

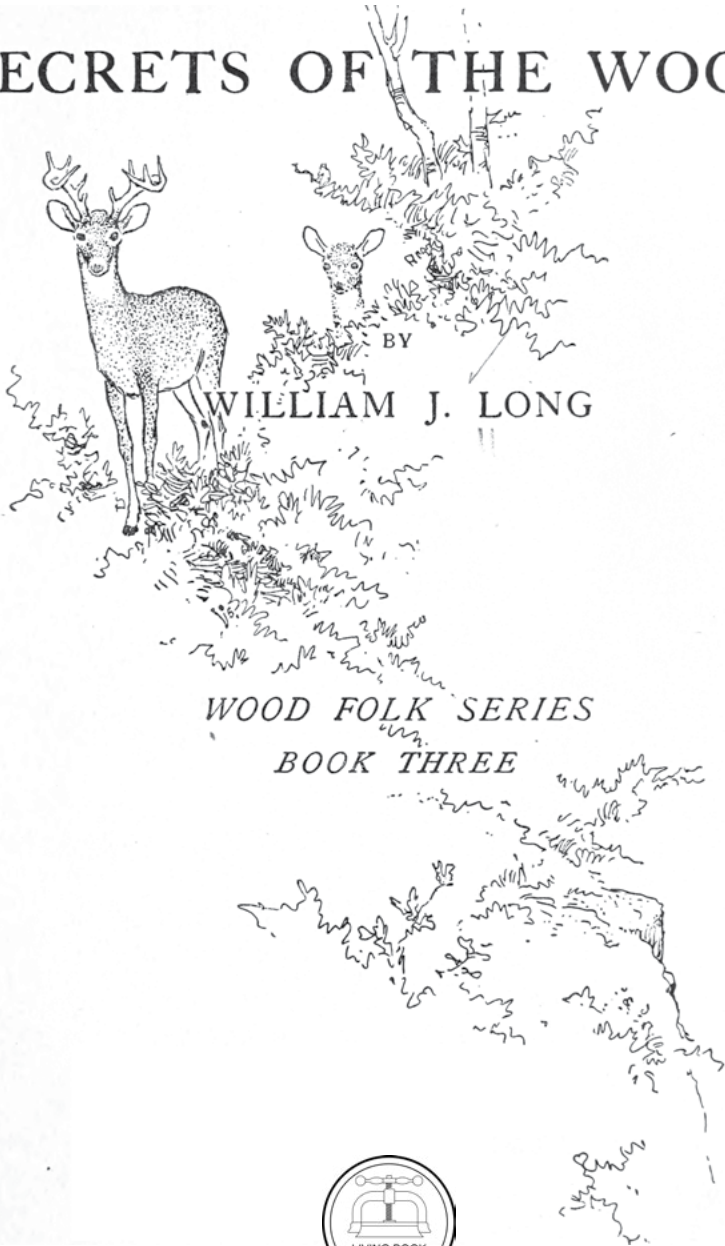
CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

