

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

THE SCHOOL
OF THE WOODS

William J. Long

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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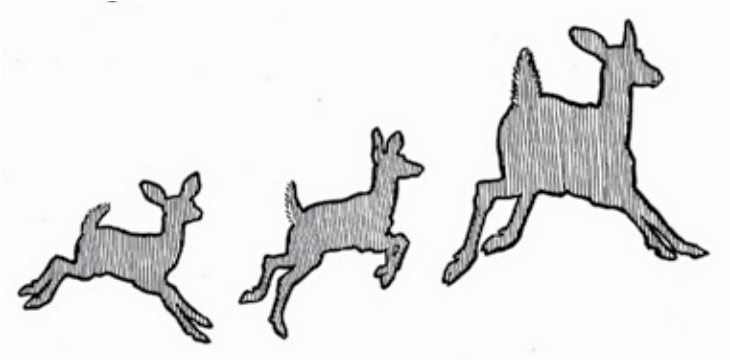


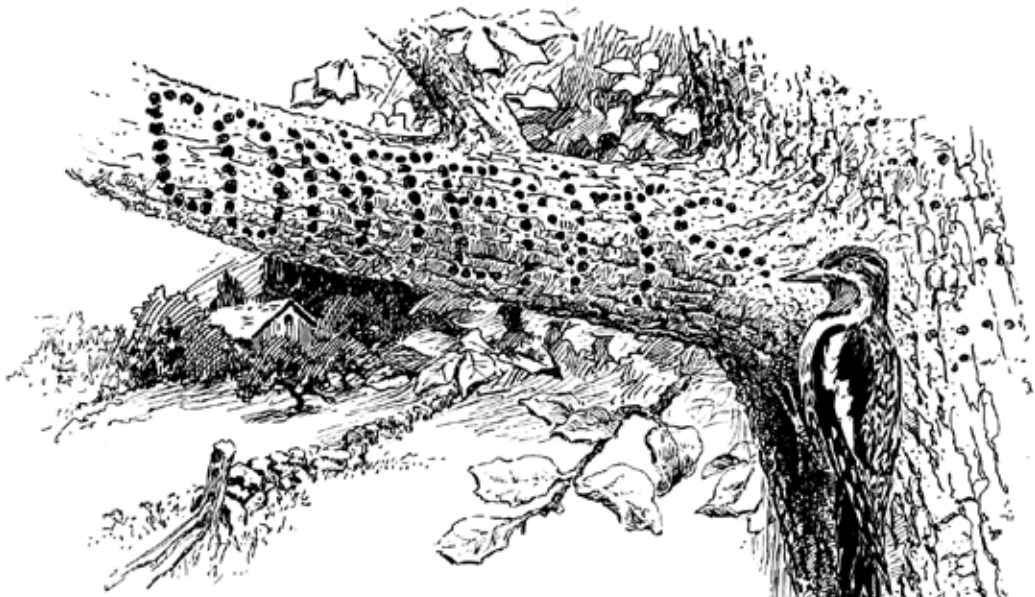
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The School of the Woods

