

White Spot's Last Run

By Billy Dock

It was three o'clock a.m. A pale waning moon was sliding down the western dome of heaven. The sky, that had been a dark-blue vault studded with ten thousand stars, was slowly changing to an opalescent hue, for the dawn comes early in the latitude of South Carolina; and an hour from now the opalescent hue would have descended from the sky to field and forest, to upland, glade and glen.

No sounds, save the voices of the night disturbed the apparently peaceful countryside. Only the nocturnal animals prowled and preyed on each other.

Had any naturalist been wandering abroad at that hour some of the voices of the night would have spelled—tragedy!

That sudden, short, shrill squeak from the patch of shrubs beside yonder purling brook would have meant that some low-roosting bird had fallen victim to a prowling mink.

The squeal from among the old-field pines dotting yon eroded hillside would have meant that some playful rabbit had been suddenly caught in the powerful claws of the horned owl. The carnivorous beasts and birds that prowl by night were seeking food.

Just where the old-field pines, among which the playful rabbit had just lost its life, joined an immense tract of heavily timbered land, a small, reddish-brown animal sat upon its haunches, one ear cocked up, listening.

In shape and size it had some resemblance to a small dog. Just back of its left shoulder-blade there was a small patch of pure white hair—a birthmark. Reynard—better known as "White-Spot" to the members of the Pinehurst Hunting Club—was abroad on his nightly prow for food. He never went home to his den hungry.

Rabbits and ground-roosting birds fell easy victims to his sagacity, quickness, and the sure scent of his sharp muzzle; and he was a frequent visitor to the hen-roosts of the farmyards for miles around.

Getting up off his haunches, White-Spot trotted on into the tract of timberland. He was bound for Farmer Ramsey's hen-house. He was in no hurry. He was feeling listless, and very little exertion gave him sharp pain in his sides.

He did not take the usual delight in his nightly forays. Now and then in his devious route thru the timber he stopped and sat down on his haunches or crouched flat on the ground, ears thrown forward, when some scarcely perceptible noise of prowling beast or bird broke the stillness of the night.

With the frequent stops he made and the devious route he took by the time he reached the thicket just back of Farmer Ramsey's barn-yard, the east was beginning to show a slight tinge of red that heralded the coming dawn.

He knew the lay of the land here, for he had been a frequent visitor; and more than one plump fowl Farmer Ramsey had unwillingly contributed to his larder.

Of Brindle, Farmer Ramsey's watchdog, broad of muzzle, slow of movement, White-Spot had no fear. He regarded the dog as a joke.

As to the traps Farmer Ramsey set to catch him, he avoided them with the sagacity that the angry farmer denounced as diabolical.

Crouching now in the thicket back of the barn-yard, he listened for a moment, then as silently as a shadow he glided forward, leaped the low rail-fence, and, with ears thrown forward, paused a moment to listen again.

The sounds he heard were sounds that did not flaunt the danger signal: The stamp of some horse in his stall, the restless movement of cattle, the contented grunt of hogs—those and kindred sounds of a barn-yard were all the sounds his acute hearing could detect.

He glided around the corner of the barn and started in the direction of the hen-house, that he knew to be in the corner of the barn-yard.

As he approached the hen-house he perceived close by an ordinary farm-yard hen-coop that his sharp muzzle told him held a tenant. With stealthy movement he approached the coop and sniffed.

The rooster inside—it was Farmer

Ramsey's blue-ribbon winner and was valued at fifty dollars—stretched his neck and made several guttural sounds, then settled back to rest. The animal outside his coop he took to be a dog, and dogs he was not afraid of.

There was no way to get in the coop but to dig under the bottom slat; so White-Spot fell to digging. The earth where the coop was sitting was soft; so in a few moments White-Spot had a sufficient hole dug out and squeezed under into the coop.

