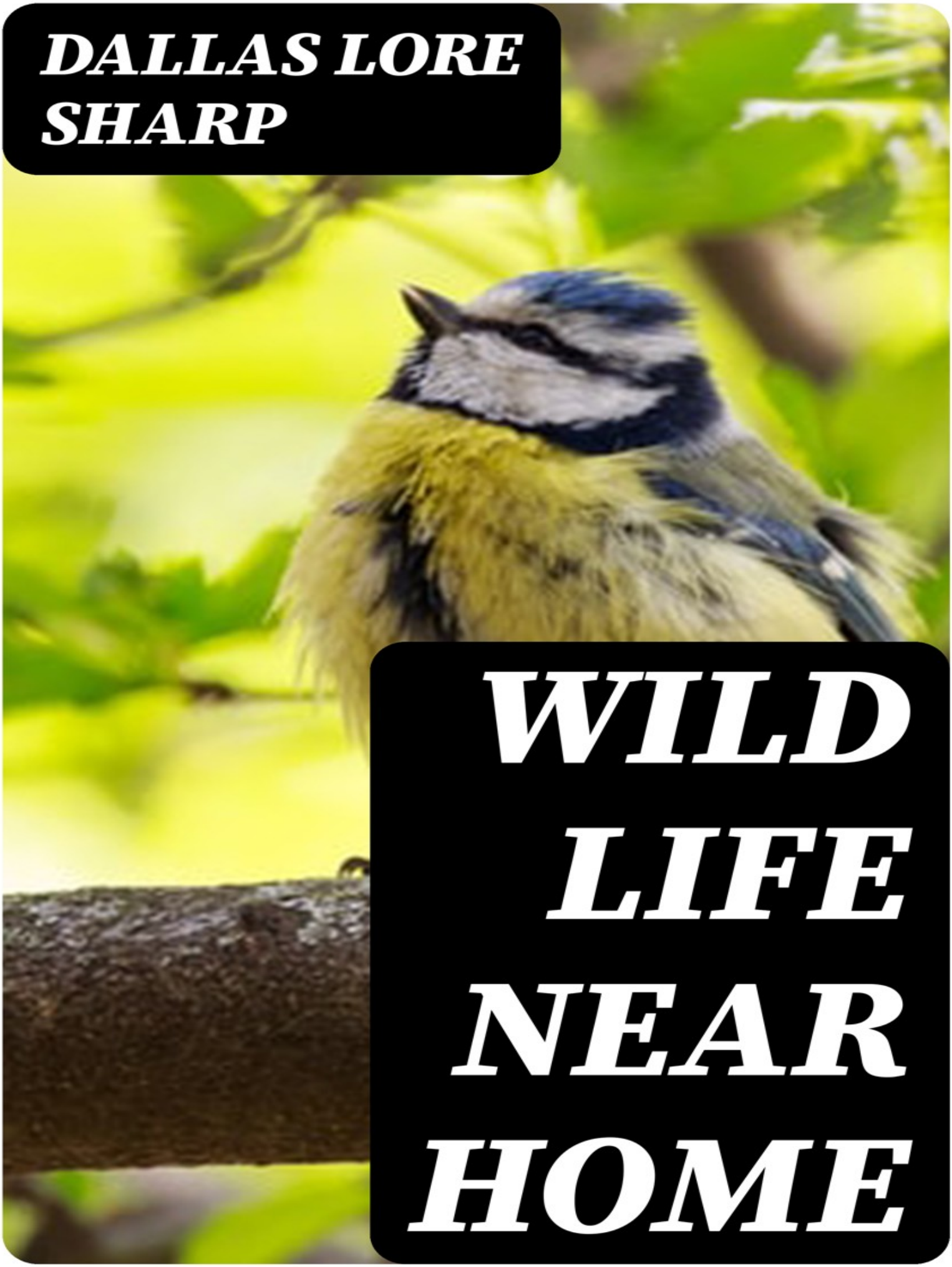
DALLAS LORE SHARP
WILD LIFE NEAR HOME

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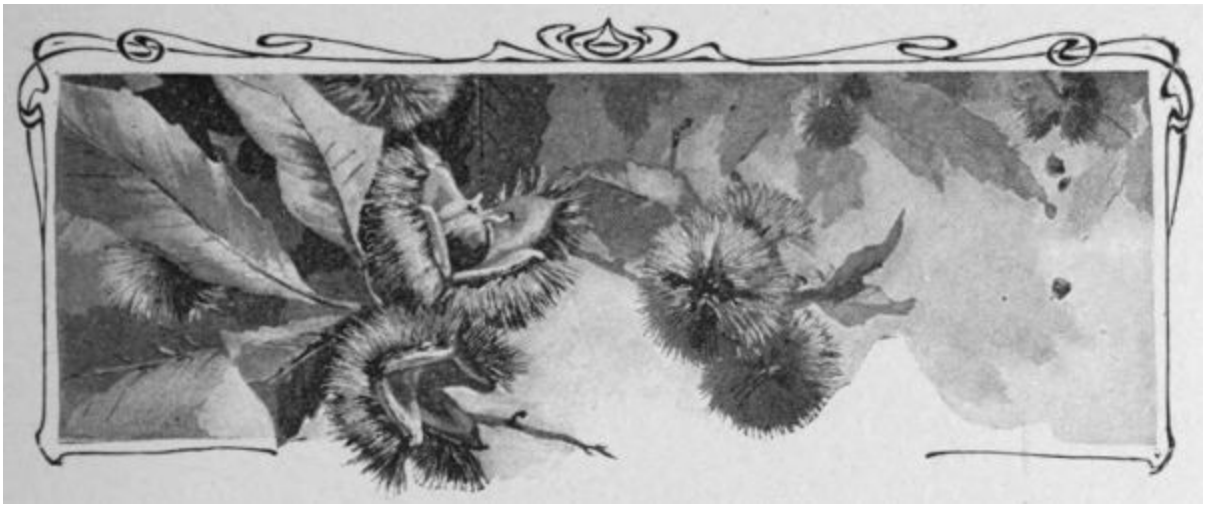


WILD LIFE NEAR HOME

IN PERSIMMON-TIME

