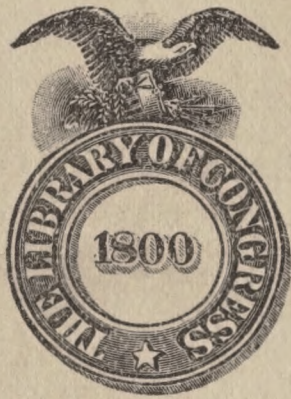


STRIPED COAT the SKUNK



by

Joseph Wharton Lippincott



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Standing once more in front of the stone pile he shook himself until his fur stood out all over him, that fur for which any dealer would give a big price

STRIPED COAT THE SKUNK

by

Joseph Wharton Lippincott

*Author of "Bun, a Wild Rabbit"
"Red Ben, the Fox of Oak Ridge"
and "Gray Squirrel"*



Illustrated by the author

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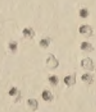
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STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

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INTRODUCTION

LEST I be misunderstood in calling this wonderful little animal man's best friend among the furry creatures of the wood, let me at the outset draw attention to the fact that, far from putting a bounty on its destruction as some people might think desirable, many states have laws protecting it, as much for its usefulness to the farmers as for the value of its very beautiful fur.

The large black and white striped skunks we or our pet dogs often encounter, sometimes to our disaster, belong only in North America. Our friend Striped Coat was one of these. In the

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southern and western states lives also a little cousin of his—the spotted skunk—whose fur though attractive is not so valuable; but neither he nor the broad-striped skunk of Central and South America enter the pages of this story, for Striped Coat lived his life farther north than the range of either.

All of the skunk family still seem to be considered unpleasant and almost unmentionable creatures merely because of their ability to throw in self-defence a liquid, in the form of a spray, possessing anything but the fragrance of roses. Admitting that the odor is indescribably awful and that to get it on one's clothing is anything but a reason for joy, it may still be claimed that the skunk himself is by no means a "smelly" animal and that his recourse to this means of

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defending his life is quite permissible as proved by our own methods of warfare.

In the ocean the otherwise defenceless little squid, when attacked, throws out a dark liquid which spreads in the water and either blinds its pursuer momentarily or so confuses his vision that the active squid has time to escape. It is the same thing in the case of the skunk. Let a fierce dog rush at him, and when a show of his little teeth and a brave stand have failed to save the poor fellow, deny him if you can the right to use as a last resort this stinging, pungent musk which, properly aimed at the eyes of his big enemy will have just enough effect to allow him a safe and bloodless retreat.

I do not doubt that there are many skunks who have never had occasion to

INTRODUCTION

pollute the air in this way. Several have lived for years in drains around my country home, and because my dogs are tied at night, have only twice made their presence known by throwing musk—once when one of their number was run over by an automobile and once when some kind of a fight occurred among the animals feeding together at night around the garbage barrel.

That they have done me great service in killing rats, field mice, beetles and grubs, is only too evident. On all sides are small holes in the earth and otherwise unobtrusive signs of their diligence in my behalf. They are my friends and I am theirs. To me no other pretty creature of the woods is more interesting.

In the past the skunk has been badly

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treated by authors. It was so easy to take a humorous but barbed fling at the poor wood pussy! But that day is past, for facts will out and our debt of gratitude is too great longer to be ignored. If my own words in tracing a part of the life history of Striped Coat, prove at all illuminating, I shall be happy. I have come across several skunks of his peculiar marking; one of them, partly tamed, is shown in the illustrations; but the story itself is largely fictional though following throughout the habits and true characteristics of these wild little friends of man. Belonging as they do to the elusive weasel tribe and being largely nocturnal in their habits, to chronicle all the actual happenings in the natural, wild life of one of them would seem an impossible task.

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Including this little creature in my wild animal series is somewhat contrary to the advice of my publishers who naturally believe in "best sellers" rather than in "best smellers," but I have a fond hope that Striped Coat will win his way with readers to a place beside Bun, Red Ben, Gray Squirrel and those to follow. I might add that a young skunk readily becomes a very tame, unusually interesting and beautiful pet, a safe one however only if accidents are provided against by "disarming," that is, by the removal of the two scent sacs.

J. W. L.

Bethayres, Pa.

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Striped Coat, the Skunk

CHAPTER I

THE WOOD PUSSY'S JOURNEY

THE full moon was shining over the narrow waters of Goose Creek. Here and there, its light slipped between the seemingly endless branches of the cedars, pines and oaks, and lay in silvery patches on the sand along the banks and on the carpet of dead leaves which extended from either side of the stream on and on, into the big silent woods. Wherever the light could not pierce the foliage, there were black shadows in streaks and squares and checker board patterns—black on white,

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white on black—just two colors all through the quiet woods.

But presently one of these patterns seemed to move. The keen round eyes of Screech Owl who was perching on a dead limb overhead, soon made out the form of an animal, about the size of a small cat, moving quietly along the woods path; but even Screech Owl had to look very hard, for this little animal was all black and white itself and therefore like a part of the woods carpet.

Along the path it ambled until another animal about the same size but gray in color appeared from the opposite direction. Then the little black and white one slowed down to a walk until the other, a 'possum, had passed, but it might have been noted that it was the 'possum which moved out of the

THE WOOD PUSSY'S JOURNEY

path. When, a little further on, a larger animal, Gray Fox, came trotting through the shadows and not seeing the black and white one, nearly bumped into it, the haste with which Gray Fox leaped aside to make the way clear was almost comical. Since both Possum and Gray Fox felt such respect for the little black and white animal it was very evident that there was something most important or formidable about it.

This same feeling was even shared by two big does who with their young fawns close at heel were walking to the creek to drink. With snorts of surprise and of warning to their tender charges, they stood in the path for an instant, at bay, the young ones peeping with wide spread ears from behind their flanks. But the black and white animal, ac-

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knowledging the right of every woods mother to protect her young, stopped just long enough to allow the deer to see who it was and gracefully to step out of the way. Then on it ambled.

Two old coons shuffled out of the path without any hesitation, so did the mate of Gray Fox—all feared to come to close quarters with a full grown wood pussy; but a mother mink who was hungry and in a bad temper anyway, halted directly in the center of the wood pussy's trail and curled back her lips in an evil snarl which showed every tooth in her head.

The skunk, taken by surprise, slowed down to a walk, her long fur bristling just a little and her bright, beady little eyes and sharp nose trying their best to search out some reason for this menace.

THE WOOD PUSSY'S JOURNEY

She had often passed the slim-bodied mink at a distance, and knew her well as one of the woods creatures that belonged in that part of the wood. Surely the mink recognized her.

With bushy tail raised well over her back and every muscle ready to meet an attack the skunk sidled cautiously forward. She was not afraid, but she was good natured and hated a fuss. Nearer she came, then suddenly stamped a front foot so fiercely and with such a show of anger that the mink instinctively drew back. Past her then grandly sailed the skunk in the very center of the path, all fluffed up like a ship under full sail. If she saw the furious gleam in the mink's eyes she did not show it, but went on about her business as unconcernedly as before.

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It was to be sure, the custom among the little wild things not to interfere with anyone in the woods unless he was a playmate or unless he looked good to eat. The little gnawing tribe of grass and nut eaters, the mice, the squirrels, the rabbits and their kind nearly always looked like a good meal to meat eaters such as the fox, skunk, mink, owl, 'possum, 'coon and cat. Therefore the little nut and grass eaters always had to be careful to keep entirely out of the way of the killers; otherwise they were seen no more. But a mink would not care to eat an old skunk unless starvation stared him in the face, nor would he go outside of the mink family in search of a playmate.

These, however, were strange, exciting days for the woods folk. It was

THE WOOD PUSSY'S JOURNEY

spring time and nearly all of them were hunting mates or, like the mother mink, taking care of families of hungry little ones. Only the wood pussy seemed all alone and unhurried as she travelled steadily through the moonlight.

Before very long, the path she followed ended in a fenced clearing. This was new to her, so she proceeded cautiously, with many stops to test the night air through her keen nose. Strange things had happened since she had been there before. Trees had been cut down and dragged into heaps; a house and a barn had been built; and worst of all for the wood pussy, the hollow stump for which she had headed so confidently all this time, was uprooted and gone from its old place. Now she too grew worried and ran this way and that hunting

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for this cozy, safe den which, during the Spring before, had been her home.

Well she remembered where it had stood, among beds of sweet fern and blackberry bushes, now all plowed under or, if their ends did stick up from the furrows, reeking with the smell of man and of his constant companion the dog.

As the poor wood pussy looked about, a new fear swept through her. It was growing light in the East; soon the shadows would be gone and she would be caught without a den far from the woodchuck burrow from which, early in the night, she had made this journey with such assurance.

She turned back, slowly retracing her steps to the edge of the wood where stood the rows of brush piles. Here she began to hunt for a temporary hiding

THE WOOD PUSSY'S JOURNEY

place. The brush piles had not been there long enough to have settled into tight, safe retreats; but one of them had a base of logs under which the wood pussy found a narrow hole. Into this she pushed her way only to be startled by the sudden scampering of some animal which had already made this a home.

It was Bun, the woods rabbit. He was big, but his teeth and mouth were shaped for gnawing soft grass and bark, not fighting, so he made way very quickly for the skunk and waited outside until she should leave. But this she did not do, so after a while he grew impatient and peeped inside only to find her curled up in his bed of leaves fast asleep.

Bun angrily thumped his hind feet against the earth and complained a bit

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to himself, but finally had to go away and find another bed. He knew of several, for he was used to this kind of treatment on the part of the powerful meat eaters and was always ready for a quick change, inconvenient though it sometimes seemed.

Through the day, while the sun shone warmly on the wood pile and the little birds hopped about it, there was no sign of the weary wood pussy. Once she looked out to see whether it was safe yet to make the trip back to the woodchuck's burrow, but finding the sun high overhead returned to Bun's nest. Several times she moved uneasily and pulled more leaves about her for bedding. But she did not leave the woodpile that day nor the night following, and when in the morning the birds

THE WOOD PUSSY'S JOURNEY

awoke with the dawn and chirruped among the twigs, there were five wood pussies instead of one, in Bun's old nest, four of them hairless, blind babies only a few hours old, over whom the old wood pussy was already keeping faithful, tireless guard.

CHAPTER II

STRONG MEDICINE

AND so it happened that Farmer Ben Slown had a family of skunks as neighbors. Some people might have been happy about it, but not he. It was well for the family that they were hidden under the wood pile so securely that he did not even suspect they were there; for Farmer Slown had never learned to live on friendly terms with the little woodsfolk.

He shot the crows and blackbirds because he thought they spent most of their time eating his crops. He set traps for the rabbits and the woodchucks because

STRONG MEDICINE

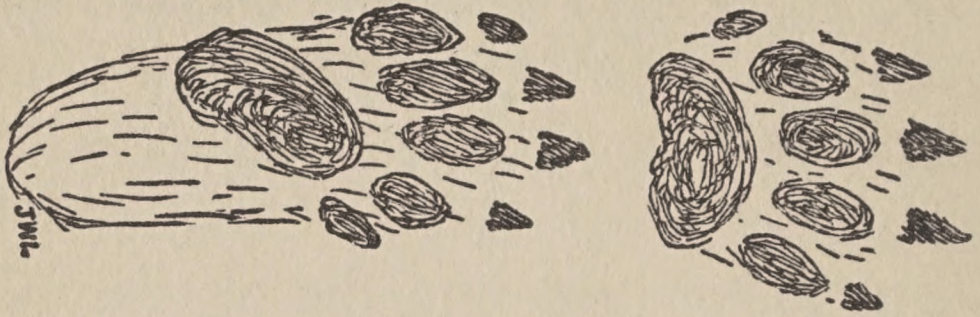
they nibbled his vegetables. The squirrels, in his opinion, lived only to carry away his corn, and the foxes, skunks, hawks and other meat eaters were supposed to be always on the lookout for his chickens. Altogether he made himself have a hard time with his wild neighbors.

