

in which I Meet One of My Own Kind and Have a Terrible Time Getting Away

Five notches into June, my house was done. I could stand in it, lie down in it, and there was room left over for a stump to sit on. On warm evenings I would lie on my stomach and look out the door, listen to the frogs and nighthawks, and hope it would storm so that I could crawl into my tree and be dry. I had gotten soaked during a couple of May downpours, and now that my house was done, I wanted the chance to sit in my hemlock and watch a cloudburst wet everything but me. This opportunity didn't come for a long time. It was dry.

One morning I was at the edge of the meadow. I had cut down a small ash tree and was chopping it into lengths of about eighteen inches each. This was the beginning of my bed that I was planning to work on after supper every night.

With the golden summer upon me, food was much easier to get, and I actually had several hours of free time after supper in which to do other things. I had been eating frogs' legs, turtles, and best of all, an occasional rabbit. My snares and traps were set now. Furthermore, I had a good supply of cattail roots I had dug in the marsh.

If you ever eat cattails, be sure to cook them well, otherwise the fibers are tough and they take more chewing to get the starchy food from them than they are worth. However, they taste just like potatoes after you've been eating them a couple of weeks, and to my way of thinking are extremely good.

Well, anyway, that summer morning when I was gathering material for a bed, I was singing and chopping and playing a game with a raccoon I had come to know. He had just crawled in a hollow tree and had gone to bed for the day when I came to the meadow. From time to time I would tap on his tree with

my ax. He would hang his sleepy head out, snarl at me, close his eyes, and slide out of sight.

The third time I did this, I knew something was happening in the forest. Instead of closing his eyes, he pricked up his ears and his face became drawn and tense. His eyes were focused on something down the mountain. I stood up and looked. I could see nothing. I squatted down and went back to work. The raccoon dove out of sight.

'Now what's got you all excited?' I said, and tried once more to see what he had seen.

I finished the posts for the bed and was looking around for a bigger ash to fell and make slats for the springs when I nearly jumped out of my shoes.

'Now what are you doing up here all alone?' It was a human voice. I swung around and stood face to face with a little old lady in a pale blue sunbonnet and a loose brown dress.

'Oh! Gosh!' I said. 'Don't scare me like that. Say one word at a time until I get used to a human voice.' I must have looked frightened because she chuckled, smoothed down the front of her dress, and whispered, 'Are you lost?'

'Oh, no, ma'am,' I stuttered.

'Then a little fellow like you should not be all alone way up here on this haunted mountain.'

'Haunted?' said I.

'Yes, indeed. There's an old story says there are little men up here who play ninepins right down in that gorge in the twilight.' She peered at me. 'Are you one of them?'

'Oh, no, no, no, no,' I said. 'I read that story. It's just make-believe.' I laughed, and she puckered her forehead.

'Well, come on,' she said, 'make some use of yourself and help me fill this basket with strawberries.'

I hesitated—she meant my strawberry supply.

'Now, get on with you. A boy your age should be doing something worthwhile, 'stead of playing mumbly peg with sticks. Come on, young man.' She jogged me out into the meadow.

We worked quite a while before we said any more. Frankly, I was wondering how to save my precious, precious strawberries, and I may say I picked slowly. Every time I dropped one in her basket, I thought how good it would taste.

'Where do ye live?' I jumped. It is terribly odd to hear a voice after weeks of listening only to birds and raccoons, and what is more, to hear the voice ask a question like that.

'I live here,' I said.

'Ye mean Delhi. Fine. You can walk me home.'

Nothing I added did any good. She would not be shaken from her belief that I lived in Delhi. So I let it go.

We must have reaped every last strawberry before she stood up, put her arm in mine and escorted me down the mountain. I certainly was not escorting her. Her wiry little arms were like crayfish pinchers. I couldn't have gotten away if I had tried. So I walked and listened.

She told me all the local and world news, and it was rather pleasant to hear about the National League, an atom bomb test, and a Mr. Riley's three-legged dog that chased her chickens. In the middle of all this chatter she said, 'That's the best strawberry patch in the entire Catskill range. I come up here every spring. For forty years I've come to that meadow for my strawberries. It gits harder every year, but there's no jam can beat the jam from that mountain. I know. I've been around here all my life.' Then she went right into the New York Yanks without putting in a period.

As I helped her across the stream on big boulders, I heard a cry in the sky. I looked up. Swinging down the valley on long pointed wings was a large bird. I was struck by the ease and swiftness of its flight.

'Duck hawk,' she said. 'Nest around here every year. My man used to shoot 'em. He said they killed chickens, but I don't believe it. The only thing that kills chickens is Mr. Riley's three-legged dog.'

