

in which Frightful Learns Her ABC's

Free time was spent scraping the fur off the deer hide to get it ready for tanning. This much I knew: in order to tan hide, it has to be steeped in tannic acid. There is tannic acid in the woods in oak trees, but it took me several weeks to figure out how to get it. You need a lot of oak chips in water. Water and oak give off tannic acid. My problem was not oak or water but getting a vessel big enough to put the deer hide in.

Coming home from the stream one night I had an inspiration.

It had showered the day before, and as Frightful and I passed an old stump, I noticed that it had collected the rain. 'A stump, an oak stump, would be perfect,' I said right out loud to that pretty bird.

So I felled an oak over by the gorge, burned a hole in it, carried water to it, and put my deerskin in it. I let it steep, oh, maybe five days before I took it out and dried it. It dried stiff as a board, and I had to chew, rub, jump on it, and twist it to get it soft. When this was done, however, I had my door. I hung it on pegs inside my entrance, and because it was bigger than it had to be, I would cut off pieces now and then when I needed them. I cut off two thin strips to make jesses, or leg straps, for Frightful. All good falcons wear jesses and leashes so they can be tethered for their training.

I smoked the meat I couldn't eat and stored it. I used everything I could on that animal. I even used one of its bones for a spearhead. I was tired of catching frogs by the jump-and-miss system. I made two sharp points, and strapped them to the end of a long stick, one on each side, to make a kind of fork. It worked beautifully. Frogs were one of my favorite meals, and I found I could fix them many ways; however, I got to like frog soup fixed in this way: 'Clean, skin, and boil until tender. Add wild onions, also water lily buds and wild carrots. Thicken with acorn flour. Serve in turtle shell.'

By now my two pairs of pants were threadbare and my three sweaters were frayed. I dreamed of a deerskin suit, and watched my herd with clothes in mind.

The deer for my suit did not come easily. I rigged up a figure-four trap under the log, and baited it with elderberries rolled into a ball. That just mushed up and didn't work. Then I remembered that deer like salt. I made a ball of hickory salt with turtle fat to hold it together.

Every evening Frightful and I, sometimes accompanied by The Baron Weasel, would go to the edge of the meadow and look toward the aspen grove to see if the great log had fallen. One night we saw three deer standing around it quietly, reaching toward the smell of salt. At that moment, The Baron jumped at my pants leg, but got my ankle with an awful nip. I guess I had grown some; my pants and socks did not meet anymore. I screamed, and the deer fled.

I chased The Baron home. I had the uneasy feeling that he was laughing as he darted, flipped, buckled, and disappeared.

The Baron was hard to understand. What did he want from me? Occasionally I left him bites of turtle or venison, and although he smelled the offerings, he never ate them. The catbird would get them. Most animals stick around if you feed them. But The Baron did not eat anything. Yet he seemed to like me. Gradually it occurred to me that he didn't have a mate or a family. Could he be a lonely bachelor, taking up with odd company for lack of an ordinary life?

Well, whatever, The Baron liked me for what I was, and I appreciated that. He was a personable little fellow.

Every day I worked to train Frightful. It was a long process. I would put her on her stump with a long leash and step back a few feet with some meat in my hand. Then I would whistle. The whistle was supposed eventually to mean food to her. So I would whistle, show her the meat, and after many false flaps she would finally fly to my hand. I would pet her and feed her. She could fly fairly well, so now I made sure that she never ate unless she flew to my fist.

One day at breakfast I whistled for Frightful. I had no food, she wasn't even hungry, but she came to me anyway. I was thrilled. She had learned a whistle meant 'come'.

I looked into her steely eyes that morning and thought I saw a gentle recognition. She puffed up her feathers as she sat on my hand. I call this a 'feather word.' It means she is content.

Now each day I stepped farther and farther away from Frightful to make her fly greater and greater distances. One day she flew a good fifty feet, and we packed up and went gathering seeds, bark, and tubers to celebrate.

I used my oldest sweater for gathering things. It was not very convenient, and each time I filled it I mentally designed bigger and better pockets on my deer-hide suit-to-be.

The summer was wonderful. There was food in abundance and I gathered it most of the morning, and stored it away in the afternoon. I could now see that my niches were not going to be big enough for the amount of food I would need for the winter, so I began burning out another tree. When the hickory nuts, walnuts, and acorns appeared, I was going to need a bin. You'd be surprised what a pile of nuts it takes to make one turtle shell full of nut meats—and not a snapping-turtle shell either, just a box-turtle shell!

With the easy living of the summer also came a threat. Hikers and vacationers were in the woods, and more than once I pulled inside my tree, closed my deer-flap door, and hid while bouncing noisy people crossed the meadow on their way to the gorge. Apparently the gorge was a sight for those who wanted a four-mile hike up the mountain.

