

SHARP DALLAS LORE

A WATCHER IN THE
WOODS

Dallas Sharp

A Watcher in The Woods

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Dallas Lore Sharp

A Watcher in The Woods

BIRDS' WINTER BEDS

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold

A storm had been raging from the northeast all day. Toward evening the wind strengthened to a gale, and the fine, icy snow swirled and drifted over the frozen fields.

I lay a long time listening to the wild symphony of the winds, thankful for the roof over my head, and wondering how the hungry, homeless creatures out of doors would pass the night. Where do the birds sleep such nights as this? Where in this bitter cold, this darkness and storm, will they make their beds? The lark that broke from the snow at my feet as I crossed the pasture this afternoon —

What comes o' thee?
Whar wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing,
An' close thy e'e?

The storm grew fiercer; the wind roared through the big pines by the side of the house and swept hoarsely on across the fields; the pines shivered and groaned, and their long limbs scraped over the shingles above me as if feeling with frozen fingers for a way in; the windows rattled, the cracks and corners of the old farm-house shrieked, and a long, thin line of snow sifted in from beneath the window across the garret floor. I fancied these sounds of the storm were the voices of freezing birds, crying to be taken in from the cold. Once I thought I heard a thud against the window, a sound heavier than the rattle of the snow. Something seemed to be beating at the glass. It might be a bird. I got out of bed to look; but there was only the ghostly face of the snow pressed against the panes, half-way to the window's top. I imagined that I heard the thud again; but, while listening, fell asleep and dreamed that my window was frozen fast, and that all the birds in the world were knocking at it, trying to get in out of the night and storm.

The fields lay pure and white and flooded with sunshine when I awoke. Jumping out of bed, I ran to the window, and saw a dark object on the sill outside. I raised the sash, and there, close against the glass, were two quails – frozen stiff in the snow. It was they I heard the night before fluttering at the window. The ground had been covered deep with snow for several days, and at last, driven by hunger and cold from the fields, they saw my light, and sought shelter from the storm and a bed for the night with me.

Four others, evidently of the same covey, spent the night in the wagon-house, and in the morning helped themselves fearlessly to the chickens' breakfast. They roosted with the chickens several nights, but took to the fields again as soon as the snow began to melt.

It is easy to account for our winter birds during the day. Along near noon, when it is warm and bright, you will find the sparrows, chickadees, and goldfinches searching busily among the bushes and weeds for food, and the crows and jays scouring the fields. But what about them during the dark? Where do they pass the long winter nights?

Why, they have nests, you say. Yes, they *had* nests in the summer, and then, perhaps, one of the parent birds may be said to have slept in the nest during the weeks of incubation and rearing of the young. But nests are cradles, not beds, and are never used by even the young birds from the day they leave them. Muskrats build houses, foxes have holes, and squirrels sleep in true nests; but of

the birds it can be said, "they have not where to lay their heads." They sleep upon their feet in the grass, in hollow trees, and among the branches; but, at best, such a bed is no more than a roost. A large part of the year this roost is new every night, so that the question of a sleeping-place during the winter is most serious.

The cheerful little goldfinches, that bend the dried ragweeds and grass-stalks down and scatter their chaff over the snow, sleep in the thick cedars and pines. These warm, close-limbed evergreens I have found to be the lodging-houses of many of the smaller winter birds – the fox-colored sparrow, snowbird, crossbill, and sometimes of the chickadee, though he usually tucks his little black cap under his wing in a woodpecker's hole.

The meadow-larks always roost upon the ground. They creep well under the grass, or, if the wind is high and it snows, they squat close to the ground behind a tuft of grass or thick bush and sleep while the cold white flakes fall about them. They are often covered before the morning; and when housed thus from the wind and hidden from prowling enemies, no bird could wish for a cozier, warmer, safer bed.

But what a lonely bed it is! Nothing seems so utterly homeless and solitary as a meadow-lark after the winter nightfall. In the middle of a wide, snow-covered pasture one will occasionally spring from under your feet, scattering the snow that covered him, and go whirring away through the dusk, lost instantly in the darkness – a single little life in the wild, bleak wilderness of winter fields!

