Woodland Tales

Written by
Ernest Thompson Seton

Edited & Published by

WOODLAND TALES

By

Ernest Thompson Seton

AUTHOR OF "WILD ANIMALS AT HOME," "WILD ANIMALS I HAVE KNOWN," "TWO LITTLE SAVAGES,"

WITH 100 ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

Contents

PREFACE

To the Guide

THESE Mother Carey Tales were written for children of all ages, who have not outgrown the delight of a fairy tale. It might almost be said that they were written chiefly for myself, for I not only have had the pleasure of telling them to the little ones, and enjoying their quick response, but have also had the greater pleasure of thinking them and setting them down.

As I write, I look from a loved window, across a landscape that I love, and my eye rests on a tall beautiful pine planted with my own hands years ago. It is a mass of green fringes, with gem-like tips of buds and baby cones, beautiful, exquisitely beautiful, whether seen from afar as a green spire, or viewed close at hand as jewellery. It is beautiful, fragile and—unimportant, as the world sees it; yet through its wind-waved mass one can get little glimpses of the thing that backs it all, the storm-defying shaft, the enduring rigid living growing trunk of massive timber that gives it the nobility of strength, and adds value to the rest; sometimes it must be sought for, but it always surely is there, ennobling the lesser pretty things.

I hope this tree is a fair image of my fairy tale. I know my child friends will love the piney fringes and the jewel cones, and they can find the unyielding timber in its underlying truth, if they seek for it. If they do not, it is enough to have them love the cones.

All are not fairy tales. Other chapters set forth things to see, thing to do, things to go to, things to know, things to remember. These, sanctified in the blue outdoors, spell "Woodcraft," the one pursuit of man that never dies or palls, the thing that in the

bygone ages gifted him and yet again will gift him with the seeing eye, the thinking hand, the body that fails not, the winged soul that stores up precious memories.

It is hoped that these chapters will show how easy and alluring, and how good a thing it is.

While they are meant for the children six years of age and upward, it is assumed that Mother (or Father) will be active as a leader; therefore it is addressed, first of all, to the parent, whom throughout we shall call the "Guide."

Some of these stories date back to my school days, although the first actually published was "Why the Chicadee Goes Crazy Twice a Year." This in its original form appeared in "Our Animal Friends" in September, 1893. Others, as "The Fingerboard Goldenrod," "Brook-Brownie," "The Bluebird," "Diablo and the Dogwood," "How the Violets Came," "How the Indian Summer Came," "The Twin Stars," "The Fairy Lamps," "How the Littlest Owl Came," "How the Shad Came," appeared in slightly different form in the *Century Magazine*, 1903 and 1904.

My thanks are due to the Authorities of the American Museum who have helped me with specimens and criticism; to the published writings of Dr. W. J. Holland and Clarence M. Weed for guidance in insect problems; to Britton and Browne's "Illustrated Flora, U. S. and Canada"; and to the Nature Library of Doubleday,

Page & Co., for light in matters botanic; to Mrs. Daphne Drake and Mrs. Mary S. Dominick for many valuable suggestions, and to my wife, Grace Gallatin Seton, for help with the purely literary work.

Also to Oliver P. Medsger, the naturalist of Lincoln High School, Jersey City, N. J., for reading with critical care those parts of the manuscript that deal with flowers and insects, as well as for the ballad of the Ox-eye, the story of its coming to America, and the photograph of the Mecha-meck.

INTRODUCTION

Mother Carey

ALL-MOTHER! Mater Cara! I have never seen you, but I hungered so to know you that I understood it when you came, unseen, and silently whispered to me that first time in the long ago.

I cannot tell the children what you look like, Mother Carey, for mortal eye hath never rested on your face; and yet I can offer them a portrait, O strong Angel of the Wild Things, neither young nor old—Oh! loving One that neither trembles nor relents!

