

***CHARLES
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***CHILDREN
OF THE WILD***

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Children of the Wild

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CHAPTER I

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THE LITTLE FURRY ONES THAT SLIDE DOWN HILL

In the brown, balsam-smelling log cabin on the shores of Silverwater, loveliest and loneliest of wilderness lakes, the Babe's great thirst for information seemed in a fair way to be satisfied. Young as he was, and city-born, the lure of the wild had nevertheless already caught him, and the information that he thirsted for so insatiably was all about the furred or finned or feathered kindreds of the wild. And here by Silverwater, alone with his Uncle Andy and big Bill Pringle, the guide, his natural talent for asking questions was not so firmly discouraged as it was at home.

But even thus early in this adventurous career, this fascinating and never-ending quest of knowledge, the Babe found himself confronted by a most difficult problem. He had to choose between authorities. He had to select between information and information. He had to differentiate for himself between what Bill told him and what his Uncle Andy told him. He was a serious-minded child, who had already passed through that most painful period of doubt as to Santa Claus and the Fairies, and had not yet

reached the period of certainty about everything. He was capable of both belief and doubt. So, naturally, he had his difficulties.

Bill certainly knew an astonishing lot about the creatures of the wild. But also, like all guides who are worth their salt, he knew an astonishing lot of things that weren't so. He had imagination, or he would never have done for a guide. When he knew—which was not often—that he did *not* know a thing, he could put two and two together and make it yield the most extraordinary results. He felt it one of his first duties to be interesting. And above all, he felt it his duty to be infallible. No one could be expected to have implicit faith in a guide who was not infallible. He never acknowledged insufficient information about anything whatever that pertained to the woods and waters. Also he had a very poor opinion of what others might profess to know. He felt convinced that so long as he refrained from any *too* lively contributions to the science of animal life, no one would be able to discredit him. But he was conscientious in his deductions. He would never have permitted himself to say that blue herons wore gum boots in wading, just because he had happened to find an old gum boot among the reeds by the outlet of the lake, where the herons did most of their fishing. He remembered that that gum boot was one of a pair which had been thrown away by a former visitor to Silverwater.

Uncle Andy, on the other hand, knew that there was an astonishing lot *he didn't* know about animals, and he didn't hesitate to say so. He was a reformed sportsman, who, after spending a great part of his life in happily killing things all

over the earth, had come to the quaint conclusion that most of them were more interesting alive than dead, especially to themselves. He found a kindred spirit in the Babe, whose education, along the lines of maiming cats and sparrows with sling shot or air gun, had been absolutely neglected.

Uncle Andy was wont to say that there was only one man in all the world who knew *all* about all the animals—and that he was not Andrew Barton, Esq. At this, Bill would smile proudly. At first this modesty on Uncle Andy's part was a disappointment to the Babe. But it ended in giving him confidence in whatever Uncle Andy told him; especially after he came to realize that when Uncle Andy spoke of the only man in the world who knew *all* about animals, he did *not* mean Bill.

But though the whole field of animal lore was one of absorbing interest to the Babe, from the day when he was so fortunate as to witness a mother fish-hawk teaching her rather unwilling and unventuresome young ones to fly, it was his fellow babes of the wild that he was most anxious to hear about. In this department of woods lore, Bill was so deeply ignorant that, not caring to lean *too* heavily on his imagination, lest it should break and stick into him, he used to avoid it quite obstinately. He would say—"Them youngsters is all alike, anyhow, an' it ain't worth while to waste no time a-studyin' 'em!" So here Uncle Andy had the field all to himself. Whenever he undertook to enlighten the Babe on any such subject, Bill would go off somewhere and scornfully chop down trees.

* * * * *

Silverwater was fed by many brooks from the deep-wooded surrounding hills. Toward one of these, on a certain golden afternoon, Uncle Andy and the Babe were betaking themselves along the shadowy trail, where the green-brown moss was soft under foot and their careful steps made no noise. When they spoke it was in quiet undertones; for the spirit of the woods was on the Babe, and he knew that by keeping very quiet there was always the chance of surprising some fascinating mystery.

