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By CHARLES G.D. ROBERTS

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August
1905

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THE LITTLE PEOPLE OF THE
SYCAMORE

Roberts' Animal Stories

6 vols., thin 12mo, cloth, illustrated by Charles
Livingston Bull, per vol., \$0.50

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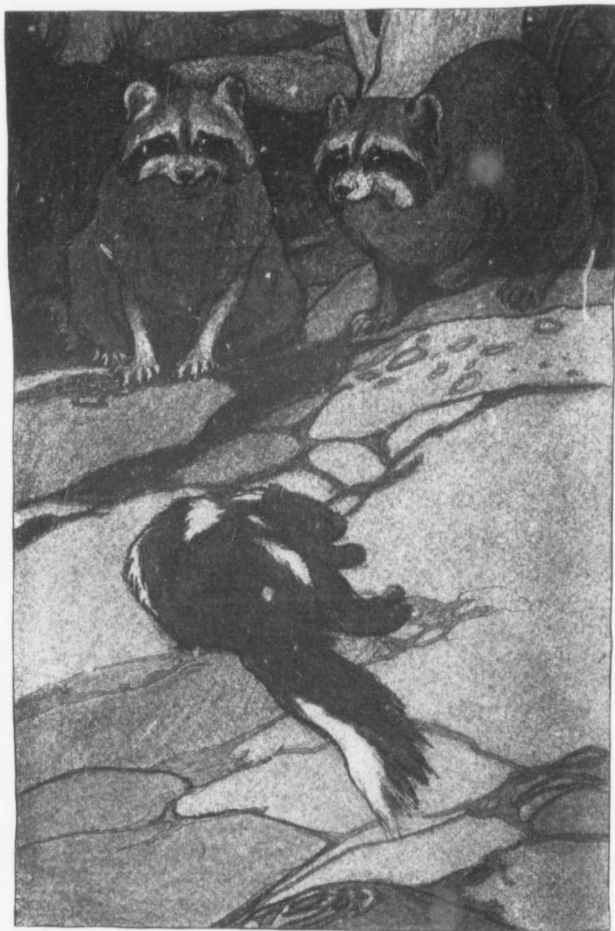


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"THEY FOUND THE BODY OF THE SKUNK."

Roberts' Animal Stories

The Little People of
the Sycamore

BY

CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

Author of "The Watchers of the Trails," "The Kindred
of the Wild," "The Heart of the Ancient Wood,"
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The Little People of the Sycamore

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THE LITTLE PEOPLE OF THE SYCAMORE



I.

THE fantastic old sycamore, standing alone on the hill, thrust out its one gaunt limb across the face of the moon. It was late April, and the buds not yet swollen to bursting. On the middle of the limb, blackly silhouetted against the golden disk, crouched a raccoon, who sniffed the spring air and scanned the moon-washed spaces. From the marshy spots at the foot of the hill, over toward the full-fed, softly rushing brook, came the high piping of the frogs, a voice of poignant, indeterminate desire.

Having reconnoitred the night to her satisfaction, the raccoon returned to a deep hole in the sycamore, and hastily touched with her pointed nose each in turn of her five, blind, furry little ones. Very little they were, half-cub, half-kitten in appearance, with their long noses, long tails, and bear-like feet. They huddled luxuriously together in the warm, dry darkness of the den, and gave little squeals in response to their mother's touch. In her absence they had been voiceless, almost moveless, lest voice or motion should betray them to an enemy.

Having satisfied herself as to the comfort of the furry children, the old raccoon nimbly descended the tree, ran lightly down the hill, and made for the nearest pool, where the frogs were piping. She was a sturdy figure, yet lithe and graceful, about the bulk of the largest cat, and with a tail almost the length of her

body. Her legs, however, were much shorter and more powerful than those of a cat; and when, for a moment of wary observation, she stood still, her feet came down flatly, like those of a bear, though in running she went on her toes, light as the seed of the milkweed. Her head was much like a bear's in shape, with the nose very long and pointed; and a bar of black across the middle of her face gave a startling intensity to her dark, keen, half-malicious eyes. Her fur, very long and thick, was of a cloudy brown; and the black rings on her gray tail stood out sharply in the moonlight. Both in expression and in movement, she showed that strange mixture of gaiety, ferocity, mischievousness, and confident sagacity, which makes the raccoon unlike in character to all the other wild kindreds.

