

WILDWOOD WAYS

BY

WINTHROP PACKARD

Table of Contents

SNUGGING-DOWN DAYS

CERTAIN WHITE-FACED HORNETS

THIN ICE

WINTER FERN-HUNTING

THE BARE HILLS IN MIDWINTER

SOME JANUARY BIRDS

WHEN THE SNOW CAME

THE MINK'S HUNTING GROUND

IN THE WHITE WOODS

THE ROAD TO MUDDY POND

AMONG THE MUSKRAT LODGES

THICK ICE



The muskrats have built higher than common this year

SNUGGING-DOWN DAYS

TO-DAY came with a flashing sun that looked through crystal-clear atmosphere into the eyes of a keen northwest wind that had dried up all of November's fog and left no trace of moisture to hold its keenness and touch you with its chill. It was one of those days when the cart road from the north side to the south side of a pine wood leads you from early December straight to early May. On the one side is a nipping and eager air; on the other sunny softness and a smell of spring. It is more than that difference of a hundred miles in latitude which market gardeners say exists between the north and south side of a board fence. It is like having thousand league boots and passing from Labrador to Louisiana at a stride.

On the north side of a strip of woodland which borders the boggy outlet to Ponkapoag Pond lies a great mowing field, and here among the sere stubble I stand in the pale shadow of deciduous trees and face the wind coming over the rolling uplands as it might come across Arctic barrens, singing down upon the northerly outposts of the timber line. On the south side the muskrat teepees rise from blue water at the bog edge like peaks of Teneriffe from the sunny seas that border the Canary Isles. Such contrasts you may find on many an early December day, when walking in the rarefied brightness of the open air is like moving about in the heart of a diamond.

Yet even the big mowing field shows unmistakable signs of having been snugged down for the winter. Here and there a tree,

still afloat in its brown undulating ocean, seems to be scudding for the shelter of the forest under bare poles, while the stout white oaks lie to near the coast under double-reefed courses, the brown leaf-sails still holding to the lower yards while all the spars above have been blown bare. The woodchuck paths, that not long ago led from one clover patch to another and then on to well-hidden holes, lie pale and untravelled, while their fat owners are snuggled down below in warm burrows with their noses folded in under their forepaws. Tradition has it that they will wake in a warm spell in midwinter and peer out of their burrows to see what the prospect of spring may be. Hence, the second of February is not only Candlemas day, but ground-hog day in rural tradition, the day on which the woodchuck is fabled to appear at the mouth of his underground retreat and look for weather signs, but I don't know anyone who has ever seen him do it. You may often find skunk tracks in the snow or mud during a good midwinter thaw, but I have never seen those of the woodchuck then, and I am quite confident that he stays snuggled down the winter through.

Scattered here and there about the borders of the field are groups of dwarf goldenrod still in full leaf and flower, so far as form goes. The crowded terminal panicles of bloom bend gracefully towards earth like stout ostrich plumes, and I think they are more beautiful in the feathery russet of crowded seed-masses than they were in their September finery of golden yellow. Their stems are lined with leaves still, but these have lost their sombre green to put on the color of deep seal brown. It is as if they had donned their sealskin cloaks for winter wear.

But all these clumps are doubly protected in another way, not for their own sake, for they are but dead stems, but for the birds, who will need their seeds when the snows later in the month shall

have covered the ground far out of their reach. All the autumn the winds have been whirling dry leaves back and forth, and each clump has trapped them cunningly till the slender stems that might otherwise be buried and broken by the snow are reënforced on all sides by elastic leaves that will hold them bravely up. Here is an open larder, a free-lunch counter for the goldfinches and chickadees of next January. Here they may glean and glean again, for except they be plucked by eager beaks some of these seeds will not let go their grip on the receptacles till spring rains loosen them and the ground is fit for their sowing.

