TALES FROM THE STORYTELLER'S HOUSE

THORTON·W·BURGESS

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THE BIG
THORNTON BURGESS
Story-Book

TALES FROM THE STORYTELLER'S HOUSE

By

Thornton W. Burgess

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TO ALL MY GRANDCHILDREN

and to all other children who love stories
these tales from Old Mother Nature
are dedicated.

FOREWORD

There are certain facts in connection with the stories in this volume that may be of interest to the reader. The Old House which furnishes the setting was built in 1742. For several years it has been my summer home. The hill immediately behind it is a splendid example of that peculiar formation made by deposits of gravel or sand by a subglacial stream and known as an esker. Laughing Brook flows along its base on the east. Several of the stories appeared years ago in the *Red Cross Magazine*, which, having served its purpose, ceased publication shortly after the World War. Other stories were published in the *People's Home Journal*. The stories told by the Old Hunter are true stories, actual incidents which occurred just as described and were furnished me by eyewitnesses. "The Joy of the Beautiful Pine" was written for the exercises with which my home city celebrated Christmas with its first municipal Christmas tree.

THE AUTHOR

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THE STORYTELLER'S HOUSE

TALES FROM THE STORYTELLER'S HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE OLD HOUSE

IN the early October dusk a deer stood at the edge of Laughing Brook where it makes the turn at the foot of Esker Hill. He was motionless, tense, his slender muzzle lifted to sift from the evening air the various scents it bore, each a message with a meaning all its own. Satisfied that all was well, the great buck relaxed. The tenseness disappeared. Slowly the beautiful antlered head was bent to the clear water running at his feet. He drank, lifted his head quickly at the quavering call of a screech owl, then drank again.

His thirst quenched, he waded in where the water was shallow. For some time he stood there at ease but with an air of expectancy. Now and then his white flag was flicked a trifle impatiently. All the time his big broad ears were slowly moved so as to catch all the faint air currents that might bring to him news for good or ill.

The shadows thickened as they settled over the wooded sides of Esker Hill, and down across the gentle slope to the Old House beneath the huge elm that for nearly two hundred years had shaded the back door, and for the greater part of that time had protectingly spread its great arms over the moss-grown roof.

From the time when, as a spindle-legged, spotted fawn at his mother's side, the big buck had first visited this favorite drinking place at Laughing Brook, he had been familiar with the Old House. To him it was as much a part of the landscape as the hill itself, solid, substantial, friendly, not to be feared even though, as he knew well, it gave shelter to man. Often after his evening drink as, mildly curious, he had stood watching the faint firelight flickering on the quaint small-paned windows, the door had opened and mingling with the odor of wood smoke the man smell had been brought to his sensitive nostrils. It brought with it nothing of fear or distrust. The twin spirits of love and gentle kindness dwelt in the Old House, and always the message from the open door was of peace and good will.

Voices, far down the road that winds past the Old House and is lost among the trees at a distant turn, caused the twitching ears to set forward so as to catch every sound from that direction. He knew those voices. He had heard them often. They were the voices of children. In them were laughter and happiness. For a few minutes the great buck, motionless, alert, yet with no trace of uneasiness, stood listening. Then, content, for it was for this that he had been waiting, he flicked his tail, lightly bounded across the brook and silently made his way through the woods to the top of the hill and along the ridge to a favorite feeding ground. It was the children's hour, and in the Old House the Storyteller awaited their coming.

The Old House was a landmark known far and wide. To the children of the neighborhood it seemed that it must always have been there. It was as easy to imagine a time when the hill back of it had not yet been fashioned by the ancient glacier that the wise men say brought from far away the sand and gravel of which it is made, as to picture a time before the Old House was built. There were times when it was not difficult to believe that it never had been built but, like its neighbor, the giant elm, had sprung from the soil and must be rooted deep in the earth it hugged so closely.

Long before the battle of Bunker Hill it stood there. Many children had lived in it, loved it, grown up in it and gone away. Boys and girls of several generations had played around the broad hearth, watched the leaping flames in its wide stone fireplace, and dreamed the beautiful dreams that only children know. And after the children Old Age in its feebleness had dwelt there alone. Now it was the Storyteller's house, and once each week in the early evening the children of the neighborhood gathered beneath its moss-grown, low-eaved roof for the tale that should be told while in the great black throat of the chimney the story-log burned, a log picked out and brought by one of the children.

This evening it was to be little Mary's story-log, and as in the soft dusk the children came up the road her brother David was carrying it for her. They loved the Old House, all of them. As they came in sight of it they paused for a moment. It had become a habit to pause just there to look up the road at its shadowy outline. To them its age was nothing short of tremendous.

"My dad says that when that ol' house was built there were bears in the woods around here. I bet a bear has looked in those winders more'n once," said Billy Blake.

"I wish one would look in while we are there." That was Midge Fuller.

"Ho! Listen to Midge! She jumps up in a chair and hollers if she sees a mouse, and now she says she'd like to see a bear looking in the window! You'd die of fright; you know you would, Midge!" hooted Jimmy Andrews.

"*I* wouldn't. I'd shoot him," declared Freddie Rogers.

"Yes you would! What with?" demanded Billy.

"That ol' gun that hangs on the wall," was the prompt reply, whereupon everybody laughed, for Freddie was only six and small for his age. The old flintlock musket was half again as tall as he.

"There were Injuns around then, I betcha. I would rather have a bear looking in the winder than an Injun. You know those ol' cuts on the big back door that is locked with a bar? I bet those were made by a tommyhawk," contributed Johnny Brown.

"I wonder. I guess the Old House is old enough for that," said Frances. "The Storyteller says that when it was first built people thought that the Sabbath began at sunset on Saturday and ended at sunset on Sunday. From sunset to sunset no work was done, not the tiniest bit, that wasn't absolutely necessary. Of course the horses and cows and pigs and hens had to be fed, but no housework was done. They didn't even wash the dishes."

"Huh! I should think that that would have mixed the week all up. I wouldn't have liked that," cried Rosemary.

"I guess they didn't have any Saturday night movies then," Billy remarked. Then turning to David he added in a tone of disgust, "Hey, you ol' butterfingers, if you are going to keep dropping that story-log you better let someone else carry it."

Jean began to run. "Come on!" she shouted over her shoulder. "The light in the window is winking at us, and you know what that means! It means we're late and we won't get any story if we don't hurry up. Come on! Hurry, everybody!"

A few minutes later, some of them still out of breath, they were in the long, low living room with its great hand-hewn beams fastened with wood pegs. It had once been kitchen as well, for in the early days all the cooking had to be done at the great fireplace with its brick oven and swinging crane. The latter still carried its pothooks and black iron kettles.

Suspended beneath the mantel, and arranged on the hearth on both sides of the fireplace, were queer implements and utensils used by the cooks of long ago, a never ending source of wonder and delight to the children.

Hanging coats and hats on a row of wooden pegs, they were soon busy before the fire toasting marshmallows and popping corn. When the last marshmallow had turned to a luscious, entrancing brown, and the last kernel of corn had danced all around the popper finally to burst with a sharp pop, the Storyteller signalled little Mary to bring him her story-log.

You don't know what a story-log is? Why, it is a log that burns while a story is being told. It is a very special log; a just-so log. On each story night there at the Old House a boy or a girl brought a small log. With proper ceremony this was placed on the fire. While it burned the Storyteller must tell a story. It couldn't be too long a story, for it wouldn't do to keep the children up too late. Of course not. And it wouldn't do to have too short a story lest the listeners should feel that they had been cheated. No indeed, that wouldn't do; it wouldn't do at all to have too short a story.

So you see how important it was that the story-log should be of just the right size, not too big and not too small; most certainly not too small. It had to be selected with great care to be sure that it would not burn too long, yet equally sure that it would not burn out too quickly. The children took turns in bringing the story-log and, as you know, this time it was little Mary's turn. Very proud and a little excited was she as she passed the small log to the Storyteller.

Chapter II

THE MOST PRECIOUS THING IN THE WORLD

As her story-log was carefully laid on the fire little Mary stood in front of the fireplace, her hands folded in front of her, her big blue eyes wide with excitement and earnestness, for this was her first story-log. Solemnly she made the exhortation to the fire which always followed the placing of a log on the fire.

"Fire, fire burn my log!
Snap and crackle! Leap and glow!
Turn to smoke and ashes but
Not too fast and not too slow!

In its heart a story lies;
Only you can set it free.
Fire, fire burn my log
While the tale is told to me!"

For a few minutes there was no sound save the crackling and snapping of red-hot coals. The lights had been turned out and in the glow of the fire the half circle of intent faces watched the story-log, little Mary's face the most intent of all. Suddenly Mary began to dance and clap her hands.

"Goody! goody! My story-log has begun to burn!" she cried excitedly.

"Why so it has, Mary. So it has," said the Storyteller. "Well, my dear, of whom shall the story be to-night?"

"Peter Rabbit! Please! oh please! I just love Peter!" cried the little girl, jumping up and down as an excited small girl can.

The Storyteller laughed. "I guess we all do, Mary," said he. "All right, about Peter it shall be. Have I ever told you children how Peter once found the most precious thing in all the great world?"

A chorus in the negative was the prompt response. "What was it—a great big di'mond'?" Robert asked.

The Storyteller shook his head. "No, Robert," said he. "No, not a diamond; something a great deal more precious than that. Something so precious that it is without price and many people have gladly given their lives for it. Luckily Peter didn't have to do that. Do any of you know why Old Mother Nature gave Peter Rabbit long ears?"

"Sure. So he can hear things," replied Robert.

The Storyteller's eyes twinkled. "Of course," said he. "Sometimes they are things that it is intended he should hear. Sometimes they are things not meant for his ears at all. I suspect that often it is these things that Peter enjoys most. A lot of people are that way, you know. They listen to things they have no business to listen to."

The Storyteller paused to look around that half circle of faces, and chuckled as not an

eye met his, but all gazed somewhat self-consciously into the fire. After a moment he continued.

"Anyway Peter is full of curiosity and is always listening. If he isn't curious about one thing he is curious about another thing. Sometimes he is curious about many things all at once.

"It happened one day that Peter was taking a nap. He was safely hidden in a bramble-tangle beside the Crooked Little Path. He was wakened by voices. At first he opened his eyes only part way, for he was still half asleep. It wasn't until he heard a low, sweet voice close by that he realized that someone was passing along the Crooked Little Path. Then his eyes flew wide open.

" 'There is just one thing without price—the most precious thing in all the Great World,' said that low, sweet voice.

"Peter knew that voice. I wonder if any of you can guess whose voice it was."

For a moment no one spoke. Then Nancy ventured a guess. "I think it was the voice of Old Mother Nature," said she.

"Right!" replied the Storyteller. "It was Mother Nature's voice sure enough. Another almost as low and sweet made reply. 'I know. What a pity it is that in so many places we do not find it. It ought to be everywhere in all the Great World, but it isn't. It often seems as if those who most want and need it are the very ones who are denied it.'

"Peter knew that voice too. He heard it almost every day, but not always so sweet and low. It was the voice of the mother of some of Peter's little friends, the Merry Little Breezes."

"I know! Old Mother West Wind!" shouted Billy.

The Storyteller laughed. "Of course," said he. "Who else could it have been? By this time Peter was wide awake. Old Mother Nature and Old Mother West Wind disappeared down the Crooked Little Path leaving behind them a long-eared bunch of curiosity.

" 'Now what,' said Peter to himself, 'can be the thing without price, the most precious thing in all the Great World?' He lifted a long hind foot and—"

"Scratched a long ear with that long hind foot!" cried Jean.

Everybody laughed as the Storyteller reached over and pinched her ear. "Right you are, my dear," said he. "That is just what he did. Then he scratched the other long ear with the other long hind foot. But the scratching was useless, for when he was through he was no wiser than before. He tried to forget the matter, but couldn't. The more he tried to forget it the more he thought about it and the more curious he became. At last, with the question fairly burning the tip of his tongue, he started out to look for the answer. The first person he met was his cousin, Jumper the Hare.

" 'Oh Cousin Jumper,' cried Peter, 'do you know what is the most precious thing in all the Great World?'

"It was Jumper's turn to scratch a long ear with a long hind foot. 'No,' said he. 'What is it?'

" 'I don't know. I'm looking for it,' replied Peter.

" 'I'll go with you,' said Jumper. So away they went—"

"Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip!" cried little Mary.

"Just so, for that is the way those two always run," chuckled the Storyteller. "So presently they came to the home of Unc' Billy Possum. Unc' Billy was sitting in his doorway. 'Mornin', Brer Rabbit. Mornin', Brer Hare,' said Unc' Billy. 'Whar yo'all goin' in such a hurry?'

"Peter's reply was prompt. 'We are looking for the most precious thing in all the Great World. Do you know where it is, Unc' Billy'?'

"Unc' Billy shook his head. 'If yo' all will tell me *what* the most precious thing in all the Great World is Ah reckon Ah may be able to tell yo' all *whar* it is,' said he.

" 'We don't know, but we thought that of course you would know,' replied Jumper.

"Unc' Billy grinned. 'Prob'ly Ah would if Ah should see it. Let me know if yo' find it,' said he.

"Peter and Jumper promised that they would and off they raced—"

"Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip!" chanted all the children together.

The Storyteller pushed back some embers that had fallen to one side of the fire and then continued. "Pretty soon they came to the house of Bobby Coon. Bobby was sitting on his doorstep. 'Oh, Bobby,' they cried, 'Do you know where the most precious thing in all the Great World is?'

"Now Bobby didn't like to admit his ignorance, but though he tried and tried he couldn't think what the most precious thing in all the Great World might be. He was honest enough to say so. 'I would go with you,' he added, 'but I am so fat, and you fellows are in such a hurry, that I couldn't keep up with you. Let me know if you find it.'

" 'We will,' promised Peter and Jumper and—"

"Away they went—" interrupted Willis.

"Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip!" chanted the chorus.

The Storyteller's eyes twinkled. "Who is telling this story?" he demanded. "Over at the Smiling Pool they found Billy Mink, but they got no help from him. Back to the Green Forest they ran and there they met Lightfoot the Deer. Lightfoot shook his handsome head and admitted that he was no wiser than they. Next they visited the pond of Paddy the Beaver. Paddy was cutting down a tree. He stopped work long enough to confess that he never had heard of the most precious thing in all the Great World. What is it Billy? What are you squirming around so for?"

"I just want to know if it was a big tree, a really, truly big tree, that Paddy was cutting," replied Billy.

The Storyteller smiled. "Yes, Billy," said he, "it was a really, truly tree and quite a big one, much, very much, bigger than you would think anyone with only teeth for tools could possibly cut down. Well, as I said, Paddy didn't know what was the most precious thing in all the Great World. Nor did Happy Jack the Gray Squirrel, nor Chatterer the Red Squirrel, nor Thunderer the Grouse. None ever had heard of it, this thing without price. Peter and Jumper even ventured to ask Buster Bear, from a safe distance of course.

" 'There isn't any such thing,' growled Buster Bear in his deepest, most rumbly, grumbly voice. 'If there was I would know it. There isn't any such thing.'

"It was then that Jumper gave up. He was tired. He, too, had come to doubt that there was any such thing. So Jumper refused to go any farther. Peter, however, was just as full

of curiosity as ever. After leaving Jumper the Hare he consulted Sammy Jay. Sammy didn't know. Blacky the Crow didn't know. Peter even inquired of Reddy Fox when Reddy happened to pass the bramble-tangle in which Peter was resting. Reddy was no wiser than the others. All this made Peter more curious than ever.

"After a while he returned to the Smiling Pool. First he asked Jerry Muskrat. Then he hunted up Grandfather Frog. Peter was sure that Grandfather Frog would know, he being old and so accounted wise.

" 'Chuga-rum!' said Grandfather Frog. 'Chuga-rum! It is something that you must first lose to really know what it is.'

" 'But one must have a thing before he can lose it, and how can one have a thing without knowing it?' cried Peter.

" 'Chuga-rum! That is for you to find out, Peter Rabbit,' retorted Grandfather Frog, and with a long neat dive from his big green lily pad he disappeared in the Smiling Pool.

" 'He doesn't talk sense,' grumbled Peter and away he went—"

"Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip!" shouted the children.

"Just so, lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip!" continued the Storyteller.

"So busy trying to puzzle out what Grandfather Frog could have meant was Peter that he failed to watch where he was going and so almost ran smack into Farmer Brown's boy and Bowser the Hound. In fact he heard Bowser before he saw him. Fortunately for Peter there was a hollow log not far away. He reached it just one good jump ahead of Bowser, and in he dived. Bowser could get only his nose in that log. He sniffed and sniffed and sniffed and with each sniff little shivers chased each other all over Peter. To make matters worse Farmer Brown's boy thrust an arm in and pulled Peter out."

"Was Peter scared?" ventured Jean.

"Was Peter scared?" The Storyteller laughed. "I should say he was! He was about as badly scared as ever he had been in all his life. He shivered and shook and wondered what would happen next. He had learned through experience that Farmer Brown's boy was a friend, but for all that he couldn't help feeling scared, terribly scared. I suppose Peter was as scared a Rabbit as ever wobbled a wobbly little nose.

"Farmer Brown's boy made Bowser lie down. Then he carried Peter over to a bramble-tangle. All the time he was talking to Peter in a low soothing voice and lightly stroking him. At the entrance to a little path leading into the bramble-tangle he put Peter on the ground and let go of him. Peter didn't stop even to say thank you. He darted into that tangle. He heard Farmer Brown's boy laugh. Then the boy called Bowser and together they went away down the Crooked Little Path. Hardly were they out of sight when Old Mother Nature and Old Mother West Wind appeared. They stopped at the bramble-tangle.

" 'Well, Peter, have you found the most precious thing in all the Great World?' asked Old Mother Nature.

"Peter looked quite as he felt, which was very foolish indeed. He hadn't guessed that Old Mother Nature knew of his search. 'No, Mother Nature. No, I haven't found it,' he replied politely.

"Old Mother Nature laughed. It was a lovely laugh. 'Well, Peter, you may not have

found it, but it has just been *given* you,' said she.

"Peter looked all around on every side. He didn't see anything that had been given him. He said so, and his face bore the funniest expression. It made both Mother Nature and Mother West Wind laugh. Peter didn't know just what to make of that laughter. It made him feel still more foolish.

" 'If you please, Mother Nature, I don't know what you mean,' he ventured timidly.

" 'What did Farmer Brown's boy do to you just now?' asked Old Mother Nature.

"Peter thought this over for a minute. 'Why,' said he slowly, 'Farmer Brown's boy let me go.'

"Mother Nature smiled. 'Yes, Peter,' said she softly, 'he let you go. He gave you —*freedom*.'

"Then Peter understood. He made a funny little jump. 'Why!' he cried. 'Why, *freedom* is the thing without price—the most precious thing in all the Great World! Is that it, Mother Nature?'

" 'Yes, Peter,' replied Mother Nature, while Old Mother West Wind nodded in agreement. 'Yes, freedom is the thing without price—the most precious thing that anyone, great or small, can possess. Never forget that, Peter. There is another name for it. It is called liberty.'

"Peter never has forgotten it. He never will. I hope you boys and girls never will forget it even for one little minute—not even when you are grown up. Most decidedly not then. Now the story-log is nothing but embers and it is time for you to start for home and bed. Whose turn is it to bring a story-log next time?"

"Mine!" cried Billy. "I've got it all picked out, and it's a snappy one, I betcha."

"Good," replied the Storyteller, laughing. "And I suppose a snappy log calls for a snappy story. All right, Billy. You bring a good log and I'll try to bring a good story. Now get your things on and straight home with you, every one of you!"

For a few minutes the Storyteller stood in the doorway listening to one of the sweetest sounds in all the world—the voices of happy children. And back on the ridge of Esker Hill the great buck lifted his head to listen also.

CHAPTER III

WHY THE GREEN FOREST HAS NO KING

THE Storyteller went to the door of the Old House and looked out. Then he returned to the fireplace where once more the children were gathered. They were laughing and chatting as they toasted marshmallows and popped corn.

"Who was to bring the story-log to-night?" asked the Storyteller.

"Billy Blake!" cried two or three together.

"I thought so," replied the Storyteller. "The little scamp is late, and that isn't a bit like Billy. I wonder where he is. Hello! We have a visitor—a cricket on the hearth. Who knows what noted writer made a cricket on the hearth famous?"

"Dickens!" cried Jean and Rosemary together.

"Right," replied the Storyteller, "and a beautiful story it is. What is it, Mary?"

"I don't know that story, but I know a song about a cricket."

"That's splendid, Mary," said the Storyteller. "While we are waiting for Billy you sing it for us. Will you?"

Little Mary hung her head shyly. "I—I—I—can't sing it," she stammered. "I—I've forgotten the tune. But I can say it," she added hopefully.

"That will do just as well, my dear," replied the Storyteller. "Now quiet, everybody! Quiet while Mary recites her poem!"

The chattering and laughing ceased. The cricket continued to chirp and the fire snapped. Mary began.

"Little Black Cricket you fiddle all day;
Fiddle and fiddle while hidden away.
When I wake up with the stars shining bright
I'm sure, little Cricket, you fiddle all night.

Little Black Cricket pray why do you hide?
Music like yours is a matter for pride.
Is it because you are fearful you may
Find someone taking your fiddle away?

Little Black Cricket we really should know
What is your fiddle and what is your bow;
How you can steadily use them without
Having your bow and your fiddle wear out."

Clapping of hands followed the shouts of "That was good!" "Where'd you learn that, Mary?" "Did you make that up?"

The Storyteller smiled down at the flushed face of the little girl. "Thank you, Mary. That was fine," said he. Then he turned to the eager faces of the others. "Listen," said he.

“Can you-all keep a secret?”

The replies came in a chorus. “Sure!” “Easy as anything!” “Of course we can!”

“All right,” was the prompt response. “I’m going to try you out. Do you remember what kind of a story-log Billy said he would bring to-night?”

“A snappy one,” cried Nancy.