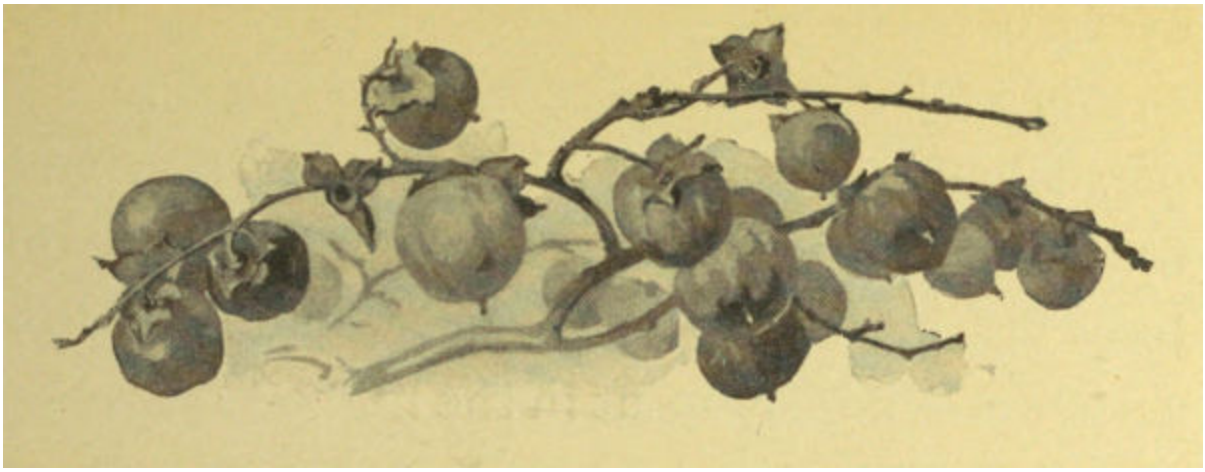
The season of ripe persimmons in the pine-barren region of New Jersey falls during the days of frosty mornings, of wind-strewn leaves and dropping nuts. Melancholy days