The two were going fishing—for Uncle Andy, with a finely human inconsistency, was an enthusiastic fisherman, and the stream toward which they were making their way was one of deep pools and cool "stillwaters" where the biggest fish were wont to lie during the hot weather. Uncle Andy had a prejudice against those good people who were always sternly consistent, and he was determined that he would never allow himself to become a crank; so he went on enthusiastically killing fish with the same zest that he had once brought to the hunting of beast and bird.

While they were yet several hundred yards from the stream, suddenly there came to their ears, unmistakable though muffled by the intervening trees, the sound of a brisk splash, as if something had fallen into the water. Uncle Andy stopped short in his tracks, motionless as a setter marking his bird. The Babe stopped likewise, faithfully imitating him. A couple of seconds later came another splash, as heavy as the first; and then, in quick succession, two lighter ones.

For a moment or two the Babe kept silence, though bursting with curiosity. Then he whispered tensely—"What's

that?"

"Otter," replied Uncle Andy, in a murmur as soft as the wind in the sedge-tops.

"Why?" continued the Babe, meaning to say—"But what on earth are they doing?" and trusting that Uncle Andy would appreciate the self-restraint of the monosyllable.

"Sliding down hill," muttered Uncle Andy, without turning his head. Then, holding up his hand as a sign that there were to be no more questions asked, he crept forward noiselessly; and the Babe followed at his heels.

After two or three minutes the sounds were repeated in the same succession as before—first two heavy splashes, and then two lighter ones. Unable to ask questions, the Babe was obliged to think for himself.

He had only a vague idea what otters were like, but he knew a good deal about sliding down hill. He pictured to himself a high, rough bank leading down to the water; but as not even Bill's daring imagination would have represented the gamesome beasts as employing toboggans or hand-sleds, he thought it must be rather bumpy and uncomfortable work coasting over the roots and rocks on one's own unprotected anatomy.

The sounds continued, growing louder and louder, till the two adventurers must have been within thirty or forty feet of the stream; and they were creeping as noiselessly as a shadow slips over the grass, in the hope of catching the merrymakers at their game. But suddenly there came one great splash, heavy and prolonged, as if all the sliders had come down close together. And then silence. Uncle Andy crouched motionless for several minutes, as if he had been

turned into a stump. Then he straightened himself up with a disappointed air.

"Gone!" he muttered. "Cleared out! They've heard us or smelt us!"

"Oh!" exclaimed the Babe in a voice of deep concern; though, as a matter of fact, he was immensely relieved, the strain of the prolonged tension and preternatural stillness having begun to make him feel that he must make a noise or burst.

Two minutes later they came out on the banks of the stream.

The stream at this point was perhaps twenty-five feet in width, deep, dark, and almost without current. Only by noting the bend of the long watergrasses could one tell which way it ran. The hither bank was low and grassy, with a fallen trunk slanting out into the water. But the shore opposite was some twelve or fifteen feet high, very steep, and quite naked, having been cut by the floods from a ridge of clay. Down the middle of this incline a narrow track had been worn so smooth that it gleamed in the sun almost like ice.

As he stared across the water a dozen questions crowded to the Babe's lips. But he realized in time that the answers to them were fairly obvious to himself, and he heroically choked them back. Had he not that very morning been rebuked by his uncle for asking too many of what he called "footy" questions? But one burst forth now, in spite of himself.

"What do they do it for?" he demanded—having perhaps a vague idea that all the motives of the wild creatures were,

or ought to be, purely utilitarian.

Uncle Andy turned upon him a withering look; and he shifted his feet uneasily, convicted of another "footy" question.

"What do you slide down hill for?" inquired Uncle Andy sarcastically.