She tipped and teetered as she crossed the rocks, but kept right on talking and stepping as if she knew that no matter what, she would get across.

We finally reached the road. I wasn't listening to her very much. I was thinking about the duck hawk. This bird, I was sure, was the peregrine falcon, the king's hunting bird.

'I will get one. I will train it to hunt for me,' I said to myself.

Finally I got the little lady to her brown house at the edge of town.

She turned fiercely upon me. I started back.

'Where are you going, young man?'

I stopped. Now, I thought, she is going to march me into town. Into town? Well, that's where I'll go then, I said to myself. And I turned on my heel, smiled at her, and replied, 'To the library.'

The King's Provider

Miss Turner was glad to see me. I told her I wanted some books on hawks and falcons, and she located a few, although there was not much to be had on the subject. We worked all afternoon, and I learned enough. I departed when the library closed. Miss Turner whispered to me as I left, 'Sam, you need a haircut.'

I hadn't seen myself in so long that this had not occurred to me. 'Gee, I don't have any scissors.'

She thought a minute, got out her library scissors, and sat me down on the back steps. She did a fine job, and I looked like any other boy who had played hard all day, and who, with a little soap and water after supper, would be going off to bed in a regular house.

I didn't get back to my tree that night. The May apples were ripe, and I stuffed on those as I went through the woods. They taste like a very sweet banana, are earthy and a little slippery. But I liked them.

At the stream I caught a trout. Everybody thinks a trout is hard to catch because of all the fancy gear and flies and lines sold for trout fishing, but, honestly, they are easier to catch than any other fish. They have big mouths and snatch and swallow whole anything they see when they are hungry. With my wooden hook in its mouth, the trout was mine. The trouble is that trout are not hungry when most people have time to fish. I knew they were hungry that evening because the creek was swirling, and minnows and everything else were jumping out of the water. When you see that, go fish. You'll get them.

I made a fire on a flat boulder in the stream, and cooked the trout. I did this so I could watch the sky. I wanted to see the falcon again. I also put the trout head on the hook and dropped it in the pool. A snapping turtle would view a trout head with relish.

I waited for the falcon patiently. I didn't have to go anywhere. After an hour or so, I was rewarded. A slender speck came from the valley and glided above the stream. It was still far away when it folded its wings and bombed the earth. I watched. It arose, clumsy and big—carrying food—and winged back to the valley.

I sprinted down the stream and made myself a lean-to near some cliffs where I thought the bird had disappeared. Having learned that day that duck hawks prefer to nest on cliffs, I settled for this site.

Early the next morning, I got up and dug the tubers of the arrow-leaf that grew along the stream bank. I baked these and boiled mussels for breakfast, then I curled up behind a willow and watched the cliff.

The falcons came in from behind me and circled the stream. They had apparently been out hunting before I had gotten up, as they were returning with food. This was exciting news. They were feeding young, and I was somewhere near the nest.

I watched one of them swing in to the cliff and disappear. A few minutes later it winged out empty-footed. I marked the spot mentally and said, 'Ha!'

After splashing across the stream in the shallows, I stood at the bottom of the cliff and wondered how on earth I was going to climb the sheer wall.

I wanted a falcon so badly, however, that I dug in with my toes and hands and started up. The first part was easy; it was not too steep. When I thought I was stuck, I found a little ledge and shinned up to it.

I was high, and when I looked down, the stream spun. I decided not to look down anymore. I edged up to another ledge, and lay down on it to catch my breath. I was shaking from exertion and I was tired.

I looked up to see how much higher I had to go when my hand touched something moist. I pulled it back and saw that it was white—bird droppings. Then I saw them. Almost where my hand had been sat three fuzzy whitish gray birds. Their wide-open mouths gave them a startled look.

'Oh, hello, hello,' I said. 'You are cute.'

When I spoke, all three blinked at once. All three heads turned and followed my hand as I swung it up and toward them. All three watched my hand with opened mouths. They were marvelous. I chuckled. But I couldn't reach them.

I wormed forward, and wham!—something hit my shoulder. It pained. I turned my head to see the big female. She had hit me. She winged out, banked, and started back for another strike.

Now I was scared, for I was sure she would cut me wide open. With sudden nerve, I stood up, stepped forward, and picked up the biggest of the nestlings. The females are bigger than the males. They are the 'falcons.' They are the pride of kings. I tucked her in my sweater and leaned against the cliff, facing the bulletlike dive of the falcon. I threw out my foot as she struck, and the sole of my tennis shoe took the blow.

