeeded in carrying it in triumph to Knockdane. Afterwards it was found that those hens which he could not carry away he had deposited in caches along the path between Knockdane and the farm, in order to remove them at his leisure.

This misdeed hurried on the day of reckoning. John Skehan laid the tattered remains of his poultry before the proper authorities, and in consequence one day early in the year the hounds came to Knockdane. The best hound in the dog-pack that season was that Ravager who had been blooded on the morning when Vix had been hunted down, more than a year before. Redpad had met Ravager once before that winter, and had been obliged to resort to every trick he knew in order to circumvent that sagacious leader of the pack.

Of course Redpad found the 'earth' stopped when he returned home at daybreak, and he accordingly sought out a hiding-place which had already baffled his enemies several times. There was an ivy-grown fir tree which the wind had partially uprooted and flung against its fellows. It was quite easily climbed, and Redpad curled himself up in the ivy about fifteen feet from the ground. Here he slept very comfortably until noon, and then the familiar 'yowl-yowl' awakened him. For an hour or more he watched the hounds as they occasionally galloped past; and at last two men in pink coats rode along and halted under the very tree where he lay hidden. Presently a squirrel, passing through a neighbouring tree, looked down and caught sight of a fox sitting like an owl in an ivy bush. Nothing upsets a squirrel so much as curiosity, and a fox in a fir tree was something quite outside the experience of this particular one. He instantly desired to know a hundred things as to the why and wherefore of this strange occurrence, and in short was transformed into one tense note of interrogation.

He chattered tentatively—the fox did not move. Then he chattered defiantly, but still there was no sign. He hopped near and dared the fox to chase him, but Redpad knew better than to stir. Then the squirrel grew almost beside himself with passion. He kicked the branch on which he sat, he scolded until the woods rang, he jibbered with rage. Three jays came up to see what the fuss was about, and added their voices to the commotion. At last it grew so loud that even the dull human ears of the men under the tree remarked that something unusual was going on. They looked up—saw something red stir in the ivy and—'By Jove!' said the younger; and his halloa sent the squirrel leaping away.

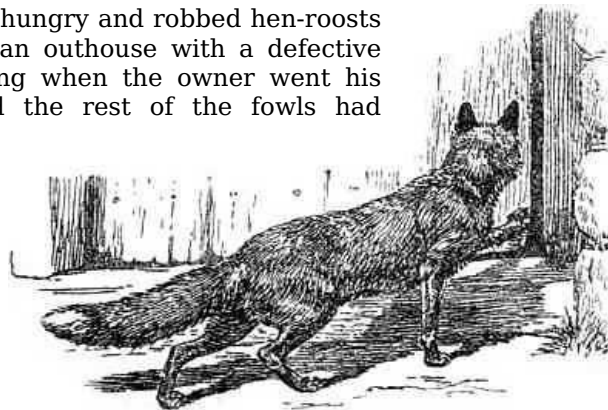
Five minutes later a council was held under the tree.

'Who will climb up and fetch him?' asked the master; but the 'boys' standing round only grinned and shook their heads.

Then old Paddy Magragh, who loved the foxes of Knockdane for the sake of the sport which the foxes begot, said: 'An' if I fetch him down to yez, will yer anner see that he has fair play and a good start?'



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'Yes,' said the master; 'you shall turn him down yourself.'

So Paddy began to ascend the tree with a sack in one hand and his coat wrapped round the other. When he was about half-way up the tree he came face to face with Redpad, and the fox looked up with a snarl, but he could retreat no further up the trunk. Magragh crept closer and held out his coat. Quick as lightning Redpad buried his double row of ivory fangs in it. But it was too thick for them to reach the hand inside, and Magragh, seizing him by the back of the neck, tumbled him into the sack.

Redpad was let loose in the middle of the Big Meadow. When the sack-mouth was opened, he went away like an arrow without a glance behind.

'Good luck to yez,' said Paddy Magragh, 'for, begob, 'tis a great hunt ye'll give them to-day.'

It is a true saying that a bagged fox will not run far, but this was not so with Redpad, for he knew every inch of the country, and besides, he had not been long enough in the sack to grow cramped. He flew over the short grass, and as he cleared the demesne wall he heard the pack open behind him. To the south lay Carricktriss with its rocks and heather blue in the distance; down in the plain there was Sutcliffe's Gorse, surrounded by wet fields where the horses would sink fetlock deep at every step, and hedges impenetrable to anything but a blackbird. However, Redpad had made up his mind where he was going, and set his mask resolutely towards the east. Four miles of meadow-land lie between Knockdane and Kiltorkan Hill, but Redpad had a map of the country in his head, and he knew that no covert in the country was a surer refuge for a hunted fox. He slipped across a grass field where a couple of hobbled goats bucketted away at his approach; and, taking just the same line which Vix, his mother, had chosen for her last race for life eighteen months before, he galloped over the bog.

Most of the fences were wide-topped banks with a 'grip'^[2] on the further side, and Redpad took them with an easy spring on and off. He was running with a good lead over a marshy field when he met with his first check at the highroad. A train of 'side cars,' 'ass cars,' and pedestrians, nearly a quarter of a mile long, were slowly proceeding to a funeral at Ballycarnew. Redpad could not cross the road under their feet, and was obliged to make a long detour which brought the hounds considerably nearer his brush—so much nearer indeed that presently he ascended a little knoll covered with furze to see if a certain drain was open. Although he did not know it, Vix in her extremity had also tried to reach this hiding-place, and she too had found it blocked. But Vix had been too exhausted to run any further and had turned to face the hounds in the field beyond, whereas Redpad was still fresh and with strength to spare.

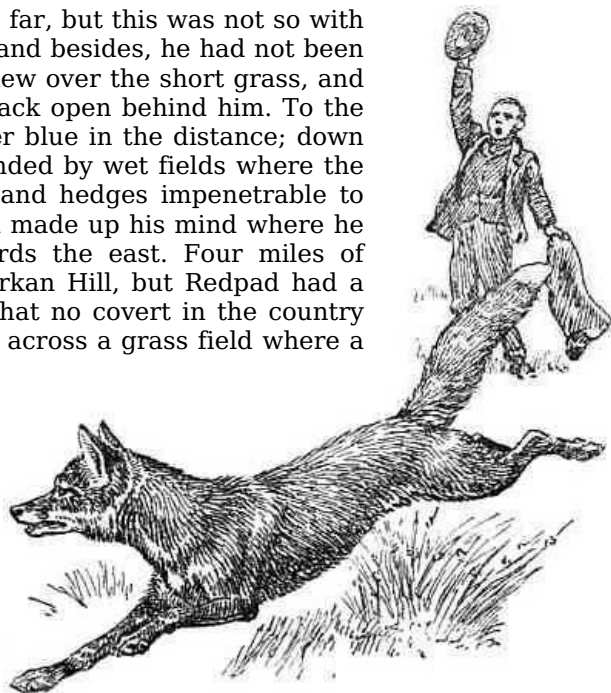
[2] Ditch.

He looked back at the pack working out his line in the fields below him, and saw that Ravager was at their head. The horsemen had been stopped by a wire fence, and were following far behind. For the first time Redpad felt a little anxious. The scent was evidently good that day, and Kiltorkan was still more than two miles ahead. He quickened his pace and tried the old old trick of running through a herd of cattle in order to foul the line. This checked the hounds for a moment, but Ravager cast forward, and presently they came on faster than ever.

Redpad was still running strongly, but his tongue was out and he was coated with mud. He skirted two or three farmsteads, forded a brook where he paused to gulp a mouthful of water, and then climbed a long gradual slope. At the top he paused and looked back. He saw that Ravager with two couple of the best hounds was working some fifty yards ahead of the rest of the pack, and that some distance in the rear rode a man in pink. Kiltorkan was about half a mile away, but at its base ran a thin shining line of railroad. The Fur Folk of Kiltorkan care little for the noisy, fussy train which pants down to Waterford twice a day. They have found out long ago that it is only formidable in its own place, and is hedged in in some mysterious way by the wire fence on either side of the embankment.

Whether Redpad had any preconceived plan in his head as he raced to the railway I cannot say, but as soon as he climbed the bank on to the metals he heard a low roar, and round the distant curve the mail train swung into view. The hounds were now very close behind, for the pace for the last half-mile had been terrific. A cunning scheme came into Redpad's brain. He raced madly up the track towards the oncoming train. Belching forth smoke, and shaking the ground with the thunder of its rushing wheels, it had fewer terrors for him than the hunters behind. It was a hundred yards off—fifty—thirty—Redpad leaped aside and let the roaring monster hurtle past him, but the hounds, running blindly on the hot scent, never saw the danger. As Redpad leaped down the embankment the engine-driver saw what would occur and jammed the brakes to the groaning wheels, but it was too late. There was one yell, which rose above the clatter of the train, and then all was over.

Redpad struggled up the hill with his heart thudding against his ribs. At the summit there was a cairn of stones strong enough to defy pick and spade. Before slipping inside he looked back. The remainder of the pack were huddled together in the field below the railway. The train was at a



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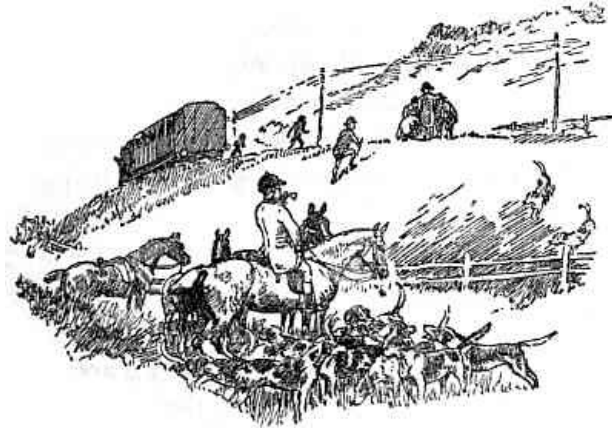
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standstill, and a group of men stood on the track looking at something lemon-and-white which lay without moving at their feet.

Redpad knew that he had nothing more to fear that day. If he had been a philosopher he might have reflected upon the saw that 'every dog has his day'; but as he was only a fox he crept into Kiltorkan Cairn to pant and bite thorns out of his pads.



CHAPTER V

[34]

THE SHEEP SLAYER

The temptation came late in February, for that is famine time in the country-side. The rabbits were alert, and it was difficult to stalk birds successfully when the leaves were off the trees. In three days Redpad had only picked up a starved rat and a sick pigeon, all skin and bone, and on the fourth day he caught nothing at all. His sides had fallen in, and his haunch bones stood out. At last he went to the moor; but although he hunted there for a long while, he did not even see a field-mouse. The sun had set when he returned to Knockdane, and the stars came out, one by one, in the steely sky. It was going to freeze. Redpad jumped a wall into a little field, where withered fern grew more plentifully than grass, and across which the sheep stampeded. These were the ewes with young lambs, and they wheeled into a jostling flock at his approach. Redpad never looked at them as he skirted the field. He was well used to sheep, but so far, in his opinion, their only use was to foul his line for the hounds. Also, even had he been so minded, he could scarcely pull down a lamb under the hoofs of the dams, for collectively the old ewes were formidable. Therefore he did not give them a second thought until he came to the far side of the field, when a little cry in the fern made him pause with pad upraised. He snuffed his way cautiously under the wall; and there, sheltered by a boulder from the cold wind, lay a newly dropped lamb. It was one of a couple, but being sickly, it had not risen and followed the dam to the rest of the flock as its fellow did. It was too weak to stand, and could only lie and shiver as the fox crept up. Redpad was ravenous—starving, in fact—and far and near the countryside was empty in the night. The old ewe was not at hand; nothing watched him but the hungry stars overhead. He seized the lamb by the shoulder, and it did not even bleat as he swung it over the wall, and cantered with it to Knockdane. That night, for the first time for many days, Redpad was full-fed, and slept soundly.

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The theft might have remained undiscovered, but unluckily the sheep belonged to Jack Skehan; and twice a day, during the lambing time, he went along a certain path in Knockdane to visit the flock. The next morning, when on his usual round, his dog ran on ahead, and presently returned carrying the woolly leg of a lamb. On the path were unmistakable traces of Redpad's last night's meal; and worst of all, in the soft earth where he had drunk from a puddle, were the plain prints of pads.

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There was no doubt who had done the deed.

Jack Skehan himself was not kindly disposed to the Hunt, and he threw out dark hints as to his future plans. However, he had no opportunity of carrying these into effect, for Redpad did not visit the sheep again after his one theft. What with one thing and another, his luck began to turn. He picked up two or three snared rabbits and other trifles, and the press of famine was over for a time.

However, a week later, he was patrolling the fir wood at the top of Knockdane. It was a still night, mild for the season, with a crescent moon struggling behind a mass of little sheep-backed clouds. Presently he heard a businesslike patter of feet on the fir needles, and snuffing, that his nose might confirm his ears in correct fox fashion, he winded a dog. Redpad hated dogs only one degree less than men, and slipped quietly



away into the shadows. The footsteps paused undecidedly at the spot where he had turned aside, then passed on.

Shortly afterwards, Redpad was scaling the demesne wall, when a distant rumble of hoofs startled him. The ground slopes away gently from the end of the wood, over the fields, and then rises again to meet the moor. Hence, from the wall, Redpad could look down into the field where the sheep dwelt. He saw the whole flock—a grey mass in the twilight—collected in a corner; and listening, it seemed to him that he heard a shrill yelp. However, it was not repeated, and as he winded nothing unusual, for the night air was damp and chilled the scent, he continued his way. Night after night he went to the moor by the same path—over the wall, and across the little field where the sheep grazed among the stones. Here he suddenly crossed a line from which the Fur Folk usually turn—the line of fresh blood; and among the dwarfed gorse he found the body of a young lamb. At that moment the sheep stampeded, and one lamb, breaking from the flock, bounded hither and thither among the rocks with the agility of despair. As it leaped, something small and dark sprang beside it. There was a wicked snarl, a piteous stifled bleat, and the lamb was dragged headlong into the furze. Redpad waited no longer, but cantered back to the wood. If something was worrying the sheep, this was no safe place for him.

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When Jack Skehan came up at eight o'clock, two lambs were missing. He called a conclave of neighbours, and they sat in judgment upon Redpad's real and supposed delinquencies. Jack Skehan, who was very wrathful, purposed to put a notice to 'foxhunters and others' in the local press, and resort to drastic measures by means of strychnine; but the rest of the council shook their heads, for they had no wish to banish the hounds from Knockdane. Ultimately they all went down to consult Paddy Magrath, whose reputation for wisdom was deservedly great where animals were concerned. Paddy was smoking in his cabin, and after he had heard all that they had to say, he said: "Twas a dog, not a fox, took the lamb lasht night, I'm thinking.' And this opinion he held to in spite of all arguments against it.



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Nothing occurred that night, and the following day Paddy Magrath went alone to the field on the hill, and searched it thoroughly. He came upon the carcase of the lamb in the gorse, and he grinned, for he knew the ways of the Fur Folk, and their law, better than most of the men round Knockdane. The next day, however, there was great consternation. Jack Skehan's flock was untouched, but Dinny Purcell had left his ewes in a field adjoining the wood, and a young lamb lay torn and dragged upon the grass. The remains were taken triumphantly to Paddy Magrath, and the foxlike print of the fangs displayed; and secretly even his conviction was shaken, although he declared stoutly that it was a dog and not a fox that had done the deed.

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With one accord it was decreed that poison should be laid down; and Jack Skehan went to Skelagh and bought strychnine, ostensibly to poison rats. Paddy Magrath had manfully opposed this scheme, for besides the fact that every fox hunted from Knockdane meant ten shillings in his pocket, he had 'stopped' the woods for twenty years, and took more pride in his foxes than he cared to own.

'If ye'll do as I tell ye,' he declared, 'ye'll lay the mate on a bit o' paper, an' if it's a fox, he'll never touch it at all, for he'd be afeard o' the paper, but if it's a dog he'll ate it.'

And this was the utmost they would grant him. Indeed, if they had believed him, he could not even have extorted this concession.

They 'doctored' some rabbit paunches with strychnine cunningly enough, and laid them seductively in the field. It was just before dark when they returned home, so they did not see how the magpie fluttered down a few minutes later, and spying the bait, sidled up to it. He did not altogether like the white paper, but he was hungry, and a paunch was a paunch. He picked it up gingerly and carried it off, for a magpie does not care to eat where he has killed—he is too accustomed to traps. Even an egg is impaled on his bill and conveyed away. Luckily for this magpie, however, it so happened that when he was flying into the wood he accidentally let the choice morsel fall out of sight among the trees. Therefore, although he went supperless to bed, he was fortunate in that he roosted in the branches that night, instead of lying claws upwards on the ground. Redpad found that paunch two days afterwards and ate a piece; but something peculiar about the morsel—in its taste or odour—warned him, and although he was very sick for some hours, yet he eventually recovered.



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There was great jubilation the next morning when it was found that some of the poison had been taken; but the triumph was short-lived, for the following night another lamb had disappeared. The next evening Jack Skehan took his old gun and the little whippet-nosed dog who worked for him among the sheep all day, and sat up to watch. The dog sat beside him on a stone, and when he was not watching his master for orders, he gazed serenely above the heads of the sheep. Nothing, however, came, and at six o'clock, tired and chilled, Jack Skehan went home.

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The poison was still there, but Redpad, made wary by his former experience with the rabbit paunch, passed it by, and besides, the mysterious rustling of the white paper underneath scared

him. The real sheep slayer never touched it, for he seemed to prefer warm meat to cold.

On the two following nights again nothing was taken; but on the third morning news was brought that an older lamb had been killed in Jack Skehan's flock, and that the carcass had not been removed, so Paddy Magrath went up to the field.

'Bedam! I'll have the poison thick in every field on the farm, and put up the wire besides,' stormed Jack Skehan. 'Is al' me sheep to be worried on me that the gentry may hunt their dirty foxes over me land? I'll have ivery mother's son o' thim prosecuted.'

'Now I'll go bail,' said Paddy Magrath, who had picked up the carcass, 'that 'twas a dog had this killed.'

'An' what dog in this country would touch a sheep, an' they wid 'em all day?' demanded Garry, Jack Skehan's young brother.

'Where have ye that felly o' yours shut at nights?' asked Paddy Magrath, looking at the little narrow-headed cur who slunk at Skehan's heel. [42]

'Shure he slapes in the cowhouse, and I lets him out in the mornin'. But he'd never harm a sheep—I rared him meself.'

Paddy Magrath spat discreetly. 'I'd have me cowhouse door mended, an' the window blocked,' said he.

'Are ye sayin' that it was a dog all the while?' demanded Skehan irately.

'I do not. Maybe 'twas a fox took one or two—the first was a little small one, an' he sick-like. But this is a dog, shure enough.' And he looked again at Jack Skehan's sheep-dog, who was licking his paws thoughtfully.

'Well, I'll have the poison down again, an' that widout the paper. Shure there's enough o' talkin'. If there's another lamb worried on me, begob, but I'll poison every fox in Knockdane,' grumbled Jack Skehan.

Paddy Magrath said nothing, for he was crafty, and the Knockdane foxes were near to his heart and his pocket, but that night, after the bait had been laid, he went to the field, and, taking the carcass of the dead lamb, he put in enough strychnine to poison a dozen dogs or foxes either, and left it by the gate. [43]

'It's a bit o' a risk,' he mumbled, 'but shure, if I don't have the right lad cot to-night, Jack Skehan is that bitter with the Hunt he'll not lave a fox in the woods, what wid the traps an' the poison.'

That night the hunger pain hurt Redpad sorely again; and if he had reflected upon the subject, he might have envied the squirrels, who, during that hard March weather, eked out a living upon germinating beechmast, or the badgers who dug up and ate the acrid tubers of the wild arum. But the Fur Folk do not possess the faculty of comparing their own lot with that of others. Perhaps they are all the happier that they lack it.

It was after midnight, and the moon was not long risen, when Redpad trotted by the gate of the field where the sheep were. He had no idea of taking a lamb. They were all able to run well by now, and he had too much respect for the hoofs of the old ewes to attack the entire flock. He crept under the gate (there be those who say that a fox will not do this, but the hedgerow rabbits whom the fox stalks know better) and then he found the carcass of the lamb. His recent experience with the rabbit paunch had made him wary, otherwise he might have eaten of it, for he was very hungry; but to his sharp senses something seemed not altogether right—perhaps the taint of human hands was still upon the food—and he passed on. For two hours he hunted in the fields, but the meagre results only whetted his appetite. Then he recollected the dead lamb, and desire for one full meal overcame his caution, and he returned to the place.



The moon, which had been obscured by sullen clouds, here brightened a little, and he caught sight of the lamb's carcass in the fern, gleaming in the dusk. He was hurrying up to it, when suddenly, by a wandering night breeze, he winded dog, and at the same instant the clouds broke entirely from the moon. Redpad stood petrified, for not thirty yards away, his back turned and his foot on the dead lamb, crouched Jack Skehan's tried sheep-dog. He looked up, and snarled at the sheep who stared fearfully at him. Evidently he was devouring his last night's kill, before attacking the flock. As Redpad watched, the dog tore off a mouthful and swallowed it. Then he growled again, and Redpad slunk silently away. The dog was lightly built, and smaller than he was, but he was thin and weak, and in no condition to fight. The Fur Folk seldom contest a kill, and besides, in Redpad's mind, dogs were so intimately connected with men that he was by no means certain that a man might not lurk under the wall. But as he went there was a half-strangled, hysterical yell behind him. The dog suddenly leaped up, and rushed madly towards the gate, as though in his terror his first instinct was to run home. His agonised eyes, fear-stricken, glinted white in the moonlight, and there was foam on his jowl. Redpad took the wall in one bound, but as he sprang he heard a dull thud, as the dog, leaping blindly in the extremity of his frenzy, struck the top bar of the gate, and fell back struggling convulsively. [44]

Redpad ran as he had seldom run before, for he believed that the other pursued him, and that the mysterious madness would be upon him too if he were overtaken. But the hideous sounds which [45]

tore the silence of the night behind gradually grew fainter, and before he had crossed the demesne wall the dog lay still and stiff beside the torn lamb. There Paddy Magrath found him at dawn, and went home chuckling; and there also, a little later, his owner found him, and buried him secretly in the corner of a turnip field.

For obvious reasons Jack Skehan did not publish the story of that night abroad; but in the country round it was noticed ever after that his lambing ewes were kept in the home-field; and also that from this time onwards he ceased to be accompanied everywhere by his favourite dog. Until recently, indeed, the identity of the sheep killer was only known to three persons—to Skehan himself, who never divulged it; to Paddy Magrath, who kept the secret faithfully, and only revealed it long afterwards in order, on another occasion, to clear the name of the foxes of Knockdane; and lastly to Redpad. But for a long while the latter avoided the place; for in his memory dwelt the recollection of that strange death which men deal to those who break the primitive law which ordains that man is placed in dominion, not only over the beasts who eat his bread, but over the Wild Folk of the hills and woods, and that his dependents and possessions are sacred, and not to be harmed with impunity.

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CHAPTER VI

[47]

FROM KILMANAGH TO KNOCKDANE

From Kilmanagh Hill the highlands stretch north and south mile after mile, with here and there the grey head of a limestone crag protruding through the heather. In the less rugged spots the peasants have collected the stones and piled them up, so as to enclose a tiny half-acre field with a wall as strong and high as a rampart; but for the most part the country lies derelict in moor and bog—the home of the curlew, plover and hfox. It is a weird land this, which in rockbound loneliness looks out over the cultivated plain. From its southern limits can be seen the sea, a pale streak in the distance; and often all day long the Atlantic mists settle down and wrap the hills in a chill pall until sunset, when the sun breaks out and the moor glows beneath him like a wet pebble. But to-night the sun had long since disappeared behind the cone of Galtymore, and the stars had taken his place, until they in their turn were drowned by the January moon which rose, polished with frost, above the highest of the eastern tiers of mountains. The western slopes of Kilmanagh were still hidden in deepest shadow, but on the east every bush and heather tuft was visible, and the faces of the limestone boulders glistened with rime.

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A shadow glided through the bushes, and sprang upon a rock. The moonlight shone on the thick brush and ruddy pads which Knockdane knew so well. But Knockdane was ten miles away over the moors. What brought Redpad to Kilmanagh that winter's night? Two days before he had left his home covert, and travelled after sunset across the open country to the foot of these wild highlands which lie some four miles to the south of Knockdane. He had travelled along leisurely, hunting as he went, and sleeping under some rock or bush. He did not know why he thus wandered through an unknown country. He only felt a desire which he could not gratify—the desire which awakens earliest in the Fox People—the desire of Love. No matter how keenly January frosts bite or January sleet showers blow, they leave their native haunts, and wander away to seek a mate. Perhaps some mysterious hereditary instinct led Redpad to the hill, for on just such a night his sire had left the highlands and come to Knockdane three years before.

To-night Redpad climbed to the highest peak of Kilmanagh Hill to see the moon rise; and there,

because he was solitary and the Love Desire so strong, he raised his long muzzle and yelped out his loneliness and longing. A sheep-dog below heard and answered with a deep 'row-row-row!' of disgust at the chain which prevented him rambling from his home.

'Yap! yap! yap!' shrilly and insistently Redpad, silhouetted against the moon, yelped a love song and challenge in one.



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LONELINESS AND LONGING

From the shadowed side of Kilmanagh rose a call less loud and defiant than his own. Redpad swung round, ears cocked, pad raised, but the still cold air of mid-January was silent but for the sheep-dog's bark. He whimpered a little and then plunged into the heather. The hillside was very dark, but Redpad's nose was keen and told him plainly who had passed that way. Where the main peak of Kilmanagh meets the more gradual slopes which rise up to meet it from the plain, is a little ravine, and here the night air bore a faint unmistakable taint to his nostrils—fox. Among the shadows ahead, his eyes, catlike, accustomed to see in the gloom, detected something which appeared more solid than a shadow. He approached it cautiously, while a low growl arose in his throat. A pair of ears twitched and then slid into the bushes. Redpad put his nose down and hunted out the trail as carefully as ever he had done that of hare or rabbit. By and by he came to a clearing. The moon had just risen above the sloping shoulders of Kilmanagh, and to fox eyes the hill was light. Here his quest ended, for not six yards from him sat the Belovèd. Her coat was as red as that of a winter squirrel, her brush was as thick as a pine sapling, and she was as desirable as a sunny evening in May. Therefore because she satisfied Redpad's longing he called her the Belovèd on the spot, and indeed he never knew her by any other name. He came forward cautiously, for he doubted what his reception might be, leaping this way and that and dropping on his forepads like a cub inviting a game. But the Belovèd had also been very solitary. She too had yelped the story of her loneliness to the moon. She trotted forward and touched Redpad caressingly, and then playfully rolled him over with her muzzle. They romped together for a few minutes, and either gave and received sundry love nips, and then they trotted down the hill in company.

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The sheep-dog was silent, but a snipe rushed up crying 'kek-a-kek.' Rabbits were playing among the furze, and there Redpad and his Belovèd hunted together until the moon began to sink, and some wet clouds from the west rose over her face, bringing warm rain.

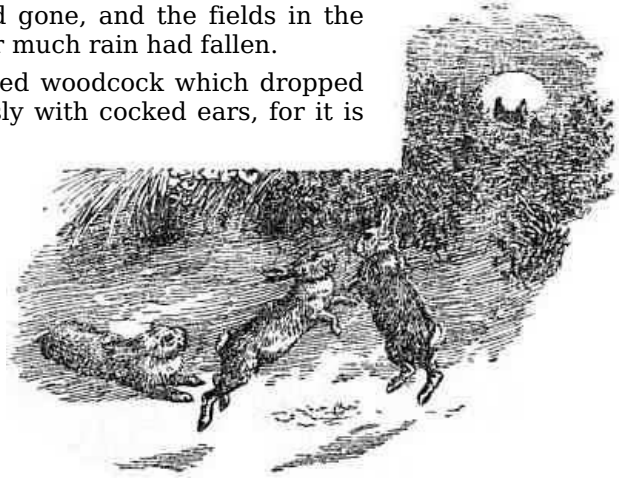
It still wanted some two hours till dawn when Redpad and his love came back up the hill, full-fed and contented. The Belovèd trotted in front, and her mate followed some little way behind. Suddenly the narrow goat-path took a sharp turn, and they came full upon an enormous fox. He stood half an inch higher at the shoulder than Redpad, and his coat was as grey as a badger's. He

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bared his teeth a little at the sight of Redpad, but most of his attention was concentrated upon the Belovèd. He crept forward with his long neck stretched out and touched her red shoulder. Redpad bared his double row of ivory fangs and the hair along his spine rose. In another moment he would have flown at his rival's throat, had not the Belovèd, as is the custom of the fox-kind, taken the quarrel upon herself. She flew at the Grey One with a fierce growl, and made her teeth meet in his flank. He would have fought with Redpad while he had a pad left to stand upon, but by the law of the Woods a fox may not attack a vixen in the love season. He felt the Belovèd's strong jaws close like a trap behind his ears, and fled. The vixen trotted back slowly to her lair, glancing back now and then over her shoulder and growling softly at the recollection of her recent skirmish and many other things. And Redpad, her accepted suitor, followed.

The afternoon was dull and raw. The frost had gone, and the fields in the plain were studded with pools of flood water, for much rain had fallen.