"Oh!" said the Babe hastily. "I see. And now are we going to catch some fish?"

But Uncle Andy had stood his rod in a bush and sat down on the fallen tree; and now he was getting out his old black pipe.

"Well now," he answered presently, "I don't think it would be much use trying. What do you think?"

"Of course not," answered the Babe. "Otter have scared 'em all away."

"You really are doing very well," said Uncle Andy, "if you *did* ask that one fool question. When we were creeping up on the otter, to try and get a look at them while they were playing, you did very well indeed. You stepped as light as a cat, and that's not easy mind, I tell you, when one's not trained to it. You didn't even breathe too hard—and I know you must have been just bursting with excitement. You've got the makings of a first-rate woodsman in you, if you take pains."

The Babe's small chest swelled with pride; for commendation from Uncle Andy was a scarce article. He too sat down on the fallen trunk and began digging at the bark with his knife to hide his exultation.

"I suppose now," went on Uncle Andy presently, when his pipe was drawing well, "you know quite a lot about otter."

"Nothing at all but what Bill's told me," answered the Babe with fine diplomacy.

"Forget it!" said Uncle Andy; and went on smoking in thoughtful silence. Presently he remarked—"This otter family appears to have been having a pretty good time!"

"Great!" said the Babe laconically.

"Well," continued Uncle Andy, regarding him with approval, "there was once another otter family, away up on the Little North Fork of the Ottanoosis, that used to have such good times till at last they struck a streak of bad luck."

"Did you know them?" asked the Babe.

"Well, not as you might say intimately," answered Uncle Andy, with a far-away look in his grey eyes. "You see, they had no way of knowing how nice I was, so they never admitted me into their family circle. But I knew a lot more about them than they ever guessed, I can tell you. When the flies weren't too bad I used to lie by the hour behind a thick bush, never stirring a finger, and watch them."

"My, but how tired you must have got!" interrupted the Babe feelingly.

"I don't *have* to twiddle my fingers, and scratch my head, and jump up and down every two minutes and a half," said Uncle Andy rather severely. "But, as I was going to say, they also got used to seeing me sitting on the bank, quiet and harmless, till they no longer felt so shy of me as they did of Jim Cringle, my guide. They knew Jim was an enemy, and they gave him a wide berth always. But they seemed to think I wasn't of much account."

"Oh!" protested the Babe politely. It did not seem to him quite right that Uncle Andy should be regarded lightly, even

by an otter.

"Well, you know, I *wasn't* of much account. I was neither dangerous, like Jim Cringle, nor good to eat, like a muskrat or a pickerel. So I don't appear any more in this yarn. If you find yourself wondering how I came to know about some of the things I'm going to tell you, just make believe I got it from the chickadee, who is the most confidential little chap in the world, or from the whisky-Jack, who makes a point, as you may have observed, of knowing everybody else's business."

"Or from Jim Cringle?" inquired the Babe demurely.

But Uncle Andy only frowned. He always discouraged the Babe's attempts at raillery.

"The two Little Furry Ones," he continued, after pressing down the tobacco in his pipe, "were born in a dry, warm, roomy den in the bank, under the roots of an old birch that slanted out over the water. The front door was deep under water. But as the old otters had few enemies to dread, being both brave and powerful, they had also a back entrance on dry land, hidden by a thicket of fir bushes. The two furry 'pups' were at first as sprawling and helpless as newborn kittens, though of course a good deal bigger than any kittens you have ever seen. And being so helpless, their father and mother never left them alone. One always stayed with them while the other went away to hunt trout or muskrat."

"Why, what *could* get at them in there?" interrupted the Babe.

"You see," explained Uncle Andy graciously, "either a fox or a weasel *might* come in by the back door—if they were

hungry enough to take the risk. Or what was much more likely, that slim, black, murderous robber, the mink, might come swimming in by the front entrance, pop his narrow, cruel head above the water, see the youngsters alone, and be at their throats in a twinkling. The old otters, who were very devoted parents, were not running any risks like that, I can tell you."

