

BILLY POPGUN
BY MILO WINTER

ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR
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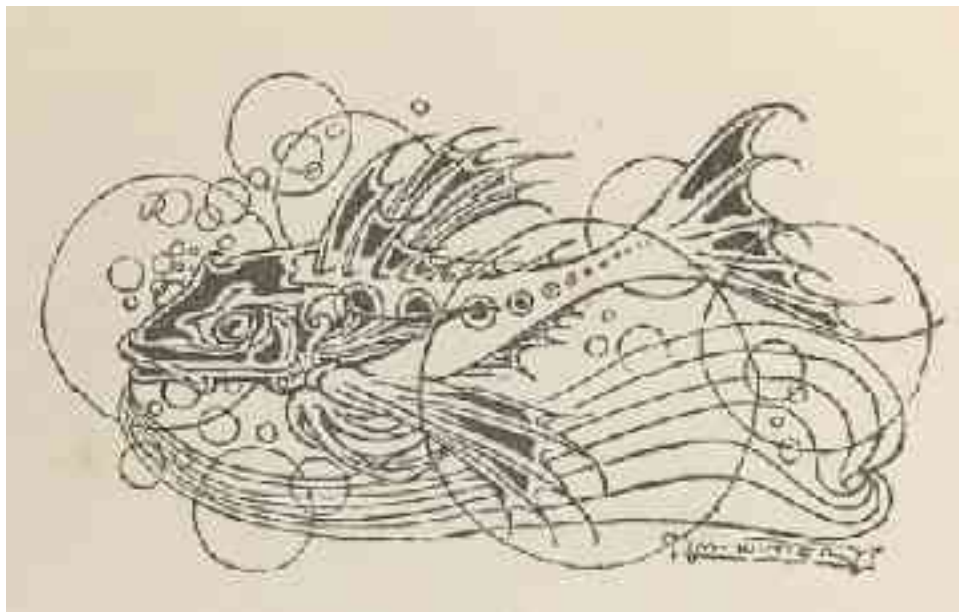
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To
My Father and Mother



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I

THE EDGE OF TOWN

What a very warm day it was. The big hot sun had shone and shone all day and the grape-arbor in Billy's back yard was about the coolest place he could find to Play in. But his kind mother had let him go right out of doors in some old pajamas, and that was almost fun enough to make one wish that very warm days would come very often.

The yard had many wonderful things in it, too. The grape-arbor with its cool green leaves and long twisty vines and roots was an ideal place to play Dragon in. If you stretched your imagination just a little bit you could see fierce and fiery Dragons in the scaly gnarled roots of the vines.

Billy had his popgun with him. He always had it with him. Even at night, he kept it beside his bed. He thought it wise. There was no knowing when it might be needed. Some one might need rescuing at any moment. On this hot day, he felt sure the Flies wanted to be rescued from the clutches of the witchy old Spiders. So he rescued as many as he could that were still buzzing for their freedom. Then he helped old Daddy Long Legs over the rough places; and watched the ant villages with all the busy little people hurrying about. Sometimes he opened new Hollyhocks for the Bees that came bumbling around for honey.

But Bees take pretty good care of themselves, and like to be let alone. Once he pinched a flower that had a Bee in it. Just once he did that. Bees look lazy, and come buzzing around with their legs dangling carelessly; but they do not like to be bothered by any one, not even little boys who want to help. They are apt to get very nervous, and make stinging remarks.

On this particular afternoon, while Billy was just aiming his popgun at a very fierce looking Root-Dragon that dug its great claws into the earth, a beautiful Butterfly came right in front of his popgun. He almost shot it! But he quickly put his gun down and

watched the beautiful fairy play and flash here and there in the sunlight, until it suddenly went over the fence.

Over the fence! This made him think. What new and wonderful things there must be in that large field outside. Through a small knot-hole he could see tall weeds and downy thistle-tops and fluffy milkweed pods and many strange new things.

Now Billy had a large imagination; he stretched it very often. This kept it from shrinking, which was a good thing; because you know, if you let your imagination shrink it soon gets too small for you – just like your underwear.

Billy stretched his imagination just a little bit more; and thought what great fun it would be to hunt out there in such a tangly jungle of things. He would just try it for a little while.

Oh! how that gate squeaked as he opened it. He crept quietly along the shadow of the fence and – there he was right out in the open field.

How many bushes there were with funny burrs on them that looked liked fuzzy caps on little old dried-up faces! And there were bugs, who seemed to be building something, or on their way to very important business.

Billy followed and followed a big Grasshopper in a

plain brown business suit, who looked very important, indeed. lie surely was on his way to some large board-meeting. Even this was a most conservative supposition, if one but saw the gravity of his countenance. But he hopped so fast and so far that Billy never found out where he went.

To begin with, Billy's house was right near the Edge of Town. And the Edge of Town, being a very hard thing to see, as Billy wandered about, he came nearer and nearer that Edge without knowing anything about it. Well! The first thing he knew, he slipped off! Yes! Right off the Edge of Town!

Down he went, skidding and sliding off the slippery grass at a terrific speed. The wind whistled in his ears and the bushes flashed past him so fast that one bush looked like a hedge. At times he hardly touched the ground, and just shot down like a cork popped from his own little gun.

"Oh", he thought, "if I go any faster I can't hang together at all, and then I can't pick myself up when I land."

But he didn't know where he was going, nor if he were going to land at all. It had happened so suddenly that he hardly knew whether it would be better to think about it now, or wait till it was all over.

What would Mother say if she knew what was happening to her little boy!