One morning I heard a group arriving. I whistled for Frightful. She came promptly. We dove into the tree. It was dark inside the tree with the flap closed, and I realized that I needed a candle. I planned a lamp of a turtle shell with a deer-hide wick, and as I was cutting off a piece of hide, I heard a shrill scream.

The voices of the hikers became louder. I wondered if one of them had fallen into the gorge. Then I said to Frightful, 'That was no cry of a human, pretty bird. I'll bet you a rabbit for dinner that our deer trap worked. And here we are stored in a tree like a nut and unable to claim our prize.'

We waited and waited until I couldn't be patient any more, and I was about to put my head out the door when a man's voice said, 'Look at these trees!'

A woman spoke. 'Harold, they're huge. How old do you think they are?'

'Three hundred years old, maybe four hundred,' said Harold.

They tramped around, actually sat on The Baron's boulder, and were apparently going to have lunch, when things began to happen out there and I almost gave myself away with hysterics.

'Harold, what's the matter with that weasel? It's running all over this rock.' A scream! A scuttering and scraping of boots on the rocks.

'He's mad!' That was the woman.

'Watch it, Grace, he's coming at your feet.' They ran.

By this time I had my hand over my mouth to keep back the laughter. I snorted and choked, but they never heard me. They were in the meadow—run right out of the forest by that fiery Baron Weasel.

I still laugh when I think of it.

It was not until dark that Frightful and I got to the deer, and a beauty it was.

The rest of June was spent smoking it, tanning it, and finally, starting on my deerskin suit. I made a bone needle, cut out the pants by ripping up one pair of old city pants for a pattern. I saved my city pants and burned them bit by bit to make charred cloth for the flint and steel.

'Frightful,' I said while sewing one afternoon. She was preening her now silver-gray, black, and white feathers. 'There is no end to this. We need another deer. I can't make a blouse.'

We didn't get another deer until fall, so with the scraps I made big square pockets for food gathering. One hung in front of me, and the other down my back. They were joined by straps. This device worked beautifully.

Sometime in July I finished my pants. They fit well, and were the best-looking pants I had ever seen. I was terribly proud of them.

With pockets and good tough pants I was willing to pack home many more new foods to try. Daisies, the bark of a poplar tree that I saw a squirrel eating, and puffballs. They are mushrooms, the only ones I felt were safe to eat, and even at that, I kept waiting to die the first night I ate them. I didn't, so I enjoyed them from that night on. They are wonderful. Mushrooms are dangerous and I would not suggest that one eat them from the forest. The mushroom expert at the Botanical Gardens told me that. He said even he didn't eat wild ones.

The inner bark of the poplar tree tasted like wheat kernels, and so I dried as much as I could and powdered it into flour. It was tedious work, and in August when the acorns were ready, I found that they made better flour and were much easier to handle.

I would bake the acorns in the fire, and grind them between stones. This was tedious work, too, but now that I had a home and smoked venison and did not have to hunt food every minute, I could do things like make flour. I would simply add spring water to the flour and bake this on a piece of tin. When done, I had the best pancakes ever. They were flat and hard, like I imagined Indian bread to be. I liked them, and would carry the leftovers in my pockets for lunch.

One fine August day I took Frightful to the meadow. I had been training her to the lure. That is, I now tied her meat on a piece of wood, covered with hide and feathers. I would throw it in the air and she would swoop out of the sky and catch it. She was absolutely free during these maneuvers, and would fly high into the air and hover over me like a leaf. I made sure she was very hungry before I turned her loose. I wanted her back.

After a few tries she never missed the lure. Such marksmanship thrilled me. Bird and lure would drop to the earth, I would run over, grab her jesses, and we would sit on the big boulder in the meadow while she ate. Those were nice evenings. The finest was the night I wrote this:

‘Frightful caught her first prey. She is now a trained falcon. It was only a sparrow, but we are on our way. It happened unexpectedly. Frightful was climbing into the sky, circling and waiting for the lure, when I stepped forward and scared a sparrow.

‘The sparrow flew across the meadow. Out of the sky came a black streak—I’ve never seen anything drop so fast. With a great backwatering of wings, Frightful broke her fall, and at the same time seized the sparrow. I took it away from her and gave her the lure. That sounds mean, but if she gets in the habit of eating what she catches, she will go wild.’

in which I Find a Real Live Man

One of the gasping joys of summer was my daily bath in the spring. It was cold water, I never stayed in long, but it woke me up and started me into the day with a vengeance.

I would tether Frightful to a hemlock bough above me and splash her from time to time. She would suck in her chest, look startled, and then shake. While I bathed and washed, she preened. Huddled down

in the water between the ferns and moss, I scrubbed myself with the bark of the slippery elm. It gets soapy when you rub it.