He had moved into the woods and started his present farm because he wished to be far away from every human being, in a place where he could do pretty much what he pleased with everything he saw. But even Farmer Slown could not regulate the actions of the wild furry folk, nor know how many pairs of bright little eyes watched the lights of his house at night from field and thicket and high tree top.

No roads led into the big woods, but

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the farmer had a flat bottomed boat in which he could pole up and down Goose Creek. Then, too, there was the woods path along the stream, worn smooth by



Striped Coat's foot-prints ; front and hind foot.

deer and by countless little padded feet. So Ben Slown was able to reach the village when he wanted to, which was not often.

When finally his new neighbor, the wood pussy, slipped from underneath the brush pile, she was not very happy. Out in the field, however, she could hear the hum of night flying beetles and the

STRONG MEDICINE

chirping of other insects, so in that direction she wandered. Beside clods of earth and under rubbish she poked her nose, cleverly digging out bugs wherever they had hidden themselves and finding, now and then, small grubs and worms of different kinds. No matter how small or how big, if she could get a hold of them that was the end of their happy days of feeding on the Farmer's crops.

But it was too early in the year for many insects to have collected in a freshly cleared field, so when she had searched most of the ground, the wood pussy's hunger was nearly as great as ever. There remained indeed the yard around the house and barn, and into this apparently deserted place the little mother's hunger now led her.

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She crept around the dog house and listened for a moment to the farmer's old black and white hound wheezing in his sleep and grunting every time a flea bit him particularly hard. There were dry bones lying about the entrance but these she was too shy to take.

Next came the barn, a more interesting building, from which issued the strong scent of horses, poultry and the Farmer's milk goat. The wood pussy examined it very carefully, sniffing through the cracks, straining to reach the open windows and finally getting underneath the floor by way of a loose board at the rear. She saw at once that this was a good hiding place, except for its nearness to things she did not understand and so could not help fearing.



The wood pussy examined it very carefully

STRONG MEDICINE

But food was the important thing now, so next she crept around the house and hungrily picked up scraps thrown from the kitchen door, potato peelings for the most part, with one foot of a hen and two fish skeletons as tid bits. An old 'possum was there too, munching away in sour silence and cracking bones with his strong jaws.

These two were not, however, long to enjoy their humble meal. Suddenly Possum looked up and shuffled towards the wood. The skunk, knowing he had discovered something wrong, also straightened up. She then saw sneaking around the house the black and white hound who had either smelled or heard the two feasters and was coming around to investigate.

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Her short legs would not make much speed, but she did her best to reach the hole under the barn. This however served only to bring on the hound full tilt to head her off. Being a noisy fellow he fairly bellowed with joy when he caught up and had her almost in his jaws.

But just in time she turned on him and threw up so quickly her dangerous looking, fluffy tail that he checked himself and began to dance around her in a circle, looking for a better chance to rush in without in any way getting hurt himself. The noise was quite enough to bring Farmer Slown's tousled head out of the window.

"What's going on around here!" he thundered. In the dark he could not see what kind of creature the dog had

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found, but wanted it killed anyway. "Sic 'em, you!" he encouraged, "sic 'em!" But the hound was a big coward at heart and only danced about all the more.

The Farmer grew angry at once.

"Just you wait!" he muttered, and vanished from the window only to appear at the door, clad in his blue night shirt and armed with a gun.

"Now, go for him!" he called and ran out to help the dog.

That was enough encouragement for the hound. Just as his master came up, he excitedly threw himself on the wood pussy, but not before that quick little animal had twisted herself around and given him a terrible musk bath square in the eyes and mouth. She could not run fast, her claws were not made for

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scratching, nor her teeth for fighting, but she had instead this weapon of defense which was enough to stop any hound.

With a yowl of pain the surprised dog threw himself on the ground and tried to rub the smarting stuff from his half blinded eyes. He wildly rolled and rubbed and finally in desperate fear and pain rushed to Farmer Slow and bounded against him again and again regardless of the man's frantic efforts to keep him away.

The dog, the man, the yard and indeed the whole farm were wrapped in a cloud of horrible odor. But the little wood pussy, unhurt and untouched by the musk, was nowhere to be seen. She had vanished in the confusion and soon was nursing the hungry young ones safe under the brush pile.

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That night, the little watchers about the clearing could have seen an angry looking figure in a blue night shirt striding down the path to the waters of Goose Creek. A big bar of soap and a towel went along too, also a strong smell, suggestive of fumes from a burning gum shoe factory. Also there was some fiery language about fool dogs, wood pussies in general and a certain one especially. Oh, it was a great night on Goose Creek!

CHAPTER III

UNDER THE BRUSH PILE

THE next day found the farm still rich with the bitter odor of musk. The Farmer's brisk scrubbing in the waters of Goose Creek removed the worst of the scent from his own limbs, but plenty remained to keep him reminded of the night's experience. So he and his hound went about with sore noses hating themselves and brooding over the mean treatment they thought they had received. Each vowed vengeance in his own way, but neither felt especially anxious to again meet the little wood pussy face to face. There

UNDER THE BRUSH PILE

was enough perfume around the farm already. It was all very well to get an occasional whiff of an odor so interestingly awful, but to have it follow them about everywhere and almost live with them, was quite another affair.

On the second day, however, a strong breeze carried away much of the objectionable smell and Farmer Slow breathed easier. He even plucked up enough courage to hunt around his field and in the neighboring thickets for the wood pussy's den, which he was shrewd enough to guess was nearby.

The brush piles quickly caught his eye. He poked around the first one, then moved to the next and finally reached the very one under which slept the baby skunks and their mother. This one looked more promising than

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the others, so the Farmer got down on his hands and knees and cautiously—oh, exceedingly carefully—peered under the logs.

Inside, the mother, hearing the heavy footsteps and the cracking of the brush, stood up in readiness to defend the little ones with her musk and with her own life if necessary. She made no sound, the young ones absorbing her fear, also keeping very still, waiting, as if knowing that terrible danger was near.

And Farmer Slowm looked and listened and sniffed but could discover nothing. He was not entirely satisfied, however, and so took the risk of moving closer. He was well within the wood pussy's fatal aim, but still did not know it. Then he poked his red face so close to the ground that a low briar

UNDER THE BRUSH PILE

pricked his nose. With an exclamation he drew back only to find that another had caught his ear and become partly wound around his neck.

At once his quick temper broke loose. Tearing himself free he kicked about him to destroy the offending bushes, and failing in this, strode away. Thus the meddlesome Farmer was saved from a much worse dose of musk than he received the first time. But more trouble was brewing; the man had made up his mind that the brush heaps were bad things to have near his fields, he had decided to burn them. That day, however, he did not have time, and on the next it rained, so the wood pussies lived on; and every day the little ones grew bigger and stronger.

But while Farmer Slown did not find

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the little family, the nest was not hidden from the prying eyes and keen noses of the woodsfolk. Gray Fox, trotting by on the first night, had at once caught the faint scent of the baby skunks and turned to investigate. He had, however, found the mother on guard and so that time had passed on.

Another who found the place was the mother mink with whom the wood pussy had already had trouble. As usual Mink was hungry; she had four little ones of her own in a burrow under a cedar whose roots dipped into Goose Creek. Therefore she sneaked under the woodpile and might have carried off one or all of the baby skunks if their mother had not returned suddenly and sprung upon her.

UNDER THE BRUSH PILE

Mink, knowing herself in the wrong, backed off snarling, then flashed out of the woodpile and away. Both she and Gray Fox, however, remembered that here was something young, helpless and good to eat. Sometime when they came in that direction the mother might not be near and then—but somehow the wise faithful mother seemed to know their designs and to try always to be on guard.

However this was a very unprotected place for the little skunks and none felt it more than the mother. After Farmer Slown's visit she became too uneasy to stay there any longer and thought only of making a move all the way back to the woodchuck's deep burrow which had been her safe home all winter. Indeed,

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no sooner had night come again than she seized the nearest young one in her teeth and started out with it.

This young one was not like the others. To begin with he was stouter. Then, too, instead of having a black and white back like his brothers and sisters he was pure black all over except where two narrow white stripes came from the top of his head down either side of his neck. This little fellow was also peculiar in his habits. Nearly all night, while the others nervously crawled about, he lay happily on his back or flat on his stomach resting. But no sooner would the mother return to feed them than he would hear or smell her and spring up so quickly that he would be eating with furious energy before the others knew quite what was

UNDER THE BRUSH PILE

happening. And so he got much food and rest and grew very fast. All over his body the fur was beginning to show. It was short, thick and soft.

Now the mother, in her anxious state had started on an impossible task. The woodchuck's burrow was much too far away to be reached in a night by a mother skunk with four youngsters that had to be carried one at a time. She had gone scarcely fifty yards with this one when her jaws and neck became very tired from lugging the fat, furry little fellow. He was slippery as well as heavy. Laying him down in the path, she rested, and at that moment caught a glimpse of Mink galloping through the woods towards the brush pile.

The wood pussy looked after this

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ruthless enemy and started to follow, forgetting the baby at her feet until by luck she tripped over him. Instantly picking him up by the neck she hurried back towards the nest. She was not as swift as Mink, but fear for the other young ones spurred her on until it seemed as if the youngster in her mouth would nearly be torn to pieces by the bushes they sped through, or choked by her tight hold.

Suddenly the brush pile was directly in front of them, and the mother slowed up as if afraid to face the sight she might find. In the next instant, however, she had rushed underneath, every hair on end, every nerve keyed for battle. But Mink was not there, she had returned in time!

A noise at the entrance caught her ear.

UNDER THE BRUSH PILE

She whirled around only to find that the young one she had dropped there in coming in, had gotten back some of his breath and was crawling shakily to the nest. Quickly picking him up she placed him among the others and then sprawled herself over them, panting, almost exhausted but ready for Mink.

And Mink came, smelled about outside, found to her surprise that the mother was again on guard and hastily bounded away to other hunting grounds. But for an hour or more the wood pussy stayed there resting and assuring herself through the feel of all those moving little bodies underneath her, that all were really safe. She had wisely given up the idea of moving them to the woodchuck burrow. When, later on hunger drove her forth, she chose an-

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other direction, and did not go further than the edge of the field where big, buzzing bugs were laying eggs in the grass, and where lizards often hid for the night.

CHAPTER IV

EVERY ANIMAL MUST EAT

FARMER SLOWN was plowing the corner of the field nearest Goose Creek. It was not far from the wood-pussies' den, so the clank of the plow chains and the loud commands of "gid up," "whoa there," kept the skunk family from their usual morning sleep. Then, too, the black and white hound amused himself by sniffing about until he discovered the hiding place of Bun, the woods rabbit, whom he chased for a long time with much crashing of brush and excited baying. Bun led the stupid hound to all the most prickly

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briar patches and then hid in a hollow log. The hound was too big to follow him there and so, after growling and gnawing at the entrance until his mouth was sore, gave up the chase and slunk away to rest and lick his scratches.

Then lunch time arrived and the Farmer unhooked the two horses from the plow and tied them to the fence, where they could munch corn he spread for them on some sacking. He then walked across the field to the farm yard to milk the goat and prepare his own meal.