A mink he was, a young mink and foolish. One of a happy brood, who were seeing the world with their mother—a first glimpse of it. She was anxious and leading, happy and proud, warning, sniffing, inviting, loving, yet angersome at trivial disobedience, doling out her wisdom in nips and examples and shrill warnings that all heeded; except this one, the clever fool of the family, the self-satisfied smart one. He would not be warned, the thing smelt so good. He plunged ahead. Mother was a fool; he was wiser than Mother. Here was a merry feasting for him. Then *clank!* The iron jaws of a trap sprang from the hiding grass, and clutched on his soft young paws. Screams of pain, futile strainings, writhings, ragings and moanings; bloody jaws on the trap; the mother distraught with grief, eager to take all the punishment herself, but helpless and stunned, unable to leave; the little brothers, aghast at this first touch of passion, this

glimpse of reality, skurrying, scared, going and coming, mesmerized, with glowing eyes and bristling shoulder-fur. And the mother, mad with sorrow, goaded by the screaming, green-eyed, vacant-minded, despairing—till a new spirit entered into her, the spirit of Cara the All-mother, Mother Carey the Beneficent, Mother Carey the wise Straightwalker. Then the mother mink, inspired, sprang on her suffering baby. With all the power of her limbs she sprang and clutched; with all the power of her love she craunched. His screams were ended; his days in the land were ended. He had not heeded her wisdom; the family fool was finished. The race was better, better for the suffering fool mink; better for the suffering mother mink.

The spirit left her; left her limp and broken-hearted. And away on the wind went riding, grimly riding her empire.

Four swift steeds for riding, has she, the White Wind, the West Wind, the Wet Wind and the Waking Wind. But mostly she rides the swift West Wind.

She is strong, is Mother Carey, strong, wise, inexorable, calm and direct as an iceberg. And beneficent; but she loves the strong ones best. She ever favours the wise ones. She is building, ceaselessly building. The good brick she sets in a place of honour, and the poor one she grinds into gravel for the workmen to walk on.

She loves you, but far less than she does your race. It may be that you are not wise, and if it seem best, she will drop a tear and crush you into the dust.

Three others there be of power, like Mother Carey: Maka Ina who is Mother Earth; El Sol, the Sun in the Sky, and Diablo the

Evil Spirit of Disease and Dread. But over all is the One Great Spirit, the Beginning and the Ruler with these and many messengers, who do His bidding. But mostly you shall hear of Mother Carey.

It is long ago since first I heard her whisper, and though I hear better now than then, I have no happier memory than that earliest message.

"Ho Wayseeker," she called, "I have watched your struggle to find the pathway, and I know that you will love the things that belong to it. Therefore, I will show you the trail, and this is what it will lead you to: a thousand pleasant friendships that will offer honey in little thorny cups, the twelve secrets of the underbrush, the health of sunlight, suppleness of body, the unafraidness of the night, the delight of deep water, the goodness of rain, the story of the trail, the knowledge of the swamp, the aloofness of knowing,—yea, more, a crown and a little kingdom measured to your power and all your own.

"But there is a condition attached. When you have found a trail you are thereby ordained a guide. When you have won a kingdom you must give it to the world or lose it. For those who have got power must with it bear responsibility; evade the one, the other fades away."

This is the pledge I am trying to keep; I want to be your Guide. I am offering you my little kingdom.

THINGS TO SEE IN SPRINGTIME

Blue-eyes the Snow Child

TALE 1

Blue-eyes, the Snow Child, or The Story of Hepatica

HAVE you ever seen El Sol, the Chief of the Wonder-workers, brother to Mother Carey? Yes, you have, though probably you did not know it; at least you could not look him in the face. Well, I am going to tell you about him, and tell of a sad thing that happened to him, and to some one whom he loved more than words can tell.

Tall and of blazing beauty was El Sol, the King of the Wonder-workers; his hair was like shining gold, and stood straight out a yard from his head, as he marched over the hilltops.

Everyone loved him, except a very few, who once had dared to fight him, and had been worsted. Everyone else loved him, and he liked everybody, without really loving them. Until one day, as he walked in his garden, he suddenly came on a beautiful white maiden, whom he had never seen before. Her eyes were of the loveliest blue, her hair was so soft that it floated on the air, and her robe was white, covered with ferns done in white lace.

He fell deeply in love with her at once, but she waved a warning hand, when he tried to come near.