THE SECRETS
OF THE WOODS

William Long

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

SECRETS OF THE WOODS



BY

WILLIAM J. LONG

WOOD FOLK SERIES
BOOK THREE

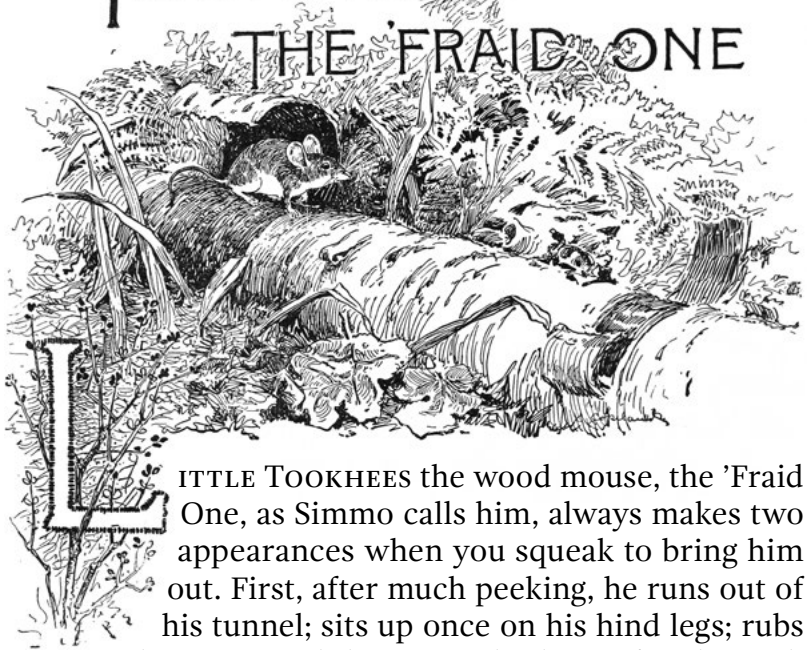


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TOOKHEES THE 'FRAID ONE



LITTLE TOOKHEES the wood mouse, the 'Fraid One, as Simmo calls him, always makes two appearances when you squeak to bring him out. First, after much peeking, he runs out of his tunnel; sits up once on his hind legs; rubs his eyes with his paws; looks up for the owl, and behind him for the fox, and straight ahead at the tent where the man lives; then he dives back headlong into his tunnel with a rustle of leaves and a frightened whistle, as if Kupkawis the little owl had seen him. That is to reassure himself. In a moment he comes back softly to see what kind of crumbs you have given him.

No wonder Tookhees is so timid, for there is no place in earth or air or water, outside his own little doorway under the mossy stone, where he is safe. Above him the owls watch by night and the hawks by day; around him not a prowler of the wilderness, from Mooween the bear down through a score of gradations, to Kagax the bloodthirsty little weasel, but will sniff under every old log in the hope of finding a wood mouse; and if he takes a swim, as he is fond of doing, not a big trout in the river but leaves his

eddy to rush at the tiny ripple holding bravely across the current. So, with all these enemies waiting to catch him the moment he ventures out, Tookhees must needs make one or two false starts in order to find out where the coast is clear.

That is why he always dodges back after his first appearance; why he gives you two or three swift glimpses of himself, now here, now there, before coming out into the light. He knows his enemies are so hungry, so afraid he will get away or that somebody else will catch him, that they jump for him the moment he shows a whisker. So eager are they for his flesh, and so sure, after missing him, that the swoop of wings or the snap of red jaws has scared him into permanent hiding, that they pass on to other trails. And when a prowler, watching from behind a stump, sees Tookhees flash out of sight and hears his startled squeak, he thinks naturally that the keen little eyes have seen the tail, which he forgot to curl close enough, and so sneaks away as if ashamed of himself. Not even the fox, whose patience is without end, has learned the wisdom of waiting for Tookhees' second appearance. And that is the salvation of the little 'Fraid One.

From all these enemies Tookhees has one refuge, the little arched nest beyond the pretty doorway under the mossy stone. Most of his enemies can dig, to be sure, but his tunnel winds about in such a way that they never can tell from the looks of his doorway where it leads to; and there are no snakes in the wilderness to follow and find out. Occasionally I have seen where Mooween the bear has turned the stone over and clawed the earth beneath; but there is generally a tough root in the way, and Mooween concludes that he is taking too much trouble for so small a mouthful, and shuffles off to the log where the red ants live.

On his journeys through the woods Tookhees never forgets the dangerous possibilities. His progress is a series

of jerks, and whisks, and jumps, and hidings. He leaves his doorway, after much watching, and shoots like a minnow across the moss to an upturned root. There he sits up and listens, rubbing his whiskers nervously. Then he glides along the root for a couple of feet, drops to the ground and disappears. He is hiding there under a dead leaf. A moment of stillness and he jumps like a jack-in-a-box. Now he is sitting on the leaf that covered him, rubbing his whiskers again, looking back over his trail as if he heard footsteps behind him. Then another nervous dash, a squeak which proclaims at once his escape, and his arrival, and he vanishes under the old moss-grown log where his fellows live, a whole colony of them.

