

THE PASSING OF SILVERTIP

By ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

SILVERTIP, the great grey fox, looked from the cedar-clump furtively and eagerly, toward the red dash of morning tingeing the heavy wintry sky. His slender muzzle sniffed the breeze fearfully and defiantly, as far across the bay a thin wreath of smoke twisted an ash-hued scrawl across the black, banked-up snow-clouds. Then he slunk back into the shelter of his thicket and glided across the snow-carpeted earth toward the pine-tipped upland, his great, grey body trailing like a giant shadow against the white earth beneath him. At the edge of a wild hazel-patch he paused and his long, lithe form stiffened as a setter dog's will, when he scents a quarry; then like a flash of light he sprang. There was the whirr of frantic wings and a bevy of quail arose and sailed brown, fluctuating dots, between the dark-grey of the wood and mottled grey of morning's skies. Then Silvertip glided upon his way, his long, strong jaws holding securely a cock quail with drooping wings and white throat plumage dyed with red. At a narrow opening in the thicket the great fox paused once more to gaze toward the Greatland across the ice-locked bay. The smoke twisted like a thin thread against the coming light and as he watched and scented it fearfully, two tiny atoms of life detached themselves from the long trap-like pile of logs, from which the smoke arose, and vanished behind the marsh-girded shore of the creek that wound inland.

II.

On that long wooded point of land, dividing the great waters of Erie from Rond Eau Bay, Silvertip was king of all the foxes. He went his way as a king would do among lowly subjects, scorning to mix with his diminutive red cousins and refusing even to sniff noses with the lordly black ones that sometimes, though not often, met him in the tangled wildernesses of bush and brier. He had no mate and wanted none. The great solitude was all he loved and cared for, although often, when the night was old and a big moon glowed low above the ice-held waters of the bay, something within him would awake to the voices of his kind, as they called barkingly to one another from their timbered retreats. At such times he would lift his massive head and point his long muzzle at the moon; but never once had he given answer to those calls. Sometimes he would slip along the knotted, frozen swales through the early twilight, his padded feet making no sound as he passed from shrub to thicket, all the wild life within him awake to the sheer joy of the hunt, the scent and the trail. Silvertip was three times greater in size than any fox in his kingdom, three times greater in wisdom, three times greater in cunning. His strength and agility were such that he feared no ordinary foe at all and even the marsh-raccoon, strong and savage as they were upon points of disputed possession, would leave their newly-captured frogs for him to feed upon, retreating snarlingly when he crept toward them from behind the rush-clumps. And this was as it should be, for was he not king, and is it not befitting a king to have his meals captured for him? Silvertip loved this sport of stealing and seizing prizes. It enriched his blood and heightened his contempt for the cringing subjects who fled at his approach. All day he slept, sometimes in the great pile of pine-trees the wind had twisted off and piled together, sometimes in the great jam-pile of ash-trees, between the oak-ridge and the swale. Miles away in the deepest, densest part of the wood was another hiding-place, to which he might turn if the need ever arose. It was the den-burrow, whose entrance was hidden by a dethroned oak and deep and far into the sand-earth it twisted and curved, with here and there along its course a room-like space lined with soft mosses and downy feathers. This was Silvertip's home by right of heritage. Close beside it ran a barren, gravel ridge, beyond it lay Rond Eau and away on westward, the tree-fringed world of man.

Silvertip watched and guarded this spot zealously almost every night visiting it and sniffing the ground about it carefully to make sure that no unwelcome visitor had intruded. While life and strength were his, he would keep to the open; when strength failed he would have refuge silent and secure to fly to.

When the first shadows of night swooped low he would creep from his hiding-place to roam and hunt and gambol until another daylight came. Twilight would find him feasting on a tender rabbit at the cedar-fringed foot of his kingdom, midnight scattering the feathers of a captured grouse near the great duck-ponds, nine miles away, and the still, morning hours would likely find him besporting himself upon his playground, the long, frozen sand-bar between the scrub-oaks and the dead rushes of

If Silvertip had dreamed that to capture him by fair means or foul was the trapper's great ambition, he might have said good-bye to his little kingdom and sought security in the inland forest, where man was as yet unknown. He did not know that his beautiful silvery coat was worth many hundreds of bright dollars to the man, who had once seen him in the early twilight and had stood too appalled by his size and beauty to lift the black rifle against him. But the great fear had come to Silvertip and from the moment he scented man he became more watchful, more alert, more cunning.