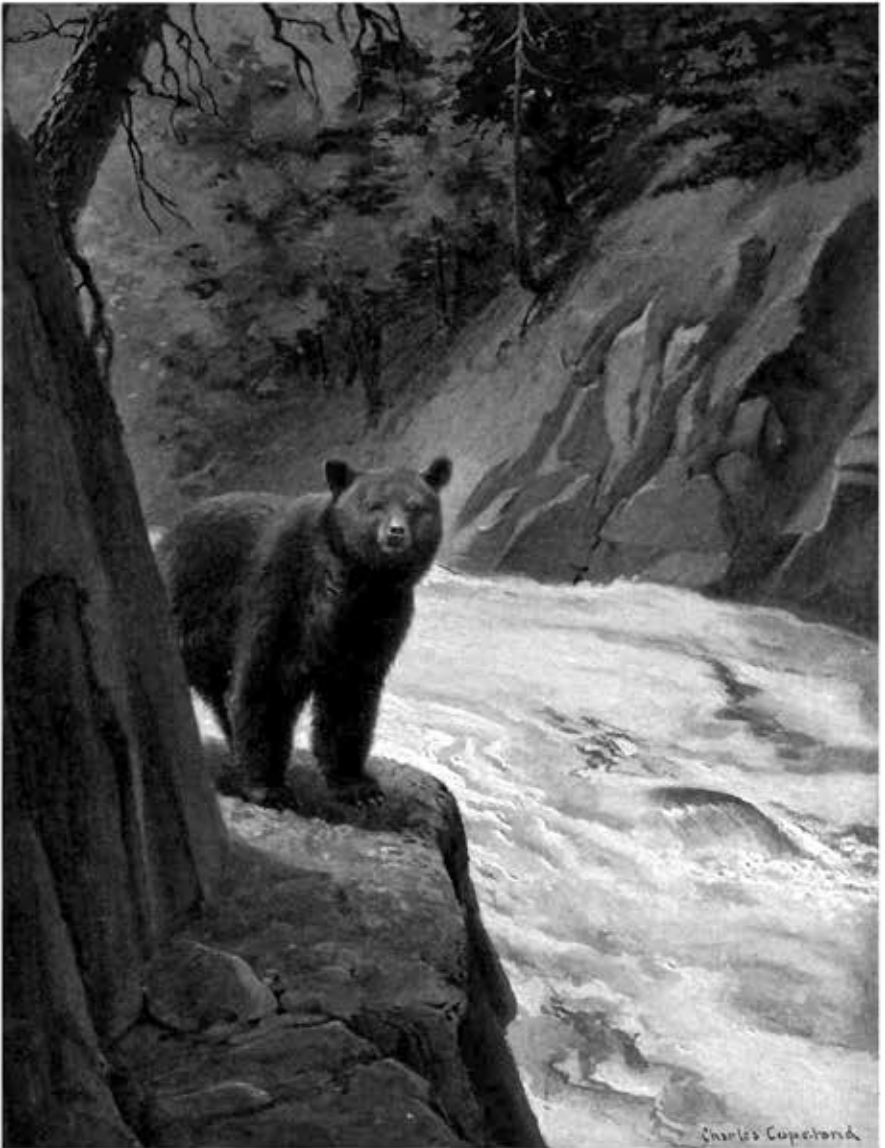
by

WILLIAM J. LONG



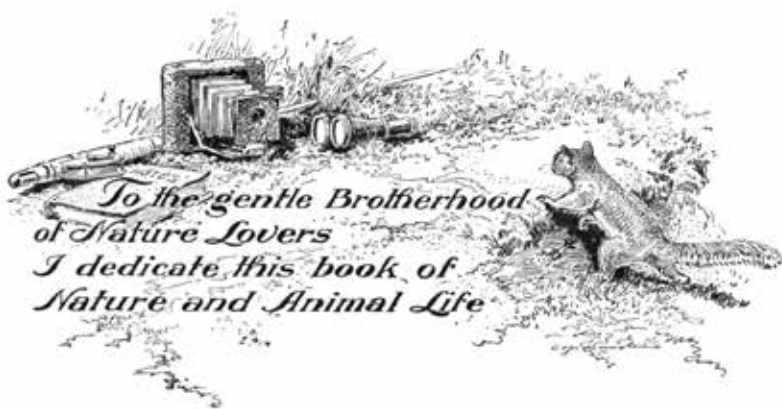


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CHARLES COPELAND

“THERE AT A TURN IN THE PATH, NOT TEN YARDS AHEAD, STOOD A
HUGE BEAR.”



*To the gentle Brotherhood
of Nature Lovers
I dedicate this book of
Nature and Animal Life*



M*OST* of the following sketches were made in the woods, with the subjects themselves living just outside my tent door. They are all life studies and include some of the unusual life secrets of a score of animals and birds — shy, wild creatures, mostly, that hide from the face of man and make their nests or their lairs deep in the heart of the wilderness.

So far as the sketches have any unity, they are the result of an effort on the part of the writer to get at the heart of things and find the meaning of certain puzzling ways of birds and beasts. A suggestion, at least, of that meaning, and also an indication of the scope and object of this book, will be found in the first chapter, the introduction to the "School of the Woods."

