

SHARP DALLAS LORE

WILD LIFE NEAR HOME

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IN PERSIMMON-TIME

The season of ripe persimmons in the pine-barren region of New Jersey falls during the days of frosty mornings, of wind-strewn leaves and dropping nuts. Melancholy days these may be in other States, but never such here. The robin and the wren – I am not sure about all of the wrens – are flown, just as the poet says; but the jay and the crow are by no means the only birds that remain. Bob White calls from the swales and "cut-offs"; the cardinal sounds his clear, brilliant whistle in the thickets; and the meadow-lark, scaling across the pastures, flirts his tail from the fence-stake and shouts, *Can you see-e me?* These are some of the dominant notes that still ring through the woods and over the fields. Nor has every fleck of color gone from the face of the out-of-doors. She is not yet a cold, white body wrapped in her winding-sheet. The flush of life still lingers in the stag-horn sumac, where it will burn brighter and warmer as the shortening days darken and deaden; and there is more than a spark – it is a steady glow – on the hillsides, where the cedar, pine, and holly stand, that will live and cheer us throughout the winter. What the soil has lost of life and vigor the winds have gained; and if the birds are fewer now, there is a stirring of other animal life in the open woods and wilder places that was quite lost in the bustle of summer.

And yet! it is a bare world, in spite of the snap and crispness and the signs of harvest everywhere; a wider, silenter, sadder world, though I cannot own a less beautiful world, than in summer. The corn is cut, the great yellow shocks standing over the level fields like weather-beaten tepees in deserted Indian villages; frosts have mown the grass and stripped the trees, so that, from a bluff along the creek, the glistening Cohansey can be traced down miles of its course, and through the parted curtains, wide vistas of meadow and farm that were entirely hidden by the green foliage lie open like a map.

This is persimmon-time. Since most of the leaves have fallen, there is no trouble in finding the persimmon-trees. They are sprinkled about the woods, along the fences and highways, as naked as the other trees, but conspicuous among them all because of their round, dark-red fruit.

What a season of fruit ours is! Opening down in the grass with the wild strawberries of May, and continuing without break or stint, to close high in the trees with the persimmon, ripe and rimy with November's frosts! The persimmon is the last of the fruits. Long before November the apples are gathered – even the "grindstones" are buried by this time; the berries, too, have disappeared, except for such seedy, juiceless things as hang to the cedar, the dogwood, and greenbrier; and the birds have finished the scattered, hidden clusters of racy chicken-grapes. The persimmons still hold on; but these are not for long, unless you keep guard over the trees, for they are marked: the possums have counted every persimmon.

You will often wonder why you find so few persimmons upon the ground after a windy, frosty night. Had you happened under the trees just before daybreak, you would have seen a possum climbing about in the highest branches, where the frost had most keenly nipped the fruit. You would probably have seen two or three up the trees, if persimmons were scarce and possums plentiful in the neighborhood, swinging from the limbs by their long prehensile tails, and reaching out to the ends of the twigs to gather in the soft, sugary globes. Should the wind be high and the fruit dead ripe, you need not look into the trees for the marauders; they will be upon the ground, nosing out the lumps as they fall. A possum never does anything for himself that he can let the gods do for him.

Your tree is perhaps near the road and an old rail-pile. Then you may expect to find your persimmons rolled up in possum fat among the rails; for here the thieves are sure to camp throughout the persimmon season, as the berry-pickers camp in the pines during huckleberry-time.

Possums and persimmons come together, and Uncle Jethro pronounces them "bofe good fruit." He is quite right. The old darky is not alone in his love of possums. To my thinking, he shows a nice taste in preferring November possum to chicken.

It is a common thing, in passing through Mount Zion or Springtown in the winter, to see what, at first glance, looks like a six-weeks' pig hanging from an up-stairs window, but which, on inspection, proves to be a possum, scalded, scraped, and cleaned for roasting, suspended there, out of the reach of dogs and covetous neighbors, for the extra flavor of a freezing. Now stuff it and roast it, and I will swap my Thanksgiving turkey for it as quickly as will Uncle Jethro himself.