No sooner had he gone from sight than Jim Crow came flying from the woods for a look around. His sharp eyes at once saw the corn, but he said nothing and turned back to the woods to wait until the horses had moved.

EVERY ANIMAL MUST EAT

away. At the same time however Red Squirrel, running about in the pines along the edge of the field, had also made a discovery of the corn. He looked all around to make sure he was the only one who had seen this food treasure, then sneaked to a nearby limb impatiently to watch for a chance to get a part of it.

But Gray Squirrel too had noticed the grain, and so also had a keen nosed deer mouse and a meadow mouse who lived in a round nest of grass hidden in a tangle of weeds beside the very posts to which the horses were tethered. So also had some black birds and a pair of starlings, and a blue jay and almost countless other creatures always on the watch for food.

Therefore when the afternoon plow-

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ing was over and the horses had been led back to the barn, birds began to arrive as if by magic to gather the scattered kernels. First appeared a mother quail with ten young ones not much larger than bumble bees following her as chicks follow a mother hen. She picked up a few of the smaller grains, then scurried away as big Jim Crow swooped down. He was followed by the starlings. Suddenly Red Squirrel sounded his rattle from the wood. Up flew Jim and the starlings in alarm only to see the little red fellow dash along the top of the fence, seize a big kernel and then rush back with it to a safe retreat. And so the feeding continued, with interruptions, until night came and only the mice and flying squirrels were left to hunt the very few kernels

EVERY ANIMAL MUST EAT

which remained. Although the horses had been careless with their feed, there had been no waste—the woods people had seen to that.

And soon from the brush pile, slipped the mother wood pussy. She had heard sounds of the feasting and now caught the scent left by some of the little creatures. She walked forward sniffing. Suddenly, up a fence post close by, ran Flying Squirrel. Out of reach of the hungry wood pussy, he squeaked shrilly and scolded. But the mother skunk was paying no attention, she had caught the fresh scent of the meadow mouse which lived in the grass nest beside the post.

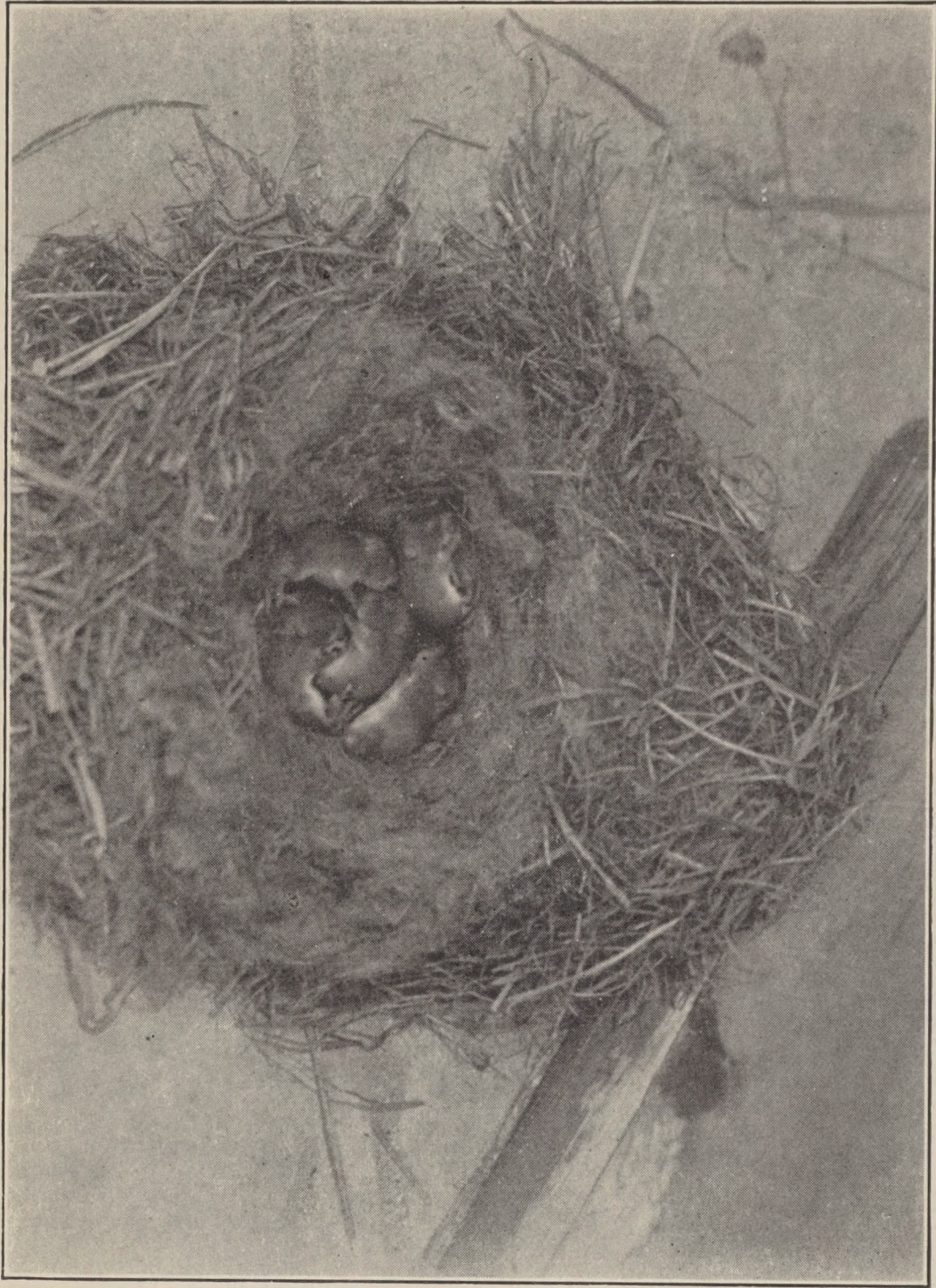
The mouse had been eating a grain of corn when Flying Squirrel's sudden alarm signal had sent her scurrying

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down her tunnel under the dead grass and leaves. Now, seeing no enemy, she was cautiously coming back to find the grain. Soon she was again gnawing away at it with a rasping noise which, slight as it was, caught the ear of the wood pussy and led her right to the spot.

The next thing the busy mouse saw was a pointed black and white head and two black paws directly above her. Without wasting breath for even a squeak of fear, she dashed headlong into her tunnel. The wood pussy could not open the tunnel quickly enough with her paws to catch up and so the mouse escaped that time.

But the skunk was a better mouser than any cat. With her strong claws she dug along the tunnels and runways,



The mouse had left in the nest her whole family of five young ones

EVERY ANIMAL MUST EAT

chasing the mouse from place to place until at last she came to the nest of grass. Her nose told her that the mouse was inside. Now was her chance! Poking her sharp head into the round entrance to keep the mouse from bolting out and past her, she dug into the mass of woven grasses with her front paws. Soon out came a mass of soft lining material made of shredded bark and tender dry grass blades, but no fat mouse. The little creature had wisely made a back door with a special safety tunnel leading into the underground burrow of a mole. Down this she had dodged. Even the wood pussy could not follow her there.

However the mouse, thinking only of saving herself had left in the nest her whole family of five young ones.

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Their eyes were still tight shut and their bodies hairless. If left undisturbed, however, they would soon have grown up and been running about like the mother making tunnels in the grass far and wide, to the disgust of Farmer Slow. So the wood pussy did the Farmer a good turn, though to her it was only a matter of easing her empty, aching stomach with a meal and providing food for her young ones.

Next day the mother mouse began to build another snug nest in a different place, in which in less than three weeks she was raising another family.

Under the wood pile, the young wood pussies were more lively than ever. It was four weeks since they were born, and their eyes were open; also their tender legs were growing

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strong enough to support their little furry bodies.

The fat black one with the white stripes on his head and neck—the one who had had such a rough journey with the mother the night she tried to move the family to the woodchuck's burrow, was still the largest. He lay now on his back as usual, apparently fast asleep. It did not seem to matter to him how many times the others climbed over him or stepped on his face. But with the first step of the mother in the entrance, he was on his feet and waddling towards her with hungry little mouth open. She liked the little fellow and rarely disappointed him. And it was he who a year later became known as "Striped Coat" from one end of Goose Creek to the other—yes, and even

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further, for fame travels fast in the woods.

At five weeks of age he was like a little black ball of fur with a handle to it, which was his tail. His teeth were strong by that time and he often helped the others strip the feathers off some tough old blackbird or crow which the Farmer had shot in the field and left there, and which the mother had dragged under the brushpile for a feast. No matter how dead the bird, he would always pounce upon it as if it might escape, then pull and worry at its feathers and finally seize it by the head and try to drag it to a corner, away from the others.

This always caused a big rumpus. The others would seize the bird and try to pull it in the other direction. All

EVERY ANIMAL MUST EAT

four tugging together on one end could drag Striped Coat all about the place, and they always did this. But while it was going on, Striped Coat was as busy as a bee chewing on the bird's neck and swallowing just as much as he could get into his mouth at a time, until he was as solidly stuffed as a plum pudding. No wonder he slept soundly all day sprawled on his stomach, or with all four feet up in the air. Life under the brush pile was a happy one.

CHAPTER V

THE BURNING WOODS

ONE fine day the Mother uncurled herself and sat up in the nest to sniff the air. The young ones awoke one by one, and sniffed too, that is, all except Striped Coat whose four black paws still pointed at the sky as he lay on his back sleeping off the effects of his last stuffing. There was a smell of smoke. Farmer Slown, true to his threat, was burning the brush piles.

Soon the smoke drifted past in masses, driven by a brisk breeze blowing towards Goose Creek. There was a crackling and snapping noise, with now and

THE BURNING WOODS

then a roar when the flames leaped high. Even the sun lost its brilliancy and could only glow dully like a red hot ball in the smoke.

The mother wood pussy walked about uneasily, looking out at the smoke from each peep hole in the brush pile. Some of the woods folk were running by in a stupid panicky way, looking this way and that, and often turning back when they should have gone only forward. Bun, the woods rabbit, actually came into the den and crouched there a moment before rushing on. Possum, his long mouth open and dripping saliva, shuffled in a moment later. Ignoring the skunks he curled up on a log and watched in sour silence.

Mice and little sharp nosed shrews were hopping about like big grasshop-

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pers with apparently no idea of the right direction. At first the Farmer had chased these with his rake. Now, however, the smoke was too thick, the fire had spread far beyond his control and was threatening to sweep the whole wood. The Farmer's one idea was to stop the flames before they reached his buildings. He worked frantically, digging and raking, stamping and beating until the fire in a great wave had swept with the wind all the way to Goose Creek and there had been checked by the water.

Meanwhile its fiery breath reached one brush pile after another, licking them up and sweeping on. The mother wood pussy waited as long as she dared, then panicky from the roar, the stifling smoke and the heat, she seized one of

THE BURNING WOODS

the young ones and tried to carry it out. It was heavy and slippery, she lost her hold and blinded by the smoke could not find it. Returning she seized first one, then another and then in her excitement tried to carry two out together. This failed. But her efforts and fear aroused the young ones, they understood that they had to flee from their home. So when the mother was forced by the smoke to move out, the young ones trooped after her on their own legs, making a long line of black and white stripes as each followed the tail of the one ahead.

Last of all came the smallest and in front of him came Striped Coat with every hair of his body on end and his tail straight up in the danger signal. Through the smoke they wandered to-

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wards the field, then along the fence, away from the path of the roaring flames.

