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THE MORNING OF THE
SILVER FROST

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THE MORNING OF THE SILVER FROST

All night the big buck rabbit (he was really a hare, but the backwoodsman called him a rabbit) had been squatting on his form under the dense branches of a young fir-tree. The branches grew so low that their tips touched the snow all around him, giving him almost perfect shelter from the drift of the storm. The storm was one of icy rain, which everywhere froze instantly as it fell. All night it had been busy encasing the whole wilderness—every tree and bush and stump, and the snow in every open meadow or patch of forest glade—in an armor of ice, thick and hard and glassy clear. And the rabbit, crouching motionless save for an occasional forward thrust of his long, sensitive ears, had slept in unwonted security, knowing that none of his night-prowling foes would venture forth from their lairs on such a night.

At dawn the rain stopped. The cold deepened to a still intensity. The clouds lifted along the eastern horizon, and a thin, icy flood of saffron and palest rose washed down across the glittering desolation. The wilderness was ablaze on the instant with elusive tongues and points of colored light, jewelled flames not of fire but of frost. The world had become a palace of crystal and opal, a dream palace that would vanish at a touch, a breath. And indeed, had a wind arisen then to breathe upon it roughly, the immeasurable crystal would have shattered as swiftly as a dream, the too-rigid twigs and branches would have snapped and clattered down in ruin.

The rabbit came out from under his little ice-clad fir-tree; and for all his caution the brittle twigs broke about him as he emerged and tinkled around him sharply. The thin, light sound was so loud upon the stillness that he gave a startled

leap into the air, landing many feet away from his refuge. He slipped and sprawled, recovered his foot-hold and stood quivering, his great prominent eyes trying to look in every direction at once, his ears questioning anxiously to and fro, his nostrils twitching for any hint of danger.

There was no sight, sound, or scent, however, to justify his alarm and in a few seconds, growing bolder, he remembered that he was hungry. Close by he noticed the tips of a little birch sapling sticking up above the snow. These birch tips, in winter, were his favorite food. He hopped toward them—going circumspectly over the slippery surface—and sat up on his hind quarters to nibble at them. To his intense surprise and disappointment each twig and aromatic bud was sealed away, inaccessible, though clearly visible under a quarter inch of ice. Twig after twig he investigated with his inquiring, sensitive cleft nostrils, which met everywhere the same chill reception. Round and round the tantalizing branch he hopped, unable to make out the situation. At last, thoroughly disgusted, he turned his back on the treacherous birch bush, and made for another, some fifty yards down the glade.

As he reached it he stopped short, suddenly rigid, his head half turned over his shoulder, every muscle gathered like a spring wound up to extreme tension. His bulging eyes had caught a movement somewhere behind him, beyond the clump of twigs which he had just left. Only for a second did he remain thus rigid. Then the spring was loosed. With a frantic bound he went over and through the top of the bush. The shattered and scattered crystals rang sharply on the shining snow-crust. And he sped away in panic terror among the silent trees.

From behind the glassy twigs emerged another form, snow-white like the fleeing rabbit, and sped in pursuit—not so swiftly, indeed, as the rabbit, but with an air of implacable purpose that made the quarry seem already doomed. The pursuer was much smaller than his intended victim, very low on the legs, long-bodied, slender and sinuous; and he moved as if all compacted of whipcord muscle. The grace of his long, deliberate bounds was indescribable. His head

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was triangular in shape, the ears small and close-set, the black-tipped muzzle sharply pointed, with the thin black lips up-curved to show the white fangs as if in a ferocious but soundless snarl, and the eyes glowed red with bloodlust. Small as it was, there was something terrible about the tiny beast, and its pursuit seemed as inevitable as fate. At each bound its steel-hard claws scratched sharply on the crystal casing of the snow; and here and there an icicle from a snapped twig went ringing silverly across the gleaming surface.

For perhaps fifty yards the weasel followed straight upon the rabbit's track. Then he swerved to the right. He had lost sight of his quarry. But he knew its habits in flight. He knew it would run in a circle—and he took a chord of that circle, so as to head the fugitive off. He knew he might have to repeat this maneuver several times, but he had no doubts as to the result. In a second or two he also had disappeared among the asure shadows and pink-and-saffron gleams of the ice-clad forest.

For several minutes the glade was empty, still as death, with the bitter but delicate glories of the winter dawn flooding ever more radiantly across it. On a sudden the rabbit appeared again—this time at the opposite side of the glade. He was running irresolutely now, with little aimless leaps to this side and to that; and his leaps were short and lifeless, as if his nerve power were getting paralyzed. About the middle of the glade he seemed to give up altogether, as if conquered by sheer panic. He stopped, hesitated, wheeled about, and crouched flat upon the naked snow, trembling violently, and staring, with eyes that started from his head, at the point in the woods from which he had just emerged.

