

The School Trail

The Story of an Ordinary Boy and an Ordinary Woodchuck

Written for The Western Home Monthly by H. Mortimer Batten

From the settlement the trail led for two miles or so through the scented woods of birch and maple, till at length the woods on the left gave way, and if one looked carefully one saw the roof of a wooden shanty rising from the entanglement of vines and flowers. It was here that the Boy lived, and each morning and evening his path to and from school lay through the scented birch and maple woods.

It was a very ordinary trail, and most people would have found it hot and tedious, but not so the Boy. His naked feet made no sound upon the gravel; he knew just where to stoop low, and where to peep quickly over the crude snake fence, and to him the daily journey was one of unlimited interests.

Firstly there was the stagnant little pool, from which issued the bellowing of brilliant green and golden frogs, accompanied sometimes by a soft whistling noise that came from among the rushes, but always ceased directly he drew near. For weeks the whistling noise troubled him, till at length an old woodsman told him that it was made by the "spring squeaker." The woodsman was content to let it rest at that, retorting doggedly that "spring squeakers" were "spring squeakers," but the creatures themselves remained a myth.

Then there was the beaver dam. No beavers had been seen there for at least five years, but the fact that the place was associated with beavers gave the Boy fresh thrills of anticipation every time he approached it. Also, at a bend of the road, lay the body of a skunk, which, with the characteristic stupidity of its kind had allowed itself to be run over in the early spring. It was not a pleasant skunk as the year proceeded, but when its remains finally sank into the earth, the Boy felt that life had lost one of its sweetest charms.

But the dearest corner of all was that at which the forest had been cleared for the space of fifty yards, and someone had planted out a buckwheat patch. From the centre of the patch rose the jagged rampike of a basswood, perhaps five feet in height, and if one approached silently one was almost sure to see a large tawny animal seated motionless upon it—so motionless, indeed, that unless one had eyes that were keen the creature appeared as part of the stump.

This animal was fully the size of a rabbit, though in appearance it was more like a cross between a guinea pig and a water vole. Its front teeth were long and chiselled, and gave it a strangely ferocious appearance, while so plump and portly was its person that one could not look upon it without being impressed by a sense of awe. It was, in fact, an old buck woodchuck—a flat-faced, fat-headed woodchuck, whose sole ambitions were to overeat himself, then sleep it off in the sun.

The Boy knew just how to approach him, but it was not very long before the youngster learnt that even a woodchuck had its moods. With catapult ready he would creep up behind the fence, and though sometimes the animal would drop from its perch almost before he loosened the elastic, at other times it would sit still without flinching while the missiles splintered chunks of wood from under its illustrious nose. Kind mother nature must have told off a special fairy to guard that woodchuck, for though the shooting became a routine affair no harm befell his paunch and portly person.

It was with a sense of awe that the Boy each day approached the rampike, while he himself regarded the shooting almost as an act of profanity. For the woodchuck had made a great impression upon his mind at an early stage of the proceedings. This happened when the Boy commissioned a still smaller boy to approach the rampike from the other side, thus getting between the animal and its hole. The small boy

did so, and when within three yards of the sleeping woodchuck he leapt to his feet with a ringing shout.

The result was startling. With a chattering snarl the woodchuck dropped from the rampike, a sinister vision of gnashing teeth and bristling fur. It rushed straight at the disturber, and as the Boy tripped over with a cry of dismay, the chisel-edged teeth fixed firmly upon the fringe of his knickers. But ere he could regain his feet the woodchuck was safely holed up and doubtless congratulating himself, with the assurance of long established bachelorhood, upon the efficiency of its methods in dealing with children.

"Bloodthirsty varmints, them woodchucks!" the Boy had said, as with one arm round his friend's neck he led the tearful youngster home. "I'll lame him when dad makes my catapult."

Thus the feud began, and since then it had simmered daily at a safe range, but the woodchuck was still intact.

One evening the Boy was late in returning from the settlement, and it was almost dark when he passed the rampike. As usual he peered over the

to destroy. Over a week went by before one evening the woodchuck again showed itself. There it sat, on the top of the rampike—but what a woodchuck! Almost all the fur of his face was gone, and huge tufts were missing from his lower person. For some reason the terrific fright of a week ago had caused him to shed his coat—an outward and visible sign that woodchucks often give when they have been in trouble.

After this occurrence the Boy felt a more friendly attitude towards the woodchuck, though he did not forego the daily pleasure of shooting at it when he thought the animal was again well enough to be shot at. As a matter of fact the mishap had only quickened the ordinary course of nature, for the fall was near at hand, and already the keen night frosts were setting in. Thus, in less than a fortnight, the woodchuck appeared in the full glory of his winter garments.

These garments were lighter in color than those he had just discarded, and as the landscape had not yet settled down to the even grey of winter he made a conspicuous landmark.

More than ever now the Boy wanted to kill that woodchuck, and he set to work methodically with traps and strychnine and snares. A family of field mice demolished the strychnine, and the Boy found them lying at the foot of the stump, their tiny legs aspiring heavenwards. The traps re-

trait of character. As though aware that physical exercise was the only cure for its stoutness during these strenuous times, it took to indulging in feats that were only fit for a squirrel to perform. The most strenuous of these was afforded by swarming up one side of the stump (he usually ascended by the inside, which was hollow) grunting and struggling as he went, and descending head first upon the other side.