Though the possum is toothsome, he is such a tame, lumbering dolt that few real sportsmen care for the sorry joy of killing him. Innumerable stories have been told of the excitement of possum-hunting; but after many winters, well sprinkled with moonlight tramps and possums, I can liken the sport to nothing more thrilling than a straw-ride or a quilting-party.

There is the exhilarating tramp through the keen, still night, and if possum-hunting will take one out to the woods for such tramps, then it is quite worth while.

No one could hunt possums except at night. It would be unendurably dull by daylight. The moon and the dark lend a wonderful largeness to the woods, transforming the familiar day-scenes into strange, wild regions through which it is an adventure merely to walk. There is magic in darkness. However dead by day, the fields and woods are fully alive at night. We stop at the creaking of the bare boughs overhead as if some watchful creature were about to spring upon us; every stump and bush is an animal that we have startled into sudden fixedness; and out of every shadow we expect a live thing to rise up and withstand us. The hoot of the owl, the bark of the fox, the whinny of the coon, send shivers of excitement over us. We jump at a mouse in the leaves near by.

Helped out by the spell of moonlight and the collusion of a ready fancy, it is possible to have a genuine adventure by seizing a logy, grinning possum by the tail and dragging him out of a stump. Under such conditions he looks quite like a ferocious beast, grunting and hissing with wide-open mouth; and you may feel just a thrill of the real savage's joy as you sling him over your shoulder.

But never go after possums alone, nor with a white man. If you must go, then go with Uncle Jethro and Calamity. I remember particularly one night's hunt with Uncle Jethro. I had come upon him in the evening out on the kitchen steps watching the rim of the rising moon across the dark, stubby corn-field. It was November, and the silver light was spreading a plate of frost over the field and its long, silent rows of corn-shocks.

When Uncle Jethro studied the clouds or the moon in this way, it meant a trip to the meadows or the swamp; it was a sure sign that geese had gone over, that the possums and coons were running.

I knew to-night – for I could smell the perfume of the ripe persimmons on the air – that down by the creek, among the leafless tops of the persimmon-trees, Uncle Jethro saw a possum.

"Is it Br'er Possum or Br'er Coon, Uncle Jethro?" I asked, slyly, just as if I did not know.

"Boosh! boosh!" sputtered the old darky, terribly scared by my sudden appearance. "W'at yo' 'xplodin' my cogitations lak dat fo'? W'at I know 'bout any possum? Possum, boy? Possum? W'at yo' mean?"

"Don't you sniff the 'simmons, Uncle Jeth?"

Instinctively he threw his nose into the air.

"G' 'way, boy; g' 'way fum yhere! I ain't seen no possum. I 's thinkin' 'bout dat las' camp-meetin' in de pines"; and he began to hum:

"Lawd, I wunda, who kilt John Henry,
In de la-ane, in de lane."

Half an hour later we were filing through the corn-stubs toward the creek. Uncle Jethro carried his long musket under his arm; I had a stout hickory stick and a meal-sack; while ahead of us, like a sailor on shore, rolled Calamity, the old possum-dog.

If in June come perfect days, then perfect nights come in November. There is one thing, at least, as rare as a June day, and that is a clear, keen November night, enameled with frost and set with the hunter's moon.

Uncle Jethro was not thinking of last summer's camp-meeting now; but still he crooned softly a camp-meeting melody:

"Sheep an' de goats a-
Gwine to de pastcha,
Sheep tell de goats, 'Ain't yo'
Walk a leetle fasta?"

"Lawd, I wunda, who kilt John Henry,
In de la-ane, in de lane.

"Coon he up a gum-tree,
Possum in de holla;
Coon he roll hi'self in ha'r,
Possum roll in talla.

"Lawd, I wunda – "

until we began to skirt Cubby Hollow, when he suddenly brought himself up with a snap.

It was Calamity "talkin' in one of her tongues." The short, sharp bark came down from the fence at the brow of the hill. Uncle Jethro listened.

"Jis squirrel-talk, dat. She'll talk possum by-um-bit, she will. Ain't no possum-dog in des diggin's kin talk possum wid C'lamity. An' w'en *she* talk possum, ol' man possum gotter listen. Sell C'lamity? Dat dog can't be bought, she can't."