All these things, and many more, I discovered the first season that I began to study the wild things that lived within sight of my tent. I had been making long excursions after bear and beaver, following on wild-goose chases after Old Whitehead the eagle and Kakagos the wild woods raven that always escaped me, only to find that within the warm circle of my camp-fire little wild folk were hiding whose lives were more unknown and quite as interesting as the greater creatures I had been following.

One day, as I returned quietly to camp, I saw Simmo quite lost in watching something near my tent. He stood beside a great birch tree, one hand resting against the bark that he would claim next winter for his new canoe; the other hand still grasped his axe, which he had picked up a moment before to quicken the tempo of the bean kettle's song. His dark face peered behind the tree with a kind of childlike intensity written all over it.

I stole nearer without his hearing me; but I could see nothing. The woods were all still. Killooleet was dozing by his nest; the chickadees had vanished, knowing that it was not meal time; and Meeko the red squirrel had been made to jump from the fir top to the ground so often that

now he kept sullenly to his own hemlock across the island, nursing his sore feet and scolding like a fury whenever I approached. Still Simmo watched, as if a bear were approaching his bait, till I whispered, "Quiee, Simmo, what is it?"

"Nodwar k'chee Toquis, I see little 'Fraid One'" he said, unconsciously dropping into his own dialect, which is the softest speech in the world, so soft that wild things are not disturbed when they hear it, thinking it only a louder sough of the pines or a softer tunking of ripples on the rocks.—"O bah cosh, see! He wash-um face in yo lil cup." And when I tiptoed to his side, there was Tookhees sitting on the rim of my drinking cup, in which I had left a new leader to soak for the evening's fishing, scrubbing his face diligently, like a boy who is watched from behind to see that he slights not his ears or his neck.

Remembering my own boyhood on cold mornings, I looked behind him to see if he also were under compulsion, but there was no other mouse in sight. He would scoop up a double handful of water in his paws, rub it rapidly up over nose and eyes, and then behind his ears, on the spots that wake you up quickest when you are sleepy. Then another scoop of water, and another vigorous rub, ending behind his ears as before.

Simmo was full of wonder, for an Indian notices few things in the woods beside those that pertain to his trapping and hunting; and to see a mouse wash his face was as incomprehensible to him as to see me read a book. But all wood mice are very cleanly; they have none of the strong odors of our house mice. Afterwards, while getting acquainted, I saw him wash many times in the plate of water that I kept filled near his den; but he never washed more than his face and the sensitive spot behind his ears. Sometimes, however, when I have seen him swimming in the lake or river, I have wondered whether he were going on a journey, or just bathing for the love of it, as he washed

his face in my cup.

I left the cup where it was and spread a feast for the little guest, cracker crumbs and a bit of candle end. In the morning they were gone, the signs of several mice telling plainly who had been called in from the wilderness byways. That was the introduction of man to beast. Soon they came regularly. I had only to scatter crumbs and squeak a few times like a mouse, when little streaks and flashes would appear on the moss or among the faded gold tapestries of old birch leaves, and the little wild things would come to my table, their eyes shining like jet, their tiny paws lifted to rub their whiskers or to shield themselves from the fear under which they lived continually.

They were not all alike—quite the contrary. One, the same who had washed in my cup, was gray and old, and wise from much dodging of enemies. His left ear was split from a fight, or an owl's claw, probably, that just missed him as he dodged under a root. He was at once the shyest and boldest of the lot. For a day or two he came with marvelous stealth, making use of every dead leaf and root tangle to hide his approach, and shooting across the open spaces so quickly that one knew not what had happened—just a dun streak which ended in nothing. And the brown leaf gave no sign of what it sheltered. But once assured of his ground, he came boldly. This great man-creature, with his face close to the table, perfectly still but for his eyes, with a hand that moved gently if it moved at all, was not to be feared—that Tookhees felt instinctively. And this strange fire with hungry odors, and the white tent, and the comings and goings of men who were masters of the woods kept fox and lynx and owl far away—that he learned after a day or two. Only the mink, who crept in at night to steal the man's fish, was to be feared. So Tookhees presently gave up his nocturnal habits and came out boldly into the sunlight. Ordinarily the little creatures come out in the

dusk, when their quick movements are hidden among the shadows that creep and quiver. But with fear gone, they are only too glad to run about in the daylight, especially when good things to eat are calling them.

