

in which I Pile Up Wood and Go on with Winter

Now I am almost to that snowstorm. The morning after I had the awful thought about the wood, I got up early. I was glad to hear the nuthatches and chickadees. They gave me the feeling that I still had time to chop. They were bright, busy, and totally unworried about storms. I shouldered my ax and went out.

I had used most of the wood around the hemlock house, so I crossed to the top of the gorge. First I took all the dry limbs off the trees and hauled them home. Then I chopped down dead trees. With wood all around me, I got in my tree and put my arm out. I made an x in the needles. Where the x lay, I began stacking wood. I wanted to be able to reach my wood from the tree when the snow was deep. I piled a big stack at this point. I reached out the other side of the door and made another x. I piled wood here. Then I stepped around my piles and had a fine idea. I decided that if I used up one pile, I could tunnel through the snow to the next and the next. I made many woodpiles leading out into the forest.

I watched the sky. It was as blue as summer, but ice was building up along the waterfall at the gorge. I knew winter was coming, although each day the sun would rise in a bright sky and the days would follow cloudless. I piled more wood. This is when I realized that I was scared. I kept cutting wood and piling it like a nervous child biting his nails.

It was almost with relief that I saw the storm arrive.

Now I am back where I began. I won't tell it again, I shall go on now with my relief and the fun and wonderfulness of living on a mountaintop in winter.

The Baron Weasel loved the snow, and was up and about in it every day before Frightful and I had had our breakfast. Professor Bando's jam was my standby on those cold mornings. I would eat mounds of it on my hard acorn pancakes, which I improved by adding hickory nuts. With these as a bracer for the day, Frightful and I would stamp out into the snow and reel down the mountain. She would fly above my head as I slid and plunged and rolled to the creek.

The creek was frozen. I would slide out onto it and break a little hole and ice fish. The sun would glance off the white snow, the birds would fly through the trees, and I would come home with a fresh meal from the valley. I found there were still plants under the snow, and I would dig down and get teaberry leaves and wintergreen. I got this idea from the deer, who found a lot to eat under the snow. I tried some of the mosses that they liked, but decided moss was for the deer.

Around four o'clock we would all wander home. The nuthatches, the chickadees, the cardinals, Frightful, and me. And now came the nicest part of wonderful days. I would stop in the meadow and throw Frightful off my fist. She would wind into the sky and wait above me as I kicked the snow-bent grasses. A rabbit would pop up, or sometimes a pheasant. Out of the sky, from a pinpoint of a thing, would dive my beautiful falcon. And, oh, she was beautiful when she made a strike—all power and beauty. On the ground she would cover her quarry. Her perfect feathers would stand up on her body and her wings would arch over the food. She never touched it until I came and picked her up. I would go home and feed her, then crawl into my tree room, light a little fire on my hearth, and Frightful and I would begin the winter evening.

I had lots of time to cook and try mixing different plants with different meats to make things taste better—and I must say I originated some excellent meals.

When dinner was done, the fire would blaze on; Frightful would sit on the foot post of the bed and preen and wipe her beak and shake. Just the fact that she was alive was a warming thing to know.

I would look at her and wonder what made a bird a bird and a boy a boy. The forest would become silent. I would know that The Baron Weasel was about, but I would not hear him.

Then I would get a piece of birch bark and write, or I would make new things out of deer hide, like a hood for Frightful, and finally I would take off my suit and

my moccasins and crawl into my bed under the sweet-smelling deerskin. The fire would burn itself out and I would be asleep. Those were nights of the very best sort. One night I read some of my old notes about how to pile wood so I could get to it under the snow, and I laughed until Frightful awoke. I hadn't made a single tunnel. I walked on the snow to get wood like The Baron Weasel went for food or the deer went for moss.

in which I Learn About Birds and People

Frightful and I settled down to living in snow. We went to bed early, slept late, ate the mountain harvest, and explored the country alone. Oh, the deer walked with us, the foxes followed in our footsteps, the winter birds flew over our heads, but mostly we were alone in the white wilderness. It was nice. It was very, very nice. My deerskin rabbit-lined suit was so warm that even when my breath froze in my nostrils, my body was snug and comfortable. Frightful fluffed on the coldest days, but a good flight into the air around the mountain would warm her, and she would come back to my fist with a thump and a flip. This was her signal of good spirits.