“That’s it, a snappy one,” replied the Storyteller. “Now here’s the secret: We’re going to play a little joke on Billy. This afternoon I was at his home and I saw what I suspect is to be the story-log. It won’t be a snappy one. You know some kinds of wood snap and crackle all the time they are burning, but there are other kinds that do not snap at all. Billy’s log is of the latter kind, but he, being a little fellow, doesn’t know it. Now here is a small stick that will snap like a bunch of firecrackers. When Billy’s log is placed on the fire I will slip this stick on too, but Billy isn’t to know about it. Hark! I think he’s coming now.”

The door burst open and Billy entered all out of breath. “I’m awful sorry I’m late,” he panted. “I forgot the story-log and had to go back for it. Here it is, and it’s a snappy one, I betcha!”

The Storyteller shook his head warningly at some smothered giggles. “All right, Billy,” said he. “We’ll forgive you for being late now that the story-log is here. We’ll put it on the fire right away and find out just how snappy it is.”

The log was put on the fire with the usual ceremony and the Storyteller suggested that while they were waiting for it to begin to burn Billy should say what kind of a story he wanted. “ ’Bout the king of the Green Forest,” was his prompt reply.

“Oh dear,” said the Storyteller, “that is just too bad. You see, Billy, there isn’t any king in the Green Forest now. Supposing—”

A loud snap followed by a succession of snaps interrupted. “Hi!” shouted Billy, dancing delightedly. “Didn’t I tell you that ol’ log would be a snappy one?”

There was a general laugh. “You certainly did, Billy. You certainly did,” said the Storyteller. “But now that the story-log has started, it is time the story should also start. Supposing I tell you why there is no longer a king in the Green Forest.”

“Do!” “Oh goody!” “That’s what we want!” was the chorused response, and the Storyteller promptly began.

“Well then, here is a little verse for you to remember:

The King is wise;
The King is strong;
The King, you know,
Can do no wrong.

“It is just as I told Billy, there is no king in the Green Forest. No king rules over the Green Meadows, the Old Pasture, the Smiling Pool or the Old Orchard. The little people living there have only Old Mother Nature to obey. They are quite satisfied that this should be so, and have been ever since the great meeting at which were present all the big and little people who wear fur, or feathers, or scales, or just plain skins, to choose a king, and didn’t.

"Just how that great meeting came about I don't know for sure, but I have heard that Peter Rabbit was the cause of it. It seems that somehow Peter got it into that funny little head of his that the animals and birds would be a lot better off if they had a king to rule over them. He could think and talk of nothing else.

" 'Not since the days when the world was young, and old King Bear is said to have ruled in the Green Forest, has there been a king over the people of the Green Forest and the Green Meadows as there should have been and should be now,' declared Peter. 'If we had a king wise enough to know what is right, and strong enough to make everybody do what is right, we would be a lot better off, and happier. We ought to have a king. Yes, sir, we ought to have a king.'

"Now if you repeat a thing often enough others will begin to believe it. At first Peter was laughed at. He didn't mind. He just kept on telling everybody that they should have a king. Hearing it so often others began to talk about it and to think that perhaps after all Peter was right. Soon talk of a king was heard everywhere. The littlest people were in favor of it because they thought that thus in times of trouble they would have someone to go to for help. Some of the big folks were in favor of it because each secretly hoped that he would be the one chosen to rule over the others. Of course this was a secret that each kept to himself, or thought he did. But it was to be noticed that these were the ones who talked most about the need of a king.

"At last it was decided to call a great meeting of all the people, big and little, who wore fur, feathers, scales, or just plain skins. But first Peter Rabbit went to Old Mother Nature to tell her what it was proposed to do and to ask her permission. You see, without this none dared call such a meeting. Old Mother Nature said that she thought it would be a fine thing and that she herself would preside at the meeting. Then the Merry Little Breezes of Old Mother West Wind were sent hurrying and scurrying in every direction to spread the news of the great meeting to choose a king.

"The great day arrived. The meeting place was on the edge of the Green Forest. Even before jolly, round, bright Mr. Sun began his daily climb up in the blue, blue sky, Old Mother Nature was there. She was on hand to make sure that not even the smallest and weakest should have anything to fear. With daylight the furred and feathered people and others began to arrive. Of course one of the first was Peter Rabbit. With him was his cousin, Jumper the Hare. About the same time Hooty the Owl arrived, and there was such a hungry look in his great, round, yellow eyes as he glared at them that Peter and Jumper kept to a bramble-tangle despite the presence of Old Mother Nature.

"As silently as the Black Shadows had disappeared came Flathorns the Moose. Not a twig snapped. Not a leaf rustled. One instant there was no sign of him, and the next instant there he was in a thicket on the edge of the Green Forest. As silently and as secretly came Buster Bear. Lightfoot the Deer approached timidly. From the Old Pasture came Reddy Fox. Across from him sat Old Man Coyote. Howler the Wolf came boldly, without fear. Yowler the Bobcat, Tufty the Lynx and their big cousin, Puma the Mountain Lion, sneaked to their places as is their way.

"All the smaller people—Whitefoot the Wood Mouse, Danny Meadow Mouse, Nimbleheels the Jumping Mouse, Timmy the Flying Squirrel, Chatterer the Red Squirrel, Striped Chipmunk, Happy Jack the Gray Squirrel—were on hand early. Johnny Chuck and Digger the Badger came from the Green Meadows. Billy Mink and his cousins,

Shadow the Weasel and Little Joe Otter, were on hand in good season. Jerry Muskrat and Paddy the Beaver came, the one up the Laughing Brook from the Smiling Pool, and the other down the Laughing Brook from the pond of his own making deep in the Green Forest. Prickly Porky the Porcupine arrived grunting and complaining, while Jimmy Skunk paid no attention to anyone and didn't hurry. Unc' Billy Possum and Bobby Coon were late, but they got there.

"Of the feathered folk it appeared that none was missing. Mr. Eagle, Ol' Mistah Buzzard, Blacky the Crow, all the members of the Hawk family, Sammy Jay, Rattles the Kingfisher, Longlegs the Heron, Honker the Goose, Mr. Quack, Thunderer the Grouse, Bob White, Welcome Robin, Winsome Bluebird and all the others were on hand. When she was sure that all had arrived Old Mother Nature looked around the great circle and smiled. Then she spoke.

" 'I understand, my children,' said she, 'that many of you are not satisfied with the way in which I govern you and so you desire a king to rule over you in my place. Is that it?'

"At first none replied. Each looked at his neighbor and on all faces was a queer expression. At last Peter Rabbit found his tongue. 'It—it—it isn't that we are not satisfied with your rule, Mother Nature,' he stammered. 'No indeed, it isn't anything of the kind. We—we just thought it might be well to have someone to keep things right, and to whom we could take our troubles, when you are not about. Of course we don't expect or want anyone even to try to take your place, Mother Nature. No one *could* do that.' And all the others chanted together, 'Of course not.'

" 'Very well,' said Old Mother Nature. 'I want all my children to be happy. So if having a king will make you happy, and you can agree on who shall be the king, there is no harm in trying it. One of your number must be chosen, and it is for you to choose. Of course a king should be big and strong, for only thus may he command respect. Is it not so?'

" 'It is so!' cried all the people, big and little, as in one voice.

" 'He must have dignity, for the undignified are laughed at, and the king must not be laughed at,' continued Old Mother Nature.

"Once again all nodded in assent. 'It is so!' they cried.

" 'He must be wise, for only through wisdom is justice to be obtained,' said Old Mother Nature.

" 'It is so. Most certainly it is so,' declared all the animals and birds and other folk, and solemnly nodded their heads in agreement.

"There was a twinkle which none saw in the eyes of Old Mother Nature when she next spoke. 'You will bear these things in mind then as you choose your king,' said she. 'First I will call before me, one at a time, the largest among you, for your king must be big. The rest of you shall choose. We will begin with the largest. Flathorns the Moose, step forth and come before me.'

"Proudly Flathorns stepped out of the thicket in which he had been standing, and all those too small to hope to be king drew a long breath of admiration for his great size, his strength, and his dignity. They were about to shout as one 'He shall be our king!' when one of the great antlers which crowned his head fell at his feet so that he had only half a

crown, as it were. All knew that the other antler would soon drop. There was no dignity left. Someone laughed. Then all together they shouted: ‘We don’t want him! Our king must have dignity.’

“Buster Bear was called next. He was big and he was strong, even as was Flathorns the Moose. But when he walked he shuffled, and when he stood before Old Mother Nature he kept swinging his head from side to side, so that he, too, lacked dignity. Then someone remembered that Buster Bear sleeps through the coldest weather. A sleeping king would be no better than no king at all.

“ ‘We don’t want him! Our king must be awake,’ cried all in chorus.

“Lightfoot the Deer was next. Handsome was he and proud he looked as with his beautiful head held high he stepped forth. Then a twig was snapped. Lightfoot jumped and turned quickly. There was fright in his beautiful eyes.

“ ‘We don’t want him! Our king must be without fear,’ chanted all the animals and birds.

“Then was Howler the Wolf called forth. He was big and great was his strength. There was dignity in his walk and in the way in which he stood before Old Mother Nature. But as he had stepped forward he had lifted his lips just enough to show for an instant the gleam of his big cruel teeth, and all the littlest people shivered. Thus he proved that he lacked wisdom, for that was a foolish thing he had done.

“ ‘We don’t want him! Our king must be wise,’ cried all the people, and Howler slunk back whence he had come.

“Puma the Mountain Lion was refused because he was a sneak, and Tufty the Lynx and Yowler the Bobcat were rejected for the same reason. Then came Mr. Eagle who by some was called King of the Birds. Mr. Eagle spread his great wings and sailed over to where Old Mother Nature was seated. He alighted on a stump before her. There was dignity and there was strength and there was majesty in his appearance. He looked every inch a feathered king. Old Mother Nature bade him approach nearer along the ground. Alas, his great curved claws were so much in his way, and he hopped so awkwardly, that many laughed aloud. ‘He robs me of my fish!’ screamed Plunger the Osprey.

“ ‘We don’t want him! Our king must be respected,’ cried all the animals and birds and other folk.

“Old Mother Nature looked around the great circle and smiled. ‘Well, my children,’ said she, ‘who is your king to be? You have refused all who are big and strong, yet you have said that your king must be big and strong. Who is your king to be?’

“All the birds and the animals and the other folk from the greatest to the least looked as foolish as they felt, and they felt very foolish indeed. Suddenly Peter Rabbit kicked up his long heels. ‘I don’t want a king!’ he cried. ‘Mother Nature is all the ruler I want. I’m going straight home to the dear Old Briar-patch and forget I ever thought I wanted a king.’ He made a low bow before Old Mother Nature, then away he went in his usual fashion—”

“Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip!” chanted the children.

“Just so,” said the Storyteller. “Then, each in turn, all the other animals and all the birds and all the other people bowed before Old Mother Nature and hurried away. At last she was alone, and smiling happily went her way. And that, boys and girls, is why there is no king in the Green Forest. Goodness, it is getting late! If you youngsters are not home

pretty soon I fear mothers will say: ‘No more storytelling.’ Who will bring the story-log next time?”

It seemed that everyone there wanted the privilege, so the Storyteller was forced to decide who should be the favored one. Slowly he looked over the eager faces. “Rosemary,” he decided. “Rosemary, you shall bring the story-log next time. Now straight home with you, every one of you, as fast as you can go!”

There was a rush for coats and hats, the good-bys were said, and presently the Storyteller was alone in the Old House to dream before the dying embers in the great fireplace as many had dreamed there before him.

CHAPTER IV

COLD TOES AND A NEW TAIL

ROSEMARY, JEAN AND FRANCES arrived at the Old House breathless and round-eyed with excitement. All wanted to talk at once.

"Guess what we saw just now!" cried Frances.

"It was a fox!" put in Jean before anyone had a chance to guess.

"And he wasn't a bit afraid of us, not a bit," declared Rosemary.

"And," began Jean and Frances together, but the Storyteller interrupted.

"One at a time, my dears. One at a time," said he laughing. "Get your things off and then while you each toast a marshmallow Rosemary shall tell us all about it. You know this is Rosemary's night and before she puts her story-log on the fire it will be lovely to have her tell us about Reddy Fox."

In a few minutes the three little girls were in their places before the fire, each with a long-handled toasting fork and a marshmallow. A big pan of buttered popcorn was started around the circle and as soon as all had been helped the Storyteller rang an old cowbell. This was the signal to stop talking. The chattering ceased.

"All right, Rosemary," said the Storyteller, "tell us about the fox. Are you sure it was a fox?"

"It was old Zeb Carlton's dog, I bet. He looks like a fox and the girls wouldn't know the difference," said Jimmy Andrews rather scornfully.

"No such thing! I guess we know a fox when we see one as well as you do!" retorted Frances heatedly.

The cowbell restored order and Rosemary resumed her story. "We were coming along past the meadow when Jean said, 'Look at that little dog over there! What's he doing?' Frances and I looked and at first we thought it *was* a dog. Then it turned so that we could see it better and Frances whispered: 'That isn't a dog; it's Reddy Fox.' It was, too."

Rosemary looked over at Jimmy and wrinkled her nose at him, whereat Jimmy grinned and made a face at her. "At first we couldn't think what he was doing," she continued. "He would steal ahead so slowly and carefully. Then he would raise up on his hind feet and look over the grass. Once he made a quick jump at something but I guess he didn't catch anything."

Willis could keep still no longer. "He was hunting mice," he broke in. "My grandpa says Reddy is the greatest mouse hunter there is, and does a lot more good than harm."

Again the bell, and Willis subsided. "I guess Reddy saw us all the time, but just didn't let on," continued Rosemary. "We just stood and watched and held our breath. It was the first time any of us ever had seen a fox excepting in a cage at a park. In a few minutes he crossed the road right in front of us. We'd have known then, if we hadn't known before, that he was Reddy Fox, for he had a big tail and it was round"—she meant "cylindrical"—"and no dog has a round bushy tail. So there, Jimmy Andrews!"

When the laugh that followed had quieted down, the Storyteller spoke. "There isn't a

bit of doubt, Rosemary," said he, "that you saw Reddy Fox, and you have brought out a point for you children always to remember and then you will never mistake a dog for a fox —the round tail. No dog has a tail like that. Hunters call it the brush. And Willis is right in thinking that Reddy was hunting for mice. They furnish him with a very large part of his food. Now if Rosemary doesn't get her story-log on the fire right away I fear we won't have any story. Mention of Reddy's tail reminds me of the story of how he happens to have a tail so different from other tails. It is called How Cold Toes Won a New Tail. I wonder how you would like that to go with your story-log, Rosemary?"

"I would love it!" cried the little girl as she passed the story-log to be placed on the fire. The usual pretty ceremony followed and then eager faces were turned to the Storyteller. This is the story he told them:

"On one side of the Smiling Pool sat Peter Rabbit. On the other side of the Smiling Pool sat Reddy Fox. Between them on his big green lily pad in the Smiling Pool sat Grandfather Frog. Reddy looked over to Peter and grinned. When he did that he showed all his teeth. Peter shivered a little despite the fact that with the Smiling Pool between them he felt perfectly safe.

" 'Come over on this side. There is the finest sweet clover over here that ever grew. You have no idea how sweet it is,' said Reddy.

" 'Neither have you. You never eat clover so you don't know anything about its sweetness,' retorted Peter, and thought himself very smart.

" 'You are wrong, Peter, quite wrong,' replied Reddy. He was still grinning, but in his half-closed yellow eyes was a crafty look. 'It is true that I do not eat clover, but I do not have to in order to know that this is very, very sweet. Busy Bee says so, and that is enough for me. She is at work among the blossoms here right now this blessed minute, and she says that it is the sweetest clover she has found this summer. You know very well, Peter, that there is no better judge of clover than Busy Bee. Long ago I learned that he who wholly depends on what he can find out for himself will never know much.'

" 'Chuga-rum!' interrupted Grandfather Frog. 'Chuga-rum! You said something then, Reddy Fox. Find out all you can for yourself, but never miss a chance to learn from others. Only thus may you become wise.'

"Reddy Fox gave Grandfather Frog a sidelong glance and continued quite as if there had been no interruption. 'I know you love sweet clover, Peter, and as I said before Busy Bee says this is the sweetest clover she has found this summer. I am sure that if you come over here and taste it you will be grateful to me for telling you about it.'

"Peter made a face at Reddy. 'I'm glad to know that clover is so sweet,' said he. 'Yes, sir, I am so. However, it happens I don't care for any to-day, thank you. I am quite satisfied on this side.'

" 'As you please,' replied Reddy carelessly, quite as if he wasn't interested. 'I was merely trying to do you a good turn.' He got to his feet, yawned, stretched, turned and trotted off without once turning his head to look back. Presently he disappeared behind a clump of tall grass. Peter chuckled.

" 'He's lying down flat behind that grass,' said Peter. 'He hopes I'll be foolish enough to go over for some of that clover. Reddy will go hungry a long, long time if he waits for me to come over there. My, what a wonderful tail that fellow has!' Peter's eyes grew

wistful. You know he has such a funny little tail of his own, hardly worth calling a tail, that he is inclined to be envious of those who have fine tails. ‘I can’t understand why Old Mother Nature gave him such a big bushy tail,’ he added.

“ ‘Chuga-rum!’ said Grandfather Frog. ‘She gave it to him for the same reason that she gave one just like it to his great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather way back in the days when the world was young.’

“ ‘And why was that?’ asked Peter, his eyes shining. He suspected that there was a story if only Grandfather Frog would tell it.

“ ‘Because,’ replied Grandfather Frog rather gruffly, ‘old Mr. Fox had cold feet.’

“Peter looked puzzled. He scratched a long ear with a long hind foot. He scratched the other long ear with the other long hind foot. He has a way of doing this when he is puzzled. ‘Cold feet,’ said Peter. ‘Cold feet—what under the sun could cold feet have to do with that tail that you say was given old Mr. Fox? I don’t see any connection between cold feet and a handsome big tail.’

“Grandfather Frog made no reply. He sat on his big green lily pad quite as if he didn’t know that Peter was anywhere about. But all the time as he sat blinking his big goggly eyes there was a twinkle in them. Peter fidgeted. At last when he could stand it no longer he asked the question that Grandfather Frog was waiting for. ‘If you please, Grandfather Frog, what did the cold feet of old Mr. Fox have to do with his big, bushy tail? A little while ago you said that one should never miss a chance to learn from others. You are old and very, very wise, and I want to learn from you.’

“ ‘That being the case,’ replied Grandfather Frog somewhat gruffly, ‘I suppose I will have to tell you the story of old Mr. Fox. I never refuse knowledge to those who really seek it. You understand, of course, that this happened ’way back in the days when the world was young. Old Mr. Fox, first of all the Fox tribe, had a very ordinary, no-account sort of tail. The hair on it was short. As tails go it was nothing to brag about. This didn’t bother old Mr. Fox. Not a bit. In fact he didn’t think anything about his tail. Neither did anyone else.

“ ‘Mr. Fox went about his business of finding a place for himself in the Great World. From the very beginning he was smart, was Mr. Fox, and he managed to get along very well indeed until the coming of the first winter. Then he had to work hard to get enough to eat, just as Reddy Fox does now when winter comes. Of course Mr. Fox had to travel about a great deal while hunting for his food. He found that when he was running about he didn’t mind the cold, but there were occasions when in order to catch a meal he had to watch without moving for a long time. It was then that he suffered from cold feet.

“ ‘When he couldn’t stand it any longer he would lift first one foot, then another, to get them off the snow and ice. He couldn’t keep still. He couldn’t think of anything but his cold feet. Of course, like everyone else, he had to sit down to rest. Then his fur coat kept his body warm, but his feet always were cold, and so was his nose. Mr. Fox was very uncomfortable.

“ ‘This must be said for Mr. Fox—he never complained. He just did the best he could and said nothing. When his feet got so cold he couldn’t stand it any longer, he ran to get them warm. It got so that he was running most of the time, or so it seemed. He couldn’t hunt properly. He couldn’t get as much sleep as he needed. He grew thin.

“ ‘One day Old Mother Nature happened along where Mr. Fox was watching for a mouse to come out of a hollow log. Of course he should have kept perfectly still. He tried to, but he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. There was an icy crust on the snow and the feet of Mr. Fox became so cold that he couldn’t stand it. He would lift one foot, then another. Now and then he got up and walked around. Of course that was no way to catch a mouse. As long as he kept moving the mouse knew he was there.

“ ‘Old Mother Nature watched him a long time. Then she called him over to her. “What is the matter with you, Mr. Fox?” she asked. “Haven’t you learned by this time that it is useless to watch for a mouse unless you keep perfectly still?”

“ ‘Mr. Fox looked a little sheepish. “Yes, Mother Nature, I know all about that, but I can’t keep still. My feet won’t let me,” said he.

“ ‘Old Mother Nature looked both surprised and puzzled. “Your feet won’t let you? Pray tell me, what is the matter with your feet?” said she.

“ ‘Mr. Fox grinned in an apologetic manner. “They’re cold,” said he. “They get so cold that I cannot keep still no matter how I try. I have to keep moving or they would freeze. You see I have no means of warming them except by running about. I certainly shall be glad when warm weather comes again.”

“ ‘Old Mother Nature looked thoughtful. “That certainly is too bad, Mr. Fox,” said she. “I should have thought of it before. Something must be done about it right away. I think I will have to give you a foot warmer.”

“ ‘Old Mother Nature reached out and passed her hand along the whole length of that ordinary no-account tail to which Mr. Fox had given so little thought. At her touch that tail became wonderfully changed. It became covered with long soft hair, a tail unlike the tail of any other animal. It was exactly like the tail of Reddy Fox of to-day, that tail you so much admire. “There,” said Old Mother Nature, “is your foot warmer. When you have to sit still just curl that around over your toes. I don’t think you ever will have any more trouble with cold feet.”