Though she was on important affairs

intent, and carrying the cares of the family, she was not too absorbed to feel the glad impulse of the spring; and for sheer exuberance of life she would go bounding over a stick or a stone, as if it were a tree or a boulder. Though life was a serious matter, she was prepared to get out of it all the fun there was to be had.

But when she neared the noisy pools she went stealthily enough. Nevertheless, for all her caution, the pipings ceased in that section of the pool when she was within two or three feet of the waterside; and in the little space of sudden silence, she knew that every small piper was staring at her with fixed, protruding eyes. On she went, straight out to the end of a half-submerged log, and there crouched flat, moveless as the log itself. She knew that if she only kept still long enough, she would come to be

regarded by the pool-dwellers as nothing more than a portion of the log. Meanwhile the high chorus from the adjoining pools swelled ever louder and shriller, as the small musicians voiced the joy of spring.

For perhaps ten minutes the space about the waiting raccoon on the log appeared lifeless. Then one little black spot, which had seemed like a lump of mud against a dead grass-stalk, moved; then another, and another, and another — all over the pool. Pale throats began to throb rhythmically; and the pipings once more pulsed forth buoyant and strong. The frogs had utterly forgotten the intruder, and their bulging eyes were no longer fixed on the log. Nevertheless, as it chanced, there was not a single piper within reach of the watcher's paw.

The raccoon's eyes gleamed with intenser fire, but she never stirred. She

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knew that the price of a meal, to most of the wood-folk, was patience as untiring as a stone. Only her full, dark eyes, set in their bar of black, moved watchfully, searching the pallid spaces all about the log.

A moment more and her patience was rewarded. A big frog from the neighbour pool, unaware that there had been any intrusion here, came swimming up, on some errand of private urgency, and made directly for the log. The next instant, before he had any inkling of the imminence of doom, the raccoon's forepaw shot out like a flash. It was a wide-spread, flexible paw, like a little, black, lean hand, strong and delicate, the fingers tipped with formidable claws. It caught the swimming frog under the belly, swept him from the water, and threw him far up on to the shore. With a pounce, the raccoon was upon him; and

a snap of her strong teeth ended his struggles.

The raccoon was very hungry, but, unlike others of the hunting tribes, she did not fall instantly to her meal. The mauled victim was covered with bits of dried stubble and leaf and earth, which clung to its sticky skin and were most distasteful to her fastidious appetite. Picking it up in her jaws, she carried it back to the pool. There, holding it in her claws, she proceeded to wash it thoroughly, sousing it up and down till there was not a vestige of soilure to be found upon it. When quite satisfied that no washing could make it cleaner, she fell to and made her meal with relish.

But what was one frog to a raccoon with a family, a mother whose breast must supply five hungry little mouths? She ran over to the brook, and followed down its bank to a spot where it widened

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out and a strong eddy made up against the hither shore, washing a slope of gravel. Here, in the shallows, she heard a feeble flopping, and knew that a sick or disabled fish was making its last fight with fate. It was a large chub, which had evidently been hooked by some heedless trout-fisher farther up-stream, torn from the hook in anger because it was not a trout, and thrown back into the water, to survive or die as the water-fates should will. It turned on one side, revealing its white belly and torn gills; then, feeling itself washed ashore by the eddy, it gave one more feeble flop in the effort to regain the safe deeps. At this moment the raccoon, pouncing with a light splash into the shallows, seized it, and with a nip through the back-bone ended its misery.

Having eaten the fish, and daintily cleaned her fur, the raccoon ascended

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the bank, with the purpose of returning to her lair in the old sycamore. She stopped abruptly, however, as a new sound, very different from that of the frog chorus, fell upon her heedful ear. It was an excited, yelping whine; and presently she caught sight of a long-legged, plummy-tailed dog rushing wildly hither and thither, nose to earth, quartering the ground for fresh trails.

The raccoon knew the dog, from a distance, for the young, unbroken, brown Irish setter which had lately come to the neighbour farm. His qualities and capabilities, however, were, as yet, unknown to her. Though she knew herself more than a match for the average dog, and particularly for the small black and white mongrel which, up to a month ago, had been the only dog on the farm, she did not know just how dangerous the Irish setter might be. Therefore,

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though the light of battle flamed into her eyes, she considered her responsibilities, and looked around for a tree.