As we came under the persimmon-trees at the foot of Lupton's Pond, the moon was high enough to show us that no possum had been here yet, for there was abundance of the luscious, frost-nipped fruit upon the ground. In the bare trees the persimmons hung like silver beads. We stopped to gather a few, when Calamity woke the woods with her cry.

"Dar he is! C'lamity done got ol' man possum now! Down by de bend! Dat's possum-talk, big talk, fat talk!" And we hurried after the dog.

We had gone half a mile, and Uncle Jethro had picked himself up at least three times, when I protested.

"Uncle Jeth!" I cried, "that's an awfully long-legged possum. He'll run all his fat off before we catch him."

"Dat's so, boy, shu' 'nough! W'at dat ol' fool dog tree a long-legged possum fo', nohow? Yer, C'lamity, 'lamity, yer, yer!" he yelled, as the hound doubled and began to track the *rabbit* back toward us.

We were thoroughly cooled before Calamity appeared. She was boxed on the ear and sent off again with the command to talk possum next time or be shot.

She was soon talking again. This time it *must* be possum-talk. There could be no mistake about that long, steady, placid howl. The dog must be under a tree or beside a stump waiting for us. As Uncle Jethro heard the cry he chuckled, and a new moon broke through his dusky countenance.

"Yhear dat? *Dat's* possum-talk. C'lamity done meet up wid de ol' man dis time, shu'."

And so she had, as far as we could see. She was lying restfully on the bank of a little stream, her head in the air, singing that long, lonesome strain which Uncle Jethro called her possum-talk. It was a wonderfully faithful reproduction of her master's camp-meeting singing. One of his weird, wordless melodies seemed to have passed into the old dog's soul.

But what was she calling us for? As we came up we looked around for the tree, the stump, the fallen log; but there was not a splinter in sight. Uncle Jethro was getting nervous. Calamity rose, as we approached, and pushed her muzzle into a muskrat's smooth, black hole. This was too much. She saw it, and hung her head, for she knew what was coming.

"Look yhere, yo' obtuscious ol' fool. W'at yo' 'sociatin' wid a low-down possum as takes t' mus'rats' holes? W'at I done tol' yo' 'bout dis? Go 'long home! Go 'long en talk de moon up a tree." And as Uncle Jethro dropped upon his knees by the hole, Calamity slunk away through the brush.

I held up a bunch of freshly washed grass-roots.

"Uncle Jeth, this must be a new species of possum; he eats roots like any muskrat," I said innocently.

It was good for Calamity not to be there just then. Uncle Jethro loved her as he would have loved a child; but he vowed, as he picked up his gun: "De nex' time dat no-'count dog don't talk possum, yo' 'll see de buzzard 'bout, yo' will."

We tramped up the hill and on through the woods to some open fields. Here on the fence we waited for Calamity's signal.

"Did you say you wouldn't put any price on Calamity, Uncle Jethro?" I asked as we waited.

There was no reply.

"Going to roast this possum, aren't you?"

Silence.

"Am I going to have an invite, Uncle Jeth?"

"Hush up, boy! How we gwine yhear w'at dat dog say?"

"Calamity? Why, didn't you tell her to go home?"

The woods were still. A little screech-owl off in the trees was the only creature that disturbed the brittle silence. The owl was flitting from perch to perch, coming nearer us.

"W'at dat owl say?" whispered Uncle Jethro, starting. "'No possum'? 'no possum'? 'no possum'? Come 'long home, boy," he commanded aloud. "W'en ol' Miss Owl say 'No possum,' C'lamity herself ain't gwine git none." And sliding to the ground, he trudged off for home.

We were back again in the corn-field with an empty sack. The moon was riding high near eleven o'clock. From behind a shock Calamity joined us, falling in at the rear like one of our shadows. Of course Uncle Jethro did not see her. He was proud of the rheumatic old hound, and a night like this nipped his pride as the first frosts nip the lima-beans.

It was the owl's evil doing, he argued all the way home. "W'en ol' Miss Owl say 'Stay in' – no use:

'Simmons sweet, 'simmons red,
Ain't no possum leave his bed.

All de dogs in Mount Zion won't fin' no possum out dis night."

No; it was not Calamity's fault: it was Miss Owl's.

We were turning in back of the barn when there came a sudden yelp, sharp as a pistol-shot, and Calamity darted through Uncle Jethro's legs, almost upsetting him, making straight for the yard. At the same moment I caught sight of a large creature hurrying with a wobbly, uncertain gait along the ridge-pole of the hen-house.