The female was now gathering speed for another attack, and when I say speed, I mean 50 to 60 miles an hour. I could see myself battered and torn, lying in the valley below, and I said to myself, 'Sam Gribley, you had better get down from here like a rabbit.'

I jumped to the ledge below, found it was really quite wide, slid on the seat of my pants to the next ledge, and stopped. The hawk apparently couldn't count. She did not know I had a youngster, for she checked her nest, saw the open mouths, and then she forgot me.

I scrambled to the riverbed somehow, being very careful not to hurt the hot fuzzy body that was against my own. However, Frightful, as I called her right then and there because of the

difficulties we had had in getting together, did not think so gently of me. She dug her talons into my skin to brace herself during the bumpy ride to the ground.

I stumbled to the stream, placed her in a nest of buttercups, and dropped beside her. I fell asleep.

When I awoke my eyes opened on two gray eyes in a white stroobly head. Small pinfeathers were sticking out of the stroobly down, like feathers in an Indian quiver. The big blue beak curled down in a snarl and up in a smile.

‘Oh, Frightful,’ I said, ‘you are a raving beauty.’

Frightful fluffed her nubby feathers and shook. I picked her up in the cup of my hands and held her under my chin. I stuck my nose in the deep warm fuzz. It smelled dusty and sweet.

I liked that bird. Oh, how I liked that bird from that smelly minute. It was so pleasant to feel the beating life and see the funny little awkward movements of a young thing.

The legs pushed out between my fingers, I gathered them up, together with the thrashing wings, and tucked the bird in one piece under my chin. I rocked.

‘Frightful,’ I said. ‘You will enjoy what we are going to do.’

I washed my bleeding shoulder in the creek, tucked the torn threads of my sweater back into the hole they had come out of, and set out for my tree.

a brief account of What I Did About the First Man Who Was After Me

At the edge of the meadow, I sensed all was not well at camp. How I knew there was a human being there was not clear to me then. I can only say that after living so long with the birds and animals, the movement of a human is like the difference between the explosion of a cap pistol and a cannon.

I wormed toward camp. When I could see the man I felt to be there, I stopped and looked. He was wearing a forester’s uniform. Immediately I thought they had sent someone out to bring me in, and I began to shake. Then I realized that I didn’t have to go back to meet the man at all. I was perfectly free and capable of settling down anywhere. My tree was just a pleasant habit.

I circled the meadow and went over to the gorge. On the way I checked a trap. It was a deadfall. A figure four under a big rock. The rock was down. The food was rabbit.

I picked a comfortable place just below the rim of the gorge where I could pop up every now and then and watch my tree. Here I dressed down the rabbit and fed Frightful some of the more savory bites from a young falcon’s point of view: the liver, the heart, the brain. She ate in gulps. As I watched her swallow I sensed a great pleasure. It is hard to explain my feelings at that moment. It seemed marvelous to see life pump through that strange little body of feathers, wordless noises, milk eyes—much as life pumped through me.

The food put the bird to sleep. I watched her eyelids close from the bottom up, and her head quiver. The fuzzy body rocked, the tail spread to steady it, and the little duck hawk almost sighed as she sank into the leaves, sleeping.

I had lots of time. I was going to wait for the man to leave. So I stared at my bird, the beautiful details of the new feathers, the fernlike lashes along the lids, the saucy bristles at the base of the beak. Pleasant hours passed.

Frightful would awaken, I would feed her, she would fall back to sleep, and I would watch the breath rock her body ever so slightly. I was breathing the same way, only not as fast. Her heart beat much faster than mine. She was designed to her bones for a swifter life.

It finally occurred to me that I was very hungry. I stood up to see if the man were gone. He was yawning and pacing.

The sun was slanting on him now, and I could see him quite well. He was a fire warden. Of course, it has not rained, I told myself, for almost three weeks, and the fire planes have been circling the mountains and valleys, patrolling the mountains. Apparently the smoke from my fire was spotted, and a man was sent to check it. I recalled the bare trampled ground around the tree, the fireplace of rocks filled with ashes, the wood chips from the making of my bed, and resolved hereafter to keep my yard clean.

So I made rabbit soup in a tin can I found at the bottom of the gorge. I seasoned it with wild garlic and jack-in-the-pulpit roots.

Jack-in-the-pulpits have three big leaves on a stalk and are easily recognized by the curly striped awning above a stiff, serious preacher named Jack. The jack-in-the-pulpit root, or corm, tastes and looks like potato. It should never be eaten raw.

The fire I made was only of the driest wood, and I made it right at the water's edge. I didn't want a smoky fire on this particular evening.

After supper I made a bough bed and stretched out with Frightful beside me. Apparently, the more you stroke and handle a falcon, the easier they are to train.

