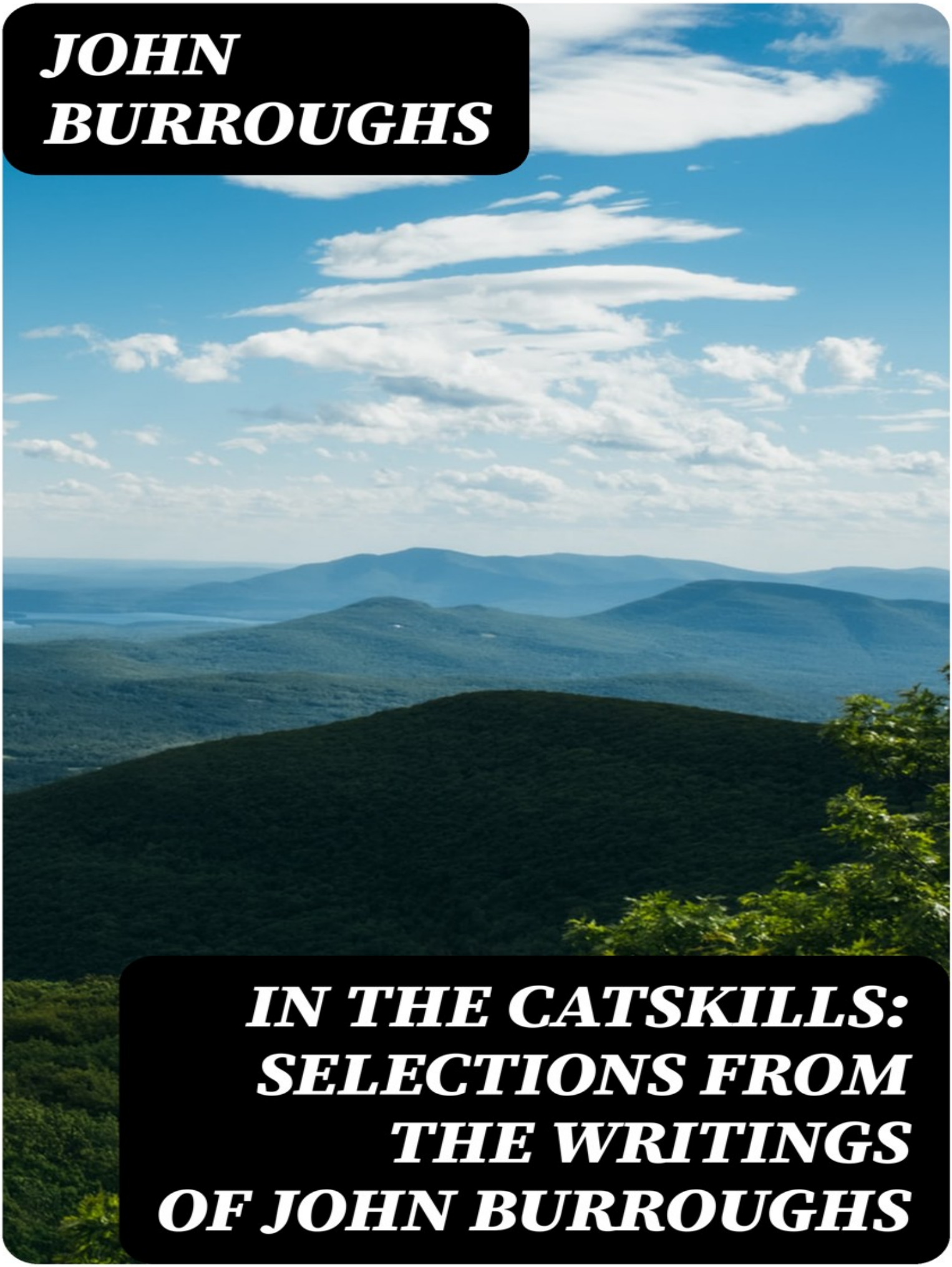
