AN OTTER'S STORY

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To my friends the otters,

with the prayer that the readers of this story

may be impressed with the loveliness

and intelligence of these little creatures

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Foreword

This is a true story of the lives of two otters and their parents and cubs. Each incident is based on actual facts and really happened at one time or another to otters I have known. Ottiga and Beauty lived in territory I have trapped and hunted in, and anyone who wants to can follow their actual journeys along the waterways of Michigan and Wisconsin.

The otter is the most maligned and misunderstood of all animals. The immense amount of good he does far outweighs the little harm he causes. Grandpa says he lives on fish and spoils the fisherman's sport. The encyclopedias say, "He is a fierce animal living in our lakes and streams and destroying the fish." Nonsense! For over thirty years I have lived with and observed the otter, both in the wilds and confined in pens. I find a steady diet of fish will kill an otter, and that crawfish, not fish, are the mainstay of his diet.

The late Dr. Robert Green of the University of Minnesota found that every pound of raw fish you feed an otter destroys three thousand units of the otter's supply of that important vitamin, B1. Dr. Ostensen and Dr. Lagler of Michigan State College and the University of Michigan found that less than forty per cent of an otter's diet in winter was fish, and advised the Michigan Conservation Commission to protect their otters.

It is not only for economic and biological reasons that the otters of our woods and streams should be protected. As Ernest Thompson Seton says, "Of all the beasts whose Lives I have tried to tell, there is one that stands forth, the Chevalier Bayard of the wilds-
without fear and without reproach. That is the otter, the joyful, keen, and fearless otter; mild and loving to his own kind, and gentle with his neighbor of the stream; full of play and gladness in his life, full of courage in his stress; ideal in his home, steadfast in death; the noblest little soul that ever went four-footed through the woods."

I. The New Home

Ottiga was born late one January on the Keweenaw Peninsula on the northernmost point of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, about seven miles east of the old fort at Copper Harbor. He was the only male in a litter of four otter cubs. His name, Ottiga, was the Indian name for "the leader of the herd."

The otters' nest was in a big white pine stump on a little stream flowing into Schlatter Lake. The stump was nearly eight feet in diameter and hollow at the butt. In former years muskrats had dug a maze of tunnels under the stump and below its branching roots; and it was there in a dark, dry passageway that the baby otters were born.
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When the lumberjacks had cut this pine tree, many years ago, they had found that the bottom twenty feet were hollow. They had left the hollow part where it fell, and the snows of many winters and the suns of many summers had decayed the wood still further. It was a giant log—at its open end it was large enough for a boy or girl to stand upright. Inside the log there were several places where the wood had not rotted, leaving shelves running nearly its full length. These ledges in the hollow log, together with the underground runways beneath the big pine stump, made a perfect playground for the otters.

Ottiga’s earliest memories were of happy hours spent playing tag and hide-and-seek with his sisters. Back and forth through the tunnels they ran, and in and out of the big old log, as fast as their short little legs would carry them. When they were tired they curled up together and went to sleep. Sometimes they looked like one big ball of soft dark fur, with only their four broad furry tails and four whiskered, button-nosed little faces to show how many cubs there were.

Tag and hide-and-seek were fun, but Ottiga was still very young when he first learned that life held danger as well as carefree games.

It was one of those cloudy, foggy days that are common in the spring on the Keweenaw Peninsula. The cubs could hear the mournful wailing of the foghorn as they played, tussling, wrestling, and squealing in sheer joy of life. They were so interested in their game as they ran through the tunnels that they forgot Mother Otter’s orders to stay in the pine stump while she was away feeding. Ottiga ran outside, closely followed by his sister Tetawish, who was trying to tag him. In the gray spring light Ottiga made a half-turn about the stump, planning to duck inside the hollow log and hide.

When Ottiga was about two feet from the log he heard a frightened tiss and scream from Tetawish. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see a great horned owl, his talons spread wide, swooping straight at him. Ottiga was terrified. Instinctively he reared back to fend off the owl’s vicious attack, screaming as he did so. For a moment the owl was bluffed. He hesitated, not sure whether this baby otter was safe prey after all. Before the owl could rise for a second stoop, Ottiga dodged into the hollow log. He crawled to the farther end and hid under one of the shelves.