“ ‘It was just so. Whenever Mr. Fox sat still he curled his big soft tail around over his toes and they were kept warm. Whenever he curled up for a nap he brought that tail around over his feet and then he buried his nose in it. From that time on he minded cold weather not at all in so far as keeping warm was concerned, and it has been so with all the members of his family ever since.’

“ ‘Now you mention it,’ spoke up Peter Rabbit, ‘I’ve often watched Reddy Fox curl his tail around over his feet, but never have guessed why. My, it must be nice to have such a handy foot warmer as that!’ He paused a moment, then added wistfully: ‘I wish I had one.’

“And that’s the story of cold toes and the tail that is a foot warmer. There goes the last spark of the story-log and it is high time you youngsters were homeward bound. What is it, David?”

“If you please,” replied David, “can’t we have a really, truly story next time ’stead of a ’maginary one?”

“A really, truly story, something that really happened, every word true—that’s an idea,” replied the Storyteller. “I tell you what, you bring the story-log next time, David, and I’ll have a really, truly story ready for you. Of whom would you like the story to be?”

“Lightfoot the Deer,” was the prompt reply.

As this met with the approval of all it was so decided. The good-bys were soon said and as the voices died away in the distance the Storyteller turned back into the Old House where a cricket on the hearth had begun to sing, and fantastic shadows danced on the ancient walls.

CHAPTER V

THE OLD HUNTER'S STORY

THE Old Hunter sat in the chimney corner in the big living room of the Old House. His face was brown, weather-beaten. Around his eyes were fine wrinkles that somehow seemed to have something to do with the laughter in his eyes. Those eyes were faded a little, but still blue, and they twinkled "just like twin stars," Frances said. His mouth was wide with the funniest little upward quirk at each corner—a mouth made for laughter. Around it were many little lines that all ran together when he smiled. His hair was white and thick and looked as if some one had just run a hand through it and rumpled it.

He was there when the children arrived. Although none of them ever had seen him sitting there before, he somehow looked as if he belonged there, as if he always had been there. The fact was he did "belong" to a certain extent. He was occupying a favorite seat where he had spent long evenings, for he and the Storyteller were old friends and it was his habit to drop in frequently, though never before of a children's evening. Most of them knew him, some to speak to and others merely by sight. But the first marshmallows were not yet properly browned before all felt as if they had known him always.

The Storyteller explained that because David had asked for a really and truly true story he had invited in the Old Hunter, "because," said the Storyteller, "he knows more about birds and animals and Mother Nature and all her children than anyone of my acquaintance, and the things he tells you will be true."

Little Mary eyed him with mingled suspicion and reproach. "Do you hunt the little people of the Green Meadows and the Green Forest?" she asked.

The Old Hunter shook his head. "No," said he. "Not any more."

"But you used to hunt them," persisted the little girl.

"Yes," replied the Old Hunter. "Yes, I used to hunt them."

"Why?" The question was fairly shot at him by the persistent little maid.

The shrewd, kindly eyes studied the sober intent faces watching him. Then the Old Hunter smiled and answering smiles broke out all around the circle. "Because," said he, "I didn't know any better and I thought it was fun. It wasn't really, but I thought it was. You see when I was a little boy I didn't have any Storyteller to help me to get acquainted with all the little people in fur and feathers, and to tell me about them and how they have just such feelings as you and I have."

"Did you ever shoot a bird?" demanded Willis bluntly.

"Yes," admitted the Old Hunter.

"What for?" was the disconcerting question.

"Did you ever throw a stone at a bird?" asked the Old Hunter, and the blue eyes twinkled more than ever.

"Yes," the small boy admitted honestly.

"What for?" asked the Old Hunter.

"Oh, just for fun; to see if I could hit it," came the prompt reply.

The Old Hunter's face was grave. "That's it," said he. "That's why I used to shoot—just for fun, although I used to make the excuse that it was for food, or for some other good reason. It took me a long time to learn that it isn't fun to kill these neighbors in feathers and fur. It *is* fun, the greatest kind of fun, to hunt them just to try to find out all about them, but not to hurt them. That isn't fun at all."

"Did you ever shoot a deer?" demanded Billy.

"Yes," admitted the Old Hunter a bit sadly. "Yes, I have shot a deer."

"How could you? Oh how could you shoot such a beautiful thing?" cried Midge, the impulsive.

"I couldn't now, my dear," replied the Old Hunter, shaking his head. "No, I couldn't do a thing like that now. But that was a long time ago before the big buck of Chestnut Ridge had opened my eyes and made me put my gun away for always."

"How could a buck make you put your gun away?" asked Brother, and his tone said as plainly as words could have done that he didn't believe anything like that.

"That is the story I invited our friend to come here and tell us to-night," said the Storyteller. "David, where's that story-log? Ha! Here it is, and it's a good one. A good story-log demands a good story, and to-night a good story must be a *true* story, Mr. Hunter. Now fill up your dishes with popcorn, all of you. David, you are big enough to put the log on the fire yourself. Mr. Hunter, keep your eyes on this log and when you see it begin to burn it will be time for you to begin your story. And don't forget that the story must end by the time the log has burned out. All right, David."

Very carefully and very solemnly, as befitted the occasion, the small boy placed the story-log on the fire and then chanted the exhortation. All eyes were intently watching the log. A thread of grayish smoke spiraled up from one end, thickened and broke into a flicker of yellow flame at its base.

"This is the story of the bravest deer I have ever known," began the Old Hunter.

"Was you out hunting him?" broke in the irrepressible Willis.

The Old Hunter shook his head. "No, I wasn't hunting him," said he. "It was out of season."

"Please, what do you mean by out of season?" asked Nancy.

"He means it was a time of year when it was against the law to hunt deer," explained Brother somewhat importantly.

"That's right, Brother," said the Old Hunter, nodding in agreement. "The law protects deer at all times excepting for a short period in the autumn when men are allowed to hunt and shoot them. It was in the spring that I met the big buck, or rather that I saw him. We didn't exactly meet. It was in May. I had at that time two foxhounds. You know those are dogs trained to chase foxes, to follow them with those wonderful noses of theirs. I would like to tell you of some of the smart things I have seen foxhounds do, and some of the smart things I have seen foxes do, but that will have to be some other night.

"One day I took the two dogs out in a certain piece of woods for exercise. I knew that bit of woodland well and I hadn't the faintest idea that we would find deer there. But we did. The dogs were running ahead of me, sniffing at this and that, running from side to side to investigate every stump and log and pile of brush as dogs will, when all of a

sudden from behind a small windfall—a windfall is a pile of fallen trees uprooted in a great wind storm—out bounded Mrs. Lightfoot, head up and white flag up, bounding over logs and tree trunks as if she had springs in her feet. My, she was a pretty sight!"

"What was she carrying a white flag for?" Jean wanted to know.

There was a titter from some of the older children, but the Old Hunter didn't even smile save with his eyes. "That's a fair question, my dear," said he. "Of course she wasn't carrying a real flag. It was her white tail that she was carrying up instead of down as she carries it when quiet and undisturbed. The tail of a deer is called a flag by hunters, and when a deer is frightened and bounds away up goes the flag. When a hunter shoots at a deer and only wounds it he can tell by the dropping of the flag.

"So Mrs. Lightfoot's flag was up and a pretty sight she was as she bounded away. I don't know of any prettier sight than a deer in a hurry where a lot of things have to be jumped over. Well, my two dogs just lit out after Mrs. Lightfoot. I yelled at them until I was hoarse, but it did no good. They were just crazy, those two dogs, crazy with excitement. They had been trained not to hunt deer, just foxes, and I reckon that if they had found just her scent they wouldn't have followed it, but seeing her was too much for them. They were baying as only good hounds on a hot trail can bay. I doubt if those dogs even heard me.

"Well, sir, I knew I was in for a peck of trouble. It is against the law to run deer with dogs even in the hunting season, and this wasn't even the hunting season. If they were not stopped those dogs were likely to run that deer until she was tired out and then pull her down and kill her. Somehow I must head them off.

"I knew that country around there just as you children know your own yards, and it was kind of lucky I did. I knew a lot about deer, too, and their ways, and I guess that was kind of lucky also. I figured that Mrs. Lightfoot wouldn't run straight away for any great distance, but would circle around. So I started to cut across what I thought would be the circle she would make, figuring to get between her and those dogs. I was pretty much out of breath when I came out of a thicket just in time to see Mrs. Lightfoot's white flag disappear in a little swamp I had guessed she would make for. She had a long lead on the dogs so I knew I was in time to head them off.

"And then in a little open place over near where those dogs were I saw another deer. It was a buck, a big fellow. He was standing with his head up listening to those dogs. His antlers, horns you know, were about half-grown. For an instant he stood there. Then what do you think he did?"

"What?" cried several voices that sounded a little breathless.

For a few seconds the Old Hunter gazed into the fire. "That buck deliberately crossed the trail of Mrs. Lightfoot," said he slowly. "Yes, sir, he crossed right between Mrs. Lightfoot and those dogs, and he didn't hurry about it. A little way beyond he stopped in a thicket and stood looking back. I could just make him out. I knew what that old fellow had done and why he had done it just as well as if he had told me. He had crossed that trail with the idea in his head that when those dogs reached that place his scent would be the stronger and they would take after him instead of Mrs. Lightfoot.

"Well, they didn't. They were running so fast on Mrs. Lightfoot's trail that they didn't notice his. The instant he saw his scheme had failed, Lightfoot turned and I lost sight of

him. But in a few minutes I saw him again. He had made a quarter-circle and had come out ahead of those dogs once more. This time he waited until they came in sight. Then stamping his forefeet he gave a sort of whistling snort and bounded away. Of course the dogs saw him and of course they took after him. He led off in another direction and I had to try to guess how he would circle and try to cut across to head off those dogs.

"Not more than halfway to where I figured I would hit that trail, I plunged into a thicket and as I entered at one side out from the other side jumped a deer, and it was Mrs. Lightfoot. And then what do you think I saw just ahead of me in that thicket?"

"Another deer!" shrilled Billy, who was sitting on the very edge of his chair and leaning so far forward in his eagerness that it was a wonder he did not pitch forward.

"Two!" chuckled the Old Hunter. "Two little, helpless, spotted fawns, the prettiest, cutest babies you can imagine. They were lying with their little necks stretched out along the ground and didn't move. It was a wonder that I saw them and didn't step on them."

"Oh, the darlings! I wish I had been there to see them," murmured Frances of the dreamy eyes. "Did you take them home?"

"No indeed," replied the Old Hunter. "You don't think I would have taken them from their mother, do you? What I did was to try to run a little faster to head off those dogs, and this time I was successful. When they saw me they just forgot all about that deer. They put their tails between their legs and came sneaking up to my feet, each a picture of shame. They knew that they had done wrong and that they deserved to be punished."

"Were they?" asked Willis.

"Of course," replied the Old Hunter gravely. "Those who are disobedient, and who do things that they know are wrong, must be punished in order that they shall not forget and do those things again. Well, sir, all the way home and for a long time after I got there I thought about the bravery and the loyalty of that buck. It was a wonderful thing that Lightfoot did. It was one of the most wonderful things I ever knew an animal to do. Lightfoot was in no condition to run. It was too warm for long running. Then, too, he was lacking in vigor and strength. You see much of his strength had gone into the growing of his new antlers."

"You mean horns," said David.

"No, he doesn't; he means just what he said. Cows have horns and they're hollow. A deer has antlers and they're solid," contributed Robert somewhat importantly because of his superior knowledge.

"Robert is right," agreed the Old Hunter. "And it is always best to call things by their right names, don't you think? As I said, much of Lightfoot's strength had gone into the growing of those antlers. One of the wonderful things that Old Mother Nature does is to enable a buck to grow a new set of antlers in just a few months. While they are growing he usually keeps by himself and is very quiet. I suspect he doesn't feel any too good. Those antlers are not hard while they are growing and are very sensitive and easily injured. So of course he cannot fight with them.

"Lightfoot probably was lying down in a thicket when those dogs started after Mrs. Lightfoot. He could have remained there quietly just as well as not, and he probably would have if it had been another buck those dogs were running. But it was Mrs. Lightfoot and that was a very different matter. Perhaps he knew of those helpless babies

hidden in that thicket. Perhaps, and what is more likely, he only guessed that Mrs. Lightfoot was a mother now. Anyway he deliberately put aside his own safety and comfort to try to save Mrs. Lightfoot, and did save her. It was a noble deed and one of the highest courage. What might have happened to Lightfoot, had I not been there to stop those dogs, I do not like to think.

"All the way home I kept thinking about what I had seen. After I got home I kept thinking about it. No human being could have done a braver deed than did that old buck of Chestnut Ridge. By the time I got home I knew I never could shoot another deer. I had thought that I knew all about deer, but I never had dreamed of such loyalty and such self-sacrificing bravery as I had witnessed. It set me to wondering if I was any wiser in regard to other people, little and big, of the Green Forest and the Green Meadows; if there might be other just such heroes among them. And presently I knew that never again would I shoot one of them. I would hunt them, yes, but to make friends with them and learn about them, but never again to hurt them. Now you know how the big buck of Chestnut Ridge made me put my gun away. Goodness me, that story-log is ashes! I'm afraid I've been too long-winded and you won't want me to come again."

"Yes, we will!" was the shouted response.

David went over and stood in front of the Old Hunter. His big brown eyes were wide and his small face grave. "Mister," said he earnestly, "was that every bit a really and truly true story?"

"Every bit," replied the Old Hunter gravely.

"Cross your heart?" asked the small boy.

"Cross my heart," replied the Old Hunter, and did so.

"I'm glad," said David with a sigh of satisfaction. "I like true stories. I hope you'll tell us another sometime."

"I will," promised the Old Hunter. "That is if the Storyteller invites me to come again."

"He will. We'll make him!" shouted Jimmy Andrews.

CHAPTER VI

THE OPENED EYES

A GREAT stone forms the doorstep of the Old House. Many feet through many years have worn it smooth. From it one steps directly into the long living room. Dusk had settled over the hills and was creeping across the meadows as the first of the children arrived for the story hour. They found the Storyteller on the doorstep looking down beyond one end and smiling at what he saw. With a sign he checked their too eager approach.

"What is it?" whispered Midge, tiptoeing forward.

"Pooh! It's nothing but an ol' hoppytoad!" exclaimed Billy scornfully. "Who wants to look at an ol' hoppytoad?"

"I think you will in a minute, Billy. Come over here by me where you can see better," said the Storyteller.

Billy obeyed and then for the first time really saw what was going on. Old Mr. Toad was trying his best to swallow a dinner that was trying its best not to be swallowed. It seemed as if it became unswallowed almost as fast as it was swallowed. Old Mr. Toad was trying to dine on a big earthworm. You know how an earthworm can stretch as if it were made of rubber. That is what this worm was doing. Old Mr. Toad had started to swallow it headfirst, whereby he showed he knew what he was about. The worm was stretching backward, trying in this way to pull itself out of Mr. Toad's mouth. Mr. Toad was using both hands to try to stuff the worm far enough into his mouth to be swallowed.

It was a funny contest to watch, and the children shouted in glee as Old Mr. Toad rolled his beautiful golden eyes up at them in the most beseeching manner as if begging them to come to his aid, all the time pushing that slippery worm in, first with one hand, then the other, and doing his best to gulp down all that was far enough in to be swallowed.

"Why doesn't he bite that worm and swallow him in pieces?" demanded practical Billy.

"Because," replied the Storyteller, "a toad has no teeth. He must swallow a worm whole or not at all. I doubt, Billy, if you know one end of an earthworm from the other, but Old Mr. Toad does, and when he starts to dine on one he always takes it in headfirst. I suppose you think that an earthworm is perfectly smooth, but it isn't. Along its entire length are four rows of tiny spines that point backward. So if Old Mr. Toad had started to swallow this worm tail first he would have had a more difficult and far more unpleasant job than he has now."

"I think toads are horrid," declared Rosemary. "What good are they, anyway?"

Just then a rabbit hopped out from some shrubbery and sat up to stare at the group. Jean spied him. "There's Peter Rabbit!" she cried, whereupon Peter promptly turned and scampered back whence he had come, so that the others got little more than a glimpse of his white tail bobbing out of sight in the bushes.

When they looked back at Old Mr. Toad he was opening and shutting his big mouth as if in relief at having a tough job over with. From one corner of his mouth hung the limp tail of the worm. Brother, David and Nancy, the last to arrive, came running up quite out

of breath. A few minutes later the children were in their favorite seats around the fireplace and Jean had placed her story-log on the fire. In silence they waited for the log to begin to burn, and this time the Storyteller did not ask what or of whom the story should be.

"Rosemary's question as to what good toads are, and the glimpse we had of Peter Rabbit, have reminded me of how Peter once had his eyes opened. Perhaps if I tell you the story Rosemary's eyes and the eyes of some of the rest of you may be opened too," began the Storyteller at the first flicker of yellow flame from under the story-log.

"It happened that Peter was in a hurry. He was in a great hurry."

"And he ran lipperty-lipperty-lip," cried Willis the irrepressible.

"Of course. How else could he run?" replied the Storyteller, looking very hard at the small boy, who appeared to suddenly find something of great interest in the fire.

"You see, Farmer Brown's boy had just chased him out of the garden and Peter wasn't quite sure that Bowser the Hound wasn't with Farmer Brown's boy," the Storyteller continued after a brief pause. "If Bowser was somewhere about it would be unwise, very unwise, to stay too near that garden. So Peter was in a hurry. People found in places where they have no business to be usually are in a hurry when they leave. Perhaps you have noticed that.

"So in the dusk of early evening Peter scampered as fast as he could go down the Crooked Little Path. Being in such a hurry he was heedless. People in a hurry have a way of being heedless, and Peter is inclined to be heedless anyway. You see he is a happy-go-lucky sort of scamp. Perhaps, too, the fact that he was looking back to see if he was being chased had something to do with what followed. Anyway he ran right smack into Old Mr. Toad and knocked him over on his back.

"Of course Peter stopped. He first made sure that he wasn't being followed. Then he turned to Old Mr. Toad. 'Excuse me,' said Peter, 'I didn't see you at all.' Then he began to laugh. 'Ha, ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho, ho!' laughed Peter. You see Old Mr. Toad flat on his back was having a dreadful time trying to turn over to get on his feet. He was awkward. He was clumsy. As he kicked and struggled he looked very funny, very funny indeed.

"At last Old Mr. Toad regained his feet. He was so indignant that for a minute or two he couldn't find his voice. All he could do was to swell up with indignation.

" 'What do you mean, you long-legged bunch of heedlessness?' he sputtered at last. 'What are you laughing at? I don't see anything to laugh at.'

" 'That is because you couldn't see yourself,' retorted Peter, his eyes filled with tears of mirth. 'You looked too funny for words.' Then he tried to make his face sober as he added: 'I'm sorry, Mr. Toad. Truly I am. I didn't knock you over purposely. You were right in my way and I didn't see you at all. If you had hopped out of my way it wouldn't have happened.'

"By this time Old Mr. Toad was so swelled out with indignation that he looked to be in danger of bursting his coat. Peter had hard work to keep from laughing again. Old Mr. Toad spoke. 'Why should I have hopped out of your way? Do you own the Crooked Little Path? Haven't I just as much right on it as you? Why should I have hopped out of your way? Tell me that,' cried Old Mr. Toad angrily.

" 'For your own good,' chuckled Peter. 'I'm ever so much bigger and stronger than you and—'

" 'How does that give you any more right on the Crooked Little Path than I have?' interrupted Old Mr. Toad. Without waiting for a reply, which was just as well for Peter, he continued. 'The trouble with a lot of big people is that they think that size and strength give them a lot of rights that smaller folks don't have; that they can do just as they please regardless of others not big enough to stop them; that just because it happens that they are big they are more important than their smaller neighbors. So they do as they please and sometimes actually fool themselves into believing that it is right and proper. Huh! A pretty place the Great World would be if that were true! Huh! Let me tell you, Peter Rabbit, some folks are not half so important as some of those they look down on.'

" 'Meaning that you are more important than I?' asked Peter, and chuckled at the thought.

" 'I didn't say so,' snapped Old Mr. Toad. 'But I do say that I have just the same right on the Crooked Little Path that you have. If you had given me half a chance I would have stepped aside for you to pass. But just because you were thinking of no one but yourself you paid no heed to your steps and knocked me over. Then you thought it a great joke. Tell me this, Peter Rabbit: What do you do in the Great World to make it a better place wherein to live?'

" 'Why—why—' began Peter, scratching a long ear with a long hind foot, and paused. 'Why—' he began again. Then, because he couldn't answer the question to his own satisfaction, he lost his temper. 'Why you little bowlegged, homely, bigmouthed, popeyed, warty runt, I certainly do as much good in the Great World as you do!' he snapped.

"Instead of becoming angrier Old Mr. Toad suddenly chuckled. 'That isn't what I asked you,' said he. 'I haven't said that you don't do as much good as I do. Instead of answering my question you call me bowlegged, homely, bigmouthed, popeyed and warty. I am all of those things, but that isn't my fault; I was made that way. But what have looks to do with doing such good as I can? There's nothing beautiful about me, but—'

"Just then Old Mr. Toad turned his head and Peter for the first time looked full into his eyes. He gave a little gasp of surprise and pleasure. He discovered that—"

"I know!" interrupted little Mary eagerly. "Those eyes were golden and very, very beautiful."

The Storyteller smiled. "Yes, Mary," said he. "That is just what Peter discovered. There was the glint of pure gold in the eyes of homely Old Mr. Toad. 'I—I—I apologize for what I said, Mr. Toad. Your eyes are lovely. They are wonderful. I never really saw them before,' said Peter.

"Old Mr. Toad chuckled way down in his throat. It was plain that he was pleased. 'If you really look for it you usually can find something beautiful in the homeliest person,' said he dryly. Then he added: 'You've been up in Farmer Brown's garden.'

" 'How do you know that?' exclaimed Peter in surprise.

" 'You left in such a hurry that you didn't finish that last lettuce leaf; a bit of it is hanging from a corner of your mouth now,' retorted Old Mr. Toad, and added: 'I was on the way up there myself.'