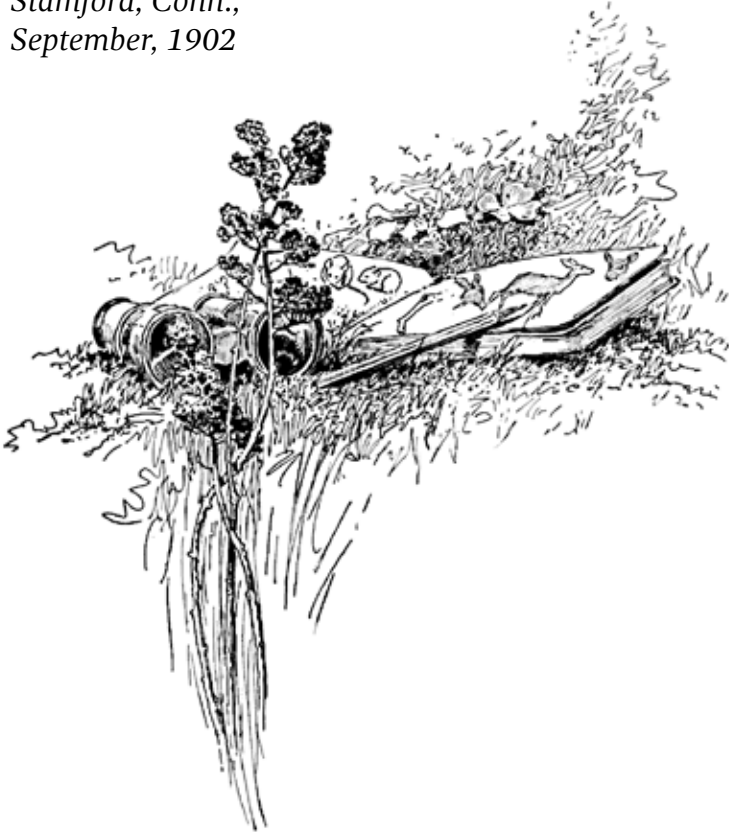
As in previous volumes, the names herein used for birds and animals are those given by the Milicete Indians. I use these names partly for their happy memories, partly for the added touch of individuality which they give to every creature, but chiefly because they have the trick of bringing the animal himself before you by some sound or suggestion. When you call the little creature that lives under your doorstep, that eats your crumbs, and that comes when you whistle certain tunes, a common Toad, the word means nothing. But when Simmo speaks of K'dunk, the Fat One,

I know something of what the interesting little creature says and just how he looks.

Two or three of these studies have already appeared in various magazines. All the rest come direct from my old notebooks and wilderness records to these newer pages, where the skillful pencil of my friend Mr. Charles Copeland makes the animals live again and peep at me shyly from behind old mossy logs, or glide away into their leafy solitudes, halting, listening, looking back at me inquisitively just as they did in the wilderness.

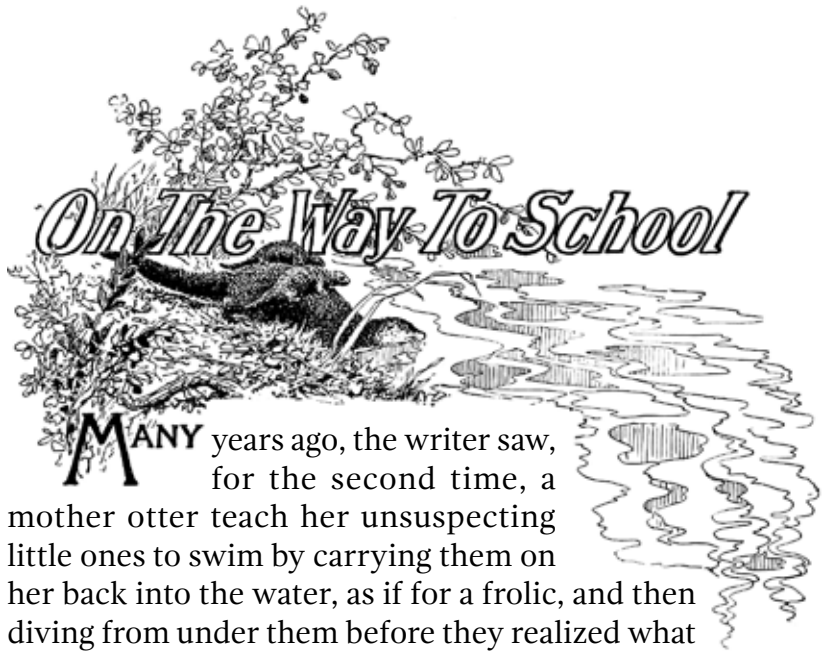
WILLIAM J. LONG.

*Stamford, Conn.,
September, 1902*



*On the Way
to School*





MANY years ago, the writer saw, for the second time, a mother otter teach her unsuspecting little ones to swim by carrying them on her back into the water, as if for a frolic, and then diving from under them before they realized what she was about. As they struggled wildly in the unknown element, she rose near them and began to help and encourage them on their erratic way back to the bank. When they reached it, at last, they scrambled out, whimpered, shook themselves, and looked at the river fearfully. Then they glided into their den. Later, they reappeared cautiously, but no amount of gentle persuasion on the mother's part could induce them to try for themselves another plunge into the water. Nor, in spite of her coaxing and playful rolling about in the dry leaves, would they climb again upon her back that day, as I had seen them and other young otters do, twenty times before, without hesitation.