There was no tree near, so she turned, crouched close to the ground, and attempted to steal off unperceived. But as she turned the dog caught sight of her. At the same instant he also caught her scent. It was a new scent to him, a most interesting scent; and he rushed upon her, with streaming tail and a peal of joyously savage yelpings. The raccoon backed up against a granite rock, and stood at bay, her long, white teeth bared, her eyes fierce, fearless, and watchful.

The Irish setter was a wild, undisciplined pup, harebrained and headlong after the manner of his breed. Of raccoons and their capabilities he had had no experience. This small, crouching animal, under the rock in the moonlight,

seemed to promise an easy victory. He sprang upon her, open-mouthed, and snapped confidently at her neck.

All his big jaws got were a few hairs; for on the instant the raccoon had dodged. Her keen claws raked the side of his face, and her fine, punishing fangs tore a gash in his neck, dangerously near his throat. With a yelp of pain and terror he tore himself free of those deadly teeth and bounded out of reach. And the raccoon, silently triumphant, backed up again into her posture of defence against the rock.

But the Irish setter, in that half-minute, had learned a great deal about raccoons. He now refused to come within four or five feet of his small antagonist. He leaped up and down, snapping and barking, but had no more stomach for the actual encounter. His noisy threatenings, however, which did violence to

the silver magic of the night, soon brought an answer; and the black and white mongrel, barking in great excitement, rushed up to take a hand in the affray.

At the sight of the quietly desperate raccoon he stopped short. But his hesitation was from discretion, not from cowardice. He knew that the raccoon could master him. He took some sort of swift counsel, therefore, with the blustering setter; and then, having apparently received assurance of support, sprang boldly on the enemy.

There was a sharp tussle, a confusion of snapping, snarling, clawing, growling, and squealing; while the Irish setter, having reconsidered his promise to take a hand, contented himself with barking brave encouragement from a safe distance. At last the black and white mongrel, finding that he was getting

badly worsted and receiving no support, tried to draw away; and the raccoon, fearing to be dragged from her post of vantage against the rock, at once let him go. Both combatants were breathless and bleeding, and they eyed each other with the watchfulness born of respect.

The little mongrel now seemed to hold a second and more elaborate conference with the Irish setter. Possibly he conveyed his opinion of the latter's character, for the proud-plumed tail drooped disconsolately, and the loud-mouthed threatenings ceased. Just what new courage the sagacious mongrel might have succeeded in infusing into the volatile heart of his ally, just what plan of concerted action might have been evolved, to the ruin of the heroic little fighter under the rock, will never be known; for at this moment a second

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and larger raccoon came running swiftly and silently up the bank.

It was the mother 'coon's mate, who had heard the noise of combat where he was foraging by himself, far down the brook. At sight of this most timely reinforcement, the beleaguered raccoon made a sortie. Recognizing the weak point in the assailing forces, she darted straight upon the hesitating setter, and snapped at his leg.

This was quite too much for his jarred nerves, and with a howl, as if he already felt those white teeth crunching to the bone, the setter turned and fled. The black and white mongrel, highly disgusted, but realizing the hopelessness of the situation, turned and fled after him in silence. Then the triumphant raccoons touched noses in brief congratulation, and presently moved off to their hunting as if nothing had happened.

OF THE SYCAMORE 23

The wild kindred, as a rule, maintain a poise which the most extravagant adventures this side of death seldom deeply disturb.

II.

UP to this time, through the hungry weeks of late winter and the first thaws, the raccoons in the old sycamore had resisted the temptation of the farmer's hen-roosts. They knew that the wilderness hunting, though the most difficult, was safe, while any serious depredations at the farm would be sure to bring retaliation from that most crafty and dangerous creature, man. Now, however, after the fight with the dogs, a mixture of audacity with the desire for revenge got the better of them; and that same night, very late, when the moon was casting long, sharp shadows from the very rim of the horizon, they hurried through the belt of forest which separated their syc-

more from the cleared fields, and stole into the rear of the barn-yard.