Besides the veteran there was a little mother-mouse, whose tiny gray jacket was still big enough to cover a wonderful mother love, as I afterwards found out. She never ate at my table, but carried her fare away into hiding, not to feed her little ones—they were, too small as yet—but thinking in some dumb way, behind the bright little eyes, that they needed her and that her life must be spared with greater precaution for their sakes. She would steal timidly to my table, always appearing from under a gray shred of bark on a fallen birch log, following the same path, first to a mossy stone, then to a dark hole under a root, then to a low brake, and along the underside of a billet of wood to the mouse table. There she would stuff both cheeks hurriedly, till they bulged as if she had toothache, and steal away by the same path, disappearing at last under the shred of gray bark.

For a long time it puzzled me to find her nest, which I knew could not be far away. It was not in the birch log where she disappeared—that was hollow the whole length—nor was it anywhere beneath it. Some distance away was a large stone, half covered by the green moss which reached up from every side. The most careful search here had failed to discover any trace of Tookhees' doorway; so one day when the wind blew half a gale and I was going out on the lake alone, I picked up this stone to put in the bow of my canoe. That was to steady the little craft by bringing her nose down to grip the water. Then the secret was out, and there it was in a little dome of dried grass among some spruce roots under the stone.

The mother was away foraging, but a faint sibilant squeaking within the dome told me that the little ones were

there, and hungry as usual. As I watched there was a swift movement in a tunnel among the roots, and the mother-mouse came rushing back. She paused a moment, lifting her forepaws against a root to sniff what danger threatened. Then she saw my face bending over the opening—Et tu Brute! and she darted into the nest. In a moment she was out again and disappeared into her tunnel, running swiftly with her little ones hanging to her sides by a grip that could not be shaken,—all but one, a delicate pink creature that one could hide in a thimble, and that snuggled down in the darkest corner of my hand confidently.

It was ten minutes before the little mother came back, looking anxiously for the lost baby. When she found him safe in his own nest, with the man's face still watching, she was half reassured; but when she threw herself down and the little one began to drink, she grew fearful again and ran away into the tunnel, the little one clinging to her side, this time securely.

I put the stone back and gathered the moss carefully about it. In a few days Mother Mouse was again at my table. I stole away to the stone, put my ear close to it, and heard with immense satisfaction tiny squeaks, which told me that the house was again occupied. Then I watched to find the path by which Mother Mouse came to her own. When her cheeks were full, she disappeared under the shred of bark by her usual route. That led into the hollow center of the birch log, which she followed to the end, where she paused a moment, eyes, ears, and nostrils busy; then she jumped to a tangle of roots and dead leaves, beneath which was a tunnel that led, deep down under the moss, straight to her nest beneath the stone.

Besides these older mice, there were five or six smaller ones, all shy save one, who from the first showed not the slightest fear but came straight to my hand, ate his crumbs, and went up my sleeve, and proceeded to make himself a

warm nest there by nibbling wool from my flannel shirt.

In strong contrast to this little fellow was another who knew too well what fear meant. He belonged to another tribe that had not yet grown accustomed to man's ways. I learned too late how careful one must be in handling the little creatures that live continually in the land where fear reigns.

A little way behind my tent was a great fallen log, mouldy and moss-grown, with twin-flowers shaking their bells along its length, under which lived a whole colony of wood mice. They ate the crumbs that I placed by the log; but they could never be tolled to my table, whether because they had no split-eared old veteran to spy out the man's ways, or because my own colony drove them away, I could never find out. One day I saw Tookhees dive under the big log as I approached, and having nothing more important to do, I placed one big crumb near his entrance, stretched out in the moss, hid my hand in a dead brake near the tempting morsel, and squeaked the call. In a moment Tookhees' nose and eyes appeared in his doorway, his whiskers twitching nervously as he smelled the candle grease. But he was suspicious of the big object, or perhaps he smelled the man too and was afraid, for after much dodging in and out he disappeared altogether.