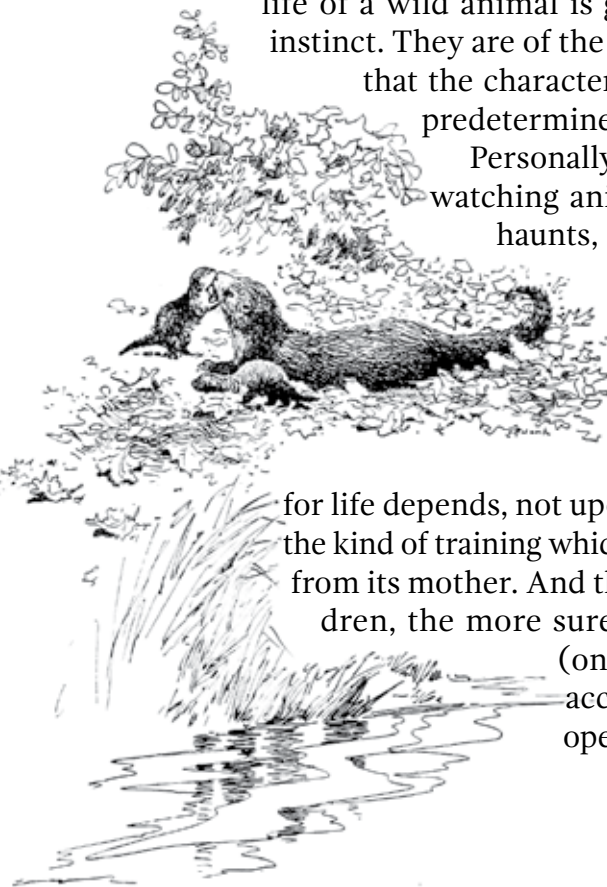
Now, to me, as I went home through the twilight woods thinking it all over, the most suggestive thing in the whole curious incident was this: that I had been taught to swim myself in exactly the same way by a bigger boy — with less help and more hilarity on his part, and a great deal

more splashing and sputtering on mine — than marked the progress of the young otters.

That interesting little comedy by the quiet river, one of the thousands that pass every day unnoticed in the summer woods, first opened my eyes to the fact that all wild creatures must learn most of what they know as we do; and to learn, they must be taught. I have had that fact in mind in gathering together from my old notebooks and summer journals these sketches of animal life, which group themselves naturally about one central idea, namely, the large place that early education holds in the life of every creature.

That animal education is like our own, and so depends chiefly upon teaching, may possibly be a new suggestion in the field of natural history. Most people think that the life of a wild animal is governed wholly by instinct. They are of the same class who hold that the character of a child is largely predetermined by heredity.

Personally, after many years of watching animals in their native haunts, I am convinced that instinct plays a much smaller part than we have supposed; that an animal's success or failure in the ceaseless struggle for life depends, not upon instinct, but upon the kind of training which the animal receives from its mother. And the more I see of children, the more sure I am that heredity (only another name for accumulated and developed instincts) plays but

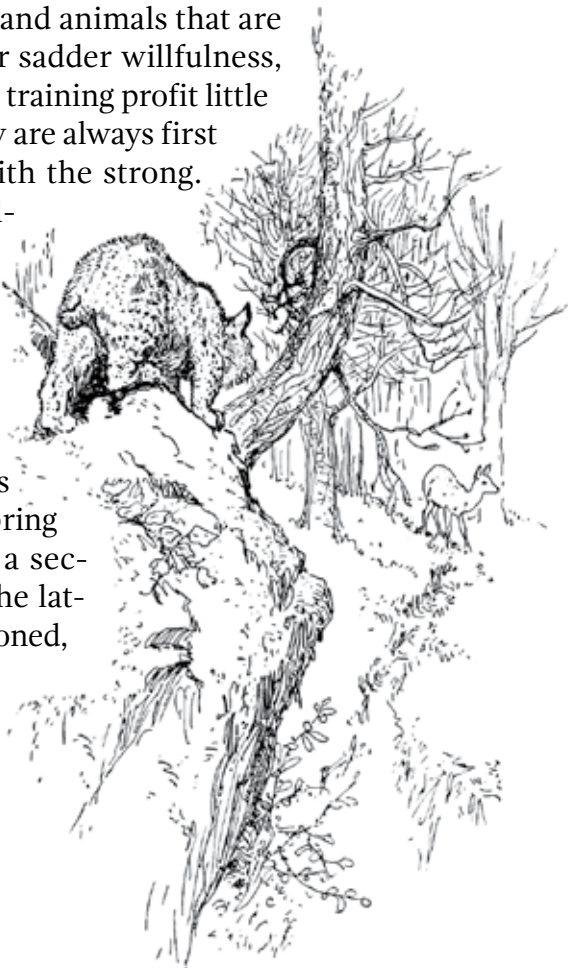


a small part in the child's history and destiny; that, instead, training — early training — is the chief factor; that Loyola, with profound wisdom in matters childlike, such as the world has rarely seen, was right when he said, in substance: "Give me a child till he is seven years old, and it matters not much who has him afterwards. He is mine for time and eternity." Substitute seven weeks for seven years, and you have an inkling of the unconscious thought which governs every little mother in the wilderness.