I did not become lonely. Many times during the summer I had thought of the 'long winter months ahead' with some fear. I had read so much about the loneliness of the farmer, the trapper, the woodsman during the bleakness of winter that I had come to believe it. The winter was as exciting as the summer—maybe more so. The birds were magnificent and almost tame. They talked to each other, warned each other, fought for food, for kingship, and for the right to make the most noise. Sometimes I would sit in my doorway, which became an entrance to behold—a portico of pure white snow, adorned with snowmen—and watch them with endless interest. They reminded me of Third Avenue, and I gave them the names that seemed to fit.

There was Mr. Bracket. He lived on the first floor of our apartment house, and no one could sit on his step or even make a noise near his door without being chased. Mr. Bracket, the chickadee, spent most of his time chasing the young chickadees through the woods. Only his mate could share his favorite perches and feeding places.

Then there were Mrs. O'Brien, Mrs. Callaway, and Mrs. Federio. On Third Avenue they would all go off to the market together first thing in the morning, talking and pushing and stopping to lecture to children in gutters and streets. Mrs. Federio always followed Mrs. O'Brien, and Mrs. O'Brien always followed Mrs. Callaway in talking and pushing and even in buying an apple. And there they were again in my hemlock; three busy chickadees. They would flit and rush around and click and fly from one eating spot to another. They were noisy, scolding and busily following each other. All the other chickadees followed them, and they made way only for Mr. Bracket.

The chickadees, like the people on Third Avenue, had their favorite routes to and from the best food supplies. They each had their own resting perches and each had a little shelter in a tree cavity to which they would fly when the day was over. They would chatter and call good

night and make a big fuss before they parted; and then the forest would be as quiet as the apartment house on Third Avenue when all the kids were off the streets and all the parents had said their last words to each other and everyone had gone to their own little hole.

Sometimes when the wind howled and the snows blew, the chickadees would be out for only a few hours. Even Mr. Bracket, who had been elected by the chickadees to test whether or not it was too stormy for good hunting, would appear for a few hours and disappear. Sometimes I would find him just sitting quietly on a limb next to the bole of a tree, all fluffed up and doing nothing. There was no one who more enjoyed doing nothing on a bad day than Mr. Bracket of Third Avenue.

Frightful, the two Mr. Brackets, and I shared this feeling. When the ice and sleet and snow drove down through the hemlocks, we all holed up.

I looked at my calendar pole one day, and realized that it was almost Christmas. Bando will come, I thought. I'll have to prepare a feast and make a present for him. I took stock of the frozen venison and decided that there were enough steaks for us to eat nothing but venison for a month. I scooped under the snow for teaberry plants to boil down and pour over snowballs for dessert.

I checked my cache of wild onions to see if I had enough to make onion soup, and set aside some large firm groundnuts for mashed potatoes. There were still piles of dogtooth violet bulbs and Solomon's seal roots and a few dried apples. I cracked walnuts, hickory nuts, and beechnuts, then began a pair of deer-hide moccasins to be lined with rabbit fur for Bando's present. I finished these before Christmas, so I started a hat of the same materials.

Two days before Christmas I began to wonder if Bando would come. He had forgotten, I was sure—or he was busy, I said. Or he thought that I was no longer here and decided not to tramp out through the snows to find out. On Christmas Eve Bando still had not arrived, and I began to plan for a very small Christmas with Frightful.

About four-thirty Christmas Eve I hung a small red cluster of teaberries on the deerskin door. I went in my tree room for a snack of beechnuts when I heard a faint 'halloooo' from far down the mountain. I snuffed out my tallow candle, jumped into my coat and moccasins, and plunged out into the snow. Again a 'halloooo' floated over the quiet snow. I took a bearing on the sound and bounced down the hill to meet Bando. I ran into him just as he turned up the valley to follow the stream bed. I was so glad to see him that I hugged him and pounded him on the back.

'Never thought I'd make it,' he said. 'I walked all the way from the entrance of the State Park; pretty good, eh?' He smiled and slapped his tired legs. Then he grabbed my arm, and with three quick pinches, tested the meat on me.