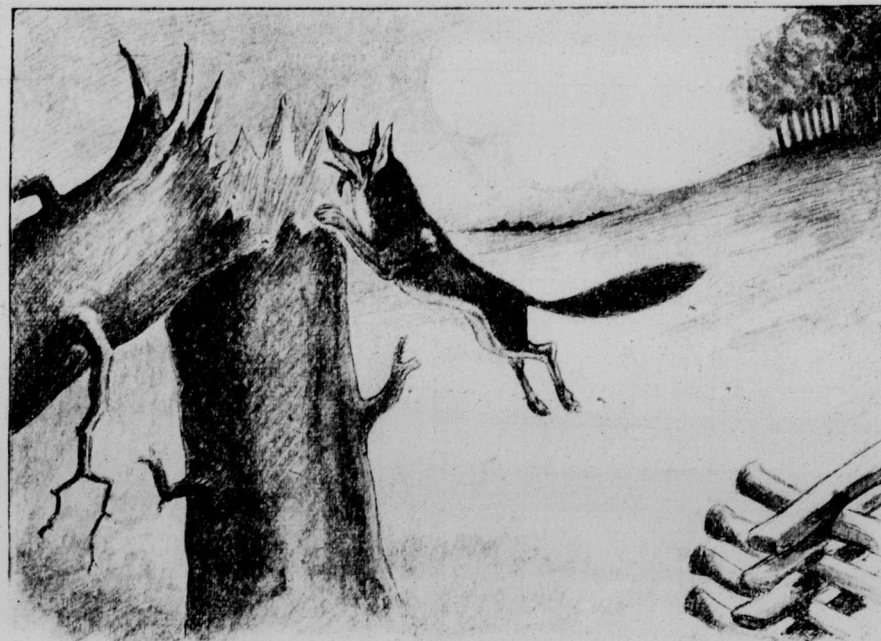
The rooster stretched his neck with the intention of letting out a decided and emphatic squawk—not so much in fright as indignation.

The squawk never materialized, as the sharp jaws of White-Spot closed on his neck, and, while his forefeet held his body, his head was jerked off.

Holding the quivering body with his forefeet, White-Spot tore the skin and feathers from the breast and proceeded to gorge himself.

Brindle, in his bed under the corner of the farmhouse, became uneasy. A vague sense of something going wrong among the things under his nightly care disturbed him.

Getting out of his bed, he walked out in the yard and sniffed; then went slowly and softly toward the barn-yard, climbed the stile, passed around the hen-house, and before White-Spot sensed his presence was at the hen-coop with his broad muzzle thrust into the hole White-Spot had dug to get in the coop.



"Desperately sprang for the split stump—and made it"

Brindle was emitting guttural growls. He knew there was something wrong inside the coop. As the hole was not large enough for him to enter, there was but one thing for him to do:

He thrust his broad, stout muzzle deeper under the coop and hurled it over, and savagely snapped for White-Spot.

The jaws closed on only air, for White-Spot, with every sense alert, sprang sidewise and away, and before Brindle realized the situation was half-way across the barn-yard.

With yelps of baffled rage Brindle gave pursuit, but White-Spot cleared the barn-yard fence fifty feet ahead of him and darted into the thicket.

The thicket was composed of laurel-bushes, a tangled mass of shrubs that covered the ground, which at this point fell away in a bluff to the brink of the creek some sixty feet below. The thick growth impeded Brindle's progress; but White-Spot glided among the dense, gnarled undergrowth with ease.

Going down the bluff to the creek, he darted along the bank up-stream, and was soon half a mile away. As Brindle had given up the pursuit at the start, White-Spot abated his run to a slow trot.

Keeping along the edge of the creek, he soon came to a point where the laurel

ended and a wooded knoll, free from undergrowth, swept gently down to the water's edge.

Leaving the creek-bank at this point, White-Spot started up—and over the knoll. His gait from a trot fell to a walk. The run from Brindle had intensified the pain in his sides. Once or twice in his ascent of the knoll he stopped; several times he yawned.

On reaching the top of the knoll he sat down on his haunches. The east was a fiery red now. A rustle among the leaves some distance ahead of him attracted his attention, and he perceived a rabbit, with frequent stops, hopping toward him.

At once his hunting instinct was aroused. He crouched low on the ground, and, with the same bodily movement as a cat creeping upon a sparrow, he started forward.

He observed a log a short distance ahead of him, and a little to the right of the direct line of vision between him and his intended victim; and he bore slightly to the right until he had the log between him and his approaching prey.

Then quickly, but as silently as the drifting shadow of a buzzard, he gained the end of the log and crouched ready to spring.

The rabbit, which, in the negro lore of the South, is one of the most sagacious of animals, but which, in fact, is one of the least sagacious, all unsuspecting the deadly peril lurking behind the log,

drifted from far away sounds that he knew and that caused him annoyance and a vague uneasiness.

The high, more vibrant notes his hearing detected he knew to be a huntsman's horn; the duller notes he knew to be the bay of hounds. He faced the direction whence the sounds came and, with ears thrown forward, listened.

No need to listen for long. His sense of distance and his natural instinct told him a pack of hounds were on his trail thru the timber-land en route to Farmer Ramsey's hen-roost. It was time for him to be moving.

He started away at a slow trot. He had gone but fifty yards when a mink, that had its den close to the bank of the creek at the foot of the knoll, came up over the hill and trotted toward the rabbit; White-Spot's first impulse was to go back and drive the mink away, but decided he wouldn't and trotted on.

The mink, as will appear later, did him a slight service.

Far away, following the devious route White-Spot had taken on his way thru the timber-land to Farmer Ramsey's hen-house, a crowd of horsemen and horsewomen, behind a pack of English foxhounds, were sweeping onward.

The members of the Pinehurst Hunting Club were out in full force and behind a pack of hounds in full cry. The hunters had declared White-Spot's brush should be taken.

Often they had chased him; and some of the members had caught good, full views of him, plain enough to see the white spot back of his shoulder-blade. Several times White-Spot had been in tight places, but had always managed to get out.

It was broad day now. The hounds, led by Leader, were running easy, the hunters straggling to the rear. Closest to the hounds was Robert Parrish, and riding with daredevil recklessness.

He had started behind the hounds with the intention of being in first at the death of White-Spot and securing the brush. He had a reason besides mere sport for this. The reason was Alice Patterson.

At the clubhouse in the gray dawn of the morning as the hunters were preparing to mount he had found himself apart with Alice, and had asked her to marry him.

"If you fill one condition I will," the girl had replied.

"And the condition?" he asked.

"That you present me with White-Spot's brush this morning," she had replied.

Hence the reckless way Robert rode to hounds that morning. Among men he was a man; but he knew very little of girls, or else the flushed face, the dewy eyes, the trembling hand of Alice would have told him something.

He had asked her to marry him, she had stated a condition, and he intended to fulfil it, or kill his mount, or break his own neck.

On thru the timber, across woodland streams and over rail-fences hounds and hunters went until they came to the rear of Farmer Ramsey's barn-yard, where the hounds caused a commotion among the inhabitants of the farm-yard as they tumbled pell-mell over the rail-fence.

Farmer Ramsey was in the barn-yard and looking decidedly mad. The master of hounds, who was close behind Robert, coming up and observing the angry farmer, started calling the hounds in. He knew Farmer Ramsey and spoke to him.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Ramsey," he said, "if we have annoyed you. We are after a fox, and did not think you would mind our coming on your place. We will withdraw; and are sorry we have angered you."

"Angered me!" snorted Farmer Ramsey. "By heck I'm mad enough; but not at you. If you'd had a fifty-dollar rooster et up by that cussed fox I guess you'd be looking mad enough. If you are after him, keep right on after him 'till you git him. I'll go with you."

Alice Patterson softly laughed.

To be concluded Next Week

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