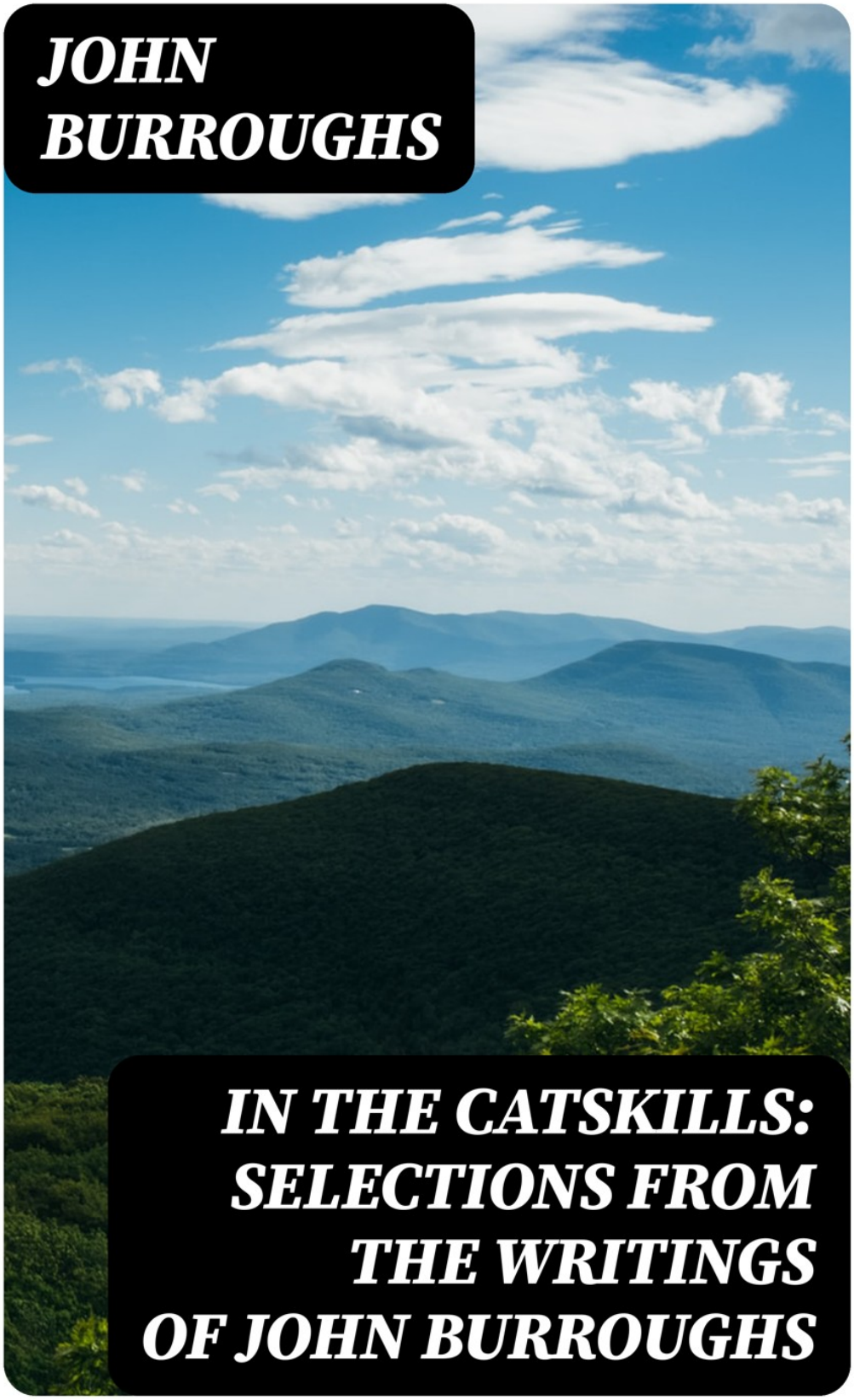