To indicate the probable truth of this position, there are certain facts and traits of animal life which are open to even a casual observer in the woods and fields.

Those young birds and animals that are left by sad accident, or sadder willfulness, without their mothers' training profit little by their instincts. They are always first to fall in the battle with the strong.

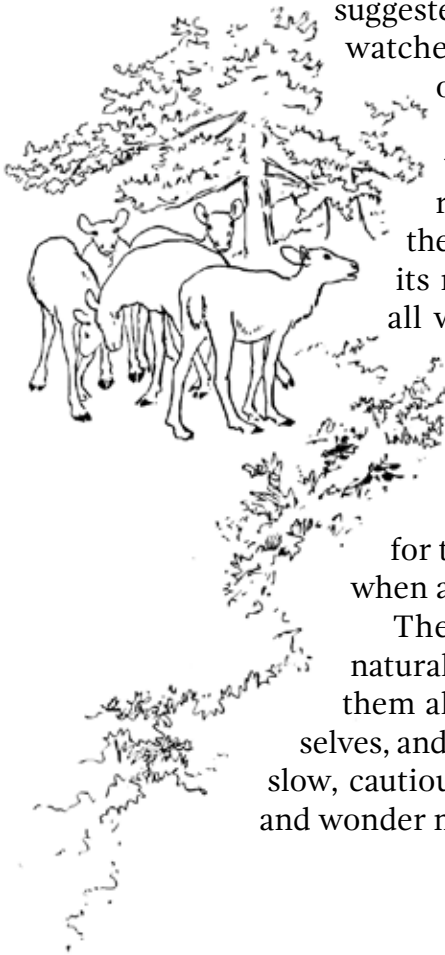
Those alone that follow their natural leaders till they learn wisdom live to grow up in the big woods. Sometimes, in the course of a long summer, birds and animals that see their first offspring well trained produce a second brood or litter. The latter are generally abandoned, at the approach of winter, before their simple education is half completed. Left with their instincts



and their imperfect training, they go to feed nature's hungry prowlers; while the better-trained broods live and thrive in the same woods, amid the same dangers. Moreover, domestic animals, which have all their wild instincts but none of the wild mother's training, far from profiting by their human association, are almost helpless when, by chance, they are lost or must take up the old, free life of the woods again. Instinct profits them nothing; they can neither catch their food nor hide from their enemies as well as their wilder kinsfolk, and they are the first to go down under the swoop or spring of hawk or wildcat.

In a more specific way, one may find the same idea suggested everywhere in the woods. I watched five or six mother caribou, one afternoon, teaching their little ones what seemed to me to be plain social regulations and rules of conduct. Up to that time, the young had lived each one with its mother in lonely seclusion, as all wild creatures do — an excellent plan, by the way, with a suggestion in it, possibly, for human mothers. Now they were brought together for the first time in preparation for their winter life on the barrens, when all caribou run in herds.

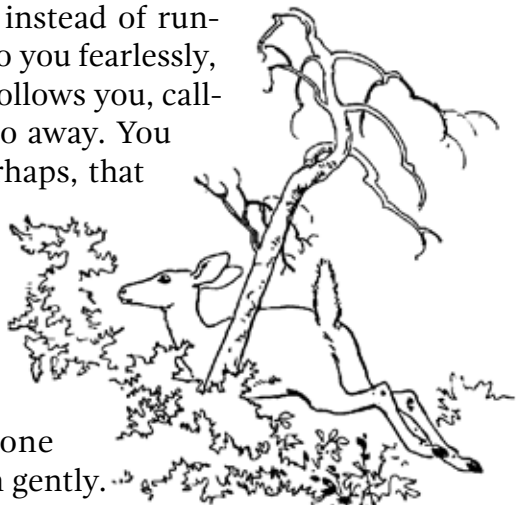
The mothers brought them to a natural opening in the woods, pushed them all out into the center by themselves, and left them to get acquainted — a slow, cautious process, with much shyness and wonder manifest on the part of the little



caribou. Meanwhile, the mothers watched over them from the shadows, encouraged the timid ones, and pushed apart or punished those that took to butting and bossing. Then, under guise of a frolic, they were taught to run in groups and to jump fallen trees — a necessary but still very difficult lesson for woodland caribou, whose home is now in the big woods, but whose muscles are so modified by previous centuries on the open Arctic plains that jumping is unnatural, and so must be taught with much care and patience.

