

RED BEN
the fox of Oak Ridge

Real Animal Stories

by Joseph Wharton Lippincott

Bun: A Wild Rabbit

Gray Squirrel

Striped Coat: The Skunk

Persimmon Jim: the 'Possum

Available from *No Fear Schoolhouse Press*
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Joseph Wharton Lippincott



with illustrations by the author

No Fear Schoolhouse Press 2022

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This edition, first published by No Fear Schoolhouse Press in 2022, is a complete and unabridged reprint of the edition first published by Penn Publishing Company in 1919.

ISBN: 9798447798833

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To
a true lover of nature
—my father.



“Blackie instantly stopped”

INTRODUCTION

THERE IS reason for the fox being termed the shrewdest of wild creatures. Unlike the deer and other vegetarians whose dinners often grow under their noses, he rarely gets a meal without outwitting other animals. He lacks the climbing ability of the opossum, the sharp claws of the lynx, the protective odor of the skunk, the diving powers of the otter—he is indeed just a little wild dog, a wonderfully bright, hardworking little animal whose cunning alone can lead him from his enemies and keep away the pangs of hunger.

He has been so persistently hunted by man that he is almost untameable; but as far as he dares to be, he is friendly under ordinary circumstances and fond of wandering around man's dwellings. Chicken stealing is charged against him; but after all he holds the same position in the animal world that the wise old crow does among the birds—his

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good deeds and his crimes nearly balance. In "Bun, a Wild Rabbit," the fox appeared as one of many woods creatures encountered by that doughty cottontail; but, to do him justice, a separate volume was required.

Foxes are much more plentiful than generally supposed. It is almost safe to say that wherever there are woods there are foxes, yet so wonderfully clever are they that few are seen. Whoever can distinguish their tracks from those of other animals is usually not disposed to tell of the discovery of fox "sign." The friend of the fox fears the fox's enemy; the trapper fears a competitor; and so the wily creature weaves his trail endlessly about the country side, unwatched except by the very few "who know."

Imagination must play a part in making the story of a wild animal complete, especially that of such an intensely shy and crafty creature as a fox; but nothing is included here which does not fall

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within the actual powers of the swift and wily red fox of today. Indeed there are numbers of them very much like Red Ben. Parts of his story are written in the snows of many woodlands besides Oak Ridge, and adventures such as his are still happening in the quiet of moonlit nights.

As fast as man thinks out new methods of destruction, the fox finds fresh tricks through which to escape. And may he ever escape! For when the edges of our old fields no longer bear the imprint of his tireless feet, when the woodlands that delighted his wild little heart have been usurped by the tame dog and the tame cat, then indeed will have departed half their charm, half the thrill of winter walks.

J.W.L., BETHAYRES, PA.

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RED BEN, The Fox of Oak Ridge

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE RED FOX

IN the state of New Jersey there are still thousands of acres of low lying woodlands, called pine barrens, where man has done little except chop down a few trees. Slowly but surely, however, the farmers are each year pushing their clearings deeper into this section, gradually overcoming the last barriers which Nature sets up to protect her own.

Ben Slown was one of these farmers. When the forest had been cut, he built a square house and a square barn.

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He planted straight-rowed orchards, he fenced in square, flat fields. He succeeded so well in stamping out all the natural loveliness that other practical farmers came there to start practical farms like his.

Soon there was a village; but Ben Slown's square fields and the edge of the wild, interesting Pine Barrens were never separated, because no plow could conquer Oak Ridge and Cranberry Swamp.

The Ridge was a long mound covered with laurel, pines and white oaks. Cranberry Swamp, on the other hand, was low, wet ground which bore a nearly impenetrable mass of greenery, largely made up of tall cedars, holly bushes and cat briars. Through the swamp flowed a little creek in whose

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deep eddies green waterweeds swung with the current, giving glimpses now and then of turtles and slender, watchful pike.

When Ben Slown first planned to come to the Pine Barrens, his friends gloomily shook their heads.

“The foxes and other varmints will drive you out,” they warned. “You won’t be able to raise a chicken. The coons and crows will eat your corn. The woodchucks will destroy your vegetables. There are critters enough in the Barrens to keep you from being lonely, but they won’t be the kind of neighbors you want.”

“You just watch me,” boasted the farmer, “I’ll fix the varmints.”

He was no sooner settled in his new place than he began to put traps and

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poison around the cleared ground. All the little creatures that still lived there, and the others which came out of the woods at night to marvel at the strange new things to be seen—mice, snakes, birds, rabbits, mink, muskrats, woodchucks, coons, possums, skunks, foxes, deer and a lot of others—all suffered the same ill-treatment. But most of all he feared and hated the foxes, for they were clever enough to give him a little trouble. One after another was destroyed, however, and the farmer was having everything his own way when all at once there was a newcomer on the Ridge.

This was a red fox, a beautiful creature several inches taller than any of the gray foxes that lived in the Barrens. She found the farmer's poisoned baits,

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but instead of taking them she took a chicken, and that right before his face.

This was the first fowl a fox had taken from Ben Slown, and therefore he complained all the more loudly; so loudly indeed that the neighbors began to think the destruction of the red fox the only thing that interested him. Instead of asking about his health, whoever met him would say, "Well, Ben, have you caught that pesky fox yet?" or perhaps, "Say, Ben, that old red fox of yours is bothering me now. Why don't you keep her at home?"

Ben would mutter something, then pass on, his brows puckered from worrying over how to get rid of her. He might have worried far more had he known that in a burrow near the south end of Oak Ridge the red fox had four

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fine little fox pups.

Weeks went by, and still the fox and her tracks were seen occasionally, and still the farmer worried over that chicken he had lost. Then, one fine day, when the mice seemed scarce and the pups were very hungry, the fox dashed among the hens and took away another, this time a big white one.



FOX TRACK

The farm yard was in an uproar. Chickens cackled and rushed about, cows mooed, sheep-dogs barked, and Ben Slown, snatching his rifle from the rack, shot twice at the fox before she reached the woods, two fields away.

He was too much excited to aim well; the bullets went wild and the fox

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went on. The farmer, however, would not believe he had made a clean miss. Out to the fields he ran to see if a tuft of fur could be found on the ground.

He was walking around and around, growing more and more angry because where the fox had been he found only the white feathers of his pet hen, when out from the woods burst a neighboring farmer.

“Ben,” this man called, “Ben, get your shovel, quick! I’ve just found the red fox’s den!”