" 'Well then you better change your mind and keep away from there. Farmer Brown's boy has just chased me out of there. You are so slow you wouldn't have any chance at all if he should get after you,' replied Peter.

" 'Farmer Brown's boy won't chase me out of the garden; he'll be glad to have me there. I work for him every night,' was Old Mr. Toad's confident reply.

" 'You work for Farmer Brown's boy!' exclaimed Peter.

" 'Well,' Old Mr. Toad explained, 'of course I work for myself, but at the same time I work for him. I eat the insects and worms that would eat his plants. I get a good living and at the same time make it possible for those plants to live and grow. That is part of what I do, or try to do, to make the Great World a better place to live in. Farmer Brown's boy doesn't seem to care that I am bowlegged, homely—'

" 'Please forget I said that,' begged Peter, looking very much ashamed. 'I guess you are important, more important than I had any idea of. If a few minutes ago anyone had asked me of what use you were, I guess I would have said that you were of no use at all, just a common little person the Great World would never miss. Now I—I—well, I guess you are of more real use than I am, Mr. Toad.'

" 'Tut, tut, tut! I wouldn't say that,' replied Old Mr. Toad kindly. 'You see I don't know of what real use you are, just as you didn't know of what use I am, but I'm sure you have a place to fill in the Great World.'

"Peter shook his head. 'No,' said he a little sadly and very meekly. 'Come to think it over I guess I'm not of any use.'

" 'Nonsense!' retorted Old Mr. Toad. 'Everyone is of some use, or can be if he will be. Everybody loves you, Peter. It does the rest of us a lot of good just to see you hopping and skipping about having a good time. Without you something good would be missing from our lives. So you see you are of use in making us glad. Your trouble is that you are such a heedless, careless, happy-go-lucky fellow that you never stop to think. How many lettuce plants did you eat up there in Farmer Brown's garden?'

" 'Oh I just took two or three of the tenderest leaves out of several,' replied Peter carelessly.

" 'There you are!' cried Old Mr. Toad triumphantly. 'Instead of eating your fill from one plant you ruined several without gaining anything. Of course you hadn't any right to touch that lettuce at all.'

" 'Those are just plants, and I have just as much right to them as Farmer Brown's boy has,' declared Peter stoutly. 'Plants are for anyone who wants them.'

"Old Mr. Toad shook his head. 'Did you plant them? Have you watered and tended them and helped them to grow?' he asked. 'Farmer Brown's boy has done all those things,' he continued. 'But for him there wouldn't be any lettuce there. They are his plants and you have no right to them at all, not even the right of need, for you have plenty of sweet clover around the dear Old Briar-patch. But because you want some lettuce you help yourself without thought that you may be doing someone else a wrong.

" 'Selfishness, Peter. That's all that is the matter with you. It's all that is the matter with a lot of folks. Nobody can live for himself alone. It just can't be done. Everything we do affects someone else, just as your heedlessness upset me and my temper. You didn't mean to do it, but the result was the same as if you had meant to. When each does his part, getting what he rightly may for himself while helping others to get their share, the Great World will be a great place to live in. Yes indeed, the Great World will be a great place to live. Well, if I don't get up to that garden pretty soon the bugs will get all that you left. So

long, Peter. And Peter—’

“ ‘What?’ Peter asked meekly.

“ ‘Don’t forget that we common little people may not always be as unimportant as we look,’ said Old Mr. Toad with a twinkle in his golden eyes, and went off up the Crooked Little Path.

“Peter scratched a long ear with a long hind foot as he watched Old Mr. Toad slowly, awkwardly, hop up the Crooked Little Path. ‘Well,’ said Peter slowly, ‘Old Mr. Toad certainly has opened my eyes. Queer how one can see people all his life and never know them. I’m sorry that I knocked him over, yet glad too. If it hadn’t been for that I would still be as blind as before. Oh, but he was funny!’

“Peter stopped to chuckle over the memory of Old Mr. Toad on his back kicking. Then he became sober again. ‘All the same I do believe that he is of more importance in the Great World than I am even though he is so small and homely, but he won’t be long if I can help it,’ said he, talking to himself. Then he added: ‘It’s queer how everybody seems to be sort of hitched together whether they want to be or not. If I can’t be of use I’ll try to keep from being of harm anyway. And I’ll begin by keeping away from that garden.’

“With this wise resolution and a sigh at the memory of how good that lettuce had tasted, Peter started for the dear Old Briar-patch—”

“Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip,” chanted the chorus.

“To think things over,” concluded the Storyteller.

A moment of silence followed. The last ember of the story-log flared up and died out.

“I don’t think that Old Mr. Toad is horrid. I think he is a darling,” said Rosemary.

A few minutes later Old Mr. Toad, sitting in his snug home under the great doorstep, listened to the sound of many feet passing overhead. Then all was still.

Chapter VII

MRS. POSSUM'S BIG POCKET

The Storyteller was counting noses. "All here but Robert, Freddie and Jimmy," said he.

"And the story-log. There isn't any story-log!" cried Jean.

"And the story-log," agreed the Storyteller. "We can't have a story without a story-log. Who was to bring it this time?"

"Freddie. It is just like him to be late," said Midge.

The Storyteller held up a hand for silence. "Listen!" said he.

From outside came the sound of excited voices. Then the door burst open without the formality of a preceding knock and in rushed the three boys, all talking at once and Robert carrying something which he thrust forward to a chorus of shrieks from the girls as they hastily backed away.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. He's dead," said Robert scornfully.

"Zeb Carlton's dog killed it just as we were coming along," explained Jimmy.

"I seen him first!" cried Freddie.

"You what?" asked the Storyteller.

"I saw him first." Freddie looked a bit sheepish as he corrected himself. "He ran across the road ahead of us and—"

"That dog came busting out of the bushes right behind him," Robert broke in.

"Bursting, not busting, Robert," interposed the Storyteller mildly.

"Well anyway he came out, and he caught this fellow right on the other side of the road," said Robert.

"And killed him before we could get there!" cried Jimmy. "Just grabbed him and shook him to death. Robert and Freddie didn't know what he is, but I did. He's a 'possum, isn't he?"

"Yes, Jimmy, he's an opossum, the one we call Unc' Billy. Too bad you couldn't have saved him from that dog," replied the Storyteller. There was a twinkle in his eyes as he took the 'possum from Robert and laid him on a bench where all could get a better view of him.

The children crowded around. The little animal was on its side. The eyes were nearly closed. The mouth was slightly open and the lips drawn back, showing the teeth. It was as if he grinned at death. There was no evidence that he had been bitten by the dog. But then Jimmy had said that he had been shaken to death.

"Too bad. Too bad," said the Storyteller mournfully, trying to keep the twinkle from his eyes. "Look at that funny tail. It has no hair on it and it is prehensile."

"What's that?" asked Nancy.

"That means that it can be used to wrap around things, like a branch of a tree, and cling with. A monkey's tail is like that. It is very handy," explained the Storyteller. "By the way," he added, "the opossum belongs to a very ancient order of animals and is the

only representative of it in America. Members of this order are called marsupials, which means that the mothers have pockets wherein to carry their babies when very small."

"Then isn't the 'possum sort of a cousin to the kangaroo?" Frances asked.

The Storyteller laughed. "Not quite a cousin, Frances, but very distantly related in that both are members of the same order. Most of the living marsupials in the world are in Australia now. Freddie, did you bring the story-log?"

"Yes, sir. It's right here," replied Freddie, producing the log.

"Good!" replied the Storyteller. "I was afraid that in the excitement you might have dropped it. It is pretty warm in here so I am going to leave the door open a little while. I'll lay poor old Unc' Billy out on the doorstep. Jean, you can see him from where you sit. Just keep an eye on him to see that that dog doesn't come nosing about after him."

So Unc' Billy was placed on the doorstep, the story-log was put on the fire and the suggestion that Mrs. Possum's big pocket should be the subject of the story was agreed upon unanimously. The Storyteller began.

"Unc' Billy and Ol' Mrs. Possum had recently moved into that part of the Green Forest where Bobby Coon lived. He had met them but once or twice, not enough to feel really acquainted. Then one morning he met Ol' Mrs. Possum. Such a sight as she was! Little 'possums were clinging all over her. It isn't polite to stare at another person. Bobby knew this. Of course. Nothing is more impolite. But curiosity is heedless of politeness. Bobby never had seen such a sight before and he was curious. So now he stared. He was startled by a voice just behind him.

" 'Mo'ning, Brer Coon. Yo' seem to be taking a right smart lot of interest in mah family.'

"Bobby turned quickly. From the top of a neighboring stump Unc' Billy Possum was grinning at him. Bobby returned the grin, but it was a foolish sort of grin. He felt foolish. No one likes to be caught staring at another.

" 'Yo' act as if yo' never have seen mah chil'en befo'. What do yo' think of them?' Unc' Billy continued.

" 'They are a fine lot,' replied Bobby Coon promptly. 'I never have seen a finer lot of children. No, sir, I never have. They are a credit to you and Mrs. Possum.'

"Unc' Billy looked pleased. He was pleased. He grinned more than ever. 'Ah think so mahself. Ah don' wonder yo' want to watch them,' said he.

" 'It isn't just the children,' explained Bobby, then hesitated a bit. 'It—it—it's that big pocket their mother carries some of them in. I've never seen anything like that before. Excuse me, please, if I seem a little personal, but I've been wondering if you yourself have a pocket like that.'

"Unc' Billy laughed right out. 'What fo' should Ah have a pocket, Brer Coon?' he demanded.

" 'I don't know,' confessed Bobby and added: 'Mrs. Possum seems to find hers very handy.'

" 'Handiest pocket ever was—for her,' agreed Unc' Billy. 'She just couldn't get along without it, Ah reckon. It sho' is a handy pocket fo' Mrs. Possum. But Ah haven't any use fo' a pocket mahself. So Ah haven't one.'

“For a few minutes they watched Mrs. Possum and the children. The more Bobby Coon thought about that pocket the more curious about it he became. ‘Mrs. Possum is the only one here in the Green Forest with a pocket to carry children in, and I’m kind of wondering how it happens that no one else has such a handy pocket,’ said he finally.

“Unc’ Billy’s shrewd little eyes twinkled. ‘A lot of folks wonder the same thing, Brer Coon,’ said he. ‘Ah reckon the reason why we-all have that fam’ly pocket is because mah great-great-ever-so-great-grandmother, who lived ’way back in the days when the world was young, was the only one smart enough to think of toting her chil’en with her and asking fo’ something to help her do it. Yo’ know, Brer Coon, yo’ don’ get much in this world if yo’ are afraid to ask fo’ what yo’ want. A tied tongue never gets one much. Know what yo’ want and then ask fo’ it. That’s what mah great-great-ever-so-great-grandmother did.’

“ ‘Good!’ exclaimed Bobby Coon. ‘I’m glad you feel that way about it, Brother Possum. You see there is something that I want right now, and if I don’t get it, it won’t be for lack of asking. I want the story of Ol’ Mrs. Possum and her big pocket and how she came to think of such a handy thing. How about it, Brother Possum?’

“Unc’ Billy’s smile broadened. He began the story. ‘Way back—’ ”

A shriek from Jean interrupted. She jumped to her feet, upsetting a pan of popcorn, and ran for the door. “He’s gone! He’s gone! I saw him go!” she cried.

More corn was spilled as the others scrambled to their feet to crowd around the open door. The doorstep was empty. There was no sign of the dead opossum. The boys looked hurriedly in the shrubbery outside, but the search was in vain. All talked at once and poor Jean was blamed for not keeping a better watch, for all believed that a dog had carried Unc’ Billy off.

“The story-log will burn out before the story is finished if you don’t watch out,” called the Storyteller from his place by the fireside, which he had not left. “In your places, all of you! Jean is right. She did see that ’possum go. There was nothing the matter with him. He wasn’t even hurt. He was just playing a joke on all of you. He was pretending—pretending he was dead. Did I know it? Of course I knew it. That is why I put him out on the doorstep—to give him a chance to sneak away when he wasn’t being watched, or thought he wasn’t. Now you know what the phrase ‘playing ’possum’ means. Now let’s see, where was I with the story?”

“Unc’ Billy was just beginning to tell a story,” prompted Willis.

“Oh yes,” said the Storyteller, “ ‘ ’Way back in the beginning of things Ol’ Mother Nature started the first pair of ’possums out to make a place fo’ themselves in the Great World. They-all were smart, those two ’possums, just like we-uns to-day. Smartness is one of the things mah fam’ly always done pride itself on.’ Unc’ Billy grinned at Bobby Coon and Bobby nodded and grinned back.

“ ‘First off, right away, those two ’possums decided that what the Great World needed most was more ’possums, and that they-all would have a big family, which they-all did. We-uns feel the same way,’ said Unc’ Billy, looking over to where distracted Mrs. Possum was frantically trying to keep watch of ten lively little ’possums.

“ ‘But Ol’ Mammy Possum soon found that a lot of the helpless babies meant a lot mo’ work than she had reckoned on,’ continued Unc’ Billy. ‘When they were tiny and

helpless it didn't seem as if she could leave them a minute. But it was worse when those chil'en got big enough to find their laigs and what they were fo'. When she was away from home Ol' Mammy Possum didn't have one minute of peace fo' fear she wouldn't find all those chil'en when she got home again. First thing she did every time was to count noses. Ol' Mammy Possum done grow thin and thinner. She so worried she get mighty cross and snappy. Yes, suh, she do so.

" 'Once she try taking those chil'en along with her while she hunt fo' a breakfast. Wasn't any breakfast that mo'ning. No, suh, there wasn't any breakfast. Yo' see there were so many of those chil'en it take all her time to keep watch of all of them.

" 'When she get them all safely home she sit down to think. "It 'pears like Ah can't leave these chil'en at home and Ah can't take them with me," thought she. "Yet we-uns must eat. Ain't any way of living without eating that ever Ah heard tell of, and these chil'en am a powerful hungry lot. If there were only two or three Ah could get along, but with so many Ah done need eyes all over mah body to keep watch of them. If Ah had a bag to tote they-all in Ah might get along. Yes, suh, Ah might get along all right if Ah only had a bag to tote those chil'en in."

" 'Just then Ol' Mother Nature came along. Right away she saw how thin was Ol' Mammy Possum and how worried she look. "Yo' seem to have something on your mind, Mrs. Possum," she say.

" 'Ol' Mammy Possum she reply right off quick. She speak right up. Yes, suh, she speak right up. "Ah have," say Ol' Mammy Possum. "Ah have 'leven chil'en on mah mind."

" 'Ol' Mother Nature she laugh right out. "That cert'nly is enough fo' anyone to have on their mind," she say.

" ' "Yes'm," reply Ol' Mammy Possum, "it sho' is. Ah done wish Ah had 'em on mah back instead."

" ' "On your back!" exclaim Ol' Mother Nature. "What fo' do yo' wish yo' had them on your back?"

" ' "Yes'm," replied Mammy Possum. "Ah done wish Ah had a bag fo' to tote those chil'en in on mah back. It cert'nly would rest mah mind." Then she told Ol' Mother Nature all her troubles. "Couldn't yo' give me a bag fo' to tote those chil'en in?" she finished.

" 'Ol' Mother Nature she chuckle inside. She chuckle and chuckle inside, but on her face don't have so much as a smile. "You have mo' than your share of worries, Mrs. Possum," she say. "Yo' cert'nly have mo' than your share. It isn't right fo' anyone willing and trying to bring up such a big family to have to worry so much. A bag fo' to tote your chil'en in is an idea, quite an idea, but Ah would be afraid that some day yo' would fo'get the bag and lose your whole family. No, Ah wouldn't dare give you a bag."

" 'Ol' Mammy Possum she look dreadfully disappointed and Ol' Mother Nature speak up quick. "And so," says she, "instead of a bag to carry on your back Ah aim to give yo' a pocket, Mrs. Possum, a great big pocket which yo' can't leave lying around and fo'get. In it yo' can carry all your children while they are helpless, and as many as can get into it when they are bigger. The rest yo' can carry on your back. Then yo' can take all of them with yo' wherever yo' go."

“ ‘Ol’ Mother Nature was as good as her word and that big pocket has been in the family ever since. That is how it is that Mrs. Possum over there has that big pocket yo’ have been wondering about, Brer Coon.’

“Bobby thanked Unc’ Billy and presently went on about his business. And now it is high time for all of you children to get about your business, which is to get home and to bed. And if you meet Unc’ Billy Possum on the way don’t let him fool you.”

There was a scramble for hats and coats, shouted good nights, and a happy group disappeared up the road. From the roof of the Old House a sharp grinning face watched them out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII

TRUTH ABOUT REDDY

CORN was popping, marshmallows were toasting, and merry tongues were flying around the great fireplace. In a few minutes it would be time for the evening story. All but Jimmy Andrews were there and it was most important that he should be, for he was the one to bring the story-log. Some were beginning to get a little anxious.

"He'll be here," declared Brother. "I saw him this afternoon and he said he was going to bring a surprise. Perhaps it is the surprise that is keeping him."

Immediately there was a lot of speculation as to what the surprise would prove to be. In the midst of it Jimmy arrived and his freckled face wore a broad grin as he ushered in the Old Hunter.

"He wasn't going to come, but I made him," declared Jimmy when the shouts of greeting were over. "He said we wouldn't want an old fellow like him around, and anyway he didn't know any stories. Then he told me one of the best stories about Reddy Fox I've ever heard, a true story, and he's going to tell it again to-night. He knows all about foxes."

The Old Hunter looked embarrassed. "Sonny," said he, "nobody knows all about foxes and nobody ever will. Nobody knows all about any of our neighbors in fur and feathers, just as you and I don't know all about our human neighbors and never will."

"But our good friend here does know a *lot* about foxes," interposed the Storyteller, "and before the story-log burns out I hope the rest of us will know a lot more about them than we do at present. Now let's get organized."

The Old Hunter was escorted to the seat he had occupied one other story night, and he was plied with popcorn and marshmallows from all sides. Jimmy was just about to put the story-log on the fire when from outside the house came a scream so frightful that the startled boy dropped the log on his own toes. The others were no less startled, some of them thoroughly frightened, so that two or three of the girls clung together. Once more the frightful sound was heard, half scream, half screech, with something of a human quality yet wild and weird and uncanny, quite indescribable. Even the Storyteller looked disturbed and no little perplexed. The face of the Old Hunter alone remained serene. It even wore a look of amusement.

"What was that?" gasped Jimmy.

"Say, Mister, was that a panther?" asked Robert, and his voice quavered a little.

The Old Hunter shook his head and smiled. That smile was reassuring. "No, son," said he. "Panthers—painters my dad used to call them—have been gone from these parts for more than fifty years. Besides, panthers don't scream like that. No panther who ever lived ever screamed like that."

"Maybe it was a wild man," whispered David, who had crept close to the old man's knee.

Again a shake of the head. "There are no wild men around here, laddie, not even a

crazy man lost in the woods, so don't you worry about that," was the comforting reply.

"Which means," said the Storyteller, "that you are going to tell us that it was just a wildcat, a Bobcat as it is called, and that even so there is nothing to fear, for one of those big pussies, fierce as they look and sound, will not unprovoked attack human beings."

The Old Hunter chuckled. "You're just as good a guesser as these youngsters and no better, Mr. Storyteller," said he. "That was Reddy Fox."

"What?" came a chorus of unbelief.

"Fact," chuckled the Old Hunter. "Reddy must have known we were talking about him and decided to show us what he can do when he sets out to. That was Reddy doing that screeching. I've known the old rascal to keep a whole neighborhood terrified for a week or two so that women and children wouldn't go out after dark, doors were kept locked and men carried guns. It is a terrible sound. Comparatively few folks ever have heard it, and most of those who have refuse to believe that a fox could possibly make it. I'll never forget the first time I heard it. Scared me so it is a wonder I didn't jump right out of my boots.

"I was a young feller then. One night in late summer I went out with an old fox hunter to give his hounds a run. We were sitting on some logs not far from a fox den. Suddenly from right close by came the most awful screech, just the same sound you heard to-night. My hair stood right on end I was so scared. It was repeated several times and the maker of it seemed to be circling that den. Finally the hounds took after the critter and we heard no more screams. Then the hunter explained that it was an old fox trying to get the dogs away from the den. I wouldn't have blamed them any if they had skedaddled home as fast as they could go. Since then I have heard that scream several times and have watched a fox scream. I don't blame anybody hearing it for the first time, and not knowing the cause, for being scared half to death."

"Now you have explained the matter, I recall having read about this terrifying scream of a fox," said the Storyteller. "A noted naturalist says that this scream of the fox probably is the most sinister, unearthly wild animal note that can be heard in America. I guess we all agree with him. Now Jimmy, get that log on the fire and tell us what you want to hear about."

"He knows," replied Jimmy, nodding toward the Old Hunter. "Fox stories. Tell us that one you told me this afternoon 'bout the fox that gave the hounds the run-around."

David put a hand on the Old Hunter's knee and looked up in the kindly weather-beaten face. "Are these going to be true stories?" he asked.

"Absolutely true," replied the Old Hunter gravely.

"I'm glad," said the small boy with a happy sigh. "I like true stories."

"All set!" cried the Storyteller as the log began to burn.

"Sometimes," began the Old Hunter, "I hear folks say, as if they knew all about it, that animals are governed wholly by instinct; that they don't think. I never heard a fox hunter, or anyone who really knows foxes, say that though. They know better; they've been fooled too many times to believe a fox doesn't think. I tell you it takes a smart man to outthink one of those wise old redcoats.

"There was the fox that gave two dogs the run-around that Jimmy mentioned. Two good smart dogs they were too. I saw the whole performance. I was sitting at a window

that looked out on a road and, on the other side of the road, a big field fenced in by old-fashioned stone walls. A barred gateway gave entrance from the road. For half an hour or more I had heard the baying of a couple of hounds and knew that they were running a fox. Presently, way down the road, I spied a spot of red coming in my direction. It was the fox. The dogs were not in sight when Reddy reached the entrance to the field opposite the house. For an instant he paused to look back as he listened to the eager baying of the hounds. Then he turned, slipped under the bars and started straight down that field. Plainly he was in a hurry.