I was wondering how long his hunger would battle with his caution, when I saw the moss near my bait stir from beneath. A little waving of the moss blossoms, and Tookhees' nose and eyes appeared out of the ground for an instant, sniffing in all directions. His little scheme was evident enough now; he was tunneling for the morsel that he dared not take openly. I watched with breathless interest as a faint quiver nearer my bait showed where he was pushing his works. Then the moss stirred cautiously close beside his objective; a hole opened; the morsel tumbled in, and Tookhees was gone with his prize.

I placed more crumbs from my pocket in the same place, and presently three or four mice were nibbling them. One sat up close by the dead brake, holding a bit of bread in his forepaws like a squirrel. The brake stirred suddenly; before he could jump my hand closed over him, and slipping the other hand beneath him I held him up to my face to watch him between my fingers. He made no movement to escape, but only trembled violently. His legs seemed too weak to support his weight now; he lay down; his eyes closed. One convulsive twitch and he was dead—dead of fright in a hand which had not harmed him.

It was at this colony, whose members were all strangers to me, that I learned in a peculiar way of the visiting habits of wood mice, and at the same time another lesson that I shall not soon forget. For several days I had been trying every legitimate way in vain to catch a big trout, a monster of his kind, that lived in an eddy behind a rock up at the inlet. Trout were scarce in that lake, and in summer the big fish are always lazy and hard to catch. I was trout hungry most of the time, for the fish that I caught were small, and few and far between. Several times, however, when casting from the shore at the inlet for small fish, I had seen swirls in a great eddy near the farther shore, which told me plainly of big fish beneath; and one day, when a huge trout rolled half his length out of water behind my fly, small fry lost all their interest and I promised myself the joy of feeling my rod bend and tingle beneath the rush of that big trout if it took all summer.

Flies were no use. I offered him a hookful, every variety of shape and color, at dawn and dusk, without tempting him. I tried grubs, which bass like, and a frog's leg, which no pickerel can resist, and little frogs, such as big trout hunt among the lily pads in the twilight,—all without pleasing him. And then waterbeetles, and a red squirrel's tail-tip, which makes the best hackle in the world, and kicking

grasshoppers, and a silver spoon with a wicked "gang" of hooks, which I detest and which, I am thankful to remember, the trout detested also. They lay there in their big cool eddy, lazily taking what food the stream brought down to them, giving no heed to frauds of any kind.

Then I caught a red-fin in the stream above, hooked it securely, laid it on a big chip, coiled my line upon it, and set it floating down stream, the line uncoiling gently behind it as it went. When it reached the eddy I raised my rod tip; the line straightened; the red-fin plunged overboard, and a two-pound trout, thinking, no doubt, that the little fellow had been hiding under the chip, rose for him and took him in. That was the only one I caught. His struggle disturbed the pool, and the other trout gave no heed to more red-fins.

Then, one morning at daybreak, as I sat on a big rock pondering new baits and devices, a stir on an alder bush across the stream caught my eye. Tookhees the wood mouse was there, running over the bush, evidently for the black catkins which still clung to the tips. As I watched him he fell, or jumped from his branch into the quiet water below and, after circling about for a moment, headed bravely across the current. I could just see his nose as he swam, a rippling wedge against the black water with a widening letter V trailing out behind him. The current swept him downward; he touched the edge of the big eddy; there was a swirl, a mighty plunge beneath, and Tookhees was gone, leaving no trace but a swift circle of ripples that were swallowed up in the rings and dimples behind the rock.—I had found what bait the big trout wanted.

Hurrying back to camp, I loaded a cartridge lightly with a pinch of dust shot, spread some crumbs near the big log behind my tent, squeaked the call a few times, and sat down to wait. "These mice are strangers to me," I told Conscience, who was protesting a little, "and the woods

are full of them, and I want that trout.”

In a moment there was a rustle in the mossy doorway and Tookhees appeared. He darted across the open, seized a crumb in his mouth, sat up on his hind legs, took the crumb in his paws, and began to eat. I had raised the gun, thinking he would dodge back a few times before giving me a shot; his boldness surprised me, but I did not recognize him. Still my eye followed along the barrels and over the sight to where Tookhees sat eating his crumb. My finger was pressing the trigger—“O you big butcher,” said Conscience, “think how little he is, and what a big roar your gun will make! Aren’t you ashamed?”