The farm was an outpost, so to speak, of the settlements, on the debatable ground between the forces of the forest and the forces of civilization, and therefore much exposed to attack. As the raccoons crept along behind the woodshed they smelt traces of a sickly pungent odour, and knew that other marauders had been on the ground not very long before. This made them bolder in their enterprise, for they knew that such depredations as they might commit would be laid to the account of the skunks, and therefore not likely to draw down vengeance upon the den in the sycamore. They killed a sitting hen upon her nest, feasted luxuriously upon her eggs and as much of herself as they could hold, and went away highly elated. For three successive nights they repeated

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their raid upon the fowl-house, each night smelling the pungent, choking scent more strongly, but never catching a glimpse of the rival marauder. On the fourth night, as they crossed the hillocky stump-lot behind the barns, the scent became overpowering, and they found the body of the skunk, where fate had overtaken him, lying beside the path. They stopped, considered, and turned back to their wildwood foraging; and through all that spring they went no more to the farmyard, lest they should call down a similar doom upon themselves.

As spring ripened and turned to summer over the land, food grew abundant in the neighbourhood of the sycamore, and there was no temptation to trespass on man's preserves. There were grouse nests to rifle, there were squirrels, hare, wood-mice, chipmunks, to exercise all

the craft and skill of the raccoons. Also there were the occasional unwary trout, chub, or suckers, to be scooped up upon the borders of the brook. And once, more in hate than in hunger, the old mother raccoon had the fierce joy of eradicating a nest of weasels, which she found in a pile of rocks. She had a savage antipathy to the weasel tribe, whose blood-lust menaces all the lesser wood-folk, and whose teeth delight to kill, after hunger is sated, for the mere relish of a taste of quivering brain or a spurt of warm blood. The raccoon carried more scars from the victory over the weasels than she had to remind her of the scuffle with the dogs. But she had the nerve that takes punishment without complaint, and the scars troubled her little.

Though the mother raccoon, on the whole, had the more strenuous life to lead, by reason of her more intimate responsi-

bilities to those eager-eyed little ones in the sycamore, her mate, nevertheless, did not pass his days and nights without excitement. Less inclined to look for trouble, he was also less inclined to avoid it when it came his way. And one morning he encountered it in an unexpected form. As a rule, the wild kindreds, when at all nearly matched, treat one another's rights with respect, and take care not to get involved in needless struggles. The strong will defer to the strong, rather than press a doubtful question. But once in awhile this good rule slips observance.

It chanced one misty morning, just on the edge of sunrise, that the old raccoon took himself down to the lower reaches of the brook, below the farm, to fish. At this point the brook was deep and broad, almost a dead-water. The mist lay thick upon it from bank to bank, coiling and

writhing, and sometimes thinning to show the brown-black, glassy tide beneath. Where a log, stranded by a little, gravelly landing, juttet far out into the dark water, was a favourite fishing spot of the old raccoon, in the hours when farm-hands and teams were not around to interrupt.

Toward this point the raccoon was moving noiselessly from the fields. But at the same time another stealthy wayfarer was approaching it also, moving down along the very edge of the stream. The stranger was a dark, sinuous animal, with a pointed head, its piercing eyes bead-black, with a fleeting glint of red behind them. It was about two feet in length, with extremely short legs. As it ran, its movements as soundless and effortless as those of a snake, it humped its long, lithe body in almost snaky curves. Stealthy, wary, and bold,

it searched the water's edge for chance small food, like snails and water-bugs, the smooth current itself for carelessly passing fish, and the underbrush up the bank for possible enemies, or some prey not to be captured without a struggle.

A little way ahead, close to the water's edge and on the broken mud just beside the landing-place, something round, and of a delicate greenish white, caught the mink's eye. Against the soft brown and deep gray of the mud the object shone brilliantly and looked absurdly out of place, as if it were some lost jewel. It was, indeed, a treasure in its way, being a duck egg, either dropped there by a careless mother, too preoccupied to journey to her nest, or left by a muskrat disturbed in his poaching. The mink was interested, and darted forward with snakelike swiftness to secure the prize.

Meanwhile, down the path to the landing came the old raccoon, stepping daintily. He was about the same length as the mink, but of a stockier build, and looking very much heavier by reason of his bushy fur. At sight of the big egg shining down there by the water, his dark, keen eyes sparkled with satisfaction. He loved eggs. With a hurried, scuffling, playful scramble, he came down the bank and reached the water's edge. But to his indignant astonishment, he found himself not the first.