"What is there to be afraid of?" he thought. And then, strange as it may seem, he was not afraid any longer. He knew he ought to be, (Faster and faster he rushed on down.) At least he always used to be if anything strange happened to him. But the more he thought, the less strange it seemed. Yet how mysterious it all was! Surely, already he must have gone miles and miles, and he knew it must be mysterious, because he was going in such an unusual manner. After all, was it so unusual? Why not slide as well as—

What was that just ahead of him? *Bump!* Up he went, and turned clear over in the air, and landed right on the back of something furry. What could it be? He grabbed two long silky ears to keep from falling off. And he saw that he was bouncing along on a big Bunny, bigger than himself!

"My! How you scared me!" the Bunny said. "I thought you were some one else, at first, instead of just Billy."

So the Bunny knew him! He felt much relieved to think that that Bunny did know him, and that he wasn't traveling all alone.

"I suppose you are on your way to the Moss Forest, too," continued the Bunny. "There will be a big hunt today, you know, and we need every one to help. Hang on tight and we shall soon be there."

"What big hunt is there going to be?" asked Billy with eyes very wide.

"What! Why, haven't you heard about the Bumble Dragon hunt?" said Bunny in the greatest surprise. "Every year, you know, the Moss Forest people all get together and try to get rid of Old Bumble, who has roamed about in the Moss Forest for so long a time that nobody knows when he came. And he frightens the poor Moss people nearly out of their wits."

"Oh! Why I did n't know there was any Bumble Dragon!" Billy felt a little provoked at the Bunny for always saying "you know" about everything, when he didn't know at all; and, what was still worse, he felt just a trifle shivery about going any farther if they were nearing the Moss Forest.

"Never even heard of him? Well, where have you been all this time, and never even heard of the Bumble Dragon?" They bounced over a big gray boulder and the Bunny stopped short. "Get off," he whispered in a whiskery voice. "Here we are."



II

THE BUMBLE DRAGON

"Here we are *where?*" thought Billy. But he got off and felt for his popgun, which was still hung over his shoulder. "What funny trees these are, without any leaves and with such twisty branches! How close together they grow, and what a beautiful color they are! "These are not really trees, are they?" Billy had said this rather fast and loud because he was somewhat excited.

"*Shh-sh!*" said the Bunny "The hunt is already started and the hunters have scattered. This is the Moss Forest, you know. You must scatter, too, and help get rid of the Old Bumble Dragon. We have tried

for many years to get him, but have never even succeeded in frightening him.

"How can I scatter?" thought Billy. But he didn't ask, because he thought he ought to know, and it would never do to let the Bunny see that he didn't. So he took his popgun in both hands and was just about to ask what the Bumble Dragon looked like, when he found himself all alone. Yes! All alone in a Moss Forest with a Bumble Dragon in it! The Bunny had undoubtedly scattered, whatever that was, and left him all alone.

Billy began carefully to pick his way among the rocks and Moss Trunks, in hope of finding a hunter, or someone to tell him what to do. What did the Moss People look like anyway? Would he know one if he saw him?

There was something coming toward him through the forest. Could it be the Bumble Dragon? No. It was surely too small for that. As it came running along at a most remarkable gait, Billy saw that it was green and had six legs, and was even smaller than himself.

"Oh! Oh!" it said in a weak, trembly, pale-green voice when it saw Billy. "Haven't you seen Old Bumble? Well, he is right over there in that thick

bunch of Moss Trees. So you had better hurry up and scatter with me."

It seemed to know Billy, but the very intimate way in which it spoke was a little startling, to say the least. Then he knew this must be a Moss Man. And soon there were a lot of them, all running and scrambling over one another in their fright. But, strange to say, they were running in the wrong direction, according to Billy's view of the matter.

"Just wait a minute," said Billy, "you are going the wrong way if the Dragon is over there. That is not the way to hunt"

"But it isn't safe to get near Old Bumble," whispered the last little Moss Man, and he looked even greener and more scared than the others.

"Well, no wonder you never get him if that is the way you hunt." And Billy took his gun and started right in the direction of the bunch of Moss Trees that the Moss Men had pointed out to him.

He was really more frightened than he pretended to be. But he knew that one never overcomes anything by running away from it, and he wanted to show those poor shivering Moss Men how brave he was. As he neared the thicket of branches and undergrowth, his progress became slower and more dull

cult. It was hard to break through in some places, and once he almost slipped down between two big rocks. How very quiet it was! It was so very quiet that he wished something would make a noise.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by a heavy long drawn-out snore, followed by a mumbling rumble, as though some great beast were talking in its sleep. At first Billy could scarcely tell from what direction it came. The sound seemed to fill the air. But, as it died away, he knew that it was straight ahead of him.

He looked around to see if any of the little Moss Men were still with him, and just caught sight of that last little one scurrying away as fast as his six legs could carry him, — and that was pretty fast.

Then he stopped to think. "Why should I run such a risk for these little cowards? And, besides, they will never learn anything if they let other folks do everything for them."

But now his curiosity to have just a peep at the Bumble Dragon was so great that he forgot everything else, and slowly picked his way into the tangle.

All at once he came to an open place with huge rocks in it, and right in the middle lay an enormous Dragon.

He was sound asleep and snoring in a low rumble,

every now and then coming to a very loud snort, and mumbling afterward.

Billy took a good long look at him. His body looked like a gigantic lizard with a long snake's tail. His large webbed feet had claws like an eagle. But his head! Oh! What a funny head he had. It looked like a cow's head, only there were scales on it, and a lion's mane, and dog's ears. Billy was just beginning to wonder why he was called a Bumble Dragon when he saw the great transparent wings of a Bumble Bee folded over his back.