Everywhere in wood and pasture the numbers of seeds of plants and trees that are thus held waiting the winter gleaners are incomputable; nor will these need to seek them on the plant itself, for little by little as the winter winds come and go they will loose their hold and scatter themselves about as we scatter crumbs for the snow-birds and sparrows. Here are the birches, for instance, holding fast still to their wealth. If bursting spring buds could be gray-brown in color instead of sage-green we well might think the trees had another almanac than our own and that with them it was late April, for wherever the trees are silhouetted against the light we see every twig decorated with new life. It is new life, indeed, but not that of spring leaves. Every tree has a thousand cones, and every cone is packed with tiny seeds about a central core of stiff fibre that is like a fine wire.

Holding the seeds tight in their places are little flat scales, having an outline like that of a conventionalized fleur-de-lis or somewhat like tiny flying birds. The whole is so keyed by the tip that as they hang head down it is possible to dislodge only the topmost scales and seeds. A very vigorous shake of the tree sends a cloud of these flying, but when you look at the tree you find that

not a thousandth part of its store has been dispensed. When the midwinter snows lie deep all about, the paymaster wind will requisition these stores as needed for the tiny creatures of the wood and scatter them wide on the white surface, till it will look as if spiced by the confectioner, so well does the forest take care of its own. The Lady Amina of the Arabian tale picking single grains of rice at the banquet might not seem to dine more daintily. The spring will be near at hand when the last of these birch seeds will have been dispensed. Thus innumerable graneries are stored the woodland and pasture through, so lightly locked that all may pilfer, and so abundantly filled, pressed down and running over that there shall be no lack in either quantity or variety.

Far other and stranger forms of winter-guarding forethought are to be seen all about the big mowing field and in the coppices that divide it from the open marsh and the pond shore, if we will but look for them. In many places has witchery been at work as well as forethought, and strange and unaccountable things have been brought to pass that tiny creatures may be kept safe until spring. Here and there among the goldenrod stems you find one that is swollen to the size of a hickory nut, a smooth globe which is merely the stem expanded from the diameter of a toothpick to three-quarters of an inch. When I split this bulb with my knife I find it made up of tough pith shot through with the growing fibres of the plant, but having a tiny hollow in the centre.

Here, snugly ensconced and safe from all the cold and storms, is a lazy creature so fat that he looks like a globular ball of white wax. Only when I poke him does he squirm, and I can see his mouth move in protest. His fairy language is too fine for my ear, tuned to the rough accents of the great world, but if I am any judge

of countenances he is saying: “Why, damme, sir! how dare you intrude on my privacy!”

After all he has a right to be indignant, for I have not only wrecked his winter home, but turned him out, unclothed and unprotected, to die in the first nip of the shrewish wind. Unmolested he would have leisurely enlarged his pith hall by eating away its substance and in the spring have bored himself a cunning hole whence he might emerge, spread tiny wings and enjoy the sunshine and soft air of summer. His own transformations from egg to grub, from grub to gall-fly, are curious enough; yet stranger yet and far more savoring of magic is the growth of his winter home. By what hocus-pocus the mother that laid him there made the slender stem of the goldenrod grow about him this luxurious home, is known only to herself and her kindred, and until I learn to hear and translate the language which the grub used in swearing at me when I broke into his home, it is probable that I shall still remain ignorant.

But let us leave Labrador and let ourselves loose upon Louisiana, for we may do it in five minutes. The oaks and the pines, the maples, the birches and the shrubs of the close-set thickets which guard the bog edge, I know not what straining and restraining power they have upon this keen wind, but when it has filtered through them it has lost its shrewishness and, meeting the warm embrace of the low hung sun, bears aromas of spring. It is as if wood violets had shot his garments full of tiny odors of April as he traversed the wood, or perhaps the perpetual magic of life which seems to well up from swampy woodland had seized upon him as it seizes upon all that passes and made him the bearer of its potency. Across the bog to the pond outlet, through this spring-soft atmosphere lies a slender road, lined with thickets, where I do not

wonder the *Callosamia promethia*, the spice-bush silk-moth, likes to spin his own winter snuggery and dangle in the soft air till the real spring taps at his silken doorway and soft rains lift the latch and let him out.