"He ran straight down the middle of the field. When he reached the wall at the end he turned left and ran along parallel with the wall to the corner. There he turned left again and ran up the field close to the wall on that side. Halfway up the field he turned left for the third time, and this headed him straight across the field. By this time I could see the dogs coming down the road in full cry. Reddy couldn't see them but he could hear them, and he put on an extra burst of speed.

"As he was headed he would cross the trail he had made going down the field. Just before he reached it he leaped. It was a beautiful running jump that carried him over and far beyond his old trail. It was the prettiest jump I've ever seen a fox make. Then he ran as if he had landed on a hot stove. A couple of seconds later he was up on the wall on the other side of the field. What do you think he did then?"

"I know!" cried Willis eagerly. "He ran along on top of the wall a little way and then jumped off as far as he could on the other side."

The Old Hunter smiled. "That's a pretty good guess, youngster," said he. "Yes, that's a pretty good guess. It is what most foxes would have done, but this one didn't. He stood an instant looking toward the entrance and listening to the dogs. Then he deliberately lay down on top of the wall and curled up with his big brush over his nose, but so that he could watch what went on in that field.

"There he lay right in plain sight as those two dogs slipped under the bars. Giving tongue as if they were trying to bay their heads off, they started down the field. The grass was a little damp and that fresh scent made a hot trail that their keen noses hadn't the least trouble in following. Straight down to the wall at the end they went. They turned there and at a gallop followed the trail to the corner, then turned up the field and overran the point at which Reddy had turned across. It didn't take them a minute to find their mistake and go yelping off on the right trail across the field straight toward where Reddy lay on the old wall.

"When they reached the place where Reddy had jumped of course the trail was broken. Now, as you all know, when a hunting dog of this kind loses a trail he begins to circle. He knows that by running in a circle with his nose to the ground he is almost certain to pick up that trail again somewhere. If it isn't found in a small circle a bigger one is tried.

"So these two began to circle, whining impatiently. They didn't look up. They had no time for looking around. Eyes wouldn't find that trail, but noses might. One nose did. At least it found the smell of fox and with an excited yelp away went that dog down the field on the old trail, the other dog after him. They were too excited for either to notice that it was an old trail that they had been over once. I saw Reddy lift his head a little to look and I could swear that he grinned. Then he put his nose back in his tail.

“Meanwhile the dogs kept on around the field until once more they came to the break in the trail where Reddy had jumped. The same thing happened as before. They circled. One found the old trail and started off on it. The other followed. The sun had come out and dried off the grass. The scent had become weak and was no longer easy to follow. The dogs kept losing it. By the time they were halfway around they had lost it altogether. They circled this way and that with an occasional whine of discouragement. Finally they gave it up, trotted up the field within less than forty feet of Reddy, and disappeared down the road.

“Then Reddy got to his feet, yawned, stretched, grinned as you have seen a dog grin when he is pleased, jumped down on the other side of the wall and disappeared in the woods. He had given those dogs a run-around as Jimmy calls it. Did that fox think?”

“Of course he did,” declared the Storyteller. “That is one of the best true fox stories I have ever heard. There is one thing about it I wish you would explain. How did Reddy know just when to jump to clear his old trail? He couldn’t see it, for there was nothing to see. He couldn’t smell it, for I take it that he wasn’t near enough for that. So how did he know when to jump?”

The Old Hunter shook his head. “I wish someone would tell me,” said he. “But then I have seen foxes do a lot of things just as puzzling as that. I tell you foxes are smart. They have to be. If they were not they never could have held their own against man as they have, what with the hunting and trapping of them. Yes, sir, they are smart. But once in a while one gets absent-minded just like human folks. I met up with one of these absent-minded fellows once and a chickadee saved his life.”

“How could a little bird like a chickadee save the life of a fox? Tell us,” begged Frances.

“He didn’t mean to,” chuckled the Old Hunter. “The chickadee didn’t know it, nor did the fox. But I did, and was I provoked? You see it was a big fox and I wanted his skin. Since then I have been mighty happy about what happened, but right at the time I was mad. You see it was before I had learned how very much more interesting our wild neighbors are alive than dead, how much more real pleasure we can get in watching them than in killing them.

“It happened in the fall. I was on a deer-hunting trip with some friends. There is little use in hunting deer in the middle of the day, so the first day in camp we decided merely to look around for likely places to hunt in the next morning. I took my rifle on the chance that I might get a shot. I was going down an old logging-road when I saw some bushes move just a little way ahead of me.

“I stopped, raised my rifle and waited. In about half a minute a fox came out from the bushes into the road and stood there broadside to me. He was a big fellow, one of the biggest foxes I’ve ever seen. And he certainly must have had something on his mind. He couldn’t smell me because the wind was the wrong way for that, but he forgot to use his eyes. He didn’t look in my direction. I already had my rifle at my shoulder and I stood perfectly still taking aim. Just then a chickadee flew down and alighted right on my gun barrel. As you know these little birds often are very tame. This is especially so up in the big woods.

“Well of course I couldn’t aim with a bird between my eyes and the sight on the end

of the gun barrel, so I began gently to move my gun a bit to try to scare the chickadee off. The fox caught that movement at once and in a flash disappeared."

"I'm glad!" cried Rosemary.

"So am I, but I wasn't then," replied the Old Hunter. "I learned something from that incident that I have never forgotten. It is that we are all more or less dependent on one another whether we know it or not. Not even a fox can live to himself alone. The one I have just told you about owed his life to that chickadee. By the way, did you ever hear of foxes playing golf?"

There was an instant chorus of unbelief that foxes ever played golf, and a warning from David that only true stories were to be told. The Old Hunter chuckled.

"I haven't said that foxes do play golf, have I?" he demanded. "Of course they don't, not the regular game of golf. But I knew of some that played with golf balls, and that's almost playing golf, isn't it?

"It happened on a golf course in Massachusetts. A pair of foxes made their den in a stone bunker on the edge of one of the fairways and in the spring they had a family of little foxes. These became so accustomed to the players that they paid almost no attention to them and would allow them to come within a few feet. As they became larger they found it great fun to chase golf balls. Often when they were playing outside the den just before dark, a ball would land near them. Then as it rolled they would chase it and the one who caught it would run away with it and hide it, so that to the golfer who had played it, it now became a lost ball. It was great fun for the foxes but sometimes quite upsetting to the players, especially when the game was an important one. Goodness, there goes the last spark of that story-log! I think we've had enough of foxes for one night, don't you?"

"No," replied David. "I'd like a lot more, Mister Hunter. I like true stories."

This time the Old Hunter got his hat and coat when the others got theirs. He had noticed certain fearful glances toward the darkness outside, and he knew that some of the smaller children had not yet fully recovered from the fright caused by those horrid screams earlier in the evening.

"Anybody goin' my way?" he asked in a jovial voice, and winked at the Storyteller as several hastened to say that they were.

CHAPTER IX

THE LONG LOOK AHEAD

"WHO brought the story-log to-night?" asked the Storyteller.

For a moment no one answered but a look of wonder yielded to a look of dismay on the eager faces around the great fireplace. In the beginning it had been agreed that no story-log would mean no story.

"Don't tell me," said the Storyteller, speaking severely, "that one of you has forgotten to bring that log!"

"No, sir," spoke up Brother. "None of us forgot. It was you who forgot. You didn't name anyone last time to bring a log to-night. Isn't that so?" he appealed to the others.

Now that they were reminded of it all agreed that it was so. The Storyteller pretended to look crestfallen. "That being the case it looks as if it is up to me to supply that log, doesn't it?" said he. "I tell you what, I have a very special log that I have been saving. I guess to-night is as good a time as any to burn it."

He left the room and presently returned with a log of the right size. It was a very ordinary looking log. There was nothing special about it that any of the children could see. Frances said so.

The Storyteller smiled. "It isn't anything about the log itself that makes it very special; it is because of the one who cut it," he explained.

"Who did?" asked Billy.

"Paddy the Beaver," replied the Storyteller.

There was an immediate stir of interest and Willis begged to take it in his hands. The log was passed around while the Storyteller told them how while he was on a fishing trip 'way up in the North Woods he had visited a beaver colony and had brought home this small log as a souvenir. He showed them at each end the marks of great cutting teeth, and explained how these busy animals cut down trees, trim them and then cut them up into convenient lengths, and do it all with their teeth.

"What do they want to do all that hard work for?" demanded Billy the practical.

"Food," replied the Storyteller. "This came out of the food-pile they were preparing for the winter."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Rosemary. "Do they eat trees?"

The Storyteller laughed. "Only the bark, my dear," said he. "But being unable to climb they have to cut down the trees in order to get the bark. In some ways beavers are the most remarkable people who wear fur. Certainly they are the most industrious. They are lumbermen, for they cut down trees. They are builders, for they build regular houses. They are engineers, for they plan and build dams to make ponds, and lay out and dig canals. They are thrifty, for they store up food. They are wise, for they plan for the future.

"But goodness me, it is high time for that log to be on the fire if we are to have a story to-night! I suppose a beaver log calls for a beaver story. Now that you have all examined it I'll put the log on the fire and we'll all join in the invocation. Then I'll tell you the story of

how Paddy the Beaver looked ahead."

Some of the children thought that log was too interesting to be burned, but when the Storyteller told them that he had another like it there were no further objections. So with proper ceremony the log was placed on the fire.

"Paddy the Beaver and his family had lived a long time in one place in the Green Forest," began the Storyteller. "They had a stout dam, a splendid pond and a fine house. Still there was a rumor that they were planning to leave these and move elsewhere, which would mean starting all over again. Jumper the Hare had heard this but hadn't believed it. Then one day he chanced to overhear Paddy and Mrs. Paddy talking. They didn't know he was about, so of course the proper thing for Jumper to have done would have been to have let them know he was there. You know it isn't nice to listen to other people when they have no idea that you are around. But Jumper didn't let them know. He just sat tight and pricked up his long ears.

" 'My dear,' said Paddy, 'do you realize that our food supply is getting short? We have cut all the aspen trees within a safe distance of our pond, and while there are enough willows to take us through the summer we must take a long look ahead and think of next winter. We must think for the children as well as for ourselves. I don't like the idea of moving. I don't for a fact. But we must eat.'

" 'I know,' replied Mrs. Paddy. 'I can't bear to think of moving any more than you can.'

"They swam away beyond hearing, but Jumper had heard enough. So that rumor was true after all. He looked around. It was a fact that all the favorite food trees of the Beavers near the water had been cut, and he knew that Paddy would not risk his own life, nor would he allow the members of his family to risk their lives, by going far from water. Thinking over what he had just heard Jumper was in no doubt at all that it was merely a question of a short time when that pond would know the Beaver family no more. He wondered where they would move to. Of course he told others what he had overheard, and soon it was generally accepted as fact that the Beavers were to move.

"So it was no surprise when a short time later Sammy Jay spread the word that he had seen Paddy and Mrs. Paddy far up the brook that fed their pond. Everybody jumped to the same conclusion—that the Beavers had left their home for good and were on their way to build a new home. Just as soon as he heard the news Jumper started for the place where Sammy Jay had seen Paddy and Mrs. Paddy. Jumper can travel fast when he gets the most out of those long legs of his. He traveled fast now. Somehow it didn't seem right to be going up the brook. He had thought all along that when the Beavers did move they would go down the brook, and to discover that they were far above their home pond was most surprising, so much so that Jumper quite forgot his manners and as soon as he could get his breath he blurted out:

" 'What are you doing 'way up here?'

" 'I might ask as much of you, Jumper,' replied Paddy mildly. 'In so far as I know I am attending strictly to my own business. Are you sure that you are doing as much?'

"Jumper looked a bit ashamed. Truth to tell he felt ashamed. The Beavers had as much right up there as anyone else, and what they were doing there was their own business and no concern of his. Right away he apologized.

“Paddy grinned. ‘That’s all right, Jumper,’ said he. ‘I understand. You are just bubbling over with curiosity and couldn’t keep it in. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Paddy and I are just looking ahead; that’s all. It had to be done, and now seemed to be as good a time as any. So here we are, just looking ahead. That’s what we are up here for.’

“Jumper sat up very straight and began looking in the direction Paddy seemed to be looking in. He didn’t know what he expected to see, but there must be something worth seeing to bring Paddy and Mrs. Paddy ’way up here just to look ahead. So Jumper stared straight ahead. After a bit a look of disappointment crept over his face. He didn’t see anything unusual, not a thing worth coming ’way up there to see. ‘Wha—what is it you see?’ he stammered.

“Paddy’s eyes twinkled. My, how they twinkled! ‘I see,’ said he, staring straight up the brook to where it was very small, ‘a pond, a big pond. It is very much bigger than our present pond.’

“ ‘Where?’ cried Jumper, sitting up a little straighter and staring up the brook. ‘I don’t see any pond.’

“Paddy continued just as if he hadn’t heard Jumper. ‘That pond is made by a dam, a long dam. It is the longest dam I ever have helped to build. I see aspen and poplar trees growing at the very edge of that pond, many of them. They are trees that once were too far from water for a beaver even to dream of cutting. I see a food-pile, a splendid food-pile, enough to last the Beaver family all winter, however long and cold it may be. I see the—’

“ ‘Wait a minute, Paddy! Wait a minute!’ Jumper cried. He was stretching as high as he could and his eyes looked as if they might pop out of his head. ‘It may be that you do see all of those things, but I don’t see even that pond yet. If it is as big as you say it is I ought to see it. I don’t believe you see it at all, so there!’

“ ‘But I told you that I am looking ahead,’ explained Paddy.

“ ‘So am I,’ retorted Jumper. ‘I’m looking ahead as far as I can, but I don’t see any pond.’

“Paddy began to laugh. Mrs. Paddy laughed too. They laughed and laughed.

“ ‘What’s the joke? I don’t see any joke any more than I see a pond,’ said Jumper crossly. He was beginning to lose his temper. He didn’t like being laughed at, and he had a feeling that he was the cause of that laughter.

“Paddy and Mrs. Paddy stopped laughing. ‘We beg your pardon, Jumper,’ said Paddy gravely, but still with a twinkle in his eyes. ‘I forgot that you cannot look ahead as we do. There isn’t any pond now. There isn’t any dam. There isn’t any food-pile.’

“ ‘Then why did you say that you could see them?’ demanded Jumper.

“ ‘Because I did see them. Now I see them again. I see them in my mind. It is with the eyes of the mind that one looks ahead and sees things that are not now but later will be,’ explained Paddy.

“ ‘How do you know they will be later?’ demanded Jumper suspiciously.

“ ‘Because when the time comes we ourselves will see to it that they are,’ replied Paddy.

“Jumper slowly scratched a long ear with a long hind foot, as he and his cousin Peter Rabbit have a way of doing when they are thinking. ‘You mean that—’

“ ‘I mean that we are going to build that dam, and the dam is going to make the pond, and the pond is going to be big enough so that the water will be right up to those aspens and poplars you can see over yonder way back from the brook, and we are going to cut those trees into food logs and float them down the pond and then down the brook to our present pond and put them in our food-pile there and—’

“ ‘Never mind the rest!’ interrupted Jumper in great excitement. ‘What I want to know right now is if that means that you and Mrs. Paddy and the children are not going to move away, but will continue to live right where you have been living all along. Is that what you mean, Paddy? Is it?’

“ ‘Of course,’ replied Paddy. ‘What else could I mean? We haven’t even thought of moving away. What put such an idea into your head?’

“Jumper looked rather ashamed as he told how he had overheard Paddy and Mrs. Paddy saying that they couldn’t bear to think of moving, but that their food supply was short and they must eat, and had taken this to mean that they were planning to move. He explained how all the neighbors believed that the Beavers had got to move. As he listened Paddy’s eyes twinkled. You see he had known all along about that rumor. It had come back to him more than once.

“ ‘That comes,’ said he, ‘of not leaving the business of other people to the ones whose business it is. Of course I wouldn’t expect a member of the Rabbit family to look ahead and work for the future, but if we Beavers didn’t do that we wouldn’t last long, I fear. Come over here by me.’

“Paddy led the way to a great mossy log way off to one side of the brook. ‘This,’ he explained, ‘is what one end of our new dam will rest against. Way over on the other side of the brook is a great rock. The other end of the dam will rest against that. With a dam as long as that will be we will have a pond three times as big as our present pond. Then it will be a long time before we have to worry about food again. Now I must stop talking and get to work. If we don’t get busy at once it will do us no good to look ahead. Come see us any time, Jumper, but don’t expect us to stop to talk.’

“Before winter came that year Jumper actually saw that dam, and that pond, and the trees being cut, and the food logs floated down, just as Paddy had described them that day when Jumper found him looking ahead.

“And now we’ll all take a look ahead so as not to be caught again without a story-log. Let me see, I think it must be Nancy’s turn to bring the log next time and to decide about whom the story shall be.”

“If you please, I don’t care who else it may be about if Peter Rabbit is in it, too,” said the little girl shyly.

The Storyteller laughed. “However would we get along without Peter Rabbit? All right, Nancy. You bring the log and I’ll try to find a story with Peter somewhere in it at least,” said he.

CHAPTER X

FUSSY FOLK

ONCE more it was story night and again the Old House echoed to the laughter and chatter of happy voices. “I see you didn’t forget to bring the story-log, Nancy,” said the Storyteller.

“No, sir. And I hope you didn’t forget about Peter Rabbit,” replied the little maid.

“I didn’t,” laughed the Storyteller. “In fact I couldn’t tell to-night’s story without Peter. I really couldn’t.”

“I know a piece about Peter Rabbit,” spoke up Jean.

“She made it up herself,” said Rosemary. “She likes to make up pieces.”

“Let’s hear it, Jean. I bet it’s good,” called Robert from the other side of the fireplace.

“Come on, Jean. I’ll eat your popcorn for you while you speak your piece,” teased Jimmy.

“Don’t you believe him, Jean. He won’t do anything of the kind, for we won’t let him. Go ahead and don’t worry about him,” said Frances.

“I’ll toast a marshmallow for you while you’re doing it,” offered Billy.

So after a little more teasing Jean entrusted her dish of popcorn to Frances, made sure that Billy was as good as his word about the marshmallow, and then recited the following:

“Peter Rabbit, tell us pray
Why you always run away.
Are you always in a fright?
Why is it your tail is white?

Peter Rabbit, won’t you stay?
Won’t you come with us and play?
We won’t hurt you, Peter dear.
What is it you always fear?

Peter Rabbit, must you go?
Peter, Peter, don’t you know
We have only love for you?
Love you dearly? Love you true?”

“Splendid, Jean! Splendid!” cried the Storyteller as Jean sat down amid enthusiastic applause. “I didn’t know we had a little poetess in our midst. After that Peter will just have to be in the story. All right, Nancy. Put the log on the fire.”

The log was carefully placed, the fire properly invoked to set the story free, and presently a little tongue of yellow flame licked at one end and the story began.

“Close upon the end of the day, just ahead of the Black Shadows, down the Lone Little Path through the Green Forest ran Peter Rabbit. As usual Peter was carefree, happy-

go-lucky, with no thought save for the present. You know Peter is one who gives no thought to the morrow and all too often forgets yesterday. To-day always is quite sufficient for Peter.

"Presently Peter came to the Laughing Brook. There he sat down to make up his mind. Peter always sits down when he has to make up his mind. He was undecided whether to go down the Laughing Brook to the Smiling Pool for a call on Grandfather Frog, or up the Laughing Brook to the pond of Paddy the Beaver. Indecision is one of Peter's chief faults. It is the cause of much of his seeming heedlessness and the trouble he gets into.

"This time the matter was decided for him. His attention was caught by a faint splash. He pricked up his long ears and listened. The sound was repeated. It came from a little way above where he was sitting. 'Someone is behind that big rock just around that bend in the Laughing Brook. I'll tiptoe up there and see who it is,' said Peter to himself.

"So Peter tiptoed along the bank, turned the bend, and peeped around the big rock. There on the edge of a little pool, a quiet, shallow little pool, sat a handsome fellow in a grayish coat. He was much bigger than Peter. Across his face was a broad band of black like a mask. He had a big tail and it was beautifully ringed with black."

"Was it Bobby Coon?" asked Billy eagerly.

"It was," replied the Storyteller. "That is just who it was. 'Hello, Bobby Coon!' cried Peter, hopping out from behind the big rock. 'What are you doing, playing in the water?'

"Bobby paused in what he was doing to look up and grin at Peter. 'Hello, Mr. Curiosity,' said he. 'No, I am not playing in the water. I am washing my food if you must know. I wouldn't enjoy my dinner if I didn't first wash it.'

"He reached into the water and felt around on the bottom of the pool. Presently he took out a clam. He opened the shell, took out the clam, dipped it in the water and carefully washed it, holding it in one hand while he lightly rubbed it with the other. Then he ate it with relish.

"In puzzled silence Peter watched. When the clam had disappeared and Bobby, still smacking his lips, reached for another Peter spoke. 'What,' he demanded, 'is the good of going to all that trouble? What if you should get a little sand in your mouth? It wouldn't hurt you. Often I have swallowed dirt with my clover, but it never has done me a bit of harm. You are fussy, Bobby Coon. That is what you are—fussy.'

"Bobby washed his hands. He opened another clam and washed it and ate it. He washed his hands again. 'Perhaps so, Peter. Perhaps so,' said he good-naturedly. 'I mean to be fussy about my food and personal habits. One can't be too particular in these matters. Sometimes I get a meal where there is no water handy. I never really enjoy such a meal. No, sir, I don't enjoy such a meal. If there is water anywhere near I always take my food to it and wash it before eating. In the first place it tastes better. I enjoy it more for knowing that it is clean. In the second place it is better for me. You can't make me believe that dirty food is good for anyone. Clean food and clean habits make for a long life, and I have a fancy to live to a ripe old age.' He grinned at Peter.