these may be in other States, but never such here. The robin and the wren—I am not sure about all of the wrens—are flown, just as the poet says; but the jay and the crow are by no means the only birds that remain. Bob White calls from the swales and "cut-offs"; the cardinal sounds his clear, brilliant whistle in the thickets; and the meadow-lark, scaling across the pastures, flirts his tail from the fence-stake and shouts, *Can you see-e me?* These are some of the dominant notes that still ring through the woods and over the fields. Nor has every fleck of color gone from the face of the out-of-doors. She is not yet a cold, white body wrapped in her winding-sheet. The flush of life still lingers in the stag-horn sumac, where it will burn brighter and warmer as the shortening days darken and deaden; and there is more than a spark—it is a steady glow—on the hillsides, where the cedar, pine, and holly stand, that will live and cheer us throughout the winter. What the soil has lost of life and vigor the winds have gained; and if the birds are fewer now, there is a stirring of other animal life in the open woods and wilder places that was quite lost in the bustle of summer.

And yet! it is a bare world, in spite of the snap and crispness and the signs of harvest everywhere; a wider, silenter, sadder world, though I cannot own a less beautiful world, than in summer. The corn is cut, the great yellow shocks standing over the level fields like weather-beaten tepees in deserted Indian villages; frosts have mown the grass and stripped the trees, so that, from a bluff along the creek, the glistening Cohansey can be traced down miles of its course, and through the parted curtains, wide vistas of

meadow and farm that were entirely hidden by the green foliage lie open like a map.

This is persimmon-time. Since most of the leaves have fallen, there is no trouble in finding the persimmon-trees. They are sprinkled about the woods, along the fences and highways, as naked as the other trees, but conspicuous among them all because of their round, dark-red fruit.



"Ripe and rimy with November's frosts."

What a season of fruit ours is! Opening down in the grass with the wild strawberries of May, and continuing without break or stint, to close high in the trees with the persimmon, ripe and rimy with November's frosts! The persimmon is the last of the fruits. Long before November the apples are gathered—even the "grindstones" are buried by this time; the berries, too, have disappeared, except for such seedy, juiceless things as hang to the cedar, the dogwood, and greenbrier; and the birds have finished the scattered, hidden clusters of racy chicken-grapes. The persimmons still hold on; but these are not for long, unless you keep guard over the trees, for they are marked: the possums have counted every persimmon.

You will often wonder why you find so few persimmons upon the ground after a windy, frosty night. Had you happened under the trees just before daybreak, you would have seen a possum climbing about in the highest branches, where the frost had most keenly nipped the fruit. You would probably have seen two or three up the trees, if persimmons were scarce and possums plentiful in the neighborhood, swinging from the limbs by their long prehensile tails, and reaching out to the ends of the twigs to gather in the soft, sugary globes. Should the wind be high and the fruit dead ripe, you need not look into the trees for the marauders; they will be upon the ground, nosing out the lumps as they fall. A possum never does anything for himself that he can let the gods do for him.

Your tree is perhaps near the road and an old rail-pile. Then you may expect to find your persimmons rolled up in possum fat among the rails; for here the thieves are sure to camp throughout the persimmon season, as the berry-pickers camp in the pines during huckleberry-time.

Possums and persimmons come together, and Uncle Jethro pronounces them "bofe good fruit." He is quite right. The old darky is not alone in his love of possums. To my thinking, he shows a nice taste in preferring November possum to chicken.

"Swinging from the limbs by their long prehensile tails."

It is a common thing, in passing through Mount Zion or Springtown in the winter, to see what, at first glance, looks like a six-weeks' pig hanging from an up-stairs window, but which, on inspection, proves to be a possum, scalded, scraped, and cleaned for roasting, suspended there, out of the reach of dogs and covetous neighbors, for the extra flavor of a freezing. Now stuff it and roast it, and I will swap

my Thanksgiving turkey for it as quickly as will Uncle Jethro himself.

Though the possum is toothsome, he is such a tame, lumbering dolt that few real sportsmen care for the sorry joy of killing him. Innumerable stories have been told of the excitement of possum-hunting; but after many winters, well sprinkled with moonlight tramps and possums, I can liken the sport to nothing more thrilling than a straw-ride or a quilting-party.