It was a queer little company. Each stumbling along as best he could, bristling up whenever strange objects like roots or stumps loomed suddenly out of the smoke, sneezing and choking when the tricky wind blew the fire towards them. Well it was that each had showy white stripes which those behind could plainly see and follow, just as men in the dark follow a lantern. For in that way the mother was able to lead them the whole length of the fence and then around the corner to the edge of Farmer Slown's barn where, as if she had been aiming for it all the time, the mother found the hole under the floor and

THE BURNING WOODS

slipped in. After her solemnly trooped the little ones.

And it was a strange thing that between them and the fire, their enemy, the Farmer, was working for all he was worth to save his home and at the same time to do what would also save their lives. He did not know that a skunk family was under his precious barn, but he had found out for himself that a fire in the woods was a terribly dangerous thing.

When, thanks to the help of Goose Creek, the Farmer had put out the last flame, he was nearly exhausted and in much worse condition than most of the little woods folk he had tried to destroy. To be sure many of them were homeless, but they could find or make new homes.

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Indeed, when that night the mother wood pussy slipped from under the barn and wandered across the field to the stretch of burned woods beyond, she found the mice already in new holes along the edge of the field and Possum carrying, in a bundle held by his tail, a lot of straw for a new bed he was making in a hollow oak.

Where the brush piles had stood, and beyond, all the way to the creek, every living thing was blackened and dying. Trees thirty feet high were scorched. The ground was almost bare. Many years would go by before the forest could cover the ugly scars.

Wandering about in an uncertain, awed way were several meat eaters besides the wood pussy. Gray Fox and his mate were slipping from shadow to

THE BURNING WOODS

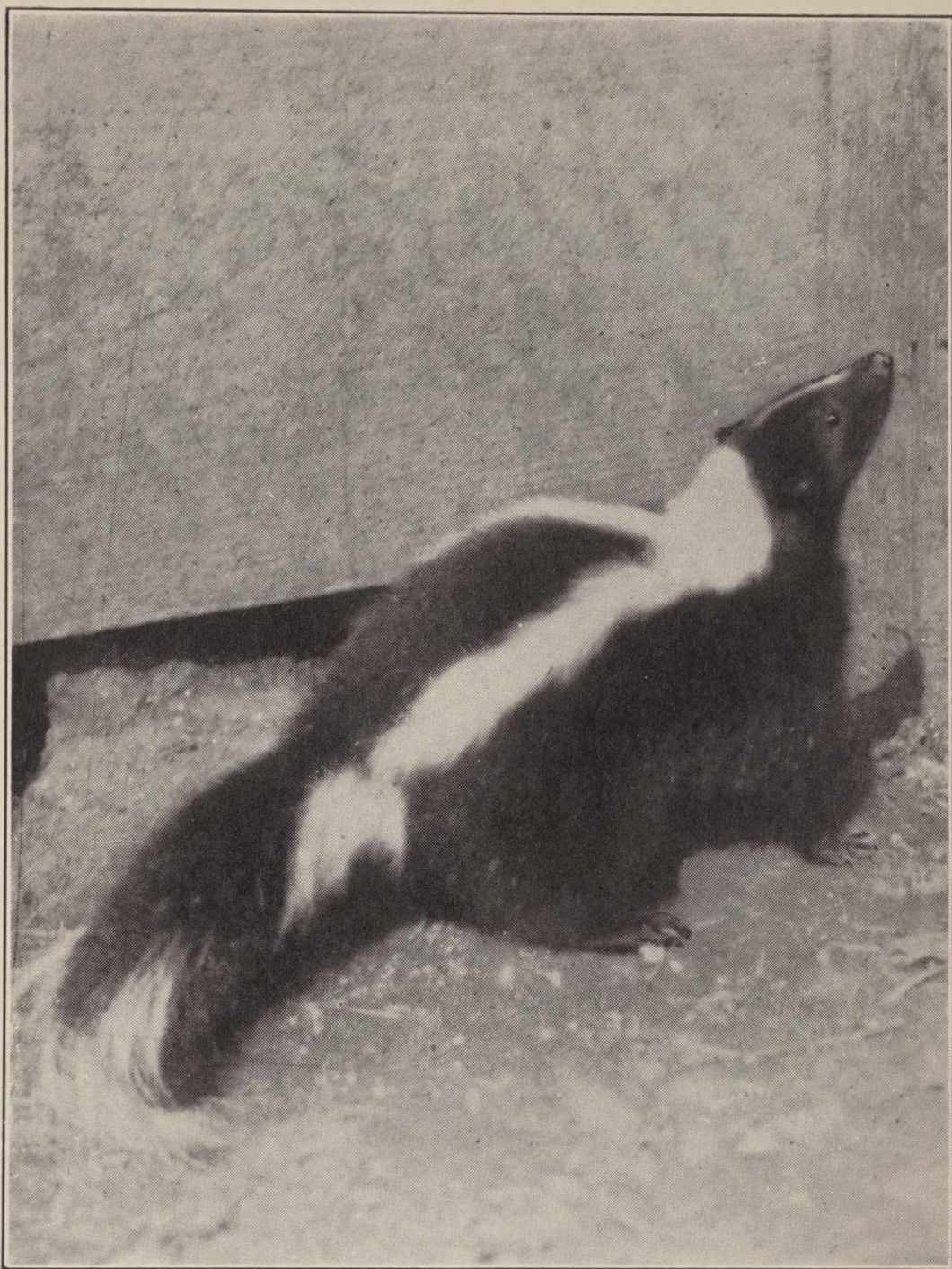
shadow examining everything, a mother coon and her three young ones passed along the edge of the creek, and overhead Screech Owl and several of his kind were talking it all over in gentle crooning voices.

The wood pussy could find no trace of her old home, the brush pile. It was gone. So after a little while she left the gloomy place.

Near the field she picked up a small toad and a yellow and brown garter snake, both killed by the fire. These and a number of wild strawberries were food enough, and she was too tired to hunt more. Back then to Farmer Slown's barn she wandered. It was not quite the kind of a place she would have selected for a den, but there seemed no other to which to take the young

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ones. Stealthily she circled the farm yard and slipped into the hole. It was smelly and damp and cold under the barn floor, but what she thought of most was whether it was safe. Several times she looked out and wandered about uneasily, each time returning to the young ones to lick and mother them. They seemed utterly tired out; so she began gathering together leaves for a bed in the farthest corner; she had decided to stay.



Several times she looked out and wandered about uneasily

CHAPTER VI

GOOD HUNTING

FARMER SLOWN owned six chickens. One of them was a white pullet which, having not yet made a nest, spent much time in going about hunting a good place and in telling the others about her difficulties. The morning after the skunk family took up residence under the barn she was still wandering around cackling and complaining.

“Cawk cawk cawk caw-w-w-w-k,” she muttered as she strolled around the corner of the barn. Striped Coat, lying as usual on his back, turned over quickly

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and looked about. "Cawk cawk cawk caw-w-w-w-k," again muttered the pullet. The little skunk slipped away from the others and peeped out of the hole at the strange white bird strolling about so close to him.

He was fascinated. Often he had seen and eaten crows, but here was a white one which his little nose told him would be especially good eating. Whenever the pullet passed the hole, he moved to the side where he could get the best view, but peeped so timidly that she did not see him.

Suddenly she got the idea that in some litter under the edge of the barn, would be a good place for her nest. She looked about, scratched around a little and then settled down to form the nest around her in a comfortable fit.

GOOD HUNTING

Striped Coat never took his eyes off this white "crow," and when with a joyful cackle the pullet sprang up and raced to the other fowls to announce that she had laid an egg, Striped Coat's excitement knew no bounds. Forgetting all natural caution he galloped out to have a look at the nest.

Sure enough, the white crow had forgotten something when she left so hurriedly. He pounced on the egg, tried to kill it and finding it a very strange hard object, sat down in the nest to study out how it could be eaten. But the egg was too large for his small mouth and he was still rolling it about when the mother came out to see what he was up to.

With one bite she took the shell off one end, then sucked the contents.

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Striped Coat, the discoverer, hustled around her eagerly, but got only the drippings and what was left on the edges of the shell. Nevertheless the mother's respect for him increased. He was, in her mind, already a successful hunter. So when that night she came out for her own regular hunt she let Striped Coat come too.

It was dark and damp, just the weather beloved by the night prowlers. The smell of the flowering shrubs and of countless things in the woods, lay heavy in the air. The little skunk, trailing after his mother's guiding white stripes, picked his way as fast as he could behind her, but without missing a look at anything especially interesting along the way. When she stopped to sniff at a mouse burrow or to dig under a stump

GOOD HUNTING

for a sleeping lizard, or to examine an ant nest for young ones and eggs, he was always where he would miss nothing of the fun.

He tried this once too often however, for the mother finally discovered the underground nest of a swarm of yellow jackets and began to dig it up in spite of the great consternation of the inhabitants. They tumbled out in masses and stung everything in sight including Striped Coat whose hair was not yet long enough to protect him all over his body. He rushed about and rolled but was so fat that the stinging could not hurt him badly.

Although the yellow jackets had not yet made a very big nest, what paper combs there were seemed almost choked with the amount of young brood they

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carried—tasty morsels for an insect loving animal like a wood pussy, and well worth a little digging and an occasional sting where the full grown little fighters were able to get under the fur.

After that feast the mother seemed content to let Striped Coat do a little hunting for himself while she moved about slowly, occasionally finding a berry, or an unwary beetle on the surface of the ground. And Striped Coat made good use of his opportunity, in tasting many kinds of plants and roots and in learning where the night crawling earth worms could be found and caught before they pulled their long bodies back into their burrows.

All too soon, the mother grew uneasy about the coming of day and started

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back. Striped Coat followed but this time found difficulty in keeping up; there were no stops now, the mother thought only of getting back to the barn. So the little skunk, work his short legs as he would, kept dropping behind. Added to this strain was the presence of a big bird, Great Horned Owl, who flew silently from tree to tree, at a little distance from them but always nearly abreast of their course. There was something so stealthy about his watchful waiting that Striped Coat grew afraid.

On and on went the mother with the galloping motion used so much by the skunks, and Striped Coat still toddled along and kept her in sight while also watching the big owl. Then some

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bushes loomed ahead and the little skunk found himself suddenly alone. A shadow seemed to pass over him; he dodged into the bushes like a flash and escaped the talons of Great Horned Owl by a mere inch. Indeed, where he had been a moment before, now stood the big bird, its eyes glaring, wings ready for another dash and strike.

Striped Coat cowered back against what seemed a solid wall of stems, and the owl noting his fear, started into the bushes after him; but suddenly things changed; with a stamp of his foot the little fellow sidled forward, every hair on end, his tail straight over his back. The owl hesitated; he was facing more of a proposition than he had bargained for. The little skunk looked young and defenseless, but it acted very grown



Where he had been a moment before, now stood the big bird,
its eyes glaring, wings ready for another dash and strike

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up. The owl knew what an old wood pussy could do.

Snapping his hooked beak, the big bird backed away and with a final glare, took wing as silently as he had come. A minute later his "Hu hu, huua hu," sounded nearby as he called to locate his mate, then further, and finally so far away it was like a faint echo in the distance. Then Striped Coat came out and continued his journey, and it might have been noticed that now he walked along with a kind of self confident dignity, every hair still on end. More than ever he looked like a little fur ball, but not the kind with which it is safe to play.

Sniffing along his mother's trail, he very quickly came in sight of the hole under the barn, but before going in he

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took a look at the nest of his friend the white crow, then, all puffed up, with furry tail still proudly held up like a flag, he marched in to join the others.

CHAPTER VII

STRANGE HAPPENINGS

A FURIOUS thunder storm was sweeping down Goose Creek; hail-stones nearly the size of marbles bounded from limb to limb or cut through the tender leaves on their way to earth. Such things sometimes happened in the last days of June, but rarely were they followed by a wind as cold as that which in the night swept through the pines around the barn of Farmer Slow. It whistled in the holes and cracks and made the wood pussies' new home drafty and uncomfortable.