" 'Pooh!' said Peter, just like that. 'Pooh!'

" 'Pooh all you please, Peter,' retorted Bobby, washing his face carefully. 'Dirty people with dirty habits are likely to be sickly and have all sorts of things the matter with them. The other evening I was up by Farmer Brown's barn and saw Robber the Rat. Of all

the dirty, disreputable-looking fellows I ever have met he was the worst. His hair was falling out. Every other minute he scratched himself because he had some kind of skin trouble, or fleas were biting him. And it was all because of the way he lives. I doubt if he ever has taken a bath in his life. If a fellow is dirty he will soon lose the respect of his neighbors and be shunned by them. I may be fussy, Peter, but no one has yet had a chance to call me dirty.'

"All this time Bobby was brushing his coat and combing out his tail with the greatest care. Peter became aware of the rough appearance of his own coat. He remembered two burrs that had been entangled in it for three days because he thought it too much trouble to get them out. He was glad that he was sitting in the shadow where Bobby couldn't see how untidy he looked.

"Peter decided to change the subject. 'Have you seen Jerry Muskrat lately?' he asked.

"Bobby nodded. 'He is down the Laughing Brook a little way above the Smiling Pool working on a new home he is building in the bank,' replied he.

" 'I think I will pay him a call,' said Peter, eager for an excuse to leave. You see he was feeling uncomfortable. He couldn't forget those burrs in his coat. So he bade Bobby good-by and hastened down the Laughing Brook. As soon as he was sure he was out of sight he stopped and pulled those two burrs from his coat. Then he brushed it somewhat hastily, for he was in a hurry to find Jerry Muskrat and learn about that new house. As he scampered along he felt better. He felt better because of his increased self-respect which the pulling out of those burrs and the brushing of his coat had given him.

"He kept close to the edge of the bank, watching for Jerry in the water. He didn't expect to see him anywhere else unless he happened to be on the bank close to the water. So when a voice from back of him, and some little distance away from the water, said: 'Hello, Longears! Looking for someone?' Peter was so startled that he almost fell into the Laughing Brook.

"Peter turned hastily. There was Jerry Muskrat himself. He appeared to be fussing over a little pile of sticks. 'My, Jerry, how you startled me!' cried Peter.

" 'Sorry,' said Jerry, but he didn't look sorry. He was grinning too much for that.

" 'I didn't expect to find you 'way up here on the bank,' Peter explained. 'Bobby Coon told me you are building a new house, so I thought I would run over and pay you a call. What are you fussing around that pile of sticks for?'

"Jerry's eyes twinkled. 'I see you are as full of curiosity as ever, Peter,' said he. 'If I should ever meet you without two or three questions hanging on your tongue I should think something was the matter with you. What I am doing here really is no business of yours, but seeing that it is you I'll tell you. My new house is right under here and I am making sure that the hole I opened here right under this brush is so well covered that no one happening along here will suspect that I have a house down below.'

"Peter looked puzzled. He was puzzled. 'Did you make that hole?' he asked.

"Jerry nodded.

" 'Does it lead into your house?' Peter asked.

"Again Jerry nodded. 'Of course. Why else do you think I would have made it?'

" 'But you can't use it under all those sticks. What good is it if you can't use it?'

questioned Peter.

" 'Certainly I can use it, and shall use it,' retorted Jerry.

" 'That is foolish talk, Jerry Muskrat,' snapped Peter, for he was somewhat put out. 'Why, a mouse couldn't get in or out of that hole between all those sticks.'

" 'True enough, but air can,' replied Jerry.

"Peter sniffed. 'What has air got to do with it? Stop talking foolishness, Jerry Muskrat,' he snapped.

"Jerry looked at Peter and shook his head. 'Peter,' said he, 'the foolishness is all in your own head. I have as fine a bank house here as ever a Muskrat had. The entrance is under water in the bank of Laughing Brook. A long hall leads up to a fine bedroom. I expect to spend a great deal of time in it next winter. I shall sleep there a great deal. But the finest house in all the Great World wouldn't be worth living in if it were not healthful, and a house without fresh air is never healthful. If I had to keep using the same air over and over again I would become stupid at least. Very likely I would become sick after a while.

" 'But you don't catch Jerry Muskrat doing anything so foolish as that. No, sir! Not me! I dug a back hall with the entrance opening under this brush where it will not be noticed. If I had to I could get out this way despite the brush. Meanwhile I am sure of plenty of fresh air. These sticks hide the hole but they don't interfere with the air. I don't intend to shorten my life by breathing bad air. No, sir, I don't. Health is the most important thing anyone can have. The one who doesn't take care to keep well and fit doesn't deserve to live. And furthermore he has no place in a respectable neighborhood. Now if you will excuse me I'll go inside and finish some work that needs to be done there.'

"Of course Peter said he would excuse him. Jerry went to the edge of the bank, slid over into the water, dived and disappeared. He had gone down to that entrance under water. Peter sat for a few minutes, then decided to go home to the dear Old Briar-patch. There he settled himself in his favorite seat under a bramblebush and became lost in a brown study, which means that he was doing some heavy thinking.

" 'I believe they are right,' said he at last, speaking to no one but himself, for there was no one else there just then. 'Yes, sir, I believe they are right. Neatness and cleanliness make a mighty fine looking fellow of Bobby Coon, and Jerry Muskrat certainly thrives on fresh air. I don't know of anyone healthier than he. Hello, it is beginning to rain! I think I'll go out in the open and take a bath, a shower bath.' And Peter did just that."

"Is that all?" asked Willis as the Storyteller stopped talking.

The latter pointed to the fire. The story-log had disappeared. "That's all," said he.

Nancy sighed softly. "I hope dear Peter remembered what he had learned," said she.

"Let me bring the log next time," begged Willis, "and I want a story about wildcats."

"All right, Willis. You bring the log and I've got just the story for you, 'How Tufty the Lynx Got His Big Feet.' "

"But I want a story about a wildcat," protested Willis.

The Storyteller laughed. "That's what you'll get," said he. "A lynx is one kind of a wildcat. Jimmy, your uncle shot a Canada Lynx once. You see if you can find out the

difference between the Canada Lynx, which is the wildcat of the North, and the Bay Lynx, called Bobcat, which is the wildcat around here, and tell us just before we have the story next time. Now home with you all or mothers will be wanting to know where you are."

CHAPTER XI

THE STORY OF BIG FEET

ROUND-EYED, breathless, with a last fearful glance behind him, Willis reached the door of the Old House. Before he could knock the door opened and the Storyteller stood smiling down at him.

"My goodness, you must have been in a hurry," said he. "And you look as if you might have met one of those wildcats you wanted to hear about."

"Yes, sir. I guess I did," panted the small boy.

"Did what?" asked the astonished Storyteller.

"Met a wildcat back there in that little piece of woods I came through," asserted the small boy.

"Did you see him?" asked the Storyteller.

"No-o," confessed Willis somewhat reluctantly. Then in an effort to be wholly honest he added: "Maybe I didn't just *meet* him. I didn't see him, but he saw me all right. He hollered at me and it was awful. It was 'most as bad as that fox we heard the other night."

"And you dropped the story-log and ran," said the Storyteller, smiling.

The small boy's mouth fell open and hung so for a few seconds. In his fright and excitement he had completely forgotten the story-log. "I—I—I guess I did," he stammered. "I guess it is back there in the road. I—"

He was interrupted by a scream followed by a variety of sounds that were enough to frighten anyone not familiar with them, to say nothing of a small boy. And they came from that little strip of woods through which the road ran. Willis clutched the Storyteller's coat. "There!" he gasped. "What did I tell you? That ol' cat's still there."

The Storyteller laughed. "I suspected as much," said he. "That wasn't a wildcat, Willis, though I don't wonder that you thought it was. That was an owl, a Barred Owl, which is one of the big owls, but not quite so big as the Great Horned Owl. These fellows seem to make a specialty of frightful sounds. I guess they like to scare folks. I knew there was one around here for I have heard him in the night several times lately. It gets dark in that strip of woods sooner than outside, so that is probably why he happens to be there at this hour. Come on; we'll go back and get that log before the others arrive. It is lucky you were the first one, for now no one need know that you were scared by an owl. I was a lot bigger and older than you when I heard a Barred Owl for the first time, and I was so scared that it seemed to me that every hair on my head stood right up on end. I've known grown men to be just as badly scared. If you hadn't been scared, hearing it for the first time, I should have thought you were a queer boy."

Willis looked up at his companion gratefully. "I was scared all right," he admitted, "but now I know about him I bet that ol' owl won't scare me again."

The log was retrieved and they were back in the Old House before the first of the others arrived. With corn popper and toasting forks all were soon busy around the fireplace, and while he popped the corn Jimmy told what he had learned about the Canada

Lynx and the Bobcat.

"The Bobcat is a lynx too, the Bay Lynx, so that makes them own cousins," Jimmy explained. "The Canada Lynx lives in Canada and along the northern border of the United States and the Bobcat is found over a large part of the rest of the country clear 'way down to Florida. They look a lot alike, only the Canada Lynx is more gray and he has a tuft of long hair growing out of the tip of each ear, and longer chin whiskers, and usually is a little bigger, but not always, and has bigger feet and—"

"I'm glad you mentioned those feet, Jimmy. You'll know why by and by. By the way, there is one sure way of telling whether you are looking at a Canada Lynx or a Bobcat. I wonder if you found out what that is," said the Storyteller.

"I was just going to tell that when you—er—" Jimmy hesitated.

"When I interrupted," finished the Storyteller for him. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry. I apologize."

"That's all right, sir," said Jimmy hastily. "What I was going to say is that it is the tails that tell the difference. Neither one has anything to brag about in the way of a tail, not much more than a stub, but that's enough. The end of the tail of the Canada Lynx is black all the way around. The Bobcat's tail is black only on the upper side."

"That's it, Jimmy. It is a simple means of identification. Just remember it. Now, Willis, on with that story-log! That's it! Now somebody give me a nice brown marshmallow. Thank you, Rosemary." The Storyteller popped the marshmallow into his mouth and by the time he had eaten it the story-log had begun to burn.

"Whitefoot the Wood Mouse had just had a very narrow escape," he began. "My goodness, I should say so! If it had not been for a handy knothole through which he had slipped into a hollow log in the nick of time, he most certainly would have slipped down the throat of Yowler the Bobcat. Yowler sniffed at that knothole, spat angrily, and went on. This had happened just about daybreak. Whitefoot didn't so much as poke his nose out until broad daylight when he knew that Yowler, who does most of his hunting at night, would probably have gone home to spend the day.

"Whitefoot was sitting with just his head out of that knothole when along came Jumper the Hare. This was a sure sign that Yowler was no longer about and Whitefoot came wholly out. He told Jumper how he happened to be in that old log. 'Reddy Fox and Old Man Coyote are bad enough, but Yowler is worse. I hate him! He is just a big sneak!' he concluded.

"Jumper nodded in agreement. 'He is pretty bad,' said he, 'but you should be thankful that he is no worse.'

" 'He couldn't be worse,' declared Whitefoot. 'No one could be worse.'

" 'He isn't as bad as his cousin who lives in the Great Woods up north. It makes me shiver every time I think of that fellow,' declared Jumper.

" 'What cousin do you mean?' asked Whitefoot in his funny squeaky voice.

" 'Tufty the Lynx,' replied Jumper. 'You should be thankful, Whitefoot, that Tufty doesn't live around here, especially in winter.'

" 'I am,' declared Whitefoot promptly. 'But why winter especially?'

" 'Because of his big feet. They are much bigger than the feet of Yowler. It is those

big feet that make him so much worse in winter,' declared Jumper.

" 'I don't see how,' said Whitefoot. 'I don't see what difference the size of his feet could possibly make to you or me.'

" 'You would if you ever should see him get about on the snow,' responded Jumper. 'Just as I can travel about on snow that my cousin, Peter Rabbit, will break through although he is so much smaller and lighter than I, so Tufty the Lynx can travel over snow that his cousin, Yowler the Bobcat, would have to wade through. Big as he is he can walk on snow that Reddy Fox would break through. It is because of those big spreading feet covered with hair. In summer they are like big cushions and he can sneak about without making a sound. Old Mother Nature certainly was good to Tufty when she gave him those big feet, but she was rather hard on his small neighbors.'

" 'Then I don't see what she gave them to him for,' declared Whitefoot.

" 'Because he would have starved to death if she hadn't done something for him. If you would like to hear it I'll tell you the story,' replied Jumper.

"Of course Whitefoot wanted to hear the story. He settled himself comfortably on the log and forgot all about the fright he had had. Jumper sat up straight. He took a long look this way. He took a long look that way. Sure that all was safe he squatted down and began.

" 'Once upon a time long, long ago—' "

"When the world was young," cried Jean.

The Storyteller looked at her very hard and she became suddenly absorbed in watching the fire, while the others giggled.

" 'When the world was young,' " resumed the Storyteller, " 'Old Mother Nature started the first of the Lynx cousins out to make a place for themselves in the Great World. There were Mr. and Mrs. Bay Lynx, called Bobcat, and Mr. and Mrs. Canada Lynx. In those days they looked even more alike than they do now. They would have looked almost exactly alike had it not been for a difference in their tails.

" 'Now when Old Mother Nature started the Lynx cousins out in the Great World she decided that it would be best for them to have separate hunting grounds. So to Mr. and Mrs. Bobcat she gave the southern half of the land wherein to hunt and make a home. To Mr. and Mrs. Tufty she gave the northern half. The cousins found no fault with this. They were quite satisfied.

" 'All through that first summer Mr. and Mrs. Tufty wandered about in the land allotted to them, getting acquainted with it. They liked it. They liked the cool dim depths of the great evergreen forest. There was food in plenty. There was nothing to worry about. They were contented. They were happy. They grew big and sleek.

" 'Then, almost without warning it seemed, came the winter with snow and ice and bitter winds. It snowed and snowed and snowed. Deeper and deeper became the snow all over the land. Food became scarce and such as there was, was hard to find. Each day was worse than the day before. Tufty and Mrs. Tufty grew thin and thinner. They were hungry all the time. They could not sleep for the hunger that was unsatisfied. And it was all because of the snow and the difficulty they had in getting about in it to hunt. The first snow they had enjoyed. But as it grew deeper it constantly became more difficult to wade through. At last they could hardly get about at all. They could catch none of the smaller folk who, because they weighed so little, could run about on the snow. My great-great-

ever-so-great-grandfather had snowshoes like mine'—Jumper meant big spreading hairy feet—'and laughed at Tufty and Mrs. Tufty when they tried to catch him. It was no trouble at all to keep out of their way.

" 'It was about this time that the natures of those two big hungry cats changed. They became fierce and cruel. There would be days at a time when they had nothing at all to eat. Time and again they missed a good dinner because they could not move quickly enough in the snow. How they did hate it! It was then that they learned patience; learned to hide and wait for someone to come within leaping distance. Thus they caught enough to keep them alive, but never enough to begin to satisfy that dreadful gnawing hunger.

" 'Time and again it seemed hardly worthwhile to keep on trying to live, but they wouldn't give up. No, sir, they just wouldn't give up. Somehow, just how they never knew, they managed to live through that first winter. At last the snow melted and summer came. Once more they found plenty to eat, and they became sleek. Once more this homeland of theirs became beautiful to them and they loved it, and that love grew.

" 'But summers in the Northland are short. All too soon the leaves began to drop and the feathered folk began to leave. Then Mr. and Mrs. Tufty knew that they were facing another winter. They shivered when they remembered all that they had suffered during the first winter and when they thought of what they might have to suffer again.

" ' "I don't believe we can live through another winter like that," said Tufty.

" ' "I don't see but that we will have to," replied Mrs. Tufty.

" ' "We might journey down to the land of our cousins, the Bobcats," said Tufty.

" 'Mrs. Tufty shook her head. "I can't bear to think of it," said she. "This is our homeland up here and I love it. Besides it is a long, long journey to the land beyond the snows. I don't mind the cold, or wouldn't if we could get enough to eat. If only we could get about easily on the snow we could manage somehow. Perhaps there will not be so much snow this coming winter."

" ' "If there isn't but half as much we won't be a bit better off," grumbled Tufty dolefully.

" ' "If only we could keep from breaking down into the snow we would have some chance. It is having no chance that takes away all my courage."

" 'Now unknown to them they were overheard. It was Old Mother Nature who overheard them. She slipped away without being seen and went about her business, but all the time she was doing some quiet thinking. One day while they slept the snow came sifting down through the trees. Old Mother Nature visited them but did not waken them. When they did awake and came out of their den for the evening hunting, the snow lay deep on the ground. They looked at each other in dismay. Then without a word they started out. Almost at once they made an amazing discovery. They could walk on that snow! It had become somewhat packed by the wind and they could walk on it without breaking in at all!

" 'They couldn't understand it. No, sir, they couldn't understand it. Then Mrs. Tufty happened to look at Tufty's feet and her eyes opened very wide. Those feet were nearly twice as big as they had been. At least they looked to be. She glanced at her own feet. They were like Tufty's. She lifted a paw to look at it closely and discovered that it was covered with stiff hairs on the bottom. They had never been there before.

“Then Tufty and Mrs. Tufty knew that Old Mother Nature had not forgotten them in their need. And from that moment no thought of leaving their beloved Northland ever again entered their heads. Their children were given just such big feet and so it has been ever since. You may be thankful, as I am, Whitefoot, that it is Yowler the Bobcat who lives around here and not Tufty the Lynx.’

“Whitefoot sighed. ‘I suppose I should be,’ said he. ‘I *am* thankful. Goodness, I hope Old Mother Nature never will take it into her head to give Yowler big feet!’ ”

CHAPTER XII

THE HANDIEST TONGUE

FRANCES, the dreamer, had arrived early. She had brought the story-log, for it was her turn, and had come ahead of the others. All the children loved the Old House but none to quite the degree that did Frances. She loved to sit on the brow of Esker Hill looking down on the Old House and to weave romances around it. So she had come early that she might have time to go up the hill to watch the glow from the sun already set behind the Purple Hills, and from these the lengthening shadows reaching to take possession of the Old House.

So it was that, looking down on Laughing Brook where it all but touched the foot of the hill on one side, she saw the great buck come for his evening drink. In breathless delight she watched him drink, then stand for a few minutes listening. Presently with a toss of his beautiful head, as if satisfied, he disappeared, making his way without haste up the hill back of her. A moment later she heard voices coming down the road and knew that his keener ears had heard them first.

Eager to tell the Storyteller of what she had seen, she hurried down. He was on the doorstep and as he listened he smiled at her excitement. “You must come down early again, my dear,” said he. “Old Peaked-toes and I are old friends. He comes every night just about dusk. He is, I think, the most beautiful of all my neighbors, just as Old Mr. Toad, who also appears at dusk, is the homeliest of my neighbors. The latter has just come out to catch his dinner, and I’m quite sure you won’t agree with me when I say that of the two he is the most interesting.”

Frances shook her head in a most decided manner. “No,” said she, “I don’t agree with you at all. I think that deer is much more interesting.”

“I thought you would even if he hasn’t got a hind side before tongue,” was the mild reply.

“Well, who has?” demanded Frances.

“Old Mr. Toad,” replied the Storyteller. “It’s a mighty handy tongue—for him. I don’t suppose that kind of a tongue would be handy for you or me or that deer, but Mr. Toad couldn’t get along without it. Don’t you think a hind side before tongue is interesting?”

Frances laughed and made up a face. “I don’t know what you are talking about,” she declared.

“One of the most interesting tongues in the world even if it doesn’t tell tales—Old Mr. Toad’s tongue,” replied the Storyteller.

Was he joking? Frances looked at him very hard. His face wore not even a ghost of a smile, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. “You’re spoofing me. Whoever heard of a hind side before tongue?” said she.

For answer he took her by the arm and drew her close beside him on the big doorstep. “Watch him,” was all he said. He pointed to Old Mr. Toad just below them. He was stalking a big fly that had alighted just ahead of him. Slowly, with the greatest caution, he crept forward. When his nose was within about two inches of that fly he stopped.

“Where did that fly go?” asked Frances suddenly. She hadn’t seen it fly, but it was no longer there. Old Mr. Toad hadn’t moved, or if he had Frances had failed to see it, and she had been looking right at him. Somehow he didn’t appear disappointed over the disappearance of the fly he had stalked so carefully. Indeed, he seemed to have a satisfied air rather than one of disappointment. An ant started to cross just in front of him. The ant mysteriously vanished. Frances thought she had seen a flash of pink, but wasn’t sure. Old Mr. Toad cocked his head to one side. Another ant was coming. It was still a good two inches away when it, too, disappeared.

“It is a handy tongue, isn’t it?” said the Storyteller.

“Stop teasing me and tell me what it all means,” said Frances.

“If he didn’t carry it hind side before he couldn’t do that,” continued the Storyteller as if he hadn’t heard.

“If you don’t tell me what you are pretending to tell me I shall scream,” threatened Frances.

“Don’t do that!” protested the Storyteller. “Here comes the others and you might scare them. I tell you what it is, we’ll make that handy tongue the subject of to-night’s story and I’ll tell you how he happens to carry it hind side before. What do you say?”

Frances agreed and this is the story wherewith the Storyteller tried to prove that a homely person may be more interesting than a handsome one.

“Frances here thinks that I was spoofing her when I told her that Old Mr. Toad has a hind side before tongue, but I wasn’t. However, I will admit that it would be a little more accurate to say that he carries his tongue hind side before. That tongue has puzzled a lot of people including some of the friends who have known old Mr. Toad longest. Johnny Chuck was one of these. It seemed to him that every time he visited Farmer Brown’s garden Old Mr. Toad was there. Always he was very busy. In the first place slugs were doing their best to eat up the lettuce as fast as it appeared above ground. In the second place cutworms were trying to cut off every plant as soon as nicely started. In the third place worms and insects of many kinds appeared to be doing their best to ruin that garden.