Again, the grass is often a dangerous bed. On the day before the great March blizzard of 1888, the larks were whistling merrily from the fences, with just a touch of spring in their call. At noon I noted no signs of storm, but by four o'clock – an hour earlier than usual – the larks had disappeared. They rose here and there from the grass as I crossed the fields, not as they do when feeding, far ahead of me, but close to my feet. They had gone to bed. By early evening the snow began to fall, and for two days continued furiously.

A week later, when the deep drifts melted, I found several larks that had perished from cold or starvation or had smothered under the weight of snow.

There is something of awe in the thought of a bird nestling close beneath a snow-laden bush in a broad meadow, or clinging fast to a limb in the swaying top of some tall tree, rocked in its great arms through the night by a winter gale. All trees, even the pines and cedars, are fearfully exposed sleeping-places, and death from cold is not infrequent among the birds that take beds in them.

The pine barrens, and especially certain pine clumps along Cohansey Creek and at the head of Cubby Hollow, used to be famous crow-roosts. Thousands of the birds, a few years ago, frequented these pieces of wood in the winter. About the middle of the afternoon, during the severest weather, they begin to fly over to the roost at the head of the Hollow, coming in from the surrounding fields, some of them from miles away, where they have been foraging all day for food. You can tell the character of the weather by the manner of their flight. In the fall and spring they went over cawing, chasing each other and performing in the air; they were happy, and life was as abundant as the spring promise or the autumn fullness everywhere. But in January the land is bare and hard, and life correspondingly lean and cheerless. You see it in their heavy, dispirited flight; all their spring joyousness is gone; they pass over silent and somber, reluctant to leave the fields, and fearful of the night. There is not a croak as they settle among the pines – scores, sometimes hundreds of them, in a single tree.

Here, in the swaying tops, amid the heavy roar of the winds, they sleep. You need have no fear of waking them as you steal through the shadows beneath the trees. The thick mat of needles or the sifted snow muffles your footfalls; and the winds still the breaking branches and snapping twigs. What a bed in a winter storm! The sky is just light enough for you to distinguish the dim outlines of the sleepers as they rock in the waves of the dark green that rise and fall above you; the trees moan, the branches shiver and creak, and high above all, around and beneath you, filling the recesses of the dark wood rolls the volume of the storm.

But the crows sleep on, however high the winds. They sit close to the branches, that the feathers may cover their clinging feet; they tuck their heads beneath their wing-coverts, thus protecting the whole body, except one side of the head, which the feathers of the wing cannot quite shelter. This leaves an eye exposed, and this eye, like the heel of Achilles, proves to be the one vulnerable spot. It freezes in very severe weather, causing a slow, painful death. In the morning, after an unusually cold night, you can find dozens of crows flapping piteously about in the trees of the roost and upon the ground, with frozen eyes. In January, 1895, I saw very many of them along the Hollow, blind in one eye or in both eyes, dying of pain and starvation. It was pitiful to see their sufferings. The snow in places was sprinkled with their broken feathers, and with pine-needles which they had plucked off and tried to eat. Nothing could be done for the poor things. I have tried time and again to doctor them; but they were sure to die in the end.

Who has not wondered, as he has seen the red rim of the sun sink down in the sea, where the little brood of Mother Carey's chickens skimming round the vessel would sleep that night? Or who, as he hears the *honking* of geese overhead in the darkness, has not questioned by what

... plashy brink
Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
On the chafed ocean-side,

they will find rest?

In winter, when a heavy southeast wind is blowing, the tides of Delaware Bay are high and the waters very rough. Then the ducks that feed along the reedy flats of the bay are driven into the quieter water of the creeks, and at night fly into the marshes, where they find safe beds in the "salt-holes."

The salt-holes are sheets of water having no outlet, with clean perpendicular sides as if cut out of the grassy marsh, varying in size from a few feet wide to an acre in extent. The sedges grow luxuriantly around their margins, making a thick, low wall in winter, against which the winds blow in vain. If a bird must sleep in the water, such a hole comes as near to being a perfect cradle as anything could be, short of the bottom of a well.