The frogs would hop out and let me in, and the woodthrush would come to the edge of the pool to see what was happening. We were a gay gathering—me shouting, Frightful preening, the woodthrush cocking its pretty head. Occasionally The Baron Weasel would pop up and glance furtively at us. He didn’t care for water. How he stayed glossy and clean was a mystery to me, until he came to the boulder beside our bath pool one day, wet with the dew from the ferns. He licked himself until he was polished.

One morning there was a rustle in the leaves above. Instantly, Frightful had it located. I had learned to look where Frightful looked when there were disturbances in the forest. She always saw life before I could focus my eyes. She was peering into the hemlock above us. Finally I too saw it. A young raccoon. It was chittering and now that all eyes were upon it, began coming down the tree.

And so Frightful and I met Jessie Coon James, the bandit of the Gribley farm.

He came headfirst down to our private bath, a scrabbly, skinny young raccoon. He must have been from a late litter, for he was not very big, and certainly not well fed. Whatever had been Jessie C. James’s past, it was awful. Perhaps he was an orphan, perhaps he had been thrown out of his home by his mother, as his eyes were somewhat crossed and looked a little peculiar. In any event he had come to us for help, I thought, and so Frightful and I led him home and fed him.

In about a week he fattened up. His crumply hair smoothed out, and with a little ear scratching and back rubbing, Jessie C. James became a devoted friend. He also became useful. He slept somewhere in the dark tops of the hemlocks all day long, unless he saw us start for the stream. Then, tree by tree, limb by limb, Jessie followed us. At the stream he was the most useful mussel digger that any boy could have. Jessie could find mussels where three men could not. He would start to eat them, and if he ate them, he got full and wouldn’t dig

anymore, so I took them away from him until he found me all I wanted. Then I let him have some.

Mussels are good. Here are a few notes on how to fix them.

'Scrub mussels in spring water. Dump them into boiling water with salt. Boil five minutes. Remove and cool in the juice. Take out meat. Eat by dipping in acorn paste flavored with a smudge of garlic, and green apples.'

Frightful took care of the small game supply, and now that she was an expert hunter, we had rabbit stew, pheasant potpie, and an occasional sparrow, which I generously gave to Frightful. As fast as we removed the rabbits and pheasants new ones replaced them.

Beverages during the hot summer became my chore, largely because no one else wanted them. I found some sassafras trees at the edge of the road one day, dug up a good supply of roots, peeled and dried them. Sassafras tea is about as good as anything you want to drink. Pennyroyal makes another good drink. I dried great bunches of this, and hung them from the roof of the tree room together with the leaves of winterberry. All these fragrant plants I also used in cooking to give a new taste to some not-so-good foods.

The room in the tree smelled of smoke and mint. It was the best-smelling tree in the Catskill Mountains.

Life was leisurely. I was warm, well fed. One day while I was down the mountain, I returned home by way of the old farmhouse site to check the apple crop. They were summer apples, and were about ready to be picked. I had gathered a pouchful and had sat down under the tree to eat a few and think about how I would dry them for use in the winter when Frightful dug her talons into my shoulder so hard I winced.

'Be gentle, bird!' I said to her.

I got her talons out and put her on a log, where I watched her with some alarm. She was as alert as a high tension wire, her head cocked so that her ears, just membranes under her feathers, were pointed east. She evidently heard a sound that pained her. She opened her beak. Whatever it was, I could hear nothing, though I strained my ears, cupped them, and wished she would speak.

Frightful was my ears as well as my eyes. She could hear things long before I. When she grew tense, I listened or looked. She was scared this time. She turned round and round on the log, looked up in the tree for a perch, lifted her wings to fly, and then stood still and listened.

Then I heard it. A police siren sounded far down the road. The sound grew louder and louder, and I grew afraid. Then I said, 'No, Frightful, if they are after me there won't be a siren. They'll just slip up on me quietly.'

No sooner had I said this than the siren wound down, and apparently stopped on the road at the foot of the mountain. I got up to run to my tree, but had not gotten past the walnut before the patrol cars started up and screamed away.

We started home although it was not late in the afternoon. However, it was hot, and thunderheads were building up. I decided to take a swim in the spring and work on the moccasins I had cut out several days ago.

With the squad car still on my mind, we slipped quietly into the hemlock forest. Once again Frightful almost sent me through the crown of the forest by digging her talons into my shoulder. I looked at her. She was staring at our home. I looked, too. Then I stopped, for I could make out the form of a man stretched between the sleeping house and the store tree.

Softly, tree by tree, Frightful and I approached him. The man was asleep. I could have left and camped in the gorge again, but my enormous desire to see another human being overcame my fear of being discovered.

We stood above the man. He did not move, so Frightful lost interest in my fellow being. She tried to hop to her stump and preen. I grabbed her leash however, as I wanted to think before awakening him. Frightful flapped. I held her wings to her body as her flapping was noisy to me. Apparently not so to the man. The man did not stir. It is hard to realize that the rustle of a falcon's wings is not much of a noise to a man from the city, because by now, one beat of her wings and I would awaken from a sound sleep as if a shot had gone off. The stranger slept on. I realized how long I'd been in the mountains.

