

THE LIFE STORY OF A SQUIRREL

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I MY FIRST ADVENTURE

CHAPTER II THE GREAT DISASTER

CHAPTER III THE PLEASURES OF IMPRISONMENT

CHAPTER IV A DAY IN RAT LAND

CHAPTER V BACK TO THE WOODLANDS

CHAPTER VI A NARROW ESCAPE

CHAPTER VII THE GREY TERROR

CHAPTER VIII I FIND A WIFE

CHAPTER IX WAR DECLARED AGAINST OUR RACE

CHAPTER X POACHERS AND A BATTUE

CHAPTER XI MY LAST ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I

MY FIRST ADVENTURE

It was a perfect June morning, not a breath stirring, and the sun fairly baking down till the whole air was full of the hot resinous scent of pine-needles; but, warm as it was, I was shivering as I lay out on the tip of a larch-bough and looked down. I was not giddy—a squirrel never is. But that next bough below me, where my mother was sitting, seemed very far away, and I could not help thinking what a tremendous fall it would be to the ground, supposing I happened to miss my landing-place. I am too old now to blush at the recollection of it, and I don't mind confessing that at the time I was in what I have since heard called a blue funk.

The fact is, it was my first jumping and climbing lesson. Even squirrels have to learn to climb, just as birds have to be taught by their parents to fly.

My mother called me by my name, Scud, sitting up straight, and looking at me encouragingly with her pretty black eyes. But I still hesitated, crouching low on my branch and clinging tight to it with all four sets of small sharp claws.

Mother grew a trifle impatient, and called to my brother Rusty to take my place.

This was too much for me. I took my courage in both fore-paws, set my teeth, and launched myself desperately into the air. I came down flat on my little white stomach, but as at that time I weighed rather less than four ounces, and the bough below was soft and

springy, I did not knock the wind out of myself, as one of you humans would have done if you had fallen in the same way.

Mother gave a little snort. She did not approve of my methods, and told me I should spread my legs wider and make more use of my tail. Then she turned and gave a low call to Rusty to follow.

Even at that early age—we were barely a month old—Rusty was a heavier and rather slower-going squirrel than I. But he already showed that bull-dog courage which was so strong a trait all through his after-life. He crawled deliberately to the very end of the branch, then simply let go and tumbled all in a heap right on the top of us. It was extremely lucky for him that mother was so quick as she was. She made a rapid bound forward, and caught her blundering son by the loose skin at the back of his neck just in time to save him from going headlong to the ground, quite fifty feet below.

She panted with fright as she lifted him to a place of safety with a little shake.

Rusty looked a trifle sulky, and mother gave him an affectionate pat to soothe him down.

Then she told us to follow her back along the branch, and she would show us how to climb up the trunk home again. She sent me first.

I had hardly reached the trunk end of the bough when I heard mother utter a cry which I had never heard her give before. It was a low sharp call. Oddly enough, I seemed to know exactly what it meant. At once I lay flat upon the bough, here quite thick enough to hide my small body, and crouched down, making myself as

small as possible. At the same instant mother seized Rusty by the scruff of his neck, and with one splendid leap sprang right up on to the wide, thick bough on the flat surface of which our home was built. In a few seconds she came back for me, and before I knew what was the matter I, too, was safe in the nest, alongside Rusty and my sister, little Hazel.

Mother gave a low note of warning that none of us should move or make any noise; and you may be sure we all obeyed, for something in her manner frightened us greatly. Presently we heard heavy footfalls down below rustling in the dry pine-needles. We sat closer than ever, hardly daring to breathe. The footsteps stopped just below our tree, and a loud rough voice, that made every nerve in my body quiver, shouted out something. From the sound of it we could tell that the speaker was peering right up between the boughs into our tree, and we knew without the slightest doubt he had discovered our drey. He must have spoken loud, even for a human, for his companion gave a sharp ‘S-s-sh!’ as if he were afraid that some one else might overhear and come down upon them. It could not have been of us he was afraid, for we, poor trembling, palpitating little things, lay huddled together, hardly daring to breathe.