The ducks come in soon after dark. You can hear the whistle of their wings as they pass just above your head, skimming along the marsh. They settle in a hole, swim close up to the windward shore, beneath the sedges, and, with their heads under their wings, go fast asleep. And as they sleep the ice begins to form – first, along their side of the hole, where the water is calmest; then, extending out around them, it becomes a hard sheet across the surface.

A night that will freeze a salt-hole is not one in which there is likely to be much hunting done by man or beast. But I have been on the marshes such nights, and so have smaller and more justified hunters. It is not a difficult feat to surprise the sleeping ducks. The ice is half an inch thick when you come up, and seals the hole completely, save immediately about the bodies of the birds. Their first impulse, when taken thus at close range, is to dive; and down they go, turning in their tracks.

Will they get out? One may chance to strike the hole which his warm body kept open, as he rises to breathe; but it is more likely that he will come up under the ice, and drown. I have occasionally found a dead duck beneath the ice or floating in the water of a salt-hole. It had been surprised, no doubt, while sleeping, and, diving in fright, was drowned under the ice, which had silently spread like a strange, dreadful covering over its bed.

Probably the life of no other of our winter birds is so full of hardship as is that of the quail, Bob White.

In the early summer the quails are hatched in broods of from ten to twenty, and live as families until the pairing season the next spring. The chicks keep close to the neighborhood of the home nest, feeding and roosting together, under the guidance of the parent birds. But this happy union is soon

broken by the advent of the gunning season. It is seldom that a bevy escapes this period whole and uninjured. Indeed, if *one* of the brood is left to welcome the spring it is little less than a miracle.

I have often heard the scattered, frightened families called together after a day of hard shooting; and once, in the old pasture to the north of Cubby Hollow, I saw the bevy assemble.

It was long after sunset, but the snow so diffused the light that I could see pretty well. In climbing the fence into the pasture, I had started a rabbit, and was creeping up behind a low cedar, when a quail, very near me, whistled softly, *Whirl-ee!* The cedar was between us. *Whirl-ee, whirl-ee-gig!* she whistled again.

It was the sweetest bird-note I ever heard, being so low, so liquid, so mellow that I almost doubted if Bob White could make it. But there she stood in the snow with head high, listening anxiously. Again she whistled, louder this time; and from the woods below came a faint answering call: *White!* The answer seemed to break a spell; and on three sides of me sounded other calls. At this the little signaler repeated her efforts, and each time the answers came louder and nearer. Presently something dark hurried by me over the snow and joined the quail I was watching. It was one of the covey that I had heard call from the woods.

Again and again the signal was sent forth until a third, fourth, and finally a fifth were grouped about the leader. There was just an audible twitter of welcome and gratitude exchanged as each newcomer made his appearance. Once more the whistle sounded; but this time there was no response across the silent field.

The quails made their way to a thick cedar that spread out over the ground, and, huddling together in a close bunch under this, they murmured something soft and low among themselves and – dreamed.

Some of the family were evidently missing, and I crept away, sorry that even one had been taken from the little brood.

SOME SNUG WINTER BEDS

It was a cold, desolate January day. Scarcely a sprig of green showed in the wide landscape, except where the pines stood in a long blur against the gray sky. There was not a sign that anything living remained in the snow-buried fields, nor in the empty woods, shivering and looking all the more uncovered and cold under their mantle of snow, until a solitary crow flapped heavily over toward the pines in search of an early bed for the night.

The bird reminded me that I, too, should be turning toward the pines; for the dull gray afternoon was thickening into night, and my bed lay beyond the woods, a long tramp through the snow.

As the black creature grew small in the distance and vanished among the trees, I felt a pang of pity for him. I knew by his flight that he was hungry and weary and cold. Every labored stroke of his unsteady wings told of a long struggle with the winter death. He was silent; and his muteness spoke the foreboding and dread with which he faced another bitter night in the pines.

The snow was half-way to my knees; and still another storm was brewing. All day the leaden sky had been closing in, weighed down by the snow-filled air. That hush which so often precedes the severest winter storms brooded everywhere. The winds were in leash – no, not in leash; for had my ears been as keen as those of the creatures about me, I might even now have heard them baying far away to the north. It was not the winds that were still; it was the fields and forests that quailed before the onset of the storm.