Redpad in his lair was awakened by a frightened woodcock which dropped down just in front of him. He sat up suspiciously with cocked ears, for it is not the way of woodcock after a clear night to shift their quarters undisturbed. There was a faint halloo at the top of the hill: 'Try-Tra-i-y.' Redpad slipped silently from the warm lair, and the Belovèd followed him, for they both knew the meaning of that sound. Suddenly there was a joyous 'yow-yow-yow.' 'Hike! hike!' came the shout again; and Redpad trotted down the hill, for although the heather hemmed him in, he knew well enough what was forward on the summit.



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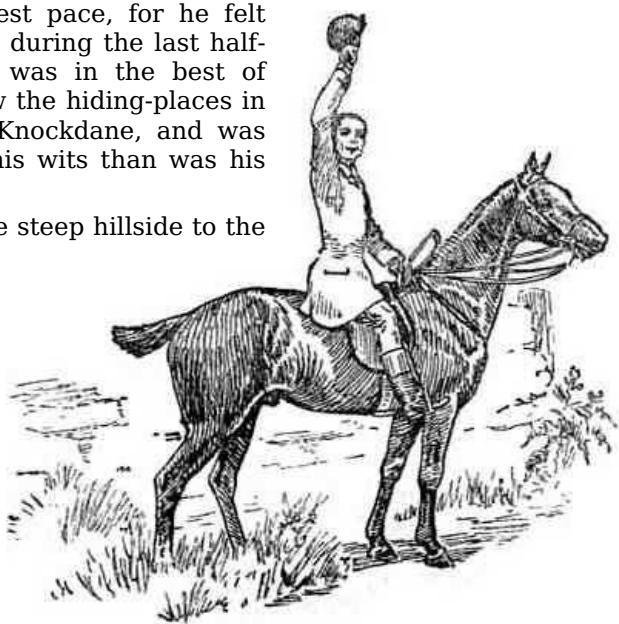
There is a low stone wall at the foot of Kilmanagh which separates a thick gorse brake from the fields, and Redpad squatted down behind it to watch. The hounds were gradually working down the hill. There was a man on a horse standing at a corner of the field, and all at once he waved his cap above his head. The Grey One was slinking down the fence. He had crossed the first field when a couple of hounds gave tongue close by. His heart failed him—he swung round to the covert again, leaped over Redpad with a snarl, and galloped back up the hill. The hounds broke into the field on his line, wheeled like a flock of plover, and came straight to where Redpad lay. It was time to be stirring—a strange covert is no refuge to a hunted fox. Redpad cantered gracefully a little further up the fence, and just as he leaped upon the wall in full view of the watcher in the field, some erratic puff of wind told him that his Belovèd had just passed that way up the hill to safety. He wavered for a moment, then the pack spoke again and he leaped. But he had not gone a hundred yards before the hounds gave tongue behind him, and a distant voice proclaimed: 'Gone away—awa-a-y—awa-a-y!'

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From the very start Redpad knew where he was going, and set his mask towards Knockdane on the hill ten miles away. At first the fields he crossed were small, and cropped as bare as a billiard-table by starveling goats and sheep, while between them rose walls of loosely piled stone, five feet high and so broad that a horse could walk along the top. More than one horseman turned home that day with a red bandage round his horse's fetlock, for Kilmanagh stones are sharp.

Two miles slipped by. Redpad kept up his best pace, for he felt instinctively that he had not increased his lead during the last half-mile, and the scent was good that day. He was in the best of condition and ran strongly, but he did not know the hiding-places in this part of the country as well as those of Knockdane, and was obliged to trust more to his legs and less to his wits than was his custom.

Presently he turned to the right and climbed the steep hillside to the moor. There was a big rabbit hole in his path into which he tried to creep, but just below the surface it narrowed, and he was obliged to back out with his coat full of dust and several precious moments lost. He could see the hounds—a pied patch on the fields below him. At that distance they appeared to be crawling along, but as a matter of fact they were racing at top speed. Just behind them rode a horseman on a great black horse, but the rest were further behind.



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Redpad ran on steadily, for he could see Knockdane with its crest of trees in the distance. The moor was boggy, and he crossed patches of quagmire which trembled even under his light weight. A big grey heron burst out of a pool and swung



skywards, and the snipe sprang up in every direction; but Redpad never paused and the hounds never checked, until the men began to wonder if their horses would hold out, and took what short cuts they might.

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Three miles further on the moor sloped down to the tilled lands again. Redpad was cantering along a bohireen^[3] when he suddenly came full upon a countryman mending a wall. The man sprang up and shouted, and a big yellow sheep-dog darted from his heel. Redpad cleared the fence at a bound, and went away over a turnip-field with the collie not half a dozen yards behind. The field was a wide one, and although he succeeded in shaking off his pursuer on the other side, yet the sudden effort told upon him. His tongue was out, and now and then his gallop dropped into a hurrying trot.

[3] Narrow lane.

By now he was in fields which he knew well, and tried all the familiar hiding-places one after another. There is a 'shore' by Kilmacabee and a badger set in Charlesfort Wood; but the rain had filled the former with water, and the latter was blocked up.

The early January evening began to close in when the home covert was still three miles away, but the scent lay stronger than ever on field and bog. Redpad was spattered with mud and his breath came in gasps, but he ran on gallantly over ploughed fields where the plover rose screaming at his approach, and over pastures where the sheep stampeded. Once he met a donkey-cart crawling down a road. The old woman in it screamed and waved her shawl at his approach, and obliged him to turn a hundred yards out of his way, but even a hundred yards is far to go when limbs are weary, and there is withal the certain knowledge that the pursuers are gaining ground. Nevertheless he could see Knockdane more and more clearly, and knew that there was only another half-mile, and the river to be forded, before he could lie down in the old 'earth.' Looking back he saw that the hounds, though tired themselves, were coming on faster than ever, and he knew that he must run his best if he would arrive at the ford by the old willow before them. His heart thudded as though it would burst its way through his ears, and his famous ruddy pads felt as though each were bound to the earth. More than once he lay down with closed eyes, and had he been a soft-hearted fox or a vixen he would have died there and then; but as he was as gallant a fox as ever ran before the hounds to a ten mile point, he rose stiffly and stumbled aimlessly forward again.

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As he crossed the brow of the hill from whence the slope fell steeply down to the river, the sun came out over the shoulder of Knockdane and shone wanly on the flood pools in the meadows. The mists were already rising, and the great solemn woods on the other side lay in shadow. The waterhens feeding on the river bank scuttled away as he limped down to the water's edge.

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The river was in full flood and rushed hurraing seawards, carrying foam flakes and branches of trees in its coffee-coloured current. It filled its banks to the brim, and not a ripple was left to tell where the ford had been. The willow tree which grew beside the spot was partially uprooted and drooped into the water with its branches festooned with flotsam. Redpad paused bewildered, for never before had this ford failed him at his need. Just then the

hounds broke over the brow of the hill and tore down the slope. Redpad saw them, and determined to make a desperate bid for freedom. Very slowly and stiffly he crept out along the horizontal trunk of the willow, and so into the smaller branches above the water, where a hound could not venture. The pack came up and crowded baying round the tree. Now and then one tried to follow along the trunk, but they were less nimble than a fox and slipped back into the water. Redpad lay crouched flat with his teeth bared, and no hound could reach him from below.

Presently two men rode down and dismounted from their tired horses. One was the man on the black horse who had ridden so well that day, and the other was the huntsman. The latter tried to climb out along the tree to Redpad, but it swayed so perilously that he was forced to return.

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'It's no use, sir,' he said. 'I am afraid we can't reach him there. Shure, it's a pity for the hounds not to chop him afther all, afther the way they hunted him.'

'It was as fine a hunt as ever I saw,' answered the other. Then looking at Redpad's half-closed eyes, he added: 'But that fellow will never run again—he is dead beat, and it is a pity they did not run into the poor brute back yonder where he lay down. At all events he has cheated us of his brush, for he was as plucky a fox as I ever saw.'

With this, his requiem, in his ears, Redpad stretched out his muzzle on his pads and closed his eyes, as he had done many a morning in the old earth in Knockdane. The light of the after-glow lit up the bright coats of the two men and the tired hounds behind. They were only a few yards away, yet he knew that they could not reach him, and therefore paid no further attention to them. The water lip-lapped round the willow, and the roar of the flood deepened as twilight fell, and the night wind shivered in the aspens. A waterhen called, and a flight of wild duck, quacking softly, flew over the hill. Redpad straightened himself slowly—then he gave a lurch, and dropped into the water. The broad stream caught him, and swept him out into the midcurrent. He struggled a little, but the eddies bound down each tired limb, and the ripples broke against his closed eyes. The water, which had so nearly cut short his life in early days, was a good friend to him now. As his body was borne down the misty stream, away from the clamour of the hounds into the august

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silences of the night, the waves lapped gently over his head; and under their kisses, his spirit drifted quietly out to the Grey Fields of Sleep where the souls of the Fur Folk go.

There is no rain known there nor any sun, and no one is ever weary or hungry or afraid, but they lie wrapped in warm mists in a country where there is no noise nor bright light burning. They sleep on there and take their rest, knowing neither joy nor grief nor hope nor disappointment until time and space shall be no more.

The moon rose over the mountains, and the flood sang joyfully on its way to the tumbling waves in the estuary.



THE STORY OF FLUFF-BUTTON THE RABBIT

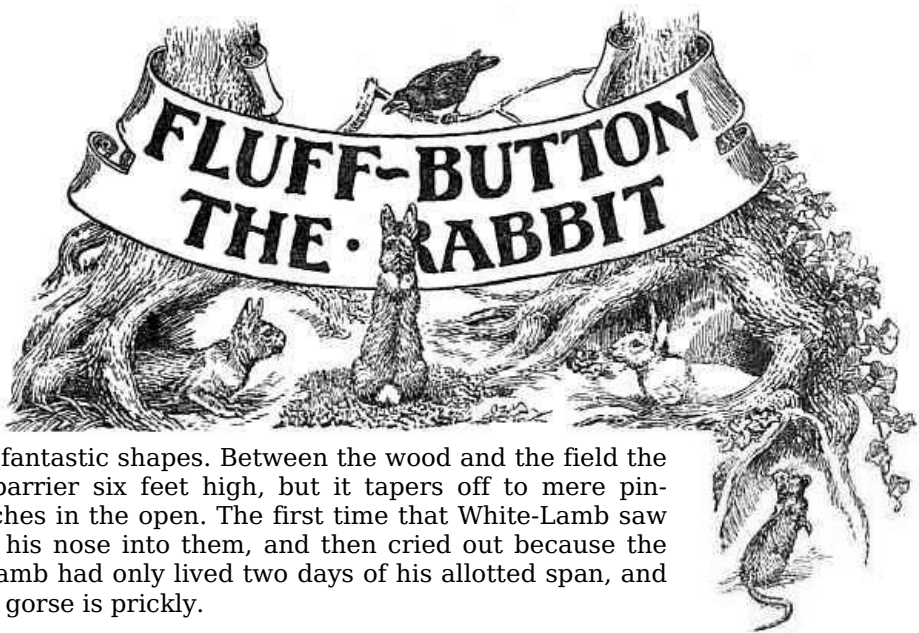
CHAPTER I

[63]

HOW FLUFF-BUTTON CRIED QUILTS

A lane winds steeply through Knockdane Wood; and at the top of the hill where the trees grow sparsely, there is a gate leading to a furze-grown field. The grass is cropped short and thick by generations of sheep and rabbits; and the slopes are dotted with gorse bushes which they have

nibbled into all kinds of fantastic shapes. Between the wood and the field the gorse forms a prickly barrier six feet high, but it tapers off to mere pin-cushions of eighteen inches in the open. The first time that White-Lamb saw the bushes, he stubbed his nose into them, and then cried out because the thorns pricked. White-Lamb had only lived two days of his allotted span, and had not yet learned that gorse is prickly.



There were a score of sheep in the field, and each of them had her white lamb (or maybe two) running beside her; but only one White-Lamb comes into this story, because he was the only one who had anything to do with the course of events in Knockdane Wood, and even his influence was only indirect through Fluff-Button the Rabbit. Fluff-Button was a great hero in Knockdane, as any of the Fur Folk can tell you; but he would never have grown up at all if it had not been for White-Lamb, as this story will relate.

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In the year of which I write, March and April changed places; for although the human calendars said that it was March, and in the woods the catkins had not shrivelled on the hazels, yet all day the westerly wind drove rain-storms over Knockdane. The lambs huddled close to their mothers with nothing but their restless tails appearing, when—hey presto—no sooner had they tucked themselves away comfortably, than the squall passed, and the sun blazed out upon the wet skirts of the rain. Raindrops dripped merrily from the hazel-catkins as the wind or a leaping squirrel shook them, and the air was full of the scent of wet earth and breaking buds.



Towards evening the showers became less frequent, and the sun shot long slanting rays over Knockdane. The old sheep coughed as they snatched at the wet grass, and the field resounded with the incessant bleating of the lambs who ran to a strange ewe and were butted aside.

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Because White-Lamb still kept his close lamb's coat, and had not yet lost the instincts of his race in the placid vegetable life of his mother, he grew restless towards nightfall, and trotted over to the gate to look at the woods—an unknown land to him. The Night Longing calls to the animals who live under man's dominion as surely as to the Wild Folk, but they very seldom hear it. Sometimes, however, the sleepy cattle in the meadows lose their wits in the dark; and if a man passes by they forget that he is their lord and master, who in the daytime goads them where he will, and only remember that at one time their forefathers charged his naked ancestors through the forest, and gored and trampled upon them. The old impulses are strongest in the young animals, just as among men a boy burns with a hundred noble purposes which he will forget when he becomes a man, and soils his hands in the world's ways.

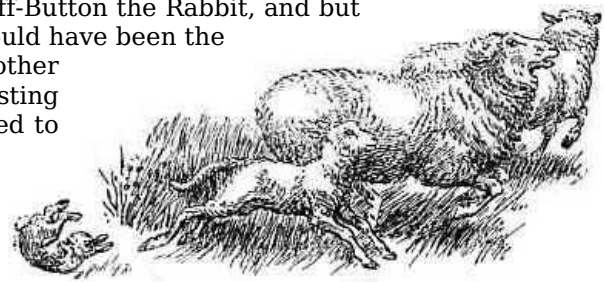
The path wound away until it was lost to view among the fir trees; but right at the end of the vista, and barred across perpendicularly by the tall stems, was a clearing into which the sunset light slanted. As White-Lamb watched the light on the path, and listened to the wind among the branches, he saw a shadow move among the withered fern stumps, and steal quickly towards him. White-Lamb watched it approach with his pink-tinted ears spread wide, and his innocent face pressed against the lower bar of the gate. At first he thought that the strange beast was a sheep, but a furtive gleam of sunshine touched its back and pointed ears and turned them ruddy. It came on with an easy silent gait, glancing from side to side, and did not perceive White-Lamb until it was quite close to him. Then it stopped, and eyed him narrowly with a pair of keen yellow eyes. White-Lamb felt a vague misgiving, and ran back a few steps towards the flock. The other slunk forward and slipped through a little hole at the side of the gate-post, whence his sharp nose peeped out. A dozen rabbits were playing a little distance down the fence, close to the sheep, and his attention was fixed upon these. Suddenly White-Lamb realised that all was not to his liking, and he uttered a loud and plaintive bleat. Instantly his mother raised her head, saw the intruder, and cried to her companions. The whole flock rushed together, each ewe with her lamb galloping beside her; and forming into a close circle they faced the enemy and stamped an insistent warning: 'Fox! fox!' The rabbits took the alarm at once, without pausing to discover the reason for the stampede. A dozen scuts whisked in the air, and then vanished into the hedgerow. There was, however, one small rabbit who had evidently but just left the nesting burrow, for he showed no fear. He hopped a few feet nearer the hedge, and then raised himself upon his fluffy pad of a tail to peer over the grass.

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The fox saw his ears twitch, and glided forward a few feet before making a spring. But the old ewes took the alarm again, and stampeded. As White-Lamb scampered by his mother, his flying hoof struck the little rabbit, and brushed him aside. The flock then wheeled again upon the fox, just in time to see the rabbit's scut uppermost as he rolled head over heels into the runway, and hear the click of the fox's jaws which closed on the empty air at the end of his spring. He stood sulkily watching the sheep for a minute or two; but though he did not fear them individually, yet collectively the old ewes looked dangerously ready to trample upon an enemy in defence of their lambs, and he thought better of it. He turned away and cantered off towards the moor.

That was the first time that White-Lamb saw Fluff-Button the Rabbit, and but for his happy instinct to baa for his mother, it would have been the last. However, as it was, they often saw one another again, for Old Doe Rabbit had tunnelled her nesting burrow under a fir tree inside the wood, and used to lead her family out to feed in the evening. At first there were six of them, but as March turned into April, and White-Lamb's body grew to proportions more in keeping with his legs, foxes, cats and stoats took their toll, and their numbers diminished to three. After a



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time they achieved a certain independence. They crept out alone, and sat among the bluebells and combed their ears and pretended to be grown-up rabbits, until a pigeon clattering out of the fir trees or a magpie croaking in glee over a thistle's nest, made them tumble inside to their mother in a hurry. A mere human hunter would have said that there was absolutely no difference between Fluff-Button and his sisters, but he would have been wrong. Fluff-Button was no more like them than all the children in a human family are like one another, but only another rabbit could have seen the difference. They all had the same white dab of a tail, and the same ever-twitching whiskers, and they all had to go through the same training. All knowledge in the woods is divided into two kinds: those things which you are born knowing, and those things which you find out for yourself. Fluff-Button was born knowing that grass was good to eat, but he had to

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find out for himself that the bluebell leaves, which look much like grass, are full of unwholesome slimy juice and not nice to nibble. He also had to find out by experience that while foxes are dangerous and should be avoided, sheep are quite harmless. When he had learned this, he used often to find his way to the Sheep Field all alone, and feed among the lambs.

Once a day Paddy Magrath used to climb the hill to count the sheep. At his heels slunk a yellow terrier with a keen nose and a silent tongue, who could do anything from rounding up a sheep for his master, to killing a fox single-handed in Knockdane. But for this early morning visit, life in the Sheep Field was very peaceful. Nothing came between the furze bushes and the spring sunshine except when a rook flew overhead, croaking a quaint spring song to himself, or when a filmy cloud raced across the sky. The gorse flowers gave out a heavy perfume like warm apricot jam, and the fine spell brought out a horde of insects to hum round them. The lambs played together among the ant-hills, and the little rabbits played also. The games they played were the oldest games in the world—tig, catch as catch can, and king o' the castle. But though White-Lamb often saw Fluff-Button, and used to run and sniff at his little brown ears in the grass, I cannot say positively whether they ever talked to one another or no. I often lay in the bushes and watched them feed side by side; but the language of the Woods is not that of men. It is a more subtle, and yet a more simple language, communicated by movements of the eyes, ears, and whiskers, and no man has ever thoroughly learned it yet.

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The night after the first bluebell had opened, Fluff-Button went all alone to the Sheep Field at moonrise for the first time. He was now three-parts grown, and instead of feeding by the hedgerow with one eye on covert, he crept further and further out towards the middle of the pasture like any old buck rabbit.

It was a chilly night; but the air on the hill was less cold than that in the valley, where a damp mist lay. A sheep-dog yelped monotonously at the end of his chain from a farmhouse beyond the wood; and at the bottom of the field short grunts and incessant bleating told that the sheep were feeding. The Sheep Field was always noisy at night. One or another of the ewes would lose sight of her lamb behind a bush, and then for a long while either cried to the other, and yet neither would stir; and the wind everlastingly sang in the trees in Knockdane.

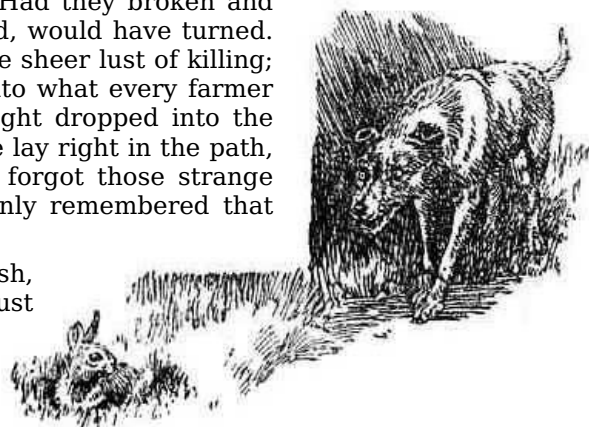
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By and by a pale April moon rose, and Fluff-Button sat up for the tenth time to flick the dew from his whiskers. The bushes around him took curious shapes in the half-light; and wander where he would among them, he saw no other rabbit. But suddenly his long ears sprang from the horizontal to the vertical, and his forelegs stiffened. The turf of the Sheep Field was firm and close, and carried the sound of galloping hoofs like a telephone. The sheep were on the move. Fluff-Button, used to their senseless panics, would have paid little heed had not the night air brought another faint taint to his nostrils. As it was, he hopped away slowly between two furze thickets. Almost before he could tumble aside the sheep were upon him, ewe and lamb jostling one another, while White-Lamb, who headed the stampede, leaped the bushes like a chamois. They rushed into a dense phalanx, and all stamped their fear and anger at something which was approaching them between the gorse bushes. Fluff-Button skipped round, and it was well that he did so, for there, not five yards away, stood Magrath's yellow cur dog with his tongue lolling out, and his wicked eyes on the sheep. The Night Longing had moved him and strange impulses stirred within him. He had forgotten all about his quiet domestic life, and his love for his master, and only listened to the voice which whispered that it would be good to chase the silly, woolly things in front of him—and leap upon them—and worry them. But for the moment he stood hesitating, for all his life it had been his duty to care for the sheep.

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It was well for the sheep that they stood firm. Had they broken and run, the scales, which were now evenly weighted, would have turned. The dog would have dragged them down from the sheer lust of killing; and after that night he would have developed into what every farmer hates and fears—a sheep-killing dog. But a weight dropped into the other scale, and that weight was Fluff-Button. He lay right in the path, and his presence decided the matter. Cur Dog forgot those strange impulses which bade him kill the sheep, and only remembered that here was a rabbit which was lawful prey.

Fluff-Button doubled away nimbly from his rush, but even so the dog's jaws snapped together just behind his scut. Away they went down the field, the rabbit leading by a few bare yards. He had no time to double back into the gorse, and here there was no covert but a few bushes, therefore he headed for the wood.



Cur Dog had won many a Sunday's coursing, and had something of the greyhound strain mingled with his terrier blood. He did not give tongue, but ran silently with his nose to the ground. With his pursuer so close behind, Fluff-Button dared not try any of those elaborate dodges and twists which every rabbit knows, but he tore down the field like an arrow. The slope was in Cur Dog's favour, for a rabbit never runs his best downhill. He decreased his distance by a foot or two, but he came no nearer, for Fluff-Button strained every sinew, and buttoned down his ears and whiskers, that nothing might hinder him in the race.

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Thus they reached the fence, and Fluff-Button cunningly slipped between two saplings, hoping that his enemy would dash into them in the dark, but Cur Dog was fortunate, and came through unscratched. Then began a long series of turns and twists among fern stumps and trees. Several times Fluff-Button thought that he had shaken off his pursuer, but every time a yelp from behind

told him that the latter was still hot on the line. In a long chase the odds are against the rabbit. He is not accustomed to sustained efforts, and although only a swift dog can catch him in a dash to the burrow's mouth, yet if hunted far he soon tires. Fluff-Button longed for a bramble brake, but there was none near. His heart thumped against his ribs until he felt as though it must burst, for just then Cur Dog gave tongue loudly and long, with the confidence of a hunter who knows that his quarry is weary.

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Fluff-Button turned down a ride. The moon had risen, and here where the trees grew sparsely it was comparatively light. Nevertheless the woods on either side were in deepest shadow, and Fluff-Button had eyes for nothing but the dog behind him. Hence he never saw a dark figure standing in the shadows, and he passed so swiftly that he scented nothing unusual. Neither did Cur Dog see or smell it as he tore down the ride, yelping on the trail with his nose to the ground.

Suddenly there was a flash—and a loud report split the silence of the woods. Cur Dog bounded his own height into the air, his howl died into a sob—he rolled over twice and then lay still.

'Not bad in the twilight,' said the keeper, jerking the cartridge from his gun.

Fluff-Button heard the report as he scudded through the bushes, but he never noticed that the galloping feet behind him had ceased. Some fifty yards further on was an old rabbit burrow. He dived into it, and lay panting in its bottommost recess until long after moonset. But no Cur Dog came to nose at the burrow's mouth.

Thus Fluff-Button might have cried quits with White-Lamb for the time that the latter summoned the flock to face the fox. But though the next evening found them together in the Sheep Field, yet they fed placidly side by side and exchanged no word nor sign; for it is not the way of the Wild Folk to show gratitude to one another.

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CHAPTER II

[76]

THE SPRING LONGING

In the valley at the foot of Knockdane Hill there is a great meadow. It is like an island surrounded by the sea, for the woods come close up to its hedge on all sides except on the east, where the river runs; and just as an island may have a lake in the middle, so in the centre of the Big Meadow there is a little copse. The trees in the copse are sycamore and red-stemmed pine, and in spring the ground is carpeted with celandines and anemones. In the copse there is a hollow where long ago men used to quarry out stones; but now it is never used, and the heaps of flints are draped with bramble and cinquefoil trails.



When the men ceased to dig out gravel and gave the copse back to the Fur Folk, an old rabbit made his burrow under the roots of a pine tree, and he or his descendants lived there ever after. At the time of which I write, however, the woods had been rigorously trapped during the winter, and one by one the inhabitants of the Copse Burrow had disappeared until there were only two doe rabbits left. One was Mutch, a veteran of four seasons, with long yellow teeth and a grey coat, well versed in the wiles of the woods; and the other was Cuni, who had only been born the previous July, and who had fur as brown as her big soft eye.

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From a human point of view a celandine bed is the most beautiful thing. It covered the copse with a broad sheet, softly green and golden, and the first things the rabbits saw when creeping from subterranean darkness were the golden flowers. Nevertheless, from the rabbit's point of view celandines are not so desirable. They are just the wrong height, and tickle the bunnies' noses as they hop through them; and besides, the broad leaves catch and retain raindrops, which is a grievous disadvantage when soaked and muddy paws have to be licked dry. At least that is what Cuni found. She came out when the flowers were all asleep after the rain, and the dawn was breaking over the mountains. The wind was keen and fresh, and bore the strong sweet scent of wet earth with it. The pine trees swayed and sighed—not with the boisterous roar with which they struggled with the autumn gales, but triumphantly, as though the sap were mounting to their topmost twigs. The light in the east grew primrose-coloured behind the wind-torn clouds, and beyond the river the rooks in the Ballylinch elms awoke and clamoured for the sun.



As the gale swept along, the woods were filled with a spirit which, although it is as old as the world itself, is yet born anew every year—the mad spirit of Spring.

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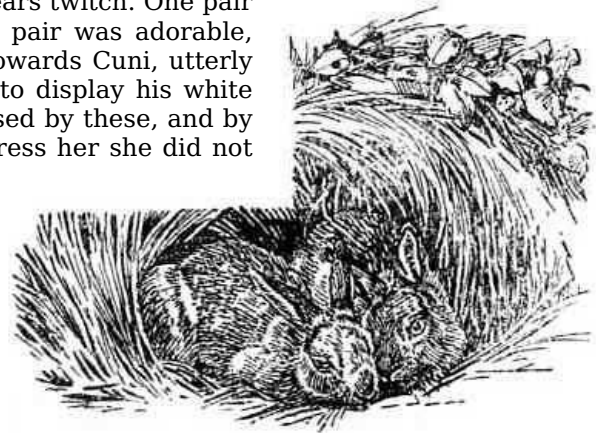
Even old Mutch felt that the season was changing. As for Cuni, she leaped three feet into the air, and tried to play at hide and seek with herself round an ash tree; but Mutch, who was old and surly, chased her into a bramble bush. It is a curious thing that, just as in human society some old spinsters ape masculine dress and ways, and prate much about the Rights of Women, because, poor dears, they do not know what those rights really are; so in the woods old doe rabbits or old hen birds often gradually adopt the colours and language of the other sex. Therefore Mutch coughed in a deep voice and gobbled grass untidily like any old buck rabbit, but Cuni fed daintily and watched the stormy sunrise.

Presently she heard a rustle in the celandines, and sniffed cautiously to discover whether that which was coming were harmless rabbit, slinking stoat, or prowling cat. Suddenly there was a crisp, short thump which made the Copse ring: it was a signal. The old doe rose on her hind legs and listened; but Cuni peeped through the brambles to see from where the noise came.

Fluff-Button sat and kicked the ground loudly and persistently. He did not know *why* he did so any more than the celandines around his paws knew why they waved in the wind; but Fluff-Button knew *when* he did so and the flowers did not—there lay the difference. He was calling for his love, and as though fascinated Cuni's tremulous nose was thrust from covert, and she began to steal towards him. But as she was about to stamp an answer, she looked to the right and saw that old Mutch had hopped half-way across the clearing.

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Fluff-Button turned round and saw two pairs of ears twitch. One pair was grey and lopped with age, but the second pair was adorable, and he made up his mind quickly. He hopped towards Cuni, utterly disregarding Mutch, and rose on his haunches to display his white vest and long whiskers. Cuni was visibly impressed by these, and by the beauty of his fine scut. When he tried to caress her she did not turn away, but suffered him to nuzzle at her furry shoulder, while she gave him delicate tickling kisses with her whiskers. After that Fluff-Button knew that his cause was won.