There is the exhilarating tramp through the keen, still night, and if possum-hunting will take one out to the woods for such tramps, then it is quite worth while.

No one could hunt possums except at night. It would be unendurably dull by daylight. The moon and the dark lend a wonderful largeness to the woods, transforming the familiar day-scenes into strange, wild regions through which it is an adventure merely to walk. There is magic in darkness. However dead by day, the fields and woods are fully alive at night. We stop at the creaking of the bare boughs overhead as if some watchful creature were about to spring upon us; every stump and bush is an animal that we have startled into sudden fixedness; and out of every shadow we expect a live thing to rise up and withstand us. The hoot of the owl, the bark of the fox, the whinny of the coon, send shivers of excitement over us. We jump at a mouse in the leaves near by.

Helped out by the spell of moonlight and the collusion of a ready fancy, it is possible to have a genuine adventure by seizing a logy, grinning possum by the tail and dragging him out of a stump. Under such conditions he looks quite like a

ferocious beast, grunting and hissing with wide-open mouth; and you may feel just a thrill of the real savage's joy as you sling him over your shoulder.

"Under such conditions he looks quite like a ferocious beast."

But never go after possums alone, nor with a white man. If you must go, then go with Uncle Jethro and Calamity. I remember particularly one night's hunt with Uncle Jethro. I had come upon him in the evening out on the kitchen steps

watching the rim of the rising moon across the dark, stubby corn-field. It was November, and the silver light was spreading a plate of frost over the field and its long, silent rows of corn-shocks.

When Uncle Jethro studied the clouds or the moon in this way, it meant a trip to the meadows or the swamp; it was a sure sign that geese had gone over, that the possums and coons were running.

I knew to-night—for I could smell the perfume of the ripe persimmons on the air—that down by the creek, among the leafless tops of the persimmon-trees, Uncle Jethro saw a possum.

"Is it Br'er Possum or Br'er Coon, Uncle Jethro?" I asked, slyly, just as if I did not know.

"Boosh! boosh!" sputtered the old darky, terribly scared by my sudden appearance. "W'at yo' 'xplodin' my cogitations lak dat fo'? W'at I know 'bout any possum? Possum, boy? Possum? W'at yo' mean?"

"Don't you sniff the 'simmons, Uncle Jeth?"

Instinctively he threw his nose into the air.

"G' 'way, boy; g' 'way fum yhere! I ain't seen no possum. I 's thinkin' 'bout dat las' camp-meetin' in de pines"; and he began to hum:

> "Lawd, I wunda, who kilt John Henry,
> In de la-ane, in de lane."

Half an hour later we were filing through the corn-stubs toward the creek. Uncle Jethro carried his long musket under his arm; I had a stout hickory stick and a meal-sack; while

ahead of us, like a sailor on shore, rolled Calamity, the old possum-dog.

If in June come perfect days, then perfect nights come in November. There is one thing, at least, as rare as a June day, and that is a clear, keen November night, enameled with frost and set with the hunter's moon.

Uncle Jethro was not thinking of last summer's camp-meeting now; but still he crooned softly a camp-meeting melody:

> "Sheep an' de goats a-
> Gwine to de pastcha,
> Sheep tell de goats, 'Ain't yo'
> Walk a leetle fasta?'
>
> "Lawd, I wunda, who kilt John Henry,
> In de la-ane, in de lane.
>
> "Coon he up a gum-tree,
> Possum in de holla;
> Coon he roll hi'self in ha'r,
> Possum roll in talla.
>
> "Lawd, I wunda—"

until we began to skirt Cubby Hollow, when he suddenly brought himself up with a snap.

It was Calamity "talkin' in one of her tongues." The short, sharp bark came down from the fence at the brow of the hill. Uncle Jethro listened.

"Filing through the corn-stubs."

"Jis squirrel-talk, dat. She'll talk possum by-um-bit, she will. Ain't no possum-dog in des diggin's kin talk possum wid C'lamity. An' w'en *she* talk possum, ol' man possum gotter listen. Sell C'lamity? Dat dog can't be bought, she can't."