He smiled to himself at the idea of such a clumsy big thing as this being able to follow him in the Moss Forest, and he almost laughed when he thought of those little Moss Men all running in such a fright.

Billy was just putting the cork in his popgun to do away forever with the beast that frightened all the little shivering Moss People out of their wits, when the Dragon awoke, with a louder snort than ever. His eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw Billy there loading his gun. His mane bristled, and he looked nearly scared to death.

By the time Billy had his gun all loaded, the poor Dragon was trembling with fright and two great tears rolled down his cheeks. He had never, never been

hunted that way before in all his life, and his feelings were hurt.

"Oh! *What shall I DO!*" he bellowed.

Here was Billy's chance, and he said in as loud a voice as he could, "Promise that you will never come here again to scare the poor little Moss People out of their wits, and I will not shoot you. Now, hurry up and get home again!"

The next instant the great wings were spread, and, with a tremendous *whir-r-r-r* that must have been heard all over the Moss Forest, Old Bumble made a bee-line for his home. He had evidently not forgotten the way after all this long time.

As he disappeared over the Moss Tops, with his long tail trailing out behind, a little Moss Man poked his head around a tree-trunk. Then another and another and in a minute the open space that had just been occupied by the Dragon was full of rejoicing Moss People, all talking at once. There were even some Moss Ladies with little Moss Babies in their arms; and they all laughed and talked wildly about how they had at last scared Old Bumble away.

Billy was just about to explain to the nearest one that it was he alone who had scared him away. Then he thought how very boastful that would sound, and



His eyes nearly popped out of his head.

maybe the hunters didn't want it known what cowards they were.

Just at that moment, the first little Moss Man he had seen burst into the open and pointed to Billy as the hunter who had really sent Old Bumble away. The assembled throng at once broke into a regular hubbub and crowded around so close and asked so many questions that poor Billy was nearly smothered.

Then the Bunny appeared and tried to explain how he had really done it, because he was the one who brought Billy to the Moss Forest in the first place. But no one listened to him. So he appointed himself spokesman; he saw that this was the only way he could get any glory out of it at all. And when the crowd had quieted down a bit, he explained to Billy that the Moss People wanted to reward him. They wanted to take him to Old Moss Back, their King, who would give him anything he asked for.

Billy thought for a moment, and then said, very politely, "I should like very much to see His Majesty, Old Moss Back, but as for a reward, I really don't deserve any. It was so easy to scare Old Bumble away —"

At this all the hunters looked so offended that Billy stopped short; he thought it much better to take his reward and say nothing more about it.



III

OLD MOSS BACK

The gay procession led Billy to Old Moss Back's court, which was down in a beautiful bower of very tall ferns and nodding reeds and rushes.

There was Old Moss Back himself (who Billy thought looked uncommonly like a fat old turtle), spread peacefully out on a flat rock, smiling complacently at everything and everybody, as though he did not know what the cares and worries of a Kingdom were. His attendants, who wore very tight-fitting green livery, hopped about waiting on the ladies and doing all the many little things necessary to maintain a properly conducted court.

Upon the entrance of the crowd of Moss People, every one made way and Billy was led by two attendants and the Bunny up to the foot of the throne. Soon the whole court was packed jam-full of crowding Moss People, all jostling one another and craning their necks to get a look at Billy, and hear all that was said. The attendants, in spite of their tight-fitting green liveries, were doing some remarkable hopping indeed, getting chairs for Moss Ladies. A humming and buzzing filled the air.

By some chance (and a very mischievous little chance it was), a small Moss Baby must have been squeezed or poked or jostled by some one in the crowd. It began to cry very loudly. To hide her embarrassment, the mother shook the poor little thing, but instead of making it quiet all the noise must have been shaken out of it at once. Such a howling you never heard. It was no time at all before every Baby and Moss Youngster under two in the entire throng was screaming at the very top of its voice.

How under the sun could anything be said or done in all this racket? But Old Moss Back, strange to say, didn't seem to mind it at all; he smiled down at every one as if the howling were done for his special pleasure, in acknowledgment of his great

kindness to all the little Moss People in his kingdom.

After much playing with seed-pod rattles and a great deal of "Shhing," the court became quiet again.

"Your Majesty," said the Bunny, "allow me to present my dear friend Billy, who has, as your royal Crustiness has undoubtedly heard, freed us from the Bumble Dragon, - and whom -"

"Ho-Ho!" interrupted Old Moss Back, "I know him well. We played Duck-On-The-Rock together. I was te Duck, while Billy threw the Rocks. Yes! Yes! We have had great times together! Ho! Ho!" He laughed so hard he nearly tumbled off the throne.

Billy vaguely remembered trying to hit a Turtle once, ad he was a little uneasy. But Old Moss Back seemed to take it as a very good joke, and he was glad of that.

"Well, well, well, we must surely do something for you this time. Now, let me see, let me see. Ho! Ho! How would you like to go down ionto my Treasure Rooms and just help yourself to anything you want? Hum! Hum! Ha! Ha!"

"Oh, I should be very much obliged to you," Billy answered politely. He thought Old Moss

Back was just a little silly, and not very dignified, to laugh so much when nothing funny had happened. It was probably just his good nature.

To Billy's surprise, he came waddling down off his rocky throne and instructed Billy to climb on his back. He was going to take him down to the treasure himself I

With the assistance of many little Moss People, Billy finally managed to get on the shell of Old Moss Back, and they started off.

As they left the court, all the little Moss People cheered and cheered, and made so much noise that even the Babies, who had all started to howl again, could scarcely be heard. They were soon out of sight, however, and at last even the cheering was far in the distance, then lost altogether. Down they went over rocks and shells. When Billy saw the shells, he inquired if the ocean were near.