Not far away, among the leaves that lie ankle deep among the shrubbery that skirts the hickories and oaks, are the cocoons of *Actias luna*; among them, shed from the oaks, are those of *Telia Polyphemus*, and if I seek, it is not difficult to find the big pouch where *Samia cecropia* waits for the same call. Some May evening there shall be a brave awakening in the glades and on the borders of the bog. It shall be as if the tans and pinky purples and rose and yellow of the finest autumn leaves took wing again in the spring twilight and floated about at will owing nothing to the winds, and then the luna moth, the fairy queen of dusk, all clad in daintiest green trimmed with ermine and seal and ostrich plumes, shall come among them and reign by right of such beauty as the night rarely sees, all this sprung from the papery cocoons swung in the roadside bushes or tumbled neglectfully among the shifting autumn leaves in the tangle at the roots of the wild smilax.

Here is magic for you, indeed, of the kind that the parlor magician is wont to supply; frail and beautiful things grown at a breath, almost, from obscure and trivial sources. Yet I seem to find a more potent if less spectacular witchery in what has been done to the willows that here and there grow in the thicket that borders the slender bog road. Some winged sprite has touched their branch tips with fairy wand and whispered a potent word to them, and the willows have obeyed and grown cones! These are an inch or more in length and as perfect with scales as those of the pines up in the wood. But there are no seeds of willow life in them. Instead there

is at the core an orange-yellow, minute grub, the larva of a fly that stung the willow tip last spring and, stinging it, laid her egg therein.

That the egg should become a grub and that later the grub in turn should become a fly is nothing in the way of magic, or that it should fatten in the meanwhile on willow fibre. The necromancy comes in the fact that every willow tip that is made the home of this grub should thenceforth forsake all its recognized methods of growth and produce a cone for the harboring of the grub during the winter's cold. There are many varieties of these gall-producing insects. The oaks still hold spherical attachments to their leaves, produced in the same way. Look among your small fruits and you will find the blackberry stems swollen and tuberculous from a similar cause, and full of squirming life. It is all necromancy out of the same book, the book of the witchery of insects that makes human life and growth seem absurdly simple by comparison. The snugging down of the open world in preparation for winter is full of such tales, and he who runs through the wood on such a day in December may read them.

Standing in the spring-like warmth at the pond outlet and looking down the line where bog meets water I can count the dark peaks of the muskrat teepees, receding like a coast range toward the other shore. The muskrats have built higher than common this year, because, I fancy, they expect much water, having had it low all summer and fall. Some of them are half as high as I am and must have cost tremendous labor in tearing out the marsh roots and sods and collecting them thus in pyramidal form. Their roads run hither and yon across the bog and are so well travelled that the travellers must be numerous as well as active. They have laid in a store of lily roots and sweet-flag for the winter, and their underwater entrances lead upward to quarters that are dry and snug.

Here they are as secure from frost as was the white grub that I hewed from his pith hall in the goldenrod stem. When the ice is thick all about, their house will be as hard of outside wall as if built of black adamant yet their water-entrance will be free, beneath the ice, and they will go to and fro by it, seeking supplies or perhaps making friendly calls.

All the morning the marsh grass billowed and the water sparkled, one to another, about their houses, and if you listened to the grass you might hear its fine little sibilant song, a soft susurrus of words whose only consonant is s, set to a sleepy swing. It is a song that seems to harmonize with the fine tan tones of the bog as they fade into silvery white where the sun reflects from smooth spears. Over on the distant hillside the pines, navy blue under cloud shadows, hummed in the wind like bassoons; distant and muted cornets sang clear in the maples, and all about the feathery heads of the olive swamp cedars you caught the faint shrilling of fifes if you would but listen intently. Now and then the glockenspiel tinkled in mellow yellow notes among the dry reeds on the marge, but these echoed but familiar runes. The tan-white bog grass that is so wild it never heard the swish of scythe, sang, soft and sibilant, an elfin song of the lonely and untamed.