As we came under the persimmon-trees at the foot of Lupton's Pond, the moon was high enough to show us that no possum had been here yet, for there was abundance of the luscious, frost-nipped fruit upon the ground. In the bare trees the persimmons hung like silver beads. We stopped to gather a few, when Calamity woke the woods with her cry.

"Dar he is! C'lamity done got ol' man possum now! Down by de bend! Dat's possum-talk, big talk, fat talk!" And we hurried after the dog.

We had gone half a mile, and Uncle Jethro had picked himself up at least three times, when I protested.

"Uncle Jeth!" I cried, "that's an awfully long-legged possum. He'll run all his fat off before we catch him."

"Dat's so, boy, shu' 'nough! W'at dat ol' fool dog tree a long-legged possum fo', nohow? Yer, C'lamity, 'lamity, yer, yer!" he yelled, as the hound doubled and began to track the *rabbit* back toward us.

We were thoroughly cooled before Calamity appeared. She was boxed on the ear and sent off again with the command to talk possum next time or be shot.

She was soon talking again. This time it *must* be possum-talk. There could be no mistake about that long, steady, placid howl. The dog must be under a tree or beside a stump waiting for us. As Uncle Jethro heard the cry he chuckled, and a new moon broke through his dusky countenance.

"Yhear dat? *Dat's* possum-talk. C'lamity done meet up wid de ol' man dis time, shu'."

And so she had, as far as we could see. She was lying restfully on the bank of a little stream, her head in the air, singing that long, lonesome strain which Uncle Jethro called her possum-talk. It was a wonderfully faithful reproduction of her master's camp-meeting singing. One of his weird, wordless melodies seemed to have passed into the old dog's soul.

But what was she calling us for? As we came up we looked around for the tree, the stump, the fallen log; but there was not a splinter in sight. Uncle Jethro was getting nervous. Calamity rose, as we approached, and pushed her muzzle into a muskrat's smooth, black hole. This was too

much. She saw it, and hung her head, for she knew what was coming.

"Look yhere, yo' obtuscious ol' fool. W'at yo' 'sociatin' wid a low-down possum as takes t' mus'rats' holes? W'at I done tol' yo' 'bout dis? Go 'long home! Go 'long en talk de moon up a tree." And as Uncle Jethro dropped upon his knees by the hole, Calamity slunk away through the brush.

I held up a bunch of freshly washed grass-roots.

"Uncle Jeth, this must be a new species of possum; he eats roots like any muskrat," I said innocently.

It was good for Calamity not to be there just then. Uncle Jethro loved her as he would have loved a child; but he vowed, as he picked up his gun: "De nex' time dat no-'count dog don't talk possum, yo' 'll see de buzzard 'bout, yo' will."

We tramped up the hill and on through the woods to some open fields. Here on the fence we waited for Calamity's signal.

"Here on the fence we waited."

"Did you say you wouldn't put any price on Calamity, Uncle Jethro?" I asked as we waited.

There was no reply.

"Going to roast this possum, aren't you?"

Silence.

"Am I going to have an invite, Uncle Jeth?"

"Hush up, boy! How we gwine yhear w'at dat dog say?"

"Calamity? Why, didn't you tell her to go home?"

The woods were still. A little screech-owl off in the trees was the only creature that disturbed the brittle silence. The owl was flitting from perch to perch, coming nearer us.

"W'at dat owl say?" whispered Uncle Jethro, starting. "'No possum'? 'no possum'? 'no possum'? Come 'long home, boy," he commanded aloud. "W'en ol' Miss Owl say 'No possum,' C'lamity herself ain't gwine git none." And sliding to the ground, he trudged off for home.

We were back again in the corn-field with an empty sack. The moon was riding high near eleven o'clock. From behind a shock Calamity joined us, falling in at the rear like one of our shadows. Of course Uncle Jethro did not see her. He was proud of the rheumatic old hound, and a night like this nipped his pride as the first frosts nip the lima-beans.

It was the owl's evil doing, he argued all the way home. "W'en ol' Miss Owl say 'Stay in'—no use:

'Simmons sweet, 'simmons red,
Ain't no possum leave his bed.