"Ho! Ho! I should think it was. Well, well, well. I should think so," repeated Old Moss Back. "My gracious me, the treasure-rooms are at the very bottom of it! Ho! Ho!"

Then Billy heard the surf pounding on the beach.

"But I can't go down into the ocean," he said; "please stop and let me off!"

"Oh, tut-tut-tut! Yes, you can; yes, you can.

While you are with me, you will never know the difference, never know it.

Billy hung on for dear life, as they went swirling on down into the deep ocean. He hardly noticed the water at all, but felt just about the same as you or I should while sitting in a warm, dry room.

Old Moss Back swam with great rapidity, gliding through the water with long, sweeping strokes. The seaweed floated in beautiful, wavy lines and the wonderful coral trees spread their pink and white branches. But the Fish! Such strange faces the Fish had. Great bulging eyes and open mouths. Some were open almost wide enough to swallow Billy in one mouthful. They all knew Old Moss Back, so they didn't try to swallow anything but their curiosity, which must have stuck in the throats of some, for they came nosing very close.

Suddenly, a fantastic little grotto opened before them. Such beautiful shells and seaweed as decorated the place, Billy had never seen before in all his life. This was one of Old Moss Back's treasure-rooms.



Old Housack swam with great rapidity.



IV

UNDER THE SEA

Billy was so bewildered by his recent swift journey down into the sea, and the weird beauty of the place, that he did not move until Old Moss Back told him to slide down off his shell. How very light he was on his feet! He could almost float without touching anything. Just an occasional push on the soft moss and the weeds would send him drifting about in a most surprising manner. What little uneasiness he may have had at first soon left him, and, by seizing a weed now and then and pulling hard, Billy rushed through the water just like a fish. He went dodging in and out among the great shells and coral trees until he had quite lost sight of the Turtle, who had not yet discovered his absence.

Part of the time he floated on his back; and it was while he was in this position, looking up through the green water at the strange creatures swimming above, that a great shadow slowly came over him; the shadow of some sea monster with a huge body and many long, waving, snaky arms. It was descending right on top of Billy with all its arms outspread, as though it were bent on entwining him with every one of them. Escape seemed impossible; for the creature followed when he tried to slip away. Where was Old Moss Back? lie had forgotten all about him while enjoying the new sensations of the deep sea. It would do no good to call out, for of course one's voice does not carry very far under water. Suppose the Turtle had forgotten him! What an awful thought I Yet very young people often forget their elders, until they are in trouble. One of the long snaky tentacles of the monster was just reaching down after Billy to carry him up and away to no one knows where. Oh I if he could only shoot him with his popgun. But he could not shoot it under water; for the moment, his dear gun was useless. He seized it anyway, and with a frantic struggle managed to point it full at a huge eye that was fixed upon him. Instantly, and with surprising alacrity for so ponderous a creature, all the

arms let go at once and the great body moved rapidly upwards and faded into the green water above. Then another form came charging through the weeds just in time to see the last of the disappearing monster. It was Old Moss Back.

"Well, you surely had a narrow escape that time, my boy! Do you realize that you were in the very clutches of one of the most horrible of the sea monsters? That was the old miser Octopus, who reaches out in all directions for his prey, clamps his suckers upon them and draws the life out of their bodies. You are very fortunate to have escaped." Billy shuddered. "But I have something much more beautiful to look at and to think about than the Octopus. You have nearly forgotten that we came down here to see my treasure-rooms. I have a very beautiful one hidden behind that sea fan."

At that moment a wild-eyed Catfish scurried between Billy's legs, nearly upsetting him with its tail, and darted past with a Dogfish in full pursuit. A Sea Horse that was peacefully standing under a spreading coral tree was so frightened by the chase that it reared up several times and dashed away out of sight. This was all so natural that it made Billy feel quite at home. The poor Cats have been chased by Dogs

for so long a time that now they expect it, and even appear offended if they are not given that attention.

Now for the treasure-room! Billy found himself peering into it with his eyes very wide. Such a collection of shells and sea plants as was displayed he had never even dreamed of. A heap of great pearls lay in an open shell; Old Moss Back invited Billy to take his choice of them to carry home as a reward for his services to the little Moss People. After long consideration he picked out one that seemed a little rounder and more perfect than the others.

"Oh! What a pretty marble this will make! -no," he thought, "I will not use it for a marble, but will give it to my Mother. Yes, that would be much more fun." He told his plan to the Turtle.

"I thought you might like to do that," said Old Moss Back. "Ho! Ho! I thought so!"