Ottiga was trembling with fear. How he wished that he had obeyed his mother and stayed safe at home in the stump. For a time he kept very quiet, and Tetawish, who had run back under the stump, thought the big owl had caught her brother and carried him off to feed to his owlets. Ottiga crouched in silence, straining his ears for any sound; but it was hard for him to be quiet when he was so frightened. He had never been so all alone before, and soon he began to chirp and call for help.
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Ottiga's sisters heard him and peeked out of their den. There was the owl, big and fierce, sitting on top of a tree stub between the stump and the log, waiting for Ottiga to come out. The sisters tissed in fright, trying to warn their brother, and ducked back under the shelter of the stump. For a time Ottiga kept quiet again. He crept forward cautiously, peering out from under a shelf at the log's entrance. He looked out carefully, but he did not see the owl until it was almost too late. He glimpsed a movement just as the owl started a swoop to grab him by the head.

Just in time Ottiga scurried back into the log. He screamed in terror, afraid the terrible owl would come into the log and catch him. The owl clicked and snapped his beak, and his great round eyes and feathery horns loomed in the entrance. Suddenly, before the owl could advance into the log, a dark furry streak of lightning rushed up and knocked the big bird off his feet. Ottiga's mother had returned from her feeding expedition just in time to hear her cub's frightened scream of terror. Running like the wind on her broad webbed feet, she charged the owl in fury, grabbing a big mouthful of his ruffled feathers. The owl seemed to be all feathers, and now that he was tumbled in a heap at
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the mother otter's feet, he no longer looked so menacing. Ottiga's mother did not stop to take another bite but ran into the log to see if her son was safe, spitting feathers out of her mouth on the way.

Ottiga was never happier to see his mother. He was still trembling as she nudged him gently in reassurance. She chuckled to him, then ran back to the entrance of the log. The owl had flown away, flurried and indignant but glad to be alive. Mother Otter turned and clucked to Ottiga to follow her back to the stump. But Ottiga was a much less adventurous otter baby than he had been a half-hour earlier. It took a little coaxing before he would follow his mother out of the log. And once he was safe at home he stayed close to his sisters in their warm, dry burrow.

That evening Mother Otter was troubled and restless. She was afraid to stay at the stump any longer. Her cubs were growing fast, and they were too full of fun to be cautious. At any time they might be caught by the owl while they were playing or when they went to their toilet outside the nest. Mother Otter fed her babies, and when it was fully dark she called them to follow her down the creek. Through the safe darkness of the night she led them down the little creek to Schlatter Lake. Then they followed along the shore of the lake to its outlet.

About midway between the outlet and Lake Superior, on the stream draining Schlatter Lake, they found a large abandoned beaver house on the bank. It was a perfect home for the otter family. The beavers had cut all the available nearby timber and had moved on to a new location the previous year. They had left behind cozy nests inside the house for some other woodland family to move into. The house was built of crisscrossed sticks and mud, plastered together in walls about a foot thick and shaped into a rough mound several feet high and nearly seven feet across. It was built so solidly that no wolf or lynx could tear it apart, and even a man with an ax would have had a hard time cutting a hole through the top.
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From inside the house passageways led underground into the water of the beaver pool. If someone tried to attack their new home, the otters could escape into the water without being seen, swim underwater, and hide in the banks of the pool. In the banks, too, there were many hidden runs that led back into the woods, under stumps and twisting roots and into hollow trees. The many hiding places delighted the cubs, who thought only of their games, but they pleased the mother otter too. She knew the secret burrows could provide refuge from sudden dangers, and she was much relieved when, at daybreak, she curled up with her tired cubs to sleep in their new home.

II. Woodland Summer

It was here at the beaver pool that Ottiga and his sisters first became acquainted with their father. Father Itatomah was a big otter, weighing nearly fifty pounds. He had been watching over his family from a distance, waiting till the mother was willing to have him join them, and now the time had come. He was so big and imposing looking that at first the cubs feared this awesome stranger; but they soon learned that he was always kind and gentle with them. He loved to join in their games, rolling and wrestling in the pine needles as merrily as they.