I had all sorts of plans for hoods and jesses, as the straps on a falcon are called, and I soon forgot about the man.

Stretched on the boughs, I listened to the wood pewees calling their haunting good nights until I fell sound asleep.

in which I Learn to Season My Food

The fire warden made a fire some time in the colder hours of the night. At dawn he was asleep beside white smoldering ashes. I crawled back to the gorge, fed Frightful rabbit bites, and slipped back to the edge of the meadow to check a box trap I had set the day before. I made it by tying small sticks together like a log cabin. This trap was better than the snares or deadfalls. It had caught numerous rabbits, several squirrels, and a groundhog.

I saw, as I inched toward it, that it was closed. The sight of a closed trap excites me to this day. I still can't believe that animals don't understand why delicious food is in such a ridiculous spot.

Well, this morning I pulled the trap deep into the woods to open it. The trapped animal was light. I couldn't guess what it was. It was also active, flipping and darting from one corner to

the next. I peeked in to locate it, so that I could grab it quickly behind the head without getting bitten. I was not always successful at this, and had scars to prove it.

I put my eye to the crack. A rumpus arose in the darkness. Two bright eyes shone, and out through that hole that was no wider than a string bean came a weasel. He flew right out at me, landed on my shoulder, gave me a lecture that I shall never forget, and vanished under the scant cover of trillium and bloodroot leaves.

He popped up about five feet away and stood on his hind feet to lecture me again. I said, 'Scat!' so he darted right to my knee, put his broad furry paws on my pants, and looked me in the face. I shall never forget the fear and wonder that I felt at the bravery of that weasel. He stood his ground and berated me. I could see by the flashing of his eyes and the curl of his lip that he was furious at me for trapping him. He couldn't talk, but I knew what he meant.

Wonder filled me as I realized he was absolutely unafraid. No other animal, and I knew quite a few by now, had been so brave in my presence. Screaming, he jumped on me. This surprised and scared me. He leapt from my lap to my head, took a mouthful of hair and wrestled it. My goose bumps rose. I was too frightened to move. A good thing, too, because I guess he figured I was not going to fight back and his scream of anger changed to a purr of peace. Still, I couldn't move.

Presently, down he climbed, as stately as royalty, and off he marched, never looking back. He sank beneath the leaves like a fish beneath the water. Not a stem rippled to mark his way.

And so The Baron and I met for the first time, and it was the beginning of a harassing but wonderful friendship.

Frightful had been watching all this. She was tense with fright. Although young and inexperienced, she knew an enemy when she saw one. I picked her up and whispered into her birdy-smelling neck feathers.

'You wild ones know.'

Since I couldn't go home, I decided to spend the day in the marsh down the west side of the mountain. There were a lot of cattails and frogs there.

> Frightful balanced on my fist as we walked. She had learned that in the short span of one afternoon and a night. She is a very bright bird.

On our way we scared up a deer. It was a doe. I watched her dart gracefully away, and said to Frightful, 'That's what I want. I need a door for my house, tethers for you, and a blanket for me. How am I going to get a deer?'

This was not the first time I had said this. The forest was full of deer, and I already had drawn plans on a piece of birch bark for deadfalls, pit traps, and snares. None seemed workable.

The day passed. In the early evening we stole home, tree by tree, to find that the warden had gone. I cleaned up my front yard, scattered needles over the bare spots, and started a small fire with very dry wood that would not smoke much. No more wardens for me. I liked my tree, and although I could live somewhere else, I certainly did not want to.

Once home, I immediately started to work again. I had a device I wanted to try, and put some hickory sticks in a tin can and set it to boiling while I fixed dinner. Before going to bed, I noted this on a piece of birch bark:

‘This night I am making salt. I know that people in the early days got along without it, but I think some of these wild foods would taste better with some flavoring. I understand that hickory sticks, boiled dry, leave a salty residue. I am trying it.’

In the morning I added:

‘It is quite true. The can is dry, and thick with a black substance. It is very salty, and I tried it on frogs’ legs for breakfast. It is just what I have needed.’

And so I went into salt production for several days, and chipped out a niche inside the tree in which to store it.

‘June 19

‘I finished my bed today. The ash slats work very well, and are quite springy and comfortable. The bed just fits in the right-hand side of the tree. I have hemlock boughs on it now, but hope to have deer hide soon. I am making a figure-four trap as tall as me with a log on it that I can barely lift. It doesn’t look workable. I wish there was another way of getting a deer.

‘June 20

‘I decided today to dig a pit to trap a deer, so I am whittling a shovel out of a board I found in the stream this morning. That stream is very useful. It has given me tin cans for pots, and now an oaken board for a shovel.