The big mink was just ahead. He reached the egg, laid a paw of possession upon it, and turned with a thin, snarling note of defiance as the raccoon came down the bank. The latter paused a half-second to note the threatening fangs and malign eyes of his slim adversary. Then with that brisk gaiety which the raccoon seems to carry into the most

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serious affairs of his life, and particularly into his battles, he ran to the encounter.

Quick as he was, however, his snaky antagonist was quicker. Doubling back upon himself, the mink avoided that confident and dangerous rush, and with a lightning snap fixed hold upon the enemy's neck. But it was not, by an inch, the hold he wanted; for his deadly teeth sank not, as he had planned, into the raccoon's throat, but into the great, tough muscle a little higher up. He dared not let go to try again for the deadlier hold, but locked his jaws and whipped his long body over the other's back, hoping thus to evade his antagonist's teeth.

The raccoon had lost the first point, and his big eyes blazed with pain and anger. His dauntless spirit was not in the least dismayed. Shaking the long

black body from his back, he swung himself half-round and caught his enemy's slim loins between his jaws. It was a cruelly punishing grip; and under the stress of it the mink lashed out so violently that the two, still holding on with inexorable jaws, rolled over into the water, smashing as they fell the prize that was the object of contention.

This turn of affairs suited the mink well enough. A hunter of fish in their deep holes, he was almost as much at home in the water as the fish themselves. But the raccoon was not suited at all. With a splutter he relinquished his hold on the mink's loins; and the latter, instantaneous to seize any advantage, snapped again for the throat. But again he miscalculated the alertness of the raccoon's sturdy muscles. The latter had turned his head the instant the mink's jaws relaxed, and the two

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gnashed teeth in each other's faces, neither securing a hold. The next moment the raccoon had leaped to land, and turned in menacing readiness as he did so.

The egg being broken, there was no longer anything to fight about; but the mink's blood was up. His eyes glowed like little, radiant carbuncles; his long, dark shape looked very fit and dangerous; and his whole appearance was that of vindictive fury. The raccoon, on the other hand, though a bit bedraggled from his ducking, maintained his gay, casual air, as if enjoying the fight too much to be thoroughly enraged. When the mink again darted upon him, straight and swift as a snake strikes, he seemed to meet the attack with a curious little, disconcerting pirouette. In the next instant the two were once more locked in a death-grapple.

For some moments it would have been hard to discern which one was getting the advantage, so closely were the squirming black body and the jerking gray one intertwined. Then it could be seen that the raccoon was using his clever, handlike paws as a bear might, to hold his foe down to the punishment. Both contestants were severely bitten, and bleeding freely; but the mink was getting slow, while the raccoon was as cheerfully alert as ever. At length the mink tore free, and made one more desperate reach for his favourite throat hold. But this time the raccoon dodged. He danced aside, flashed back,—and caught the mink fairly under the jaw. Then, bracing himself, he shook his foe triumphantly, as a terrier might; and in a minute or less the long black shape lay moveless on the mud.

Presently the raccoon let go of the

unresisting body and stood over it expectantly. Having bitten it several times and elicited no response, he suffered himself to feel assured of his victory. Then, pulling it disdainfully into a heap with his forepaws, he turned his back upon it, gave a regretful sniff at the remains of the broken egg, and ran cheerfully up the bank into the underbrush.

When the five young raccoons came down from the sycamore and began to depend upon their own foraging, it soon became necessary to extend the range, as game grew shyer and more scarce. Even chub and suckers learn something in course of time; and as for wood-mice and chipmunks, under such incentive as an active family of raccoons can give them, they attain to a truly heartless cunning in the art of making their enemies go hungry. Hanging together with an intense clannishness, the raccoon

family would make expeditions of such length as to keep often for two or three days at a time away from the home in the sycamore.