"I guess not!" agreed the Babe, wagging his head wisely.

"Well," went on Uncle Andy, "just *because* those level-headed old otters were always ready for it, nothing happened. You'd better make a note of that. If you are always ready for trouble when the other fellow makes it, he will be pretty shy about beginning. That's why the foxes and the weasels and the minks never came around.

"When the Little Furry Ones were about the size of five months' kittens they were as handsome a pair of youngsters as you are ever likely to set eyes upon. Their fur, rich and soft and dark, was the finest ever seen. Like their parents, they had bodies shaped for going through the water at a tremendous speed—built like a bulldog's for strength, and like an eel's for suppleness."

"Not *slimy!*" protested the Babe, who had hated eels whole-heartedly ever since the day when he had tried to take one off the hook.

"Of course not!" answered Uncle Andy impatiently. "As I was going to say, they were shaped a good deal like those seals you've seen in the Zoo, only that instead of flippers they had regulation legs and feet, and also a tail. It was a tail worth having, too, and not merely intended for ornament. It was very thick at the base and tapering,

something like a lizard's, and so powerful that one twist of it could drive its owner through the water like a screw."

"Wish I could swim that way!" murmured the Babe, trying to do the movement, as he imagined it, with his legs.

"But though the Little Furry Ones were just built for swimming," continued Uncle Andy, graciously overlooking the interruption, "they were actually afraid of it. They liked to see their father or their mother dive smoothly down into the clear, goldy-brown water of their front door, and out into that patch of yellow sunlight shimmering on the weedy bottom. But when invited to follow, they drew back into the corner and pretended to be terribly busy.

"One fine morning, however, to their great delight they were led out by the back door, under the bush, and introduced to the outside world. How huge and strange it looked to them! For a few minutes they stole about on their absurdly short, sturdy legs, poking their noses into everything, and jumping back startled at the strange smells they encountered; while their parents, lying down nearby, watched them lazily. At last, beginning to feel more at home in this big, airy world, they fell to romping with each other on the sunny bank, close beside the water. Presently their parents got up and came over beside them. The father slipped gracefully in, and began diving, darting this way and that, and throwing himself half-way out of the water. It was most interesting, I can tell you, and the two little Furry Ones stopped their play, at the very edge of the bank, to watch him. But when he called to them coaxingly to come in with him and try it, they turned away their heads and pretended to think it wasn't worth looking at after all. They would

rather look at the trees and the sky, and kept staring up at them as if perfectly fascinated. And *while* they were staring upwards in this superior way, they got a great surprise. Their mother slyly slipped her nose under them and threw them, one after the other, far out into the water."

"Ow!" exclaimed the Babe with a little gasp of sympathy. He himself felt the shock of that sudden, chill plunge.

Uncle Andy chuckled.

"That's just the way they felt," said he. "When they came to the top again they found, to their surprise, that they could swim; and feeling most indignant and injured they struck out straight for shore. But there, between them and the good dry ground, swam their mother, and would not let them land. They did not see how mothers could be so heartless. But there was no help for it; so they swam out again very haughtily and joined their father in mid-stream. And before they knew it they were enjoying themselves immensely.

"And now life became much more interesting to them. For a bit it was harder to keep them out of the water than it had been to get them into it. They had their first lessons in fishing. And though they were too clumsy at first to catch even a slow, mud-grubbing sucker, they found the attempt most interesting. The stream just opposite their home was deep and quiet, but a little way below, the current ran strong; and once, having ridden down it gaily for a couple of hundred yards, they found themselves unable to swim back against it. At first they battled bravely and were most surprised to find themselves making so little progress. Then they grew tired; and then frightened, and they were just

being carried off down stream by this strange, soft, irresistible force when their mother arrived. The current was nothing to her. She took them on her back, and shot off up stream again with them. After that they would ride on her back, or on their father's whenever they got tired. And their parents began to take them on long trips up and down stream. You see, their housekeeping being so simple, they didn't mind going away even for a couple of days at a time, and leaving the house to look after itself."