It was a possum – as big as a coon. He was already half-way down the side of the coop; but Calamity was below him, howling like mad.

Uncle Jethro nearly unjointed himself. Before the frightened animal had time to faint, the triumphant hunter was jouncing him up and down inside the sack, and promising the bones and baking-pan to Calamity.

"W'at dat yo' mumblin', boy? Gwine ax yo'self a' invite? G' 'way; g' 'way; yo' don' lak possum. W'at dat yo' sayin' 'g'in' C'lamity? Yo' 's needin' sleep, chil', yo' is. Ain't I done tol' yo' dat dog gwine talk possum by-um-bit? W'at dem 'flections 'g'in' ol' Miss Owl? Boosh, boy! Dat all fool-talk, w'at ol' Miss Owl say. We done been layin' low jis s'prise yo', me an' C'lamity an' ol' Miss Owl has." And as he placed the chopping-block upon the barrel to keep the possum safe till morning, he began again:

"Coon he up a gum-tree,
Possum in de holla;
Coon he roll hi'self in ha'r,
Possum roll in talla.

"Lawd, I wunda, who kilt John Henry,
In de la-ane, in de lane."

The next morning Uncle Jethro went to get his possum. But the possum was gone. The chopping-block lay on the woodshed floor, the cover of the barrel was pushed aside, and the only trace of the animal was a bundle of seed-corn that he had pulled from a nail overhead and left half eaten on the floor. He had stopped for a meal on his way out.

Uncle Jethro, with Uncle Remus, gives Br'er Rabbit the wreath for craft; but in truth the laurel belongs to Br'er Possum. He is an eternal surprise. Either he is the most stupidly wise animal of the woods, or the most wisely stupid. He is a puzzle. Apparently his one unburied talent is heaviness. Joe, the fat boy, was not a sounder nor more constant sleeper, nor was his mental machinery any slower than the possum's. The little beast is utterly wanting in swiftness and weapons, his sole hope and defense being luck and indifference. To luck and indifference he trusts life and happiness. And who can say he does not prosper – that he does not roll in fat?

I suppose there once were deer and otter in the stretches of wild woodland along the Cohansey; but a fox is rare here now, and the coon by no means abundant. Indeed, the rabbit, even with the help of the game laws, has a hard time. Yet the possum, unprotected by law, slow of foot, slower of thought, and worth fifty cents in any market, still flourishes along the creek.

A greyhound must push to overtake a rabbit, but I have run down a possum with my winter boots on in less than half-way across a clean ten-acre field. He ambles along like a bear, swinging his head from side to side to see how fast you are gaining upon him. When you come up and touch him with your foot, over he goes, grunting and grinning with his mouth wide open. If you nudge him further, or bark, he will die – but he will come to life again when you turn your back.

Some scientifically minded people believe that this "playing possum" follows as a physiological effect of fear; that is, they say the pulse slackens, the temperature falls, and, as a result, instead of a pretense of being dead, the poor possum actually swoons.

A physiologist in his laboratory, with stethoscope, sphygmoscope, thermometer, and pneumonometer, may be able to scare a possum into a fit – I should say he might; but I doubt if a plain naturalist in the woods, with only his two eyes, a jack-knife, and a bit of string, was ever able to make the possum do more than "play possum."

We will try to believe with the laboratory investigator that the possum does genuinely faint. However, it will not be rank heresy to run over this leaf from my diary. It records a faithful diagnosis of the case as I observed it. The statement does not claim to be scientific; I mean that there were no 'meters or 'scopes of any kind used. It is simply what I saw and have seen a hundred times. Here is the entry:

I have known the possum too long for a ready faith in his extreme nervousness, too long to believe him so hysterical that the least surprise can frighten him into fits. He has a reasonable fear of dogs; no fear at all of cats; and will take his chances any night with a coon for the possession of a hollow log. He will live in the same burrow with other possums, with owls, – with anything in fact, – and overlook any bearable imposition; he will run away from everything, venture anywhere, and manage to escape from the most impossible situations. Is this an epileptic, an unstrung, flighty creature? Possibly; but look at him. He rolls in fat; and how long has obesity been the peculiar accompaniment of nervousness?