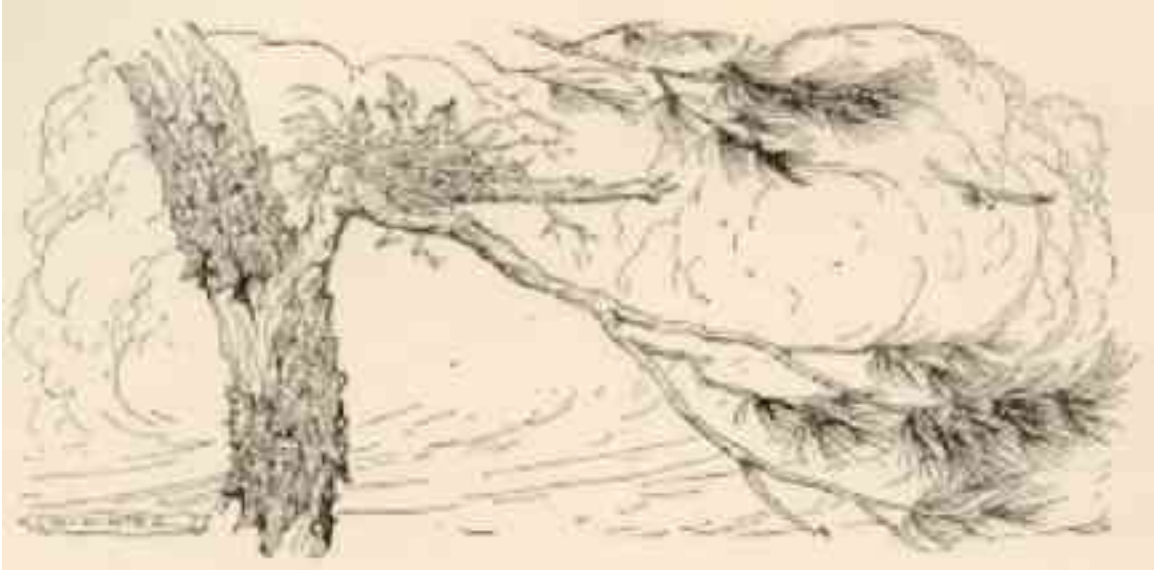
Billy thought he would like to take a few more for his friends, but that would not have been right; so he comforted himself with the hope that his Mother would let each of his friends take the pearl to play with. Then he remembered having seen a poor ragged little sea urchin outside the treasure-room. His pity was so aroused when he thought of all this wealth so near at hand



I will give it to my Mother.

that he told the kind-hearted Old Moss Back about the poor little urchin.

"Do whatever you like, but let us hurry, for the light is fading andd we must be going" was the reply. So Billy gave the delighted little urchin a Pearl, placed his own carefully under his arm, ir'e, climbed on Old Moss Back's shell, holding his gun tightly in his hand, and up they started. Scarcely had they neared the surface than they realized that the waves were rolling very much higher than when they first went into the water. Up they shot and then suddenly burst into the air. Oh! How the wind was blowing. A great wave towered over them and came thundering down, with such force that Billy and Old Moss Back were hurled apart and sent spinning through the air and spray.



V

BALDY

When Billy has composed himself sufficiently to think of what had happened, he discovered that he was high and dry upon the beach. Old Moss Back was nowhere to be seen. When he came to think of it, he realized that he must have lain there for some time, for the waves had quite subsided. What was more, the day was bright and warm Summer clouds drifted in the sky. Why, he must have been there all night!

The pearl! Where was his precious pearl? Oh, there it was, within a few feet of him, more beautiful than ever in the morning light. His gun! Where was that? Right beside the pearl.

As Billy sat there wondering what to do next, he saw coming toward him a great bird, sailing on wide-spread wings and looking down at the beach with an eagle eye. Closer and closer it came and finally, with a rapid fluttering of large wings, it alighted right near him.

"Why, Billy, what are you doing here on the beach alone?" said the bird.

"How is it that all the creatures know who I am?" thought Billy.

This is too fine a day to waste sitting here. Come on up with me. The air is fine today."

Noting Billy's hesitation, the bird explained that it would be perfectly safe to go so long as Baldy, whom you may have guessed was an old Eagle, was with him.

A great assortment of things had been washed ashore in the night; among them was a rickety wastebasket. To this, Baldy tied some pieces of rope; then he invited Billy to get in it. Then he took hold of the loops of rope in such a way that when he rose in the air, the basket hung under him with Billy in it. Billy put his pearl in the bottom of the basket, and held his gun in his hand. Away they went, up higher than the tree-tops, higher than the cliffs along the shore, until they seemed to be right among the clouds. The

clouds were floating along below and all around them. At times they passed right through the big fleecy clouds, and came out the other side of on the soft, clinging wetness into the warm sunshine. The air was so fresh, and the swift flight so invigorating, that Billy shouted out loud for pure joy, and shot his popgun off in the air.

"Where are we going?" he asked at last.

"Oh, just over to my nest," replied Baldy. "I want you to see my babies."

Now Billy had heard of how Eagles went out to get food for their young ones in the nest, and at first he was afraid he might be fed alive to the little Eagles. But the old bird's manner was so reassuring that the thought vanished. He could see far below him the hills dotted with trees. There were brown and white spots here and there that he knew were cows and horses grazing. An occasional farmhouse and barn would peep from under the trees, little boxes; the little white specks running around the yard he knew were chickens and geese. Once a farmer who was working in a field, stopped and raised his hand to his head. He must have looked up and seen Baldy and Billy, for he ran toward his house and called out all his family to look.



Part 1 - one of the most beautiful eagles in

In a short time they came to a low range of hills that rapidly developed into high cliffs and crags. On a very high cliff stood a great pine tree and in the top of it was Baldy's nest. They alighted on a branch, and Billy climbed out of the basket, leaving the pearl in the bottom of it, and ran along until he could peek over into the nest. Of all the scrawny, awkward-looking things Billy had ever seen, these baby Eagles were the scrawniest and awkwardest! Of course he knew that all baby Eagles must be like these, because the old bird was so proud of them. So he spoke of the babies as being very remarkable children.

"Did you ever see more beautiful children than mine? I think you never did. They are nothing short of wonderful."

Now, Baldy said all this very earnestly, and was really no different from many other parents except in expressing the thoughts frankly. Billy was obliged to agree to all of this, and to add some polite remark concerning these extraordinarily ugly young Eagles. They evidently were not very happy to have Billy brought home to them instead of food, for they held their mouths open and squawked very loudly. There was nothing to do but get food for them, so Billy prepared himself to wait in the nest, which was

strongly built of small branches, till Baldy could find something for the babies.