JOHN BURROUGHS
IN THE CATSKILLS: SELECTIONS FROM THE WRITINGS OF JOHN BURROUGHS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John Burroughs

In the Catskills: Selections from the Writings of John Burroughs

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INTRODUCTION

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The eight essays in this volume all deal with the home region of their author; for not only did Mr. Burroughs begin life in the Catskills, and dwell among them until early manhood, but, as he himself declares, he has never taken root anywhere else. Their delectable heights and valleys have engaged his deepest affections as far as locality is concerned, and however widely he journeys and whatever

charms he discovers in nature elsewhere, still the loveliness of those pastoral boyhood uplands is unsurpassed.

The ancestral farm is in Roxbury among the western Catskills, where the mountains are comparatively gentle in type and always graceful in contour. Cultivated fields and sunny pastures cling to their mighty slopes far up toward the summits, there are patches of woodland including frequent groves of sugar maples, and there are apple orchards and winding roadways, and endless lines of rude stone fences, and scattered dwellings. In every hollow runs a clear trout brook, with its pools and swift shallows and silvery falls. Birds and other wild creatures abound; for the stony earth and the ledges that crop out along the hillsides, the thickets and forest patches, the sheltered glens and windy heights offer great variety in domicile to animal life. The creatures of the outdoor world are much in evidence, and at no time do their numbers impress one more than when in winter one sees the hand-writing of their tracks on the snow.

The work on the farm and the workers are genuinely rustic, but not nearly so primitive as in the times that Mr. Burroughs most enjoys recalling. Oxen are of the past, the mowing-machine goes over the fields where formerly he labored with his scythe, stacks at which the cattle pull in the winter time are a rarity, and the gray old barns have given place to modern red ones. It is a dairy country, and on every farm is found a large herd of cows; but the milk goes to the creameries. The women, however, still share in the milking, and there is much of unaffected simplicity in the ways of the household. On days when work is not pushing, the men are

likely to go hunting or fishing, and they are always alert to observe chances to take advantage of those little gratuities which nature in the remoter rural regions is constantly offering, both in the matter of game and in that of herbs and roots, berries and nuts.

Mr. Burroughs's old home has continued in the family, and the house and its surroundings have in many ways continued essentially unaltered ever since he can remember. What is most important—the wide-reaching view down the vales and across to the ridges that rise height on height until they blend with the sky in the ethereal distance, is just what it always has been.

That the Catskills have proved an inspiration to Mr. Burroughs cannot be doubted. Possibly we should never have had him as a nature writer at all, had he spent his impressible youthful years in a less favored locality. It is, however, a curious fact that the town which produced this lover of nature also produced one other man of national fame, who was as different from him as could well be imagined. I refer to Jay Gould. He was born in the same town and in the same part of the town, went to the same school, saw the same scenes, was a farm boy like Burroughs, and had practically the same experiences. Indeed, the two were a good deal together. But how different their later lives! It seems easy to grant that environment helped make the one; but what effect, if any, did that beautiful Catskill country have on the other?

There are two seasons of the year when Mr. Burroughs is particularly fond of getting back to his old home. The first is in sap-time, when maple sugar is being made in the little

shack on the borders of the rock-maple grove. The second is in midsummer, when haying is in progress. Both occasions have exceptional power for arousing pleasant memories of the past, though such memories have also their touch of sadness. In his early years he helped materially in the farm work while on these visits; but latterly he gives his time to rambling and contemplation. He once said to me, in speaking of a neighbor: "That man hasn't a lazy bone in his body. But I have lots of 'em—lots of 'em."

This affirmation is not to be interpreted too literally. He has made a business success in raising small fruits, and his literary output has been by no means meagre. I might also mention that in youth he was something of a champion at swinging the scythe, and few could mow as much in the course of a day. But certainly labor is no fetich of his, and he has a real genius for loafing. In another man his leisurely rambling with its pauses to rest on rock or grassy bank or fallen tree, his mind meanwhile absolutely free from the feeling that he ought to be up and doing, might be shiftlessness. But how else could he have acquired his delightful intimacy with the woods and fields and streams, and with wild life in all its moods? Surely most of our hustling, untiring workers would be better off if they had some of this same ability to cast aside care and responsibility and get back to Nature—the good mother of us all.