The two tormentors turned away a few paces after a few lower-toned remarks, and I began to think they had gone, when——

Crash, a great jagged lump of stone came hurtling up within a yard of our home, frightening us all abominably.

Mother crouched with us closer than ever into our frail little house of sticks, which was not made to stand the force of stones.

Almost immediately there fell another mass of whizzing stone, even nearer than the first. It shore away a large tassel from the bough just overhead, and this fell right on the top of us, frightening Hazel so much that she jumped completely out of the nest, and, if mother had not been after her as quick as lightning, she must have fallen over the edge and probably tumbled right down to the ground and been killed at once. Even a squirrel, particularly a young one, cannot fall fifty feet in safety.

Mother saved her from this fate, but the mischief was done. The quick eyes of our enemies below had caught a glimpse of red fur among the pale green foliage, and they roared out in triumph, the louder and noisier making such a row, I thought that anyone within hearing must come rushing to see what was the matter. Then they began disputing together, perhaps as to which of them should carry us away.

We lay there nestling under mother's thick fur, shaking with fright.

The two fellows down below argued like angry magpies for several minutes, and at last it was decided that the quieter one should do the climbing. I peeped over timidly and saw him throw off his coat, and drew back to make myself as small as possible. Presently I heard a bough creak, and then there followed a scraping and grinding as his heavy hobnailed boots clawed the trunk in an effort to reach the first branch. Once on that, he came up with dreadful rapidity. The boughs of the larch were so close together that even such a great clumsy animal, with his hind-paws all covered up with leather and iron, could climb it as easily as a ladder. We heard him coughing and making queer noises as the thick green dust, which always covers an old larch, got into his throat, and the little sharp dry twigs switched his face. But he kept on steadily, and soon he

was only three or four branches below us, and making the whole top of the tree quiver and shake with his clumsy struggles. But as he got higher the branches were thinner, and he stopped, evidently not daring to trust his weight to them, and called out something to his companion. All the answer he got was a jeering laugh, and this probably decided him, for, with a growl, he came on again. The tree really was thin up near our bough, at least for a great giant like this. The trunk itself bent, and the shaking was so tremendous that I began to think that our whole home would be jerked loose from its platform and go tumbling down in ruins with us inside it.

Suddenly the fellow's great rough head was pushed up through the branches just below. His fat cheeks were crimson, and his hair all plastered down on his forehead with perspiration. I stared at him in a sort of horrible fascination. I could not have moved for the life of me, and, as Rusty and Hazel told me afterwards, they felt just the same. But mother kept her head. She was sitting up straight, with her bright black eyes fairly snapping with rage and excitement.

The man made a desperate scramble, and up came a large dirty paw and grasped the very branch on which we lived. This was too much for mother. Her fur fairly bristled as she made a sudden dash out of the nest by the entrance nearest to the trunk, and went straight for that grasping fist. Next instant her sharp teeth met deep in his first finger. He gave one yell and let go. All his weight came on his other hand, there was a loud snap, and his large red face disappeared with startling suddenness.

For a moment our tree felt just as it does when a strong gust of wind catches and sways it. Our enemy, luckily for himself, had fallen upon a wide-spreading bough not far below, had caught hold of it, and so saved himself from a tumble right down to the bottom.

I heard his companion cry out in a frightened voice. For a moment there was no reply, and then a torrent of language so angry that I am sure no respectable squirrel would have used anything so bad even when talking to a weasel.

The man who had fallen was dancing about, holding his hand in his mouth, and taking it out to show his comrade. I watched him excitedly, hoping that now he had been hurt he would go away; but no, picking himself up he began again clumsily climbing up towards us. He came more slowly than before, trying each branch carefully before he put his weight on it. Presently I saw his furious face rising up again through the branches, and now he had something shining and sharp, like a long tooth, clutched between his lips. I did not know then what a knife was, but I thought it looked particularly unpleasant. There was a nasty shine, too, in his pale blue eyes. I could feel my heart throbbing as if it would burst. Again his great ugly paw came clutching up at our bough. Fortunately he could not quite reach it. Having broken off the branch just below us, he had nothing to hold on to. However, he was so angry that there was no stopping him. He got his arms and legs round the trunk and began to swarm up.