With the singing of the wind into the tender spring of the south side the day grew cold with clouds. The sky was no longer softly blue, but gray and chilling, the pond lost its sparkle and grew purple and numb with cold, and all among the bare limbs you heard the song of the promise of snow. But the clouds stopped at a definite line in the west and at setting the sun dropped below this and sent a golden flood rolling through the trees that mark the boundary between field and pond, lighting up all the bog with glory and gilding the muskrat teepees and the tall bog grass and the

distant trees across the water till all the sere and withered leaves were bathed in serenity, as softly and serenely bright as if the golden age had come to us all. In this wise the crystal day, with its sheltered exultation of spring and its gray promise of winter's snow all fused into one golden delight of sunset glory, marched on over the western hills trailing paths of gilded shadow behind it along which one walked the homeward way as if into the perfect day.

CERTAIN WHITE-FACED HORNETS

THE loneliest spot in all the pasture, the one which the winter has made most vacant of all, is the corner where hangs the great gray nest of the white-faced hornets. Its door stands hospitably open but it is no longer thronged with burly burghers roaring to and fro on business that cannot wait. It was wide enough for half a dozen to go and come at the same time, yet they used to jostle one another continually in this entrance, so great was the throng of workers and so vigorous the energy that bubbled within them. While the warm sun of an August day shines a white-faced hornet is as full of pent forces, striving continually to burst him, as a steam fire-engine is when the city is going up in flame and smoke and the fire chief is shouting orders through the megaphone and the engineer is jumping her for the honor of the department and the safety of the community. He bubbles and bumps and buzzes and bursts, almost, in just the same way.

It is no wonder that people misunderstand such roaring energy, driving home sometimes too fine a point, and speak of *Vespa maculata* and his near of kin the yellow jackets, and even the polite and retiring common black wasp, with dislike. In this the genial Ettrick Shepherd, high priest of the good will of the open world, does him, I think, much wrong. "O' a' God's creatures the wasp," he says, "is the only one that is eternally out of temper. There's nae sic thing as pleasing him."

This opinion is so universal that there is little use in trying to controvert it, and yet these white-faced hornets which I have

known, if not closely, at least on terms of neighborliness, do not seem to merit this opprobrium. That they are hasty I do not deny. They certainly brook no interference with their right to a home and the bringing up of the family. But I do not call that a sign of ill temper; I think it is patriotism.

Probably the trouble with most of us is that we have happened to come into quite literal contact with white-face after the fashion of one of the early explorers of the country about Massachusetts Bay. Obadiah Turner, the English explorer and journalist, thus chronicles the adventure in the quaint phraseology of the year 1629.

“Ye godlie and prudent captain of ye occasion did, for a time, sit on ye stumpe in pleasante moode. Presentlie all were hurried together in great alarum to witness ye strange doing of ye goode olde man. Uttering a lustie screme he bounded from ye stumpe and they, coming upp, did descrie him jumping aboute in ye oddest manner. And he did lykwise puff and blow his mouthe and roll uppe his eyes in ye most distressful waye.

“All were greatlie moved and did loudlie beg of him to advertise them whereof he was afflicted in so sore a manner, and presentlie, he pointing to his foreheade, they did spy there a small red spot and swelling. Then did they begin to think yt what had happened to him was this, yt some pestigeous scorpion or flying devil had bitten him. Presentlie ye paine much abating he saide yt as he sat on ye stumpe he did spye upon ye branch of a tree what to him seemed a large fruite, ye like of wch he had never before seen, being much in size and shape like ye heade of a man, and having a gray rinde, wch as he deemed, betokened ripenesse. There being so manie new and luscious fruites discovered in this fayer lande none

coulede know ye whole of them. And, he said, his eyes did much rejoyce at ye sight.