By now the sun was up, and the celandine calices expanded into perfect golden stars. The Spring Longing bade Fluff-Button leave the Copse and spend the day in the main wood, and Cuni went with him. They crossed the field, and entered a clearing where the low briars were draped with dry grass. The rabbits crept inside a tuft and hollowed it out into a neat round chamber. Fluff-Button obliterated the door with two deft touches, and then they settled down side by side. No hawk had eyes keen enough to detect them from above, and any foe on legs might have passed within a yard and never have seen them. But there are other ways of hunting than by sight.

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Crash! It was noon. The rabbits, dozing contentedly in their form, awoke. Fluff-Button's ears moved the fraction of an inch, and then he squatted down with his eye glued to a peep-hole. Some heavy animal was forcing its way through the briars, but that did not frighten the rabbits so much as did a more distant sound: 'yow, yow, yowl.' 'Good dog!' said a voice just above their heads. Suddenly something rustled beside the form. The grass curtains were violently torn aside, and a huge grey rabbit head was thrust in. It was old Mutch. As she burst into the form her eyes glistened white as she glanced backwards. She thrust Cuni violently aside, and squatted down panting in her place, while Fluff-Button lay as still as death with his ears flattened and his paws bunched together. Cuni, terrified, forgot that primary rule of 'lie still,' in keeping of which rabbit safety lies, and ran a few steps. The man, standing knee-deep in briars, saw the grass stir. 'Here! good dog!' he called; and motioned with his hand. There was a rush, a wild scuffle, and Cuni bolted down the hedge. It was well for her that the dog started in pursuit, otherwise the gun would have cracked before she had gone a dozen yards; but as it was the man dared not fire for fear of hitting his dog, and when he did so the shot merely buried itself harmlessly two feet in

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front of Cuni's nose.

Now began a long chase. The dog was young and headstrong, and the temptation to chase the rabbit was too much for him; but afterwards he wished that he had obeyed his master's whistle and left her alone. For first of all Cuni led him through laurels against which he stubbed his nose at every turn; and then she took him through some brambles where he tore his ears; and last of all she raced for the Lower Wood. Here she increased her lead a little, and then, looping back upon her trail, she ran under a fallen fir tree, and went to ground thirty yards further on. The dog went down the blind lead first, then had to turn back along the true one to the fir tree. It took three minutes for him to convince himself that his game was gone, and then he returned, panting, to an interview with his irate master, after which he was a sadder and wiser dog.

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Cuni could not stay long underground when the Spring Longing was abroad in the wood, and two hours afterwards she crept out again. Her instinct led her back to the bramble patch, but, alas, the form was cold and empty. A jay squawked overhead and warned her not to linger. The jay is a most untrustworthy watchman and gives a false alarm twenty times a day; but the Wood Folk know that if by any chance an enemy should pass by, the jay will surely see it, therefore they always obey his warning. On this occasion the enemy turned out to be a stoat, and Cuni fled quaking lest it should be on her trail. Not until she was far away did she feel safe to continue her search. Once she ventured to signal timidly, but the only answer she received was from a doe rabbit, who, when she found that it was one of her own sex who had stamped, looked much as one girl in a ballroom might do if another invited her to stand up and dance.



At last Cuni came upon a trail. It was cold and stale, but unmistakably rabbit, and the Spring Longing bade her follow it. It led her through devious ways across the Big Meadow into the Celandine Copse, and thither Cuni followed it through an archway under a bramble. The wind had dropped and the Copse was silent but for the spring chirp of an oxeye. Under the trees the scent was stronger but strangely irregular, as though a second and feebler trail were mingled with the first. Cuni followed it into the gravel pit, expecting a signal, but none came. She slid down a heap of tinkling shale, and her nose led her to the old cart road on the other side, where the grass was tender and beloved by the rabbits.

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Cuni could guess well enough what had happened here, for the trails were like a double string of beads—a narrow thread where the rabbits had hopped straight forward, and here and there an expansion where one or other had turned aside to graze.

Suddenly Cuni turned a corner and came full upon Fluff-Button, who was sitting with his back turned to her; while just in front of him stood—Mutch. Fluff-Button was feeding in a nervous, jerky manner, and when presently Mutch crept up to him and touched him pleadingly, he only hopped away petulantly.

Mutch, repulsed, sat up and looked round—to see Cuni. Whether the sight awoke in her the old mother instinct of the woods to drive away a young one able to fend for itself, or whether it was simply jealousy, I cannot say, for the Spring Longing works strange changes in the beasts; but, anyhow, she rushed straight at Cuni and ripped a tuft of fur from her flank. Cuni staggered, but Mutch was no longer young enough to wheel and pursue her advantage quickly, and before she could renew her attack, the little rabbit, spurred by the pain and fear of the old bully, whisked past Fluff-Button into the bushes. Mutch hopped back, full of pride at her achievement, and sought to caress Fluff-Button with her whiskers. But her jealousy had over-reached itself. Fluff-Button had wandered all the way from the Wood to the Copse seeking something which had gone from him; and although Mutch had followed him all the way with caresses he had rejected her, for she did not satisfy the longing which possessed him. However, when he saw Cuni's little white scut scurry by, his instinct told him that this was what he sought. He pushed past Mutch unceremoniously, and leaving her behind to stamp impotent signals, he scampered after Cuni.

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He found her for the second time crouching among the celandines; and this time he did not delay, but claimed her at once. Neither did Cuni play any more love games, but just nestled against him happily.

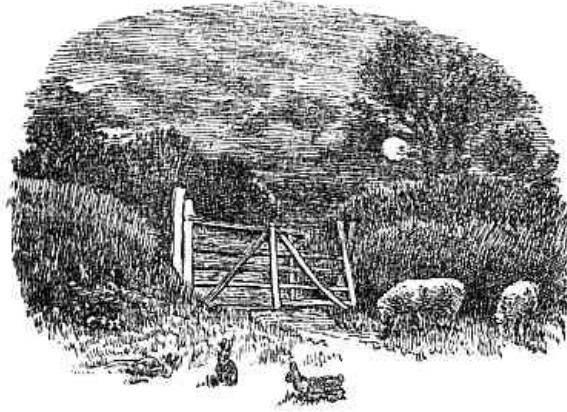
Could there have been found a fairer Eden than that Copse, and could Adam and Eve in their innocence have been happier than were Fluff-Button and Cuni? Even the All-Father in Whom the woods live cannot make happiness more than perfect, and for a little while these two were perfectly happy, for the Spring desire was satisfied.

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If there were a tragedy in the Woods that day, perhaps it was that of old Mutch, who came upon the pair too late, for it was the first time that she had failed to win a partner for the summer, and she was bitterly jealous. However, grief and joy, and even life itself, are very transitory among the Wild Folk, and before the early evening closed in Mutch was grazing peacefully in the Meadow.

And there, when the celandines shut, Fluff-Button and his beloved followed her to see the moon

rise; and the wind sang among the swelling buds of the warm summer days to be.



CHAPTER III

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THE INVASION OF GARRY'S HILL

Fluff-Button and Cuni re-opened the big burrow at the top of Garry's Hill. Garry's Hill is a big grassy mound just outside Knockdane, with one stunted hawthorn growing on the top. Long ago many rabbits had lived here, but a mysterious epidemic had swept them all away, and the grass grew thickly over the entrance to the holes. Fluff-Button lay out in the woods all day and worked at the burrow at night. Cuni was never very far away from him at this time, and often made her form close to his; but she never allowed him to touch her or follow her about.



By and by she dug out another tunnel further down the field, and took particular pains that her mate should not find out its existence. For more than a month she lived apart, and he only saw her occasionally; but one fine day she returned to the burrow with six fluffy atoms hopping after her. At first Fluff-Button was disposed to resent their intrusion on his privacy, but Cuni discreetly kept her family away from his own particular dormitory, and led them out to feed at a respectful distance.

The six youngsters thrive, for Garry's Hill was so exposed on all sides that if ever hawk, cat, fox or man came near, Mother Cuni's keen senses discovered him, and a smart 'thump' summoned her family below ground at once. Of course, as accidents will happen, not all the six grew up. A cunning old vixen from Knockdane came round one evening and hid on the brow of the hill. Cuni's eldest born grew impatient, and ventured out, in spite of his mother's warning 'thumps.' He was never seen again, and neither was his sister who fed far out in the field one evening and was marked down by a stoat.



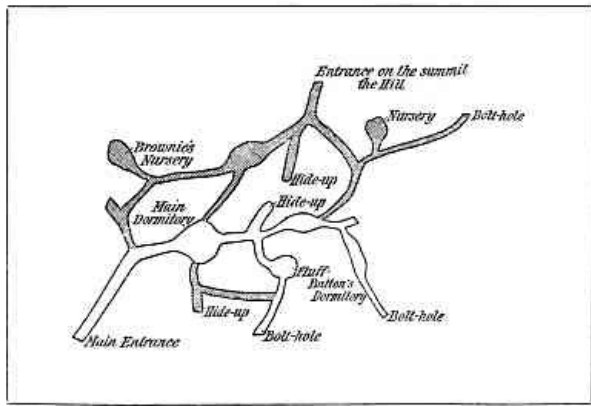
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When the survivors of the family were grown up, Cuni opened out an old gallery, and lined it with grass bents and fur from her soft body. She grew very morose and shy at this time, and would let none of her other offspring venture near. A few days later a second litter appeared, but Cuni did not lead them out to graze with the others until July was well begun. During the long summer evenings the rabbits lay and basked in the sun, stretching themselves on the hot sand to warm their white waistcoats, or fed and frolicked with one another. A rabbit is the most humorous and cheerful creature in the world—those whose lives are hardest and most precarious usually are—and delights in nothing so much as in playing off a mild joke on his fellows. Only Fluff-Button fed apart, and kept his own little plot of pasture to himself; for he permitted no liberties, and kept strict discipline among his sons and daughters.

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Now that the rabbit family was so increased, they enlarged their quarters considerably. Sometimes they used the tunnels of a bygone generation, but more often dug them out for themselves. This is a plan of the burrow, and, as will be seen, it is very complicated and irregular. Whenever one of the rabbits felt inclined he dug a new passage, but as he generally left it unfinished, there were many blind alleys which led nowhere in particular. All the parts which are shaded in the plan were seldom-used 'hide-ups' and 'escapes,' but the rabbits knew their geography very well, and in times of danger generally had at least one 'bolt-hole' open.

That August was very wet and cold. There was never very much grass on Garry's Hill, and now what there was was wet and sodden, and the wind drove through the lonely hawthorn bush on the summit with a roaring rush. Clouds of mist drifted over Knockdane, and the pigeons were blown about the rainy skies. The hill burrow was well drained and dry, but on the flat lands the

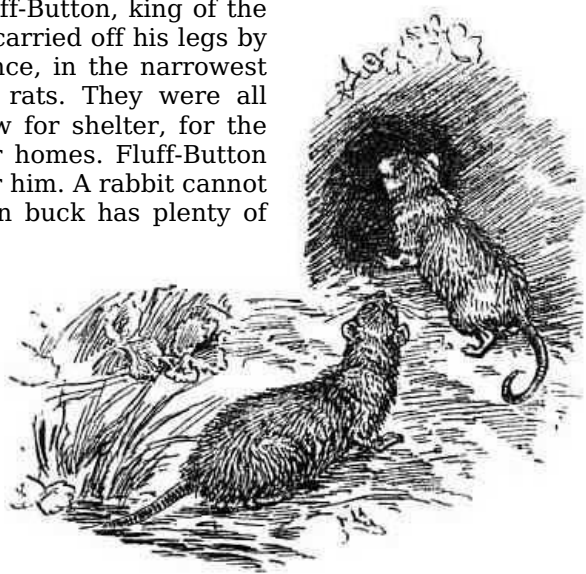


Garry's Hill stood in a field, at the bottom of which was a blackthorn fence among whose roots dwelt a colony of brown rats. A stream flowed swiftly at the foot of the hedge, and one gusty afternoon when one of the rabbits crept out to nibble a little sodden grass, it was rising fast. The rabbit did not notice it, however, for the Fur Folk have no time to waste over what does not directly concern them, and even when she saw a big grey rat, dripping wet, run up the bank, she did not take the alarm.

All the early part of the night the rain came down steadily until the upper galleries of the warren were quite wet. The burrow was pitch dark, and the air hot and thick, when Cuni awoke. She was blocked in on all sides by warm furry bodies, nevertheless she detected an unusual noise at the burrow's mouth—a faint scratching, and then a squeak. Something was creeping in. Cuni kicked the ground warningly, and as the others awoke, she pushed into the main passage. Something small and wiry beneath her paws squealed and snapped. Cuni darted up the passage stamping wildly—it was a rat.

By this time the rest of the rabbits were awake and rushing about in a panic. Every now and then they collided in the darkness, and fled under the impression that they had run against an enemy. Rabbits are like sheep: let one lose his head and the rest will follow suit.

Suddenly there was a sonorous 'thump,' and Fluff-Button, king of the burrow, came out of his dormitory, to be nearly carried off his legs by a pair of rabbits who jostled past him. All at once, in the narrowest part of the tunnel, he came upon a party of rats. They were all draggled and wet, and crowded into the burrow for shelter, for the brook had risen and drowned them out of their homes. Fluff-Button backed into a hide-up, and the rats crowded after him. A rabbit cannot fight his best in cramped quarters, but a grown buck has plenty of courage when pushed into a corner, and his sharp claws are weapons not to be despised. One rat nipped Fluff-Button's shoulder, and in an instant the latter buried his teeth in the aggressor's quarters. The rat yelled, for they cut like chisels, and his companions came on eagerly. Like a schooner among a fleet of herring boats, Fluff-Button ploughed through the band, jostling them right and left, and sprang into the wider chamber further on where a herd of frightened doe rabbits crouched. Here he had more space, and when he heard the invaders coming, he kicked out



with his strong hind claws. The foremost rat rolled back limply with blood upon his snout, and instantly the rest threw themselves upon him with shrill cries. Fluff-Button took advantage of the respite to fly. He scuttled through the tortuous windings of the burrow, and through a bolt-hole to the open air. It was still raining fitfully, but there was a pale streak in the east where the sun would presently rise. Rabbits popped in and out of all the holes, for they dared not rest below ground lest the rats should drive them into one of the many 'hide-ups' and then attack them. Fluff-Button scampered over the brow of the hill, and into a bolt-hole on the other side, where he lay panting.

There was a young rabbit of Cuni's first family, who, although the season was so late, had a litter in a remote chamber, just beyond where Fluff-Button lay. She dared not thump, lest the noise should betray her presence, but lay very still with four youngsters nuzzling at her side. By and by Fluff-Button heard something sniffing its way towards him, for the tunnel carried sound like a telephone. The anxious little mother also heard it, and sat up. Fluff-Button waited until he judged that the rat was within range, and then flung up a shower of sand with his hind feet. The rat squeaked and sat up to dust his whiskers. He imagined that he had come up a blind passage, and retraced his steps. Now there were two ways which he might have taken, but as luck would have it, he chose the wrong one, and blundered up the gallery towards Brownie's nursery. It was shaped like a bottle with a long winding neck, and in the narrowest part he met Brownie.

As a rule a doe rabbit is the gentlest of wild things; but motherhood will nerve the most timid, and Brownie's whiskers twitched as she faced the foe who was stealing towards her in the darkness. The rat cried out, and was answered by three or four of his comrades, who crowded after him. They were hungry, and very fierce, for they had already tasted blood and knew that a meal awaited them if they could win it.

In mortal terror Brownie struck out right and left with her teeth, and sundry squeaks told her that her snaps had taken effect. Two rats clung to her on either side, but hampered as she was, she kept the rest at bay, for while she struggled they could not press past her into the nest.

Just now the rabbits were in desperate straits. Two of the weaklier youngsters had been killed, and many more were badly bitten. Gradually the rats were driving them out as wolves drive sheep. All alone in the distant nesting burrow, Brownie faced her assailants and held her body as a living shield to protect her little ones; but she was failing fast. The airless darkness around her seemed full of noise, hot gasping breathing, and snapping teeth.

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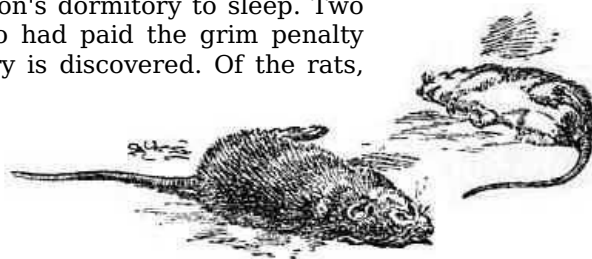
Suddenly a strong pungent odour drifted down the passage—an odour which every rabbit knows and fears; and Brownie made a last despairing struggle, for her nose told her as well as her eyes could have done that a stoat was loping towards the scene of the fight. The rats rallied their forces in alarm, and the rabbits stampeded anew, for both knew that their most deadly enemy was hunting through the warren.

But for once in a way the stoat brought salvation to the rabbits on Garry's Hill, for a rash rat snapped, and his teeth met in the newcomer's shoulder. Instantly four stiletto points pierced his brain—he tottered round in a circle, sobbed and died. The stoat, with his appetite whetted, passed on and drove into the press of rats. They clung round him like leeches, but the place was very narrow and they could not reach his flanks. In that face-to-face combat in the darkness the odds were with the stoat. A rat's courage is indomitable and his teeth are sharp; but between them and those of the stoat there is all the difference between a scythe and a bayonet. Both are good cutting instruments, but the latter is fashioned expressly for war and the former is not.

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The stoat went into the fray joyously. He slew two and drove the others back. Then, for he never noticed Brownie trembling in her nursery, he glided off and made his way to the main dormitory, where he found another party of rats assembled. These fled before him into a 'hide-up,' whither he followed them, and although he sustained two or three wounds himself, he mortally wounded another. The tables were now turned with a vengeance. The rats were in a worse plight than their whilom victims; for wet, starving and bewildered, they were hunted through a strange warren by their most implacable enemy. The rabbits had one and all retreated to the remotest corners which they could find, but the stoat heeded them not, for he killed among the panic-stricken rats for the sheer lust of killing. Even if by chance he crossed a rabbit's trail and followed it up, he invariably stumbled across some terrified rat who sat and jibbered in the darkness.

At last he was satiated and retired to Fluff-Button's dormitory to sleep. Two rabbits were dead besides Brownie's litter, who had paid the grim penalty which is always paid by nestlings whose nursery is discovered. Of the rats, two had been wounded and slain by their fellows; the stoat had accounted for four; as many more had bolted from the burrow; and the survivors, some six in number, cowered in an old nursery as far as possible from their enemy.



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The stoat slept until the day was well advanced towards noon, and neither rat nor rabbit dared to stir lest he should wake and slay once more. At last he rose and glided from the burrow, and then—and not until then—did they venture to leave their hiding-places.

So that was the end of the great invasion of Garry's Hill, but it was long before the rabbits settled down afterwards. As for the remnants of the rats, they retreated to the little-used end of the warren and established a system of tiny passages of their own, running among those of the rabbits. They lived on terms of armed neutrality with their unwilling hosts—never daring to attack a full-grown buck or doe, although not so scrupulous with regard to nestlings; and often on warm summer evenings, if you hide behind the brow of the hill and wait, you may see the rats and rabbits feeding and playing side by side.



CHAPTER IV

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THE FEAR THAT WAS IN THE WAY

Brownie was one of the first family of Fluff-Button and Cuni. It has already been related how she fought the rats in the Garry's Hill burrow, and enough has been said to show that she was a very devoted mother, as indeed most rabbits are. But she had been so terrified by that experience that she resolved to make her next nest right away from the warren; so she dug a hole into the hillside at about a hundred yards' distance.



In the darkness her four babies were only known to her as a squeaking, naked mass, helpless and wholly beloved. She was ignorant of their very number, they had no individuality, nevertheless she lavished all her care upon them, and lay with them all day, feeding and licking them. Only at nightfall she crept out to feed herself, with both ears on the alert. But very few enemies crossed Garry's Hill at night. Now and then an owl hooted in Knockdane; the nightjars purred among the pine trees at the bottom of the hill; and from the warren came the distant bustle of the rabbit community—the munching of many teeth, the splashing of many feet in the dew, and the stamping of scores of signals.

The fern croziers had fully uncoiled, and the lowest bells on the wild hyacinth carillons were fading, before the babies acquired their fur jackets. Under ordinary circumstances they would have remained below ground a few days longer, but an unfortunate accident hurried them out into the world.

Theoretically June is the month of sunshine and flowers; actually—in Knockdane, at all events—there are flowers enough, but June is too often ushered in by pitiless soaking rain. All the new greenery of the woods is saturated, and the hemlocks and nettles, stimulated to ardent growth, begin to send up their shoots waist-high. This is what happened in the season of which I write, for it rained for two nights and a day, and all the flowers seemed drowned. There was trouble enough in the Garry's Hill burrows, but it was very serious indeed for Brownie. A nesting-hole is dug for temporary use only, and has not the drainage of a permanent burrow. The water soon began to filter in from the sides, and a very respectable trickle ran from the entrance. By the second morning the bedding was soaked, and the sucklings lay in a pool of water. For the present they were homeless, and Brownie saw that the only thing was to take them into the fields. Three brown tots, blinking painfully in the daylight, crawled on to the grass; but when the fourth appeared, Brownie sat up, and her nose worked as fast as the 'quaking grass' round, for the last little rabbit was as white as the hawthorns in the hedgerows. There were legends in Knockdane that, in the days when the beeches round the Great White House were saplings, there had been a race of white rabbits in the woods; but for many many years none had been seen there. Perhaps some long-gone ancestor had transmitted his singular colouring to Brownie's nestling, or else some trifling detail in Nature's machinery had been out of gear, for she had not a brown hair upon her, and out on the open slope was as conspicuous as a crow on a snowdrift. However, the Fur Folk live and work only in the present. They are guided by mysterious laws—the accumulated wisdom of past generations—written in the blood of those who went before and neglected to obey the code—and Brownie knew that her babies must lie out on the hillside, for to take them to the warren was to court disaster. She hid the first one in a tussock six feet away in one direction, and the second a few paces from him, while the third was left in some clover. The fourth—the white one—had to put up with a meagre root of rushes. When each little rabbit lay stone-still, the mother went away herself, for she knew that her presence would only add to their danger. When she looked back to judge of the success of her stratagem, the three brown babies were invisible in the grass, but the white one could be seen all over the field. Nevertheless, because of the rulings of the law of the Fur Folk, Brownie went her way, and left her litter to shift for themselves during the day.



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The rain had ceased at sunrise, and, although grey vapours curled before the clearing lift, the hillside was a very pleasant place. There were rosy clover clubs, and the yellow bird's foot trefoil beloved of blue butterflies, daisies, and the dainty milkweed, all growing so close together that the grass was almost crowded out. The fluting of the blackbirds in Knockdane only seemed the more mellow for the rain, and skylarks mounted up in rapturous jubilee.

The sun had climbed quite high before the sparrow-hawk came swinging round the wood. He spied the tell-tale white ears a hundred yards away, and turned towards them. He slanted down at fifty miles an hour, glanced aside six feet from the rush-tuft, and switch-backed upwards again—rabbit verily, but doubtful—uncanny—white. Again he stooped and hovered. This stillness, this whiteness transcended his experience. It was too blatantly conspicuous—there was surely something in it not apparent to the eye. Perhaps it was a trap. As the hawk paused, his grim shadow fluttered above the youngster in the clover, and the latter lost his nerve. He ran a few inches and crouched again. The hawk saw a quarry which was normal and probably safe. Besides, he was hungry. He dropped on to the grass, and pitching lightly, struck. There was a little cry; and then flying low, overweighted with his burden, he skimmed across the field.

That was the first, but not the last time, that danger turned aside from the—

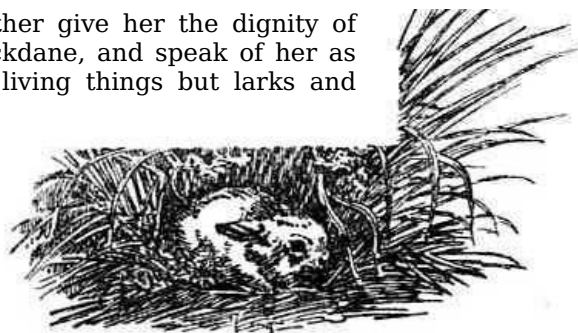
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white rabbit I was about to say, but let us rather give her the dignity of capitals, a dignity ever afterwards hers in Knockdane, and speak of her as the White Rabbit. For the rest of the day no living things but larks and bumble bees came near, although once or twice a bullock blundered by and set the rabbits' hearts thit-thudding. Towards evening the mother-rabbit came up the hill to the nesting burrow. The babies heard her coming well enough, but two—the White One and a brown—were too well drilled to budge. The third, however, ran to her unsummoned, and was instantly punished for his disobedience, for she kicked him head over heels, and then signalled to the others that their time of waiting was over. Whether she noticed that one was missing I cannot say. The Fur Folk have no time to grieve. She gathered the three remaining ones together, and fed them and licked them all over tenderly with soft whisker kisses.



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They spent that night on the hill. When it rained the babies sheltered under their mother's soft coat and did not know how cold it was. Brownie could have told how sharp the night winds were, and how wet the ground, but the little bodies under her white vest were warm, and that was compensation enough for her.

The next day they again lay out on the hill; but alas! the sparrow-hawk has a good memory, and where he has killed one day, he will come the next. Thus it happened that on the second evening only two answered the mother's signal—the White Rabbit and a brown brother.

On the third day Brownie took them down the field. It was dangerous, for the hedge was full of enemies, but she dared not risk the hawk again. Even the peeps from the hill had not prepared the little ones for anything so immense as the world into which they came, blue sky overhead and grass—a perfect forest peopled with strange beasts—all around them. Brownie was ravenous, and the young ones, watching her tear off grass blades and eat them up, ventured for the first time on imitation. She kept her family in the ditch all day, she herself lying hidden close at hand with eyes and ears always alert for danger. Nevertheless, for all her care, the little brown rabbit strayed too far from her side, and being young and ignorant, he never heard the sniff-sniff of the stoat hunting down a runaway, until it was too late. Then Brownie, who knew the meaning of that pitiful minor cry, very quickly and silently shepherded her one remaining young one over the fence into the next field; and the scent was cold before Keen resumed his hunting.

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So only one of the litter remained, and for three days Brownie guarded her jealously. On the fourth morning very early they went out to feed. The dewfall had been very heavy, and soaked them from nose tip to tail, and the bats wheeled overhead. The coat of the little White Rabbit looked weird in the gloom as she sat up and tried to comb her whiskers as her mother did. Of the short hot nights of June—of their mystery, and their majesty, and the ways of their children, what do men know? Nothing, but they mar much. Only the white owl had seen Jack Skehan go his rounds at sunset, and he, who, happy bird, lived where pole traps were unknown, how could he know the significance of what was left on the hedge bank? So it came to pass that at sunrise, when the larks were singing on the hill, and the whitethroats babbling in the brambles, Brownie, slithering through the hedge with her suckling behind her, slipped her head into a snare cunningly set against a burrow mouth, and somersaulted into the ditch, drawing the noose tight round her neck. At the first alarm the little one bolted and hid tremulously in a clump of buttercups, not daring to move for several minutes. Then, as all was still and the robins began to sing again, she ventured to peep out. Her mother stood raised on her hind legs as she had often seen her before when about to climb such a bank; but now Brownie leaned there statue-still, her hind paws just dragging on the ground. The White Rabbit did not understand it at all. She bit off a few grass blades and tried to chew them up, but they seemed hard and stringy to her unaccustomed teeth, and she ventured to nuzzle at her mother's soft coat. It was quite warm, but Brownie took no notice of the caress; and when the little one pushed against her, she swung ever so gently to and fro.

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The sun rose over the crest of Garry's Hill, and the dragon-flies—winged needles of red and blue—hawked backwards and forwards over the brambles. The White Rabbit did not stray very far from the place; she waited for her mother to go on, but Brownie gave no signal, nor did she stir. The little one grew uneasy, and raising herself on her fluffy tail licked her mother's flank to show that she was hungry, but even this never-failing appeal received no answer. Nevertheless soon afterwards, when Jack Skehan went the round of his snares, he found a doe rabbit hanging in the hedge bottom with her neck broken; and nestling at her side, tiptoeing up to reach, a little white rabbit was helping herself to a warm drink. Even in death Brownie fulfilled the first office of motherhood.

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How the White Rabbit knew that man was dangerous I cannot say. Hitherto she had innocently trusted every bird and beast; but bolt she did, and only just in time, as a dirty brown hand snatched at her. She ran up the hedge as fast as her stumpy legs could carry her, stubbing her nose against hemlock stalks, and tripping over bramble trailers. It seemed to her that she had run many miles, but as a matter of fact it was only ten yards before she flopped down, utterly breathless, with her flanks heaving. For the first time she was afraid—terribly



afraid. Every leaf concealed an enemy, every rustle seemed a footstep. Fear was abroad on the hedgside. The shadow of the man's presence lingered even when his footsteps had passed into the distance. A broody blackbird 'chinked' anxiously, and a pigeon wheeled aside with a 'swoof.' A few inches from where the little rabbit lay gaped a bolt-hole of the hedge burrow, and her instinct bade her creep within into the cool, comfortable darkness.



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This is how the White Rabbit entered upon her life in the woods, orphaned, with nothing to guide her but the ancestral code which every rabbit knows. However, she had already learned three things, and important ones too—that hawks are dangerous, stoats still more so, and men are to be dreaded most of all.