It looked as if nothing could save us now. Mother herself was too frightened of that long gleaming tooth to try to bite our enemy again. She jumped out of the nest by the entrance on the far side, and did her best to persuade us to follow her out to the end of the branch where we had been having our jumping lessons. But we were much too frightened to move. We lay shivering in the moss at the bottom of the nest, and made ourselves as small as we knew how.

The man's head was level with the bough; he was stretching out for a good hand-hold, when suddenly I heard the sharp clatter of a blackbird from the hedge at the border of the spinny, and immediately afterwards the crash of dry twigs under a heavy boot.

A sharp hiss came from below in warning. Bill's hand stopped in mid-air, just as I once saw a rabbit stop at the moment the shot struck it. His cheeks, which had been almost as red as my tail, went the colour of a sheep's fleece. He listened for a moment, then suddenly dropped to the bough below, and began clambering down a good deal more quickly than he had come up.

We guessed it was the keeper, who had always left us alone, though we had often seen him about.

The steady tramp of his boots suddenly changed to a quick thud, thud; and when he saw the fellows at the tree, he gave a deep roar, just like the bull that lives in the meadow by the river when he gets angry. He came running along at a tremendous pace, making such a tramping among the leaves and pine-needles that the blackbird, though she had flown far away, started up again with a louder scream than ever.

The man on the ground did not wait. Deserting his companion, he made off at top speed. But old Crump, the keeper, knew better than to waste his time in catching him. He had seen the boughs shaking and he came straight for our tree, and shouted triumphantly as he caught sight of the other one, who was by this time only a few boughs from the ground.

In his hurry and fright the fellow missed his hold. Next moment there was a tremendous thump, and a worse row even than when he had taken his first tumble.

I peeped out of the nest again more confidently, and I thought they were fighting. But what had happened was that the poacher had fallen right on the top of Crump's head, flooring him completely, and, I should think, knocking all the breath out of him. Then, before the keeper, who was as fat as a dormouse, could gain his feet, the other had picked himself up and gone off full tilt after his friend.

The keeper growled and muttered to himself as he rose slowly. He picked up his gun and walked round the tree, looking up, evidently puzzled as to what the men had been after. Then he caught sight of us, and shook his head, as if he would have much liked to capture us himself. He certainly could not have had any friendly feeling for us, as we bit the tips off his young larches. But he must have had orders to let us alone, for he did not attempt to molest us, and presently, to our great relief, he too stumped off and left us undisturbed.

We lay very still for a long time, slowly getting over our fright. Suddenly mother gave a pleased little squeak and jumped out of the nest. I crawled out too, as boldly as you please, and looked down. Here came father running along over the thick brown carpet of pine-needles which covered the ground. I know some of you humans laugh at a squirrel on the ground. But it is not our fault that we do not look so well there as in our proper place—a tree. Why, even the swan, supposed to be the most graceful thing in the world, waddles in the clumsiest fashion imaginable when it is on dry land! At any rate, even over flat ground a squirrel can move at a good pace.

Father was lopping along with his fore-paws very wide apart, and stopping now and then to sniff or burrow a little among the pine

and larch needles. In one place he evidently found something good—possibly a nice fat grub—for he stopped, sat up on his hind-legs, and, holding whatever it was in his fore-paws, began to nibble at it daintily. How handsome he looked sitting there, with his beautiful sharp ears cocked, his splendid brush hoisted straight up, and the rich, ruddy fur of his back just touched by a stray gleam of sunshine, contrasting beautifully with the snowy whiteness of his waistcoat! It has always been my opinion that he was the handsomest squirrel I ever saw, and I was never more pleased in my life than when mother once told me that she thought I was more like him than any of her other children.

Mother called again. Father looked up, caught sight of her, gave a quick flick of his tail and an answering call. Next instant we heard the rattle of his claws on the rough bark, and almost before I could look round here he was with us.

He was full of good-humour, for he had been over to the beech copse, and the mast, he told us, was the finest crop he had seen for years. We must collect a good store as soon as it got ripe.

But he suddenly noticed that mother was quivering all over, and he had not time to ask what had upset her before she burst into an account of all the dreadful things that had happened that morning.

Then he looked very grave.