"I don't think I'd like to be wet like that *all* the time, even in summer," remarked the Babe, shaking his head thoughtfully.

"Oh, they weren't that. They used to go ashore and, in spite of their ridiculously short legs, make most respectably long journeys through the woods to some other stream, pretending, I suppose, that the fish over there had a different flavor. Sometimes, too, when they came upon a patch of smooth, mossy ground, they would have a wild romp, as if they had just been let out of school—a sort of game of tag, in which the father and mother played just as hard as the youngsters. Or they would have a regular tug of war, pulling on opposite ends of a stick, till the moss was all torn up as if a little cyclone had loafed along that way. Then one day they came to a clay bank, something like that one across yonder. The old ones had been there before, but not for some time, and the clay had got all dry and hard. But the father and mother knew very well how to fix that. When they had slid down a couple of times with their fur all dripping the track was smooth as oil. As for the youngsters,

you may depend upon it they did not need any coaxing or persuasion to make them believe *that* was a good game."

"I should think not!" murmured the Babe, looking longingly over the stream to where the wet slide glistened in the sun, and wishing that he might try it without any regard whatever to the seat of his little trousers.

"Taking it all together it was a pretty jolly life, I can tell you, there in the sweet-smelling, shadowy woods and sunny waters. Then one day all at once, as quick as falling off a log, everything was changed."

Uncle Andy paused to relight his pipe. After a few seconds the Babe's impatience got the better of him; and before he could stop himself he blurted out "Why?" The moment he had spoken he knew it was a fool question to ask, and he flushed. But to his grateful relief Uncle did not seem to hear.

"A hunter from the city came that way. He had a good eye, a repeating rifle, and no imagination whatever. With the luck that sometimes comes to those fellows, he was sitting under a tree near the bank, staring across at the otter-slide (which did not mean anything whatever or suggest anything to him, but was merely a strip of bare clay), when the otter family came to slide. The father started down. It was most interesting—so the stranger under the tree, who was as spry as a sparrowhawk, shot instantly; and the otter came down in a crumpled heap. The mother might have escaped; but for just one second she hesitated, glancing round to see if her little ones were out of danger. That second was enough for the smart shot across the water. She dropped. It was good shooting, of course. The

two little ones, horrified by the spiteful noise, and quite unable to understand what had happened, shrank away into some thick bushes and lay very still, waiting for their mother to come and tell them the danger was past."

"And she could never come!" murmured the Babe thoughtfully.

"Well, she didn't," snorted Uncle Andy, the discourager of sentiment. Fairly reeking with sentiment himself, at heart, he disliked all manifestation of it in himself or others. He liked it left to the imagination. "They never stirred for an hour or more," he went on. "Then at last they stole out and began looking everywhere for those lost parents. All about the slide they hunted—among the bushes at the top, in the water and the rushes at the bottom—but they found nothing. For the man had come in his canoe and carried off his victims.

"All day long the two Little Furry Ones continued their search. But you would not have known them for the same creatures as those which had started out that morning. Then they had played carelessly and gone boldly, thinking not of enemies and fearing none. Now they crept noiselessly, sniffing this way and that, and never showing their noses outside a thicket without first taking observations. For life was now a very different matter with them. Never in all their lives before had they come across so many hostile and threatening smells as they encountered this one afternoon. But then, to be sure, they had never looked for them before. They were all the time running into trails of mink, or weasel, or wildcat; and it seemed to them as if the world had suddenly become quite full of foxes. They were painfully

surprised, for they had never thought there were so many disagreeable creatures in the world. You see, being so young and inexperienced, it never occurred to them that one fox or one weasel could make quite a lot of trails. So they kept having palpitations every other minute.