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This morning as he looked toward the smoke scratching an ashy line against the storm-cloud, Silvertip felt something more than fear. The quail in his mouth fluttered feebly and he set his sharp teeth deep into its quivering flesh. Backing into the thicket he threw the bird from him, placed his long fore-paws against it and tore it asunder bit by bit, lashing his great silvery brush in fury and scattering the bird's brown feathers to the morning wind, which now swept through the trees bringing with it the smell of smoke from the Greatland.

IV.

All that day Silvertip lay in the jam-pile of fallen ash-trees, gazing with watchful, baleful eyes through the chinks at the day-world. That something which had come to him, as he watched the smoke from the trapper's cabin, was with him still, tightening his sinews to steel-like tension and goading him to a fury he had never known before. He knew the man was coming and all throughout that day he lay watchful and expectant. Toward evening the man came. Silvertip knew that he was near although he heard no footfall on the newly-fallen snow. With upper lip curled back and muscles bunched beneath his glossy coat, the giant fox lay watching and waiting, for what—he could not tell.

The man came, slowly and with head bowed, as though fatigued. In one hand he carried a bunch of glittering traps, in the other the black rifle. In his belt were hung the dripping pelts of two red foxes. Three times that day had Silvertip heard the black rifle speak and that day, too, had he heard another sound—the wild cry of an animal new and terrible to him. Sometimes the cry was high and shrill, sometimes deep, hollow and booming. Intuitively he knew that he had reason to fear that animal whose very voice made him shudder down in fear, but he did not fear it like he feared the man. Suddenly that cry was raised close beside him, loud and terrible it rang, and a thick-throated animal with lolling tongue hurled itself against his hiding-place.

Then the great fox leaped between the logs on the farther side, his goal the wild-hazel tangle forty yards away. As he sprang from the jam-pile he heard the clink of steel upon the frozen earth. Like the flash of a meteor he passed the man who had lifted the rifle and as the king fox made his cover, he heard the rifle's voice. Something clutched him with a grip of steel and threw him forward among the bushes. He arose almost as quickly as he had fallen and loped away. But he left a red track behind him on the snow. Far behind him sounded the baying of the hound, now low, now high. Silvertip was glad he was safe. He would keep to the open.

V.

Night fell and the big moon looked out from behind the edge of a ragged cloud, calling to Silvertip in its olden way to scent, trail and tear down. Far away, where the scrubby oaks met the marsh-land, a long strip of frozen sand lay grey-white between the wood-shadow and the dead rushes. Here and there were places packed smooth and hard, where some animal rich in God's gift of life, had spent its exuberance of spirits in past play-time hours, before the dawn. Beneath a twisted sapling, its wing-feathers protruding from the snow, lay a partly demolished ruffed-grouse. Silvertip had concealed it there thinking to feed upon it again tonight.

But all throughout this white night the king fox was fleeing before the awful voice of the hound.

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"His slender muzzle sniffed the breeze."

Drawn by R. E. Johnston.

the inland waters.

He would creep out fearfully, trailing belly close to earth for a short distance, to leap with a low bark of joy high in the air, and alighting, would speed away down the bar in a long, smooth stride, his beautiful silver coat scintillating like a swarm of fire-flies against the blue-white night. Or, he would sometimes after gorging himself, sprawl on the sand, his four feet in air, and roll over and over in the sheer joy of life. Sometimes, he was fortunate enough to find the badly decomposed carcass of a fish and at such times his joy would be complete. He would carry it to his playground and placing it on the sand, roll himself over and over in it, filling his long, silky fur with its evil odour. In the very early morning he would bury his prize deep beneath the snow, and once more seek the woodland.

III.

With the coming of the trapper to the Greatland across the bay, had come the great fear to Silvertip. Into all that land of wood and marsh the great fear had entered. The water-rats, the wild ducks, even the screeching eagles that had for so long nested unmolested in the great elm along the shore, learned to know it. The deer and the wild turkey sought security farther inland. The water-rats built their dome-like homes of twisted grasses farther out into the waters of Rond Eau. No more the wild duck sought the old feeding-grounds in the slow light of autumn dawn or the swift shades of autumn evening. Man possessed the world so far as the breeze could bespeak his coming. He owned the great, twisting creek that felt its way inland and rested like a string of pearls against a cushion of green velvet, when the summer world was queen, and along which the red deer were accustomed to browse and the musk-rats build securely, in the long white months of winter. Man's coming had changed all this and he was the enemy of the animal world.