It is the amazing coolness of the possum, however, that most completely disposes of the scientist's pathetic tale of unsteady nerves. A creature that will deliberately walk into a trap, spring it, eat the bait, then calmly lie down and sleep until the trapper comes, has no nerves. I used to catch a possum, now and then, in the box-traps set for rabbits. It is a delicate task to take a rabbit from such a trap; for, give him a crack of chance and away he bolts to freedom. Open the lid carefully when there is a possum inside, and you will find the old fellow curled up with a sweet smile of peace on his face, fast asleep. Shake the trap, and he rouses yawningly, with a mildly injured air, offended at your rudeness, and wanting to know why you should wake an innocent possum from so safe and comfortable a bed. He blinks at you inquiringly and says: "Please, sir, if you will be so kind as to shut the door and go away, I will finish my nap." And while he is saying it, before your very eyes, off to sleep he goes.

Is this nervousness? What, then, is it – stupidity or insolence?

Physically as well as psychologically the possums are out of the ordinary. As every one knows, they are marsupials; that is, they have a pouch or pocket on the abdomen in which they carry the young. Into this pocket the young are transferred as soon as they are born, and were it not for this strange half-way house along the journey of their development they would perish.

At birth a possum is little more than formed – the least mature babe among all of our mammals. It is only half an inch long, blind, deaf, naked, and so weak and helpless as to be unable to open its mouth or even cry. Such babies are rare. The smallest young mice you ever saw are as large as possums at their birth. They weigh only about four grains, the largest of them, and are so very tiny that the mother has to fasten each to a teat and *force* the milk down each wee throat – for they cannot even swallow.

They live in this cradle for about five weeks, by which time they can creep out and climb over their mother. They are then about the size of full-grown mice, and the dearest of wood babies. They have sharp pink noses, snapping black eyes, gray fur, and the longest, barest tails. I think that the most interesting picture I ever saw in the woods was an old mother possum with eleven little ones clinging to her. She was standing off a dog as I came up, and every one of the eleven was peeking out, immensely enjoying this first adventure. The quizzing snouts of six were poked out in a bunch from the cradle-pouch, while the other five mites were upon their mother's back, where they had been playing Jack-and-the-beanstalk up and down her tail.

Historically, also, the possum is a conundrum. He has not a single relative on this continent, except those on exhibition in zoological gardens. He left kith and kin behind in Australia when he came over to our country. How he got here, and when, we do not know. Clouds hang heavy over the voyages of all the discoverers of America. The possum was one of the first to find us, and when did he land, I wonder? How long before Columbus, and Leif, son of Eric?

In his appetite the possum is no way peculiar, except, perhaps, that he takes the seasons' menus entire. Between persimmon-times he eats all sorts of animal food, and is a much better hunter than we usually give him credit for. Considering his slowness, too, he manages to plod over an amazing amount of territory in the course of his evening rambles. He starts out at dusk, and wanders around all night, planning his hunt so as to get back to his lair by dawn. Sometimes at daybreak he is a long way from home. Not being able to see well in the light, and rather than run into needless danger, he

then crawls into the nearest hole or under the first rail-pile he comes to; or else he climbs a tree, and, wrapping his tail about a limb, settles himself comfortably in a forked branch quite out of sight, and sleeps till darkness comes again.

On these expeditions he picks up frogs, fish, eggs, birds, mice, corn, and in winter a chicken here and there.

In the edge of a piece of woods along the Cohansey there used to stand a large hen-coop surrounded by a ten-foot fence of wire netting. One winter several chickens were missing here, and though rats and other prowlers about the pen were caught, still the chickens continued to disappear.

One morning a possum was seen to descend the wire fence and enter the coop through the small square door used by the fowls. We ran in; but there was no possum to be found. We thought we had searched everywhere until, finally, one of us lifted the lids off a rusty old stove that had been used to heat the coop the winter before, and there was the possum, with two companions, snug and warm, in a nest of feathers on the grate.

Here were the remains of the lost chickens. These sly thieves had camped in this stove ever since autumn, crawling in and out through the stovepipe hole. During the day they slept quietly; and at night, when the chickens were at roost, the old rascals would slip out, grab the nearest one, pull it into the stove, and feast.