Were I to relate all the vicissitudes which befell the White Rabbit during the following days, I should be accused of recounting miracles; for perhaps under the circumstances not one rabbit in ten would have survived. The ditch was full of enemies, for hedges are the Fur Folk's highways from field to field, and foxes, cats, and stoats patrolled it from hour to hour. The next evening the White Rabbit worked along to the demesne wall, under which a little drain ran, and crept into the wood. If there was vastness and mystery in the fields, how much more under the trees? The sanicle spread a silvery pall above the dying bluebells; the thick scent of the hawthorn was borne to and fro on the night wind; and the woodcock, playing in the dusk, 'chissicked' as they wheeled overhead. That night, for the first time, the White Rabbit ate grass and relished it. She was very hungry, and once her little teeth learned the knack of nibbling criss-cross up a blade, she found that it was pleasanter than her previous attempts had led her to believe. In fact, she was so intent upon her newly learned accomplishment that she never heard the owl swoop down with a thrum of soft wings, and then slant up just as the hawk had done on the hill. But she heard the click as he alighted on a branch overhead, and seeing his eyes, catlike and luminous in the gloom, she hid under a bush.

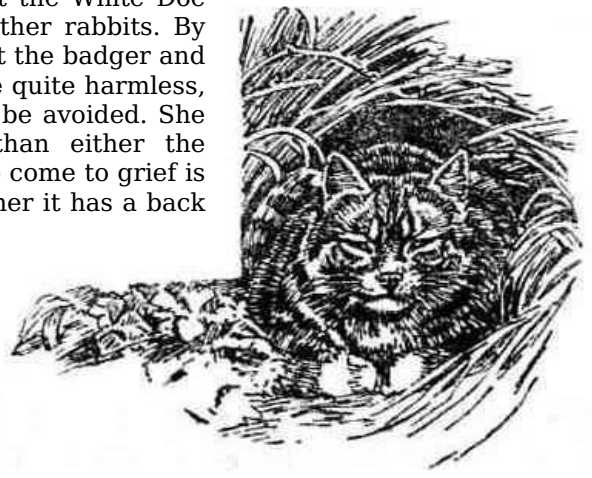
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A day or two later, the White Rabbit had one of the narrowest escapes of her life. Perhaps she had got over her first fright and grown reckless; at any rate, she came out into the grass in broad daylight. The field was purple with ripening grasses, and the warm wind bore the scent of young birch leaves—the sweetest of all summer scents. It was good to be alive. The White Rabbit lay down on her side, and stretched herself luxuriously in the hot sun. Bees hummed comfortably in the vetches, and the grasshoppers assiduously polished their shanks. Suddenly, in the sunshine-chequered hedge, she caught sight of a curious creature moving gently to and fro. She had never seen anything quite like it before. Its deliberate, rhythmical movements fascinated her, and she watched it dance behind a dock plant and out again, with an intentness which rejoiced the heart of a certain wary hunter who crouched behind the said dock. The White Rabbit hopped a step or two nearer, and stood up in order to see this wonderful thing better. At that moment the cat ceased to lash its tail and sprang. The rabbit caught a glimpse of unsheathed claws, bared gums, and dilated eyes, and dived into a forest of cockfoot grass. The cat, at fault, made short excited rushes hither and thither as he heard the rustle of the fugitive's steps, but the White Rabbit flung herself into a stunted blackthorn bush and lay gasping. By and by, when she had recovered sufficiently from her fright to sit up and polish the 'cuckoo froth' from her whiskers, she peeped out; and lo and behold in a runaway, with his paws tucked away cosily before him, the cat sat and waited.... The White Rabbit very silently withdrew, and escaped by the further side of the bush. That was the fourth lesson she learned: Beware of the cat—the patient hunter.

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It was not until she was three parts grown that the White Doe realised that she was not in all respects like other rabbits. By then she had learned many things. She knew that the badger and the hedgehog and the squirrel and the shrew are quite harmless, but that the fox and the stoat and the cat must be avoided. She knew that the meadow-grass tastes better than either the cockfoot or the couch; and that the surest way to come to grief is to bolt into a hole without first finding out whether it has a back door or no. By degrees, however, she began to find out something more important still, namely, that the rest of the Fur Folk turned aside from her path. Did she hop into the clearing where the other rabbits came of nights to feed, or visited the Dark Pool among the sallies, then the circle was immediately broken up, and vanishing feet fired a whole volley of signals from the bushes. If she fed in the daytime, the squirrels overhead chattered and speculated until the jays took up the matter, and half the woodside was in a fluster. This knowledge did not come in a day. The pignut flowers died, and the enchanter's nightshade had sent up its faint spires in dark places before the White Rabbit realised her powers. It was the fox who opened her eyes to the fact that a certain magic was hers in her perilous ways. One evening after sunset she squatted upon a 'rabbit's table.' There is a rabbit 'table' in almost every glade. It is generally a moss-grown tree stump, or more seldom an ant-hill, upon which the rabbits love to sit for the sake of the expansive view (comparatively speaking) which the extra twelve inches affords them. It is also very often a

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trusting-place. The White Rabbit was washing herself. It was the penalty which she paid for her uniqueness, that she was obliged to spend no mean portion of the day combing her pink ears and cleansing her silky stockings. Hence she neither heard nor winded the fox's approach until he snapped a twig in the clearing itself. Then, looking up, she saw in the shadows what appeared to be a pair of red stars. The blood of the White Rabbit seemed turned to water; she was paralysed with fear; even her nose ceased its eternal tremolo. She could only stare back, bemused with terror. It must be said that the fox had not entered the glade with any fixed idea of hunting there, he was merely passing through it; hence the increased awfulness of the apparition of the ghost-rabbit on the moss cushion. It was nearly dark, but a shaft of light came down aslant between two tree-tops. In the gloom she appeared larger than her natural size—misty, luminous. The hair along the fox's spine bristled, a growl rose in his throat. It was so quiet, so light; as if fascinated he began to tiptoe forward. Remember that there is hardly anything white known in the woods, except here and there a flower. There is neither white bird nor beast; even the white eggs of the pigeon are laid where none of the Fur Folk can see them, except it be Koutchee the squirrel. Men—wiseacres—who would judge Nature by their printed books, talk grandly of the benefit of Protective Resemblance, and the Survival of the Fittest. They have left out of count the germ planted in the being of the higher Fur Folk—a germ which is often carried from birth to death undreamed of, undeveloped—but which in man, another step up the ladder, becomes a power which is accountable for untold cruelty and strife—superstition. Had all rabbits been white since the first of the race, then indeed the fox's hunting would be easy enough; but when once in ten generations a white rabbit appears, its chances of life are many times greater than those of its fellows, for in the eyes of the hunters it is compassed round with magic, a thing set apart.

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The fox crept to within eight feet of the mystery and cowered down, for there was little or no scent to enlighten him as to its nature. The White Rabbit's red eyes were wide with horror, but under the nightmare spell of the fox's proximity she could not move. Fear clogged her limbs, and she watched him, fascinated. She was, of course, entirely unaware that it was she herself who thus checked him. She believed herself almost invisible, and feared to move lest she should betray her presence, thus obeying the arbitrary law of her race: Lie still and he may pass you by. So they gazed eye to eye while one might pant half a score of times, and then a heron, sweeping by with a shriek which ripped the silence of the night, broke the spell. With a snarl the fox leaped sideways into the bushes; and the rabbit, ears flattened, paws twitching, crouched where she was until the rush of his footsteps died away. After this adventure the White Rabbit gradually grew bolder. She lived in some ready-made burrows in the corner of the wood, and fed in the field below Garry's Hill. But if a prowling cat or fox came by, and the rest of the community dived underground, the White One merely sat at the hole's mouth and waited; and in two cases out of three the hunter, after a stealthy glance, passed on. The third case was generally a cat who, more accustomed to the mysterious ways of men, their dependents and belongings, was not afraid to stalk the White Doe of Garry's Hill.

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By this time it was August, and the birds went to moult in the deepest thickets of Knockdane. Only an occasional robin sang a bar or two of his roundelay, or a chiff-chaff, who had forgotten the rhythm of his call, cried 'chaff-chaff' in the beech trees. Big spikes of purple loosestrife crowned the damper clearings, and missel thrushes went out to the fields in straggling bands. The mornings grew cooler and later, damp mists steamed up from the river, and the beeches began to turn orange and brown. One fine night the cuckoos disappeared, and the corn-crakes prepared to follow them, for the corn was ripe, and all through the hazy days the whirr of machinery was heard from the hills, like some gigantic grasshopper. The squirrels and oxeyes squabbled in the hazels, and the badgers went harvesting when the moon rose. To the Fur Folk the autumn was a faint echo of the spring. There was something in the mild, still weather, and equal hours of day and night, which stirred them to vague repetition of their doings early in the year. The rabbits wandered away from their burrows, and made desultory scrapings by the pathsides, and the birds, the throstle and pigeon, sang again half heartedly. The White Rabbit, with no idea why she did so, also dutifully scratched little holes in the moss, and followed faint trails which led nowhere in particular. However, the first frost put an end to all this; and after the frosts came the November gales, which slashed the sleet across the woods. Once or twice the men came to shoot in Knockdane, but the White Rabbit was safe enough, for she never made a 'form,' but always lay underground. In fact, there was little enough covert in that part of Knockdane in the winter, and in January, when the foxes were ravenous, the woods were quite bare. However, the White Rabbit passed unscathed through that time of peril; even the traps, which doubly decimated her companions, spared her. Nature, who had put a mark upon her which set her apart from her fellows, had in compensation gifted her with keener wits and judgment. As everybody knows, a rabbit track runs hop-dot down the hedgerow like a rosary of beads, and Paddy Magragh set his snares cunningly in the beads, which are the little patches from which the rabbits hop over the tussocks; but the White Doe went safely to and fro, merely skipping aside if the wicked loop struck her nose. Perhaps, again, it was her colour which saved her here, for many a bunny blundered into the noose when his fellows chased him in sport or anger; but the brown rabbits ignored the White Doe, and she hopped leisurely between her hole and the meadow unharmed. Nevertheless, towards the end of the winter, she, with the rest of the rabbit kind, suffered grievously from famine, for the weather had spoiled all the greenery in the woods. Here again it was the White Rabbit who first set the example of climbing into the boughs of a fallen thorn tree to gnaw a meagre sustenance from the bark of the ivy entwined in it. The idea became fashionable in her burrow; and, clambering clumsily among the branches three or four feet from the ground, the rabbits chiselled away at the ivy until its twigs were as white as bone.

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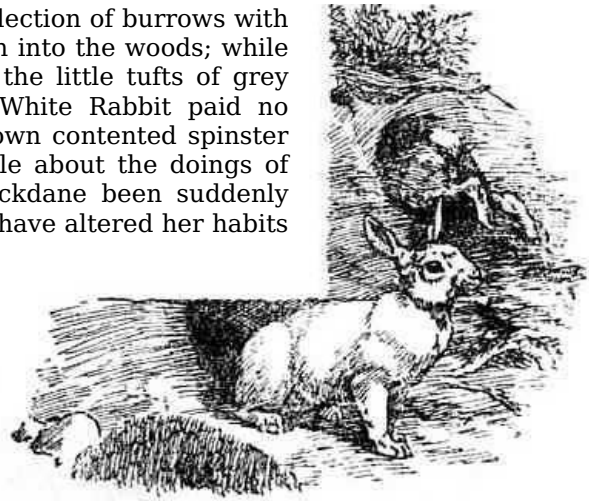
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With February—the famine month—the love season began in earnest.

All the other rabbits who lived in the outlying collection of burrows with the White Doe, forsook them and wandered down into the woods; while up on Garry's Hill the ground was dotted with the little tufts of grey wool, ripped from one rival by another. The White Rabbit paid no attention to these changes at first, but led her own contented spinster life. The Wild Folk concern themselves very little about the doings of their neighbours; and had every rabbit in Knockdane been suddenly wiped out of existence, the White One would not have altered her habits in a single particular.

It was not until the woodcock began to mate that the White Rabbit found out that she was lonely. Then she left her burrow and went out into the woods, which was a dangerous thing to do in daylight. The robin was reciting his marriage vows to his mate under a holly bush; and the pigeons, recklessly bold, flapped lazily from tree to tree. The White Rabbit scraped enthusiastically for a few minutes, for



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she felt impelled to unaccountable energy that day, but when she had dug a few inches she broke off, for she could not remember what to do with the hole when she had finished it. Near at hand a buck rabbit stamped, and presently another, larger than he, came out of the bushes and fought him. The White Doe hopped towards them, but being stranger rabbits they broke off their tournament, and fled at the sight of her whiteness. She saw many rabbits that day, and half of them ran away, and the other half were indifferent. The White Rabbit had never felt so lonely before—not even when her mother had been taken from her. Presently she came upon a luckless rabbit which had been killed by a stoat an hour before. The White Rabbit did not know this, and went up to sniff at him. Here at last was something which would not run from her; but when she smelt the fresh blood and saw the wound behind his ear, she turned and galloped away. There was fear everywhere. She was feared by her own kind; and she again feared the blood-hunters. A wren caught sight of her and began to scold—it, too, was afraid. The White Rabbit was very sorrowful.

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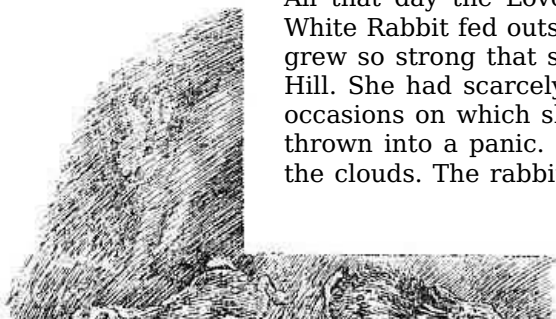


The Love Longing was not always so strong. Sometimes for weeks at a time she lived alone as happily as heretofore. Then it would break out again, and send her into the woods; but she never found a mate, although young rabbits played outside the burrows, and the birds were all nesting. So March turned to April, and April to May, and the lowest bracken fronds opened like green wings before the crimped tops were uncurled. Then again one day the Love Longing came upon the White Rabbit, and she went to the Dark Pool where the Fur Folk go to drink. There are willow saplings all round, and the chaffinches were collecting the down for nest-lining, for the seeds were ripening. On the further side the White Doe passed a rabbit's 'registry' tree. Most woods have their own registry where the buck rabbits repair in spring, and each tries to scrape away the bark and set the imprint of his teeth a little higher than his fellows. Most of the rabbit duels take place near these trees. Sometimes it is a young sycamore, or a laurel, or a beech, which is chosen out from among the rest; but in this part of Knockdane it was a willow sapling, peeled and scored for two feet above the ground, and with little paths, beaten hard by rabbit feet, converging to it from every direction. As the White Doe passed by, she saw a brown buck rabbit, on his hind legs, leisurely rubbing his whiskers against the trunk; and hopping up quietly behind him she touched him with her white nose. He darted away a few paces, and sat rigid. The White Doe approached him beseechingly and caressed him with a whisker kiss; but he only stared horror-stricken at her wonderful pink eyes, beat his fore paws once or twice in surprise and dismay, and scudded out of sight.

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All that day the Love Longing would not be satisfied, and when the White Rabbit fed outside her burrow after dark, the restlessness in her grew so strong that she crept from the shadow of the trees to Garry's Hill. She had scarcely ever visited her native warren, and on the rare occasions on which she wandered thither, the whole burrow had been thrown into a panic. It was dark on the hill, for the moon was behind the clouds. The rabbit people were all munching busily, and the White

Rabbit, happy in a sense of companionship, crouched near them. Now and then one bunny, in the sheer joy of living, skipped three feet into the air, and the older bucks





chivied the younger ones in and out of the earthworks which many generations of excavators had thrown up. Two rabbits were playing 'tig' on the slope, dodging one another backwards and forwards. The White Doe watched their twinkling white scuts for a

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minute, and then, just as the moon broke from behind the clouds, with a hop, skip, and jump she launched herself playfully between the couple. They stood still for one paralysed instant, and then, stamping frantically, the whole community stampeded in every direction. The White Rabbit did not realise that she was responsible for this flight, but, believing it to mean cat or stoat, she bolted with the rest. She plunged down a burrow and scurried along never-ending corridors and side-ways. She could hear footsteps which fled before her, and all round the passages rang with muffled danger signals. At last she entered a hide-up, and hearing shuffling feet, explored it to its end. In the dark she collided with something which was furry and soft, and felt twitching whiskers brush her face. Another rabbit had taken refuge there; and surely it was—yes, it was—the noses of the Fur Folk are as trustworthy as our eyes—the same who had repulsed her in the wood that morning. But obviously he did not recognise her in the darkness, for he cowered to her at the end of the passage. There was comfort in companionship, and they huddled together, fearful lest something stealthy and terrible should sniff its way towards them. The White Rabbit thought of stoats, but the other dreaded nameless things—magic things, white things—which leaped out of the gloom. Every now and then the White Rabbit turned her head and nestled against the soft fur of the other's shoulder. Here was rabbit—normal rabbit, brown rabbit—and yet he did not shrink from her, for in her turn she felt a tremulous nose sniff at her ears....

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An hour afterwards the business of the Garry's Hill warren went on as usual. The White Doe was still below ground, but after midnight she came out with the Brown Buck behind her. The rest of the warren stamped, but little recked she. If the Brown Buck was staggered at the sight of her in the moonlight, he did not show it. White or brown, did he not know the scent of her who had come to him in the burrow, and who perhaps had stood between him and the misty terror that had leaped upon him in the dark. This was rabbit—strange, it is true—but still rabbit and wholly lovable. He put his head under her chin that she might scratch his ears, and this is the greatest token of esteem among the rabbit kind. Thus the spell was broken, and the fear which was round the White Doe was gone, for she had become as other rabbits. She had entered into her inheritance, the inheritance of motherhood—the highest happiness known in the woods.

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They nestled side by side under the old whitethorn which, for once in a way, forgot to moan as the wind went down. The moon set, and the fur of the White Doe gleamed in the starlight. But now the rabbits around only munched unconcernedly. There was no more mystery about her; for, in the words of the greatest love song ever penned, and as true of the beasts as of the men for whom it was written, she was her beloved's, and his desire was towards her.



CHAPTER V

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UNDER THE MOON

A little band of forewandered plover flapped southwards drearily. To the east the mountains were

still encumbered with the great snowclouds which had driven over Knockdane an hour before, and converted Garry's Hill into a white sugar loaf. Now it was evening, and as the red sun sank, he flushed the fields with a dream-pink, while the moon struggled over the stormy hills.



Cuni hopped out into the cold air and shook each paw delicately, for the snow clung to them. Her eyes looked bigger and her ears longer than when we saw her last, for the cruel February weather, which spared neither the Fur nor the Feather Folk, had pressed the rabbits sorely. For weeks frost and thaw had alternated night by night, and slowly killed every green leaf and blade of grass. Sometimes cold rain fell and soaked the woods, at others snow came and covered them.

Within five hundred yards of the warren there was not a tuft of grass large enough to make a 'form'; and the rabbits lay below ground in their damp burrows, and tried to deaden the hunger pain with sleep.

Although it was scarcely an hour since the snowstorm had blown by, Fluff-Button had already left Garry's Hill for the woods; and a neat trail—two little tentative punches of the forefeet over-passed by the bolder impression of the hind—indicated which path he had taken. Cuni followed him across the field. The snow was not more than two inches deep and the longest grass blades peered through it.



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Knockdane Woods are surrounded by a mason-built stone wall six feet high; but in one spot the ivy, insinuating itself between the stones, has loosened them, and the smaller Fur Folk—the rabbits, rats, and stoats—have scratched a tunnel leading into the woods. Through this passage Cuni hopped, and passed from the bleakness of the white fields into an enchanted palace. Every twig and bough bore its burden of whiteness. The fir trees were converted into huge Christmas trees, and the beeches' branches were etched against a sky suffused with the illusive lilac reflections of the snow. There was an uncanny white glamour over the woods, and except for the distant roar of the unfrozen river rushing between its banks, a vast silence had fallen upon Knockdane.

Not far from the wall, in a clearing, there is a pool. It is black and stagnant, with banks overgrown with yellow pimpernel, water flags, and rushes; nevertheless many of the Fur Folk depend upon it for their water supply. To-night it was darned across with ice needles, and the silver 'cat-ice' round the edge crackled under Cuni's paws. As she expected, Fluff-Button was seated on the other bank taking a tonic. In winter when the grass is sodden and tasteless, rabbits are seized with a burning desire for strong astringent food, and they often wander far from their burrows to seek rushes, or the dry bark of saplings. To-night Fluff-Button gnawed the knotted roots of the wild iris, and as their bitterness burnt his mouth and made him sneeze, his nose quivered with pleasure. On any other night Cuni would have kept at a respectful distance from her lord; but to-night, in spite of the frost and snow, the Love Longing was beginning to awaken among the rabbit kind, and instinctively she felt that he would not repulse her. She approached him diffidently, and, instead of chasing her away, he merely glanced up and coughed. She squatted at his side and chiselled away at the iris roots, until the moon grew bright enough to light snow candles on every twig and bough.

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FLUFF-BUTTON WAS SEATED ON THE OTHER BANK TAKING A TONIC

So busy were they that they never heard the footsteps of Garry Skehan, when, half an hour later, he crossed the snowy hill to Knockdane, nor noticed how they paused at the spot where the double trail entered the wood. The woodcraft of Garry Skehan was of a rough and ready sort; for him wild creatures were divided into two broad classes—those which could be trapped and those which could not—but even he could tell that this was a rabbit run, and he chuckled over it. By and by he tramped away over the crisp snow, so softly that not even the drowsy pigeons overhead heard him.

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Many of the Fur Folk passed outside the wall that night, and each one stopped to look at the place where Garry Skehan had knelt and scored the surface with his clumsy boots. First of all a rat came along, trailing his naked tail callously on the snow behind him. He gave one glance at the spot, and then hurriedly crossed the wall lower down. By and by a stoat passed. It is not in stoat nature to resist a hole wherever it may lead, and this one gingerly thrust in his nose; but at that moment he caught sight of something under his feet and drew back quietly. The mice came by and danced fairy quadrilles over the snow, but they also left the hole in the wall alone.

As the moon rose higher the frost began to bite, and the snowflakes, which had hitherto dropped rhythmically from the branches, were welded firmly together; while every leaf upon the ground was so crisped with rime that it crackled under the touch. Fluff-Button and Cuni, having made a scanty meal of such bramble leaves and ferns as remained green, turned homewards. Cuni went first, for her mate dallied behind to scratch his whiskers against a tree trunk. She came to the hole in the wall and hopped inside, for among the stones and mortar was hollowed a little chamber. There was a thin wind blowing, which had drifted the snow against the opposite opening and blocked it up, but the drift was not thick, and crumbled away when Cuni thrust her nose against it. The field was a white blank, marked with inky shadows below the trees, and not a living thing was in sight.

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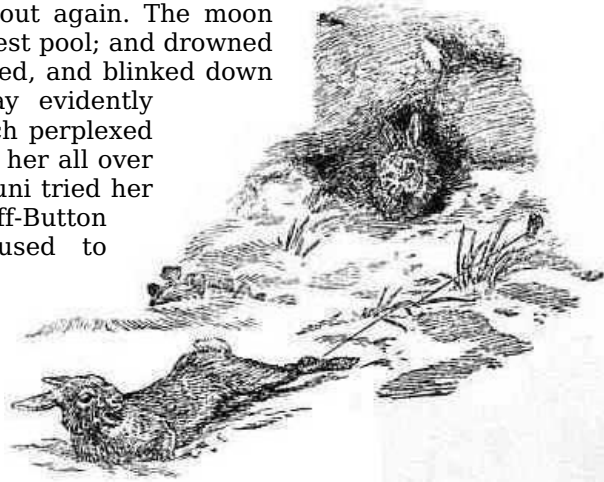
With one comprehensive hop Cuni alighted in the drift, and at the same instant something seized her hind leg. 'When in doubt, skip!' is the rabbit maxim, which she obeyed instantly, but she was rudely jerked back into the snow, and the grip on her leg tightened. She whisked round to see her foe, and behold there was nothing there. Cuni was terrified. She began to struggle desperately, but although the enemy's clutch tightened, there was nothing to be seen but a long strand of copper wire on the snow. Just then there was a rattle of stones, and Fluff-Button hopped through the wall. He noticed nothing amiss, and seeing that the snow was scraped away all round he began to munch the frozen grass blades. In some measure his presence reassured Cuni. She ceased to struggle, and in the perfect bliss of her mate's proximity almost forgot the mysterious enemy that held her.

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Meanwhile the face of the night was changed. A snowstorm came up and drove tiny stinging flakes over the woods. They sifted into the rabbits' coats until Fluff-Button hopped inside the wall, shaking his ears. Cuni tried to follow, and although that unknown *something* clutched her

again, yet it permitted her to creep just inside the hole. Her body prevented the entrance of the driving snow, and Fluff-Button came and snuggled against her warm vest, while his twitching whiskers left soft 'butterfly kisses' on her nose. In the mother-instinct, which is as easily awakened in the woods as among men, Cuni forgot that Fluff-Button was the King-Buck whose will was law in the warren, and only remembered that he was cold and came to her for warmth. She disregarded the snow which chilled her from without, and licked him with her warm tongue as tenderly as if he had been a sleepy suckling in the nesting burrow.

The snowstorm passed and the rabbits came out again. The moon sailed up a sky as black and mysterious as a forest pool; and drowned the stars, until only one great white one survived, and blinked down like a wicked eye. Fluff-Button hopped away evidently expecting his mate to follow him, and was much perplexed to find that she was unable to do so. He sniffed her all over carefully, beseeching her to accompany him. Cuni tried her best, but in vain, and lay down panting. Fluff-Button became seriously annoyed. He was not used to disobedience, and it must be told that he kicked his mate hard with his strong hind leg. Finding that this did no good, he became alarmed. Wild creatures hate and fear the unknown, and Cuni's predicament was a most uncanny thing to rabbit ideas. Fluff-Button hopped away and began to feed doubtfully on an old turnip rind some thirty yards off, and took no notice of his mate's signals and struggles.



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At last Cuni lay still and watched him. Nature is kind to her wild children, and after the first biting coldness of the snow sends a blessed lethargy which soothes away the pain. Cuni was fast drifting into this dreamy state when her senses suddenly returned to her and she sat up alertly. Silhouetted against the white field stole a lithe form—pads which made no noise, eyes gleaming faintly red, ears cocked forward towards the prey ahead of him in the snow, while the moonlight laid a long grotesque shadow behind. The fox was thin and weak with famine, and his whole attention was riveted upon Fluff-Button, who sat with his back turned. He began to stalk his victim as noiselessly as a cat, taking advantage of every ant-hill or snowdrift to screen himself.

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There are two laws which have been given to the rabbit kind in the hour of danger. One is, 'Squat and be still'; and the other is, 'Scoot, if you will, but let your fellows know it.' A few rabbits obey the first all their lives; but the majority—Cuni among the number—'scoot' on an alarm, but as they run they stamp upon the ground that their friends may hear and do likewise. However, Cuni was wounded, and her wise instinct bade her lie still, and then the fox would pass her by. With frightened fascinated eyes she watched the dark form slide over the snow, clapping flat if the unconscious Fluff-Button chanced to move.

'Lie still,' whispered Instinct, numbing her limbs with fear, 'he will never see you.' But the Angel who works for the good of the race, and who sacrifices his units that his tens may be saved, cried: 'Stamp aloud and warn him, no matter what it may cost.' The two impulses struggled together in Cuni's heart, and the fox cramped his limbs together for the final rush.

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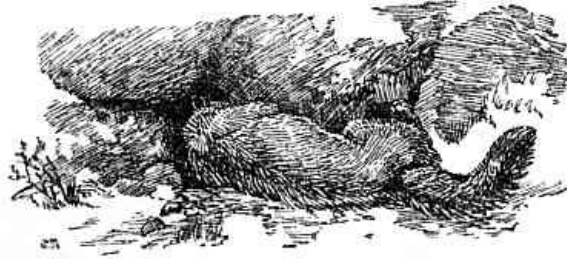
'Thump!' It was a very feeble little sound, muffled by the soft snow. 'Again!' cried the stronger Angel, and summoning up all her strength, Cuni stamped again. This time Fluff-Button heard. Without as much as a glance behind, he bolted for the wall, leaped over his mate, dashed into the tunnel, and the scurry of his steps died away.

The fox checked abruptly; he knew that in the woods he had no chance against a cunning buck rabbit, and if Cuni had lain still perhaps all might have been well. Unluckily panic seized her, and, stamping again and again, she struggled for her freedom. The fox saw her and began to stalk anew, for there seemed something uncanny about this rabbit, and he dared not risk a rush too soon. Cuni forgot her pain, she forgot her fear and even that desire to live which is so firmly implanted in each one of the Fur Folk, in her overmastering rage at the thing which held her. With tooth and claw she attacked the peg round which the wire was twisted, but the frost had bound it firmly to the snow. Ah! a last spasmodic jerk wrenched it up, and trailing a broken leg, Cuni crept into the wall—free. Alas! just the other side she was brought up with a jerk. The peg was wedged between two stones, and she was as much a prisoner as ever, although just beyond the fox's reach. She heard his stealthy pads scrunch on the snow the other side of the wall, and then he found the hole. He lay down on his side and thrust his head into the opening; and when he snorted, Cuni felt his hot breath on her whiskers. He began to whimper eagerly, and scrape at the loose stones and mortar. He worked his shoulders further and further in, and the little chamber was filled with dust. Presently he drew back—his cunning wits had told him of a better way. Just here the wall was too high to leap, but further down it was lower, and there he could climb over. Cuni heard his footsteps tiptoe away, and then her Guardian Angel whispered that her teeth were sharp and pointed out a way to freedom—but not the cost. She listened to the counsel, for the desire to live burnt fiercely within her and her leg was twisted and useless now, a mere encumbrance. There was a short, sharp struggle, and the snare and its captive were parted indeed. Stiff and numbed, she crept away among the trees.