But he taught them more than games. Little by little Ottiga and his sisters learned to swim as easily as they ran on land, following their father and mother farther along the streams each day. They learned to dive and swim underwater, holding their breath and using their tails as rudders to guide them. Itatomah showed them how to find crawfish and frogs to eat, diving after them along the bottom of the pool or searching them out of their hiding places along the banks.

Itatomah always found more crawfish and frogs than any of them, enough for all of them to feast on. He was a skillful hunter, and his sharp eyes and keen sense of smell
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always seemed to tell him where to find food and where it was safe to go. Even when he played tag with the cubs or hunted in the streams, his senses were always alert to protect his family.

One day when the family was on a foray crossing Schlatter Lake, Itatomah noticed a large shadow over the water. He snorted an alarm. The otters looked up just in time to see a big bald eagle plummeting at them out of the sky. The cubs and their mother dived as one, but not Itatomah. He reared up, treading water and screaming at the eagle. The eagle, frightened, broke his swoop and turned aside just before reaching Itatomah. He sailed over the water and perched on the nearest tree. The eagle probably had thought the otters were a school of fish cavorting on the surface of the water. But Itatomah's brave defense of his family had taught him otherwise.

That summer was a happy one for Ottiga and his sisters. They had great fun playing water tag, fishing for crawfish, chasing frogs, and rolling logs in the lake. Their parents took them on many journeys on the side streams leading into and out of Schlatter Lake. The first time they traveled as far as Lake Superior the cubs were frightened by the loud roar of the surf pounding on Superior's rocky shore. They had never seen such big waves or heard such a din in the quiet forests by the beaver pool. It was a long time before they were courageous enough to dive into the surf with their father and mother. But once they became used to the big waves they often swam along Superior's shore, sometimes journeying as far south as Bete Grise Bay.

Each day the otters roamed farther over the Keweenaw Peninsula. The cubs came to know and love the beautiful streams and quiet ponds, the hardwood forests and the tall straight pines that surrounded them on every side. In the late spring trilliums bloomed on the hillsides, and in June the cedar swamps were gay with delicate pink lady's-slipppers. Big beds of blueberries grew on the sandy flats, and thimbleberry and black raspberry bushes were everywhere. The otters slept through most of the hot summer days, for they usually felt safer when they hunted and fished by night. In the late afternoons Ottiga and his sisters would wake up full of joy, run out to dive in the cool blue waters, and climb the banks to roll in the warm, sweet-scented pine needles.

This northern end of the peninsula was quite inaccessible and seldom visited by man. Ottiga had not yet encountered the human animal that he later learned to fear, but every day he met deer, muskrats, mink, beaver, and other animals who shared this wilderness paradise. Once in late spring as he ran through the swamp a mother spruce grouse rose in needless alarm from her nest, whirring her wings. And sometimes he heard the strange drumming of the ruffed grouse, rumbling like distant thunder.

One June evening while the otters were swimming and diving, catching frogs and crawfish for their breakfast, they saw a little week-old fawn standing on a raised islet in the middle of a beaver dam at the outlet of Gratiot Lake. This seemed a strange place
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for a mother deer to keep her fawn, but she had undoubtedly placed it there to protect it from stray dogs and wolves. Each end of the dam was under a swift flow of water, which warded off would-be marauders. When they first found the fawn Ottiga and his sisters wanted to investigate, but wise Father Itatomah called them away. His was a program of live and let live, and, always thoughtful of the other animals, he never permitted the cubs to meddle with any mother or her babies.

Once, however, the otter family met a mother and her babies who were well able to take care of themselves, for they were a mother black bear and her three cubs. One morning Itatomah and his mate had led their youngsters up a stream toward Medora Lake to fish for suckers, and while the cubs amused themselves their parents caught their dinner. The cubs were tumbling happily on the bank when suddenly a big mother black bear appeared around a bend in the stream, walking leisurely through the shallow water and flipping the fish out on the bank with her paws. Her three young cubs followed along the shore, gobbling the fish as fast as she tossed them out.
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At first sight of the bears Itatomah called a warning to his family; but as the mother bear seemed willing to share the fishing pool, Itatomah decided that it was safe to stay. The otter cubs were wild with curiosity about the three young strangers, and soon they ventured to approach the little bears. Ottiga went first, sniffing, retreating, and chuckling inquiringly, while the young bears watched him in great uncertainty. They looked to their mother for a clue to how they should act, but the old bear was fishing and eating unconcernedly.