“But I want the trout,” I protested.

“Catch him then, without killing this little harmless thing,” said Conscience sternly.

“But he is a stranger to me; I never—”

“He is eating your bread and salt,” said Conscience. That settled it; but even as I looked at him over the gun sight, Tookhees finished his crumb, came to my foot, ran along my leg into my lap, and looked into my face expectantly. The grizzled coat and the split ear showed the welcome guest at my table for a week past. He was visiting the stranger colony, as wood mice are fond of doing, and persuading them by his example that they might trust me, as he did. More ashamed than if I had been caught potting quail, I threw away the hateful shell that had almost slain my friend and went back to camp.

There I made a mouse of a bit of muskrat fur, with a piece of my leather shoestring sewed on for a tail. It served the purpose perfectly, for within the hour I was gloating over the size and beauty of the big trout as he stretched his length on the rock beside me. But I lost the fraud at the next cast, leaving it, with a foot of my leader, in the mouth of a second trout that rolled up at it the instant it touched his eddy behind the rock.

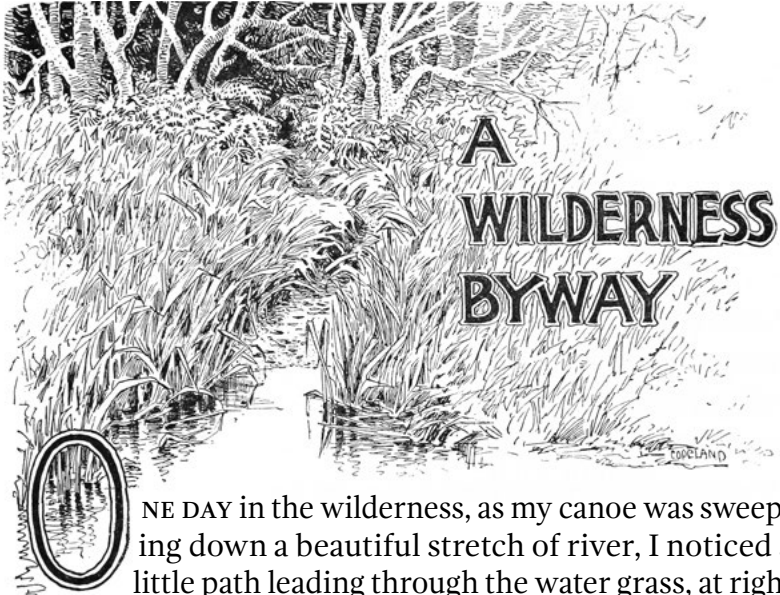
After that the wood mice were safe so far as I was concerned. Not a trout, though he were big as a salmon, would ever taste them, unless they chose to go swimming of their own accord; and I kept their table better supplied than before. I saw much of their visiting back and forth, and have understood better what those tunnels mean that one finds in the spring when the last snows are melting. In a corner of the woods, where the drifts lay, you will often find a score of tunnels coming in from all directions to a central chamber. They speak of Tookhees' sociable nature, of his long visits with his fellows, undisturbed by swoop or snap, when the packed snow above has swept the summer fear away and made him safe from hawk and owl and fox and wildcat, and when no open water tempts him to go swimming where Skooktum the big trout lies waiting, mouse hungry, under his eddy.

The weeks passed all too quickly, as wilderness weeks do, and the sad task of breaking camp lay just before us. But one thing troubled me—the little Tookhees, who knew no fear, but tried to make a nest in the sleeve of my flannel shirt. His simple confidence touched me more than the curious ways of all the other mice. Every day he came and took his crumbs, not from the common table, but from my hand, evidently enjoying its warmth while he ate, and always getting the choicest morsels. But I knew that he would be the first one caught by the owl after I left; for it is fear only that saves the wild things. Occasionally one finds animals of various kinds in which the instinct of fear is lacking—a frog, a young partridge, a moose calf—and wonders what golden age that knew no fear, or what glorious vision of Isaiah in which lion and lamb lie down together, is here set forth. I have even seen a young black duck, whose natural disposition is wild as the wilderness itself, that had profited nothing by his mother's alarms and her constant lessons in hiding, but came bobbing up to my canoe among the

sedges of a wilderness lake, while his brethren crouched invisible in their coverts of bending rushes, and his mother flapped wildly off, splashing and quacking and trailing a wing to draw me away from the little ones.