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Twenty yards further on there was a clearing where the snow lay soft and deep. Here Fluff-Button's trail could be seen plainly, and the wide tracks showed that he had crossed it at full gallop. Cuni set out to follow it, plodding along in the muffling snow, and stumbling into drifts at

every step. The woods were dead—neither Fur nor Feather Folk stirred—and Fluff-Button's solitary trail alone broke the blankness before her; but whereas his consisted of four regular punctures, that which she left beside it had three only, and, in place of the fourth, a red stain. She dared not pause, for the twilight was full of a horror which was all the greater that it was nameless and but dimly realised—the fear of the hunted when strength fails. The shadows seemed full of shining eyes and crouching forms which would spring if she lay down, for she did not know that the fox had already given up the quest, and left her alone.



The snow was soft and deadly cold. It clogged her limbs like so much clay, and the very air was so chilled that she seemed to draw her breath in nothingness.

Still Fluff-Button's trail ran forward towards the Pine Tree burrows, which are warm and deep, and down which no fox can pass; and Cuni stumbled on blindly, for it is the instinct of the Fur Folk when maimed or sick to death to seek some hiding-place where not even the stars can spy upon them.

Presently she fell into a deeper drift, and because she was too tired to struggle out, she lay still. It was good to rest awhile before setting out once more, and feel the pain and fear slip away before the blessed peace which stole over her. The snow now seemed so warm and dark that she believed herself in the Pine Tree burrows, and nestled down as contentedly as if she leaned against Fluff-Button's soft coat. Her nose ceased to quiver as her breath came more and more faintly, and her big brown eye closed; while her spirit drifted further and further away, until it silently crossed the borderland into the country from which there is no return.

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A cloud blotted out the moon and wrapped the woods from end to end in the vast silence of snow. Great flakes as big as pigeon's feathers floated down into the clearing. The double trail was covered up, and the drifts piled higher and higher, until not even the tip of a dark ear peeped out to show where little Cuni lay.

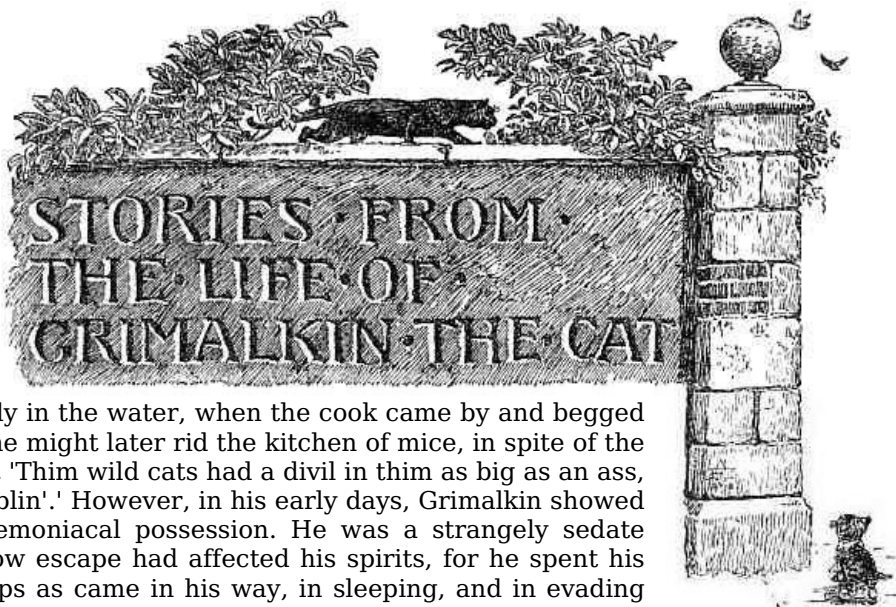


CHAPTER I

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THE FIRST HUNTING

When it was discovered that the stable-cat had a litter of kittens in the hayloft, sentence of death was pronounced immediately, and before noon three little grey corpses floated in the horse pond. The fourth kitten, *the* kitten, with whom this



history deals, was actually in the water, when the cook came by and begged for his life in order that he might later rid the kitchen of mice, in spite of the gardener's assertion that 'Thim wild cats had a divil in thim as big as an ass, an' would niver quit ramblin'.' However, in his early days, Grimalkin showed no signs of any such demoniacal possession. He was a strangely sedate kitten. Possibly his narrow escape had affected his spirits, for he spent his days in eating such scraps as came in his way, in sleeping, and in evading the flying feet of the cook and her satellites. Hence, for many days his horizon was bounded by the four walls of the kitchen and the square of backyard, in the corner of which was the ashpit—to feline ideas the Elysian Fields. The yard was enclosed by a high wall, and wooden doors shut it off from the outside world, so that at the time of which I write, Grimalkin had had but most fleeting glimpses of what lay beyond.

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In one place the wall was overhung by a laurel bush, and here the sparrows used to squabble and chatter all day long, except when now and then a sinuous black form stole along the coping and dropped into the yard. This was the farmyard mouser, Sir Charles, a worthy who, although he possessed a name befitting a Crusader, was nevertheless a prowler, a poacher, and a buccaneer born and bred. One half of his time he spent in filching stray morsels from the kitchen and in dozing in the sun, while the rest of his days were passed—Grimalkin did not know where. But Paddy Magrath, the earthstopper of Knockdane, could have told you how often he saw the glossy black form sneaking along the hedgerows, or 'lying up' beside a rabbit burrow.

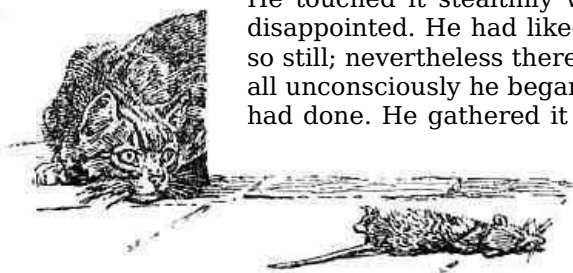
About the time that Grimalkin's eyes intensified from their original pale kitten blue to the yellow of maturer cathood, it happened that Sir Charles returned from a three weeks' sojourn in the woods. His coat was sleek and glossy, and comfortable and contented was his face, as of one who had lived well for some time. The early autumn evening was drawing in after a still, misty day. Sir Charles squatted by the ashpit wall; and Grimalkin from the scullery steps noted with admiration how he drew his supple paw behind his ears after applying it to his tongue, and how he scientifically smoothed his sooty waistcoat. Suddenly he ceased his ablutions and gazed fixedly at the foot of the wall, lashing his tail lightly. Grimalkin, following the direction of his eyes, saw a tiny grey dot moving among the cobblestones. The black cat made a dart—springing out and back in two nimble bounds—then cantered across the yard with it in his mouth. He dropped it on the stones and watched it scurry for covert, but before it could reach it he headed it off and struck it with his paw. Henceforth it ran round in little futile circles as though bewildered, and every time it scuttled out of striking distance he carried it back to the middle of the yard. Suddenly he caught sight of Grimalkin, crouched hard by with his eyes as round as a pigeon's as he watched this most fascinating game. The veteran breathed a low growl over his shoulder which made the kitten shrink hastily behind the doorpost; but the next minute he was peeping out again, staring with all his eyes, and no wonder, for, for the first time in his life, Grimalkin was witnessing the death-game which the cat kind play over their 'kill.' At last the little grey beast would run away no more, but lay still, gasping; and even when its captor pushed it with his paw it did not try to escape. The black cat stood up and yawned—the sport was over. Had it been a rat or a mouse he would have killed it outright and then feasted—but a shrew! Sir Charles was an old hunter, but since the long-gone day when he struck down his first rabbit, he had never tasted a shrew. He strolled away and left it where it lay. No sooner was his back turned than Grimalkin slipped



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across the yard and approached circumspectly. For him so far the animal kingdom had consisted of three divisions only: cats, men, and cockroaches. Evidently this was a fourth species, for, although not very much larger than a cockroach, instead of being rust coloured it was grey, and its coat was furry like his own.



He touched it stealthily with his paw, but it did not move. Grimalkin was disappointed. He had liked to see it run about and struggle, and now it was so still; nevertheless there was something mysteriously alluring about it, and all unconsciously he began to leap and gambol round it even as the other cat had done. He gathered it up in his paws and flung it over his head, leaping

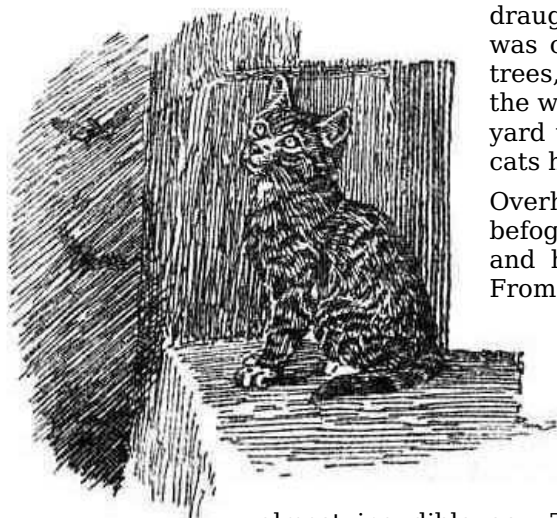
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after it and shaking it, but its nose only twitched feebly and it fumbled with its paws. By now it was nearly dark, and Cook, who had an idea that a cat of any age was necessarily possessed of a charm to scare away mice, came out to look for him. For the first time in

his life Grimalkin turned and spat at her, lest she should intend to snatch his treasure from him. Then he darted with it into the kitchen, and took refuge under the dresser.

'Shure, he has a mouse cot at last,' said Cook, well pleased. She turned down the light, raked out the fire and left the room, locking the door behind her. Then Grimalkin crept on to the hearth, carrying his mouse with him. As a rule he drowsed happily all evening, for then there was peace in the kitchen, and no fear of heavy felt-shod feet descending upon his tail. To-night, however, he did not sleep, but sat and watched the glow of the embers slowly fade beneath a coat of white ash. Presently a cinder dropped with a crash, and that was a sign for the cockroaches to come out. They ran to and fro in the shadows, and the red light turned their wing-cases to copper. Grimalkin often caught and ate beetles, but to-night he did not look at them, but wandered restlessly about the room. After one circuit of the walls he came back to the hearth again. The mouse lay where he had left it, and a bright red bead had risen among its fur. Grimalkin touched it stealthily with his tongue. It left a warm saline taste in his mouth—a taste he had never known before—the taste of fresh blood. He drew back licking his chops. All at once he felt afraid of this small still thing; but the taste of the blood mounted to his head like strong wine. The beetles still ran to and fro upon the hearth, but he did not look at them. He felt a vague indescribable yearning for something. He was not cold nor hungry, nor thirsty nor in pain, and yet he was not comfortable. Grimalkin did not know that it was the taste of the blood which had awakened this strange indefinable desire in him; nevertheless it was so, and an instinct was roused which would make it impossible for him to spend another night between four walls.

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The shutter of the window was carelessly fastened, and a sudden draught of air blew it in. The lower half of the casement was open, and the night wind bore in the rustle of the trees, and the sough of the breeze in the laurel bush by the wall—the laurel bush which formed a bridge from the yard to the woods, across which so many generations of cats had gone forth to their hunting.

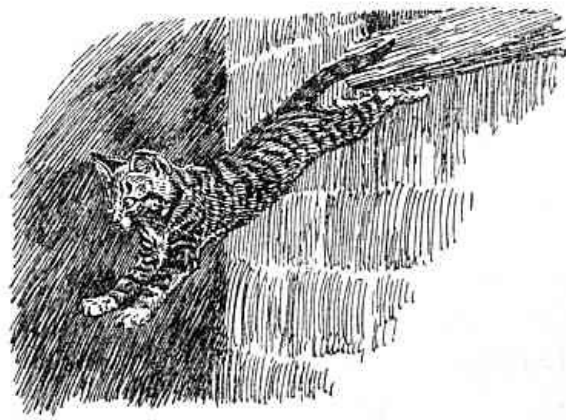
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Overhead the skies were cloudy, with here and there a befogged star. The air swayed by the south wind was hot and heavy. Great moths and wheeling bats flitted by. From the ash tree the leaves fell now and then with a patter like a footstep. The woods came up almost to the doors of the house, and as Grimalkin listened, the piteous scream of a rabbit close at hand made his whiskers stiffen and his tail move. The roar of the river over the weir rose and fell, now low now loud, as the night wind carried it by. Grimalkin uttered an

almost inaudible cry. The Night Longing, that mysterious power which draws all animals, wild and tame, gripped him. You may hear a dog howling the night-long by his kennel—the Night Longing which he cannot obey hangs heavy over his mind. When evening comes the purring tabby dozing by the fire rises and steals into the cold and darkness without. It is always the same. Man has taken them and tamed them, worked them and cherished them, but once in a while the woods call—the woods where their fathers were born and hunted and died—and they go. It is also certain that those among men who spend much time alone under the free sky, feel the Night Longing also, and obey it.

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The sweet clean smells of the night called to Grimalkin to come. He did not know what this impelling force might mean. He could not know that for centuries this had been the hour for his ancestors to rise and go forth to the night's hunting. He only knew that, come what might, he must leap out into the darkness, over the garden wall and into the woods beyond. They filled the night with that vast silence which is full of movement. They were his inheritance. He came from the hedgerows and thickets, and thither he would return. Behind him lay the dark kitchen where the embers threw a glow over the dead mouse—the spoils of his first hunting; and in front of him were the woods and the night. Grimalkin poised himself upon the window-sill for a moment, then the Night Longing called again, and he leaped.



CHAPTER II

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THE STEALTHY DEATH

In September daylight and darkness are equally divided. The days are still and mellow, with a blue haze which clings to the shadows of the woods; and at night the big moon rolls over the eastern mountains, and turns the fog in the valleys into a silver sheet.



All through the warm nights the Fur Folk come and go through Knockdane Woods, for the men sleep in the Great White House and no one disturbs them. Strange things happen at night under the trees of which humans have no idea; and one of the strangest of all in Knockdane is the tale of how Grimalkin the cat tried a fall with the Stealthy Death and escaped alive.

For many months Grimalkin had lived a dual life, spending part of the day at the Great White House, but wandering back to the woods at night. But as time went on, and his strength and cunning increased, his visits to men became fewer and shorter, and his absences stretched into days and weeks. No cat will stay by the hearth in early summer when the young rabbits are out, especially when the blood of semi-wild ancestors runs in his veins. The keepers grew to recognise Grimalkin and to hate him; and, indeed, he was recognisable enough—a huge grey tabby, strong enough to pull down a grown rabbit, and cunning enough to know a keeper with a gun from a prowling poacher like himself.



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There are some nights on which, although they may seem eminently favourable to a mere human hunter, the Fur Folk do not stir abroad. On the other hand, there are others on which they come forth in their scores—the hunters and the hunted—and such nights are known in the woods as hunters' nights. It was such a night in Knockdane. The air was warm, but a little breeze was stirring, and one by one the leaves floated down on their fallen fellows with a rustle like a faint footstep. Big white moths whirred round the ivy blossoms and bats wheeled through the clearings. The moon rose early, and by the time the afterglow had faded she was high in the sky, casting long shadows across the Hollow Field.

Grimalkin trotted quickly through the wood with the easy swing and depressed tail of a cat who knows where he is going. Every now and then he paused with uplifted paw as some twig fell with a crackle to the ground, or a patter of leaves told of game afoot, and the green light flickered in his eyes. The fence which separates the Hollow Field from the wood had run to waste for many years, before the blackthorns, each as thick as a man's arm, had been trimmed; and their roots had been undermined in every direction by rabbits. Inside the field the fence's foot was overgrown with tussocks of long grass, honeycombed by runways. It was easy to crouch in one of these until a young rabbit hopped within distance, and then a few soft steps—a pounce—and the kill. Grimalkin slid into the grass, which closed over his striped back and hid him.

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The moon was bright as day. Further down the fence half a dozen rabbits were feeding; but the other side of the field, beyond which lay a beech wood, was deep in shadow. Shrill threads of sound from a neighbouring grass tuft meant that the field mice were squabbling among the fallen beech nuts; but Grimalkin only cocked one ear and tucked his paws away neatly against his chest. It was a hunter's night and he awaited nobler quarry.

A long hour passed. Then one of the rabbits sat up and kicked the ground uneasily, while the rest listened. A rabbit was cantering across the field towards them. She picked her way among the thistles, and stopped every now and then quivering. She did not seem in a hurry, and yet was

apparently quite unaware of their presence. The other rabbits thumped suspiciously and scattered—there was something uncanny about the way this rabbit ran. She came straight towards Grimalkin; her eyes were wide and staring as she glanced behind her, and her limbs moved stiffly. Grimalkin drew himself together. As she lilted within a yard of him, he sprang and struck. The rabbit sobbed, and rolled over panting. Beautiful, lithe, cruel, Grimalkin leaped upon her and dealt the death blow, ere commencing the death-game which the cat kind always play over the stricken quarry. He stood listening for a moment, and a rustle in the grass made him pause. His ear caught the faint unmistakable sound of a hunter who hunts his quarry by scent, and who smells fresh blood near at hand. Down towards the rabbit stole a stealthy dark shape, sniffing as it came upon the line. Keen, the stoat, seldom misses his kill, and woe betide the beast who crosses his trail; he hunts for the joy of killing, and in the woods they call him in whispers, 'the Stealthy Death.' The stoat paused and saw the dead rabbit, and the cat standing over it with a wicked gleam in his small eyes. He squeaked once, and then—like a bent watch-spring loosed—flung himself upon his enemy. Had his fangs sunk where he intended—into the great arteries of the neck—Grimalkin would speedily have lain beside the rabbit; but he partially missed his hold, and fastening into the shoulder instead, clung there like a leech. Grimalkin felt the hot blood trickle down, and, wild with fear and wrath, he smote and bit desperately at the clinging death which hung upon his neck. He had never encountered an enemy who fought after this fashion. His claws ripped the stoat's flank. With a squeak, Keen shifted his hold from the shoulder to the throat, half throttling Grimalkin. The combat raged to and fro, the cat striking, spitting, writhing, and the stoat battered, torn, flung this way and that, but all the while burying his fangs deeper in his victim's flesh. The death which Keen deals is slow but very sure. The dog worries, and the cat tears his prey, but the stoat silently sucks the life-blood, until the quarry, struggle as he may, succumbs at last, with only four tiny wounds in the throat to show how his strength was drained away.

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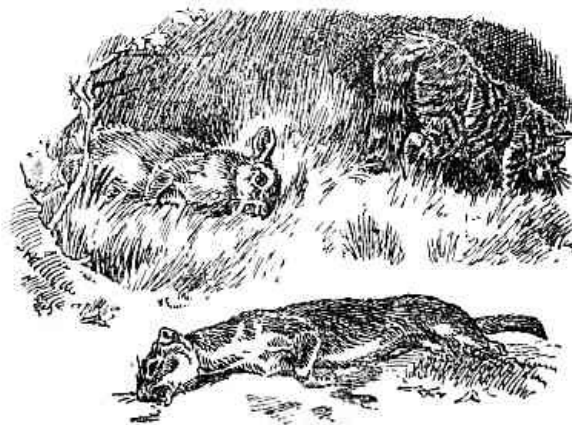


A battle on these terms could not last. Already the great cat was tiring—weakened by loss of blood and the weight on his neck. He rolled over exhausted, and although his claws tore feebly at his enemy, his eyes were half closed and his tongue lolled out. Keen knew that his time had come. He loosened his hold for an instant, instinctively seeking a fresh grip upon the great blood-vessels behind the ear. But that instant proved his undoing. Grimalkin, roused from his stupor by the prick of a new

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wound, rose with a sudden convulsive effort. His enemy was off his guard, and left his side exposed. Instantly Grimalkin buried his teeth in it. He held on grimly, crushing the life out of the slender writhing form until it ceased to quiver and throb, and hung limp. Then he flung it aside, and Keen, his white chest stained scarlet, lay stretched on the grass beside the dead rabbit.

Grimalkin did not stay to look at this, his record kill. It was no time to triumph. His life-blood had been drained freely, he felt weary and strangely weak. He crawled to the hedgerow, and sought an old lair of his, a deserted rabbit burrow. Dead leaves had drifted in, and it was dry and safe. Here Grimalkin lay and nursed his wounds, until the sunshine striking on the hedge side, and the singing of the flies over the grey and brown spots in the grass, brought home to him the fact that he was hungry, and must go out and hunt in the woods again.



'THE COLLARED BUCK'

On the northern slope of Knockdane there is a little glen whose sides are hung with ivy and aromatic ale-hoof, and which is so deep that even on the longest day of the year the sun can never climb high enough to shine upon its southern wall. The glen is strewn with limestone rocks, and at its head stands a twisted crab-apple tree. Beneath the roots of the latter there is a dry roomy chamber into which dead leaves have either drifted or been carried; for the Crab Tree burrow has been beloved of the Fur Folk ever since the tree itself began to bear a yearly load of wizened fruit. Some have used it as a den, some as a nursery, and many more as a sanctuary. Grimalkin adapted it to the first of these uses, and took up his abode there at the end of November.



Frost and snow seldom come to Knockdane before January. During the close of the year the weather is damp and mild; rain drips relentlessly upon the sodden ground; and the scarlet and orange agarics in the moss are the only things which flourish. One morning in mid-December Grimalkin went hunting among the bramble thickets of upper Knockdane. The whole place was traversed by an elaborate system of runways, the geography of which was accurately known to the rabbit people alone. A warm mist lay over the woods, distilling into great drops on every grass blade and twig ere dripping to the saturated ground. Indeed, it was hard to tell which was the most water-logged—the earth or the air. Like all his race, Grimalkin hated the wet, and he shook his head impatiently as the water trickled inside his ears. The air was so damp and heavy among the briars that there was little or no scent, so that when a rabbit waft came to his nostrils he knew that the trail must be fresh. He turned down a side alley, and suddenly came face to face with the most amazing rabbit which he had ever beheld. It was large and grey, but the strangest thing about it was a broad white stripe which passed completely round its neck and ended in a pointed gorget. The rabbit was squatting with its ears flattened and its eyes half closed, and in this attitude the strange collar stood out round its neck in so uncanny a fashion that Grimalkin paused doubtfully. Suddenly fear leaped into its eyes—its ears sprang up vertically, and just as Grimalkin cramped himself together for a rush, the strange rabbit wheeled round and burst out of the 'form.' Grimalkin pulled himself up abruptly, for he was too experienced a hunter to give chase; but even in that brief space he had time to remark that its tail was not carried in the usual jaunty rabbit manner, but was depressed like that of a hare.

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That was the first time that Grimalkin met the Collared Buck rabbit of upper Knockdane. The Collared Buck, like the lost Incas, was the last of his race. Years before, a whole colony of white-necked rabbits had lived in the hedgerows outside the wood, but their ornament had proved a fatal guide to foxes and stoats, and this winter the sole survivor lived in Knockdane, a hermit and a solitary. He had his headquarters in a burrow in the elder thicket above Grimalkin's glen; but as in that wet season, like many other of the holes in Knockdane, it was often full of water, he was obliged to 'lie up' in the woods, whether he liked or not. Very early in the morning, after moonset, he went out to feed in the sheep field by a well-worn track; but, as soon as the 'false dawn' appeared, he returned to the wood, and made a 'form' in some patch of fern or bramble, where he passed the day. Grimalkin the cat never wasted his time over rabbits unless there was reasonable chance of success, and although he often crossed the Collared Buck's hot trail he never turned aside to follow it. Sometimes indeed he caught a glimpse of the Buck himself lirting across a clearing in the starlight, or feeding with a wary eye fixed on covert; but this rabbit's remarkable appearance was only equalled by his cunning, as indeed Grimalkin soon saw for himself.

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One crisp January day Grimalkin was taking a sun-bath in the fork of a large beech tree, when a sudden 'bang-bang' apprised him that men were in the wood, and that they were there with intent to slay. Grimalkin regarded men with more hatred and less fear than did the Fur Folk themselves, for his early days by the fireside had made an indelible impression upon him; but he was aware of the limitations of human discernment, and knew that if he remained where he was he would be reasonably safe. The reports of the guns came nearer, and presently a pair of jays flew overhead, squawking to all the birds within earshot that it was time to move on. In front of the beech tree the trees grew more sparsely, and the ground was encumbered with a low growth of fern and bramble. By and by the shooting party came out of the covert and advanced slowly up the glade. Grimalkin, blinking down from his coign of vantage, saw rabbit after rabbit bolt from its 'form' only to turn a somersault and collapse into a palpitating heap. Just below the beech tree there was a thick patch of briars, broken up by numerous passages and clearings. Grimalkin, unlike the men below, had a bird's-eye view of the place, and just before the line of beaters came abreast of it a rabbit hopped out of a runway. His white necklet proclaimed that he was the Collared Buck. He sat up upon his curious hare-like tail, and peered through the bushes. Just then another shot was fired, and a luckless rabbit close by crawled screaming through the fern. The Collared Buck made up his mind—he rolled over limply upon his back and lay still. The beaters came up and began to whack the bushes, but he never twitched a whisker, and he might have escaped notice altogether had not one man caught sight of his white gorget gleaming in the grass, and walked over to pick up, as he considered, the dead rabbit. The Collared one lay like a stone until a hand was put out to seize him, then he suddenly leaped sideways and ran for his life. Bang! bang! bang! he bolted down the whole line of guns, and each fired as he passed; but although the shot clipped twigs from the bushes all round him, he ran on unscathed. Just out of shot he paused, and then quietly and deliberately crept down an adjacent burrow, leaving the sportsmen the poorer of self-respect and cartridges.

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After this the weather became fine and warm, and the rabbits used to come out of their burrows to take sun-baths. Three times Grimalkin saw the Collared Buck basking outside his hole above the glen, with his legs sprawled on the dry leaves, and his eyes blinking blissfully in the heat. Three times did Grimalkin then attempt to stalk his prey, and three times did the Buck take alarm, and hop underground with insulting leisure. The desire to circumvent the Collared Buck became an obsession with Grimalkin. He spent hours at a stretch watching the burrow mouth; all in vain. He often caught a glimpse of the white collar, or saw the drooping scut flit into the bushes, but he never gave chase on these occasions, for he knew well that in a race he was no match for a rabbit, and that his skill in hunting depended less upon his legs than upon his patience. So the Collared Buck fed nightly in the fields, and arrogantly chiselled his mark upon the old willow tree which is the trysting place of the buck rabbits in spring, and upon which each sets the imprint of his teeth.



Earlier in the autumn Grimalkin had lived principally upon the squirrels who squabbled among the beech-mast, but as the season advanced, Koutchee, who, though a noisy meddlesome fellow, is no fool, grew wary, and the suspicion of a barred tabby tail twitching in covert was sufficient to send him scuttling up a tree. Henceforth Grimalkin lived chiefly upon thrushes. The ripening of the haws brought in hordes of missel-thrushes, redwings, and blackbirds, who tore at the crimson berries and littered them over the countryside with the wasteful profusion of the Feather Folk who take no thought for the morrow, and then came, full cropped and drowsy, to roost in Knockdane. At dark Grimalkin used to creep beneath the bushes which were weighted down with the sleepy birds, and took his toll. The redwings were his favourite game, for it was possible to strike one down silently; whereas no sooner did he miss a spring at throstle or blackbird than the whole wood knew of the occurrence. Creeping in the darkness among the locked laurel stems, Grimalkin often knew that he was not the only hunter abroad. Sometimes as a cloud came over the moon, a blackbird 'spinked' agonizedly, and then all at once the whole hillside seemed to spring into rushing whirring life as every bird within earshot dashed out. There would be dire confusion for a few minutes until the flock settled in another thicket, and then the patter of pads tiptoeing away told that the fox was also hunting that way that night.

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One evening Grimalkin was prowling on such an excursion along the edge of the wood. Just in front of him a deep drain, cut straight through the hedgebank, opened into the field. This cutting was a favourite path of all the Fur Folk, and its muddy bottom was trampled by many feet, from the splay pugs of the badger to the fairy spools of the rats. It was for the latter that Grimalkin waited, under a fern stub. Famine had gripped the rats with the rest of the Wood People, and drove them out to feed on the rotting beech-mast far from their holes. The blackbirds were arguing together loudly as they settled down in the laurels for the night; nevertheless through all the din Grimalkin detected a distant scurry and patter of feet. His practised ear soon recognised that the oncoming steps belonged to a running rabbit, and just behind he caught the galloping rustle of some pursuer. Grimalkin the cat feared neither fox nor dog, and he knew that the smaller folk all feared him and turned aside from his path; so that, with a glance to locate a convenient tree in case of emergency, he remained where he was. The bushes suddenly parted and out sprang the Collared Buck. His ears were laid down and his eyes showed the whites as he glanced behind him. He came straight as an arrow for the drain; not until he was almost upon it did he catch sight of Grimalkin, and at that moment Redpad the fox came leaping upon his trail. The Collared Buck saw that he was in a trap. He was yet three yards from the bank when he jumped, but the force of his rush was with him and carried him into the drain. At the same instant the cat's claws tore his flank, but the smart merely spurred him to further efforts. He changed feet nimbly, and shot through the hedge far out into the field beyond. Grimalkin alighted on the ditch bottom in a smother of dead leaves, not three feet from the fox's nose. He put his back against the bank, and his eyes looked ugly as he breathed a menace. The fox stopped dead, and they glared eye to eye while one might pant a score of times. Then the fox dropped his eyes uneasily. He dared not face the great cat's scimitar claws in the narrow path, and he slid cautiously back in his tracks out of striking distance before leaping into the bushes.