Again, you find a little fawn hidden in the woods, as described in the next chapter, and are much surprised that, instead of running away, he comes to you fearlessly, licks your hand, and follows you, calling wistfully as you go away. You have yet to learn, perhaps, that fear is not instinctive; that most wild creatures, if found early, before they have been taught, have no fear, but only bright curiosity for one who approaches them gently.

A few weeks later, while prowling through the woods, you hear a sudden alarm blast and see the same fawn bounding away as if for his life. You have not changed; your gentleness is



the same, your heart as kind to every creature. What then has come over the son of Kish? Simply this: one day, while the fawn was following his mother, a scent that was not of the woods stole in through the underbrush. At the first sniff, the doe threw up her head, thrust her nose into the wind, snorted, and bounded away with a sharp call for the fawn to follow. Such a lesson rarely needs to be repeated. From that moment, a certain scent means danger to the fawn, and when the friendly wind brings it to his nostrils again, he will bound away, as he was taught to do. Of all deer that flee at our approach in the wilderness, not one in ten has ever seen a man or suffered any harm; they are simply obeying one of their early lessons.

There is a simpler way still, in which you may test the theory. Find a crow's nest in the spring (I choose the crow because he is the wisest of birds, and his nest is not hard to find) and go there secretly when the young are almost ready to fly. One day, you will see the mother bird standing near the nest and stretching her wings over her little ones. Presently, the young stand up and stretch their wings in imitation. That is the first lesson. Next day, perhaps, you will see the old bird lifting herself to tiptoe and holding herself there by vigorous flapping. Again, the young imitate and soon learn that their wings are a power to sustain them. Next day, you may see both parent birds passing from branch to branch about the nest, aided by their wings in the long jumps. The little ones join the play, and lo! They have learned to fly without even knowing that they were being taught.

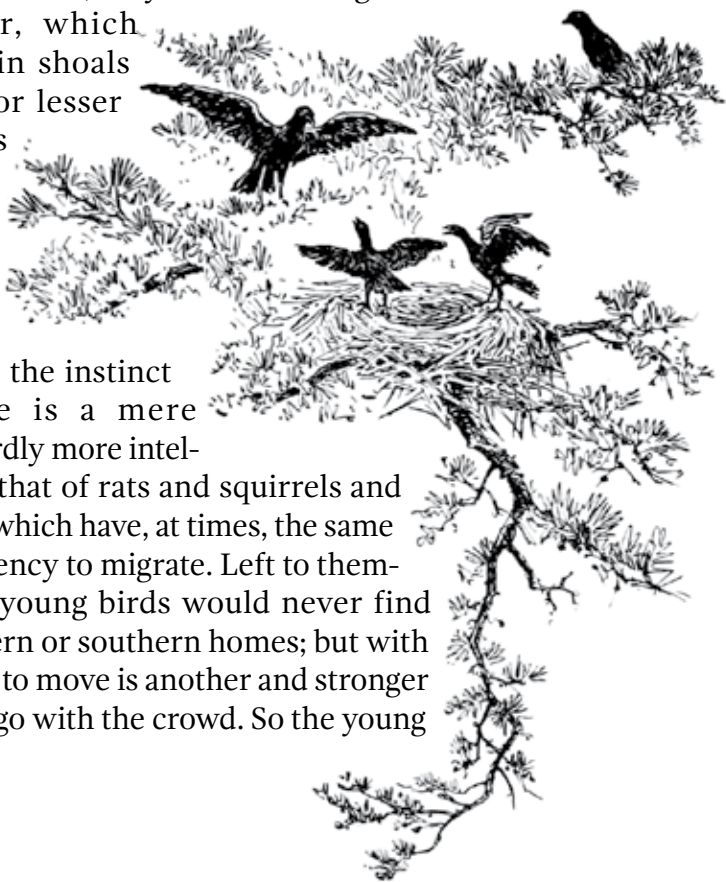
All this, of course, refers only to the higher forms of animal life, of which I am writing. The lower orders have no early training, simply because they need to know so little that instinct alone suffices. Each higher order, however, must know not only itself but all about the life below, on

which it depends for food, and something of the life above, from which it must protect itself by speed or cunning; and there is no instinct sufficient for these things. Only careful mother training can supply the lack and make the little wild things ready for their battle with the world.