As he waited, the cool breeze rocked the old tree. and the nest swayed back and forth in such a soothing manner that he became drowsy and almost went to sleep. The little eagles were all curled up together, lulled to slumber by the sighing wind. Billy was just about half-awake, looking out of a nearly closed eye across the broad world, when the basket that had his pearl in it slipped off the branch where it had hung, and went tumbling down to the ground. He aroused himself instantly, and crawling very carefully out of the nest in order not to awaken the baby eagles, he made his way, slowly and cautiously down the tree. The pearl must not be lost. His mother should have it.

When he reached the bottom, there was the basket, but it had upset and the pearl was gone! "Surely, it must be right near somewhere," thought Billy. But it was not there. That would have ended the matter, if he had not seen a hole among the roots of the tree. "The pearl must have gone down here," thought Billy, "and the hole is big enough to get into." He crawled in and followed the narrow passage down into the dark ground.



VI

UNDER THE GROUND

BILLY had gone but a short way when his path was crossed by a stream of water that flowed along with a gurgling sound down under the ground. He wondered how far it was to the other side. The stream could not be very wide; his pearl must be down there somewhere,—so he jumped.

Splash! He was right in the middle of the stream and the current was so swift that he could not keep his feet down but was carried rapidly from the place where he had jumped in. Struggle as he might, he could not regain his footing. The stream gained in strength of current and in size till it fairly roared along with Billy tumbling about in it. What was to be done?

He managed to obtain a position on his back with his feet downstream; this seemed less dangerous.

As his eyes became more accustomed to the dim light, he saw that the walls and ceiling of the passage were beautifully decorated with glistening stones of marvelous shapes and colors. Some hung down in long spikes and glistened like thousands of tiny diamonds, while others were in the form of large crystals. Finally, what little light there was faded into a blackness that even Billy's sharp eyes could not penetrate. Soon, however, many little yellow lights appeared here and there, and darted about as though attached to something alive. Then he could see that there were a great number of Gnomes hard at work; some carried the little lanterns that gave the yellow light; others bore yokes on their shoulders, with pails on them; and still others carried pieces of dirt. All of this was so interesting to Billy that he made a desperate effort to stop a minute and watch them. He clung to an unusually thin spike hanging from the ceiling, and watched several groups that were very busy with the pails, filling them at the stream, and carrying them back to a great many twining roots, over which they emptied them. Then the dirt carriers packed the roots all round with soft earth. How strange their little old faces were,

all brown and wrinkled! And their hands and feet were so large and bony! Why were they doing all this work away down in the dark ground? Suddenly Billy realized what it was all about. They were feeding the roots of the trees and plants above the ground!

Billy became so interested that he made a great effort to reach the bank; he finally succeeded in doing this by climbing along a stray root. Instead of being frightened, as Billy thought they might be, the Gnomes never seemed to notice him at all, but just kept right on with their toil. Not a sound did they make. No one asked any questions, so of course no one made any answers. Each seemed to know exactly what to do, so no one needed to talk.

They were not all carrying water and packing dirt, however, as Billy soon discovered. A short distance away several of these silent little Dwarfs were working over some earthen paint-pots. These pots were filled with all the colors of paint you can imagine. One was mixing a pot of bright red, stirring it with a stick; and from his delighted expression, Billy thought he must have had just the color he wanted. Others had yellow, blue, and green paint-pots that they were mixing with just their bare hands. Now and then the

color would slop over, making the ground all brightly spotted.

A rather important-looking Gnome was testing the colors on a pair of Butterfly wings. As he finished applying the color on one wing, the other was folded against it, so that the same design was printed on both. These were then laid aside to dry. As Billy watched him a troop of fairy Butterflies came dancing down a long corridor and stopped at a counter where the finished wings were for sale. They tried on various ones, and finally purchased some of very bold design and bright colors. Then off they danced again amidst laughter and joyous talking.

But the Dwarf who did the testing on the wings was only half done when he had decided that the colors were good. He made a hole in a root that was labeled "Butter Cup," and in it he poured nearly half a pot of bright yellow paint. Then a pot of red was nearly all used on a root marked "Poppy"; then some blue on a Blue-Bell root; and so on from one root to another he went, pouring the colors until his red, yellow, and blue were nearly gone. Then the most delicate shades were mixed for the roots of some of the pale-tinted blossoms, like the Primrose, and the trailing Arbutus. The colors for the wild flowers were

sent out in all directions by Gnomes who seemed to know where they grew. So this was how the flowers all received their beautiful colors from the ground!

Billy followed some Dwarfs who carried the pot marked "Blue for Violets." They had not gone far before some Violet roots were found, and the color poured in.

"It must be a beautiful spot up there where the Violets live," thought Billy. "They always choose a pretty home' He wanted to get out some way, back to the top of the ground where he had always lived. Billy never seemed to have to wait any great length of time for something new to turn up; he glanced around and saw a hole leading right up to the bright daylight.

Just as Billy was leaving the entrance of the hole that came out under a great tree, a group of Gnomes carrying paint-pots saw him, in the full light of day. They were stricken with terror, and dropping everything, fled back into the darkness. Why had they not been afraid before, and why should they run now? Then the mysterious actions of the Dwarfs became quite clear to Billy. They could not see him in their own fairy light; but in the strong light of day he

loomed up! The poor little Dwarfs would have been very foolish not to run I

He found himself on the mossy bank of a quiet stream that came bubbling from under some big rocks. There were the Violets nodding above him. But those nearest were very pale because the Dwarfs had been frightened away, and had not had time to give the Violet roots enough blue. \hen you see some very pale Violets next time you are in the woods, you will know that some one must have frightened the Gnomes away before they had finished putting in the color.

Billy wandered along the border of the stream and was delighted to find so many smooth round pebbles of various sizes and colors. 'While collecting a few of the most attractive his eyes were suddenly held by a large translucent stone that lay right in the shallow water. lie picked it up to examine it more closely; to his great joy it was his pearl' This must have been the same stream that came down under the ground, and his pearl had been carried right out to the very place where he also had reached the surface. This was good fortune, indeed. There was nothing left to do but to find his way home now with the treasure.



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VII

THE BULL FROG

BILLY, gun in hand was making his way through some water rushes that grew near the edge of the stream, when a noise something like the twanging of a huge fiddle string nearly made him drop his pearl; it was so close in his ear. An enormous Bull Frog hopped out and viewed Billy with his bulging blinking eyes.

Billy had never seen anything so funny as the very wide mouth and puffy body of this great, clumsy Frog; he wanted to laugh, but thought it much safer not to, though he had his popgun, with which to defend himself if necessary.

"What! You here? You here?" gulped the Frog. "Well, you'll do. You'll do - you'll do."

"Do for what?" said Billy.

For Judge, for judge," croaked the Frog, "to decide between the Frogs and the Field Mice. You know nothing of the question, so you will make a very good Judge, good Judge. You are not prejudiced. [Billy hoped he was not.] We Frogs want to keep the Field Mice from building houses. We don't believe in it. And so they have no right to build houses because we don't believe in it. They are not -

"Wait," interrupted Billy. "You ought not to tell me any more or I shall be no good judge of anything."

"But remember what I told you," said the Frog. "The meeting will be to-night in the Marsh. We have time to get there before dark. But we may as well start now and go slowly. Follow me."

Billy tried to follow him, but the first hop took the Frog out of sight, and left him alone again in the tall reeds. If the Frog cared no more for him than to leave him alone like that, why should he trouble himself about being a Judge for him, he thought. The head of the Frog suddenly reappeared between the rushes.

"What's the matter? If you can't follow me, at this

slow pace, how do you expect to follow the arguments this evening at the meeting?"

Billy had just about made up his mind that he did not expect to be at the meeting at all. Then, on the other hand (his left hand, because the pearl was in the right), he thought it might be just the Frog's nature to be a little grumpy, so he made no answer at all and started ahead again.

But it was no use. He could not keep the Frog in sight, so there was nothing to do but accept a grumpy invitation to ride on the Frog's back. How was it that he was always just about the right size to ride everything? Anyway, he found it great fun to go hopping along with such tremendous leaps that they went clear over some of the shorter reeds. Billy could not carry his pearl, and his popgun, too, and hang on, so the Frog put the pearl in his mouth.

At last the stream they were following widened out and became sluggish. The ground was soft and boggy and the reeds grew taller and closer together. Dragon Flies nearly as big as Billy himself darted about pretty close; almost too close for his comfort. They were dangerous-looking creatures and their wings whirred and buzzed like sawmills. Billy was tempted to shoot one that was really too bold. But it was just as well

that he did not, for it would have been no time at all before hundreds of them would have been buzzing around him, threatening his life.

Presently Billy heard a sing-song din that sounded like a chorus of high-pitched kettle-drums, all tuned differently. It was the croaking of the Marsh Frogs. When the noise softened and mellowed a bit, as it did now and then, he could hear the accompanying fiddles of the Katy-Dids and Crickets. This was the Marsh where the big meeting was to be held. The noise was the "marshall" music, meant to call all the Marsh people together.

All at once and with scarcely any warning, the Frog jumped right into the middle of the meeting, with Billy on his back. There were the Frogs on one side and the Field Mice on the other. You would never have known that the Mice were there at all, they were so quiet, but the Frogs—oh! how they croaked.

Now, the big question seemed to be: Should the Field Mice have a right to build houses when the Frogs did not believe in it? The Frogs claimed that there was no need of having houses; they were only extra expense and trouble. Also, it was much more healthful to sleep out of doors. Think of the Field



He found it best to go to the bottom of the well.

Mice being forced to come to this meeting and hear all the talk and squabbling of the Frogs about housebuilding I But they made no loud protests. They just stayed close together, all huddled up and not making a sound, either for or against the matter of building houses.

It was quite plain to Billy that the poor Mice were in sore need of their houses at that very moment, and were having such a hard time to keep warm, what with the chattering of teeth, and the huddling together, they could hardly have talked if they had wanted to. Why should nt the poor Field Mice be cold? They could not stand being out in the chilly damp Marsh with no cover. It was quite a different matter with the Frogs. They were cold-blooded anyway and were very comfortable, though they did not even have the fur coats that the Mice always wore.

Up to this time there had been more or less confusion among the Frogs. But now they all got in a ring with a few old Bull Frogs in the middle; the Bull Frogs began to croak the whole trouble over a~in. Pretty soon the ring started to move slowly around, and Billy found himself drawn into it. He simply had to keep going around and around, because the crowd was moving that way.

What are you doing this for?" he asked of a Frog at his right.

"Why we are following the arguments, of course," said the Frog.

It seemed to Billy that it was not a bad way to follow them, after all, because most of the arguments he had heard so far did go round in a circle.

The ring stopped its giddy whirl after a while, and the question was then placed before Billy to decide. He had to think quickly, and still do justice to both sides.

"I think I should very much like to see a Mouse house first before I decide that they should never be built any more," said Billy, after some deliberation.

This answer caused a horrible chorus of impatient croaks among the Frogs. They wanted the question definitely and finally decided upon then and there. But Billy, knowing he was right, was very steadfast in his request; and as he had been chosen as Judge there was nothing for the Frogs to do but to let him see a Mouse house.