CLIFTON JOHNSON.

Hadley, Mass., 1910.

NOTE.—The pictures in this volume were all made in the Catskills and are the results of several trips to the regions

described in the essays.

IN THE CATSKILLS

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THE SNOW-WALKERS

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He who marvels at the beauty of the world in summer will find equal cause for wonder and admiration in winter. It is true the pomp and the pageantry are swept away, but the essential elements remain,—the day and the night, the mountain and the valley, the elemental play and succession and the perpetual presence of the infinite sky. In winter the stars seem to have rekindled their fires, the moon achieves a fuller triumph, and the heavens wear a look of a more exalted simplicity. Summer is more wooing and seductive, more versatile and human, appeals to the affections and the sentiments, and fosters inquiry and the art impulse. Winter

is of a more heroic cast, and addresses the intellect. The severe studies and disciplines come easier in winter. One imposes larger tasks upon himself, and is less tolerant of his own weaknesses.

The tendinous part of the mind, so to speak, is more developed in winter; the fleshy, in summer. I should say winter had given the bone and sinew to Literature, summer the tissues and blood.

The simplicity of winter has a deep moral. The return of nature, after such a career of splendor and prodigality, to habits so simple and austere, is not lost either upon the head or the heart. It is the philosopher coming back from the banquet and the wine to a cup of water and a crust of bread.

And then this beautiful masquerade of the elements,—the novel disguises our nearest friends put on! Here is another rain and another dew, water that will not flow, nor spill, nor receive the taint of an unclean vessel. And if we see truly, the same old beneficence and willingness to serve lurk beneath all.

Look up at the miracle of the falling snow,—the air a dizzy maze of whirling, eddying flakes, noiselessly transforming the world, the exquisite crystals dropping in ditch and gutter, and disguising in the same suit of spotless livery all objects upon which they fall. How novel and fine the first drifts! The old, dilapidated fence is suddenly set off with the most fantastic ruffles, scalloped and fluted after an unheard-of fashion! Looking down a long line of decrepit stone wall, in the trimming of which the wind had fairly run riot, I saw, as for the first time, what a severe yet master

artist old Winter is. Ah, a severe artist! How stern the woods look, dark and cold and as rigid against the horizon as iron!

All life and action upon the snow have an added emphasis and significance. Every expression is underscored. Summer has few finer pictures than this winter one of the farmer foddering his cattle from a stack upon the clean snow,—the movement, the sharply defined figures, the great green flakes of hay, the long file of patient cows, the advance just arriving and pressing eagerly for the choicest morsels, and the bounty and providence it suggests. Or the chopper in the woods,—the prostrate tree, the white new chips scattered about, his easy triumph over the cold, his coat hanging to a limb, and the clear, sharp ring of his axe. The woods are rigid and tense, keyed up by the frost, and resound like a stringed instrument. Or the road-breakers, sallying forth with oxen and sleds in the still, white world, the day after the storm, to restore the lost track and demolish the beleaguering drifts.

All sounds are sharper in winter; the air transmits better. At night I hear more distinctly the steady roar of the North Mountain. In summer it is a sort of complacent purr, as the breezes stroke down its sides; but in winter always the same low, sullen growl.

A severe artist! No longer the canvas and the pigments, but the marble and the chisel. When the nights are calm and the moon full, I go out to gaze upon the wonderful purity of the moonlight and the snow. The air is full of latent fire, and the cold warms me—after a different fashion from that of the kitchen stove. The world lies about me in a "trance of snow." The clouds are pearly and iridescent, and

seem the farthest possible remove from the condition of a storm,—the ghosts of clouds, the indwelling beauty freed from all dross. I see the hills, bulging with great drifts, lift themselves up cold and white against the sky, the black lines of fences here and there obliterated by the depth of the snow. Presently a fox barks away up next the mountain, and I imagine I can almost see him sitting there, in his furs, upon the illuminated surface, and looking down in my direction. As I listen, one answers him from behind the woods in the valley. What a wild winter sound, wild and weird, up among the ghostly hills! Since the wolf has ceased to howl upon these mountains, and the panther to scream, there is nothing to be compared with it. So wild! I get up in the middle of the night to hear it. It is refreshing to the ear, and one delights to know that such wild creatures are among us. At this season Nature makes the most of every throb of life that can withstand her severity. How heartily she indorses this fox! In what bold relief stand out the lives of all walkers of the snow! The snow is a great tell-tale, and blabs as effectually as it obliterates. I go into the woods, and know all that has happened. I cross the fields, and if only a mouse has visited his neighbor, the fact is chronicled.