'You've been living well,' he said. He looked closely at my face. 'But you're gonna need a shave in a year or two.' I thanked him and we sprang up the mountain, cut across through the gorge and home.

'How's the Frightful?' he asked as soon as we were inside and the light was lit.

I whistled. She jumped to my fist. He got bold and stroked her. 'And the jam?' he asked.

'Excellent, except the crocks are absorbent and are sopping up all the juice.'

‘Well, I brought you some more sugar; we’ll try next year. Merry Christmas, Thoreau!’ he shouted, and looked about the room.

‘I see you have been busy. A blanket, new clothes, and an **ingenious** fireplace—with a real chimney—and say, you have silverware!’ He picked up the forks I had carved.

We ate smoked fish for dinner with boiled dogtooth violet bulbs. Walnuts dipped in jam were dessert. Bando was pleased with his jam.

When we were done, Bando stretched out on my bed. He propped his feet up and lit his pipe.

‘And now, I have something to show you,’ he said. He reached in his coat pocket and took out a newspaper clipping. It was from a New York paper, and it read:

wild boy suspected living off deer

and nuts in wilderness of catskills

I looked at Bando and leaned over to read the headline myself.

‘Have you been talking?’ I asked.

‘Me? Don’t be ridiculous. You have had several visitors other than me.’

‘The fire warden—the old lady!’ I cried out.

‘Now, Thoreau, this could only be a rumor. Just because it is in print, doesn’t mean it’s true. Before you get excited, sit still and listen.’ He read:

‘ “Residents of Delhi, in the Catskill Mountains, report that a wild boy, who lives off deer and nuts, is hiding out in the mountains.

“Several hunters stated that this boy stole deer from them during hunting season.” ’

‘I did not!’ I shouted. ‘I only took the ones they had wounded and couldn’t find.’

‘Well, that’s what they told their wives when they came home without their deer. Anyway, listen to this: “This wild boy has been seen from time to time by Catskill residents, some of whom believe he is crazy!” ’

‘Well, that’s a terrible thing to say!’

‘Just awful,’ he stated. ‘Any normal red-blooded American boy wants to live in a tree house and trap his own food. They just don’t do it, that’s all.’

‘Read on,’ I said.

‘ “Officials say that there is no evidence of any boy living alone in the mountains, and add that all abandoned houses and sheds are routinely checked for just such events. Nevertheless, the residents are sure that such a boy exists!” End story.’

‘That’s a lot of nonsense!’ I leaned back against the bedstead and smiled.

‘Ho, ho, don’t think that ends it,’ Bando said, and reached in his pocket for another clipping. ‘This one is dated December fifth, the other was November twenty-third. Shall I read?’

‘Yes.’

old woman reports meeting wild boy while picking strawberries in catskills

‘ “Mrs. Thomas Fielder, ninety-seven, resident of Delhi, N.Y., told this reporter that she met a wild boy on Bitter Mountain last June while gathering her annual strawberry jelly supply.

‘ “She said the boy was brown-haired, dusty, and wandering aimlessly around the mountains. However, she added, he seemed to be in good flesh and happy.

‘ “The old woman, a resident of the mountain resort town for ninety-seven years, called this office to report her observation. Local residents report that Mrs. Fielder is a fine old member of the community, who only occasionally sees imaginary things.” ’

Bando roared. I must say I was sweating, for I really did not expect this turn of events.

‘And now,’ went on Bando, ‘and now the queen of the New York papers. This story was buried on page nineteen. No **sensationalism** for this paper.

boy reported living off land in catskills

‘ “A young boy of seventeen or eighteen, who left home with a group of boy scouts, is reported to be still scouting in that area, according to the fire warden of the Catskill Mountains.

‘ “Evidence of someone living in the forest—a fireplace, soup bones, and cracked nuts—was reported by Warden Jim Handy, who spent the night in the wilderness looking for the lad. Jim stated that the young man had apparently left the area, as there was no evidence of his camp upon a second trip—” ’

‘What second trip?’ I asked.

Bando puffed his pipe, looked at me wistfully and said, ‘Are you ready to listen?’

‘Sure,’ I answered.

‘Well, here’s the rest of it. “. . . there was no trace of his camp on a second trip, and the warden believes that the young man returned to his home at the end of the summer.”