The little bears sat on their haunches, silently watching till Ottiga was very near. Then one raised a paw to touch him curiously, and Ottiga rushed away in sudden fright and dived into the stream. In a moment he got up his courage and approached again, and finally all four otter cubs were running round and round the little bears, begging them to play. At last the baby bears could resist the invitation no longer and, rolling excitedly on the ground, they joined the otter cubs in a rough-and-tumble wrestling match.

For nearly an hour the seven cubs ran and leaped and boxed and rolled, making such a growling, squeaking mass of furry bodies that it was hard to tell which was otter and which was bear. The otters tried to coax the bears into the stream for a game of water tag, and the bears showed off by climbing every tree in sight; but mostly they wrestled and played tag until they all were breathless and exhausted. Ottiga's mother watched anxiously, not sure how rough these bear cubs played. The mother bear paid no attention at all, except to give an absentminded cuff to one of her babies who rolled by accident between her feet.

When at last Itatomah called to the cubs that it was time to go they were reluctant to leave their new friends. During the days that followed Ottiga always hoped to meet the little bear triplets again, but he never did. Late in August when the wild cherry trees were laden with fruit he watched the black bears coming from far and near to feast, but he never could be sure whether or not his three young friends were among them.

In the forest the otters saw mink mothers feeding crawfish to their kits; they met spiny porcupines waddling along the forest trails; once they even passed a pair of rare martens, the only pair in the state of Michigan, who lived on the pine ridges of that area. As the cubs grew older and stronger there was no need to fear attacks by birds of prey. And as the summer drew to a close the otter family lived happily and in peace with all the creatures of the peninsula, hunting only crawfish and frogs and an occasional sucker or bullhead for their food, and safe as yet from man and his traps, his guns, and his dogs.
III. Disaster

The happy summer sped by all too quickly. Ottiga and his sisters grew by leaps and bounds, and by early fall they were nearly as big as their parents. Ottiga was four feet long now, from the tip of his inquisitive black nose to the end of his broad, tapering tail. His fur was a sleek dark brown, and his mother had taught him to dry it by rolling in the sand or pine needles and to smooth it by shaking himself vigorously. His strong, arched back curved gracefully as he ran along the woodland floor or dived in the lakes and streams. The cubs were catching most of their own food now, but if one of them lost a frog in the murky weeds or was outsmarted by a wily old crawfish, the mother or father otter would catch some extra tidbits for the youngster.

The happy days continued until midfall. The October frosts had come, the birch and maple leaves had fallen, and there were shell-like rims of ice about the edges of the pools, when two outlaw trappers from L'Anse paddled a canoe along the shore of Lake Superior and into the outlet of Schlatter Lake. There they pitched camp. From his first whiff of their scent Father Itatomah was very uneasy and nervous about these invaders, and rightly so. Within a day there were steel traps set all over the end of the peninsula where the otters had played and fished all summer. Many of their animal friends - beaver, muskrat, and mink - were caught and drowned the first night the traps were set.

With anxious hearts Father and Mother Otter decided that they must leave their pleasant home and take their family to a safer place. That same evening Itatomah and his mate called to the cubs to follow them. They were about to leave the beaver pool for good when the mother otter caught a sucker. A good meal would fortify them for their journey, so, calling to the cubs to come and eat, she started to crawl out on the beaver house with the fish. Just at that moment she stepped into a hidden trap that was set under the water beside the beaver den. As usual, the trappers had craftily splashed water all about to wash away the scents of man and steel that would have warned the otters.

The mother otter struggled in terror, calling for help. Forgetting the danger to himself, Itatomah swam to help her and stepped into another trap set just a few feet from where his mate was struggling to free herself. Both parents swam back and forth as far
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as the chains would permit. Frantically they warned the cubs to flee the pool, but it was some time before they could persuade their frightened children to obey them. At last Ottiga and his sisters, dazed with grief and terror, began to swim toward Lake Superior. Though nearly full-grown, they were babies still in their inexperience, and before morning one of the sisters was caught in a mink trap set on an animal crossing at the outlet of the stream.