I skirted Lupton's Pond and saw the muskrat village, a collection of white mounds out in the ice, and coming on to Cubby Hollow, I crossed on the ice, ascended the hill, and keeping in the edge of the swamp, left the pines a distance to the left. A chickadee, as if oppressed by the silence and loneliness among the trees, and uneasy in his stout little heart at the threatening storm, flew into the bushes as near to me as he could get, and, apparently for the sake of companionship, followed me along the path, cheeping plaintively.

As I emerged from the woods into a cornfield and turned to look over at the gloomy pines, a snowflake fell softly upon my arm. The storm had begun. Now the half-starved crows came flocking in by hundreds, hurrying to roost before the darkness should overtake them. A biting wind was rising; already I could hear it southing through the pines. There was something fascinating in the oncoming monster, and backing up behind a corn-shock, I stopped a little to watch the sweep of its white winds between me and the dark, sounding pines.

I shivered as the icy flakes fell thicker and faster. How the wild, unhoused things must suffer to-night! I thought, as the weary procession of crows beat on toward the trees. Presently there was a small stir within the corn-shock. I laid my ear to the stalks and listened. Mice! I could hear them moving around in there. It was with relief that I felt that here, at least, was a little people whom the cold and night could not hurt.

These mice were as warmly sheltered inside this great shock as I should be in my furnace-warmed home. Their tiny nests of corn-silk, hidden away, perhaps, within the stiff, empty husks at the shock's very center, could never be wet by a drop of the most driving rain nor reached by the most searching frosts. And not a mouse of them feared starvation. A plenty of nubbins had been left from the husking, and they would have corn for the shelling far into the spring – if the fodder and their homes should be left to them so long.

I floundered on toward home. In the gathering night, amid the swirl of the snow, the shocks seemed like spectral tents pitched up and down some ghostly camp. But the specters and ghosts were all with me, all out in the whirling storm. The mice knew nothing of wandering, shivering spirits; they nibbled their corn and squeaked in snug contentment; for only dreams of the winter come to them in there.

These shock-dwellers were the common house-mice, *Mus musculus*. But they are not the only mice that have warm beds in winter. In fact, bed-making is a specialty among the mice.

Zapus, the jumping-mouse, the exquisite little fellow with the long tail and kangaroo legs, has made his nest of leaves and grass down in the ground, where he lies in a tiny ball just out of the frost's reach, fast asleep. He will be plowed out of bed next spring, if his nest is in a field destined for corn or melons; for *Zapus* is sure to oversleep. He is a very sound sleeper. The bluebirds, robins, and song-sparrows will have been back for weeks, the fields will be turning green, and as for the flowers, there will be a long procession of them started, before this pretty sleepy-head rubs his eyes, uncurls himself, and digs his way out to see the new spring morning.

Does this winter-long sleep seem to him only as a nap overnight?

Arvicola, the meadow-mouse, that duck-legged, stump-tailed, pot-bellied mouse whose paths you see everywhere in the meadows and fields, stays wide awake all winter. He is not so tender as *Zapus*. The cold does not bother him; he likes it. Up he comes from his underground nest, – or home, rather, for it is more than a mere sleeping-place, – and runs out into the snow like a boy. He dives and plunges about in the soft white drifts, plowing out roads that crisscross and loop and lady's-chain and lead nowhere – simply for the fun of it.

Fairies do wonderful things and live in impossible castles; but no fairy ever had a palace in fairy-land more impossible than this unfairy-like meadow-mouse had in my back yard.

One February day I broke through the frozen crust of earth in the garden and opened a large pit in which forty bushels of beets were buried. I took out the beets, and, when near the bottom, I came upon a narrow tunnel running around the wall of the pit like the Whispering Gallery around the dome of St. Paul's. It completely circled the pit, was well traveled, and, without doubt, was the corridor of some small animal that had the great beet-pit for a winter home.