‘Frightful will hop from the stump to my fist. She still can’t fly. Her wing feathers are only about an inch long. I think she likes me.’

How a Door Came to Me

One morning before the wood pewees were up, I was smoking a mess of fish I had caught in the stream. When I caught more than I could eat, I would bone them, put them on a rack of sticks, and slowly smoke them until they dried out. This is the best way to preserve extra food. However, if you try it, remember to use a hard wood—hickory is the best. I tried pine on the first batch, and ruined them with black tarry smoke. Well, it was very silent—then came a scream. I jumped into my tree. Presently I had enough nerve to look out.

‘Baron Weasel!’ I said in astonishment. I was sure it was the same weasel I had met in the trap. He was on the boulder in front of the hemlock, batting the ferns with his front feet and rearing and staring at me.

‘Now, you stay right there,’ I said. Of course, he flipped and came off the rock like a jet stream. He was at the door before I could stop him, and loping around my feet like a bouncing ball.

‘You look glad all over, Baron. I hope all that frisking means joy,’ I said. He took my pants leg in his teeth, tugged it, and then rippled softly back to the boulder. He went down a small hole. He popped up again, bit a fern near by, and ran around the boulder. I crept out to look for him—no weasel. I poked a stick in the hole at the base of the rock trying to provoke him. I felt a little jumpy, so that when a shot rang out through the woods I leapt a foot in the air and dove

into my hole. A cricket chirped, a catbird scratched the leaves. I waited. One enormous minute later a dark form ran onto the meadow. It stumbled and fell.

I had the impression that it was a deer. Without waiting to consider what I might be running toward, I burst to the edge of the meadow.

No one was in sight, I ran into the grass. There lay a dead deer! With all my strength I dragged the heavy animal into the woods. I then hurried to my tree, gathered up the hemlock boughs on my bed, rushed back and threw them over the carcass. I stuck a few ferns in them so they would look as if they were growing there and ran back to camp, breathless.

Hurriedly I put out the fire, covered it with dirt, hid my smoking rack in the spring, grabbed Frightful and got in my tree.

Someone was poaching, and he might be along in a minute to collect his prize. The shot had come from the side of the mountain, and I figured I had about four minutes to clean up before the poacher arrived.

Then when I was hidden and ready, Frightful started her cry of hunger. I had not fed her yet that morning. Oh, how was I going to explain to her the awful need to be quiet? How did a mother falcon warn her young of danger? I took her in my hands and stroked her stomach. She fought me and then she lay still in my hand, her feet up, her eyes bright. She stiffened and drooped. I kept on stroking her. She was hypnotized. I would stop for a few moments, she would lie still, then pop to her feet. I was sure this wasn't what her mother did to keep her quiet, but it worked.

Bushes cracked, leaves scuttled, and a man with a rifle came into the meadow. I could just see his head and shoulders. He looked around and banged toward the hemlock forest. I crawled up on my bed and stroked the hungry Frightful.

I couldn't see the man from my bed, but I could hear him.

I heard him come to the tree. I could see his boots. He stopped by the ashes of the fire; and then went on. I could see my heart lift my sweater. I was terrified.

I stayed on the bed all morning, telling the fierce little bundle of feathers in my hand that there was deer meat in store for her if she would just wait with me.

Way down the other side of the mountain, I heard another shot. I sure hoped that deer dropped on the poacher's toes and that he would now go home.

At noon I went to my prize. Frightful sat beside me as I skinned and quartered it. She ate deer until she was misshapen.

I didn't make any notes as to how long it took me to do all the work that was required to get the deer ready for smoking and the hide scraped and ready for tanning, but it was many, many days.

However, when I sat down to a venison steak, that was a meal! All it was, was venison. I wrote this on a piece of birch bark. 'I think I grew an inch on venison!' Frightful and I went to the meadow when the meal was done, and I flopped in the grass. The stars came up, the ground smelled sweet, and I closed my eyes. I heard, 'Pip, pop, pop, pop.'

'Who's making that noise?' I said sleepily to Frightful. She ruffled her feathers.

I listened. 'Pop, pip.' I rolled over and stuck my face in the grass. Something gleamed beneath me, and in the fading light I could see an earthworm coming out of its hole.

Nearby another one arose and there was a pop. Little bubbles of air snapped as these voiceless animals of the earth came to the surface. That got me to smiling. I was glad to know this about earthworms. I don't know why, but this seemed like one of the nicest things I had learned in the woods—that earthworms, lowly, confined to the darkness of the earth, could make just a little stir in the world.