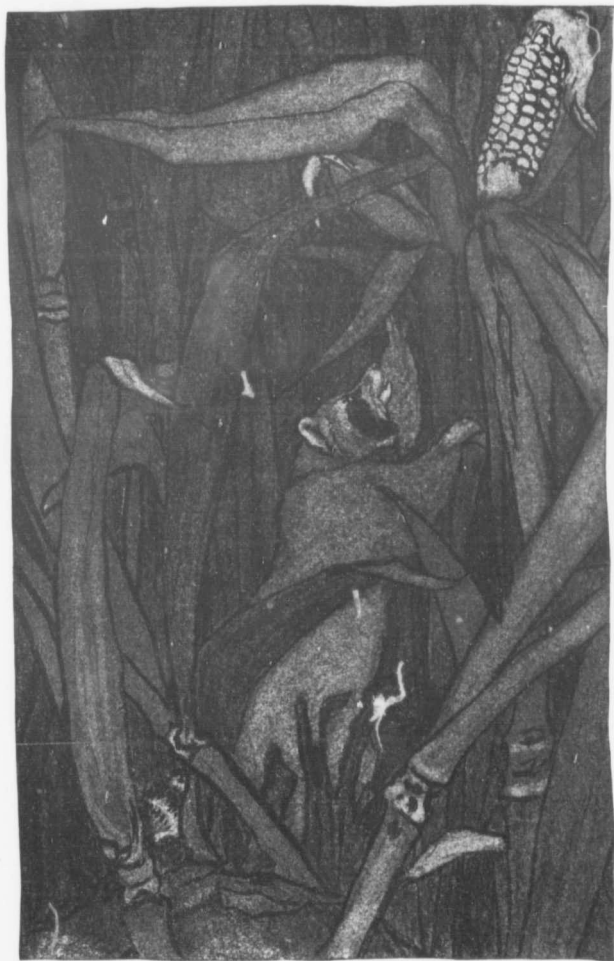
At last, one night in late summer, when the stars seemed to hang low among the warm and thick-leaved trees, and warm scents steamed up wherever the dew was disturbed by furry feet, the raccoons wandered over to the edge of the corn-field. It chanced that the corn was just plumping to tender and juicy fulness. The old raccoons showed the youngsters what richness of sweetness lay hidden within the green wrappings of the ears; and forthwith the whole clan fell to feasting recklessly.

In regard to the ducks and chickens of the farm, the raccoons were shrewd enough to know that any extensive depredations upon them would call down the swift vengeance of the farmer-folk;

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but they could not realize that they were in mischief when they helped themselves to these juicy, growing things. The corn, though manifestly in some way involved with the works of man, seemed nevertheless to them a portion of nature's liberality. They ran riot, therefore, through the tall, well-ordered ranks of green, without malice or misgiving; and in their gaiety they were extravagant. They would snatch a mouthful out of one sweet ear, then out of another, spoiling ten for one that they consumed.

Night after night they came to the corn-field, and waxed fat on their plunder, till at last, when they had done the damage of a herd of oxen, one silvery night they were discovered. The young farmer, with his hired boy and the hare-brained Irish setter, chanced to come by through the woods, and to notice that



"THEY RAN RIOT . . . THROUGH THE TALL, WELL-ORDERED
RANKS OF GREEN "



the corn was moving although there was no wind. The raccoons were promptly hunted out; and one of the young ones, before they could gain the shadowy refuge of the trees, was killed with sticks,—the setter contributing much noise, but keeping at a very safe distance. When the affray was over, and the young farmer, going through the field, found out what damage had been done, he was eloquent with picturesque backwoods blasphemies, and vowed the extermination of the whole 'coon clan. With the aid of the setter, who now, for the first time, was able to prove the worth of his breeding, he tracked the escaping marauders through the woods, and at last, after a long hunt, located their lair in the old sycamore-tree on the hill. At this his wrath gave way to the hunter's elation. His eyes sparkled.

“To-morrow night,” said he, to the

hired boy, "we'll have a reg'lar old-fashioned 'coon hunt!"

Then, whistling off the setter, who was barking, jumping, and whining ecstatically at the foot of the sycamore-tree, he turned and strode away through the moon-shadows of the forest, with the dog and the hired boy at his heels. The diminished raccoon family, with beating hearts and trembling nerves, snuggled down together into the depths of the sycamore, and dreamed not of the doom preparing for them.

III.

ON the following night, soon after moonrise, they came. Stealthily, though there was little need of stealth, they crept, Indian file, around the branchy edges of the fields, through the wet, sweet-smelling thickets. The hunter's fever was upon them, fierce and furtive. They came to the corn-field — to find that the raccoons had paid their visit, made their meal, and got away at the first faint signal of the approach of danger. With an outburst of excited yelpings, the dogs took up the hot trail, and the hunters made straight through the woods for the sycamore-tree.