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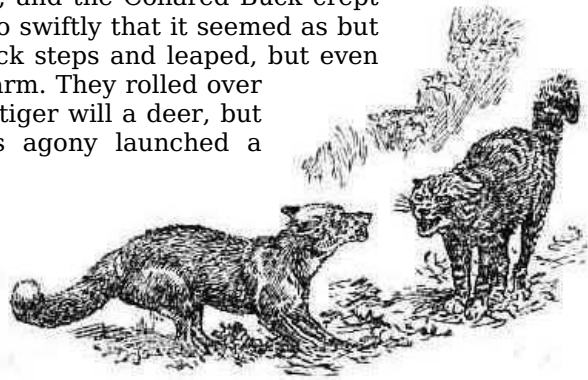
Grimalkin caught a rat and a bird that night, and at dawn went back to his lair. He licked his muddy coat dry, and being full fed and comfortable for the first time for many days, he sang a low song to himself, which made the little mice, among the ivy at the cave's mouth, cower and hide. But by and by the purring ceased, and Grimalkin, thoughtfully watching the dim light on the floor, growled softly at the recollection of the baulked spring in the hedge bottom; and in his dreams that night—for the Fur Folk often dream—his claws worked softly as though he had struck them into the kill.

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After that Grimalkin watched the hedge bottom for two nights, but the Collared Buck was wary, and went out to feed by another way. On the third evening he came again, but a breath of wind warned him in time of his enemy's presence. This happened once or twice, and then Grimalkin grew tired of a fruitless vigil in the damp ditch and laid other plans.

One January night Grimalkin came out of his cave, and stealing across the glen, climbed the opposite wall. It was dark under the trees, but a white blur in the shadows guided him to the mouth of the burrow in the elders. Very very cautiously he sniffed at the place. All was well. The Buck had not yet gone out. Grimalkin squatted down within striking distance, tucked his paws away cosily in front of him, and waited.

An hour passed—there was a stir in the burrow, and the Collared Buck crept out, his white throat a beacon in the starlight. So swiftly that it seemed as but one movement, Grimalkin took half a dozen quick steps and leaped, but even as he did so the big rabbit stamped a sudden alarm. They rolled over together, Grimalkin bearing down his prey as a tiger will a deer, but the latter was frenzied with fear, and in his agony launched a desperate kick which caught Grimalkin upon the point of the nose. As he staggered back he felt the rabbit slip from between his claws. The Collared Buck bounded away among the elders, stamping an alarm at every stride, until his dancing white collar disappeared among the bushes. Grimalkin sat up and wiped the blood from his face. He realised that another point had been scored against him.



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An hour later as Grimalkin was passing the well-worn track to the Sheep Field, dawn was breaking, and a fine rain began to fall. He followed a path among the furze bushes, and on turning a corner caught sight of a rabbit in the grass. He stalked it scientifically, and from nearer covert looked at it again. There was no doubt but that it was the Collared Buck. He was lying prone upon his chest as though for a sun-bath, and apparently had noticed nothing amiss. But why should he bask when rain was falling? Grimalkin was uneasy. The Fur Folk fear what is unusual; nevertheless because he was hungry, and his enemy so close, he sprang. His claws sank deep into the white collar, but the Collared Buck neither moved nor gasped. His body was warm and limp, and round his neck, although Grimalkin never noticed it, was twisted a wicked strand of brass wire. It never occurred to Grimalkin to question how his long-sought quarry had died. He drew himself up and his tail swayed with triumph. The Collared Buck lay beneath his claws and old scores were repaid. He began to play the death-game which the cat kind always play over the kill. First of all he touched the rabbit with his paw, daring it to rise up and run from him; then, as though to make surety doubly sure, he leaped upon it and struck again. While there is life in bird or beast they will struggle from the death-play blindly, but the Collared Buck lay placidly still with the rain draggling his fur and his eyes staring. Even his sensitive nose never quivered; for, although Grimalkin did not know it, the wire round his neck had long ago choked the breath in his throat. Next Grimalkin rolled upon the ground, and drawing the limp form towards him, licked its fur and caressed it, while he sang a song praising its strength and cunning, and vaunting his own superior skill as a hunter. The wrens in the furze scolded and flew away, for few of the lesser folk are bold enough to stand by while Grimalkin plays after the kill. He gambolled to and fro like a kitten for the joy of feeling the strong muscles swell in his limbs; and growling, he dared any of the Wood People to snatch his prey from him. So absorbed was he in his game that he never heard a step on the close turf, and only when a blackbird chuckled an alarm did he look up to see Paddy Magrath standing watching him, with a bundle of rabbit snares in his hand. Then all make-believe was at an end. Should he, Grimalkin, Cat-King of Knockdane, give up his kill? He growled menacingly, and dragged at the body, until the peg round which the wire was twisted, already loosened by the rabbit's death-struggles, was pulled out of the ground.

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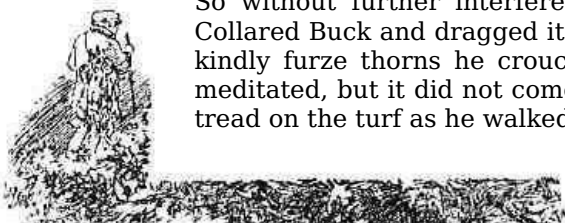
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'Drop it, ye thafe,' shouted Paddy Magrath, flinging his stick at the cat. It missed its mark, and Grimalkin merely glared as he dragged his kill towards the bushes a few yards away. Magrath had lost his cudgel, but he strode up to kick his antagonist aside with his heavy boots. However, Grimalkin turned upon him with such a ferocious snarl that he drew back, for no leather would have been proof against those teeth. By the time he had fetched his stick, Grimalkin, tripping over his burden, had almost gained the bushes. He gave chase instantly, but Grimalkin had never yet abandoned his prey, and only trotted the faster. They reached the bushes simultaneously. The earthstopper struck out brutally with his stick and knocked aside Grimalkin, who rolled over and over half stunned; but then Magrath lost his advantage, for he rashly stooped and laid hold of the rabbit. In an instant, with a strangled yell, Grimalkin's teeth met in his wrist. He sprang back with an oath as the blood trickled down.

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'Begob! there's something not right wid that cat,' he muttered fearfully, stepping aside. 'And the rabbit is a quare one. 'Tis a drop o' holy wather, not a stick, ye'd want for the likes o' him, I'm thinking.'

So without further interference Grimalkin returned to the limp body of the Collared Buck and dragged it laboriously into the bushes. Once protected by the kindly furze thorns he crouched down panting, lest another attack should be meditated, but it did not come; and presently he heard the earthstopper's heavy tread on the turf as he walked away.



Then indeed Grimalkin's triumph was complete. He had even outwitted man



himself, and robbed him of his kill. He turned to the rabbit once more, and played out the death-game to an end before returning to his lair.



GRIMALKIN

CHAPTER IV

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ZOE

The day on which the first swallow came was marked with white in Grimalkin's calendar. He was looking for chaffinches' nests in the big whitethorn hedge at the back of Ballymore Rectory, when he suddenly spied a rat. The rat was sitting up eating a snail, and every now and then it cast a beady glance around; but Grimalkin slid through the grass like a snake, and it did not see him. He had cramped his limbs together for a spring when all at once something fell like a miniature thunderbolt from a neighbouring crab-tree, and alighted just six inches behind the rat, who dropped his supper and vanished in a twinkling.



Grimalkin was astonished. It was a cat—but what a cat! She was small, but such was the length of her fur that she appeared much larger than she really was. She had a foam-white vest and socks, but the rest of her coat was deep mouse colour, and a wide ruffle stood out on either side of her face. Had it been a tom-cat who had leaped at his game, Grimalkin's paw would speedily have buffeted his ears. As it was, he crept forward humbly and tried to attract her attention. Zoe's back gradually rose to a semicircle, and when he touched her she struck him smartly across the face. Certainly love can work miracles, or else Grimalkin, King-Cat of Knockdane, would never have suffered such a blow quietly; but as it was he only passed his tongue deprecatingly over his whiskers. Zoe eyed him to see whether he took his punishment with due

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humility, and then sat down to wipe her ears with her fluffy white paw. Presently Grimalkin rolled over on to his back, rubbing his tabby ears. A deep rumbling purr vibrated his throat: 'Prr-r-eaow!' cried Grimalkin, with that subtle inflection which cats understand to mean: 'You are altogether desirable.' Zoe crept forward, and Grimalkin, rearing up his tabby length, rubbed his whiskers vigorously against her cheek. She too began to purr, but very softly and evenly; and by and by when she trotted away, she glanced back to intimate to him that he might follow if he wished.

After that they often met. Zoe was the cherished pet of the Rectory, and was consequently shut up every night; nevertheless she often eluded her mistress and stole down the whitethorn hedge where Grimalkin caught cockchafers—a trick learned from the blackbeetles of his kitchen days. At first she was reluctant to remain out for long together. After a little excursion she would pause and turn back. Instantly Grimalkin would be at her side imploring her with all feline caresses to accompany him. He could not understand the ties of custom which bound her to her human friends. He had broken them long ago when a kitten, and was now as truly wild as any of the Fur Folk in Knockdane. But Zoe and her parents before her had lived by the fireside and eaten men's food, and it was more difficult for them to hear the call of the woods.



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Once for three days she stayed at home; but on the third evening she looked down the field, and saw Grimalkin waiting. A little cry rose in her throat; she dropped out of the window and ran to him.

They hunted together until the long sunbeams were cut off by the hill, and the dew began to fall. A score of blackbirds piped in Knockdane, and a corncrake rasped in the meadow. The darkness fell, and the night peoples—the badgers, bats, and owls—came out. When the night was half gone, Zoe's instinct to return to her human friends awoke, but she was tired, and Grimalkin's presence was very dear to her. She felt drawn two ways. Instinct bade her remain in the woods; custom, parent of instinct, commanded her to return home. The shadows under the oak trees were full of the mysterious sights and sounds of the night. A skylark on the hill believed that he saw the false dawn, and rose singing to meet it; and a cuckoo in the valley awoke and fluted drowsily. Out in the woods the ways of men seem very small and far away. Grimalkin looked round. 'Prr-r-eaow!' he cried, which being interpreted is: 'O my love, the desirable one'; and the cuckoo's voice mingled with the murmur of the river. Zoe's doubts fled. She forgot her former life, and all the kindness which she had always received from man. Grimalkin was calling and her heart went out to him—Knockdane was calling and she obeyed it. She followed her mate to his lair.

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At the beginning of July Zoe left Grimalkin altogether. Now and then he caught a glimpse of her, but she always fled from him as though he had been some dangerous thing, and for many nights he hunted alone.

Years before, a south-westerly gale had driven in from the Atlantic, and ploughed a deep furrow through the fir grove at the top of Knockdane, piling the snapped trunks on one another. Nobody moved them, and they lay there in rotting heaps; but their fall let in the sunshine and rain to the earth, and the next summer a multitude of plants grew up where previously had been nothing but gloomy firs. Briars ran riot over the decaying branches, grass grew rank and long, and alders pushed a way to the air and light. These were woven into a jungle so dense that only the rabbits thoroughly knew their way about in it; but the foxes and cats followed their runways and often hunted them on their own ground.

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Early one morning Grimalkin went to the 'Jungle.' No dew had fallen for many days, and the sun rose up a cloudless sky. Grimalkin glided down a rabbit track, and so into a little clearing surrounded by walls of thorn and wild rose. Here lay a tree trunk which had been uprooted by the storm. Under its roots was a little cavern half hidden by ivy and broken branches. Grimalkin jumped upon the trunk, and squatted down to watch for rabbits and enjoy the morning sunshine. Presently a bough snapped behind him, and he turned his head very slightly. His muscles were tense to spring, when a soft voice of infinite motherliness thrilled him. 'Purr-r-utchuck!' it said, which in cat language means: 'Thy mother loves thee, little love!' Trotting towards the tree came Zoe. She was thin and her coat looked rough, but her eyes had a tender glow. Grimalkin watched her glide into the lair under the ivy, and then he leaped after her. Carefully concealed from curious eyes was a little chamber lined with grass bents. On the ground squeaked and squirmed a heap of grey and white fur, and encircling it proudly with her body lay Zoe. She purred softly to her brood, and licked the tiny round heads thrust forward so eagerly for a meal. She never noticed Grimalkin until his shadow darkened the doorway, and then she sprang up—a very fierce mother—with back arched. In the woods motherhood for a time swamps all other feelings; and Zoe now looked upon her former lover as she would have done upon any other creature who threatened her kittens.

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However, Grimalkin had no evil intentions. He thrust his head into the nursery and touched Zoe's whiskers; and, although her claws were drawn back to strike, she suffered the caress. One of the kittens, mewling plaintively, crawled to Grimalkin, and thrust its minute pink nose into his side. Grimalkin stood frozen with horror for a moment, glaring at his son, then with a hiss of indignation he leaped into the bushes and fled. Henceforth he avoided the old fir tree, although he often met Zoe elsewhere.



That summer was long remembered in the countryside as 'The year of the great drought.' No dew or rain fell, and the whole land leaped and quivered in the heat all day long. The pools and brooks dwindled, leaving cracked patches of mud to show where they had been. Brooding birds upon the nest gaped with thirst, but dared not leave their eggs to seek the distant river. For the Fur Folk in Knockdane there was only one little trickle of tepid water left; and all day long it was crowded with thirsty birds who struggled with one another for room to drink and bathe. It was hard work for Zoe in these days, for she had to hunt for five besides herself. She grew very thin; but as the kittens throve she did not spare herself, for that is the way of mothers, human and furred.



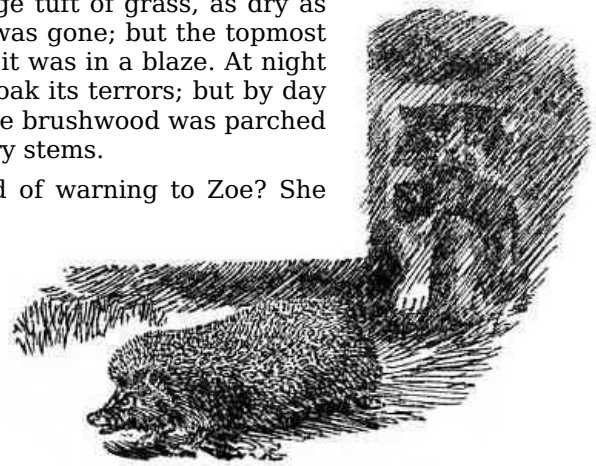
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One blazing noon she left her family for a little while, and was sitting with Grimalkin in a hawthorn some little way from the 'Jungle.' Their attention was attracted by the thud of footsteps, and they saw Paddy Magrath the earthstopper. He had paused to draw his pipe from his pocket and light it. The cats watched intently lest he should discover them, but he threw away the match and passed on.

By and by Grimalkin looked down the path and saw what looked like a row of orange crocus flowers, which grew up in a moment and died down, leaving the ground black behind them. The cats came down from the tree, and at the first whiff of the burnt grass Zoe's back rose. She knew that smell better than did Grimalkin, for she was more accustomed to the ways of men, and had sat by the fireside; but there the flames had been caged behind iron bars—here in the free woods they had it all their own way. Grimalkin growled, and then, stealthily, as though he had sighted a rabbit snare, he slipped into the bushes and glided away. Zoe stood there longer, for although she hated and feared the fire, yet it was less strange to her than to her mate.

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The flames crept along until they came to a large tuft of grass, as dry as tinder. There was a sudden flare and the grass was gone; but the topmost tongue licked a bramble bush, and in an instant it was in a blaze. At night a fire puts on a certain majesty with which to cloak its terrors; but by day it has nothing to redeem its native fierceness. The brushwood was parched with the drought and the flames roared up the dry stems.



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Did some kind angel stoop and whisper a word of warning to Zoe? She suddenly turned and ran to the 'Jungle,' which was not very far away. The kittens were hungry and begged a meal, but she disregarded them, and, picking up the youngest, set off at a steady pace across Knockdane. The woods were quite silent but for the song of the birds. Close to the nursery an old blackbird was feeding a brood of fledglings, and a hedgehog nosed along the path. Above the tree tops a faint smoke rose, quivering in the sunshine.

Zoe trotted away with her head up, carrying the kitten very carefully lest her teeth should lacerate its tender skin. She crossed Knockdane and sought the open country, for she mistrusted every tree and thicket since she knew what she had left in the woods behind. She found an empty rabbit hole, laid the kitten inside, and cantered back to Knockdane; but it was more than half a mile away, and by the time she reached it, little white ashes were floating over the 'Jungle' like snowflakes, and the fire was singing merrily to itself. Nevertheless a wide path separated it from where the kittens lay, and so far the danger did not seem so very pressing.

Zoe picked up a second youngster and carried it off. As she set her face towards Knockdane for the second time she saw that a thick smoke was rolling up and reddening the sun. The country lay still in the heat haze. As yet no one seemed to have noticed anything unusual on the hill, for the valley was sparsely populated, and most people were enjoying a siesta. When Zoe reached the 'Jungle' she saw a frightened rabbit scudding away. The fire was raging in the saplings near and licking away the brushwood with a fierce hiss. A charred space, littered with red embers, lay in a circle of fire which was encroaching ever further and further into the wood. The laurels crackled as the heat changed them to molten gold and ruby before dropping them into the flames. There was no time to be lost. Already blazing fragments were dropping from the tree into the dead grass at the edge of the 'Jungle,' and the brushwood burned like tinder when kindled.

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Zoe took up her third kitten, and this time she ran faster than before. The old blackbird was croaking to her brood, beseeching them to use their wings to escape, but they only gaped foolishly for more worms. The hedgehog was waddling through the grass as fast as his short legs would permit. Zoe easily overtook and passed him, but the kittens were heavy and the day very hot. The sun came through the leaves, and cast chequered patterns on the path. The woods were very still, but for the rush and crackle of the fire.

For the third time Zoe toiled back up the hill. The air seemed hotter and heavier than ever, and smoke hung among the trees. Suddenly she came upon the vanguard of the fire. It had leaped the path and was creeping into the 'Jungle' with a roar. Alder, fir branch, and briar in turn flared up and fell before it, and the yellow flames streamed skywards, dissolving into sparks and smoke. Behind lay utter desolation. The charred tree-trunks stood up among the surrounding blackness,

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and the leaves which the fire could not reach hung blistered from their twigs. The fire was not two hundred yards away from the fir tree. It was to be a race—Zoe against the flames; but the former had a mile to travel, and a kitten to carry into the bargain.

Her eyes smarted from the smoke and she was dizzy with fatigue, but she gallantly took up her fourth baby, and ran for its life. She caught a glimpse of some men hastening up the hill, but did not heed them. She laid her kitten with the rest of the litter, and made the best of her way back to Knockdane.

The 'Jungle' was crowned with flames. Everything was thickly peppered with ashes and the sun shone luridly through the smoke. For a moment Zoe was utterly at a loss—then she limped up the accustomed path towards the fir tree. Once or twice she trod on a burning cinder, and the heat made her whiskers shrivel; but she kept on bravely for the sake of the baby in the pine-tree nursery.

She darted to the nest. There was just half a minute to spare before the fire would sweep up to the tree. The earth was burning hot, and already the ivy leaves were blistering. She plunged into the hole and groped desperately for her treasure. The moments flew by—she could not find it. Her eyes were accustomed to see in the gloom, but this darkness was impenetrable. Ah! at last she touched the mewling kitten, and gripping it turned to fly. Outside she shrank back, for she was met by a veritable wall of flame. The fir tree was surrounded by fire, for the grass was blazing, and the bushes were kindling in every direction. There was only one place through which escape could be made—where the burning zone was narrowest. Zoe gripped the kitten tighter, laid back her ears, closed her eyes, and leaped. For one fierce moment the fire actually licked her body, and then she dropped safely on the ashes beyond. Her whiskers were gone, her beautiful ruffle had shrivelled away, her coat was black with ashes; but the kitten for whom she had dared so much was safe. She crawled wearily away, dragging it after her, while the fire leaped and danced round the old fir tree.

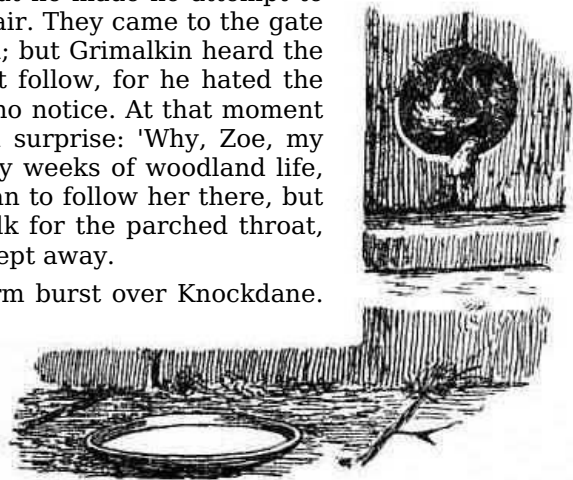
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At sunset, as Grimalkin prowled through the fields at the back of the church (for he avoided the woods while that mysterious bright power hunted there) he saw Zoe, again carrying a singed kitten. In the hour of danger old ties had reasserted themselves. She was going back to man, for with all his ignorance he had treated her better than the wild had done, and already four of the kittens lay in the Rectory hayloft.

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She put up her back when she saw Grimalkin, but he made no attempt to stop her, and only trotted behind with a puzzled air. They came to the gate of the Rectory yard, and Zoe crawled underneath; but Grimalkin heard the scorched woods calling to him, and he could not follow, for he hated the abodes of men. 'Meaow!' he cried, but Zoe took no notice. At that moment a girl came into the yard, and stopped short in surprise: 'Why, Zoe, my pet!' she cried joyfully. Zoe, trained in caution by weeks of woodland life, climbed into the hayloft. The girl knew better than to follow her there, but presently she came back bearing a saucer of milk for the parched throat, and laid it down outside. Grimalkin turned and crept away.

That night the drought broke, and a thunderstorm burst over Knockdane. The rain poured in torrents and doused out the fire completely. But for many months there was a wide black clearing where the 'Jungle' had been; and a charred log in the middle was all that was left of Zoe's nursery.



CHAPTER V

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WHERE THE BATTLE IS TO THE STRONG

In March the nights are long and winds are cold; food is scarce, yet hunters must live.



Grimalkin passed down the palings at the woodside, and stole on noiseless feet among the grass-tufts under the stormy dawn.

Four summers have passed over Grimalkin's head since we saw him last; four years of uninterrupted supremacy in the woods. His own kind feared him; the lesser Fur Folk fled from him; the gamekeeper hated him. He was the patriarch of his race, a Prince among his people. But these four years, while raising Grimalkin to the height



of his fame, had taken their toll. His coat already showed a suspicion of grey along the spine and jowl; his eyes were keen as ever, but many kills had blunted the mighty claws and teeth; and his whiskers had fallen in. Nevertheless the Spring Longing danced as gladsomely in his blood as when he had been a kitten.

March mornings are stormy. The wind woke at daybreak and sighed up the valley. The trees of Knockdane swept a stately arpeggio in answer as the steely south-easter roared louder through the organ pipe of the woods, and bent the tasselled larch on which the storm-cock chanted to the celandines.

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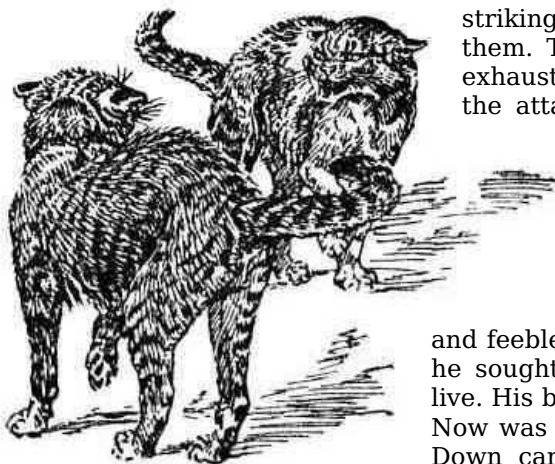
The sunrise was pale and watery, fitful gusts shook the bushes. Grimalkin's thoughts ran on rabbits—the rabbits always come out on the Long Bank first of all. He squatted under a briar brake, tucked his paws away cosily before him, and watched.

A rustle among the brambles, a stir on the dead leaves. Grimalkin's muscles stiffened, and his whiskers twitched. He crouched flat, then slid forward sinuously, paw after paw. Never yet had he failed in his spring on a March rabbit. His eye dilated and his muscles swelled with the thought of victory. Then came the rub. The quarry, nervously nibbling at the open grass, was outside striking distance. A young cat might have risked a spring and failure. Grimalkin was too old a hunter, and sat down to wait.

Again the grasses stirred, and green eyes, keen and deadly, were framed in the waving stems. The hunter knew them well. A reproduction of his own, they belonged to his great-grandson, a worthy whose well-groomed face betrayed all feline vices.

The newcomer licked his lips, his face took a smug complacent expression. He also scrutinised the rabbit—he also would wait. If there should be a battle, well and good—let the strongest win. Grimalkin made no sign save that he bared his teeth in a silent snarl of concentrated hate; but hot anger boiled within him, for it is one of the laws of the Fur Folk, that if one beast hunts the quarry of another of the same kind, the latter may kill him if he will. But never before had another cat dared to stalk Grimalkin's game, or beard him to his face. It was intolerable, and he half turned, and in so doing betrayed himself. The rabbit is the wariest of Wood Folk. If he were not so he would have died out centuries ago. He sat up with alert ears, and lilted suspiciously to a distance. The hunters saw that their game had disappointed them, but they scarcely heeded it. They watched one another for a minute with slowly undulating tail-tips. Then very evenly and softly from the patriarch's throat rose the challenge of Clan Cattus: 'mi-ee-awl.' His grandson answered, flinging back the cry loudly and defiantly, interlarding it with those insults of which a tom-cat is such an unrivalled master.

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The heroes circled round one another, and then closed, striking out tufts of fur until the ground was sprinkled with them. They buffeted one another until they were utterly exhausted, and then drew back to recover before renewing the attack. Grimalkin strained every sinew to teach this

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upstart the respect due to his position and years, but—try as he would—not a blow went home. Feint, counterfeint, undercut and smashing downward stroke, all were parried, and Grimalkin sank down breathless after every round with blood trickling from his ears. A new sensation assailed him—his limbs seemed numb and feeble. He was weary. It was not now revenge for which he sought—he was struggling despairingly for the right to live. His blows grew more feeble, and foam hung on his jaws. Now was the time for the superiority of young blood to tell. Down came the iron paw, armed with the strong curved

claws, upon the veteran's skull. Grimalkin yelled and leaped back as a hot red curtain fell before his sight. Baffled and half stunned, he crept away, cowed, into the bramble covert.

The victor sat up and licked his wounds. Henceforth there was a new king for the cat-folk in Knockdane.

The day was well begun. Why did the throstle pipe overhead? Why did the daffodils dance in the

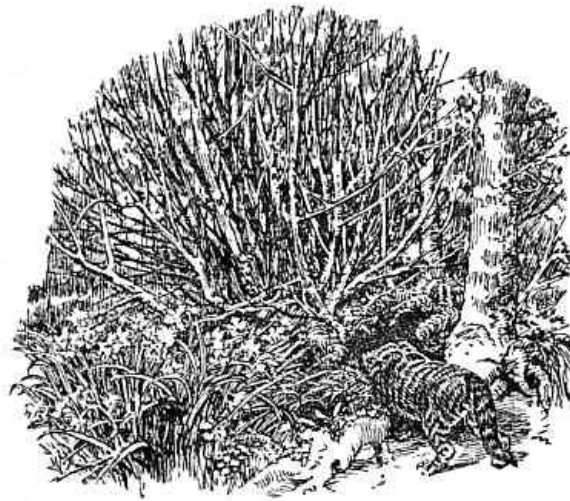
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breeze? Why was the Spring Longing so insolently apparent in every bud and bough, and why did they flaunt it so heartlessly in his face? Could they restore a darkened eye, or rejuvenate weakened limbs? Thus might have mused Grimalkin of Knockdane, who was king there no more. It had come at last, a cold hand which grips man and beast alike, certain and irremediable. *Old Age* was stealing fast behind him. And old age means more to the Fur Folk than to human beings. When their strength once declines ever so slightly, they must go to the wall to make room for stronger hunters. They are the lawful prey of any who can take them. If by any chance they escape death by their fellows, nothing remains but Starvation—a slower agony.

Grimalkin could not look into the future and see what Fate had in store for him, but perhaps he was all the happier for it. Mortified and baffled as he was at his defeat, he did not realise that a day would come when he must pass by the full-grown buck rabbit for the young and sickly, or later on prey on grass-mice which he now disdained. But this day was still far off. Loud called the March wind overhead. Grimalkin rose, and ceased to try and tear the darkness from his blinded eye. He was hungry, and his hunter's skill still remained to him. What he lacked in strength and endurance must be compensated for by cunning. He crept from his hiding-place, and stole silently down the path to his hunting grounds.