There were numerous dark galleries branching off from this main hallway, piercing out into the ground. Into one of these I put my finger, by way of discovery, thinking I might find the nest. I did find the nest – and more. The instant my finger entered the hole a sharp twinge shot up my arm, and I snatched away my hand with a large meadow-mouse fastened to the end of my finger, and clinging desperately to her, lo! two baby mice, little bigger than thimbles.

In this mild and even temperature, four feet below the frozen surface of the garden, with never a care as to weather and provisions, dwelt this single family of meadow-mice. What a home it was! A mansion, indeed, with rooms innumerable, and a main hall girdling a very mountain of juicy, sugary beets. This family could not complain of hard times. Besides the beets, the mice had harvested for themselves a number of cribs of clover-roots. These cribs, or bins, were in the shape of little pockets in the walls of the great gallery. Each contained a cupful of the thick, meaty tap-roots of clover, cut into lengths of about half an inch. If the beets should fail (!), or cloy upon them, they had the roots to fall back on.

It was absolutely dark here, and worse; there was no way to get fresh air that I could see. Yet here two baby mice were born in the very dead of winter, and here they grew as strong and warm and happy as they would have grown had the season showered rose-petals instead of snowflakes over the garden above.

Hesperomys is the rather woodsy name of the white-footed or deer-mouse, a shy, timid little creature dwelling in every wood, who, notwithstanding his abundance, is an utter stranger to most of us. We are more familiar with his tracks, however, than with even those of the squirrel and rabbit. His is that tiny double trail galloped across the snowy paths in the woods. We see them sprinkled over the snow everywhere; but when have we seen the feet that left them? Here goes a line of the wee prints from a hole in the snow near a stump over to the butt of a large pine. Whitefoot has gone for provender to one of his storehouses among the roots of the pine; or maybe a neighbor lives here, and he has left his nest of bird-feathers in the stump to make a friendly call after the storm.

A bed of downy feathers at the heart of a punky old stump beneath the snow would seem as much of a snuggery as ever a mouse could build; but it is not. Instead of a dark, warm chamber within a hollow stump, Whitefoot sometimes goes to the opposite extreme, and climbs a leafless tree to an abandoned bird's nest, and fits this up for his winter home. Down by Cubby Hollow I found a wood-thrush's nest in a slender swamp-maple, about fifteen feet from the ground. The young birds left it late in June, and when Whitefoot moved in I do not know. But along in the winter I noticed that the nest looked suspiciously round and full, as if it were roofed over. Perhaps the falling leaves had lodged in it, though this was hardly likely. So I went up to the sapling and tapped. My suspicions were correct. After some thumps, a sleepy, frightened face appeared through the side of the nest, and looked cautiously down at me. No one could mistake that pointed nose, those big ears, and the round pop-eyes so nearly dropping out with blinking. It was Whitefoot. I had disturbed his dreams, and he had hardly got his wits together yet, for he had never been awakened thus before. And what could wake him? The black-snakes are asleep, and there is not a coon or cat living that could climb this spindling maple. Free from these foes, Whitefoot has only the owls to fear, and I doubt if even the little screech-owl could flip through these interlaced branches and catch the nimble-footed tenant of the nest.

In spite of the exposure this must be a warm bed. The walls are thick and well plastered with mud, and are packed inside with fine, shredded bark which the mouse himself has pulled from the dead chestnut limbs, or, more likely, has taken from a deserted crow's nest. The whole is thatched with a roof of shredded bark, so neatly laid that it sheds water perfectly. The entrance is on the side, just over the edge of the original structure, but so shielded by the extending roof that the rain and snow never beat in. The thrushes did their work well; the nest is securely mortised into the forking branches; and Whitefoot can sleep without a tremor through the wildest winter gale. Whenever the snow falls lightly a high white tower rises over the nest; and then the little haycock, lodged in the slender limbs so far above our heads, is a very castle indeed.

High over the nest of the white-footed mouse, in the stiffened top of a tall red oak that stands on the brow of the hill, swings another winter bed. It is the bulky oak-leaf hammock of the gray squirrel.