The red fox is the only species that abounds in my locality; the little gray fox seems to prefer a more rocky and precipitous country, and a less rigorous climate; the cross fox is occasionally seen, and there are traditions of the silver gray among the oldest hunters. But the red fox is the sportsman's prize, and the only fur-bearer worthy of note in these mountains.[1] I go out in the morning, after a fresh fall of snow, and see at all points where he has crossed the

road. Here he has leisurely passed within rifle-range of the house, evidently reconnoitring the premises with an eye to the hen-roost. That clear, sharp track,—there is no mistaking it for the clumsy footprint of a little dog. All his wildness and agility are photographed in it. Here he has taken fright, or suddenly recollected an engagement, and in long, graceful leaps, barely touching the fence, has gone careering up the hill as fleet as the wind.

The wild, buoyant creature, how beautiful he is! I had often seen his dead carcass, and at a distance had witnessed the hounds drive him across the upper fields; but the thrill and excitement of meeting him in his wild freedom in the woods were unknown to me till, one cold winter day, drawn thither by the baying of a hound, I stood near the summit of the mountain, waiting a renewal of the sound, that I might determine the course of the dog and choose my position,—stimulated by the ambition of all young Nimrods to bag some notable game. Long I waited, and patiently, till, chilled and benumbed, I was about to turn back, when, hearing a slight noise, I looked up and beheld a most superb fox, loping along with inimitable grace and ease, evidently disturbed, but not pursued by the hound, and so absorbed in his private meditations that he failed to see me, though I stood transfixed with amazement and admiration, not ten yards distant. I took his measure at a glance,—a large male, with dark legs, and massive tail tipped with white,—a most magnificent creature; but so astonished and fascinated was I by this sudden appearance and matchless beauty, that not till I had caught the last glimpse of him, as he disappeared over a knoll, did I awake to my duty as a sportsman, and

realize what an opportunity to distinguish myself I had unconsciously let slip. I clutched my gun, half angrily, as if it was to blame, and went home out of humor with myself and all fox-kind. But I have since thought better of the experience, and concluded that I bagged the game after all, the best part of it, and fleeced Reynard of something more valuable than his fur, without his knowledge.

This is thoroughly a winter sound,—this voice of the hound upon the mountain,—and one that is music to many ears. The long trumpet-like bay, heard for a mile or more,—now faintly back in the deep recesses of the mountain,—now distinct, but still faint, as the hound comes over some prominent point and the wind favors,—anon entirely lost in the gully,—then breaking out again much nearer, and growing more and more pronounced as the dog approaches, till, when he comes around the brow of the mountain, directly above you, the barking is loud and sharp. On he goes along the northern spur, his voice rising and sinking as the wind and the lay of the ground modify it, till lost to hearing.

The fox usually keeps half a mile ahead, regulating his speed by that of the hound, occasionally pausing a moment to divert himself with a mouse, or to contemplate the landscape, or to listen for his pursuer. If the hound press him too closely, he leads off from mountain to mountain, and so generally escapes the hunter; but if the pursuit be slow, he plays about some ridge or peak, and falls a prey, though not an easy one, to the experienced sportsman.

A most spirited and exciting chase occurs when the farm-dog gets close upon one in the open field, as sometimes

happens in the early morning. The fox relies so confidently upon his superior speed, that I imagine he half tempts the dog to the race. But if the dog be a smart one, and their course lies down-hill, over smooth ground, Reynard must put his best foot forward, and then sometimes suffer the ignominy of being run over by his pursuer, who, however, is quite unable to pick him up, owing to the speed. But when they mount the hill, or enter the woods, the superior nimbleness and agility of the fox tell at once, and he easily leaves the dog far in his rear. For a cur less than his own size he manifests little fear, especially if the two meet alone, remote from the house. In such cases, I have seen first one turn tail, then the other.