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So passes Grimalkin from this tale, through the grey trees, into the depths of the mysterious woods, where the race is only to the swift and the battle to the strong, and about which man can know nothing certainly.



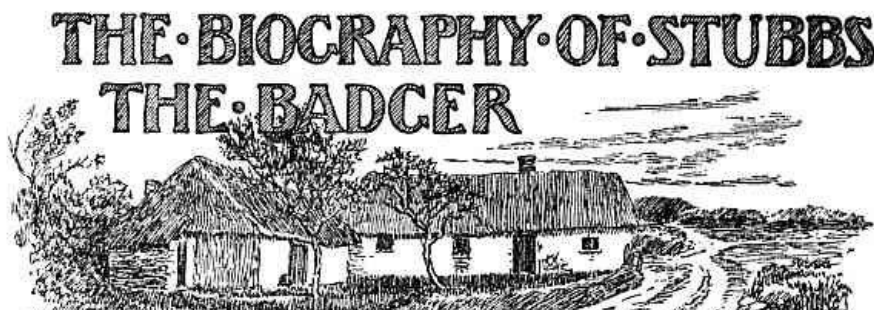
THE BIOGRAPHY OF STUBBS THE BADGER

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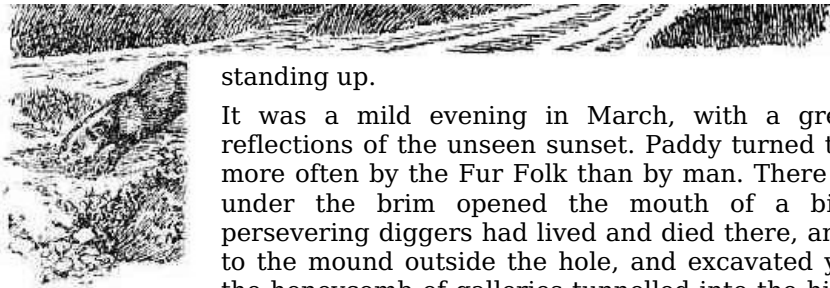
CHAPTER I

THE TWILIGHT HUNTERS

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The spoor was impressed deeply in the muddy ground where a stream ran by the path. The broad toes were well defined, and the punctures of the great digging claws had cut the clay. 'There's badgers in



the auld earth again,'
said Paddy Magrath,

standing up.

It was a mild evening in March, with a grey sky streaked with faint reflections of the unseen sunset. Paddy turned to the right, up a track used more often by the Fur Folk than by man. There was a shallow pit here, and under the brim opened the mouth of a big burrow. Generations of persevering diggers had lived and died there, and each had added his quota to the mound outside the hole, and excavated yet another chamber among the honeycomb of galleries tunnelled into the hill. However, for some years, the 'earth' had been empty, and the dead leaves had drifted thickly against the entrance. The rabbits had dug burrows about the place; and after a hard-pressed fox had taken refuge there, two winters before, Magrath himself had built up the 'set' with stones and earth, so strongly that fox-pads could not open it. Now, however, the barricade was scraped away, and leaves and grass littered the mound outside. Magrath looked up at the fading sky and turned homewards, but after a few steps he returned. Had Fate set him in another sphere, he might have been a great naturalist. As it was, although he had a profound knowledge of those of the Wild Folk who furnished 'shpoort' for himself and his fellow men, of the lesser breeds he was almost entirely ignorant. Nevertheless, the spirit of the true naturalist slept in him, unsuspected, and to-night, for once in a way, it awoke. He would not admit to himself that he desired to see the inmates of this burrow without chance of 'shpoort' or slaughter, but muttered shamefacedly: 'Shure, I'll watch a bit see would the craythurs come out to-night.' Those who spend much time alone under the free sky acquire this habit of soliloquy; indeed, after a while, each finds himself his own best company.

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Paddy Magrath sat down under a tree, and watched the light fade from the surrounding bushes. The bats hawked to and fro, and a blackbird 'chink-chinked' in notes like the dripping of water. A rabbit came out of a hole hard by with his scut buttoned down, and slid away to feed, so softly that his footsteps never stirred the leaves; but he did not see Paddy Magrath, who, in his tattered coat and broken boots, looked as shapeless and as knotted as the old stump against which he leaned. The woods were quite quiet but for the trickling of the little stream near at hand, and even the nibbling of the rabbit in the brambles was plainly

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audible.

When it was so dark that the shrews could only be located by their voices as they squabbled in the dead leaves, there came a rustle at the 'earth' mouth, and a striped snout was poked out. After the snout slid a long grey body—a shadow among the shadows—humped and clumsy, yet so silent that not a twig snapped under the heavy pads. Magrath sat with his hands clasped over his 'ash-plant.' The badger sniffed suspiciously, then waddled off by a little, well-worn path. A minute or two afterwards, from the stream, could be heard the sound of water lapped down a thirsty throat. Paddy was wise. He sat for another ten minutes. The silence grew more tense and the darkness deeper. Then, without any warning, a badger, larger than the last, scurried across the pit so quickly that Magrath's old eyes had barely caught sight of him before he vanished in the shadows.

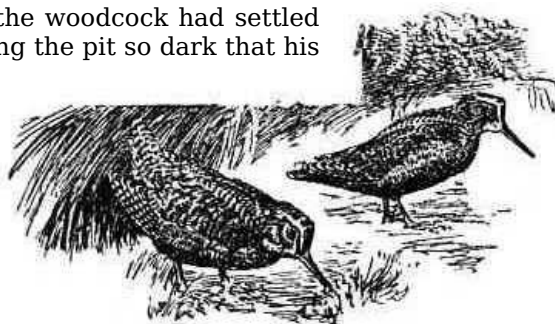


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'A pair o' thim,' said the old man, hobbling homewards.

A week later he waited there again; waited until the woodcock had settled down to feed, and the light was almost gone, leaving the pit so dark that his eyes saw nothing when his ears caught the rustle of a single hunter turning up the hill from the 'earth.'

'There's cubs wid'in,' opined Paddy Magrath.



Tunnelled ten yards into the hillside, up a narrow gallery to the right, and then down another, dug at right angles to avoid a rock proof against even a badger's claws, was the nursery; and here the cubs were born at the end of March. If Mother Badger had been wary before, she now increased her caution to an unheard-of degree. Even the distant shuffle of her mate's footsteps, as he went out to feed, was sufficient to rouse her to a rumbling growl. She herself never stirred outside the 'earth' until after midnight, and, even then, the 'wick-wick' of a wakeful throstle set her heart thudding.

It was the middle of April before Mother Badger took her cubs into the woods. She chose a starlit night—the badgers love the stars better than the moon—and led them to the burrow mouth. They crawled up the mound outside, and then flopped down to rest; for their longest journey hitherto had been across their nursery, and their short legs soon grew weary. Although the alternate tracts of their pied snouts were well defined, the black was washed over with chocolate colour; otherwise they were exact replicas of their parents.

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Mother Badger did not dare to lead them far afield that night. As it was, once or twice she took alarm and hustled them underground. However, the cubs did not trouble about the limitations of their bounds. The sand at the burrow mouth was light and dry, and they delightedly thrust their

paws into it and scattered it about, just as children at the seaside dabble their feet in the water. The biggest cub found a rabbit scrape, and, thrusting in his nose, dug lustily. Presently one of his sisters came pushing up and they fought viciously, rolling over and over to the bottom of the mound, with locked claws. This roused Mother Badger, who lay above the 'earth' with one eye on her cubs and the other upon the woods. She waddled down and cuffed them; then brought them back, and licked and fed them tenderly. Long before dawn she took them below ground again; even before Father Badger had returned home, grunting, to his solitary dormitory.

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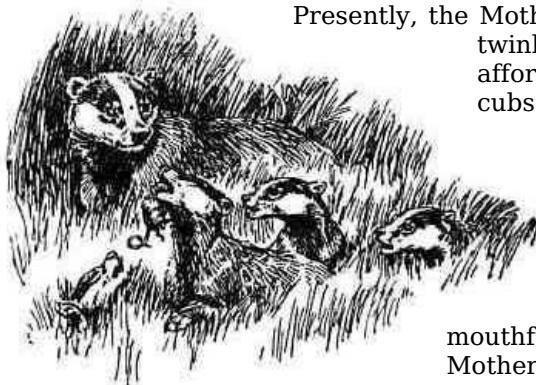


HOMeward BOUND

The next night, however, they went as far as the Hollow Field. Mother went first, and the cubs, their eyes fixed upon her shaggy, bumping quarters, followed her closely in single file. Her feet made no sound; but now and then one of the little ones, less used to tread where the least rustle aroused the whole woodside, snapped a twig. That was their first real hunting. Last night by the 'earth' had merely been play, but now they learned the science of smells, for a badger relies very greatly upon his nose. They learned that, as the night wore on, the scent grew stronger or fainter according to the dew-fall and the wind and the state of the ground, and to what different smells belonged. A strong taint blew aslant the hedge—that was fox. Mother Badger sampled it scientifically, and the cubs dutifully followed her example. The rabbit trails intersected one another in a labyrinth, but the badger has no dealings with grown rabbits, and they passed these by. Every tree and herb and bird and beast has its own particular odour, and, as there is no directory of scent in the woods but that which each of the Fur Folk compiles for himself, the little badgers had to learn each separately.

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Thus, follow-my-leader-wise, they entered the Hollow Field, and Mother Badger sought a likely spot where the babies might receive a first lesson in beetle-hunting. She dug up the turf, and grunted for her family to turn over the scrapings. He who nosed deepest obtained the morsel—a dor-beetle, well-flavoured, and devoured with gusto with the condiment of Nature's providing.



Presently, the Mother Badger craned her long neck, and her little eyes twinkled. She had winded something else which would afford a very good object-lesson, besides supper, for the cubs. Each little one tiptoed up and sniffed in turn: it was an unknown smell, but good—decidedly good. 'Hunt it!' grunted Mother Badger, as plainly as grunt could speak. Listening, they heard needlets of sound, and the ghost of a rustle, as though some tiny thing thrust the grass-blades aside. The eldest cub went first. He located it, as he thought exactly, and snapped gingerly. He caught a mouthful of grass only, and the rest had no better fortune. Mother Badger saw that she must assist, or else her pupils

would go supperless. She thrust in her snout, drew out a mouse, and dropped it before them. The cubs rushed in helter-skelter, and the eldest presently pushed his way out of the scrimmage with the rest of his brothers and sisters tugging and snatching at the mouse which dangled from his mouth. He tore it to pieces, growling, and the others kept at a safe distance, for he was the biggest and strongest of the litter. After this they turned down the field to the pool in the middle, and here Mother Badger showed them another game. On the bank the meadow-sweet grew rankly, and hearing the familiar 'plop-plop' of a frog in the dew-soaked herbage, she set the example of chasing it. The cubs grew eager, and hunted with little squeaks and snorts of excitement. Frog was better than mouse, for it could not run from them so silently. Now and then there was a splash as some amphibian, more lucky than his fellows, dived through the crowfoots into the pond. When this occurred the cubs were puzzled—water was a mystery to them—but another frog was soon afoot, and the chase began again.

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Thus, night by night, they learned field-craft, and gradually grew to know the geography of the woods, with every pool and thicket and pathway.

At the top of Knockdane there are three or four acres, which are so rock-encumbered, and so overgrown with heather and bracken, that an occasional broken-topped fir or oak sapling is the only tree which will grow there. Here and there a narrow path twists through the fern, and the industrious rabbit people, who live among the rocks, keep the grass on those spots close and green. Above this, the hill grows steeper till it meets a grey crag which drops sheer down from the fir wood, whose brow, shaggy with gorse and ling, overhangs the place. The Fur Folk all visit this wilderness. The rabbits and squirrels love it, because the grass and fir-cones there are good, and the blood-hunters follow them thither. There the badgers went one evening at sunset, and feasted on the great worms which were tempted out by the coolness of the night, and on the pignuts in the clearings. After their surfeit the cubs could scarcely waddle among the bracken, for their tight little bodies brushed the stems on either side. Under the crag they stopped to drink, where the water dripped from the height above; and as five badgers guzzling in the mud made much commotion and splashing, Mother Badger never heard the thud of approaching feet until they were almost on the top of her party. She grunted of danger, imminent and serious, and gathered her cubs together. Dinny Purcell had made a short-cut through Knockdane, on his way home from a meeting of the local branch of the Gaelic League at Whelan's 'public'; and, as the proceedings had terminated agreeably with some toasts to the success of the League, Dinny felt valiant enough to defy any number of ghosts. Mother Badger stood on the other side of the little marsh, and growled thunderously; but Dinny did not hear, and stumbling and cursing, knee-deep in mud, came on. The cubs glided into the fern, but the old badger stood her ground. She had never met her match where strength was concerned, therefore she did not trouble to use her teeth, but set her snout against the intruder's legs and shoved.

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'Holy Mother—it's the divil,' hiccoughed Dinny Purcell, crossing himself; and he tried to run faster, but Mother Badger growled and thrust again.

'Give over,' muttered Dinny, fuddled with drink, and striking out timorously with his stick, he thwacked Mother Badger's shaggy coat, and thereby incited her to charge again. Dinny would gladly have taken to his heels, but as his feet were stuck fast in the mud it was impossible; and sobered by superstitious fears, he remembered his match-box, and fumbled for it. Mother Badger was normally placid and slow to wrath, but this man's presence so near to her cubs angered her. She caught the top of his boot—it was well for Dinny that her fangs missed his leg—and bit it. Just then he found his matches, and struck one. It was hot—bright—pungent, such as she had never winded before. She backed hastily, but as what a badger has seized that will he hold as long as there is breath in him, she ripped the boot from top to sole. Dinny yelled, and dropping the match, which fell sputtering into a puddle, he swung himself on to an adjacent rock and tucked up his legs. 'It's the divil, an' he runnin' like a pig,' he groaned.

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But Mother Badger had no mind to fight for fighting's sake. Had she not feared for her cubs, she would have fled at once from a creature who could summon that hot, bright mystery at will. She withdrew cautiously in her tracks, and one by one her cubs followed her from rock or heather tuft where each lay. Once in the darkness, beyond the reek of whisky and the dreaded voice of man, they breathed more freely; and they bumped along in single file down to the beech and bramble woods which lie by the Hollow Field, and which from bud-time to leaf-fall are seldom visited by men.

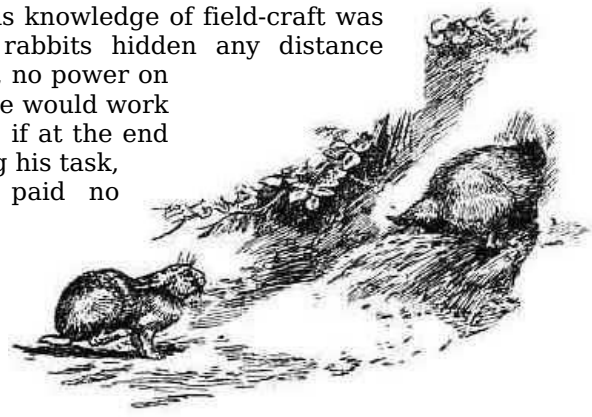
But, from that day to this, Dinny Purcell swears that the devil met him that night in Knockdane, in token of which he shows his split boot-leather; and for every time of telling, the devil increases so much in size and ferocity.

Towards the end of May the cubs were weaned, and henceforth they hunted less with their parents, and more often alone, or in couples. In this litter of four there were two sows and two boars, of which one was the little badger who has hitherto been referred to as the 'eldest cub,' but because his legs and likewise his snout were short and stumpy, even for a badger, he was afterwards known in Knockdane as Stubbs. It is he with whom this history deals.

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The young ones opened the other galleries of the old 'earth,' and slept in dormitories away from the nursery. But in June, when the nights were short, and the badgers sometimes went hunting before the sun was well set, and stayed out until the dawn had broken over the hills, now and then it happened that morning overtook one of the family far from home, and, blinded by the early sunshine, he was obliged to seek some hide-up for the day.

By August, Stubbs was almost full-grown, and his knowledge of field-craft was profound. He could detect a nest of young rabbits hidden any distance underground, and once he had located the place, no power on earth could hinder him from digging them out. He would work all night, dislodging stones and shovelling earth, if at the end there was a chance of a meal of rabbits. If, during his task, the unfortunate doe-rabbit came home, he paid no attention to her. She might stamp as much as she pleased at the stumpy tail protruding from her nursery—nothing would turn Stubbs aside from his purpose. He could also locate truffles six inches underground—the big knobby ones which grow under oak trees, and the little potato-like ones which smell so strong, and are found under laurels in Knockdane. Besides this, he could wind a man a quarter of a mile away, and he knew every 'shore' and rock and tree in Knockdane.



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The badger's daily round is more monotonous than those of most of the Fur Folk. He is too large greatly to fear any other beast, and he is so wary that he seldom comes in collision with man. Year in, year out, from spring to autumn, autumn to spring, his comings and goings follow the set rules of his ancestors. Now and again, however, a badger is born to a more stirring career, and such a one was Stubbs.

In September the badgers lived well, and their sides grew sleek and round. They dug up the bykes of the orange-bellied bumble-bees, regardless of their stings, and guzzled over the sticky sweetness of the honeycomb. Later they visited the crab-trees, and spent many a blissful hour scrunching the sour pippins, and dropping the pieces about the grass, for the badger is an untidy feeder.

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At the end of the month the 'earth' was littered down in preparation for the winter's Big Sleep. The whole family were still living under one roof, so to speak, but as they mostly occupied galleries far apart, it was almost more like a hotel. More than half a badger's life is spent in sleep—profound, blissful sleep, in a world of great silences and deep shadows. In October came a night with frost nip in the air, and a damp mist. Stubbs felt the chill in his bones as he crept to the entrance of the 'earth'; nevertheless, because he was hungry, he went out. Shortly afterwards his brother came up, snuffed the wind, stretched himself and yawned—then, because he was sleepy, and the night undesirable, he waddled back again and slept the clock round. The next night the rest did likewise—why hunt when they were not hungry? There are few winter nights in Knockdane that are not either cold or wet, and such nights the badgers eschewed. Now and again they went out for a few hours, but in the small hours when the morning frost set the grass in the meadows crackling with rime, they grunted disgustedly and returned to bed.

The whole family—parents and young ones—slept through December without ever stirring out, for snow was on the ground most of the month; but in January I know not what mysterious influence, creeping underground, knocked at the closed doors of the badgers' brains, and told them that the frost was gone and the night was warm. Stubbs woke first, and groped his way out. The air was mild and damp, and the roar of the river was borne to him as, rain-laden, it plunged over the weir. The dead leaves were moist and limp, and overhead a foggy moon peered through the bare trees. He trotted stiffly down the woods and visited his old haunts, but, go where he would, he could find nothing to eat but a few sodden mushrooms. An hour later he returned, wet and chilled, and lay down in his dormitory to suck his paws meditatively, until sleep overtook him again. His head dropped on his forepads, and, with a sigh, he fell into a slumber which lasted, with few waking hours, until the Spring Longing came to the woods, and roused him with the rest of the Fur Folk.

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Spring nights are stormy with driving rain-showers, but under the trees the Fur Folk are sheltered from the blustering winds, and come and go from dusk to dawn; for the day on which the first throstle sings is the beginning of the new year in the woods.

The badgers came out with the rest, but they were lean with long fasting, and their toes were tender with much drowsy sucking. Stubbs went through the elder trees, whose buds were growing big and purple, and he dug up and ate the wild arum tubers. They were very bitter and burning to taste, but a badger's palate is not a delicate one, and he devoured them greedily. Besides, there was nothing else left to eat in the woods, for, during the recent famine time, they had been patrolled up and down by bird and beast.

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In March, Mother Badger had another litter of cubs in the old nursery, but there were fewer grown badgers in the 'earth' at this time, for the younger boar cub of the previous season had been 'stopped' out one February night, and had never come home again—perhaps the Carkenny hounds knew why. Stubbs lived a bachelor life by himself at one end of the 'earth.' Even now he was scarcely thoroughly awake after his long sleep, and on any cold or wet night he lay abed. By April, however, he felt better, and put on flesh; and it was then that he finally broke with his family. One night he went round by the Heronry where grew Father Badger's 'Claw-Clapping' tree, a young wych-elm. Father Badger used to resort thither to polish his long digging claws and to scratch himself, and his feet had patted down a little track round the roots. Stubbs went up to the sapling, and began, with great satisfaction, to chisel off strips of bark, for he was proud of his claws. He grunted contentedly, and rubbed his shaggy sides up and down—and, the next minute, heavy as he was, he was sent flying head over heels; for Father Badger had come along, and was

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wroth to find his place usurped. For the first time he realised that, during the Big Sleep, the cub had become a full-grown badger almost as strong as himself. Therefore he challenged; and it was a sign that Stubbs had arrived at adult badger estate that he accepted his father's challenge. They ran at one another, growling ferociously, but they did not use their teeth, only thrust with their snouts; for it is the law of the Fur Folk that two of a kind shall not fight to the death, and it is a law that is not often broken. However, Father Badger was the older and the heavier, and, although a year later Stubbs would have been fully his match, he drove his son away. After that Stubbs did not return to the 'earth' among the elder trees, but led a nomadic life in the woods for some weeks, sleeping in a dry drain or old rabbit-hole, and at night wandering miles abroad over the countryside. In those days there was a drouth in Knockdane, and the streams dried up. It was serious for the badger people, for they were often obliged to search very far afield for water. Sometimes a shower fell, but never enough to fill the springs. At such times the badgers resorted to a hollow in a path, along which horses had passed in winter when the mud was deep. Now, after a shower, each hoof-mark was a clay goblet of water, and the badgers' thirsty red tongues used to lick out the contents gratefully.

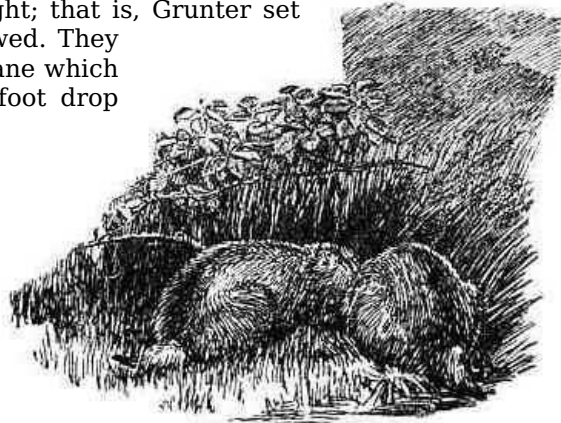
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One close night in May, Stubbs went down to the Great White House, where the men live. The Great White House stands on a little oasis of open grass, but the woods come up close round, and the rabbits trespass under the very windows. In the field round, the men have planted roots which are new to badger palates, and some of them are very good. Stubbs sampled them all. Some were narcissus and hyacinth, evil-tasting and slimy, and he threw them aside. Others, the crocus and tulip, were better; but best of all were the snowdrops, which were sweet and nutty, and of these Stubbs ate all he could find. At last he ventured quite close to the walls of the house. Faint notes of music beat from one of the windows, and these made Stubbs raise his head suspiciously. All at once it seemed that eyes were watching him from the shadow to his leeward side—mysterious eyes, eager yet timid. He grunted, and dug up another bulb, but the sensation of being watched grew stronger. Instinctively he knew that it was not an enemy who spied upon him thus—rather the contrary. He could neither see, hear, nor wind anything unusual, but that mysterious sense which is perhaps the parent, not the outcome, of the other senses, told him that the watcher was hidden under the oak tree to his right, and that he would do well to pursue it thither. Suddenly the shutters of a window were thrown open, and a golden beam of light was flung across the darkness. It lit up the rough bark of the oak tree on the lawn, and at the foot of the latter, blinking resentfully in the light, Stubbs saw the owner of the watching eyes. In a second or two the light was shut off, and the music grew muffled again; but Stubbs thought no more of bulbs, for he heard the patter of feet which scampered back to the wood, and gave chase.

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Perhaps she did not run very fast, at all events he soon came up with her. In size she was less than himself, but judged by badger standards her charms were surpassing. Also she did not repulse him, for she came from the Ballinakill 'earth' outside Knockdane, and had dwelt mateless for many days.

So Stubbs and Grunter hunted together that night; that is, Grunter set the pace and chose the paths, and Stubbs followed. They went by the main badger path, and crossed the lane which runs across Knockdane, slithering down a five-foot drop which is scored in every direction by deep claw-prints, and entered the Big Meadow together. The cattle slept in the dewy grass, and, stealing in among them, the badgers hunted every inch of ground for beetles. Every now and then a 'bum-clock' boomed overhead, and then fell 'splotch' to earth. Small chance had it when the badgers' noses probed for it in the grass: but Grunter took the lion's share, for in the wood there is a law that, during the days of courtship, the female may take what she will and her mate shall not gainsay her.



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Henceforward they hunted together night after night. Sometimes they sought for partridges' eggs—eggs are a badger tit-bit, when he can find them, which is not often—and these went down, shell and all, 'crunch-squolch.' Sometimes they beat a way through the standing meadow grass, leaving a track behind which two days' sun would not eradicate, or searched for wasps' nests in the hedge-banks. These were honeymoon nights, and, sweet though they were, they could not last for ever. It was the weather which first stimulated the pair to find a permanent 'set.' It was showery, with now a cool wet evening which made the badgers think of the comfort of a deep burrow in preference to a makeshift rabbit-hole or drain; and then again came a hot starlit night, a hunter's night, when Stubbs filed his claws on a tree-trunk because of the wasted digger's energy within him.

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On the second such night they went to Larch Hill. The soil there is dry and sandy, and it is a pleasant place—cool in summer and warm in winter—and, wherever the wind stirs, the supple larches bend before it, and nod and whisper mysteriously among themselves. Here there was an empty rabbit burrow, and Stubbs poked in his nose, and snuffled. Grunter shouldered him aside and crawled in until only her shaggy hind-quarters appeared. Then she began to dig, and a continuous shower of sand spurted out between her hind-legs. When the heap bid fair to block her in altogether, she backed awkwardly, shovelling it out as she came. This was Stubbs' chance. He lumbered into the cavity, and scraped likewise until his coat was full of dust. Grunter tried to press in after him, but a well-directed kick sent her sprawling upon her broad back, and she was

obliged to wait outside until her mate was tired. So they worked alternately, until a most respectable tunnel had been driven under the larch trees.

Meanwhile, however, the herons flew in from the bogs, full cropped after the night's fishing, and the morning wind was heavy with the scent of elder flowers. The caverns of shadow around began to resolve themselves into cool green arcades, and the woodcock croaked during their aerial romplings overhead. The larks sang up on the hill, and the wood birds answered with a blast of song. The badgers were tired and dusty and sleepy. Grunter crept into the half-completed 'earth'; and Stubbs, after pausing to lick his sore pads, followed her. They lay down with grunts of content, snout to snout, stomachs upwards, and in two minutes were snoring comfortably. That was their house-warming.

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CHAPTER II

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BORRIGAN'S BAITING

'Get out, ye baste!' growled Marky Borrigan, shaking the sack he carried over the mouth of a barrel. There was a stifled grunt, a struggle, and a grey bundle fell into the cask with a thud.



'Shure, we have him all safe,' said Borrigan, with a grin.

'Begob, that was a good night's work,' said Micksey Bolger, henchman and confederate of the said Mark. 'Where had ye him cot?'



'Twas over in Knockdane. I was there at two o'clock this morning and up at the "earth." I had the sack wid a bit o' cord run round the mouth, an' I put it down the hole wid just the mouth set open, an' the twine fast to a three-thrunk. I sent the dog huntin' down the wood, and by and by I heard this felly cantherin' up as it might be a pig. He stopped just fernent me, and bedam, he cut a look on me as wicked as a Christian, an' I t'rew the stick at him an' druve him into the sack in the hole. But, indade, whin I come to pick it up he was fightin' inside like the divil an' all his childher, and a terrible job I had to git him here, six mile in the ass-cair.'

'He's a gran' big felly,' said Bolger, peering into the cask. 'I'm told Andy Grace'll bring his tarrier, an' there are two boys from Ballyoughter wid a dog that won the coorsin' there at the New Year, and two three more. This chap is fresh an' in fine condition. Bedam, he'll put up a great fight this evening!'

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'Put him, barrel an' all, into the ould barn,' said Borrigan. 'The flure there is concrete, an' he'll not get away on us.'

They carried the barrel into the barn, and went away, and the yard was left quiet.

All Stubbs' preconceived notions of life had been rudely shaken, when he had darted into his burrow, only to find it changed into a treacherous cul-de-sac; and they had been still more overset when he found himself thus unceremoniously imprisoned in the barrel. At first he was bewildered into quietude, but as, in spite of his stolid ways, a badger is as plucky a beast as hunts the woods, he soon began to revolve plans of escape. When all had been quiet for an hour and a half (a badger's wits are like his legs, slow but serviceable), Stubbs stood up and upset the barrel. The barn was lighted by a single loophole, and was quite empty. The floor was of concrete and undiggable, but the walls were plaster, and Stubbs' claws—the strongest in the woods—stripped them bare quickly. Alas! underneath were bricks, bricks—nothing but bricks: not a chink or cranny to give purchase to his claws. In fear and trembling he hid in the cask again, where the

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mild light of the summer morning could not filter; and there, ostrich-like, he believed himself safe.