“Seizing a stone he hurled ye same thereat, thinking to bring yt to ye grounde. But not taking faire aime he onlie hit ye branch whereon hung ye fruit. Ye jarr was not enow to shake down ye same but there issued from yt, as from a nest, divers little winged scorpions, mch in size like ye large fenn flies on ye marshe landes of olde England. And one of them, bounding against hys forehead did give in an instant a most terrible stinge, whereof came ye horrible paine and agonie of wch he cried out.”

Let go on the even tenor of his home-building and home-keeping way, white-face is another creature. One of his kind used to make trips to and from my tent all one summer, and we got to be good neighbors. At first I viewed him with distrust and was inclined to do him harm, but he dodged my blow and without deigning to notice it landed plump on a house-fly that was rubbing his forelegs together in congratulatory manner on the tent roof. He had been mingling with germs of superior standing, without doubt, this house-fly, but his happiness over the success of the event was of brief duration. There came from his wings just one tenuous screech of alarm followed by an ominous silence of as brief duration. Then came the deep roar of the hornet’s propellers as he rounded the curve through the tent door and gave her full-speed ahead on the home road. An hour later he was with me again, had captured another fly almost immediately, and was off. He came again, many times a day, and day after day, till I began to know him well and follow his flights with the interest of an old friend.

He never bothered me or anyone else. He had no time for men; the capture of house-flies was his vocation and it demanded all his

energy and attention. In fact that he might succeed it was necessary that he should put his whole soul into earnest endeavor, for he was not particularly well equipped for his work. He had neither speed nor agility as compared with his quarry, and if house-flies can hear and know what is after them, the roar of his machinery, even at slowest speed, must have given them ample warning. It was like a freighter seeking to capture torpedo boats. They could turn in a circle of a third the radius of his and could fly three miles to his one, yet he was never a minute in getting one.

I think they simply took him for an enlarged edition of their own kind and never knew the difference until his mandibles gripped them. He used to go bumbling and butting about the tent in a near-sighted excitement that was humorous to the onlooker. He didn't know a fly from a hole in the tentpole, and there was a tack in the ridgepole whose head he captured in exultation and let go in a sort of slow wonder every time he came in. He got to know me as part of the scenery and didn't mind lighting on top of my head in his quest, and he never thought of stinging me. I timed his visits one sunny, still day and found that he arrived once in forty seconds. But this was only under most favorable weather conditions. A cloud over the sun delayed him and in wet weather he was never to be seen.

His method with the fly in hand was direct and effective. The first buzz was followed by the snip-snip of his shear-like maxillaries. You could hear the sound and immediately see the gauzy wings flutter slowly to the tent floor. If the fly kicked much his legs went in the same way. Then white-face took a firmer grip on his prize and was off with him to the nest. The bee line is spoken of as a model of mathematical directness, but the laden bee

seeking the hive makes no straighter course than did my hornet to his nest in the berry bush down in the pasture.

Flies were plentiful and, knowing how many hornets there are in a nest, I expected at first that he would bring companions and perhaps overwhelm my hospitality with mere numbers, but he did nothing of the kind. I have an idea that he was detailed to the fly catching work just as other workers were busy gathering nectar and honey dew for the young and others still were nest and comb building. Later in the summer another did come, but I am convinced that he happened on the other's game preserve by accident and was not invited. The two between them must have captured thousands of flies and carried them off alive to their nest.

Thus their paper fort, hung from the twigs of a blueberry bush, had by September grown to the dimensions of a water-bucket and contained a prodigious swarm of valiant fighters and mighty laborers, so much will persistent labor, even by near-sighted, dunder-headed hornets, accomplish. I say near-sighted, for the two specimens of *Vespa maculata* who used to hunt flies in my tent were certainly that. I say also dunder-headed, for if not that they would have learned eventually the location of that tack head and ceased to capture it. Barring these failings, no doubt congenital, I know of no pasture people who show greater virtues or more of them than the white-faced hornets.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