‘You know, Thoreau, I could scarcely drag myself away from the newspapers to come up here. You make a marvelous story.’

I said, ‘Put more wood on the fire, it is Christmas. No one will be searching these mountains until May Day.’

Bando asked for the willow whistles. I got them for him, and after running the scale several times, he said, ‘Let us serenade the ingenuity of the American newspaperman. Then let us **serenade** the conservationists who have protected the American wilderness, so that a boy can still be alone in this world of millions of people.’

I thought that was suitable, and we played 'Holy Night.' We tried 'The Twelve Days of Christmas,' but the whistles were too stiff and Bando too tired.

'Thoreau, my body needs rest. Let's give up,' he said after two bad starts. I banked the fire and blew out the candle and slept in my clothes.

It was Christmas when we awoke. Breakfast was light—acorn pancakes, jam, and sassafras tea. Bando went for a walk, I lit the fire in the fireplace and spent the morning creating a feast from the wilderness.

I gave Bando his presents when he returned. He liked them. He was really pleased; I could tell by his eyebrows. They went up and down and in and out. Furthermore, I know he liked the presents because he wore them.

The onion soup was about to be served when I heard a voice shouting in the distance, 'I know you are there! I know you are there! Where are you?'

'Dad!' I screamed, and dove right through the door onto my stomach. I all but fell down the mountain shouting, 'Dad! Dad! Where are you?' I found him resting in a snowdrift, looking at the cardinal pair that lived near the stream. He was smiling, stretched out on his back, not in exhaustion, but in joy.

'Merry Christmas!' he whooped. I ran toward him. He jumped to his feet, tackled me, thumped my chest, and rubbed snow in my face.

Then he stood up, lifted me from the snow by the pockets on my coat, and held me off the ground so that we were eye to eye. He sure smiled. He threw me down in the snow again and wrestled with me for a few minutes. Our formal greeting done, we strode up the mountain.

'Well, son,' he began. 'I've been reading about you in the papers and I could no longer resist the temptation to visit you. I still can't believe you did it.'

His arm went around me. He looked real good, and I was overjoyed to see him.

'How did you find me?' I asked eagerly.

'I went to Mrs. Fielder, and she told me which mountain. At the stream I found your raft and ice-fishing holes. Then I looked for trails and footsteps. When I thought I was getting warm, I hollered.'

'Am I that easy to find?'

'You didn't have to answer, and I'd probably have frozen in the snow.' He was pleased and not angry at me at all. He said again, 'I just didn't think you'd do it. I was sure you'd be back the next day. When you weren't, I bet on the next week; then the next month. How's it going?'

'Oh, it's a wonderful life, Dad!'

When we walked into the tree, Bando was putting the final touches on the venison steak.

'Dad, this is my friend, Professor Bando; he's a teacher. He got lost one day last summer and stumbled onto my camp. He liked it so well that he came back for Christmas. Bando, meet my father.'

Bando turned the steak on the spit, rose, and shook my father's hand.

'I am pleased to meet the man who sired this boy,' he said grandly. I could see that they liked each other and that it was going to be a splendid Christmas. Dad stretched out on the bed and looked around.

'I thought maybe you'd pick a cave,' he said. 'The papers reported that they were looking for you in old sheds and houses, but I knew better than that. However, I never would have thought of the inside of a tree. What a beauty! Very clever, son, very, very clever. This is a comfortable bed.'

He noticed my food caches, stood and peered into them. 'Got enough to last until spring?'

'I think so,' I said. 'If I don't keep getting hungry visitors all the time.' I winked at him.

'Well, I would wear out my welcome by a year if I could, but I have to get back to work soon after Christmas.'

'How's Mom and all the rest?' I asked as I took down the turtle-shell plates and set them on the floor.

'She's marvelous. How she manages to feed and clothe those eight youngsters on what I bring her, I don't know; but she does it. She sends her love, and says that she hopes you are eating well-balanced meals.'

The onion soup was simmering and ready. I gave Dad his.

'First course,' I said.

He breathed deeply of the odor and downed it boiling hot.

'Son, this is better onion soup than the chef at the Waldorf can make.'