So the mother very wisely went out

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in search of warmer covering for their nest and after digging into leaf piles and finding them disagreeably wet, turned her attention to hunting strips of bark on the dry sides of dead trees. This search brought her to Farmer Slow'n's fence, the posts of which she carefully examined until, within the yard, very near the barn, she found just what she wanted. But it was not bark, it was the Farmer's blue cotton night shirt which, following the storm, he had hung on the fence to dry and had forgotten to bring in with the rest of his wash.

The mother reached up to feel it, then taking a firm hold with her teeth, pulled and swung it about until her weight brought it down on top of her. This surprised her mightily, and being

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entangled in its folds she nearly gave it a better musk bath than it had had on the eventful evening when the Farmer came out of his bed to the aid of his cowardly hound. With her under it the night shirt performed some strange antics; then suddenly it released her and fell in such a helpless heap that excited as she was she realized it was after all not a living enemy which had leaped upon her. Instantly calming down, she dragged it under the barn where some chewing and tearing on the part of the whole family soon made it into very good bedding, though Farmer Slown might not have thought so. Indeed, he was in one of his rages all the next day while hunting for it in vain from one end of his field to the other.

But comfortable as the blue night

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

shirt proved to be, the mother was not quite satisfied with her bed, and so on the following night went out in search of something else warm. She looked first to see if by any chance there might be another night shirt growing on the fence, but was very satisfied at finding instead two pairs of socks and an under-shirt which the Farmer, still following his usual habit, had unwisely hung out on this makeshift clothesline.

After supper he remembered the clothes and went out to bring them in, but, feel about as much as he liked, he could not find them, they were gone, absolutely and completely. Then he grew really peeved and, using some harsh language, commenced a ferocious march around the yard, armed with a lantern and a stick. At length, still

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completely mystified, he sat down on his doorstep to think the thing out.

“Last night it was the night shirt,” he muttered. “Tonight it’s socks and an undershirt! What on earth can be doing all this dirty work? It can’t very well be the wind blowing them away. It couldn’t be an eagle; nor a tramp way out here; it can’t be the goat—no, the goat would do it all right, but she’s safely tied. Bugs couldn’t have eaten them. Pshaw! I can’t see what did take them, but one thing I am sure of and that is that they didn’t walk off by themselves!” With that he slapped a mosquito on his neck and went inside the house.

A few minutes later, however, he strode out like one to whom has suddenly come a great idea. In his hand

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were two socks which he proceeded to nail to the fence with the feet hanging down as naturally as before.

“Now, you spook you, get those if you can!” he said encouragingly. Returning then to the house he put out the lights and posted himself at an open window with shot gun at his elbow and a pocket full of spare cartridges. As he looked at the bait on the fence opposite he chuckled grimly and acknowledged himself very clever indeed.

But if the weird creature, whatever it was, had earlier been eager for his clothes it certainly was so no longer. Hours passed and still the Farmer sat there with eye glued on the two socks hanging in the moonlight. Behind them the woods came in close and black, throwing long shadows which moved

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from time to time under the influence of the night wind. There was a gentle rustle of countless leaves, the hooting of distant owls, the call of Great Blue Heron and the patter of flying squirrels as they leaped onto his roof from the nearest tall tree. There was also the endless hum of the insect army, increased now and then by the rasping of a locust in a limb close by; but nothing of an unusual nature.

Suddenly the Farmer rubbed his eyes and leaned forward, then rubbed them again; one sock was gone! Yes, there was no doubt about it! He had seen nothing, heard nothing strange, yet there in the moving black and white shadows hung only one lone sock. It seemed so impossible that he just sat there with mouth open.

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A few minutes later, however, he reached stealthily for his gun with a hand that trembled oddly. His eyes had a queer bulge and chills were running up his spine and into the roots of his stiff hair. The other sock was gone!

Carefully closing the window, Farmer Slowly tiptoed about the house, noiselessly barring doors and even propping things against them. For the first time in his life he had seen something uncanny, had felt that the great woods contained something more cunning, perhaps more powerful, than he. He shivered while listening suspiciously. And at this unfortunate moment, the black and white hound took the notion to feel lonely and to howl at the moon. It was the loneliest, most woebegone sound imaginable. Perhaps

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it could not be said that the Farmer ran up the dark stairs, rather might it be said that he flew. Behind the locked door of his room he felt better, but still the weird loneliness of the dark woods came through from the window. With a jerk he pulled down the shade, then jumped into bed, clothes and all.

If he felt shivery that night, at least the wood pussies did not. The mother was now entirely satisfied with their nest, for it was truly a wonderful one. She had found the last two socks somewhat harder to tear down than the others, but had managed to get them by pulling the ends through the fence one at a time and then straining back with all her strength until the wool stretched on the nail and gave way with such suddenness as to roll her over. This

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stretching and sudden jerk was what caused each sock to vanish through the fence so quickly that the Farmer could not see it go. The moving shadows did the rest. Into them the black wood pussy with her long white stripes fitted in as naturally as if a part of them.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERY SOLVED

FARMER SLOWN arose early, milked the goat with nervous speed, breakfasted on one less egg than usual and started for the village in his flat-bottomed boat. His principal errand there was the buying of two huge steel traps guaranteed to hold anything up to a grizzly bear in size. These two traps having long been on exhibit in a hardware store window as curiosities to draw a crowd and to help advertise the store's wares, their purchase by the Farmer very naturally aroused the curiosity of the shopkeeper and of several

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village loungers who happened to be witnesses of the sale.

Questions soon drew from the Farmer enough details of the strange doings on Goose Creek to make a very good story. He was buying the huge traps to catch some uncanny creature which visited his farm at night and carried off whole clothes lines. That was enough for the village gossips. They enlarged the story at each telling until it became a regular fairy tale, with the villain a creature nearly as high as the trees, marching about in the woods terrorizing the inhabitants.

So sure did the gossips become of the truth of the story, that they even made Farmer Slowen wonder whether it might not be true. He stayed all day in the village repeating his version of it to all

THE MYSTERY SOLVED

the newcomers and so thoroughly enjoying being a hero that he let his own imagination work a little to make the story better. He even described the dreadful creature as he thought it ought to look. Needless to say it did not resemble a little wood pussy.

One of those who took great interest in the affair was the Editor of the little local paper. He saw a great opportunity and made the most of it in a special afternoon edition with the story under black headlines and illustrated with sketches of a creature as large as a house and resembling a cross between a camel and an elephant.

The little paper circulated far and wide and was quoted by papers elsewhere until the story in its exaggerated form, was being discussed in the biggest

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

cities. The general conclusion seemed to be that someone had gone loony or else that a prehistoric mammal had been hiding in the Pine Barrens all these years and had now suddenly been discovered.

In a week Goose Creek was a famous place. Newspapers sent photographers there who poled up and down the stream taking pictures of places wild enough to be the den of the monster and of any holes in the mud which might be taken for its foot prints. And Farmer Slown was still the great hero whom everyone had to visit and listen to and sympathize with.

Meanwhile the wood pussies, cause of all the excitement, could not understand what had happened to make the place so noisy and unsafe for them.



He approached with caution

THE MYSTERY SOLVED

There were strange people and strange dogs in the woods, there were shouts and gunshots and new odors. The mother, always nervous, hunted for a new den and finally moved the family to a deserted woodchuck burrow under a holly tree in the middle of the burned section of the wood, not very far from where the brush pile had once stood.

But Striped Coat did not like the change. The other young ones were quarrelsome and the new quarters were crowded. Also he missed his white crow. So after one day in the burrow he made a trip all by himself back to the barn, looking more than ever like a fur ball as, all fluffed up with excitement, he marched along the field.

Nor had his white crow disappointed him. He approached with caution and

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in her nest found a fine egg, with a shell thin enough for him to crack. Its luscious contents were both food and drink. Afterwards he wandered under the barn and remodelled the bed to suit his own needs. The remains of the blue night shirt he draped around the top, the socks he stuffed underneath. By morning he was curled up in the middle of the comfortable mass, fast asleep.

That day a city cousin of the Farmer, a Mrs. Simkins, arrived by boat to get first hand details of the strange affairs which had so suddenly made the family famous. She brought as companion her son, an overgrown boy named Oswald who, having read a good many books, thought himself pretty smart, and perhaps he was. At any rate, while his

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mother was talking to the Farmer in the parlor, Oswald nosed about the farm.

He managed to escape disaster, except for one bee sting and a good butting from the goat, until by mere chance he wandered back of the barn and caught sight of the hole leading underneath it. Here was mystery! In true detective fashion he examined the opening and found two large hairs, one black the other white.

“A cat!” said the bright Oswald. “Maybe it has kittens under here. I’ll have a look.” Getting down on his stomach he wormed his way under the barn until, his eyes becoming used to the darkness, he could see all about. Everything was bare except in one corner. Oswald elbowed his way in that direction. Yes, he had certainly found

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the kittens, for here was a bed for them, all nicely made with rags!

“Pussy, pussy,” called Oswald. He did not want to surprise an angry cat. “Pussy, pussy.” And then to his joy there stood up in the middle of the nest not a big mother cat but a fluffy black kitten with white stripes on its head and neck.

Oswald’s heart gave a thump of delight. Here was just the pet for him. He would catch it and take it home. Of course his cousin the Farmer wouldn’t mind, since it was he who had found it. But he must not let it get away! Craftily advancing an arm under cover of many “pussy, pussies,” he felt the right moment had come. Around went his hand in a sudden wild grab.

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“Yow-w-w-w-w!” howled Oswald as the little “kitten” gave him a musk bath precisely where it would do the most good—“Yow-w-w-w-w!”

He could not see and he could not breathe, so he made up for it in yells which even reached his mother in the Farmer’s parlor. She had just been telling her cousin what a wonderful boy her Oswald was.

“Yes,” she went on, “he isn’t like other boys at all. He is never idle, he is always finding out things for himself or doing something splendid! Ah! What’s that! I think I hear him calling. He always does that when he’s found something wonderful!”

So Mrs. Simkins and the Farmer went out of the house to see what Oswald had found. They heard him all

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right, but they could not find him.

“Yow-w-w-w-w!” howled Oswald more wild with fury because his fond Mamma had not at once come to his rescue. “Yow-w-w-w-w! ! !”

“Sounds as if he were under the barn!” exclaimed the Farmer at last. He walked around to the back and there found a foot sticking out of the hole. Dodging a kick, he seized the foot and began to pull, Mrs. Simpkins, now much alarmed, pulling also until between them they nearly pulled Oswald in two.

“We’ve got him!” gurgled Mrs. Simpkins as more body appeared and the sound of the yells grew louder. “Oh, what an awful smell!”

“I say so, too!” agreed the Farmer heartily. “Let’s poke him back.”

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But just then the whole of Oswald came out and his mother clasped him to her in utter disregard of consequences.

“My son,” cried Mrs. Simpkins tragically, “what has happened!”

“A kitty!” cried Oswald, “a little black kitty with a white striped coat.” Then, seeing the Farmer’s convulsed face, his tears drowned all else.

“Well, well, it’s all right,” crooned his mother, “but what’s that you’ve got in your hand?” The Farmer looked too and all at once his face grew very red. Tightly clutched in Oswald’s hand was all that was left of the blue night shirt.

A few hours later Mrs. Simpkins, waiting with her son for a train at the village station, was being interviewed by an appreciative reporter.

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“Yes,” she was saying. “It was all my Oswald. He isn’t like other boys. He is always finding out things for himself. He went under the barn all alone and discovered the lost clothes. Isn’t he wonderful?”

The reporter’s eye swept appraisingly over the blushing Oswald.

“Well, yes,” he admitted reluctantly. “he certainly is; but, doesn’t he smell awful!”

CHAPTER IX

FIFTY DOLLARS ON HIS HEAD

FARMER SLOWN was sitting on his doorstep reading another special edition of the village paper. Opposite him stood a stranger watching with amusement the changing expression on the Farmer's red face.

"That's the line I referred to," he interrupted the other man. "See, right here!" He pointed to a paragraph. The Farmer began to read it aloud.

"And so," he read, "the great monster of the woods, the prehistoric mammal, turned out to be nothing more than a little skunk. The boy who made the

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discovery described it as jet black all over except for white stripes on its head and neck. Could a more ridiculous ending possibly be—”

“That’s enough,” said the man, “did you notice it said jet black except for white on its head and neck? Well I’ve come to buy that skunk. What do you want for him alive?”

“But he got away, vanished before we came back from the house after scrubbing the boy.”

“That’s all the better; might have got hurt otherwise, eh? He will stay around here somewhere. Now what I want you to do is to set some traps until you catch him. I’ve brought the traps. They’re made like boxes, plenty of room inside. What do you say?”

“Catch a live skunk!” the Farmer ex-

FIFTY DOLLARS ON HIS HEAD

claimed suspiciously. "Not I, do it yourself." Then the thought came to him that perhaps the man really would be fool enough to pay money for a skunk. "How much will you give for him," he asked.

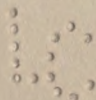
"Twenty-five dollars," was the prompt reply. The Farmer could scarcely conceal a gasp of surprise. Why, his goat wasn't worth that much! His eyes narrowed;

"Not enough," he answered craftily.

"Thirty-five, then."

"Not enough," croaked the Farmer again experimentally. The man regarded him doubtfully.

"Well," he said at length, "fifty is my limit. But he's got to be unhurt and well, do you understand?" The Farmer stood up.



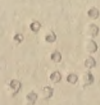
STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

“All right,” he agreed, “I’ll catch him for you. Let’s see your traps. I’ve had two of mine set for several nights but haven’t caught anything.”

“What do you use for bait?”

“Socks,” grunted the Farmer shamefacedly. “He seemed to like them.” The man held back a smile, gave some instructions and then turned to his boat for the trip back to the village. He owned a farm on which he raised skunks in pens much as a poultryman raised chickens except that it was the fur of the skunks which was marketable. The more black fur there was on a skin, the more valuable it was, therefore an almost entirely black skunk like Striped Coat was worth a good sum to the farm.

While Striped Coat was thus being sold alive, he was safely sleeping with



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his family in the holly tree burrow to which he had run after discovery by the boy. A less sensible skunk might have remained and been killed but Striped Coat was not one of that kind.

It was on the third night after this, that he and the others came across the first of Farmer Slown's new traps. The family had just come from Goose Creek, for now that it was time for them to take care of themselves in the world, the mother's milk had failed them and they needed water as well as food.

Wandering along a path made by old Muskrat in his search for grass roots, they caught the scent of a freshly killed chicken and found that it came from a long box which had an opening at one end. The mother, nervous as usual, looked at this with such suspicion that

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the others held back too, although much interested in the smell of this kind of food.

They kept wandering around the box sniffing, until all at once the runt of the family, a pretty black and white little fellow, could resist it no longer and slipped in. They crowded about the entrance when—bang—down came a board with a clatter, nearly smashing a nose or two and completely shutting the entrance.

Those on the outside sprang back, but the runt was caught and could only add to their alarm by frantic scratching on the hard wood inside. That was lesson enough for Striped Coat; he knew now that a box with a hole was something dangerous even if it contained good food.

FIFTY DOLLARS ON HIS HEAD

In that way the family lost the runt. Soon afterwards quarreling divided the remainder, the mother and Striped Coat staying together and still living in the holly tree burrow. Sometimes they all met at night in their hunting, but these meetings grew less frequent until Striped Coat and the mother seemed to have the woods around Farmer Slown's entirely to themselves.

It was to be sure the time of plenty. Every rain brought out many kinds of edible toadstools in the woods, blackberries hung heavily from their stems, grasshoppers and crickets had grown big and fat, white grubs swarmed under the grass roots around the Farmer's field. Also there were great green tomato worms, turtles, frogs, toads and little snakes, nests of yellow jackets,

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

bees and other insects. Mice too were plentiful and unwary.

So Striped Coat grew amazingly just as did all the other young woods folk. At first he grew long and lanky, with short patchy fur and spindly tail, in much the same way as a young hawk before it acquires its full plumage; later he filled out, his fur becoming thick and glossy. By the end of August he was as large as his mother and still growing. He was wise enough not to be lured into the Farmer's traps and, like his mother he now had the right of way over the other woods animals, being indeed treated with all the dignity of a full grown skunk.

More men than the Farmer were after him however, for the news had



In much the same way as a young hawk before it acquires
its full plumage

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spread that he was worth fifty dollars, and that sum, walking around as it were, loose and unclaimed in the woods, was a decided lure to everyone. Ever since the great mystery of Farmer Slown's lost clothes had been cleared up by the boy's description of Striped Coat, he had become a marked individual, spoken of, oddly enough, as Striped Coat, the black skunk. Whenever the word skunk was mentioned, people soon switched the conversation to him.

The question to be solved was, where did he have his den. With that discovered, the matter of trapping or digging him out would be a simple one. The old trappers of the neighborhood said little but waited patiently for the

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

coming of late autumn, when the leaves would no longer be on the bushes. And every day brought this danger time just that much nearer.

CHAPTER X

CAPTURED AT LAST

IT was in September that Striped Coat made an important discovery; travelling further up Goose Creek than usual, he came across a log cabin, not the kind ordinarily built by summer visitors on a good stream for canoeing, but one which seemed a part of the woods itself.

Instead of being wary about approaching it, Striped Coat found it actually luring him. Coming closer, he found at one end an open door leading into a room lighted only by the dull glow from an open fire-place in front of

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

which stood cozy chairs and a table, objects which to him seemed to offer good cover under which to hide if necessary.

For some moments he stood on the threshold, lured by the smell of food and by the interesting look of the place, but undecided whether it was safe to venture where man had evidently recently been. Finally, encouraged by the absolute quiet, he stepped in, warily, but without any fear, for real fear such as many animals showed, was something which he did not seem ever to have. Wandering silently about the room, his nostrils dulled by the smoke, he came directly in front of a man lolling comfortably in one of the chairs. The effect was almost electrical. The man's eyes grew suddenly round and bulging and he turned a complete back-

CAPTURED AT LAST

ward somersault, landing on his feet and then diving through the open window.

“Help!” he yelled when outside.
“Mr. Henry, come quick!”

Striped Coat, who had fluffed up in readiness for anything, moved for the door, just as another man sprang in and slammed it behind him. The man stood absolutely motionless with his back against the door looking at Striped Coat who had stopped with tail over his back and every hair on end waiting for the slightest further move of this new enemy. It was a critical moment. The man won; Striped Coat would not attack, his weapon was for defense, and the man did not move even a finger.

So Striped Coat sidled to the other end of the room to find another outlet.

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

He did not hurry, he was on his dignity and knew he was being watched. Looking up at the open window, which was out of his reach, he was just in time to see the top of the first man's head duck out of sight. Mike had come back to watch, but knew a skunk when he saw one and was taking no chances.

There was no other opening. Striped Coat was trapped at last.

Mr. Henry, the man at the door moved quietly to a chair and sat down.

"Mike," he called, "did you ever see a skunk like that? It's the black one they're all after. Isn't he a daisy!" The top of Mike's head and one eye appeared warily over the window sill.

"He's all of that," he answered, "the biggest, prettiest skunk I ever saw!"

CAPTURED AT LAST

And he nearly had me, too!" Mr. Henry laughed, then picked a piece of fish from one of the plates on the table, and laid it on the floor in front of him. Soon Striped Coat in circling the room again, came across this and ate it just to show he was not afraid. When he came around again, he found another piece in the same place and ate that. It was good fish! Everytime he came to that spot he found a piece, laid there by Mr. Henry, whom he presently began to watch with more interest than he would show an enemy. When this man moved at all, it was so slowly that Striped Coat could not take offense.

Presently the man stood up, very quietly moved to the corner of the room and pulled a huge wood box the distance of a foot from the wall; behind

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this, in the corner, he spread some clothes and an armful of cotton waste. Striped Coat could go in and out of this cozy nest from either side of the box; it therefore had none of the looks of a trap. After a little while he tried it, then tried it again and finally settled down for a rest in this new bed.

“Well, I never!” came from the awe-struck Mike. Mr. Henry then arranged some bedding on one of the sofas and suggested that Mike also prepare for a sleep; but that worthy preferred the boat. The last thing was to place some more fish and a bowl of water on the floor and to open the door leading out to the woods; after that Mr. Henry went comfortably to sleep on the couch.

Striped Coat, too, actually took a nap, the warmth being pleasant and the still-

CAPTURED AT LAST

ness reassuring. Before the glow of the fire had entirely died, however, he walked out and looked all around the room; finding the door open he moved out, then returned and ate the fish; soon afterwards he was again in the woods but with no unfriendly feeling towards the Henry cabin. Near the Creek he came across a likely den under a stump, and being loggy with all the food he had eaten, slipped in there for the day.

This proved a serious blunder, for a picnic party came up the creek in canoes and chose that precise spot for luncheon. One of the men sat on the stump and amused himself by poking sticks into the hollow underneath it, finding to his surprise that something inside resented this and replied with dis-

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tinctly audible stamps of its feet. Proudly announcing this discovery, he poked more thoroughly while the others stood about and excitedly encouraged him.

Suddenly there was a scuffle and out sprang Striped Coat, at the same time giving the young man the full benefit of the musk bath. Amid the confusion of shrieks from the women and yells from the men he slipped into the bushes and ran as he had never run before. After him came a yelling crowd, gathering up sticks and trying to head him off.

And still Striped Coat ran, dodging and threatening his pursurers when they came too close, but ever getting nearer to the Henry cabin. At the open doorway stood Mr. Henry, a pipe

CAPTURED AT LAST

in his mouth; he did not move a muscle as the wood pussy crossed the little clearing, eyed him inquiringly and then slipped by and into his nest behind the woodbox, with all his old dignity suddenly returned.

Outside the cabin a howl of joy went up from the pursuers.

“We’ve got him now!” they shouted. But Mr. Henry still quietly smoked in the doorway and eyed them composedly.

“The skunk,” he said, at last, “is in my house. It is safe with me.”

“But that’s the black skunk! That’s old Striped Coat!” shouted one. They stood about arguing until another of their number called disgustedly. “Ah! can’t you see? He wants all the reward for himself. Come on back.”

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Then they trooped away, vowing all kinds of vengeance; but Mr. Henry still smoked.

He was however thinking very hard. Unless he did exactly the right thing he saw very clearly that this splendid little animal of the woods would sooner or latter be killed or captured. The news of where it had last been seen would spread only too quickly. Presently he called in the reluctant Mike and helped him make a hole in one corner of the cabin floor to serve as a safer retreat for Striped Coat who by using it could go under the cabin itself.

And Striped Coat seemed to understand, for all that night he could be heard digging under the floor to make the place even more cozy and safe.