That day was a holiday, and therefore it was arranged that, in the afternoon, the cur dogs of the neighbourhood should have an opportunity of trying their mettle against Stubbs' formidable teeth and claws. It was very hot, and the badger, accustomed to the fresh mildness of the hours of darkness and the cool of the burrows, gasped in the stuffy barn. There had been a pan of water in the place, but in his first terrified scamper he had upset this, and it had not been refilled. He panted, and watched a dusty streak of sunlight creep from west to east along the wall. Every time that he heard a louder voice or step outside, he fled into the barrel; for hitherto he had known nothing but the silence and shadows of the woods at night, and noise and light were both terrible to him.

At last he heard footsteps clatter up to the barn. The door was flung open, and a flood of sunlight poured in.

'All right! he's in the tub,' said Borrigan, looking inside. Stubbs felt himself lifted up and carried out. There was much clamour of voices and shuffling of feet. [211]

'Take two to one on Grace's tarrier.' ... 'Not weight enough. Shure, none o' them dogs could pull him down.' ... 'A shilling on Comerford's sheep-dog!' and so on.

The barrel was turned upon its side, and Stubbs, half blinded by the glare, and wholly terrified, saw many men peering at him. The cluster of grinning faces all seemed to be part of one awful monster; and he slunk back, growling, with bared teeth.

'Begob, he'll put up a fight,' said Micksey Bolger. 'Let the dogs come at him wan be wan, at first.'

The first was a medium-sized dog, with prick ears, and a woolly yellow coat. He evinced a decided desire to fly at the throats of the rest of his kind, but this being checked, he advanced truculently to the barrel, with his scruff standing up. Some one kicked the tub and shouted: 'Git up, ye devil'; and there was a chorus of yells from the bystanders. Stubbs



bundled out in a hurry, and at the same moment the dog flew at his throat. The unprovoked assault restored his wits to the badger. At any rate here was a definite enemy, who fought, not with sacking and rope, but by recognised methods. He struck out, scoring his assailant's shoulder, and then backed hastily into the barrel, until only his striped snout could be seen. A badger realises that his weakness lies in his lack of agility, and by preference he fights with his back to a tree, that he may not be taken in the rear. Three times the dog charged the barrel; and each time, strong and vigilant, the badger drove him back, amid the shouts of the men and the yells of the surrounding dogs. For the fourth time the dog—the blood trickling down his muzzle—rushed in. His temper was up, he was utterly reckless, and he left his shoulder unguarded. Like lightning Stubbs' claws fell—and under that stroke the dog's ribs were laid bare. His owner came forward and carried him out of the ring, and the next dog was brought out. [212]

Of the fight which Stubbs fought for the next hour I shall say little more, for it is neither good to read about nor to write of. It will be sufficient to say that of the five dogs which at last were set upon him at once, four bear scars to this day, and the fifth never moved again. Although Stubbs still crouched victoriously in the barrel, he had sustained three or four wounds. His eyes were red, for he was very angry, and he growled continuously; but he was very tired. However, there was no dog left to match him. [213]

The men stood round undecidedly, when suddenly a voice in the group said: 'Shure, ye should set Kinchella's dog agin him!'

'Me dog's too good for this sort of job,' returned Kinchella. But his voice was none of the steadiest, for, in addition to the farm and a flourishing poaching business, Borrigan showed the match-box in the window.^[4]

[4] In some parts of Ireland a box of matches in a cottage window is a secret sign that the place is a 'shebeen,' or house where drink is distilled, or sold without a licence.

'Ah, now, what hurt to him,' said Mark in honeyed tones, for he was in no hurry for his customers to depart. 'Shure, he is twice the size o' that little baste there, and he'd have him pulled down aisy.'

'Pull him down, is it?' broke in another. 'Begob, that badger would skkin anny dog between this an' the say, let alone that bit of a sheep-dog o' Kinchella's.'

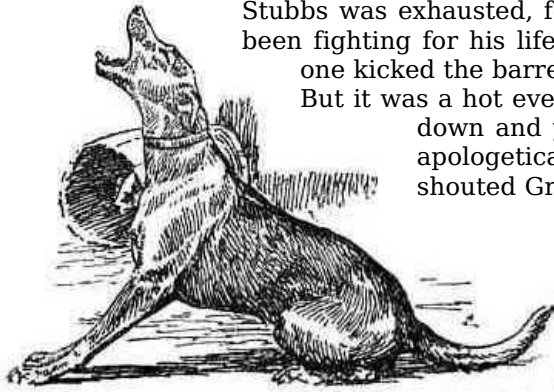
'He'd pull him down fast enough,' retorted Kinchella sharply, 'but I've no mind to have him kilt on me, an' that lad's claws cut like a mower!'

'Bring him, an' let us see it!' shouted another. 'Didn't me little tarrier ate the face off him lasht week, an' him runnin' from him like a rabbit.'

Kinchella turned round scowling. 'Bedam, but I'll fetch him,' he said thickly; 'an' whin he has this baste aten, ye'll alther ye singin'.' And he strode heavily away. [214]

Now James Kinchella's dog, Moss, was well known. He was a big grey sheep-dog with a wall eye;

and although he counted a collie among his immediate ancestors, the rest of his pedigree was buried in oblivion. However, he was reckoned the best cattle dog in the country; and besides, had the name for killing a dog (let alone a fox) in half the time taken by his peers. He was the apple of his master's eye, and in a cooler moment Kinchella would sooner have tackled the badger himself, bare handed; but as it was, he presently reappeared with the dog in a leash.



Stubbs was exhausted, for, besides the strain of his imprisonment, he had been fighting for his life for more than an hour; nevertheless, when some one kicked the barrel and shouted at him, he prepared for battle again.

But it was a hot evening, and the dog was not inclined to fight. He sat down and yawned. To his master's orders he merely whined apologetically and wagged his tail. 'More power to ye,' shouted Grace sarcastically. Kinchella had been drinking, and his eyes were hot and angry. He dealt his dog an unaccustomed kick, and urged him savagely towards the barrel. Moss rose, hurt and puzzled; then catching sight of Stubbs, he instantly associated him with the outrage, and flew at his throat. The badger snapped back again, and they grappled together. In many

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respects they were evenly matched, for although the dog was the larger and more active of the two, the badger was heavy, and furthermore was protected by the barrel. However, Moss was too clever to be rash. He knew the power of Stubbs' paw, so he circled round just out of reach, endeavouring to tempt his opponent into the open that he might take him in the flank. But the badger was also very wary. He knew the strength of his position, and refused to budge. These feinting tactics went on for some minutes, and then the men began to jeer: 'He should have him cot by now' ... 'Indeed, he is a great lad on his pins' ... 'Not so handy wid his teeth'....

'Damn it,' shouted Kinchella, 'what chance has the dog wid ye dirty barrels?' And striding forward, in his drunken rage he tipped up the cask, and tumbled the badger into the open yard, just as the dog rushed in.

They met in a smother of dust, and whirled round. Now and then white fangs snapped, and once—twice the great claws of the badger fell and rose again, stained crimson. It was a fight to the death, and no man there dared interfere; not even James Kinchella, who looked on, half sobered by the result of what he had done. Gradually the dust cleared, and the combatants, locked together, heaved this way and that in their struggle. The dog had seized the badger behind the left ear and shoulder, and again and again in his frenzy he almost lifted his antagonist from the ground; but the latter had a lower hold, and slowly and surely he was seeking his way to his enemy's throat. The dog felt the relentless fangs closing more and more tightly, and he fought madly for breath; but however torn, battered, beaten a badger may be, he never quits his hold, even in death. Gradually his teeth met ... the dog's struggles grew weaker ... his head lolled back.

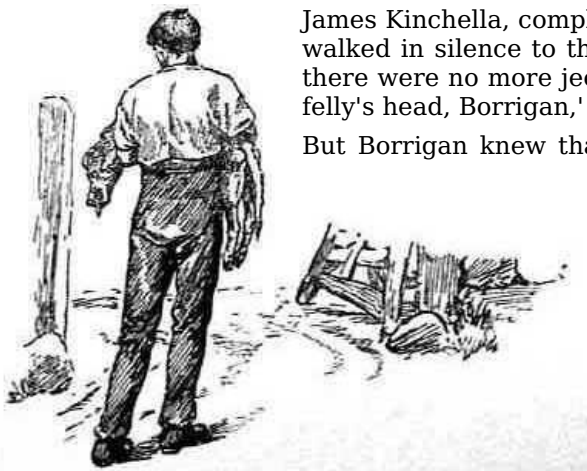
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'Pull off your divil, Borrigan!' yelled Kinchella, breaking into the ring; but he was powerless to loosen Stubbs' jaws—those terrible jaws that are designed for such work as this.

'Shure, he has him kilt!' said Bolger.

It was many minutes before the two could be separated, for the badger clung to his dying adversary with a tenacity which defied them all. Then the dog lay limp and still, and Stubbs himself was in little better plight.

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James Kinchella, completely sobered, picked up the body of his dog and walked in silence to the gate. The men made way for him to pass, and there were no more jeers nor laughter. 'Ye should put a bullet into that felly's head, Borrigan,' growled the owner of the other dead dog.

But Borrigan knew that the publican at Rathmore would pay well for the loan of the badger, and, without heeding the openly expressed anger of the men, he drove Stubbs back to the barn, and locked the door.

Some hours later the last drunken shouts had died away, and the yard was quiet once more. Stubbs had been hiding in a corner under a wisp of straw, but now that the daylight—the

hateful daylight—and the noise were gone, he ventured to creep out. He was very tired, and his wounds were stiff and sore; nevertheless he was determined to escape. He shuffled round the place, testing every brick in the walls. Presently one pale moon-beam filtered through the keyhole. The moon was rising just as he had seen her rise night after night, behind the larches in front of the badger earth, miles away in Knockdane. There was only one crack, and that a very little one; nevertheless he worked his claws into the interstice and dug. Some minutes' hard labour, and then the loosened brick fell out. Inside, the mortar had crumbled a little, and broke away in cakes; nevertheless the bricks were sound, and now and then one jammed obliquely across the opening, and it gave him much trouble to dislodge it. At the end of two hours he had made quite a creditable breach in the masonry; but the wall was far more strongly built than that

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of most Irish barns, and he seemed as far as ever from the fresh air. Time after time he drew back panting, his tongue dry with dust; but nothing in the woods is stouter than a badger's claws except a badger's heart, and he always fell to work again. By and by he came to a place where the bricks had broken, and he tore them away more easily, scraping them out behind him with his sturdy hind-legs. Once a shrewd kick sent one flying across the barn with a clatter, and Stubbs scurried into the straw, in terror lest the men should be upon him again; but luckily Borrihan slept soundly, and never dreamed of how his captive was employing the night.

The moonlight began to fade, and the breeze which heralds the dawn sighed around the farm. Stubbs knew instinctively that morning was not far away, and that were he not free by then his chances of escape would be poor indeed. But surely a fresher draught blew through the stones? He stuck in his claws and scraped again, and five minutes later a brick fell—not inside the barn, but outwards with a thud into the field behind. He had made an opening at last. It was child's play to enlarge the hole that his head might enter; and where a badger's head and shoulders can go the rest of him can follow. He wormed his way between the bricks, and tumbled head over heels into the nettle bed below the wall.

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No one saw him canter across the fields. The grass was soaked with dew, and the moon, red and luminous in the haze, looked at him like a friendly eye. He pattered along at his best pace, for the east was growing bright, and he feared lest daylight should find him in the open. He knew the country immediately round Knockdane as he knew the passage of his own burrow, but these fields were strange to him. However, he picked his way with that unerring instinct which is the peculiar heritage of the Wild Folk, and of men who live as the Wild Folk live. He turned northwards, and, fording the trout stream where he paused to drink deeply and cool his sore feet, entered the low-lying fields which lie between Coolgraney and Knockdane. The grass was all but hidden under a blue blur of scabious, and the cobwebs in the hedges were elaborately studded with dew-drops. In some places the corn was already ripening, and the sparrows harvested there before the farmer was astir. A kestrel patrolled the fields for breakfast, and a hare lilted back to her form. Lazy pigeons flapped over the barley fields, and the rabbits kicked up their scuts and bolted into the hedges as the badger trudged past.

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As he climbed the long slopes at the back of Knockdane, the early beams of the August sunrise shot over the hill. A cock-pheasant, gobbling blackberries, ran away at his approach, and boomed, crowing, over the hedge. Something must indeed be amiss that the badger was astir after sunrise. Stubbs had never seen the sun so high in all his life, and to his eyes the whole world was bathed in perplexing glare—green, blue, and golden. He climbed painfully over the boundary wall and into the grateful shadows of the wood, where the mists, as though entangled in the tree-trunks, were long in lifting.

He turned down the well-known track, and presently, like the gates of a city of refuge, the mouth of the 'earth' opened before him. Not a leaf stirred, but scent lay long on the warm air, and his nose told him that Grunter was down there before him. He slid underground, and limped through the comfortable darkness to the dormitory. There she slept with her limbs extended awkwardly. She did not awaken; and Stubbs, flinging himself down with his head between her fore-paws, closed his eyes with a sigh of content. Two minutes later he was completely oblivious to light or darkness, man or beast, as he sank into a blessed sleep which bade fair to last far into the succeeding night.

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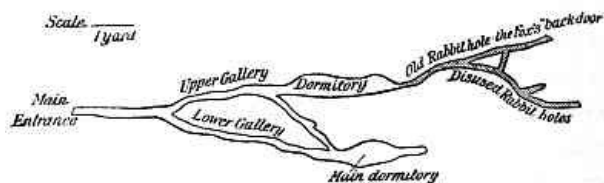
CHAPTER III

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THE LARCH HILL 'EARTH'

On the sunny side of the wood where the larches spindle up tall and thin, each trying to outstrip

the rest in the race for free air and sunshine, is the 'earth' which Stubbs and Grunter dug, as has been already related. It had originally been an old rabbit burrow, but no rabbits had used it for many years, although it was well drained, warm, and dry. It consisted of one long main tunnel, with other side chambers communicating with it, and of a smaller gallery running parallel to the first. The 'earth' had only one main entrance, although there was a rabbit-hole some distance off which opened into the upper of the two principal galleries; but its roof was so low that a badger could hardly have crept along it.



As a spider sits in the centre of his web, so the badgers lay in the middle hall of their abode. Long, grey and sprawling, they snored noisily in their sleep like pigs, with their pied snouts nestled together in the stuffy darkness. At moonrise, however, Grunter woke, punctual as an alarm clock. She rose from the warm bed of moss, and stretched herself so vigorously that she woke her lord, who smote his head against the roof and growled. She glided past him down the passage, and came to the main entrance, where the fresh night air blew in. Grunter was hungry. The last two nights it had rained, and the badgers had lain a-bed, but to-night was fine and mild again. She thrust her long snout right and left, and sampled all the strong damp odours of the night before she ventured to trust herself to the woods; but all was still, and she pattered away. Five minutes later Stubbs stole out. By that mysterious telepathy which is the secret of the Fur Folk, he knew whither she had gone, and followed her down the main highroad of the badgers of Knockdane, under the wet bushes to the fields by the river bank.

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Greybrush came along about two hours later, and snuffed thoughtfully at the hole. Greybrush was a Ballymore fox. He had been born in a hedgerow during the spring, and now that autumn was coming on, he sought winter quarters in Knockdane. There were certainly many desirable points about this 'set.' He sat down and sucked his pads, for they were wet with dew, shook his brush plummy again, and meditated. The upshot of his meditations was that he presently entered the 'earth.'

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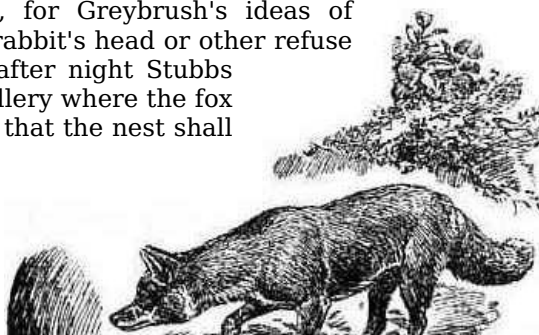
Before the autumn sun had struggled through the mist, the badgers came home, grunting with comfort begotten of a raided bees' byke and truffles. But when Stubbs poked his snout into the burrow he drew it out again smartly, and his grunt said plainly and indignantly: 'Fox!' Then more cautiously they proceeded to investigate. Stubbs crept in first, and Grunter followed exactly two feet behind, in approved badger fashion. The passage wound downwards, and the air inside being hot and still, the scent was very strong. Suddenly the silence was broken by a low snarl—the snarl of a full-fed fox awakened from his sleep. Stubbs backed precipitately, for the sound was just under his paws, and in so doing collided with his mate. For a few seconds there was a scrimmage as they jammed shoulder to shoulder in the narrow passage. Then Stubbs struggled free, and they fled to discuss the situation from a safe distance. A fox is no match for a badger in open fight, but in this case the advantage of position decidedly lay with the intruder. As they deliberated, the ringing snarl sounded again. That settled it. Sleep is a necessity to a badger, and it was already long past bed-time. Stubbs was wet, full-fed, drowsy, and in no fighting trim. They retired to the draughty main tunnel, and slept there on the bare ground.

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The next evening the fox went out hunting, and when the badgers woke and gingerly investigated the dormitory, they found it empty. They immediately took possession again, and sniffing fastidiously, dragged out the deep comfortable bedding which they had prepared against the winter; for Stubbs hates anything which a fox has tainted.

On his return Greybrush found the passage littered with moss and leaves, while porcine snoring resounded throughout the earth. The fox was too cunning to assail the badgers in their lair. He dug a hollow in the rabbit burrow and slept there, for he was not particular, and only desired some place to protect him from the weather; but he had no intention of making an 'earth' for himself if he could find one already made.

But it certainly was annoying for the badgers, for Greybrush's ideas of cleanliness did not coincide with theirs. To find a rabbit's head or other refuse lying about, distressed them terribly, and night after night Stubbs delayed his hunting that he might scavenge the gallery where the fox slept. It is also one of the laws of the badger code that the nest shall be spring-cleaned twice a year: in March before the cubs are born, and in September, in preparation for the winter's sleep. The last-named clearance had only just been effected, and the dormitory was in apple-pie order before the fox's intrusion. However, the badger is



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nothing if not persevering, and Stubbs and Grunter decided to make one last effort to oust the invader. They entered the other gallery one

night, prepared to turn their unwelcome lodger out of doors; but the fox had opened up the ancient rabbit burrow to serve as his back door in case of emergency, and when the indignant badgers arrived, they found him 'not at home.' They congratulated themselves on having ousted him so easily, and began to refurnish their chamber. There happened to be a spell of warm dry weather just then, and the fox lay out in the woods without once returning to Larch Hill, so that they met with no hindrance. There is a clearing about two hundred yards from the mouth of the 'earth,' overgrown with dead grass. Here the badgers repaired for their harvesting. They tore up quantities of dry grass and moss, and twisted them into long wisps deftly enough. By the time Stubbs had made a selection of what he considered the finest and driest bedding, the clearing looked as though a herd of pigs had been rooting there. The path to the 'earth' was littered with balls of grass and moss. Several times Grunter started home with a heavy load, but by the time she had reached the burrow she had dropped all but one little wisp, which, however, she carried underground, and deposited with as much care as if she had housed the whole collection. At this rate the badgers' progress was naturally slow, and it was nearly a week before all was arranged to their satisfaction.

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Alas! the first wet night found the evicted lodger back in his former quarters, and the badgers, seriously perturbed, prepared to give battle. They found the smaller gallery empty, but a snarl from the passage beyond told them where the intruder had ensconced himself, and they had perforce to retire baffled. This happened not once but many times. Stubbs never came to close grips with his enemy; the fox was too clever to be caught napping, and at the sound of shuffling pads in the gallery, he used to back hastily into the old rabbit burrow, which was too small for the badger's comfort.

So matters dragged on for more than a month, and then the hounds came to Knockdane, and precipitated the crisis.

One night the fox went out betimes, but it was damp and raw, and the badgers slept longer than usual, for their winter slothfulness was creeping over them. The weather also accounted for the fact that Paddy Magrath, the earthstopper, went his rounds before moonrise that he might return the sooner to his warm cabin. It was only eight o'clock when he came by the Larch Hill earth, and examined the marks outside. He saw Stubbs' broad spoor (Stubbs' spoor was a spoor to be wondered at—two and a half inches in width), and he chuckled, for he had heard of Borrigan's 'baitin' and its sequel. Then he set to work with such right good-will that when Grunter wished to go out, an hour later, she found a firm barricade of earth and branches piled against the burrow's mouth. Grunter was very wary. The hated taint of man hung about the place, mingled with the smell of wet earth. What might not be lurking outside? She crept back to the entrance to the fox's quarters, and picked her way delicately to Greybrush's back door, which was so small that it had even escaped the keen eye of Paddy Magrath. Then she buttoned down her stumpy tail, and waddled off truffle-hunting.

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The morning was grey and misty, with a cold nip in the air. Scent lay strong in covert—every rabbit which hopped across the path left a trail which lingered on the wet leaves. The tits aloft in the bare branches chatted together in little splinters of song, and the woodpigeons squabbled over clusters of unripe ivy berries. It was as though the day was reluctant to come; and at noon, save for a pale sun spot in the mist overhead, it was as still and damp as at daybreak.

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The jays, scolding in the Fir Plantation at the top of the wood, saw Greybrush running hard from Carigaboola with seven couple of hounds behind him. His tongue was out and his brush was down, and he thought gratefully of the 'earth' on Larch Hill as he tore through the brambles, and stubbed his nose against tree-roots, as fast as his stiff legs would carry him. All the chaffinches cried: 'Spink—spink—see the fox! 'ware fox!' but as the hounds did not understand finch language it did not matter much. He dived in through his back door just as the foremost hound burst out of the covert. The latter marked the place, and bayed there, with his comrades round him, until the men rode up. The huntsman crashed through the bushes and looked at the hole, and then he ordered a terrier to be brought and put in, that it might bolt the fox. But Paddy Magrath came down the path, and although he knew that he ought to have found and stopped this hole, yet his love of the hunt was greater than his pride in his woodcraft, and he said: 'Bedam, Captain, if ye put a terrier down there ye'll niver see the tail of him again. This burra' goes into the "earth" below, and there's badgers in it. Shure, they'd ate him.'

But the master, who was young and very foolish, said: "This is too far away to join the big "earth.""

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'Them badgers would dig down to hell itself,' said Magrath. But the master would have none of it, and called again for a dog.

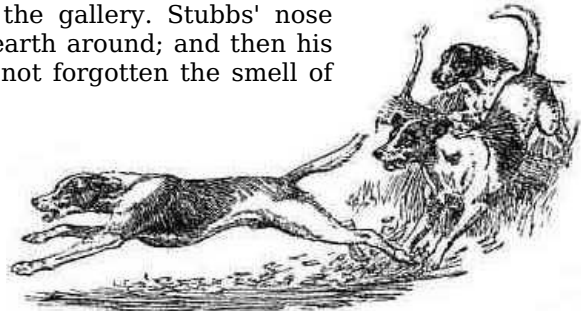
Now Rip, the kennel terrier of the Carkenny pack, was as game and eke as disreputable a little cur as ever ran with hounds. His rough coat was pepper and salt, and his right ear was pricked, but the left had drooped down ever since it had been torn in a great fight which he had with an old dog-fox in Kiltorkan rocks. But he was a bold little terrier and went straight into the 'earth' after Greybrush.

Stubbs was awakened by a smell of fox. Smells do not awaken human beings as a rule, but a

badger's nose is exquisite, and is always alert, even when its owner is asleep. Since the fox had come to the 'earth' this was not an uncommon occurrence; as a rule Stubbs growled in his dreams and lay still, but to-day his ear caught the sound of scuffling close at hand, and he stood up. The burrow was pitch dark, and the narrow passages carried sound like a telephone, but overhead Stubbs heard—or rather felt—mysterious thuds. Grunter, quick to take alarm, cowered down at the back of the chamber with the moss heaped over her back, but the hair along Stubbs' spine rose, and he went out to investigate. Now, as we have said, the Larch Hill 'earth' consists of two main tunnels connected by a side passage. As Stubbs listened he heard something moving along the other gallery, and knew that the fox had bolted home in a hurry. Suddenly he whisked round. He was standing at the spot where the passages crossed, and something had glided behind him into his dormitory. He growled, and waddled back, for he guessed what it was. Greybrush was thoroughly frightened, and not daring to lie up in his own quarters, he had sought refuge in those of the badgers. Stubbs began a systematic search of the chamber. It was not large, but it was pitch dark, and so close that his nose could not guide him. Halfway round he bumped into Grunter, who had also taken the alarm, and for a minute or two there was a wild scuffle before they could establish one another's identity. Greybrush, too terrified to move, lay still in the middle, which was perhaps the best thing he could have done, for the two badgers groped round the walls and thus missed him.

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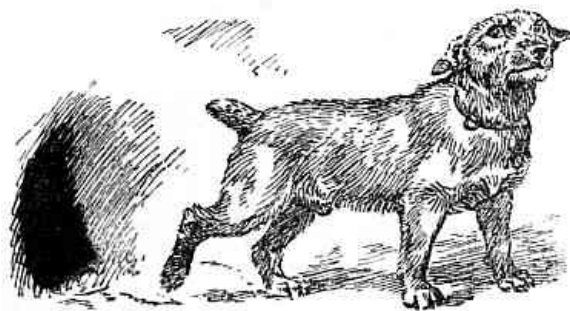
But presently another smell was wafted down the gallery. Stubbs' nose disentangled it from the scent of fox and damp earth around; and then his little pig's-eyes grew red and angry, for he had not forgotten the smell of dog which he had learned in Borrigan's yard that summer. The terrier was groping his way awkwardly, for the dust in his nose made him sneeze, and his eyes were as yet scarcely used to the darkness. However, when he discovered which way the fox had gone he gave an excited yelp, and came on. Stubbs rumbled threateningly. A badger does not fight willingly,



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and always gives notice when his patience is growing short. Rip instantly snarled and rushed in—fox or badger, either was a legitimate adversary. In the dark he partially missed his hold and seized Stubbs under the ear. Stubbs grunted, and flung his head back, but Rip hung on gamely. Then the badger bored forward and crushed him against the side of the passage, and he let go for an instant; but the next moment he sprang in again, and his teeth met in the other's shoulder. What little air there was in the burrow was thick with dust, and both the combatants choked for breath. Stubbs cut at the terrier with his digging claws, but the space was too confined, and only a grunting gasp and momentary tightening of the teeth in his neck told that his blows took effect. Rip then shifted his hold again, and tugged and dragged at the badger's thick hair, with all four legs widely extended. Stubbs lunged forward in vain—his enemy merely retreated backwards as he felt the strain on his jaws slackening. Suddenly the grip of the terrier's teeth gave way, and he staggered back with his mouth full of grey hair. The badger ran forward and in the darkness stumbled right on the top of the dog. Something hairy brushed his mouth, and his jaws closed like a trap upon the terrier's leg. It was well for Rip that it was his leg and not his body which those teeth seized, or else all the life would have been squeezed out of him very quickly; but as it was, as he fell he twisted himself round and snapped at Stubbs' jaw. The badger grunted and let go, and the terrier crawled backwards, dragging his broken leg and sobbing in his breathing.

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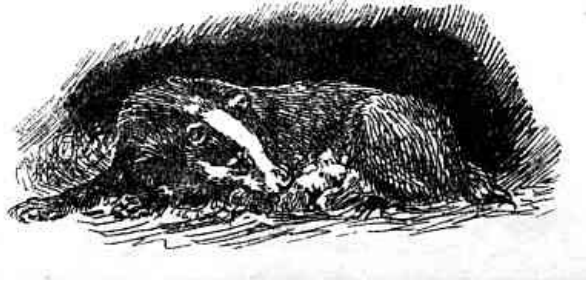
But as long as there was life in Rip's shaggy body there was pluck. He rested for a few seconds, and then turned to the attack again. The badger heard the muffled yelping close at hand, and knew that to win his way to the open air he must face the snapping fury in front of him. He resolved upon another plan. Grunting and gasping in the stifling atmosphere he turned round, and plunging his pads into the light soil, he began to throw up a barricade. He dug with his long fore-claws, and shovelled the earth with his hind-legs until the pile nearly filled the passage. He could hear the terrier whimpering and scuffling on the other side as he attempted to climb the barrier, and dug the deeper. Only when he had put two feet of earth between himself and his assailant did he slink to the bottom of the burrow to lick his wounds.

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Rip climbed the barricade time after time. Then, when he was finally convinced that it was useless, he dragged himself to the light of day once more, tattered and torn, with his eyes and nose full of sand. But they could see that he had fought a great fight, and Dennis the Whip vowed

that he should never go underground any more. Indeed, he never could do so, but limped on one leg to the end of his days.

How Greybrush ultimately escaped from the badgers I do not know, but he was not seen abroad in Knockdane for several days. However, after the battle the badgers ceased to try and evict him. Instead, they dug a new and deeper gallery at right angles to their former one, and dwelt there. So that if you go to Knockdane and ask Paddy Magrath, he will show you the Larch Hill 'earth,' and tell you that foxes live in the upper tunnels and badgers in the lower. And if you could creep down, where even Paddy Magrath cannot go, you might hear the rumbling snores of Stubbs from a side dormitory; and in the deepest chamber of all, well lined and cosy, the maternal snorts of Grunter, and the squeals of her new-born cubs.



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LIVES OF THE FUR FOLK ***

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