This manoeuvre he would carry on for hours together, and since naturalists have agreed that only the very best climbing animals can safely descend a tree head foremost, like the squirrel and fisher, it will be understood that the feat was a difficult one. The wolverine, the porcupine and the cat are all good climbers, but they have not attained that high standard in the art of climbing to enable them to practise the supreme test of descending head foremost as a regular thing. Thus, before long, the stout and inactive woodchuck learnt the folly of over-estimating his own abilities. One day he fell with a sodden flop, and ere he could regain his bearings his tail encountered one of the traps, and the steel jaws instantly closed upon it.

The Boy leapt up, eager to secure his quarry, but gaining the trap he found only the skin of the tail awaiting him. The central bone had slipped out of it, as a sword slips from a sheath, and thus the woodchuck had escaped "by the skin of its tail," so to speak.

The Boy bore the tail to school in triumph, feeling that he had, at any rate, made one step towards the fulfilment of his great desire.

But man is bound to triumph in the end over the wild creature he has set his heart upon destroying, and too late, alas, he learns that the joy of the hunt is in the chase, while the kill is merely the sorrowful ending. Winter was drawing near, and fearful that the woodchuck would evade him after all, the Boy decided upon a fresh course. One dark and chilly evening he went to the house of a friend who possessed a .22 repeater rifle—a veritable millionaire of a boy! He spoke of the woodchuck, and the two sallied forth intent on bloodshed and murder. They found the old woodchuck seated on the stump, and they callously blew out his brains at a twenty-five yards range.

Not till the terrible deed was done did the Boy realize that the glorious summer's chase was ended. Since spring began the woodchuck had proved a source of endless amusement to him—had brightened his journeys to and from school, but now the hero of all those gallant escapades lay still and stark at his feet.

"Poor old woodchuck," said the Boy. "Seems a shame to have killed him, don't it? We'll bury him right here, under the stump."

And as he spoke a soft flake of snow settled upon his hand, and he knew that not only the woodchuck, but summer too was gone.

A Czarina of Russia, while taking a pleasure ride, saw a beautiful wild rose bush in full bloom by the roadside. She ordered a guard posted there to protect it, then forgot the incident. Long after the flowers had withered and the bush died, the sentry remained on guard.

Long after the freshness and even the life of their religious experience has gone, many people retain the form and go on with their forms and ceremonies as before.



Pacific Seals, Victoria Museum, B.C.

fence, but could see nothing of the woodchuck, though presently he heard strange sounds issuing from the direction of the stump, and peering through the dimness saw the buckwheat waving at the foot of it. Curiosity mastered his fears, and he crept up to investigate.

What he saw startled him. There at the foot of the stump, in an attitude of frenzied defence, sat the woodchuck. In front of it, dashing up and down in the grass, was a long slim animal, whose eyes burnt like living coals. This animal was a mink—one of the dreaded killers of the northern forests. So quickly it turned that one could scarcely follow its movements—backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, with snakelike activity, its terrible gaze fixed upon the woodchuck.

The Boy watched breathlessly, while the long slim animal wore a pathway in the grass, drawing nearer and nearer each moment to its prospective quarry. Exactly what effect the snakelike manoeuvres had upon the woodchuck is difficult to say. They seemed to paralyse him with fear—to turn him giddy till presently his bullet head began to tremble and nod. Then with a movement too quick to follow the mink fell upon him, jerking and dragging him roughly away from the rampike.

All the fight was gone out of the woodchuck, but at that moment the Boy joined in. He aimed a terrific blow at the mink, but ere the club descended the animal shot aside and vanished instantly through the buckwheat, while the woodchuck fled for his hole with more haste than dignity.

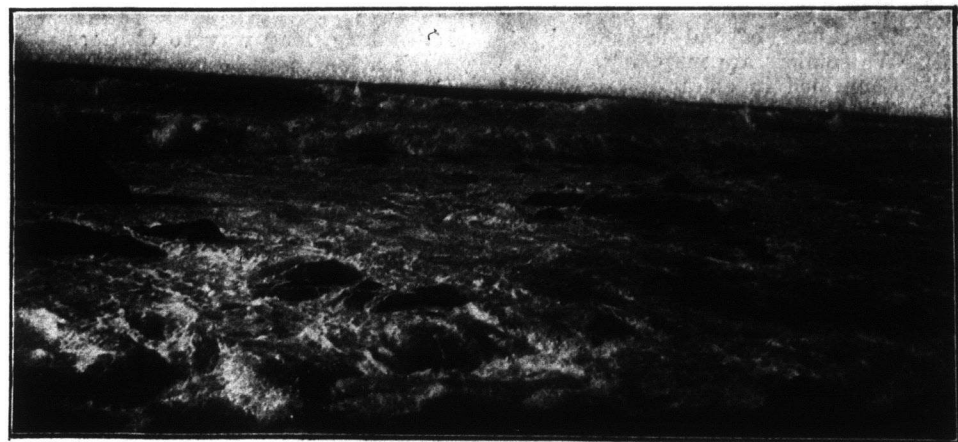
That night the Boy turned homewards happy in the knowledge that he had saved the animal he had sought so long

to destroy. Over a week went by before one evening the woodchuck again showed itself. There it sat, on the top of the rampike—but what a woodchuck! Almost all the fur of his face was gone, and huge tufts were missing from his lower person. For some reason the terrific fright of a week ago had caused him to shed his coat—an outward and visible sign that woodchucks often give when they have been in trouble.

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