A hammock for a winter bed? Is there anything snug and warm about a hammock? Not much, true enough. From the outside the gray squirrel's leaf bed looks like the coldest, deadliest place one could find in which to pass the winter. The leaves are loose and rattle in the wind like the clapboards of a tumble-down house. The limb threatens every moment to toss the clumsy nest out upon the storm. But the moorings hold, and if we could curl up with the sleeper in that swaying bed, we should rock and dream, and never feel a shiver through the homespun blankets of chestnut bark that wrap us round inside the flapping leaves.

Be it never so cozy, a nest like this is far from a burrow – the bed of a fat, thick-headed dolt who sleeps away the winter. A glance into the stark, frozen top of the oak sends over us a chill of fright and admiration for the dweller up there. He cannot be an ease-lover; neither can he know the meaning of fear. We should as soon think of a sailor's being afraid of the shrieking in the rigging overhead, as of this bold squirrel in the tree-tops dreading any danger that the winter winds might bring.

There are winters when the gray squirrel stays in the hollow of some old tree. A secure and sensible harbor, this, in which to weather the heavy storms, and I wonder that a nest is ever anchored outside in the tree-tops. The woodsmen and other wisecracks say that the squirrels never build the tree-top nests except in anticipation of a mild winter. But weather wisdom, when the gray squirrel is the source, is as little wise as that which comes from Washington or the almanac. I have found the nests in the tree-tops in the coldest, fiercest winters.

It is not in anticipation of fine weather, but a wild delight in the free, wild winter, that leads the gray squirrel to swing his hammock from the highest limb of the tallest oak that will hold it. He dares and defies the winds, and claims their freedom for his own. From his leafless height yonder he looks down into the Hollow upon the tops of the swamp trees where his dizzy roads run along the

angled branches, and over the swamp to the dark pines, and over the pines, on, on across the miles of white fields which sweep away and away till they freeze with the frozen sky behind the snow-clouds that drift and pile. In his aery he knows the snarl and bite of the blizzard; he feels the swell of the heaving waves that drive thick with snow out of the cold white north. Anchored far out in the tossing arms of the strong oak, his leaf nest rocks in the storm like a yawl in a heaving sea.

But he loves the tumult and the terror. A night never fell upon the woods that awed him; cold never crept into the trees that could chill his blood; and the hoarse, mad winds that swirl and hiss about his pitching bed never shook a nerve in his round, beautiful body. How he must sleep! And what a constitution he has!

"MUS'RATTIN"

One November afternoon I found Uncle Jethro back of the woodshed, drawing a chalk-mark along the barrel of his old musket, from the hammer to the sight.

"What are you doing that for, Uncle Jeth?" I asked.

"What fo'? Fo' mus'rats, boy."

"Muskrats! Do you think they'll walk up and toe that mark, while you knock 'em over with a stick?"

"G'way fum yhere! What I take yo' possumin' des dozen winters fo', en yo' dunno how to sight a gun in de moon yit? I's gwine mus'rattin' by de moon to-night, en I won't take yo' nohow."

Of course he took me. We went out about nine o'clock, and entering the zigzag lane behind the barn, followed the cow-paths down to the pasture, then cut across the fields to Lupton's Pond, the little wood-walled lake which falls over a dam into the wide meadows along Cohansey Creek.

It is a wild, secluded spot, so removed that a pair of black ducks built their nest for several springs in the deep moss about the upper shore.

It is shallow and deeply crusted over with lily-pads and pickerel-weed, except for a small area about the dam, where the water is deep and clear. There are many stumps in the upper end; and here, in the shallows, built upon the hummocks or anchored to the submerged roots, are the muskrats' houses.

The big moon was rising over the meadows as we tucked ourselves snugly out of sight in a clump of small cedars on the bank, within easy range of the dam and commanding a view of the whole pond. The domed houses of the muskrats – the village numbered six homes – showed plainly as the moon came up; and when the full flood of light fell on the still surface of the pond, we could see the "roads" of the muskrats, like narrow channels, leading down through the pads to the open space about the dam.