"It was just as well, however, that they got such an exaggerated idea of the numbers of their enemies. For it was astonishing how quickly the news got around that the old otters were dead. Toward sunset that evening, when the two lonely youngsters, puzzled and miserable, stole back to their old den under the bank, they found that a mink had dared to kill a big trout in their own pool. There were the remains, and the presumptuous intruder's tracks, almost at their very door. They were indignant, and the thick hair bristled on their necks. But, realizing suddenly how hungry they were, they did not scorn to eat the stranger's leavings. Then they dived into their den; and after sniffing about and whimpering lonesomely for a while, they curled themselves up close together and went to sleep. It had been a strange and dreadful day.

"As you may imagine, these two youngsters had never yet been trained to the useful habit of sleeping with one ear open. They had left that to their parents. But to-night, even while they slept most soundly, something within them seemed to keep watch. Whatever it was, suddenly it woke them. And instantly they were tremendously wide awake. Before they knew why they did it, they were uncurled from the ball in which they slept and, crouching side by side, glaring savagely up the narrow passage that led to their back door.

"There they saw a pair of cruel eyes, small and flaming, and set very close together, which seemed to float slowly down towards them."

Here Uncle Andy was so inconsiderate as to pause, as if he wanted to think. The Babe could not hold himself in.

"Was it a snake?" he demanded breathlessly.

"There you go again, interrupting," growled Uncle Andy, most unfairly. "And who ever heard of a snake's eyes flaming? But the Little Furry Ones knew what it was at once; and the hair stood straight up on their necks. Of course they were frightened a little. But most of all were they in a rage at such an impudent intrusion. There was no sign of fear, I can tell you, in the low growl which came from between their long, white, snarling teeth. And those stealthy eyes halted. For half a minute, motionless, they studied the crouching and defiant youngsters, evidently surprised to see how big and strong they had grown. Then, very slowly and with dignity, they withdrew and presently disappeared. For the weasel, though perhaps the most fearless assassin that prowls the woods, is no fool. And he saw that the otter children had grown too big for him to handle.

"The youngsters were a good deal set up, of course, by this unexpectedly easy rebuff of so venomous an enemy; but there was no more thought of sleep for them. It made them terribly anxious, the idea of anything stealing in on them that way, by the back door. For a long time they lay there motionless, their wide eyes staring into the dark, their ears straining to every faint, mysterious sound, their sensitive noses questioning every scent that came breathing in to them from the still night forest. At last they

heard a stealthy footfall outside the back door. It was as light—oh, lighter than a falling leaf. But *they* heard it. If you and I had such ears as that, maybe we could hear the grasses growing."

"*That* would be fun," muttered the Babe.

"And then," continued Uncle Andy, "they smelt a faint, musky scent. I *don't* think it would be fun if we had such noses as that. We'd smell so many smells we did not want to. Eh? And I tell you, the youngsters did not want to smell that smell. It was a fox. They couldn't fight a fox. Not yet. With their hearts in their throats they backed softly down to the front door, and waited, ready to slip into the water.

"But fortunately the fox was cunning, and proud of it. He had heard a rumor that the old otters were dead. But he was much too cunning to believe all he heard. It would be just like them, he thought, to pretend they were dead, so that he might come in and get caught. Assuredly there was a good, strong, live otter smell coming up out of that hole. He poked his nose down and gave a very loud sniff, then cocked his ear sharply and listened. Nothing stirred. Had it been only the little ones, down there all by themselves, he thought, they would have been frightened enough to jump. So, it was plainly a trap. Waving his great bushy tail complaisantly, he tiptoed off to hunt rabbits, pleased with the notion that somebody else was going to get taken in.

"The youngsters stayed where they were, close beside the water. The first glimmer of dawn, striking on the misty surface of the pool outside, struggled up into the den. The youngsters turned to greet it, with the thought, perhaps, that it was time to go fishing. Just at this moment the mink,