“Now Old Mr. Toad had taken it upon himself to see that these little matters were attended to. He was working hard to rid the garden of all these pests, for he was very fond of that garden. He had made it his home for three years. Johnny often had watched Old Mr. Toad at work. Every time he came within a couple of inches of a slug or a worm or an insect it would disappear, but Johnny never could see just how it happened. So far as he could see Mr. Toad did nothing at all but sit there. But he swallowed each time, and sometimes smacked his lips. It seemed as if those slugs and worms and insects simply jumped down Mr. Toad’s throat. It was very mysterious. You know that, don’t you, Frances?”

“Yes, I know,” replied Frances, wrinkling her nose at the Storyteller, who merely smiled and continued with the story.

“Johnny Chuck sat watching Mr. Toad at work in the dusk and began to ask questions. Mr. Toad took no heed at all. He was too busy. It would soon be dark and he wanted to catch as many as possible of those slugs and worms and insects before dark.

“ ‘All right for you, Mr. Toad, if you can’t answer a few questions for a friend, an old friend like me, it is a pity. I’ll never speak to you again,’ said Johnny.

“Old Mr. Toad said nothing at all. He was too busy. But his beautiful golden eyes twinkled, and had he not been too busy swallowing a big slug he would have chuckled. He knew that Johnny would speak the very next time they met.

“Johnny went home in a huff. The next day he took it into his head to go over to the Smiling Pool. Long before he got there he heard a deep gruff voice chanting over and over: ‘Chuga-rum! Chuga-rum! Chuga-rum!’

“When Johnny reached the bank of the Smiling Pool there sat Grandfather Frog on his favorite big green lily pad leading the great chorus of the Smiling Pool. Johnny listened for a while. As he watched Grandfather Frog he was reminded of Old Mr. Toad and this in turn reminded him of what he wanted to know. During the first lull in the chorus Johnny spoke.

“ ‘Grandfather Frog, how does your cousin, Old Mr. Toad, catch his food?’ he inquired.

“ ‘What’s that?’ exclaimed Grandfather Frog. ‘Say that again.’

“Johnny explained how he had watched slugs and worms and insects disappear whenever Mr. Toad got near them. ‘He gets them into his throat somehow, for I see him swallow, but how does he do it?’

“ ‘Chuga-rum; that’s easy enough. He catches them with his handy hind side before tongue,’ explained Grandfather Frog.

“ ‘Hind side before tongue!’ exclaimed Johnny. ‘What kind of a tongue is that?’

“Grandfather Frog chuckled. ‘You may not call it that but I do,’ said he. ‘His tongue is rooted up in the very front of his mouth and the tip is down in his throat where the roots of an ordinary tongue would be. If that isn’t hind side before, what is? It certainly suits my cousin, Old Mr. Toad, and he gets along a great deal easier and more comfortably than did the first of all the Toads way back when the world was young.’

“ ‘Please, Grandfather Frog, please tell me what happened,’ begged Johnny Chuck.

“ ‘Chuga-rum! I suppose I’ll get no peace until I do,’ grumbled Grandfather Frog. ‘It isn’t much of a story but it does show how Old Mother Nature always has tried her best to give to each of her children those things which will best serve them and fit them to live in the Great World.

“ ‘It happened way back in the days when the world was young and the first of all the Toads was foolish enough to leave the water to live on land and started a habit which all Toads have been silly enough to follow ever since,’ said Grandfather Frog, who is rather scornful of his land-loving cousins. ‘At that time Mr. Toad didn’t have the handy tongue that my cousin of to-day has. His tongue was much the same as the tongue of other folks. When he started to catch flies and bugs on land he had a hard time of it. Worms he had little trouble with because they were slow-moving, but flies and other insects were another matter. All he could do was to steal as near as he could without frightening them and when near enough jump for them.

“ ‘Usually he missed. He was too slow and clumsy. It was discouraging. Still he kept at it. Sometimes he would see a fly or an ant on the trunk of a tree and would jump with all his might. Bang! Mr. Toad would bump his nose against the tree while the fly would sail away or the ant would dodge.

“ ‘Sometimes he would jump into holes he hadn’t seen. Sometimes he would

unexpectedly jump off a bank and land sprawling on his back with all the breath knocked out of him. Sometimes he would land in a pool of water and have to swim ashore. He was forever jumping into trouble.

" 'But he was a persistent fellow, was Mr. Toad. He wouldn't be discouraged. He was bound that he would learn to catch flies and other quick-moving insects. He was stubborn about it. The more he bumped his nose the harder he kept on trying. The oftener he jumped into trouble the more determined to succeed he became.

" 'One day, unseen by Mr. Toad, Old Mother Nature happened along and watched him try to catch flies. He bumped his nose. He fell on his back and flopped his legs in the funniest way as he tried to turn over. Old Mother Nature laughed until the tears came and Mr. Toad thought it was raining. But she didn't fail to notice that in spite of all Mr. Toad kept right on trying.

" 'By and by Mr. Toad had to rest. The sun was warm so he found a shady place and settled himself for a nap. When he was sound asleep Old Mother Nature approached and gently opened his mouth. She took out his tongue. She replaced it so that it was fastened at the very front of his mouth. She folded it over so that the tip was in his throat. The last thing she did was to make that tongue very sticky. When Mr. Toad awoke the first thing he saw was a fly just about two inches from his nose. He was making ready to jump for it when Old Mother Nature spoke.

" ' "Just try darting your tongue out at that fly," said she softly.

" 'Of course Mr. Toad did as he was told to do, as does everyone when Old Mother Nature speaks. He was the most surprised fellow in all the Great World when the tip of his tongue just touched that fly and the fly stuck to it. He drew back his tongue in a hurry. It just naturally folded over and there was that fly at just the right place for swallowing.

" ' "It is the reward of patience and persistence and it shall be yours and for those who come after you as long as good use is made of it," said Old Mother Nature. So ever since then every Toad has had just such a tongue. Now you know how my cousin, Old Mr. Toad, catches the slugs and the worms and the flies in Farmer Brown's garden.' "

Just then with a final flicker the last of the story-log crumbled to ashes. The Storyteller looked over at Frances. "Now what do you think, my dear?" he asked.

"I think that a homely person may be more interesting that a handsome one, but I'm glad I saw that deer."

"So am I," replied the Storyteller.

CHAPTER XIII

IT REALLY HAPPENED

"I WISH the Old Hunter would come again and tell us another true story," said David as the children gathered around the fireplace for the story hour.

"And I wish that my wishes would come true as quickly as yours has," said Frances as the latch clicked, the door opened and the Old Hunter entered.

He was greeted with shouts of welcome, escorted to what the children were pleased to call "his seat" and deluged with offers to toast marshmallows for him. David moved over so as to sit beside him.

"Timmy and I thought we would just drop in to listen to-night," said the Old Hunter apologetically. "We don't aim to bother you none at all."

Instantly he was assured most emphatically that this was impossible, that he would have to tell a story, that they didn't see why he didn't come oftener; that they were always going to keep that special seat for him. In the midst of the hubbub Willis asked:

"Who is Timmy?"

"That's so!" exclaimed Brother. "You said something about Timmy. Who is he anyway?"

The Old Hunter smiled. He slipped a hand into a pocket and took out a little ball of fur which promptly unrolled and amid little squeals and cries of excitement ran up his arm to his shoulder from where he stared somewhat uncertainly with big soft black eyes at the eager faces that came crowding about.

"I know what he is! He's a flying squirrel!" cried Robert, as one possessing superior knowledge.

The Old Hunter nodded. "That's right, son," said he.

"I wish he would fly," said Jean. "Can't you make him fly?"

"He can't fly," said Robert scornfully. "He just jumps and glides. No animals but bats can truly fly."

Just then the little squirrel jumped, seemed to flatten out, glided down to the bottom of a window curtain, ran up it and from this greater height took off and glided the whole length of the room, landing on the bottom of a coat hanging there. Without pause he ran up this and took off again, this time to a knee of the Old Hunter, then ran up and disappeared in the pocket from which he had been taken. There were many "ahs" and "ohs" and some begging that he be taken out again. Two or three wanted to hold him.

The Old Hunter shook his head. "We won't disturb him any more just now," said he. "Timmy isn't used to a lot of company and is a little bashful. He's naturally timid. I don't suppose there is any animal any more timid than one of these little squirrels. Yet one of the bravest things I've ever seen done was done by a flying squirrel."

"Tell us about it! Tell us! Tell us!" begged his listeners.

"Was it a braver deed than the one you told us about when the big buck saved the doe by getting between her and the dogs that were chasing her?" Jimmy asked.

“Yes,” replied the Old Hunter, “I think it was. I sure would be glad to tell you the story and let you judge for yourselves, but I don’t just see how I can. I don’t see any story-log on that fire and I’ve been sort of given to understand that without one of these here special logs burning there can’t be any storytelling.”

At this broad hint Brother hastily produced the log he had brought and with proper ceremony placed it on the fire.

“It’s going to be a true story, something that really happened, isn’t it?” asked David.

“Yes, David, it really happened. Cross my heart,” said the Old Hunter solemnly, and crossed his heart.

“I’ve seen many brave deeds by animals and birds,” began the Old Hunter. “Yes, I’ve seen many of them, deeds as brave as anything human beings have ever done. That buck I told you about was brave. It took real courage to do what he did. But it took even more courage for the little flying squirrel I am going to tell you about to do what she did. Those of you children who have been over to my place know that I have a lot of birdhouses up all around the place. Now you all know that birdhouses should be cleaned out in the fall so as to be ready for early arrivals in the spring. Well, last fall I was so busy that I didn’t get around to cleaning out some of those houses. Fact is I was late in getting around to doing it this spring. I remembered that last year bluebirds used one of these houses for a second nesting. I thought perhaps they might do it again this year, so one morning I went to clean this house out for them.

“I got my stepladder and climbed up to open the house. It opened from the bottom by means of screws. When the bottom was out some of the nesting material fell to the ground. I should have noticed that stuff then, an old woodsman like me. I should have seen that it was not the usual material of a bluebird’s nest. But I didn’t. I reached in and pulled out the rest of the nest and dropped it to the ground. Then I went down and began to pull the nest apart to see if there was anything in it. There was. What do you think I found?”

“Some eggs,” guessed Billy.

“A baby bird,” cried Rosemary.

The Old Hunter shook his head. “Wrong, both of you,” said he. “It was—”

“I know!” cried David, jumping to his feet. “It was a baby squirrel!”

“Now how did you know that?” asked the Old Hunter, and the smile wrinkles were all about his eyes. Then without waiting for an answer he continued. “You are just one-third right, young man, just one-third right. There were three baby squirrels, baby flying squirrels, helpless, squirming little mites that didn’t yet have their eyes open. Did I feel bad? Say, I never was more sorry for anything in my life.

“I was just going to put the babies down and try to put that nest back when there was a little thump right near the foot of that tree. I looked down and there was the mother of those babies looking up at me with such fear and pleading in her big soft eyes that it gave me a funny feeling. I guess you know how it is when you have a sort of catch in your throat. She jumped to the ground, grabbed a mouthful of that nesting stuff, ran clear to the top of the tree, jumped and sailed down to the foot of a big hickory tree a good fifty feet away. I measured the distance afterward.

“She just sort of slid down on the air just like she was coasting. She landed on the foot

of that tree, ran up near the top and took off again. She sure was pretty to watch. This time she landed on the trunk of a great big elm tree. She sort of shot upward a little just as she was almost to the tree and landed on it about four feet above the ground. She didn't wait a second. Up this tree she ran and I wondered where she would jump to next.

"Well, she didn't jump. No, sir, she didn't jump. Two-thirds the way up that tree was a dead limb. In it was a woodpecker's hole, an old one that hadn't been used so far as I knew for three or four years. She disappeared in this. In less than a minute she popped out again and started on up that tree. There was nothing in her mouth now.

"All this time I had been trying to get that nest back in the box. I figured that if I got that back in I could drop the babies in through the entrance hole. I had the babies in my hand and was just going to start up the stepladder when keplunk! something hit the trunk of that tree right alongside of me. It was Mother Squirrel. She hadn't come back the way she went, in fifty-foot jumps. She had climbed to the top of that elm and sailed down in one grand jump of over a hundred feet."

"Some jump!" exclaimed Jimmy, with a low whistle of amazement.

"You might call it that," said the Old Hunter. "Anyway, there she was right beside me looking at me in the most beseeching manner. Scared? She was scared almost to death. I could see her sides going in and out from the beating of her heart. There she was within arm's reach of this huge giant and there she stayed. That took courage, real honest-to-goodness courage.

"Slowly, so she wouldn't be any more frightened than she already was, I reached my hand containing the babies toward her. When it was near enough she put her two hands on mine, give me a sort of pleading look, then reached over, took one of those babies in her mouth and turned back up that tree. Instead of taking that baby into the old home in the birdhouse as I kind of hoped she would, she kept on up the tree, made that fifty-foot jump to the hickory, climbed that and took off again for the elm, all the time carrying that baby. She carried it up to that dead limb and into that hole I told you about. Two minutes later she came sailing down from the top of that elm. Keplunk, she landed right where she had landed before.

"Didn't seem to me right that that poor little mother should be scared any more than necessary, so I had put the two remaining babies in a little of that nest and put 'em on the top step of the ladder and gone off far enough to ease that little mother's heart somewhat. One at a time she took the two babies just as she had the first one up to that new home in the elm tree. Later she came and took more nesting stuff out of that birdhouse. In fact by the next day she had carried all of it off to the new home."

The Old Hunter ceased speaking and for a long moment stared into the fire. When he spoke again it was in a low voice as if he were talking to himself. "Yes," said he, "that was, I think, the bravest deed I ever witnessed."

Chapter XIV

THE FOX AND THE SEAL

It was apple night in the Old House. There was no popcorn. There were no marshmallows —only apples. They were floating, big red-cheeked fellows, in a tub of water on the floor in the center of the big room. They were hanging, great golden globes, by strings of various lengths from the huge beams, where they swung back and forth in the most provoking and tempting manner whenever they were touched, and it seemed that every boy or girl who passed near one just had to reach out and touch it. On a big sheet of paper tacked to the wall written in big lettering was a verse.

There was a lot of giggling and anticipatory excitement while waiting for the last arrivals. One or two knew what was coming, but the others could only guess. When at last the Storyteller had counted noses and found all present he explained what was to be done.

"There are two apples for each of you to be eaten while the story-log burns and the story is told, but first you must get the apples and you must get them with your teeth and nothing else. Notice that these hanging apples are on strings of different lengths. Those on the longest strings are for the shortest folks and those on the shorter strings are for the taller ones. Now each of you find the apple that you think is meant for you, but don't touch it."

Amid much laughter and shuffling about, the apples were selected. "Now," said the Storyteller, "put your hands behind your backs and keep them there. All of you can read that verse over there. When I give the word you will all repeat it together. Afterward when I say *go* try to get your apple by biting into it with your teeth. Then hold it until I cut the string. Remember to keep your hands behind your backs. Now then, all ready for the verse."

The Storyteller started it and all promptly joined in.

"Apple, apple, hanging there,
Treat me kindly; treat me fair.
Luck I beg that you will bring,
Golden apple on a string."

"Go!" cried the Storyteller.

Amid squeals and shouts of laughter the battle of the apples began. In the most exasperating manner the apples would spin and twirl and swing away only to swing back and bump unwary noses. It was exciting. It was fun. The Old House rang with shouts and laughter. For a time it looked as if no one was to have an apple. Then Jean's sharp teeth bit into hers and held. The Storyteller's knife flashed and the string was cut. Then Robert got his. So, one by one, the apples were cut down until only Billy's was left swinging and dodging in the most tantalizing way. Someone remembered that two of Billy's front teeth were missing, and it was unanimously voted that in view of this handicap and his persistent efforts he was entitled to his apple.

Bobbing for the red apples followed. Towels were brought forth, for there were bound

to be wet faces, and then the children gathered around the tub. Three at a time they tried to sink their teeth into those exasperating apples that would bob under at the lightest touch, those looking on shouting encouragement while awaiting their turns. This time it was Nancy who was first.

When all had secured their apples the tub was removed, the story-log was laid on the fire, and, while the children ate the apples they had worked so hard for, the story of the queer feet was told.

"A certain fox had taken up his abode in an old brush-grown pasture not far from the seashore. One moonlit night he happened to wander over on the beach and there he found a fish that had been washed up by the tide. It was good eating. After that he often went over to the beach at night. Many strange things were to be found there and always he was sure of something to eat. Usually he had the beach to himself.

"One night he stayed so long that he decided not to go back to his home in the old pasture. He had found a comfortable place among the sand dunes where he was sure he would not be disturbed, so instead of hurrying home as usual at the first hint that jolly, round, bright Mr. Sun was about to begin his daily climb up in the blue, blue sky, the fox lingered on the beach.

"It was the first time he ever had seen Mr. Sun climb out of the water. He had had no idea that Mr. Sun could be so big and round and red. With the first light came Graywing the Gull, screaming harshly, and Forktail the Tern, whose scream was shrill as he plunged into the water and came out with a small fish for his breakfast. Far back on the marshes Tattler the Yellowlegs whistled. Peep the Least Sandpiper flew past and at the very edge of the water began running this way and that picking up things so small that the fox could not see them.

" 'It's a queer place here on the edge of the sea,' said the fox to himself, for there was no one else to talk to. 'The only ones living here seem to be birds and crabs and fish in the sea. It is queer that there are no animals in the sea.'

" 'Who says that there are no animals in the sea?' screamed a harsh voice.

"The fox looked up. Graywing the Gull was circling just above him. 'Well, are there any animals in the sea?' asked the fox.

" 'Listen,' commanded Graywing.

"The fox listened. Then he pricked up his ears a little more sharply. He turned and looked out over the sea. Big rocks showed their black tops above the water but he could see them only as black masses, for it was not yet light enough to see clearly. 'There's a dog out there!' he exclaimed and began to look uneasy.

"Graywing chuckled. 'No,' said he. 'There isn't a dog out there.'

" 'There is too! I hear him barking. I guess I know a dog when I hear one,' retorted the fox.

" 'Pull the fur out of your ears! You never have heard a dog bark just like that,' scoffed the gull.

"The fox was an honest fellow. After listening again he admitted that he never had heard the bark of a dog that sounded just like that. 'Who is it?' he asked.

" 'Barker the Seal. He lives in the sea and if he isn't an animal you tell me what he is,'

replied Graywing, and flew away.

"That fox tingled with curiosity clear to the tips of his toenails. He wished that Mr. Sun would climb a little faster that there might be more light. At last Mr. Sun was wholly above water. The Black Shadows fairly flew away. Eagerly the fox looked out to those rocks. On one of the outer ones he could see someone. Even as he looked the stranger plunged into the water and disappeared. Disappointment was written all over the face of that fox as he sat staring out at those rocks.

"A round head popped out of the water. So unexpected was it that the fox was startled. In the distance it looked very much like the head of a man and it was moving straight in toward the shore. Soon the fox saw that it was not the head of a man. It was the head of a stranger, someone he did not know at all. The swimmer headed for a big rock, the flat top of which was quite near the shore. When he reached it he scrambled or flopped out on it. In the sunlight his smooth sleek body glistened. How that fox did stare. The stranger lifted his head and barked.

"Then the fox guessed who this was. 'It must be the fellow that gull called Barker the Seal,' thought he. 'I wonder if I can get near enough to make his acquaintance. He hasn't seen me yet, I am sure.' You see the fox had all the time been between some rocks.

"Now, keeping behind those rocks, he cautiously stole forward. He reached the water's edge. It was still some distance to where Barker was taking a sun bath, but the tide was going out. In his stay near the shore the fox had been observing. He had discovered that every day the water had a queer way of going away from the shore and later coming back. Of course it was the tide going out and coming in. As yet the tide was not as far out as it would be. The fox sat down to wait. He could be patient. All foxes can when there is something to gain by being patient.

"By and by the water had gone out until the fox could get quite near to the rock on which lay Barker the Seal. The latter appeared to be taking a nap. The fox hesitated. Then he opened his mouth and barked gently. Then he barked a little louder. On the instant the stranger lifted his head and the fox saw that his eyes were big and soft. They were looking straight at him.

" 'Excuse me,' said the fox. 'Are you Barker the Seal?'

"For a minute or two Barker stared. Then he nodded. 'They call me that,' said he. 'What of it?'

" 'I—I—I just wanted to know,' stammered the fox. 'Are you an animal?'

" 'Are you?' replied the seal.

" 'Of course,' replied the fox. 'Can't you see that I am?'

" 'I don't know why you should think that you look any more like an animal to me than I do to you. Of course I'm an animal. By the way, I presume that when you say animal you really mean mammal.'

" 'And is it true that you live in the sea?' persisted the fox.

" 'I should hope so!' exclaimed Barker. 'Indeed I should hope so. I can't think of anything worse than being obliged to live on land. I sometimes wonder how you fellows get enough to eat. Now the sea is full of fish. Whenever I'm hungry I have only to catch a fish, and fish are the best eating in the world.'

“ ‘Oh they are good for a change,’ admitted the fox. ‘I wouldn’t want to live on them all the time.’

“ ‘There’s nothing better,’ declared Barker. ‘Speaking of fish I would like one right now.’ With this he slid smoothly into the water headfirst. A few minutes later he returned with a fish and flopped out onto the rock. At first the fox was reminded of Little Joe Otter, whom he knew well, but forgot this in amazement at what he now saw. That seal had no legs! He had no feet! At least so it looked to the fox.

“ ‘Where are your feet?’ he demanded most impolitely.

“ ‘Just where they should be,’ replied Barker, and lifted what seemed to the fox to be an odd sort of tail.

“The fox stared. He now saw that it wasn’t like any tail he ever had seen, but no more was it like feet. Barker lifted what seemed like fins growing where his legs should have been.

“ ‘But those are not feet!’ cried the fox.

“ ‘Is that so?’ exclaimed Barker. ‘Then tell me what they are. They are the best feet in the world for a swimmer. I’ll swim you a race any time. I’ll show you whether or not they are feet.’ He was quite indignant.