Is there anything on record in the way of audacity better than that?

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 corn-field 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 wiseacres 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!

A BIRD OF THE DARK

The world is never more than half asleep. Night dawns and there is almost as wide a waking as with the dawn of day. We live in the glare till it leaves us blind to the forms that move through the dark; we listen to the roar of the day till we can no longer hear the stir that begins with the night. But here in the darkness is life and movement, – wing-beats, footfalls, cries, and calls, – all the wakefulness, struggle, and tragedy of the day.

Whatever the dusk touches it quickens. Things of bare existence by day have life at night. The very rocks that are dead and inanimate in the light get breath and being in the dark. What was mere substance now becomes shadow, and shadow spirit, till all the day's dead live and move. The roads, fences, trees, and buildings become new creatures; landmarks, distances, and places change; new odors are on the winds; strange lights appear; soft footsteps pass and re-pass us; and hidden voices whisper everywhere. The brightest day is not more awake; at high noon we are not more alert.

One of the commonest of these night sounds is the cry of the whippoorwill. From the middle of April to the end of September it rings along the edge of the clearing; but how seldom we have seen the singer! To most of us it is only a disembodied voice. Night has put her spell upon the whippoorwills and changed them from birds into wandering shadows and voices. There is something haunting in their call, a suggestion of fear, as though the birds were in flight, pursued by a shape in the gloom. It is the voice of the lost – the voice of the night trying to find its way back to the day. There is snap enough in the call if you happen to be near the bird. Usually the sound comes to us out of the darkness and distance – the loneliest, ghostliest cry of all the night.

It is little wonder that so many legends and omens follow the whippoorwill. How could our imaginations, with a bent for superstition, fail to work upon a creature so often heard, so rarely seen, of habits so dark and uncanny?

One cannot grow accustomed to the night. The eager, jostling, open-faced day has always been familiar; but with the night, though she comes as often as the day, no number of returns can make us acquainted. Whatever is peculiarly her own shares her mystery. Who can get used to the bats flitting and squeaking about him in the dusk? Or who can keep his flesh from creeping when an owl bobs over him in the silence against a full moon? Or who, in the depths of a pine barren, can listen to a circle of whippoorwills around him, and not stay his steps as one lost in the land of homeless, wailing spirits? The continual shifting of the voices, the mocking echoes, and the hiding darkness combine in an effect altogether gruesome and unearthly.

One may hear the whippoorwill every summer of his life, but never see the bird. It is shy and wary, and, with the help of the darkness, manages to keep strangely out of sight. Though it is not unusual to stumble upon one asleep by day, it is a rare experience to surprise one feeding or singing at night.

One evening I was standing by a pump in an open yard, listening to the whippoorwills as they came out to the edge of the woods and called along the fields. The swamp ran up so close on this side of the house that faint puffs of magnolia and wild grape could be strained pure from the mingling odors in the sweet night air. The whippoorwills were so near that the introductory *chuck* and many of the finer, flute-like trills of their song, which are never heard at a distance, were clear and distinct. Presently one call sounded out above the others, and instantly rang again, just behind a row of currant-bushes not ten feet away.

I strained my eyes for a glimpse of the creature, when swift wings fanned my face, and a dark, fluffy thing, as soft and noiseless as a shadow, dropped at my feet, and exploded with a triple cry of *Whip-poor-will!* that startled me. It was a rapid, crackling, vigorous call that split through the night as a streak of lightning through a thunder-cloud. The farmers about here interpret the notes to say, *Crack-the-whip!* and certainly, near by, this fits better than *Whip-poor-will!*

The bird was flitting about the small platform upon which I stood. I remained as stiff as the pump, for which, evidently, it had mistaken me. It was not still a moment, but tossed back and forth on wings that were absolutely silent, and caught at the insects in the air and uttered its piercing cry. It leaped rather than flew, sometimes calling on the wing, and always upon touching the ground.

This is as good a view of the bird as I ever got at night. The darkness was too thick to see what the food was it caught, or how it caught it. I could not make out a pose or a motion more than the general movements about the pump. The one other time that I have had a good look at the bird, when not asleep, showed him at play.