Such an one is generally abandoned by its mother, or else is the first to fall in the battle with the strong before she gives him up as hopeless. Little Tookhees evidently belonged to this class, so before leaving I undertook the task of teaching him fear, which had evidently been too much for Nature and his own mother. I pinched him a few times, hooting like an owl as I did so,—a startling process, which sent the other mice diving like brown streaks to cover. Then I waved a branch over him, like a hawk's wing, at the same time flipping him end over end, shaking him up terribly. Then again, when he appeared with a new light dawning in his eyes, the light of fear, I would set a stick to wiggling like a creeping fox among the ferns and switch him sharply with a hemlock tip. It was a hard lesson, but he learned it after a few days. And before I finished the teaching, not a mouse would come to my table, no matter how persuasively I squeaked. They would dart about in the twilight as of yore, but the first whisk of my stick sent them all back to cover on the instant.

That was their stern yet, practical preparation for the robber horde that would soon be prowling over my camping ground. Then a stealthy movement among the ferns or the sweep of a shadow among the twilight shadows would mean a very different thing from wriggling stick and waving hemlock tip. Snap and swoop, and teeth and claws,—jump for your life and find out afterwards. That is the rule for a wise wood mouse. So I said good-by, and left them to take care of themselves in the wilderness.



ONE DAY in the wilderness, as my canoe was sweeping down a beautiful stretch of river, I noticed a little path leading through the water grass, at right angles to the stream's course. Swinging my canoe up to it, I found what seemed to be a landing place for the wood folk on their river journeyings. The sedges, which stood thickly all about, were here bent inward, making a shiny green channel from the river.

On the muddy shore were many tracks of mink and muskrat and otter. Here a big moose had stood drinking; and there a beaver had cut the grass and made a little mud pie, in the middle of which was a bit of musk scenting the whole neighborhood. It was done last night, for the marks of his fore paws still showed plainly where he had patted his pie smooth ere he went away.

But the spot was more than a landing place; a path went up the bank into the woods, as faint as the green waterway among the sedges. Tall ferns bent over to hide it; rank grasses that had been softly brushed aside tried their best to look natural; the alders waved their branches thickly, saying: There is no way here. But there it was, a path for the wood folk. And when I followed it into the shade and

silence of the woods, the first mossy log that lay across it was worn smooth by the passage of many little feet.

As I came back, Simmo's canoe glided into sight and I waved him to shore. The light birch swung up beside mine, a deep water-dimple just under the curl of its bow, and a musical ripple like the gurgle of water by a mossy stone—that was the only sound.

“What means this path, Simmo?”

His keen eyes took in everything at a glance, the wavy waterway, the tracks, the faint path to the alders. There was a look of surprise in his face that I had blundered onto a discovery which he had looked for many times in vain, his traps on his back.

“Das a portash,” he said simply.

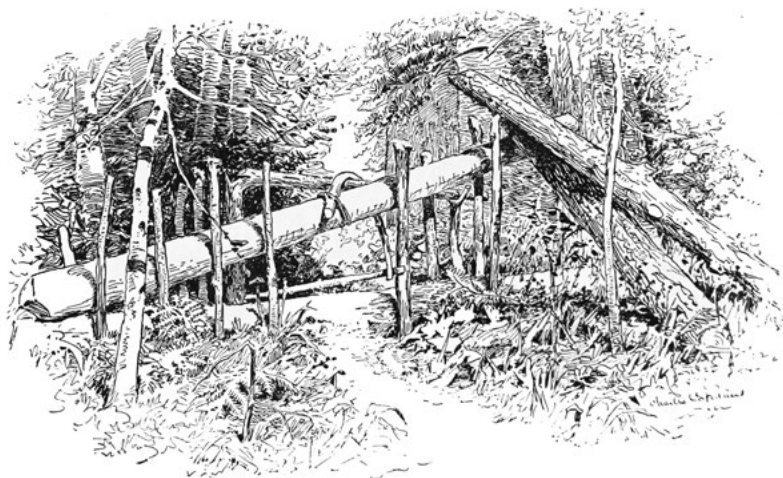
“A portage! But who made a portage here?”