A muskrat's domestic life is erratic. Sometimes there will be a large village in the pond, and, again, an autumn will pass without a single new house being built. It may be that some of the old houses will be fitted up anew and occupied; but I have known years when there was not a house in the pond. At no time do all of the muskrats build winter houses. The walls of the meadow ditches just under the dam are honeycombed with subterranean passages, in which many of the muskrats live the year round. Neither food nor weather, so far as I have found, influence them at all in the choice of their winter quarters. In low, wet meadows where there are no ditches, the muskrats, of course, live altogether in mud and reed houses above ground, for the water would flood the ordinary burrow. These structures are placed on the tussocks along a water-hole, so that the dwellers can dive out and escape under water when danger approaches. But here in the tide-meadows, where the ditches are deep, the muskrats rear their families almost wholly in underground rooms. It is only when winter comes, and family ties dissolve, that a few of the more sociable or more adventurous club together, come up to the pond, and while away the cold weather in these haystack lodges.

These houses are very simple, but entirely adequate. If you will lift the top off an ordinary meadow lodge you will find a single room, with a bed in the middle, and at least one entrance and one exit which are always closed to outsiders by water.

The meadow lodge is built thus: The muskrat first chooses a large tussock of sedge that stands well out of the water for his bedstead. Now, from a foundation below the water, thick walls of mud and grass are erected inclosing the tussock; a thatch of excessive thickness is piled on; the channels leading away from the doors are dug out if necessary; a bunch of soaking grass is brought in and made into a bed on the tussock – and the muskrat takes possession.

The pond lodges at the head of Lupton's are made after this fashion, only they are much larger, and instead of being raised about, a tussock of sedge, they are built upon, and inclose, a part of a log or stump.

This lodge life is surely a cozy, jolly way of passing the winter. The possums are inclined to club together whenever they can find stumps that are roomy enough; but the muskrats habitually live together through the winter. Here, in the single room of their house, one after another will come, until the walls can hold no more; and, curling up after their night of foraging, they will spend the frigid days blissfully rolled into one warm ball of dreamful sleep. Let it blow and snow and freeze outside; there are six inches of mud-and-reed wall around them, and, wrapped deep in rich, warm fur, they hear nothing of the blizzard and care nothing for the cold.

Nor are they prisoners of the cold here. The snow has drifted over their house till only a tiny mound appears; the ice has sealed the pond and locked their home against the storm and desolation without: but the main roadway from the house is below the drifting snow, and they know where, among the stumps and button-bushes, the warm-nosed watchers have kept breathing-holes open. The ice-maker never finds their inner stair; its secret door opens into deep, under-water paths, which run all over the bottom of the unfrozen pond-world.

Unless roused by the sharp thrust of a spear, the muskrats will sleep till nightfall. You may skate around the lodge and even sit down upon it without waking the sleepers; but plunge your polo-stick through the top, and you will hear a smothered *plunk, plunk, plunk*, as one after another dives out of bed into the water below.

The moon climbed higher up the sky and the minutes ran on to ten o'clock. We waited. The night was calm and still, and the keen, alert air brought every movement of the wild life about us to our ears. The soft, cottony footfalls of a rabbit, hopping leisurely down the moonlit path, seemed not unlike the echoing steps on silent, sleeping streets, as some traveler passes beneath your window; a wedge of wild geese *honked* far over our heads, holding their mysterious way to the South; white-footed mice scurried among the dried leaves; and our ears were so sharpened by the frosty air that we caught their thin, wiry squeaks.

Presently there was a faint splash among the muskrat houses. The village was waking up. Uncle Jethro poked the long nose of his gun cautiously through the bushes, and watched. Soon there was a wake in one of the silvery roads, then a parting of waves, and stemming silently and evenly toward us, we saw the round, black head of a muskrat.

It was a pretty sight and a pretty shot; but I would not have had the stillness and the moonlit picture spoiled by the blare of that murderous musket for the pelts of fifty muskrats, and as the gun was coming to Uncle Jethro's shoulder, I slipped my hand under the lifted hammer.

With just an audible grunt of impatience the old negro understood, – it was not the first good shot that my love of wild things had spoiled for him, – and the unsuspecting muskrat swam on to the dam.