Right at that moment, as I looked at his unshaven face, his close-cropped hair, and his torn clothes, I thought of the police siren, and put two and two together.

'An outlaw!' I said to myself. 'Wow!' I had to think what to do with an outlaw before I awoke him.

Would he be troublesome? Would he be mean? Should I go live in the gorge until he moved on? How I wanted to hear his voice, to tell him about The Baron and Jessie C. James, to say words out loud. I really did not want to hide from him; besides, he might be hungry, I thought. Finally I spoke.

'Hi!' I said. I was delighted to see him roll over, open his eyes, and look up. He seemed startled, so I reassured him. 'It's all right, they've gone. If you don't tell on me I won't tell on you.' When he heard this, he sat up and seemed to relax.

'Oh,' he said. Then he leaned against the tree and added, 'Thanks.' He evidently was thinking this over, for he propped his head on his elbow and studied me closely.

'You're a sight for sore eyes,' he said, and smiled. He had a nice smile—in fact, he looked nice and not like an outlaw at all. His eyes were very blue and, although tired, they did not look scared or hunted.

However, I talked quickly before he could get up and run away.

'I don't know anything about you, and I don't want to. You don't know anything about me, and don't want to, but you may stay here if you like. No one is going to find you here. Would you like some supper?' It was still early, but he looked hungry.

'Do you have some?'

'Yes, venison or rabbit?'

'Well. . . venison.' His eyebrows puckered in question marks. I went to work.

He arose, turned around and around, and looked at his surroundings. He whistled softly when I kindled a spark with the flint and steel. I was now quite quick at this, and had a tidy fire

blazing in a very few minutes. I was so used to myself doing this that it had not occurred to me that it would be interesting to a stranger.

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‘Desdemondia!’ he said. I judged this to be some underworld phrase. At this moment Frightful, who had been sitting quietly on her stump, began to preen. The outlaw jumped back, then saw she was tied and said, ‘And who is this ferocious-looking character?’

‘That is Frightful; don’t be afraid. She’s quite wonderful and gentle. She would be glad to catch you a rabbit for supper if you would prefer that to venison.’

‘Am I dreaming?’ said the man. ‘I go to sleep by a campfire that looked like it was built by a boy scout, and I awaken in the middle of the eighteenth century.’

I crawled into the store tree to get the smoked venison and some cattail tubers. When I came out again, he was speechless.

‘My storehouse,’ I explained.

‘I see,’ he answered. From that moment on he did not talk much. He just watched me. I was so busy cooking the best meal that I could possibly get together that I didn’t say much either. Later I wrote down that menu, as it was excellent.

‘Brown puffballs in deer fat with a little wild garlic, fill pot with water, put venison in, boil. Wrap tubers in leaves and stick in coals. Cut up apples and boil in can with dogtooth violet bulbs. Raspberries to finish meal.’

When the meal was ready, I served it to the man in my nicest turtle shell. I had to whittle him a fork out of the crotch of a twig, as Jessie Coon James had gone off with the others. He ate and ate and ate, and when he was done he said, ‘May I call you Thoreau?’

‘That will do nicely,’ I said. Then I paused—just to let him know that I knew a little bit about him too. I smiled and said, ‘I will call you Bando.’

His eyebrows went up, he cocked his head, shrugged his shoulders and answered, ‘That’s close enough.’

With this he sat and thought. I felt I had offended him, so I spoke. ‘I will be glad to help. I will teach you how to live off the land. It is very easy. No one need find you.’

His eyebrows gathered together again. This was characteristic of Bando when he was concerned, and so I was sorry I had mentioned his past. After all, outlaw or no outlaw, he was an adult, and I still felt unsure of myself around adults. I changed the subject.

‘Let’s get some sleep,’ I said.

‘Where do you sleep?’ he asked. All this time sitting and talking with me, and he had not seen the entrance to my tree. I was pleased. Then I beckoned, walked a few feet to the left, pushed back the deer-hide door, and showed Bando my secret.

‘Thoreau,’ he said. ‘You are quite wonderful.’ He went in. I lit the turtle candle for him, he explored, tried the bed, came out and shook his head until I thought it would roll off.

We didn't say much more that night. I let him sleep on my bed. His feet hung off, but he was comfortable, he said. I stretched out by the fire. The ground was dry, the night warm, and I could sleep on anything now.

I got up early and had breakfast ready when Bando came stumbling out of the tree. We ate crayfish, and he really honestly seemed to like them. It takes a little time to acquire a taste for wild foods, so Bando surprised me the way he liked the menu. Of course he was hungry, and that helped.