So far as I have observed, young fish receive no teaching whatever from their elders. Some of them follow the line of least resistance and go downstream to the sea. When the time for reproduction arrives, they find their way back from the sea to the same river — always the same river — in which they were hatched. This double migration has been supposed to be purely a matter of instinct. I am not so sure. From studying trout and salmon particularly, and from recent records of deep-sea trawling, I think that, instead of following instinct, they follow the larger fishes from the same river, which are found in shoals at greater or lesser distances offshore.

This is certainly true of the birds.

With them, the instinct to migrate is a mere impulse, hardly more intelligent than that of rats and squirrels and frogs, all of which have, at times, the same strong tendency to migrate. Left to themselves, the young birds would never find their northern or southern homes; but with the impulse to move is another and stronger impulse, to go with the crowd. So the young



birds join the migrating hosts, and from their wiser elders, not from instinct, learn the sure way down the coast and over the seas and through the unmapped wildernesses, to where food and quiet resting places are awaiting them.

The plovers are the only possible exception to this rule that I know. Young plovers start southward, over the immense reach from Labrador to Patagonia, some ten or twelve days earlier than their elders; but I have sometimes noticed, in a great flock of "pale-bellies" that a sudden southeaster had driven to a landing on our shores, two or three old "black-breasts"; and I have no doubt that these older birds are the guides, just as they seem to give the orders in the endless wing drills that plover practice as regularly as a platoon of soldiers.

Among the higher orders, one can tread his ground more firmly. There, as with children, the first and strongest instinct of every creature is that of obedience. The essential difference between the two, between the human and the little wild animal, is this: the animal's one idea, born in him and strengthened by every day's training, is that, until he grows up and learns to take care of himself, his one business in the world is to be watchful for orders and to obey them instantly; while the child, by endless pettings and indulgences, by having every little cry attended to and fussed over as if it were a Caesar's mandate, too often loses the saving instinct of obedience and grows up into the idea that his business in the world is to give orders for others to obey. So that at three or five or twenty years, when the mischief is done, we must begin to teach the obedience which should never have been lost, and without which life is a worse than useless thing.

When one turns to the animals, it is often with the wholesome, refreshing sense that here is a realm where the law of life is known and obeyed. To the wild creature,

obedience is everything. It is the deep, unconscious tribute of ignorance to wisdom, of weakness to power. All the wilderness mothers, from partridge to panther, seize upon this and, through long summer days and quiet starlit nights, train and train it, till the young, profiting by their instinct of obedience, grow wise and strong by careful teaching. This, in a word, seems to me to be the whole secret of animal life. And one who watches the process with sympathetic eyes — this mother fishhawk, overcoming the young birds' natural instinct for hunting the woods, and teaching them the better mysteries of going a-fishing; this mother otter, teaching her young their first confidence in the water, which they naturally distrust, and then how to swim deep and silent — can only wonder and grow thoughtful, and mend his crude theories of instinct and heredity by what he sees, with open eyes, going on in the world all about him.

Therefore, have I called this book the "School of the Woods"; for the summer wilderness is just one vast schoolhouse, of many rooms, in which a multitude of wise, patient mothers are teaching their little ones, and of which our kindergartens are crude and second-rate imitations. Here are practical schools, technical schools. No superficial polish of French or literature will do here. Obedience is life; that is the first great lesson. Pity we men have not learned it better! Every wild mother knows it, lives by it, hammers it into her little ones. And then come other, secondary lessons — when to hide and when to





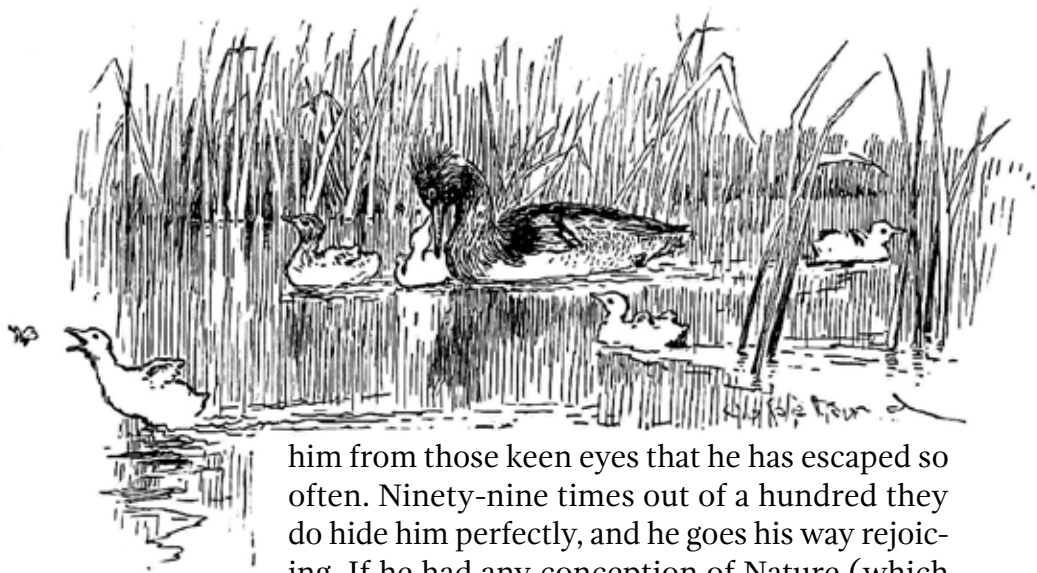
run; how to swoop and how to strike; how to sift and remember the many sights and sounds and smells of the world, and to suit action always and instantaneously to knowledge — all of which, I repeat, are not so much matters of instinct as of careful training and imitation.