It was a party of five. With the

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young farmer, the hired boy, the hare-brained Irish setter, and the wise little black and white mongrel, came also the young schoolmaster of the settlement, who boarded at the farm. A year out of college, and more engrossed in the study of the wild creatures than ever he had been in his books, he had joined the hunt less from sympathy than from curiosity. He had outgrown his boyhood's zeal for killing things, and he had a distinct partiality for raccoons; but he had never taken part in a 'coon hunt, and it was his way to go thoroughly into whatever he undertook. He carried a little .22 Winchester repeater, which he had brought with him from college, and had employed, hitherto, on nothing more sentient than empty bottles or old tomato-cans.

Now it chanced that not all the raccoon family had made their escape to



"BY THE TIME THE HUNTERS CAME UP THE MONGREL HAD
DRAWN OFF."

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the deep hole in the sycamore. The old male, who was rather solitary and moody in his habits at this season, had followed the flight of the clan for only a short distance; and suddenly, to their doubtful joy and complete surprise, the two dogs, who were far ahead of the hunters, overtook him. After a moment's wise hesitation, the black and white mongrel joined battle, while the setter contributed a great deal of noisy encouragement. By the time the hunters came up the mongrel had drawn off, bleeding and badly worsted; and the angry raccoon, backed up against a tree, glared at the newcomers with fierce eyes and half-open mouth, as if minded to rush upon them.

The odds, however, were much too great for even so dauntless a soul as his; and when the enemy were within some ten or twelve paces, he turned and

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ran up the tree. In the first fork he crouched, almost hidden, and peered down with one watchful eye.

The young farmer was armed with an old, muzzle-loading, single-barrelled duck-gun. He raised it to his shoulder and took aim at the one bright eye gleaming from behind the branch. Then he lowered it, and turned to his boarder with a mixture of politeness and rustic mockery.

"Your first shot!" said he. "I'll shoot the critter, after you've tried that there pea-shooter on him!"

"He's licked the dogs in fair fight," said the schoolmaster. "Let's let him off!"

The farmer swore in unaffected amazement. "Why that's the — — that does more damage than all the rest put together!" he exclaimed. "You'll see me fix *him*. But you take first shot,

Mister Chase. I want to see the peashooter work!"

The young schoolmaster saw his prestige threatened,—and with no profit whatever to the doomed raccoon. Prestige is nowhere held at higher premium than in the backwoods. It is the magic wand of power. The young man fired, a quick, but careful shot; and on the snappy, insignificant report, the raccoon fell dead from the tree.

"You *kin* shoot some!" remarked the farmer, picking up the victim, and noting the bullet-hole in its head. And the hired boy spread his mouth in a huge, broken-toothed grin of admiration.

The old sycamore stood out lonely in the flood of the moonlight. Not a raccoon was in sight; but the round, black doorway to their den was visible against the gray bark, beside the crotch of the one great limb. The frantic yelpings of

the dogs around the foot of the tree were proof enough that the family were at home. The hunters, after the ancient custom of men that hunt 'coons, had brought an axe with them; but the hired boy, who carried it, looked with dismay at the huge girth of the sycamore.

"Won't git that chopped down in a week!" said he, with pardonable depreciation of his powers.

"Go fetch another axe!" commanded the farmer, seating himself on a stump, and getting out his pipe.

"It would be a pity to cut down that tree, the biggest sycamore in the country, just to get at a 'coon's nest!" said the young schoolmaster, willing to spare both the tree and its inhabitants.

The farmer let his match go out while he eyed the great trunk.

"Never mind the axe," said he, calling back the hired boy. "Fetch me the new

bindin' rope out of the spare manger; an' a bunch of rags, and some salmon-twine. An' stir yerself!"

Relieved of his anxiety as to the chopping, the boy sped willingly on his errand. And the young schoolmaster realized, with a little twinge of regret, that the raccoon family was doomed,

When the boy came back, the farmer took the bunch of rags, smeared them liberally with wet gunpowder, and tied them into a loose, fluffy ball, on the end of the length of salmon-twine. Then, having thrown the rope over the limb of the sycamore, he held both ends, and sent the hired boy up into the tree, where he sat astride, grinning and expectant, and peered into the well-worn hole.

"Now," said the farmer, tossing the ball of rags up to him, "light this 'ere spittin' devil, an' lower it into the hole, an' we'll see what's what!"