Now the cubs were panic-stricken. Too terrified to go on alone, they swam back to the home pool, hoping to find Itatomah and their mother. But their mother was nowhere to be seen, and Itatomah was crouched on the beaver house with his foot and leg swollen in the trap, so sick he could not talk to them. His teeth were splintered and broken from biting at the cruel steel that held him, and blood had matted on his sore, cracked jaws. By now he was so feverish he did not even recognize his cubs. Heartbroken and bewildered, Ottiga realized at last that there was no hope for either of his parents.

Just then the cubs heard a paddle hit the side of a canoe. The trappers were approaching, making their rounds to gather their catch. Instinctively Ottiga chuckled a warning to his sisters, calling them to follow him. Tired and fearful but driven by necessity, they dived and swam under and on top of the water until they reached Lake Superior. All that day they followed south along the shore of Superior, where the water was so rough no trap would stay set even if the trappers tried to set one. Toward evening they went up a small spring stream to look for something to eat. They were exhausted and miserable and terribly lonesome for their parents and sister.

With only short rests and forays for food, the cubs kept traveling on. The next evening as they crossed a beaver dam another sister got caught in a trap. Ottiga and Tetawish, the two remaining otter babies, were overcome with sorrow and misery, but Ottiga
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knew his poor trapped sister was beyond help. He had learned by now that this cold, steel enemy could not be fought and conquered, and that where the trappers set one trap there were sure to be more. With a heavy heart he called to Tetawish to follow as he swam up the lake. But brave, foolish Tetawish insisted on going back to where her sister was struggling in the trap. In her anxiousness to be of help she was heedless as she started to crawl out on the dam where her sister had been caught. Before she knew it she had snapped a submerged trap set for a beaver. As she dived under water to free herself, the trap caught on a branch and held her under, and in a few moments Tetawish had drowned. When Ottiga swam back to look for her, there was no sign of either sister.

Now Ottiga was all alone. Filled with misery, he swam the lonely lakeshores, mourning his lost family. The happy summer seemed like a dream. At daybreak when he curled up to sleep, sad and exhausted, in the dead leaves or under an uprooted tree, he would chirp plaintively and mournfully, unable to forget his yearning for his mother, father, and sisters. The beautiful happy life they had led on the peninsula had ended with brutal suddenness. Many of the otters' woodland friends had suffered the same sad fate, and even the martens, who were supposed to have absolute legal protection from trappers, had been caught. As winter approached, the woods and swamps seemed more than usually bleak and empty, and all the barebranched oaks and sighing pine trees, all the ice-bound ponds and crying winds, seemed to grieve over the wanton murder of the forest folk.

In his cold and lonely hours Ottiga tried to understand what had happened. He thought back over his father’s nervousness when the trappers had first come. Undoubtedly if Itatomah had lived and could have directed the family, none of them would have been trapped. Itatomah was a trap-wise old otter, and he would have taught them of the dangers and how to avoid them. Only his great love and loyalty to his mate had caused him to lose his head and act against his better judgment, careless of all danger.

It dawned on Ottiga that whenever they went to their accustomed hunting and playgrounds, or followed a well-used animal trail, one of the family or another of their woods friends was caught in a cruel steel trap. The only way to live was to avoid the old haunts and never to set foot on shore where there was a crossing or animal trail, nor
where he smelled man. Ottiga decided to do just that. It was very hard to follow these rules, and in avoiding the animal meeting places his life became still more lonely. But it was a wise plan, and by following it Ottiga survived the short trapping season.

Now he spent most of his time traveling along the rough shores of Lake Superior, going north around the point. The waters were icy cold, but a layer of fat under his skin and the double layer of his soft thick fur kept him warm and waterproof. Even his tail was covered with the heavy warm fur. He swam and hunted; he explored the lakeshores and the woodland shortcuts; he saw his first snowstorm and took his first slide down a snowbank.