‘We must go,’ he said. ‘It means building a new house. And this tree has suited us so admirably. I do not think that I have ever seen a weasel near it; then, too, we are so capitally sheltered from bad weather by all these thick evergreens. In any case I shall not leave the plantation, but I suppose we must look out for another tree. We

cannot do anything to-day; it is too late. Now I will mount guard over the youngsters while you go and get some dinner.'

And rather uneasily she went off.

The heat of the day was over, but the sun was still warm. A little breeze was talking gently up in the murmurous tops of the trees, causing the shadows to sway and dance in dappled lights on the lower branches. You humans, who never go anywhere without stamping, and running, and talking loudly, and lighting pipes with crackly matches, have no idea what the real life of the woods is like, especially on a fine June afternoon such as this one was. Though our larch was one of a thick clump, yet from the great height of our nest we could see right across into the belt of oaks, beeches, and old thorn-trees which lay along the slope below, and could even catch a glimpse of the tall hedge and bank, and of the sandy turf beyond where the rabbit-warren lay.

One by one the rabbits lopped silently out of their burrows and began to feed till the close turf was almost as brown as green. Stupid fellows, rabbits, I always think, but I like to watch them, especially when the young ones play, jumping over and over one another, or when some old buck, with a sudden idea that a fox or weasel is on the prowl, whacks the ground with one hind-leg, and then all scuttle helter-skelter back into their holes.

A pompous old cock pheasant came strutting down a ride in the young bracken, the sun shining full on his glossy plumage and black-barred tail. Presently his wife followed him, and behind her came a dozen chicks flitting noiselessly over the ground like so many small brown shadows. A pair of wood-pigeons were raising their second brood in a fir-tree, not far away from where we lived,

and every now and then, with a rapid clatter of wings, one of the old birds came flapping through the aisles of the plantation with food for their two ugly, half-fledged young ones. I wonder, by the by, why a wood-pigeon is so amazingly careless about its nest building. I never can understand how it is that the young ones do not fall off the rough platform of sticks which is their apology for a nest. And it must be shockingly cold and draughty, too. Birds are supposed to be ahead of all other nest-builders, but I can tell you there are a good many besides the wood-pigeon who might take a few pointers in architecture from us squirrels, to say nothing of our distant cousin the door-mouse.

A sharp rat-a-tat just behind startled me, and there was a big green woodpecker hanging on tight against the trunk of our own larch with his strong claws, and pounding the bark with his hammer-like beak. Father looked at him with interest.

‘Ah,’ he observed, ‘it’s about time we did move. The old tree must be getting rotten, or we shouldn’t have a visit from him.’

It was all most pleasant and peaceful as we sat there—Rusty, Hazel, and I—enjoying the gentle swinging in the soft west wind, and waiting for mother to come home.

It was a very fine summer, that one. I have never seen one like it since. We had very little rain and no storms for weeks on end, and the crops of mast and nuts were splendid.

But I am running ahead too fast. The very next day after our narrow escape from the two loafers, father set to work to make a new house in the fir-tree he had spoken of. Luckily for him, there was an old carrion crow’s nest handy in the top branches, and he got plenty of sticks out of this for the framework. Mother helped

him to gather some moss—nice dry stuff from the roots of a beech, and he made a tidy job of it within three days. Of course, he did not build so elaborately as if he had been constructing a winter nest—we squirrels never do. But all the same, he put a good water-tight roof over it.

Meantime mother had been keeping us youngsters hard at work with our climbing and jumping lessons. We all got on very well, and the day before we were to move she actually let me come down to the ground. It was the funniest feeling coming down so low, and at first I cannot say that I liked it. There was no spring in the earth, and one did not seem able to get a good hold for one's claws. The pine-needles slipped away when one tried to jump. However, after the first novelty wore off, I enjoyed the new sensation hugely, and my joy was complete when mother showed me a little fat brown beetle which she said I might eat. I tried it, and really it might have been a nut, it was so crisp and plump.

Rusty and Hazel were sitting on a bough overhead, and as full of envy as ever they could be, for mother had said that she really could not have more than one of us at a time down among the dangers of the ground, and that I was the only one quick enough to look after myself if anything happened.