All de dogs in Mount Zion won't fin' no possum out dis night."

No; it was not Calamity's fault: it was Miss Owl's.

We were turning in back of the barn when there came a sudden yelp, sharp as a pistol-shot, and Calamity darted through Uncle Jethro's legs, almost upsetting him, making straight for the yard. At the same moment I caught sight of a large creature hurrying with a wabbly, uncertain gait along the ridge-pole of the hen-house.

It was a possum—as big as a coon. He was already half-way down the side of the coop; but Calamity was below him, howling like mad.

Uncle Jethro nearly unjointed himself. Before the frightened animal had time to faint, the triumphant hunter was jouncing him up and down inside the sack, and promising the bones and baking-pan to Calamity.

"W'at dat yo' mumblin', boy? Gwine ax yo'self a' invite? G' 'way; g' 'way; yo' don' lak possum. W'at dat yo' sayin' 'g'in' C'lamity? Yo' 's needin' sleep, chil', yo' is. Ain't I done tol' yo' dat dog gwine talk possum by-um-bit? W'at dem 'flections 'g'in' ol' Miss Owl? Boosh, boy! Dat all fool-talk, w'at ol' Miss Owl say. We done been layin' low jis s'prise yo', me an' C'lamity an' ol' Miss Owl has." And as he placed the chopping-block upon the barrel to keep the possum safe till morning, he began again:

"Coon he up a gum-tree,
Possum in de holla;
Coon he roll hi'self in ha'r,
Possum roll in talla.

"Lawd, I wunda, who kilt John Henry,
In de la-ane, in de lane."

The next morning Uncle Jethro went to get his possum. But the possum was gone. The chopping-block lay on the woodshed floor, the cover of the barrel was pushed aside, and the only trace of the animal was a bundle of seed-corn that he had pulled from a nail overhead and left half eaten on the floor. He had stopped for a meal on his way out.

Uncle Jethro, with Uncle Remus, gives Br'er Rabbit the wreath for craft; but in truth the laurel belongs to Br'er Possum. He is an eternal surprise. Either he is the most stupidly wise animal of the woods, or the most wisely stupid. He is a puzzle. Apparently his one unburied talent is heaviness. Joe, the fat boy, was not a sounder nor more constant sleeper, nor was his mental machinery any slower than the possum's. The little beast is utterly wanting in swiftness and weapons, his sole hope and defense being luck and indifference. To luck and indifference he trusts life and happiness. And who can say he does not prosper—that he does not roll in fat?

"He had stopped for a meal on his way out."

I suppose there once were deer and otter in the stretches of wild woodland along the Cohansey; but a fox is rare here now, and the coon by no means abundant. Indeed, the rabbit, even with the help of the game laws, has a hard time. Yet the possum, unprotected by law, slow of foot, slower of thought, and worth fifty cents in any market, still flourishes along the creek.

A greyhound must push to overtake a rabbit, but I have run down a possum with my winter boots on in less than half-way across a clean ten-acre field. He ambles along like a bear, swinging his head from side to side to see how fast you are gaining upon him. When you come up and touch him with your foot, over he goes, grunting and grinning with his mouth wide open. If you nudge him further, or bark, he will die—but he will come to life again when you turn your back.

Some scientifically minded people believe that this "playing possum" follows as a physiological effect of fear;

that is, they say the pulse slackens, the temperature falls, and, as a result, instead of a pretense of being dead, the poor possum actually swoons.

A physiologist in his laboratory, with stethoscope, sphygmoscope, thermometer, and pneumonometer, may be able to scare a possum into a fit—I should say he might; but I doubt if a plain naturalist in the woods, with only his two eyes, a jack-knife, and a bit of string, was ever able to make the possum do more than "play possum."

We will try to believe with the laboratory investigator that the possum does genuinely faint. However, it will not be rank heresy to run over this leaf from my diary. It records a faithful diagnosis of the case as I observed it. The statement does not claim to be scientific; I mean that there were no 'meters or 'scopes of any kind used. It is simply what I saw and have seen a hundred times. Here is the entry: