

THE TUNNEL RUNNERS

Underground Comedies and Tragedies of the Down-Trodden Folk

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Drawings by Charles Livingston Bull.

THE deep copper-red channel of the little tidal river wound inland through the wide yellowish levels of the salt marsh. Along each side of the channel, between the waving fringes of the grass and the line of usual high tide, ran a margin of pale yellowish brown mud flats, baked and seamed with sun cracks, scurfed with wavy deposits of salt, and spotted with meagre tufts of sea green samphire, goose-tongue, and sea rosemary. Just at the edge of the grass fringe an old post, weather beaten and time eaten, stood up, a solitary sentinel over the waste, reminder of a time when this point of the river had been a little haven for fishing boats—a haven long since filled up by the caprice of the inexorable silt.

Some forty or fifty paces straight back from the moldering post, a low spur of upland, darkly wooded with spruce and fir, jutted out into the yellow-green sea of grass. Off to the left some hundred yards or so away ran a line of round topped dike, with a few stiff mullen stalks fringing its crest. Beyond the dike, and long ago reclaimed by it from the sea, lay basking in the sun the vast expanses of sweet-grass meadow, blue-green with timothy, clover, and vetch, and hummed over by innumerable golden belted bumble-bees. Through this sweet meadow wound the slow curves of a placid and brimming fresh water stream, joining itself at last to the parent river through a sluiceway in the dike, whose sunken valves protected it completely from the fluctuations of the tides.

The dividing line between the tall, waving, yellow salt grass and the naked mud flat was as sharp as if cut by a dike's spade, and it was fringed by a close brown tangle of grass roots which seemed to feel outward over the baked mud and then curl back upon themselves in apprehension.

Close to the foot of the moldering post, where this fringe half-encircled it, appeared suddenly a pointed brownish head, with tiny ears and a pair of little, bright, beadlike eyes set very close together. The head was thrust cautiously forth from the mouth of a narrow tunnel under the grass roots. The sharp overhung muzzle, with nostrils dilating and quivering, interrogated the perilous outer air; the head eyes searched the sky, the grass fringe, the baking open of the flat. There was no danger in sight; but just in front, some five or six feet distant, a gaudy caterpillar on some bold venture bent was making his slow way across the scurfed mud, from one goose-tongue tuft to another.

The pointed head shot swiftly forth from the tunnel, followed by a ruddy brown body. Straight out across the bright naked space, and back again, like a darting shuttle, into the hole—and the too rashly adventuring caterpillar had disappeared.

A little way back from the edge of the flats a mottled brown marsh hawk was flying hither and thither. His wings were shorter and broader than those of most members of his swift, marauding race, and he flew flapping almost like a crow, instead of gliding, skimming, and soaring after the manner of his more aristocratic kindred. He flew close above the swaying grass tops, his head thrust downward and his hard, unwinking eyes peering fiercely down between the ranked coarse stems of the "broad leaf" grass. He quartered the meadow section by section, closely and methodically as a well handled setter. Once he dropped straight downward into the grass, abruptly as if he had been shot; and when, an instant later, he rose again, with a great buffeting of grass tops, he was clutching some tiny grey object in his talons. Had one been near enough to see, it would have proved, probably, to be a young shrew. Whatever it was, it was too small to be worth carrying off to his high perch on the dead pine tree beyond the ridge of the uplands. He flew with it to the open crest of the dike close by, where he tore it and swallowed it in savage gulps. Then, having wiped his beak on the sod, he resumed his assiduous quartering of the salt grass.

ABOUT this time the little brown pointed head with the bead eyes reappeared in the mouth of the tunnel by the foot of the post. Everything seemed safe. The samphire and the goose-tongue tufts, palely glimmering in the sun, were full of salt loving, heat loving insects. Warily the ruddy brown body behind the pointed head slipped forth from the tunnel and darted to the nearest tuft where it began



The Murderous Crow Stabbed This Way and That.

nosing sharply and snapping up the small game.

The marsh mouse was a sturdy little figure, about six inches in length, with a dull chestnut-brown back sprinkled with black hairs, shading downward through warm grey to a delicate fawn-coloured belly. Its shoulders and short fore legs were heavily molded, showing the digger of tunnels, and its fore paws moved with the swift precise facility of hands. The tiny ears were set flat and tight to the head, and the broad based skull over the triangular muzzle gave an impression of pugnacious courage, very unlike that of the wood mouse or the house mouse. This expression was more than justified by the fact; for the marsh mouse, confident in his punishing little jaws and distrustful of his agility, had a dangerous propensity to stay and fight when he ought to be running away. It was a propensity that, owing to the abundance of his enemies, would have led speedily to the extermination of his race, but for the amazing and unrelenting fecundity that dwelt in his blood.

For all his courage, however, there were some foes that he had no inclination to meet and face—even he, one of the biggest and strongest of his kind. As he glanced aside from his nosing in the samphire tufts, he caught sight of a broad black splotch of shadow, sweeping up the baked surface of the flat at terrific speed.

He did not look up. He had no need to. Only too well he knew what was casting that sinister shadow. Though agility was not supposed to be his strong point, his movement as he shot across the open from the samphire tuft to the mouth of his tunnel was almost too quick to follow. He gained the root fringed door just in time. As his frantic, cringing hind quarters disappeared into the hole, the great talons of the pouncing hawk plunged into the root fringe, closing and clutching so savagely that the mouth of the tunnel was obliterated. Grass roots, however, were not what those rending talons wanted, and the great hawk, rising angrily, flapped off to the other side of the dike.

WITHIN the tunnel the brown mouse ran on desperately, as if he felt those fatal talons still reaching after him. The tunnel was not quite in darkness; for here and there a gleam of light came filtering through the roots that formed its roof, and here and there a round opening gave access to the yellow-green world among the big stiff grass stalks. The floor was smooth from the feet and teeth of countless other marsh mice, water voles, and mole shrews. To right and left went branching off innumerable side tunnels and galleries, an apparently inextricable maze. But the brown mouse raced straight on, back from the water side, deep into the heart of the marsh, anxious only to put himself as far as possible from the scene of his horrid adventure.

Running thus suddenly, he bumped hard into a little wayfarer who was journeying in the opposite direction. The tunnel was so narrow that only by the use of a certain circumspection and consideration could two travellers pass each other comfortably. Now, the stranger was a mole shrew, much smaller than the brown mouse, but of a temper as unpleasant as that of an angry buffalo. That the mouse should come butting into him in that rude fashion was an indignity not to be tolerated. Gnashing his long chisel-like teeth, he grappled blindly, and rent the brown mouse's ear to ribbons. But this was a mistake on his part, a distinct error of judgment. The brown mouse was no slim timorous barn mouse or field mouse, no slow and clumsy mole. He was a fighter, and with strength to back his pugnacity. He caught the angry shrew by the neck, bit him mercilessly, shook him limp, trod him under foot, and raced on. Not until he reached his snug nest in the burrow at the foot of the dike did he quite regain his equanimity.

Just about this time there came a succession of heavy southwest gales, which piled up the water into the funnel-like head of the bay, dammed back the rivers, and brought a series of high tides. Tides so high were quite unseasonable, and caught the swarming little tunnel runners of the salt marsh unprepared. As the first flood came lapping up over the sun baked flats, covering the samphire tufts, setting all awash the root fringes of the grass, and sliding noiselessly into the tunnels, there was a wild scurrying, and a faint, elusive clamour of squeaks came murmuring thinly up through the grass. Myriads of brown and orange grasshoppers, beetles black and green and blue and red, with here and there a sleek grub, here and there a furry caterpillar, began to climb the long stiff grass stalks. The battalions of mice and voles and shrews, popping up indignantly through the skylights of the tunnels, swept unanimously toward the barrier of the dike. Everyone of them knew quite well that to the sweet meadows beyond the dike the peril of the tide could not pursue them.

The big brown marsh mouse, as it chanced, was asleep at the bottom of his burrow. Stealing up between the grass stems, a chill douche slipped in upon him. Startled and choking, he darted up the steep slope of his gallery and out into the wet turmoil. He was an expert swimmer; but he liked to choose his own time for the exercise of his skill. This was not one of those times. For a second he sat upon his sturdy little haunches, squeaking angrily and surveying the excitement. Then, shaking his fur free of the few drops of water that clung to it in tiny globules, he joined the scurrying migrant throngs swarming over the dike.

Along the dike top the migrants were running the gauntlet with death. With the first invasion of the tide across the flats all the marsh hawks of the neighbourhood, some four or five, had gathered to the hunt, knowing well just what the flood would do for them. Also many crows had come. At intervals along the crest of the dike stood the hawks, with wings half spread, screaming excitedly, clutching at their victims, and devouring them with unlordly haste. Two already gorged, were flapping away heavily toward the forest clad inland ridges, carrying limp trophies in their talons. As for the crows, there were perhaps two score of them, all cawing noisily, flying low along the crest of the dike, alighting delicately from time to time to stab right and left with their dagger-like beaks.

THE big brown marsh mouse, wise with experience and many escapes, took this all in as he mounted the slope of the dike. Marking a hawk just above him, he doubled nimbly back, jumping over half a dozen blindly blundering fugitives. Some ten feet farther along he again ascended. As he came over the crest, in a mob of shrews and smaller mice, he saw a crow just dropping on him. The eyes of the crow, impish and malevolent, were fixed not on him, but on a small shrew close at his side.

Imagining himself, however, the object of attack, the brown mouse fell into a rage. Darting upward, he fixed his long teeth in the black marauder's thigh, just above the leg joint, and pulled him down into the scurrying stream of rodents. With a squeak of rage and alarm, the crow struck out savagely. His murderous beak stabbed this way and that in the crowd,