Bando sipped his, and I put mine in the snow to cool.

'Your mother will stop worrying about your diet when she hears of this.'

Bando rinsed Dad's soup bowl in the snow, and with great ceremony and elegance—he could really be elegant when the occasion arose—poured him a turtle shell of sassafras tea. Quoting a passage from one of Dickens's food-eating scenes, he carved the blackened steak. It was pink and juicy inside. Cooked to perfection. We were all proud of it. Dad had to finish his tea before he could eat. I was short on bowls. Then I filled his shell. A mound of sort of fluffy mashed cattail tubers, mushrooms, and dogtooth violet bulbs, smothered in gravy thickened with acorn powder. Each plate had a pile of soaked and stewed honey locust beans—mixed with hickory nuts. The beans are so hard it took three days to soak them.

It was a glorious feast. Everyone was impressed, including me. When we were done, Bando went down to the stream and cut some old dried and hollow reeds. He came back and carefully made us each a flute with the tip of his penknife. He said the willow whistles were too old for such an occasion. We all played Christmas carols until dark. Bando wanted to try some complicated jazz tunes, but the late hour, the small fire dancing and throwing heat, and the snow insulating us from the winds made us all so sleepy that we were not capable of more than a last slow rendition of taps before we put ourselves on and under skins and blew out the light.

Before anyone was awake the next morning, I heard Frightful call hungrily. I had put her outside to sleep, as we were very crowded. I went out to find her. Her Christmas dinner had been a big piece of venison, but the night air had enlarged her appetite. I called her to my fist and we went into the meadow to rustle up breakfast for the guests. She was about to go after a rabbit, but I thought that wasn't proper fare for a post-Christmas breakfast, so we went to the stream. Frightful caught herself a pheasant while I kicked a hole in the ice and did a little ice fishing. I caught about six trout and whistled Frightful to my hand. We returned to the hemlock. Dad and Bando were still asleep, with their feet in each other's faces, but both looking very content.

I built the fire and was cooking the fish and making pancakes when Dad shot out of bed.

'Wild boy!' he shouted. 'What a sanguine smell. What a purposeful fire. Breakfast in a tree. Son, I toil from sunup to sundown, and never have I lived so well!'

I served him. He choked a bit on the acorn pancakes—they are a little flat and hard—but Bando got out some of his blueberry jam and smothered the pancakes with an enormous portion. Dad went through the motions of eating this. The fish, however, he enjoyed, and he asked for more. We drank sassafras tea, sweetened with some of the sugar Bando had brought me, rubbed our turtle shells clean in the snow, and went out into the forest.

Dad had not met Frightful. When she winged down out of the hemlock, he ducked and flattened out in the snow shouting, 'Blast off.'

He was very cool toward Frightful until he learned that she was the best provider we had ever had in our family, and then he continually praised her beauty and admired her talents. He even tried to pet her, but Frightful was not to be won. She snagged him with her talons.

They stayed away from each other for the rest of Dad's visit, although Dad never ceased to admire her from a safe distance.

Bando had to leave two or three days after Christmas. He had some papers to grade, and he started off reluctantly one morning, looking very unhappy about the way of life he had chosen. He shook hands all around and then turned to me and said, 'I'll save all the newspaper clippings for you, and if the reporters start getting too hot on your trail, I'll call the New York papers and give them a bum steer.' I could see he rather liked the idea, and departed a little happier.

Dad lingered on for a few more days, ice fishing, setting my traps and snares, and husking walnuts. He whittled some cooking spoons and forks.

On New Year's Day he announced that he must go.

'I told your mother I would only stay for Christmas. It's a good thing she knows me or she might be worried.'

'She won't send the police out to look for you?' I asked hurriedly. 'Could she think you never found me?'

'Oh, I told her I'd call her Christmas night if I didn't.' He poked around for another hour or two, trying to decide just how to leave. Finally he started down the mountain. He had hardly gone a hundred feet before he was back.

'I've decided to leave by another route. Somebody might backtrack me and find you. And that would be too bad.' He came over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. 'You've done very well, Sam.' He grinned and walked off toward the gorge.

I watched him bound from rock to rock. He waved from the top of a large rock and leaped into the air. That was the last I saw of Dad for a long time.