It was an early August morning, between two and three o'clock. The only doctor in the village had been out all night at a little town about five miles away. He was wanted at once, and I volunteered to get him.

Five miles is pure fun to a boy who has run barefoot every one of his fifteen summers; so I rolled up my trousers, tightened my belt, and bent away for Shiloh at an easy dog-trot that, even yet, I believe I could keep up for half a day.

There was not a glimmer in the east when I started. I had covered three miles, and was entering a long stretch of sprout-land when the dawn began. The road was dusty, and the dew-laid powder puffed beneath the soft, swift pats of my feet. Things began to stand out with some distinctness now as the pale light brightened. No wagons had been along, and every mark of the night was plain. Here and there were broad, ragged-edged bands across the road – the trails of the wandering box-turtles. I saw the smooth, waving channel left by a snake that had just gone across. Here and there were bunches of rabbit tracks, and every little while appeared large spots in the road, where some bird had been dusting itself.

Suddenly I made a sharp turn, and almost ran over a whippoorwill concealed in a very cloud of dust which she was flirting up with her wings. This explained the spots back along the road. The bird flew up and settled a few yards ahead of me, and took another hasty dip. This she kept up for nearly a quarter of a mile.

The road was alive with whippoorwills. It was their bathing-hour, and playtime, too. The serious business of the night was done; they had hunted through the first hours, and now it was time to be social. The light was coming rapidly, and so was bedtime; but they called and capered about me, playing away the narrowing night to the very edge of day.

On my return, an hour later, the sun was looking over the tops of the "cut-offs," but he did not see a whippoorwill. They were all roosting lengthwise upon the logs and stumps back among the bushes.

These unnatural, unbirdlike habits of the whippoorwill are matched by the appearance of the bird. The first time one sees a whippoorwill he questions whether its shape and color are the result of its nocturnal life or whether it took to the night to hide its unbeautiful self from the gaze of the day.

It has ridiculously short legs, a mere point of a bill, and a bristled, head-dividing gap that would shame a frog. Looked at in the daylight, its color, too, is a meaningless mixture, as unreal and half done as the rest of the creature. But we should not be so hasty in our judgment. There is design in all things in nature; utility is the first law of creation: and the discovery of plan and purpose is the highest appreciation of beauty.

The whippoorwill's dress must be criticized from the view-point of its usefulness to the bird; then it becomes one of the most exquisitely artistic garments worn. Compare it with that of any other bird, and your wonder at it grows. Another such blending of light and shadow cannot be found. The night herself seems to have woven this robe out of warp from the strands of early dawn and of woof spun from the twilight.

The whippoorwill cannot change the color of its dress with the passing clouds, nor match it with the light green of unfolding leaves and the deep bronze of old tree-trunks, as the chameleon can. But the bird has no need of such control. It is always in harmony with its surroundings. In the falling

twilight it seems a shadow among the shadows; in the breaking dawn it melts into the gray half-light, a phantom; at midnight it is only an echo in the dark; and at noontime you would pass the creature for a mossy knot, as it squats close to a limb or rail, sitting lengthwise, unlike any bird of the light.

We need not expect a bird of such irregular habits as the whippoorwill to have the normal instincts of birds, even with regard to its offspring. A bird given to roaming about at night, the companion of toads and bats and spooks, is not one that can be trusted to bring up young. You cannot count much on the domesticity of a bird that flits around with the shadows and fills the night with doleful, spellbinding cries.

The nest of the whippoorwill is the bare ground, together with whatever leaves, pebbles, or bits of wood happen to be under the eggs when they are laid. I found a nest once by the side of a log in the woods, and by rarest good fortune missed putting my foot upon the eggs. Here there was no attempt at nest-building, not even a depression in the earth. There were two of the eggs, – the usual number, – long and creamy white, with mingled markings of lavender and reddish brown. Here, upon the log, one of the birds dozed away the day, while the mate on the nest brooded and slept till the gloaming.

The effect of this erratic life in the forest glooms and under the cover of night has been to make the whippoorwill careless of her home and negligent of her young. She has become a creature of omen, weird and wakeful, lingering behind the time of superstition to keep myths moving in our scanty groves and mystery still stirring through the dark rooms of the night.