"Who are you, oh radiant princess? I love you even before I hear you speak."

"I am Snowroba, the daughter of the great King Jackfrost," she said.

"I love you as I never loved any one. Will you marry me? I am the King of the Wonder-workers. I will make you the Queen."

"No," said she, "I cannot marry you, for it is written that if one of my people marry one of your people, she will sink down and die in a day."

Then El Sol was very sad. But he said, "May I not see you again?"

"Yes," she answered, "I will meet you here in the morning, for it is pleasant to look on your beauty," and her voice tinkled sweetly.

So she met him in the morning, and again on the third morning. He loved her madly now, and though she held back, he seized her in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

Then her arms fell weakly to her sides, and her eyes half closed as she said: "I know now that the old writing spake truth. I love you, I love you, my love; but you have killed me."

And she sank down, a limp white form, on the leafy ground.

El Sol was wild with grief. He tried to revive her, to bring her back.

She only whispered, "Good-bye, my love. I am going fast. You will see me no more, but come to this place a year from now. It may be Maka Ina will be kind, and will send you a little one that is yours and mine."

Her white body melted away, as he bent over it and wept.

He came back every morning, but saw Snowroba no more. One year from that day, as he lingered sadly over the sacred spot, he saw a new and wonderful flower come forth. Its bloom was of the

tenderest violet blue, and it was full of expression. As he gazed, he saw those eyes again; the scald ing tears dropped from his eyes, and burned its leaves into a blotched and brownish colour. He remembered, and understood her promise now. He knew that this was their blue-eyed little one.

In the early springtime we can see it. Three sunny days on the edge of the snowdrift will bring it forth. The hunterfolk who find it, say that it is just one of the spring flowers, out earlier than any other, and is called Liverleaf, but we Woodcrafters know better. We know it is Hepatica, the child of El Sol and Snowroba.

TALE 2

The Story of the White Dawnsinger

or

How the Bloodroot Came

HAVE you noticed that there are no snow-white birds in our woods during summer? Mother Carey long ago made it a rule that all snow-white landbirds should go north, when the snow was gone in the springtime. And they were quite obedient; they flew, keeping just on the south edge of the melting snow.

But it so happened that one of the sweetest singers of all—the snow-white Dawnsinger with the golden bill and the ruby legs—was flying northward with his bride, when she sprained her wing so she could not fly at all.

There was no other help for it; they must stay in that thicket till her wing grew strong again.

The other white birds flew on, but the Dawnsinger waited. He sang his merriest songs to cheer her. He brought her food: and he warned her when enemies were near.

A moon had come and gone. Now she was well again, and strong on the wing. He was anxious to go on to their northern home. A second warning came from Mother Carey, "White birds go north."

But the sunny woodside had become very pleasant, food was abundant, and the little white lady said, "Why should we go north when it is so much nicer right here?"

The Dawnsinger felt the same way, and the next time the warning came, "White birds go north," he would not listen at all, and they settled down to a joyful life in the woods.

They did not know anything about the Yellow-eyed Whizz. They never would have known, had they gone north at their right time. But the Yellow-eyed Whizz was coming. It came, and It always goes straight after white things in the woods, for brown things It cannot see.

Dawnsinger was high on a tree, praising the light in a glorious song, that he had just made up, when It singled him out by his whiteness, and pierced him through.

He fell fluttering and dying; and as she flew to him, with a cry of distress, the Yellow-eyed wicked Whizz struck her down by his side.

The Chewinks scratched leaves over the two white bodies, and—I think—that Mother Carey dropped a tear on the place.

That was the end of the White Dawnsinger and his bride. Yet every year, at that same place, as the snow goes, the brown leaves move and part, and up from beneath there comes a beautiful white flower.

The Story of the White Dawnsinger

Its bloom threads are yellow like the Dawnsinger's beak, and its stem is ruby like his legs; all the rest is snow-white like his plumes. It rises, looks about, faces the sun, and sings a little odour-song, a little aroma-lay. If you look deep down into the open soul of the Dawnsinger you will see the little golden thoughts he sings about. Then up from the same grave comes another, just the same, but a little smaller, and for a while they stand up side by side, and praise the light. But the Wither-bloom that haunts the flowers as the Yellow-eyed Whizz does the birds, soon finds them out; their song is ended, their white plumes are scattered, and they shrink back into their grave, to be side by side again.