My quickness was fated to be tested. While mother was scratching about the tree-roots, having a hunt for any stray nuts of last autumn's store that might hitherto have been overlooked, I moved off to see if I could not discover another of those tasty beetles. At a little distance lay a great log, the slowly-rotting remains of a tall tree that had been torn up by the roots in some winter gale many years before, and was now half buried in the ground. On its far side was a perfect thicket of bracken, and a great bramble grew in the

hollow where the roots of the tree had once been, and hid the fast decaying trunk. There was a curious earthy smell about the place which somehow attracted me. I know now that it was from a sort of fungus which grows in the rotten wood, and is quite good to eat, but at that time I was still too young to understand this. However, I went gaily grubbing about, and at last ventured on the very top of the log and pattered down it towards the trunk end. Near the butt was a hollow in the worm-eaten wood. The bramble was thick on all sides, but there was an opening above through which a patch of bright sunlight leaked down. In the middle of this dry, warm cavity was a small coil of something of almost the same colour as the wood on which it lay. At first I took it for a twisted stick, but it attracted me strangely, and I gradually moved nearer. It was not until I came to the very edge of the hollow and sat up on my hind-legs that I suddenly became aware that the odd coil had a little diamond-shaped head, in which were set two beady eyes. There was a horrible cold, cruel look in those unwinking eyes which had a strange effect upon me. I turned cold and stiff, and felt as if, for the very life of me, I could not move. Suddenly a forked tongue flickered out, the dead coil took life, I saw the muscles ripple below the ashen skin. It was that movement which saved me. As the horrid head flashed forward, I leaped high into the air. The narrow head and two thin, keen fangs gleaming white passed less than my own length below me, and I fell into the thick of the bramble, the worst scared squirrel in the wood. How I scrambled out I have no idea, but in another instant I was scuttling back to my mother, full of my direful tale.

When I told her what had happened she looked very grave.

‘It was an adder,’ she said, shivering. ‘If it had bitten you, you would have been dead before sunset. Keep close to me, Scud.’

The next day we moved into our new quarters in the fir-tree. Personally, I never liked a fir so well as most other trees. It is so dark and gloomy, and you get so little sun. My own preference has always been for a beech. An old beech has such delightful nooks and crannies, and often deep holes, sometimes deep and large enough to build a winter home in—always capital for the storage of nuts. There was no doubt, however, that the fir which father had chosen had many points to recommend it. It was an immensely tall tree, and thick as a hedge, yet there were no branches close to the ground to tempt evil-minded young humans like our recent invaders to climb up. What was still better, so cunningly had father chosen his site that it was quite impossible for any evil-minded, two-legged creatures to see us from below. Our nest was founded on a large, flat-topped branch close in to the thick red trunk, and only about two-thirds of the way up to the top. Another branch almost equally thick formed a roof over our heads, so that we were very snug and comfortable.

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT DISASTER

The day on which the great disaster befell us was wet in the early morning, and when the sun rose a thick, soft mist, white like cotton-wool, hung over the country-side. Not a breath of air was stirring, and it was so intensely still that it seemed as though one could hear everything that moved from one end of the wood to the other. The plop of a water-rat diving into a pool in the stream on the far side of the coppice came as clearly to my ears as though the water had been at the bottom of our own tree instead of several hundred yards away, and when the wood-pigeons began to move unseen in the smother, the clatter of their wings was positively startling.

We squirrel folk are not fond of wet, so we lay still and snug in our cosy retreat until the sun began to eat up the mist. Soon the grey smother thinned and sank, leaving the tree-tops bathed in brilliant light, every twig dripping with moisture, and every drop sparkling with intense brilliance. Then we crept out one by one, and, sitting up straight upon our haunches, began our morning toilet. No other woodland creature is so careful and tidy in its habits as a squirrel, and mother had already thoroughly instructed us in the proper methods of using our paws as brushes and our tongues as sponges, and in making ourselves neat and smart as self-respecting, healthy squirrels should be.

Suddenly a peal of distant bells came clanging through the moist, calm air with such a vibrating note that they made us all start. Father sat up sharply, and mother asked him what was the matter.

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