A novel spectacle often occurs in summer, when the female has young. You are rambling on the mountain, accompanied by your dog, when you are startled by that wild, half-threatening squall, and in a moment perceive your dog, with inverted tail, and shame and confusion in his looks, sneaking toward you, the old fox but a few rods in his rear. You speak to him sharply, when he bristles up, turns about, and, barking, starts off vigorously, as if to wipe out the dishonor; but in a moment comes sneaking back more abashed than ever, and owns himself unworthy to be called a dog. The fox fairly shames him out of the woods. The secret of the matter is her sex, though her conduct, for the honor of the fox be it said, seems to be prompted only by solicitude for the safety of her young.

One of the most notable features of the fox is his large and massive tail. Seen running on the snow at a distance, his tail is quite as conspicuous as his body; and, so far from

appearing a burden, seems to contribute to his lightness and buoyancy. It softens the outline of his movements, and repeats or continues to the eye the ease and poise of his carriage. But, pursued by the hound on a wet, thawy day, it often becomes so heavy and bedraggled as to prove a serious inconvenience, and compels him to take refuge in his den. He is very loath to do this; both his pride and the traditions of his race stimulate him to run it out, and win by fair superiority of wind and speed; and only a wound or a heavy and moppish tail will drive him to avoid the issue in this manner.

To learn his surpassing shrewdness and cunning, attempt to take him with a trap. Rogue that he is, he always suspects some trick, and one must be more of a fox than he is himself to overreach him. At first sight it would appear easy enough. With apparent indifference he crosses your path, or walks in your footsteps in the field, or travels along the beaten highway, or lingers in the vicinity of stacks and remote barns. Carry the carcass of a pig, or a fowl, or a dog, to a distant field in midwinter, and in a few nights his tracks cover the snow about it.

The inexperienced country youth, misled by this seeming carelessness of Reynard, suddenly conceives a project to enrich himself with fur, and wonders that the idea has not occurred to him before, and to others. I knew a youthful yeoman of this kind, who imagined he had found a mine of wealth on discovering on a remote side-hill, between two woods, a dead porker, upon which it appeared all the foxes of the neighborhood had nightly banqueted. The clouds were burdened with snow; and as the first flakes

commenced to eddy down, he set out, trap and broom in hand, already counting over in imagination the silver quarters he would receive for his first fox-skin. With the utmost care, and with a palpitating heart, he removed enough of the trodden snow to allow the trap to sink below the surface. Then, carefully sifting the light element over it and sweeping his tracks full, he quickly withdrew, laughing exultingly over the little surprise he had prepared for the cunning rogue. The elements conspired to aid him, and the falling snow rapidly obliterated all vestiges of his work. The next morning at dawn he was on his way to bring in his fur. The snow had done its work effectually, and, he believed, had kept his secret well. Arrived in sight of the locality, he strained his vision to make out his prize lodged against the fence at the foot of the hill. Approaching nearer, the surface was unbroken, and doubt usurped the place of certainty in his mind. A slight mound marked the site of the porker, but there was no footprint near it. Looking up the hill, he saw where Reynard had walked leisurely down toward his wonted bacon till within a few yards of it, when he had wheeled, and with prodigious strides disappeared in the woods. The young trapper saw at a glance what a comment this was upon his skill in the art, and, indignantly exhuming the iron, he walked home with it, the stream of silver quarters suddenly setting in another direction.