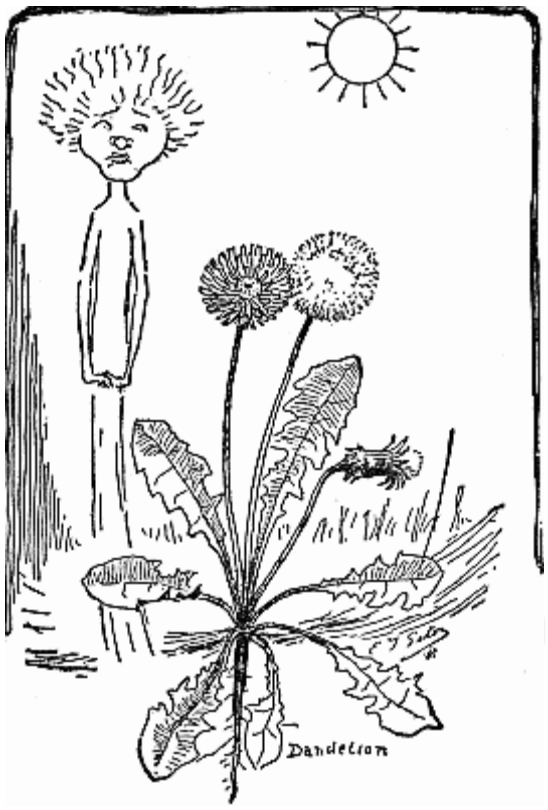
You can find their little bodies, but deal gently with them, for they are wounded; you may make them bleed again.

And when you hear the Chewinks scratching in the underbrush, remember they are putting leaves on the grave of the White Dawnsinger.

Surely you have guessed the secret; the flower is the Bloodroot, and the Whizz is the Sharp-shinned Hawk.

TALE 3

The Prairie-girl with Yellow Hair



The Prairie-girl

TALL and fair was the Prairie-girl. She was not very pretty, but her form was slender and graceful, and her head was covered with a mass of golden hair that made you see her from afar off. It has been whispered that she was deeply in love with El Sol, for wherever he went, she turned her head to look at him; and when she could not see him, she drooped and languished. But he never seemed to notice her. As she grew older her golden head turned white, and at last the swish of Mother Carey's horses carried away all her white hair, and left her old, bald, and ugly. So she pined and died, and Maka Ina buried her poor little body under the

grass. But some say it was Father Time that blew her hair away, and that El Sol had the body cremated.

If you look on the lawns or the fields in springtime, you are sure to find the Prairie-girl. The Guide can show her to you, if you do not know her. But he will call her "Common Dandelion," and I do not know of any flower that has so many things for us children to remember.

If you are learning French, you will see how it got the name "Dandelion"; it used to be written *dent de lion;* that is, "tooth of a lion"; because its leaves are edged with sharp teeth, like a lion's jaw.

Its golden-yellow flower is said to open when the Swallows arrive from the south, that is, in April; and though it blooms chiefly in springtime it keeps on blooming till long after the Swallows fly away. It certainly thrives as long as the sun shines on it, and fades when the cold dark season comes. But I have seen it out in November; that is, the Dandelion blooms for fully nine months. I do not know of any other flower that does; most of them are done in one month.

When the yellow flower is over, its place is taken by a beautiful globe of soft, white plumes; this is why the story says its golden hair turns white with age. The children believe that this woolly head will tell you the time of day. You hold it up, then pretend you are Father Time blowing her hair away, blow a sharp puff with your breath, then another and another, till the plumes are blown

away. If it takes four blows, they say it means four o'clock; but it is not a very true clock.

Some children make a wish, then blow once and say, "this year"; the second time, "next year"; the third time, "some time"; the fourth time, "never." Then begin all over, and keep on as long as any plumes are left, to tell when the wish is coming true.