“The fox had to grin. ‘I’m no swimmer,’ said he. ‘I tell you what, I’ll run you a race on land.’

“It was the seal’s turn to grin. ‘I suppose,’ said he, ‘that these do seem funny feet to you, but no more so than yours seem to me. When Old Mother Nature discovered that my ever-so-great-grandparents, the first of all the seals, had found out for themselves that the sea was the best place in all the Great World in which to live, she changed their legs and feet to what mine are to-day. She changed them to flippers, and flippers all seals have had ever since.’

“ ‘But how,’ asked the fox, ‘do you breathe under water?’

“ ‘I don’t,’ replied Barker. ‘I breathe just as you do, but I can hold my breath longer than you can. I can stay under water for a long time, but then I must come up for fresh air or drown.’

“By this time it had become very hot and the fox was feeling very uncomfortable. ‘Phew, how hot it is!’ he exclaimed. ‘If you will excuse me I think I will try to find a shady and more comfortable place. I’m glad to have met you. And I still think you have queer feet.’

“Barker grinned. ‘If you want to be comfortable, come with me,’ said he, and slid into the water. ‘It is lovely and cool here,’ he called, putting his head out of water. ‘I told you that the sea is the best place in all the world.’ Then Barker the Seal dived and disappeared.”

The story-log had burned out. There was silence for a minute. It was Rosemary who broke it. Sitting with her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands, she was gazing dreamily into the embers. “I guess,” said she, “that the very best place in the world is the place each likes best.”

“And that is or should be your own home,” said the Storyteller softly.

CHAPTER XV

A WONDERFUL AND BEAUTIFUL DISCOVERY

TO-NIGHT as the storytelling began the only light in the long quaint living room of the Old House was reflected from the great fireplace. Frances had suggested the turning out of all other lights.

"I like stories best in firelight," she had explained. "It is the only real story light. I love it. When the room is all shadowy I can look into the fire and see the people and things of the story.

"All right," said the Storyteller, taking his place by the fire. "Look hard now for Peter Rabbit."

"I see him," said Frances. "There are his long ears sticking above the story-log."

"And Sammy Jay is there somewhere," said the Storyteller.

"I saw him fly up the chimney!" cried Billy.

"There is one more, just one more, who must be there somewhere to make the story complete. It is Reddy Fox," said the Storyteller.

"I see him. He is curled up behind the biggest log. I see his black paws and the black tips of his ears and his red coat," declared Rosemary.

"Once upon a time something queer came over Peter Rabbit," began the Storyteller promptly. "Yes, sir, something very queer came over Peter Rabbit. It was a feeling quite different from any he could remember. He knew that he ought to feel joyful, ought to want to kick up his long hind legs and skip and dance. At least he thought that he knew that he ought to. He knew that Sammy Jay, watching sharply from a little tree at the edge of the dear Old Briar-patch, expected him to feel that way. And he didn't. He didn't feel that way at all. No, sir, he didn't.

" 'It's too bad,' said Peter, more to himself than to Sammy. 'I'm sorry.'

"Sammy leaned so far over that he lost his balance and had to spread his blue and white wings to keep from falling. 'What's that?' he demanded sharply, staring so hard at Peter with his beady black eyes that Peter had the uncomfortable feeling that those eyes were boring right into him. 'What was that you said? I think my hearing must be getting poor,' said Sammy.

" 'I said that it is too bad and I'm sorry,' repeated Peter.

" 'Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!' screamed Sammy Jay, and in his excitement he lost his balance completely and had to fly to another tree. There he fairly danced in anger and disgust. 'Here I hurry as fast as my wings can carry me from the Old Pasture to bring you some good news and you sit there and say you are sorry! You ought to be tickled half to death. The minute I saw that Reddy Fox was too badly hurt to do any running for some time, I thought to myself here is great news for Peter Rabbit. Now instead of being glad you sit there looking as mournful as if it were your best friend instead of one of your greatest enemies who is hurt, and you say you are sorry. Bah! That foolish head of yours is too much for me. There isn't an atom of sense in it. Sorry! Well, there are others who

won't be sorry. I think I see Danny Meadow Mouse, Bob White, Johnny Chuck or Mrs. Grouse being sorry for Reddy Fox! They will know how to appreciate good news when they hear it. I must hurry along to tell them. Why don't you go give yourself up to Reddy for his dinner? Sorry—bah!' With this Sammy flew off to spread the news.

"Peter watched him go and there was a funny look on Peter's face. He scratched a long ear with a long hind foot. He scratched the other long ear with the other long hind foot. Never had he been more puzzled than he was now. He was puzzled because he was sorry for Reddy Fox. This puzzled him quite as much as it did Sammy Jay. He didn't understand it any more than did Sammy.

" 'Of course I ought to be glad,' thought Peter. 'I *am* glad. No, I'm not either. Oh dear, never before in my life have I had such mixed feelings. Ever since I was big enough to first follow my mother's tail Reddy Fox has tried to catch me. He has given me more frights than I can remember. Ever since I was big enough to put my nose outside the dear Old Briar-patch I have had to watch out almost every minute to keep from furnishing Reddy a dinner. From the very first time I saw his red coat I hated him. Anyway I thought I did. So now that for a while at least I won't have him to worry about I ought to be glad. Sammy Jay is right about that. I *am* glad that I haven't got to worry and be everlastingly on the watch for Reddy, but—but—oh, I do hope he isn't dreadfully hurt.'

"Peter left the dear Old Briar-patch and hopped—"

"Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip!" chanted the chorus.

"Who is telling this story?" demanded the Storyteller, trying to look severe. "Of course that's the way he ran. He went straight to a favorite patch of clover and prepared to feast in peace and comfort. It was a beautiful morning. The Merry Little Breezes of Old Mother West Wind came dancing over the Green Meadows and joyously tickled Peter's wobbly little nose with the sweet odors of many flowers. Bubbling Bob the Bobolink was pouring out in liquid music the joy in his heart as he hovered high above Peter's head. Carol the Meadowlark sat on a distant fence post and his clear sweet whistle was good to hear.

" 'All the Great World is happy,' thought Peter. He reached for a leaf of tender sweet clover. Contentedly he began to eat it. Then he remembered Reddy Fox, his enemy, wounded and perhaps helpless over in the Old Pasture, and over Peter swept that queer feeling again. He didn't know what it was, but you know and I know. It was pity. Yes, sir, pity had crept into and was filling Peter's heart. With joy and gladness all about him Reddy Fox was lying somewhere wounded and suffering. Peter tried not to think of it, but he just couldn't help thinking of it.

"He stopped eating. Somehow the sweetness had gone out of that clover. 'Of course,' muttered Peter, talking to himself, for there was no one else to talk to, 'Reddy had no business to try to steal that chicken. If he had kept away from that henhouse he wouldn't have been shot.' This is what Sammy Jay had said had happened. 'I suppose it serves him right and that I ought to be glad of it, but somehow I can't help feeling sorry for him,' he continued.

" 'He wouldn't feel sorry for you if he found you hurt and helpless. He'd gobble you up and be tickled to death to get a dinner so easily,' said a small voice inside of Peter.

" 'I don't care if he would,' Peter replied. 'Anyway he wouldn't let me suffer. He

would put a quick end to my pain.' Peter had to grin at such a queer idea of mercy. 'I wonder if he will get well.'

"At the thought that perhaps Reddy might not get well Peter grew very sober. 'The Green Meadows wouldn't be the same without him,' he thought. 'He makes me a lot of trouble and worry but the Green Meadows wouldn't be the same without him. If he should catch me it would be my own fault. I don't suppose he has a single friend to call on him and try to do something for him. I—I—'

"Peter paused to scratch a long ear with a long hind foot. Then he finished what he had been thinking. 'I believe I'll run over there and see if I can do something for Reddy,' said he right out loud. Then hastily he looked this way and looked that way to make sure that no one had overheard him. He knew that if anyone had they would surely think him crazy.

"Peter wasted no time. Away he went—"

"Lipperty-lipperty-lipperty-lip," chanted the chorus.

"Across the Green Meadows," continued the Storyteller. "He headed straight for the Old Pasture. But though he was in a hurry he didn't forget to be watchful. Every few jumps he stopped to sit up and look and listen. Once he saw Redtail the Hawk sailing in circles high up in the blue, blue sky. Instantly Peter squatted in the tall grass and didn't move so much as an ear until Redtail was out of sight.

"When he reached the Old Pasture he felt safer because there were bushes and brambles there in plenty. He knew where Reddy's home was and he made straight for it. As he drew near it he took care not to make a sound. Every hop or two he would stop to look and listen. Perhaps Sammy had been mistaken and Reddy was not so helpless as Sammy had thought.

"At last he reached a place where he could peep from under a bush and see Reddy's home. Reddy was there. He was stretched out in front of his doorway. He didn't move. His eyes were closed. Could it be that he was dead? For a long time Peter kept perfectly still. At last Reddy opened his eyes. In them was such a look of pain that Peter at once knew that Sammy Jay had spoken truly. Peter thumped the ground ever so lightly. Instantly Reddy turned his head and saw Peter. He tried to grin, but it was a feeble, sorry kind of a grin.

" 'Hello, Peter,' said he in a weak voice. 'I suppose you heard what happened to me and have come over here to tell me that it serves me right and to make fun of me now that I am helpless.'

"Peter hopped out from under the bush. 'Yes, I heard, and I've come over to tell you how sorry I am, and to see if I can do something for you,' replied Peter, and hopped a step nearer.

"Reddy's black ears twitched. 'What's that? Why don't you tell the truth, Peter? Why don't you say that you are tickled almost to death to see me like this?' he demanded.

" 'But I'm not!' cried Peter. 'Truly I'm not! I'm ever and ever so sorry. I'd like ever so much to do something for you, Reddy.'

"Reddy looked very hard at Peter, blinked and looked again. It was hard to believe that Peter was telling the truth. But when he saw the look in Peter's big soft eyes he knew that Peter really meant just what he said. Something very like softness crept into Reddy's own eyes. 'Peter,' said he, 'I believe you do mean it. You are the only one but Mrs. Reddy who

has come near me to-day who hasn't seemed glad to see me in trouble.' Reddy moved a hind leg and a look of pain crossed his face.

" 'Does it hurt dreadfully?' Peter asked, and his voice was filled with sympathy.

"Reddy nodded. 'It certainly does,' he replied. 'I'm pretty badly hurt. I'll get over it, I guess, but it will be a long time before I can run about much. You won't have to watch out for me for quite a while.' Reddy grinned, but it was a pathetic grin.

"Peter didn't grin back. 'I would much rather have to watch out for you than to see you suffering like this, Reddy,' said he very earnestly. 'How will you get enough to eat?'

" 'I don't feel much like eating now. When I do I guess Mrs. Reddy will keep me supplied,' Reddy replied.

"At mention of Mrs. Reddy, whom he had quite forgotten, Peter turned his head this way and that and looked uneasy. Reddy saw that look and understood it. 'She's likely to be back any time now,' said he. 'I advise you to run along back to the dear Old Briar-patch, Peter. There's nothing more that you can do for me.'

" 'But I haven't done anything for you!' cried Peter.

" 'Yes, indeed, you have,' retorted Reddy. 'You've brought me sympathy, which is all you can do. I feel better for it already. You have no idea how much it helps. I shall tell Mrs. Reddy to keep away from the Briar-patch. Now skip along, Peter, and take care that you do not get into trouble yourself.'

"So once more Peter told Reddy how sorry he was, bade him farewell, and started for the dear Old Briar-patch. Somehow he felt better than he had felt since he had first heard the news about Reddy. The joyousness and gladness all about him filled his heart and with it a new kind of happiness, a happiness he never had known before. It was the happiness from having tried to do something for someone in trouble. He knew now what had caused that queer feeling when Sammy Jay had brought the news of Reddy's dreadful trouble. He knew now the meaning and beauty of pity and sympathy. Peter had found a wonderful and beautiful thing—the spirit of compassion."

The Storyteller reached out and turned on the lights. Frances drew a long breath. "I love that story," said she.

CHAPTER XVI

THE JOY OF THE BEAUTIFUL PINE

THE yellow disk of the moon hung just above the trees on Esker Hill. It flooded with soft light a white world. From every little window of the Old House light made yellow bars across the snow. A great wreath of holly hung from the knocker on the door. In each of the windows of the lower part of the house was a smaller wreath. Inside in the big living room holly, laurel, ropes of ground pine and sprays of hemlock and sweet-smelling balsam fir partly hid the great beams and filled the corners save one where stood a Christmas tree. A great fire blazed cheerfully in the fireplace, sending yellow sparks flying upward to become lost in the black throat of the chimney.

It was both a Christmas and a farewell party, for after this night the Old House would be closed for the winter. All the children and their parents were there. The tree in the corner had given of its bounty to the children, not one being overlooked by Santa Claus whose voice sounded strangely like that of the Old Hunter. There had been feasting and merriment and the singing of Christmas carols. Now the Storyteller brought in a birch log. It was larger than the usual story-log. The lights were turned out, the log placed on the fire and at a signal the invocation was chanted by the children. A streamer of smoke burst into a tongue of flame.

"Of course," said the Storyteller, "to-night's story must be a Christmas story."

"Of course," cried the children.

"And so," continued the Storyteller, "I am going to tell you the story of the Beautiful Pine and how it found the joy of Christmas. Once upon a time long, long ago the great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather of Happy Jack Squirrel, whose name was Happy Jack too, was scampering along the Lone Little Path that winds down the hill through the Green Forest. He was happy, which was quite as it should be, for he had everything to make him happy. He was fat with the good things he had had to eat. He had a beautiful new coat to keep him warm when rough Brother North Wind and Jack Frost should come driving before them the snow clouds to make white the Green Meadows, and to so change the Green Forest that should any of the little people who live there only in summer happen to return they would never, never know it. But rough Brother North Wind and Jack Frost had not yet come, and Old Mother Nature was still busy preparing the Green Forest for them.

"The Green Forest was not as green as it had been all summer. Oh my, no! You see most of the trees sleep through the winter, as does Johnny Chuck. They had shaken off their leaves and wrapped all their little buds, which would be next year's leaves, in warm brown blankets which Jack Frost could not get through though he should pinch his hardest. Only the pine trees and the hemlock trees and the spruce trees, which love the winter just as Peter Rabbit does, kept their green leaves that in spite of the bare brown branches of other trees no one should ever forget that this was still the Green Forest.

"So Happy Jack scampered down the Lone Little Path and now and then turned aside to peep under red leaves and turn over yellow leaves and pull aside brown leaves to see what he might find under them. His heart was happy for his stomach was full, and as you

know a full stomach, unless it be too full, almost always make a happy heart. Now as he peeped under a red leaf his sharp eyes spied a little brown seed. It was a homely little seed that had fallen from a rough pine cone. Very likely you or I would not have seen it at all, or if we had would have thought it of no account. But Happy Jack's eyes sparkled when he saw that little brown seed, for he knew that it was very good to eat. Not that he was hungry. Oh my, no! There wasn't room in his stomach for the least teeny weeny bit more just then. But Happy Jack knew that there might come a time when his stomach would not be so full, and then that little brown seed would taste oh, so good.

" 'I will put it away where I can find it when I need it just as I have put away so many other little brown seeds and fat nuts,' said Happy Jack to himself, and picked up the little brown seed.

"Now Happy Jack's way of putting away things was to hide them in various places instead of putting all in one place. You see if he had put all in one place someone else might have found them, in which case he would have lost all, which would have meant going hungry. So he hid some in a hollow tree but very many more he hid under leaves and in tiny holes he dug in the ground, some here, some there. He knew that if he couldn't remember just where each one was his keen little nose would help him find them when he most needed them.

"Now he had already hidden many little brown seeds and fat nuts near the Lone Little Path, so when he picked up this particular little brown seed he decided he would take it elsewhere. So he scampered along with the little brown seed until at last he came to the edge of the Green Forest. He looked this way. He looked that way. Sure that no one was watching him, he ran a little way out from the edge of the Green Forest, dug a tiny hole in the soft warm earth with his paws, dropped into it the little brown seed and covered it carefully.

" 'There,' said he to himself as he scampered back to the Green Forest, 'everyone knows that I live in the Green Forest and no one will think to look out here for what I have hidden.'

"Old Mother Nature, who had seen just what Happy Jack had done, smiled for she knew that it was more than likely that Happy Jack would forget that little brown seed. If he did she had a plan to use it herself and Happy Jack had saved her some trouble, for he had planted it for her. It all came about just as Old Mother Nature had thought it would. Happy Jack never once thought of that little brown seed. It lay just where he had hidden it until in the spring gentle Sister South Wind came and with her soft fingers opened all the little brown blankets of the leaf buds, something which Jack Frost had tried all winter to do with his hard fingers and couldn't. Then Old Mother Nature remembered the little brown seed and wakened a fairy who was sleeping in the heart of it, and the name of the fairy was the Fairy of Life.

"So out from the warm earth sprang a tender green shoot which really was a teeny weeny pine tree. Jolly, round, bright Mr. Sun, looking down from the blue, blue sky, saw it and smiled and this made the teeny weeny pine tree happy, for it warmed the ground and comforted the little roots growing there. Old Mother West Wind saw the teeny weeny pine tree and sent some of her children, the Merry Little Breezes, to drive up a shower cloud that the little tree might not go thirsty. No one else saw the teeny weeny pine tree or if they did they took no notice of it. Happy Jack ran right past without so much as looking

at it. He had forgotten all about that little brown seed he had planted there. Once Peter Rabbit, nibbling clover, nearly nipped off the head of the teeny weeny pine tree and didn't even know it.

"Happily no harm came to the teeny weeny pine tree and it grew and grew and was happy, for it loved jolly, round, bright Mr. Sun and Old Mother West Wind and the Merry Little Breezes and they loved it. So it grew and grew and when rough Brother North Wind came again he covered it with a soft blanket of snow to keep it warm all winter,

> And he shouted 'Ha, ha!' And he shouted 'Ho, ho!
> I cover you deep, little tree, with snow!
> But the day will come if you grow and grow
> When I'll test your strength with a mighty blow.'

"So the teeny weeny pine tree was kept safe all the long winter. When gentle Sister South Wind returned in the spring it once more began to grow. It grew and grew until it no longer was teeny weeny. It put out sturdy branches and was very good to look upon. It held its head high, for it was indeed a beautiful young tree, and it was very, very happy.

"There came a time, however, when it began to feel lonely. All the other pine trees were in the Green Forest and often it could hear them whispering together and longed to whisper with them and could not. So it sighed and sighed and Peter Rabbit, passing that way, often stopped to wonder what could make such a handsome young pine tree seem so sad.

"But if the young pine tree couldn't whisper with the others it could grow and before long it was the handsomest of all the young pine trees far and near, for it could spread its broad green branches as far as it would, while the young pine trees in the Green Forest were so crowded that there was no room for their branches and these withered and died until only the tops of the trees were green and fair to see. When the young pine tree saw this it became more contented and took pride in growing still more beautiful. And when the birds sought it that they might build their nests in it, and when on bitter winter nights Mrs. Grouse and Peter Rabbit found warmth and shelter beneath its low-growing branches, it became happy once more.

"So the years passed and the young pine tree became bigger than any of its neighbors in the Green Forest and became known as the Beautiful Pine and was beloved by all the little people of the Green Forest and gave them shelter and was happy. But it was happiest when in spring and summer little children played under it, and in the autumn rested beneath its broad branches after a busy morning seeking nuts with the squirrels in the Green Forest. Only in winter when rough Brother North Wind and Jack Frost had driven the children away was the Beautiful Pine sad. Then would it sigh and sigh for the happiness of making others happy.

"Once every year, long, long after the nuts had been gathered and when all the world seemed drear and bare, came merry children and older folk and with laugh and song and happy shout they would cut young pine trees and hemlock trees and would carry them away. At first the Beautiful Pine pitied the young trees, but when it saw that it was possession of them that made the children so happy it began to envy them. And when Jack Frost told of peeping in at many windows and seeing these same little trees made beautiful

with many colored lights, and hung with things to fill the hearts of little children with joy, the Beautiful Pine sighed more than ever.

" 'For,' murmured the Beautiful Pine to the kindly stars, 'I would gladly give myself to bring joy to the heart of one little child, but alas, I am too big. I am too big. No little child wants me because I am too big.'

"So Christmas after Christmas the Beautiful Pine watched the little trees carried away and would murmur sadly: 'I can give Christmas joy to no little child because I am too big, too big.' And the wandering Night Wind would carry that sad murmur all through the Green Forest—'I am too big, too big.' "

The Storyteller paused. As he resumed a phonograph began playing "Holy Night." "Then one day when the snow lay white on the Green Meadows and in the Green Forest and the Beautiful Pine had watched the little trees for Christmas carried away with laugh and shout, as it had so many times before, came men and horses. Keen axes sent shivers clear to the top of the Beautiful Pine and at last its proud length lay stretched on the snow. And somehow it cared not, for it had so wanted to give joy to just one little child and could not because it was too big, too big.

"It was carried to a great city and there in the heart of the great city the Beautiful Pine was raised until it stood as proudly as it had stood just beyond the edge of the Green Forest. It was hung with many colored lights until it was quite the most beautiful tree that ever was. And there came not one little child but a thousand children, and they danced around the Beautiful Pine and laughter was in their eyes, for joy was in their hearts. And they sang, and their voices were joyous. And they shouted and their voices were merry. And they cried,

" 'It is the most beautiful tree in all the world, for it is *our* Christmas tree—the Christmas tree of *all* the children!'

"Then was the heart of the Beautiful Pine, planted long years ago by the great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather of Happy Jack Squirrel, filled with a great joy—the joy of giving—for it had given its greatest gift, the gift of itself, for the joy of many. And the spirit of Christmas, which is love for all mankind, descended upon it as sweet-toned bells chimed 'On earth peace, good will toward men,' and the glad voices of a thousand little children cried 'Merry, merry Christmas!' "

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Tales from the Storyteller's House* by Thornton Waldo Burgess]