THE PINE-TREE SWIFT

In any large museum you may see the fossil skeletons, or the casts of the skeletons, of those mammoth saurians of the Mesozoic Age. But you can go into the pine barrens any bright summer day and capture for yourself a real live saurian. The gloom of the pines is the lingering twilight of that far-off time, and the pine-tree lizard, or swift, is the lineal descendant of those reptile monsters who ruled the seas and the dry land before man was.

Throughout southern New Jersey the pine-tree swifts abound. The worm-fences, rail-piles, bridges, stone-heaps, and, above all, the pine-trees are alive with them. They are the true children of the pines, looking so like a very part of the trees that it seems they must have been made by snipping off the pitch-pines' scaly twigs and giving legs to them. They are the aborigines, the primitive people of the barrens; and it is to the lean, sandy barrens you must go if you would see the swifts at home.

In these wide, silent wastes, where there are miles of scrub-pine without a clearing, where the blue, hazy air is laden with the odor of resin, where the soft glooms are mingled with softer, shyer lights, the swifts seem what they actually are – creatures of another, earlier world. When one darts over your foot and scurries up a tree to watch you, it is easy to imagine other antediluvian shapes moving in the deeper shadows beyond. How they rustle the leaves and scratch the rough pine bark! They hurry from under your feet and peek around the tree-trunks into your face, their nails and scales scraping, while they themselves remain almost invisible on the deep browns of the pines; and if you are inclined to be at all nervous, you will start and shiver.

The uncanny name "lizard" is partly accountable for our unpleasant feelings toward this really intelligent and interesting little beast. If he were more widely known as "swift," *Sceloporus* would be less detested. The *z* in "lizard" adds a creepy, crawly, sinister something to the name which even the wretched word "snake" does not suggest. "Swift," the common name in some localities, is certainly more pleasing, and, at the same time, quite accurately descriptive.

There is nothing deadly nor vicious, nor yet unlovely, about the swift, unless some may hate his reptile form and his scales. But he is strangely dreaded. The mere mention of him is enough to stampede a Sunday-school picnic. I know good people who kill every swift they meet, under the queer religious delusion that they are lopping off a limb of Satan. "All reptiles are cursed," one such zealot declared to me, "and man is to bruise their heads." The good book of nature was not much read, evidently, by this student of the other Good Book.

The swift is absolutely harmless. He is without fang, sting, or evil charm. He is not exactly orthodox, for he has a third eye in the top of his head, the scientists tell us; but that eye is entirely hidden. It cannot bind nor leer, like Medusa. Otherwise the swift is a perfectly normal little creature, about six inches long from tip to tip, quick of foot, scaly, friendly, wonderfully colored in undulating browns and blues, and looking, on the whole, like a pretty little Noah's-ark alligator.

On the south side of the clump of pines beyond Cubby Hollow is a pile of decaying rails where I have watched the swifts, and they me, for so many seasons that I fancy they know me. Dewberry-vines and Virginia creeper clamber over the pile, and at one end, flaming all through July, burns a splendid bush of butterfly-weed. The orange-red blossoms shine like a beacon against the dark of the pines, and lure a constant stream of insect visitors, who make living for the swifts of this particular place rich and easy while the attraction lasts.

Any hot day I can find several swifts here, and they are so tame that I can tickle them all off to sleep without the slightest trouble. They will look up quickly as I approach, fearless but alert, with head tilted and eyes snapping; but not one stirs. With a long spear of Indian grass I reach out gently and stroke the nearest one. Shut go his eyes; down drops his head; he sleeps – at least, he pretends to. This is my peace greeting. Now I may sit down, and life upon the rail-pile will go normally on.

Upon the end of a rail, so close to a cluster of the butterfly-weed blossoms that he can pick the honey-gatherers from it, – as you would pick olives from a dish on the table, – lies a big male swift without a tail. He lost that member in an encounter with me several weeks ago. A new one has started, but it is a mere bud yet. I know his sex by the brilliant blue stripe down each side, which is a favor not granted the females. The sun is high and hot. "Fearfully, hot," I say under my wide straw hat. "Delightfully warm," says the lizard, sprawling over the rail, his legs hanging, eyes half shut, every possible scale exposed to the blistering rays, and his bud of a tail twitching with the small spasms of exquisite comfort that shoot to the very ends of his being.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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