CHAPTER XI

THE WINTER SLEEP

MR. HENRY had taken such a liking to Striped Coat that he wanted to make sure the wild wood pussy would like the cabin well enough to make it a permanent home. With this in mind he built an underground drain leading under it to a pile of stones nearby. Safety was even more important than comfort in the matter of a den, and through this back door Striped Coat could feel able to go or come when he chose. The stone pile hid the entrance and allowed no animal larger than he, to enter through its cracks.

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

It was a fine arrangement and Striped Coat liked it. He built a big nest of dry grass, leaves and cotton waste under the cabin and slept there instead of in his corner back of the wood box, but at night he often came out of the hole in the floor and walked around the room while Mr. Henry was eating supper, showing friendliness but in a dignified, distant way. After eating a few scraps he would go back to the hole, then out through the drain to the stone pile around which he would walk for a time scenting the air and making very sure all was well before leaving for the woods.

He was growing bigger and finer every day. By the time the frosts of October had turned the leaves red, sweetened the acorns and numbed the big in-



Under the persimmon and wild apple trees he picked up
ripe fruit, often shaken down by Possum

THE WINTER SLEEP

sects so that they were more easily caught, his winter coat of fur to keep him warm in the coming icy weather, was almost at its full prime, long, almost like velvet in softness, and black as coal, yet so glossy that it fairly glittered in the sunlight. On his head and neck stood out the pretty white markings which had given him his name.

His hunts in the woods now were wonderful picnics. In the grassy spots he could find big, full grown grasshoppers and crickets, as well as luscious white grubs which dry weather had brought up within an inch or two of the surface of the ground. Around the grape-vine tangles, and under the persimmon and wild apple trees he picked up ripe fruit often shaken down by Possum, and under the white oaks,

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acorns almost as sweet as chestnuts, while many other plants, bushes, vines and trees bore edible things which he liked, such as tubers, berries or seeds. He found many mice too in their nests of grass, and more yellow jacket and bumble bee combs than he could eat. No wonder therefore that he was able to store up a lot of surplus food in the form of fat, to help him live through the coming winter when bad weather might keep him from finding more food for weeks at a time.

It is well that Autumn is a time of plenty, for in the North it enables the animals and even some birds which do not migrate to the warm South, to gather much more food than they need at the moment. When the cold winds blow and the ground is frozen it is badly

THE WINTER SLEEP

needed. Red Squirrel hid nuts in forks of limbs and in hollows and crevices, Grey Squirrel buried a supply in good safe places, Ground Hackie made a granary for himself underground, the foxes buried things like dead mice, pieces of rabbit, frogs, snakes, fish and even apples, but creatures like Bear, Woodchuck, Possum, Coon and Striped Coat just stored, in layers of rich fat around their body, enough nourishment to carry them through the hard months, until warm, pleasant days came. Those that were not wise enough to gather a supply in some form, had a terrible time and often died before spring.

As Mr. Henry kept open house at the cabin every Sunday, it was usual for at least one canoe party of his family and friends to come for luncheon and a walk

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around the interesting woods. But more interesting to them than anything else was an occasional glimpse of Striped Coat, who though usually sleeping in the day time was waked up by the new voices and often induced to come out for a dainty piece of meat or fish. The friendliness of this beautiful and entirely free creature of the woods delighted many a visitor.

When really cold weather set in, Mr. Henry prepared to leave the cabin until Spring, so he anxiously watched Striped Coat in the hope that before leaving time came, the wood pussy would hibernate, that is to say, go to sleep for the winter in the safe, warm nest. His fat would feed him while he slept, for without exercise he would not need much nourishment. The woods were



The friendliness of this beautiful and entirely free creature of the woods delighted many a visitor

THE WINTER SLEEP

well sprinkled with traps and a snow for tracking might come at any time and help Farmer Slown or other woodsman to locate his den and set the traps more dangerously unless he was guarded.

At length a very cold day came and Striped Coat could be heard remodeling his nest and digging energetically. Mr. Henry watched for him and was surprised once or twice to see the head of an entirely strange wood pussy thrust out of the hole in the floor as it looked around. What it was hunting for, was soon shown by Striped Coat who presently came out and began dragging at the rug as if to carry it away with him.

“Ah! so that’s it,” thought the watcher, “you have brought in a friend

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to stay with you and need more covers to make him comfortable. Well, you shall have them!" And as often as Striped Coat came up, he was handed a ball of cotton waste. Soon he appeared no more and all was quiet except for the sighing of the north wind outside. Striped Coat had gone comfortably to sleep, and with him, as in the days when he was little, was his mother.

CHAPTER XII

THE SPRING AWAKENING

DECEMBER and January passed without Striped Coat waking up for more than an occasional peep at the woods whenever the warm south wind was blowing; but the last days of February found him uneasy and on the watch for good weather; then there came a gentle warm rain which brought a new scent into the woods—the scent of Spring.

Striped Coat caught it and was lured out as soon as darkness came; his mother followed eagerly. They were both anxious to get food but also interested

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in looking around and hunting up the old places which they had frequented in the summer. The mother travelled to the deserted woodchuck burrow under the holly tree, and finding it pleasantly dry and homelike, rearranged the nest and slept there instead of returning to the cabin.

Striped Coat however went further; he made a great circle through the woods which carried him far beyond Farmer Slown's field to a sandy hill where, because the ground was dryer and warmer than below, many animals had their winter dens and where therefore it was not as lonely as nearer the Creek. Here he found the trails of Possum and of Coon and even of Gray Fox, but of none of his own kind. Wherever he went he saw others of the woods

THE SPRING AWAKENING

folk, all hungry, all in a hurry and none interested in him.

That day he spent in a hollow log far in the pines. It was an uncomfortable place, so he left it early on the following night and restlessly resumed his trip through the dripping, scented woods, on and on with scarcely a stop for rest. The long sleep had left him lonely, he knew that somewhere were companions, and he would keep on going until he found them.

Nearly all of the food of the last year had already been gathered by the woods creatures and the new year's food had not begun to grow, but here and there he picked up something to stave off hunger—a half awakened insect or two, a dead shrew, scattered acorns and some grass bulbs. Here and there, too, he

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found good dens and spent more than one day in comfortably sleeping in them, only to start out again at dusk.

His seemed now almost a hopeless task, due to the success of trappers and especially to Farmer Slown's relentless work against the wood pussies; yet still he searched.

At length his circle brought him back to the Goose Creek country where he knew the trails and felt a longing once more to sleep safely in his home under the cabin. For ten nights he had been travelling, and now disheartened, footsore and thin, he was back where he started, after finding the world a lonely place. But here would at least be his mother, or was she too gone now and he left, the last of the wood pussies on Goose Creek?

THE SPRING AWAKENING

Ahead loomed the cabin. Striped Coat, dragging himself gloomily through the bushes scarcely looked at it until, near the stone pile, he caught on a breath of wind an unfamiliar scent—very faint, very elusive but at the same time unmistakably telling him that a strange wood pussy had been there.

In an instant it reawakened his interest in life and made of him a different looking creature. Again he was alert, quick footed, eager. Again his wonderful fur fluffed up, until his body looked like a perfect muff.

Cautiously, he entered the drain, following the elusive scent which led under the cabin and showed that in his absence the other wood pussy had actually slept in his cozy nest. Now the

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den was empty, he had come back too late.

Striped Coat moved about, noting all the places where the other had walked also. Little changes had been made here and there—a burrow started, some earth moved away from the nest and the nest itself made smaller as if to fit around a smaller body. Presently he came again to the drain and started out, determined to go in search of this other, where he did not know.

And then he noticed the scent more strongly, and coming out of the stone pile found it stronger still, as if the other had been there only a moment before. Searching this way and that he picked up the trail and followed it into the woods. Had the other come back to the cabin and, finding the rightful

THE SPRING AWAKENING

owner in possession tried to escape unobserved? But how escape Striped Coat, whose nose was as keen as a knife blade was sharp; Striped Coat, the fame of whose fur had travelled over a whole country and who yet lived; Striped Coat who could travel a whole night without growing tired; Striped Coat who was lonely!

And did the other really wish very much to escape? Was not she too lonely? If not, why should she have gone so slowly into the woods as to be scarcely out of sight of the cabin when Striped Coat came rushing along her trail. Pretty little wood pussy! Was not she as thrilled as he at this meeting and timidly anxious to make friends?

And yet she pretended with all her might that she did not care the least bit

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about him and wanted to continue her lonely way, and only when Striped Coat seemed on the point of turning back would she look around and hesitate and lead him on again. And somehow it happened that instead of going further into the big woods, they made a circle which brought them back to the cabin. Side by side they neared the entrance, and just as the sun lit up the sky in the East they vanished that way into the stone pile, and Striped Coat had found a companion.



Side by side they neared the entrance

CHAPTER XIII

RAISING A FAMILY

WHEN the early pink and white flowers of the trailing arbutus brightened the ground in many parts of the slowly awakening woods, Mr. Henry returned to the cabin. It was there that he found it possible to do his best work, for he was a writer, who needed the quiet and solitude of a place like this. Nothing really unpleasant ever seemed to happen there, and interesting things were always cropping up. For instance there was Striped Coat! And now Striped Coat had a mate!

But the other little wood pussy did

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not like the noise of footsteps on the floor over her head. They frightened her. So after two days of nervous watchfulness, she could bear it no longer and slipped out under cover of the twilight, picking her way into the woods until she reached an uprooted pine under whose trunk a large woodchuck had dug a burrow. This old fellow had only recently awakened from his winter sleep and was at that moment in his snug nest, dreaming no doubt of the time when the woods would again be full of eatable green things.

It could not be said therefore that he was overjoyed when he heard scratching at his front door and caught the scent of the wood pussy as she descended towards him. Knowing from experience that to steal a burrow like

RAISING A FAMILY

this was a great temptation to the meat eaters who needed dens for themselves, he at once began to make unpleasant remarks in woodchuck language and to threaten with his teeth, the longest of which being arranged like a rat's in the front of his mouth, could give a fearful bite.

But the wood pussy had come there because she already knew that this burrow was just the right size for her, a smaller woodchuck's home would not have been comfortable. Moreover an old woodchuck's den was usually well hidden and made with plenty of protection against rain and dampness as well as with a second entrance for escape in case of danger. It would not be an easy matter to drive out the old fighter who was quite as large as herself, but

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her need was urgent and this burrow suited her exactly.

Showing her teeth and threatening with the musk bath made no difference however to this woodchuck, indeed he worked himself into such a rage that he even drove her back inch by inch until he had her almost at the entrance again. This fighting spirit however proved his undoing, for suddenly he was attacked from the rear and with a force which there was no resisting. Striped Coat had followed the trail of his companion and, finding her fighting in the burrow, had run in too and tried to push past in order to help. The burrow being much too narrow for this, he had then rushed out of that entrance and in at the back door so quickly that he was able to surprise the old chuck before he could re-

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turn to his usual fighting position in a corner with back protected.

Now, there was nothing for him to do but get out of his burrow as quickly as he could and go somewhere else where he might hope to have a little peace before being found again and driven out by some den hunter. It sounded like a hard life, but Ground Hog's claws and feet were so powerful that in soft earth he could dig a fairly good den in a day. He was lucky this time, for had it been a fox instead of a wood pussy, he would surely have been eaten.

And so with Striped Coat still living under the cabin, his mate got a fine den all to herself, which came in handy a few weeks later when six little ones arrived, three of them like the mother and three with the dark body and the mark-

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ings of Striped Coat, their father, already showing in their skin. Healthy little things they were too, with plenty of appetite which their mother was usually able to supply, for almost her only thought now was of these helpless, hairless little youngsters.

She had carried into the den and stored away conveniently, several half eaten mice, lizards and little snakes which, for a day or two, made it unnecessary for her to do much hunting, but on the fourth day she felt very hungry and wandered all the way to Farmer Slow'n's field.