A second later the grim pursuer appeared. He saw his victim awaiting him. But he did not hurry his pace by a hair's-breadth. With the same terrible deliberation he approached. Only his jaws opened, his long fangs glistened bare. The blood-red globule of light glowed redder at the back of his eyes.

One more of those inexorable bounds and he would have been at his victim's throat. The rabbit screamed.

At that instant, with a hissing sound, a dark shadow dropped out of the air. It struck the rabbit. He was enveloped in a dreadful flapping of wings. Iron talons, that clutched and bit like the jaws of a trap, seized him by the back. But now he struggled convulsively, no longer submissive to his doom, the hypnotic spell cast upon by the weasel being broken by the shock of the great hawk's unexpected attack.

But the weasel was not the stuff or temper to let his prey be snatched thus from his jaws. Cruel and wanton assassin though he was, ever rejoicing to kill for the lust of killing long after his hunger was satisfied, he nevertheless had the courage of a wounded buffalo. A mere darting silver of white, he sprang straight into the blinding confusion of those great wings.

He secured a hold just under one wing, where the armour of feathers was thinnest, and began to gnaw inward with his keen fangs. With a startled cry the hawk freed her talons from the rabbit's back and clutched frantically at her assailant. The rabbit, writhing out from under the struggle, went leaping off into cover, bleeding copiously but carrying no fatal hurt. He had recovered his wits, and had no idle curiosity as to how the battle between his enemies would turn out.

The hawk, for all her great strength and the crushing superiority of her weapons, had a serious disadvantage of position. The weasel, maintaining his deadly grip and working inward like a bulldog, had hunched up his lithe little body so that she could not reach it with her talons. She tore furiously at his back with her rending beak, but the amazingly tough, rubbery muscles resisted even that weapon to a certain degree. At last, securing a grip with her beak upon her adversary's thigh, she managed to pull the curled-up body out almost straight and so gained hold upon it with one set of talons.

That grip was crushing, irresistible, but it was too far back to be immediately fatal. The weasel's lithe body lengthened out under the agonizing stress of it, but it could not pull his jaws from their hold. They continued inexorably

their task of gnawing inward, ever inward, seeking a vital spot.

The struggle went on in silence, as far as the voices of both combatants were concerned. But the beating of the hawk's wings resounded on the glassy-hard surface of the snow. As the struggle shifted ground, those flapping wings came suddenly in contact with a bush, whose iced twigs were brittle as glass and glittering like the prisms of a great crystal candelabra. There was a shrill crash and a thin, ringing clatter as the twigs shattered off and spun flying across the crust.

The sound carried far through the still, iridescent spaces of the wilderness. It reached the ears of a foraging fox, who was tip-toeing with dainty care over the slippery crust. He turned hopefully to investigate, trusting to get a needed breakfast out of some fellow marauder's difficulties. At the edge of the glade he paused, peering through a bush of crystal fire to size up the situation before committing himself to the venture.

Desperately preoccupied though she was, the hawk's all-seeing eyes detected the red outlines of the fox through the bush. With a frantic beating of her wings she lifted herself from the snow. The fox darted upon her with a lightning rush and a shattering of icicles. He was just too late. The fox leaped straight upward, hoping to pull her down; but his clashing jaws just failed to reach her talons. Laboring heavily in her flight, she made off, striving to gain a tree-top, where she might perch and once more give her attention to the gnawing torment which clung beneath her wing.

The fox, being wise, and seeing that the hawk was in extreme straits, ran on beneath her as she flew, gazing upward expectantly.

The weasel meanwhile, with that deadly concentration of purpose which characterizes his tribe, paid no heed to the fact that he was journeying through the air. And he knew nothing of what was going on below. His flaming eyes were buried in his foe's feathers. His jaws were steadily working inward toward her vitals.

Just at the edge of the glade, immediately over the top of

a branchy young paper-birch which shot a million colored points of light in the sunrise, the end came. The fangs of the weasel met in the hawk's wildly throbbing heart. With a choking burst of scarlet blood it stopped.

Stone dead, the marauder of the air crashed down through the slim birch-top, with a vast scattering of gleams and crystals. With wide-sprawled wings she thudded down upon the snow-crust, almost under the fox's complacent jaws. The weasel's venomous head, covered with blood, emerged triumphant from the mass of feathers.

As the victor writhed free, the fox, pouncing upon him with a careless air, seized him by the neck, snapped it neatly and tossed the long limp body aside upon the snow. He had no use for the rank, stringy meat of the weasel when better fare was at hand. Then he drew the hawk close to the trunk of the young birch, and lay down to make a leisurely breakfast.