Now pull the head off the stalk. You will find it leaves a long, open tube that sounds like a trumpet when you blow through it from the small end. If you force your finger into the big end, and keep pushing, you split the tube into two or three pieces; put these in your mouth and they will curl up like ringlets. Some children hang these on their ears for ornaments. Take a stalk for each year of your age; pull its head off. Then you will find that the top end will go into the bottom and make a ring. Use all the stalks you have gathered, to make a chain; now throw this chain into a low tree. If it sticks the first time, your wish will come true this year. Each time it falls puts your wish a year farther away.

This may not be true; but it is a game to play. Some big girls use it, to find out when they are going to be married.

Now dig up the whole plant, root and all—the gardener will be much obliged to you for doing so—take it home, and ask the Guide to make the leaves into a salad; you will find it good to eat; most Europeans eat it regularly, either raw, or boiled as greens.

Last of all, ask the Guide to roast the root, till it is brown and crisp, then grind it in a coffee-mill, and use it to make coffee. Some people think it better than real coffee; at any rate, the doctors say it is much healthier, for it is nourishing food, and does not do one any harm at all. But perhaps you will not like it. You

may think all the time you are eating the body of the poor little Prairie-girl, who died of love.

TALE 4

The Cat's-eye Toad, a Child of Maka Ina

WHEN you were little, O Guide! didn't you delight in the tales of gnomes or *nibelungen*, those strange underground creatures that lived hidden from the light, and busied themselves with precious stones and metals? How unwillingly we gave up those glad beliefs, as we inevitably grew old and lost our fairyland eyes!

The Cat's eye Toad (life size)

But you must not give up all your joyful creeds; you must keep on believing in the weird underground dwarfs; for I am going to tell you of one that the cold calculating Professor Science has at

last accepted, and that lives in your own back-yard. That is, the Cat's-eye Toad or Spadefoot. It is much like a common Toad, but a little smoother, the digging spade on its hind foot is bigger and its eye, its beautiful gold-stone eye, has the pupil up and down like that of a Cat, instead of level as in its cousin, the warty Hoptoad.

But the wonderful thing about the Cat's-eye is that it spends most of its life underground, coming out in the early springtime for a few days of the most riotous honeymoon in some small pond, where it sings a loud chorus till mated, lays a few hundred eggs, to be hatched into tadpoles, then backs itself into its underground world by means of the boring machine on its hind feet, to be heard no more that season, and seen no more, unless some one chance to dig it out, just as Hans in the story dug out the mole-gnome.

In the fairy tale the Shepherd-boy was rewarded by the gnome for digging him out; for he received both gold and precious stones. But our gnome does not wish us to dig him out; nevertheless, if you do, you will be rewarded with a golden fact, and a glimpse of two wonderful jewel eyes.

According to one who knows him well, the Cat's-eye buries itself far underground, and sleeps days, or weeks, *perhaps years* at a time. Once a grave-digger found a Cat's-eye three feet two inches down in the earth with no way out.

How and when are we then to find this strange creature? Only during his noisy honeymoon in April.

Do you know the soft trilling whistle of the common Hoptoad in May? The call of the Cat's-eye is of the same style but very loud and harsh, and heard early in April. If on some warm night in springtime, you hear a song which sounds like a cross between a

Toad's whistle and a Chicken's squawk, get a searchlight and go quietly to the place. The light will help you to come close, and in the water up to his chin, you will see him, his gold-stone eyes blazing like jewels and his throat blown out like a mammoth pearl, each time he utters the "squawk" which he intends for a song. And it is a song, and a very successful one, for a visit to the same pond a week or two later, will show you—not the Cat's-eye or his mate, they have gone a-tunnelling—but a swarm of little black pin-like tadpole Cat's-eyes, born and bred in the glorious sunlight but doomed and ready, if they live, to follow in their parents' tracks far underground. Sure proof that the song did win a mate, and was crowned with the success for which all woodland, and marshland song first was made.

End of Book Preview

We hope you enjoyed reading this book. This is only preview of the book with limited chapters available for reading. To download complete book, become a registered member of PDFBooksWorld and access our eBooks library with unlimited download of high quality PDF eBooks. Do share & link to our website through social networks, blogs and websites.