Striped Coat, coming across her trail, followed her there and arrived at almost the same moment, so together they explored the edge of the field for beetles and at length reached the barn under

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which Striped Coat slipped, as in the old days; but now things were changed, there were vile odors and diggings of rats on all sides.

Even as they entered, a huge male rat ran past them and sulkily entered a burrow. Striped Coat turned towards him, but not as quickly as his mate who dashed after the flying tail. She was still ravenously hungry and here was meat.

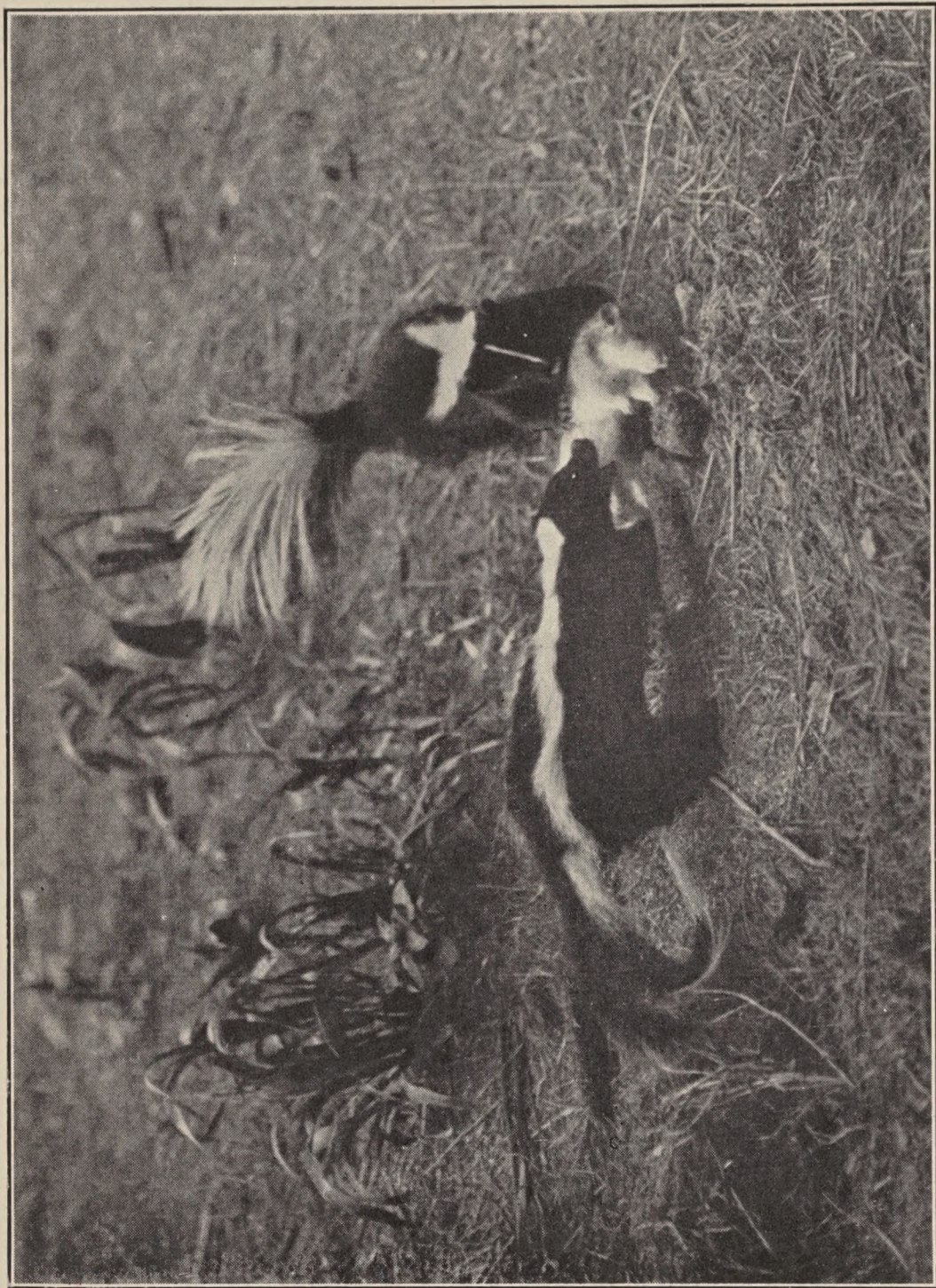
The rat however was now in his narrow den, feeling quite safe enough to turn and chatter furiously at his pursuers who accepted his challenge by beginning to dig. The burrow ran close to the surface of the ground, so they made the dirt fairly fly and took short cuts by skipping over some sections. This was the kind of work they were

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built for and the eagerness of his mate had now thoroughly aroused Striped Coat.

From one hole to another they chased the clever rat until it seemed as if at any moment they would have him cornered and force him to fight, but he knew what he was about and kept one thing in reserve, a dash to Farmer Slown's own house, under which he had a hole leading into the kitchen. He reckoned however without the experienced wisdom of Striped Coat.

When what seemed to him the right moment had come, the rat poked his battle scarred gray nose out of the hidden hole, saw that the way seemed clear and made a rush, but Striped Coat had been waiting for just this move and



The three tugging, biting, squealing and pulling each other this way and that until they burst from under the barn and had it out on the flat ground

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made a rush too. He and the rat bumped into each other amid furious squeals, and the rat was thrown off his feet. In that moment the other wood pussy reached him and landed on top with both front paws and all her weight, but without so much as knocking the breath out of the powerful, big fellow who rolled over and would have escaped had not Striped Coat caught him suddenly by the skin on the back of his head.

Then the fight became furious. The three tugging, biting, squealing and pulling each other this way and that until they burst from under the barn and had it out on the flat ground directly in front of the Farmer's house. Here the moon shone on the battle and

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helped the mother wood pussy to see her chance to get the death grip on the rat's thick neck and finish him.

They did not hear a window open over their heads nor see the Farmer's face appear; in the heat of the fighting they had forgotten all else. But now Striped Coat, who still had his grip on the rat's head, began to drag him under the fence and then to the bushes and then to a dark thicket where they seemed safe.

Striped Coat lay down to lick a badly bitten paw and to free his wonderful fur from dirt, which he did by carefully shaking, scratching and much work with his mouth. But his mate began at the left hind leg of the rat and ate as long as she could find anything tender enough to chew. It was not as tasty a

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meal as she would have liked, but it all went to keep her strong and so to help the six little ones to get all the milk they needed.

CHAPTER XIV

MASTER OF THE WOODS

IT was early morning. Under the cabin, Striped Coat was in his big bed curled up asleep but twitching occasionally as he dreamed of battles with old warrior rats. In the woodchuck's burrow under the uprooted pine, Striped Coat's mate was giving all the little "striped coats" their morning bath, using her wet tongue as the wash rag. And in the old den under the holly tree Striped Coat's mother was doing much the same with four little ones which made up her new family; pretty youngsters, but all showing signs of having

MASTER OF THE WOODS

as much white as black in their markings, when they grew up.

Over their heads the woods was now a mass of green. Birds were singing, bees were buzzing around numberless flowers, far and wide there was the hum of the insect army now come again to feed on the plant life. How this army would spread and grow and ravage the land, if birds by day were not constantly after it on the ground, in the trees and in the air, and if at night its ranks were not attacked by the active little shrews, the swift flying bat, and the wood pussies, not to mention other woodsfolk like the fox, the mole, old Possum and even Screech Owl, who all helped! In the water the fish did their part. Yes, everything must eat to live.

And the farmers were cultivating

STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK

their crops and raising chickens and other live stock, for man too must eat; and they were fighting everywhere the insects and the other vermin which would like to take all these things for themselves. One of these farmers was Ben Slown of Goose Creek. Upon him on this beautiful morning Mr. Henry made a call.

It was not very formal; the Farmer sat on his cultivator in the field and Mr. Henry leaned against the fence nearby.

“Well, how’s life at the cabin?” asked the Farmer.

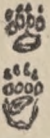
“Very interesting. The wild creatures are growing tame again. They are around or in my cabin most of the day and night; it’s on account of them that I came to see you; I wondered whether you and I, working together, couldn’t

MASTER OF THE WOODS

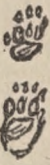
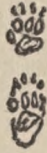
stop the trapping that's going on around here. Woods animals that do a lot of good are being killed off; there are the skunks for example, only a few old ones are left. Can't we save them? What do you say?" Mr. Henry spoke seriously and the Farmer listened equally so. Once he looked up rather sharply, as if wondering how much the other man suspected the part he had taken in trapping during the autumn and winter, but he did not interrupt.

"I've been thinking about those skunks, Mr. Henry," he replied. "I know you kept a watchful eye over the black one last autumn and I'm kind of glad of it now. All last year I saw their tracks over my field. I calculated they'd eat every vegetable and ear of corn I raised, and yet somehow I never

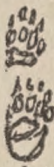
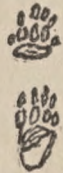
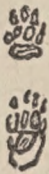
STRIPED COAT, THE SKUNK



had a better crop anywhere. I'll admit it. No cutworms, no grubs, none of those big brown beetles, even no mice to speak of.



"I didn't know just what was doing the good work until I—that is, the trappers—caught off the skunks last autumn. I can tell you that after that the mice and rats nearly ate me up. Well, I still hadn't studied it out when the other night I saw the queerest thing ever! Two skunks killing a sewer rat almost on my doorstep, and it an old fellow half as big as one of them. Such squealing you never heard, I



Skunk tracks.



“That big black skunk of yours was the one that did the trick”

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guess! That big black skunk of yours was the one that did the trick; he wouldn't let go, the other one just helped finish things. I tell you it was a real fight!" Farmer Slownd chuckled at the recollection.

"That rat," he continued, "had done a heap of damage already, gnawing and digging and carrying off little chickens; and neither I nor that dog of mine could ever get a hold of him. I have a feeling that the skunks take an egg whenever it's left lying around, but they never come into my hen house like that rat.

"I'm a farmer and haven't time to fool with wild animals the way you can, but I like to have people like you around to buy things I raise and I have a change of feeling about those skunks. I'm all

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for them since that rat business. Yes sir! And what's more you needn't worry about traps any longer." Having said which Farmer Slowen stood up to resume work as if the matter were now ended.

Mr. Henry, however, jumped the fence to give his hand a hearty shake.

"I hope we'll be neighbors a long time!" he cried. As he strode back through the woods, the Farmer looked after him for a moment or two.

"It's funny," he said. "Who would have thought I would ever find that neighbors and skunks were any good!"

That night Striped Coat took a long trip. He wandered far below the Farmer's field and then to the sandy hill in the pines and lastly along the bank of Goose Creek. He met Mink and Coon

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and old Possum, Gray Fox, Brown Weasel, Bun and the deer from Cranberry Swamp. All looked at him and then gave him the path. Yes, there were many animals, but after all this was his range and he was master of them all.

Standing once more in front of the stone pile he shook himself until his fur stood out all over him, that fur for which any dealer would give a big price. Some day his children, and perhaps later his children's children, with black fur like his, would wander at night through the woods of Goose Creek chasing the elusive mice and beetles; but he was the first of the new order, he was Striped Coat, the Black Skunk!

As he stood there, a pale light spread over the sky, the protecting black shad-

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ows grew fainter. He knew that he, a creature of the night, must now bid farewell for a while to all the outside world. Reluctantly, he bowed his head and entered the low arch of the stone pile. Slowly his body moved out of sight, then the long tail until not even the tip remained in view.

THE END

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