As he spoke, he turned, and gave the schoolmaster a slow wink, which quickened the latter's expectations. The next moment the boy had set a match to the rags, and they were ablaze with wild sputterings and jets of red flame. Eagerly, but carefully, he lowered the fiery ball into the hole, paying out the string till it was evident that the tree was hollow almost down to the butt.

Suddenly there was a wild commotion of squeals, grunts, and scratchings, in the depths of the invaded hole. The sounds rose swiftly up the inside of the trunk. Then there was an eruption at the mouth of the hole. A confusion of furry forms shot forth, with such violence that the startled boy almost lost his balance. As it was, he backed away precipitately along the branch, amid derisive encouragement from his friends below.

Having eluded, for the moment, the flaming invader of their home, the raccoons paused on the limb to survey the situation.

"Fling 'em down to us," jeered the farmer, hugely amused at the boy's dismay.

The latter grinned nervously, and started forward as if to obey. But at this moment the raccoons made their decision. The dogs and men below looked more formidable than the hesitating boy astride of their branch. In a resolute line, their fierce old mother leading, they made for him.

The boy backed away with awkward alacrity, but still keeping his hold on the salmon-twine. Consequently, by the time he had nearly reached the end of the limb, the still sputtering fire-ball emerged from the hole in the crotch. At the sound of it behind them the

young raccoons turned in terror, and straightway dropped from the tree; but the old mother, undaunted, darted savagely upon her foe. The boy gave a cry of fear. The next instant there was a spiteful crack from the schoolmaster's little rifle. The old raccoon stopped, shrank, and rolled lifeless from the limb.

Meanwhile, the youngsters were in a *mêlée* with the two dogs. Though little more than three-fourths grown, they had courage; and so brave a front did they oppose to their enemies that for a few moments the dogs were cautious in attack. Then the black and white mongrel sprang in; and the big setter, realizing that these were no such antagonists as their parents had been, followed, and was astonished to learn that he could stand a bite from those sharp teeth and resist the impulse to howl and run away. In less time than it takes to

describe, one of the raccoons was shaken to death in the setter's great jaws, and then the other three scattered in flight.

One was overtaken in two seconds by the black and white mongrel, and bitten through the back. The second ran past the farmer, and was killed by a quick blow with his gun-barrel. The third, full of courage and resource, flew straight at the setter's throat, and so alarmed him that he jumped away. Then, seeing no tree within reach, and probably realizing that there was no escape by any ordinary course, he fled straight to the farmer.

The farmer, however, mistook this action for the ferocity of despair. He struck out with his gun-barrel, missed his aim, swore apprehensively, and caught the little animal a kick, which landed it within a couple of yards of the spot where stood the young schoolmaster, watching the scene with mingled interest

and pity. The latter's sympathies now went out warmly to this brave and sole survivor of the little people of the sycamore. His quick intuitions had understood the appeal which had been so cruelly repulsed.

For a second the young raccoon stood still where he had fallen, and his keen, dark eyes flashed a glance on each of his enemies in turn. Both dogs were now rushing upon him. The ever-imminent doom of the wild kindred was about to lay hold of him. He half-turned, as if to die fighting, then changed his mind, darted to the feet of the young school-master, ran up his trouser-leg, and confidently took refuge under his coat.

"Shake him off! Shake him off! A 'coon's bite is pizen!" shouted the farmer, in great excitement.

"Not much!" said the young school-master, with decision, gathering his coat

snugly around his panting guest. "This 'coon hunt's over. This little chap's coming home to live with me!"

The farmer stared, and then laughed good-naturedly.

"Jest as you say," said he. "Reckon ye've 'arned the right to have a say in the matter. But ye'll find 'coons is mighty mischeevous 'round a house. Fetch the karkisses, Jake. Reckon we've done pretty well for one night's huntin', an' there ain't goin' to be no more 'coons messin' in the corn *this* summer!"

In a few minutes the procession was again plodding, Indian file, through the still, dew-fragrant, midnight woods. The little raccoon, its heart now beating quietly, nestled in secure contentment under the young schoolmaster's arm, untroubled even by the solemn and deep-toned menace of a horned-owl's cry from

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the spiky top of a dead hemlock near at hand. From the lake behind the hill came the long laughter of a loon, the wildest and saddest of all the wilderness voices. And a lonely silence settled down about the old sycamore on the hill, solitary under the white, high-sailing moon.

THE END.

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