A shivering little gray Mouse, taking courage, piped up in a high, squeaky voice and invited Billy to his house. "Won't you come home with me?" he said.

"I have a warm little house that you are very welcome to sleep in tonight."

He was so polite and courteous that even some of the Frogs felt somewhat ashamed of their loud, accusing croaks. Billy accepted at once, and went off with the Field Mouse to see his house. He was also very glad of a warm dry place to sleep in. Neither his pearl, nor the popgun was forgotten, however, when leaving the Frogs.



VIII

THE FIELD MOUSE

Billy had begun to feel pretty chilly himself and his sympathy had already been placed with the Field Mice. He was not coldblooded like a Frog, and a warm little house would be very cozy, indeed, he thought.

The Mouse stopped at last in front of a bunch of dry weed st~ks, with a tangled ball of grasses and a hole in it up about three times as high as Billy's head. When he bowed and waved his front foot toward the ball of dry grasses, Billy knew this must be the house, though from the outside it did not look like any house he had ever seen before. He was just a wee mite disappointed, in fact. But you never can tell by the

outside of a house what may be inside. Billy had to climb up the weed stalks, and it was with a good deal of shaking and scratching of shins that he finally succeeded in crawling through the little door. The Mouse tossed the pearl up after him and scurried up into the house in less than a quarter of the time it had taken Billy to do it.

Though the outside of the house, as Billy observed, was not very pretty to look at, the inside was as snug and warm and neat as it could be. It was a great deal better than the cold Marsh, and Billy decided without any further hesitation that the Field Mice were quite right in building houses. But the Frogs would never know how comfortable a house was, because you couldn't get one into a Mouse house no matter how hard you tried. Personally Billy thought it was just pure jealousy on the part of the Frogs; and maybe that was why they were so green I

It was almost dark, so Billy and the Field Mouse went to bed in the soft furry little room; way off in the distance they could still hear the Frogs croaking at the Marsh meeting.

Next morning very early, when it was just light, the Mouse woke Billy and told him breakfast was ready.

'Breakfast!' thought Billy. 'Why I have not had a bite to eat for an awfully long time.'

Tie followed the Mouse down out of the house, and at a short distance there lay a great ear of corn that looked as big as a log to Billy. The Mouse broke off a kernel, handed it to Billy, and took another for himself. Here was something new in the way of breakfast food; a raw kernel of corn as big as your hand. But it was not bad at all. A trifle tough perhaps, but such things do not count if you are hungry, and your host is as pleasant as the Field Mouse was. He squeaked about the fine weather, and he squeaked about the excellent crops in the field near by. Billy knew now for the first time why a Field Mouse had such large ears. It surely could be for no other reason than that he ate so many ears of corn.

Suddenly he noticed that the Mouse was no longer talking to him, but to something behind a piece of corn husk. He peeked around and there to his astonishment was the Grasshopper in the plain brown business suit that he had seen when he first started out.

"Well, I sold a lot yesterday and have a good start this morning," he said, then spat some tobacco juice over the side of the toadstool he stood on. Then Billy saw what it was he was selling. Tobacco, to be sure



Something new in the way of breakfast food

lie had several packages of plug with him then, that he was taking to some customer. But Grasshoppers and some men being the only creatures that chew tobacco, he knew that he could never sell any to the Mouse or Billy, so he hopped away.

"This is probably the very field," Billy thought, "that I first wandered into, if that was the same Grasshopper." He was sure it was. Then he must have been right near his home all night without knowing it. His home! Billy hadn't thought of it for such a long time that now the very word sounded so beautiful to him he said it aloud several times, much to the surprise of the Mouse.

"Do you feel quite well?" inquired the Mouse. He thought Billy had eaten too much corn, but didn't want to tell him so because lie was his guest.

"Oh, yes, very well, indeed," replied Billy, "only I just happened to think that maybe I was near my home."

"You are," squeaked the Mouse. "Do you mean to say that you do not know this field?"

Billy looked around very carefully. There was surely something familiar about a certain clump of Thistles not far off. Yes, he had seen those same Milk Weeds before.

"Please, may I have my pearl and popgun? I left them up in your house." Billy was quite excited now. "I want to go home right away."

The Mouse got his pearl and gun, gave them to him, and asked, with a rather plaintive squeak, if he would please tell the Frogs what he thought about the houses. But the Frogs never found out what Billy thought. lie never stopped for anything after that till he reached his home. And so now, any time you happen to be near a Marsh at night you can hear them still arguing the old question. As for the Field Mice, they still continue to build their houses. But you will never be invited in to see how cosy they are inside. It is quite impossible even to start a conversation about the weather with a Field Mouse. Their confidence in people is so severely shaken.

Billy ran from one familiar place to another, till at last he could see his house. There was the old back fence with the gate. As he approached the gate, strange as it may seem, he was just the same size he had always been. The bar that held it shut was just within his reach, as it used to be. lie ran through the yard and scrambled up the steps into the house. Where was his Mother? Quick! She must have the pearl. lie had brought it so carefully all the way, and now

the glad moment had arrived to give it to her. Where could she be? What? 'Was that her voice calling him? Yes, there was no mistaking it. Billy ran to her, and she received him with a Mother's tenderness. But she did not seem to realize what wonderful things had happened to Billy. Of course his story interested her, but she was no more excited about seeing him than if he had just come downstairs that morning in his pajamas. And as for the pearl, well, she thought it very beautiful indeed, and told Billy so. Yet, let me tell you, right down in her own heart she was quite sure it was just a stone.