The successful trapper commences in the fall, or before the first deep snow. In a field not too remote, with an old axe he cuts a small place, say ten inches by fourteen, in the frozen ground, and removes the earth to the depth of three or four inches, then fills the cavity with dry ashes, in which

are placed bits of roasted cheese. Reynard is very suspicious at first, and gives the place a wide berth. It looks like design, and he will see how the thing behaves before he approaches too near. But the cheese is savory and the cold severe. He ventures a little closer every night, until he can reach and pick a piece from the surface. Emboldened by success, like other mortals, he presently digs freely among the ashes, and, finding a fresh supply of the delectable morsels every night, is soon thrown off his guard and his suspicions quite lulled. After a week of baiting in this manner, and on the eve of a light fall of snow, the trapper carefully conceals his trap in the bed, first smoking it thoroughly with hemlock boughs to kill or neutralize the smell of the iron. If the weather favors and the proper precautions have been taken, he may succeed, though the chances are still greatly against him.

Reynard is usually caught very lightly, seldom more than the ends of his toes being between the jaws. He sometimes works so cautiously as to spring the trap without injury even to his toes, or may remove the cheese night after night without even springing it. I knew an old trapper who, on finding himself outwitted in this manner, tied a bit of cheese to the pan, and next morning had poor Reynard by the jaw. The trap is not fastened, but only encumbered with a clog, and is all the more sure in its hold by yielding to every effort of the animal to extricate himself.

When Reynard sees his captor approaching, he would fain drop into a mouse-hole to render himself invisible. He crouches to the ground and remains perfectly motionless until he perceives himself discovered, when he makes one

desperate and final effort to escape, but ceases all struggling as you come up, and behaves in a manner that stamps him a very timid warrior,—cowering to the earth with a mingled look of shame, guilt, and abject fear. A young farmer told me of tracing one with his trap to the border of a wood, where he discovered the cunning rogue trying to hide by embracing a small tree. Most animals, when taken in a trap, show fight; but Reynard has more faith in the nimbleness of his feet than in the terror of his teeth.

Entering the woods, the number and variety of the tracks contrast strongly with the rigid, frozen aspect of things. Warm jets of life still shoot and play amid this snowy desolation. Fox-tracks are far less numerous than in the fields; but those of hares, skunks, partridges, squirrels, and mice abound. The mice tracks are very pretty, and look like a sort of fantastic stitching on the coverlid of the snow. One is curious to know what brings these tiny creatures from their retreats; they do not seem to be in quest of food, but rather to be traveling about for pleasure or sociability, though always going post-haste, and linking stump with stump and tree with tree by fine, hurried strides. That is when they travel openly; but they have hidden passages and winding galleries under the snow, which undoubtedly are their main avenues of communication. Here and there these passages rise so near the surface as to be covered by only a frail arch of snow, and a slight ridge betrays their course to the eye. I know him well. He is known to the farmer as the "deer mouse," to the naturalist as the white-footed mouse,—a very beautiful creature, nocturnal in his habits, with large ears, and large, fine eyes, full of a wild,

harmless look. He is daintily marked, with white feet and a white belly. When disturbed by day he is very easily captured, having none of the cunning or viciousness of the common Old World mouse.

It is he who, high in the hollow trunk of some tree, lays by a store of beechnuts for winter use. Every nut is carefully shelled, and the cavity that serves as storehouse lined with grass and leaves. The wood-chopper frequently squanders this precious store. I have seen half a peck taken from one tree, as clean and white as if put up by the most delicate hands,—as they were. How long it must have taken the little creature to collect this quantity, to hull them one by one, and convey them up to his fifth-story chamber! He is not confined to the woods, but is quite as common in the fields, particularly in the fall, amid the corn and potatoes. When routed by the plow, I have seen the old one take flight with half a dozen young hanging to her teats, and with such reckless speed that some of the young would lose their hold and fly off amid the weeds. Taking refuge in a stump with the rest of her family, the anxious mother would presently come back and hunt up the missing ones.

The snow-walkers are mostly night-walkers also, and the record they leave upon the snow is the main clew one has to their life and doings. The hare is nocturnal in its habits, and though a very lively creature at night, with regular courses and run-ways through the wood, is entirely quiet by day. Timid as he is, he makes little effort to conceal himself, usually squatting beside a log, stump, or tree, and seeming to avoid rocks and ledges where he might be partially housed from the cold and the snow, but where also—and