“Well, Musquash he prob'ly make-um first. Den beaver, den h'otter, den everybody in hurry he make-um. You see, river make big bend here. Portash go 'cross; save time, jus' same Indian portash.”

That was the first of a dozen such paths that I have since found cutting across the bends of wilderness rivers,—the wood folk's way of saving time on a journey. I left Simmo to go on down the river, while I followed the little byway curiously. There is nothing more fascinating in the woods than to go on the track of the wild things and see what they have been doing.

But alas! mine were not the first human feet that had taken the journey. Halfway across, at a point where the path ran over a little brook, I found a deadfall set squarely in the way of unwary feet. It was different from any I had ever seen, and was made like the drawing you see on the opposite page.

That tiny stick (trigger, the trappers call it) with its end resting in air three inches above the bed log, just the right height so that a beaver or an otter would naturally put his



foot on it in crossing, looks innocent enough. But if you look sharply you will see that if it were pressed down ever so little it would instantly release the bent stick that holds the fall-log, and bring the deadly thing down with crushing force across the back of any animal beneath.

Such are the pitfalls that lie athwart the way of Keeonekh the otter, when he goes a-courting and uses Musquash's portage to shorten his journey.

At the other end of the portage I waited for Simmo to come round the bend, and took him back to see the work, denouncing the heartless carelessness of the trapper who had gone away in the spring and left an unsprung deadfall as a menace to the wild things. At the first glance he pronounced it an otter trap. Then the fear and wonder swept into his face, and the questions into mine.

"Das Noel Waby's trap. Nobody else make-um tukpeel stick like dat," he said at last.

Then I understood. Noel Waby had gone up river trapping in the spring, and had never come back; nor any word to tell how death met him.

I stooped down to examine the trap with greater interest. On the underside of the fall-log I found some long hairs still

clinging in the crevices of the rough bark. They belonged to the outer waterproof coat with which Keeonekh keeps his fur dry. One otter at least had been caught here, and the trap reset. But some sense of danger, some old scent of blood or subtle warning clung to the spot, and no other creature had crossed the bed log, though hundreds must have passed that way since the old Indian reset his trap, and strode away with the dead otter across his shoulders.

What was it in the air? What sense of fear brooded here and whispered in the alder leaves and tinkled in the brook? Simmo grew uneasy and hurried away. He was like the wood folk. But I sat down on a great log that the spring floods had driven in through the alders to feel the meaning of the place, if possible, and to have the vast sweet solitude all to myself for a little while.

A faint stir on my left, and another! Then up the path, twisting and gliding, came Keeonekh, the first otter that I had ever seen in the wilderness. Where the sun flickered in through the alder leaves it glinted brightly on the shiny outer hairs of his rough coat. As he went his nose worked constantly, going far ahead of his bright little eyes to tell him what was in the path.

I was sitting very still, some distance to one side, and he did not see me. Near old Noel's deadfall he paused an instant with raised head, in the curious snake-like attitude that all the weasels take when watching. Then he glided round the end of the trap, and disappeared down the portage.

When he was gone I stole out to examine his tracks. Then I noticed for the first time that the old path near the deadfall was getting moss-grown; a faint new path began to show among the alders. Some warning was there in the trap, and with cunning instinct all the wood dwellers turned aside, giving a wide berth to what they felt was dangerous but could not understand. The new path joined the old again, beyond the brook, and followed it straight

to the river.

Again I examined the deadfall carefully, but of course I found nothing. That is a matter of instinct, not of eyes and ears, and it is past finding out. Then I went away for good, after driving a ring of stout stakes all about the trap to keep heedless little feet out of it. But I left it unsprung, just as it was, a rude tribute of remembrance to Keeonekh and the lost Indian.