Life itself is the issue at stake in this forest education; therefore, is the discipline stern as death. One who watches long over any of the wood-folk broods must catch his breath at times at the savage earnestness underlying even the simplest lesson. Few wild mothers will tolerate any trifling or willfulness in their little schools; and the more intelligent, like the crows and wolves, mercilessly kill their weak and wayward pupils. Yet tenderness and patience are here too, and the young are never driven beyond their powers. Once they have learned their lessons, they are watched over for a few days by their teachers and are then sent out into the world to put their education to the practical test of getting a living and of keeping alive.

One thing more: these interesting little wild kindergartens are, emphatically, happy gatherings. The more I watch them, teachers and pupils, the more I long for some measure of their freedom, their strength of play, their joyfulness. This is the great lesson which a man soon learns, with open eyes and heart, in the school of the woods.

There is a meadow lark out yonder — I watched him for half an hour yesterday — lying flat in the brown grass, his color hiding him from the great hawk that circles and circles overhead. Long ago that lark's mother taught him the wisdom of lying still. Now his one thought, so far as I can judge it, is how perfectly color and quietness hide



him from those keen eyes that he has escaped so often. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred they do hide him perfectly, and he goes his way rejoicing. If he had any conception of Nature (which he has not), he would give thanks for his wonderful color and for the fact that Nature, when she gave the hawk keen eyes, remembered her other little children, and so made those eyes incapable of seeing a thing unless it moves or has conspicuous coloring. As it is, the lark thinks he did it all himself and rejoices in himself, as every other wild creature does.

There can be no greater mistake, therefore, than to imagine an animal's life to be full of frightful alarms and haunting terrors. There is no terror in extreme watchfulness. To the animal, it is simply the use of his unusual powers, with the joy and confidence that the use of unusual powers always brings, to animals as well as men. The eagle, watching for prey far above his high mountaintop, has not more, but rather less, joy in his vision than the doe has in hers, who sees his sudden slanting flight and, knowing its meaning, hides her fawns and bids them lie still while she runs away in plain sight to take the robber's attention away from her little ones, and jumps for thick cover at last, where the eagle's broad wings cannot follow. And she is not terrified, but glad as a linnet and exultant as a kingbird, when she comes cantering back again, after the danger is over.

Neither is there any terror, usually, but rather an exultant sense of power and victory in running away. Watch the deer yonder, in his magnificent rush, light and swift as a hawk, over ground where other feet than his must halt and creep. Watch the partridge in that clean, sure, curving plunge into the safety and shelter of the evergreen swamp. Hoof and wing alike seem to laugh at the danger behind and to rejoice in their splendid power and training.

This simple fact, so glad in itself, so obvious to one who keeps his eyes open in Nature's world, is mentioned here by way of invitation — to assure the reader that, if he enters this school of the woods, he will see little truly of that which made his heart ache in his own sad world; no tragedies or footlight effects of woes and struggles, but rather a wholesome, cheerful life to make one glad and send him back to his own school with deeper wisdom and renewed courage.

Of late, many letters have come to the writer from kindly, sympathetic people who are troubled at the thought of suffering, even of animal suffering. Some of them have also seen their children's tears at the imagined sorrows and woes of animals. And these all ask: Is it true? Do animals suffer, and sorrow in secret, and die tragically at the last?

It is partly in answer to these troubled questions that two chapters, of more general interest, are added to these studies of indi-



vidual animals, instead of awaiting their place in a later volume of nature essays and addresses. They are *The Glad-some Life* and *How the Animals Die*. They sum up, in a general way, what seems to me to be the truth concerning animal life and death, as it appears to me now, after much watching and following the wild things of our woods and fields.

And now, if a too long introduction has not wearied the reader and kept his children waiting for animal stories, here is the school, and here are some of Nature's children that work and play therein.