A plank had drifted against the bank, and upon this the little creature scrambled out, as dry as the cat at home under the roaring kitchen stove. Down another road came a second muskrat, and, swimming across the open water at the dam, joined the first-comer on the plank. They rubbed noses softly – the sweetest of all wild-animal greetings – and a moment afterward began to play together.

They were out for a frolic, and the night was splendid. Keeping one eye open for owls, they threw off all other caution, and swam and dived and chased each other through the water, with all the fun of boys in swimming.

On the bottom of the pond about the dam, in ten or twelve feet of water, was a bed of unios. I knew that they were there, for I had cut my feet upon them; and the muskrats knew they were there, for they had had many a moonlight lunch of them. These mussels the muskrats reckon sweetmeats. They are hard to get, hard to crack, but worth all the cost. I was not surprised, then, when one of the muskrats sleekly disappeared beneath the surface, and came up directly with a mussel.

There was a squabble on the plank, which ended in the other muskrat's diving for a mussel for himself. How they opened them I could not clearly make out, for the shells were almost concealed in their paws; but judging from their actions and the appearance of other shells which they had opened, I should say that they first gnawed through the big hinge at the back, then pried open the valves, and ate out the contents.

Having finished this first course of big-neck clams, they were joined by a third muskrat, and, together, they filed over the bank and down into the meadow. Shortly two of them returned with great mouthfuls of the mud-bleached ends of calamus-blades. Then followed the washing.

They dropped their loads upon the plank, took up the stalks, pulled the blades apart, and soused them up and down in the water, rubbing them with their paws until they were as clean and white as the whitest celery one ever ate. What a dainty picture! Two little brown creatures, humped on the edge of a plank, washing calamus in moonlit water!

One might have taken them for half-grown coons as they sat there scrubbing and munching. Had the big barred owl, from the gum-swamp down the creek, come along then, he could easily have bobbed down upon them, and might almost have carried one away without the other knowing it, so all-absorbing was the calamus-washing.

Musk rats, like coons, will wash what they eat, whether washing is needed or not. It is a necessary preliminary to dinner – their righteousness, the little Pharisees! Judging from the washing disease which ailed two tame muskrats that I knew, it is perfectly safe to say that had these found clean bread and butter upon the plank, instead of muddy calamus, they would have scoured it just the same.

Before the two on the plank had finished their meal, the third muskrat returned, dragging his load of mud and roots to the scrubbing. He was just dipping into the water when there was a terrific explosion in my ears, a roar that echoed round and round the pond. As the smoke lifted, there were no washers upon the plank: but over in the quiet water floated three long, slender tails.

"No man gwine stan' dat shot, boy, jis t' see a mus'rat wash hi' supper"; and Uncle Jethro limbered his stiffened knees and went chuckling down the bank.

FEATHERED NEIGHBORS

I

The electric cars run past my door, with a switch almost in front of the house. I can hear a car rumbling in the woods on the west, and another pounding through the valley on the east, till, shrieking, groaning, crunching, crashing, they dash into view, pause a moment on the switch, and thunder on to east and west till out of hearing. Then, for thirty minutes, a silence settles as deep as it lay here a century ago. Dogs bark; an anvil rings; wagons rattle by; and children shout about the cross-roads. But these sounds have become the natural voices of the neighborhood – mother-tongues like the chat of the brook, the talk of the leaves, and the caw of the crows. And these voices, instead of disturbing, seem rather to lull the stillness.

But the noise of the cars has hardly died away, and the quiet come, when a long, wild cry breaks in upon it. *Yarup! yarup! yarup-up-up-up-up!* in quick succession sounds the call, followed instantly by a rapid, rolling beat that rings through the morning hush like a reveille with bugle and drum.

It is the cry of the "flicker," the "high-hole." He is propped against a pole along the street railroad, nearly a quarter of a mile away. He has a hole in this pole, almost under the iron arm that holds the polished, pulsing wire for the trolley. It is a new house, which the bird has been working at for more than a week, and it must be finished now, for this lusty call is an invitation to the warming. I shall go, and, between the passing of the cars, witness the bowing, the squeaking, the palaver. A high-hole warming is the most utterly polite function in birddom.

Some of my friends were talking of birds, not long ago, when one of them turned to me and said hopelessly:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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