His natural otter spirits kept him from being too heavyhearted, but his loneliness followed him everywhere, no matter how ceaselessly he journeyed. By early winter he had reached Copper Harbor, very near the place where he was born. Here he found plenty of food—sluggish frogs and crawfish hibernating in frozen dens, and fish that swam all winter in the free-flowing water below the ice. Ottiga decided to stay in the harbor throughout the long, lonesome winter.

IV. Ottiga Alone

Early the next spring Ottiga could not resist visiting his old home at Schlatter Lake. He took a shortcut back, following a creek that came into Lake Superior east of Copper Harbor. He followed it up through the rocky hills, circled around a waterfall, and was back at his childhood playground in one night. If he had followed the shore of Lake Superior it would have taken him a week or longer.

Ice still covered many ponds as Ottiga traveled south to the entrance of the stream draining Gratiot Lake. There were few signs of life about the beaver dams anywhere in the area, for most of the beaver had been killed by the poachers. At one beaver pool on the lower stream, however, Ottiga found the water squirming with eel-pout, or freshwater cod, that were on their way to spawn in Gratiot Lake. He had a wonderful time diving after the fish and carrying them out onto the ice, where he feasted on them,
crunching them hungrily with his strong, blunt teeth. There were hundreds of them swarming in the pools and up the stream, answering nature's urge to go to Gratiot Lake and deposit their eggs.

Ottiga spent a lonesome summer at his old haunts on the peninsula. The woods and swamps were as beautiful as ever, but every trail and pond, each beaver dam and stream bank, reminded him of happier days. One day while he was chasing a school of herring out in Lake Superior he became so absorbed that he swam farther than he had ever swum before. When he stopped to take stock he saw an island a short distance away. This was Manitou Island. Deciding to explore, Ottiga swam over. It was a rather small island with rocky shores, and there was a little lake tucked away on one side. It was quiet there, and Ottiga felt very peaceful, lying on the mossy rocks, sunning himself. He stayed over a week in this remote and tranquil hideout before he returned to the mainland.

Ottiga grew larger and stronger during this second summer, and every day he became more skillful in hunting for food and wiser in the lore of the woods. By fall, when the black ducks and swift-flying blue-winged teal had started south, he was back at Copper Harbor. There he spent his second winter. The following spring, when he was two years old, the ancient otter urge to explore awoke in him full strength. Without quite knowing why, he felt that he must leave this well-known region and search out new ponds and swamps, discover exciting, unknown lakes and streams.

He started west and south along the Lake Superior shore until he came to a stream that flowed out on the sandy beach. He followed this crystal-clear stream as it wound through bogs and alder thickets, catching food on the way. When he came to a highway he loped straight across the road and back to the stream. Soon he came to a side branch of the stream that led into an ice pond. Here he found plenty of the frogs and crustaceans so dear to an otter's palate. After eating his fill he went back to the main stream and followed it to its headwaters, where the water petered out, disappearing into its underground source.

Ottiga stopped to rest, wondering if he should go back to Lake Superior where he had entered the stream. But he had no family to go back to. The northern peninsula meant only loneliness now. Obeying the instinct that has made the otter a wanderer from his
beginning, Ottiga pushed on along the dry run to the top of the ridge. Over the ridge and down the other side of the watershed the dry run led him into Torch Lake, near Lake Linden. Swimming around the shore of the lake, he carefully scouted the docks and boat landings used by man.

Here on the docks on upper Torch Lake, Ottiga found the first playmate he had had since he lost his parents and sisters. One day as he was nosing about under a dock, feeling for crawfish with his whiskers, a little boy and his dog came down with a fishpole to fish off the dock. The little brown-and-white fox terrier, Raggles, smelled Ottiga right away. He barked excitedly through a crack in the dock, then ran down on the the water. At first Ottiga was alarmed and stayed well out in the water; but before long he became convinced that Raggles' bark was a joyous, friendly greeting. The dog was inviting him to come and play. He wagged his tail three times with every "yipe, yipe, yipe," and soon Ottiga was joyfully chuckling back. He porpoised and somersaulted in and out of the water, beside himself with happiness, urging the terrier to come into the water and join in his games.

But Raggles was afraid to go into the water. He ran along the shore, barking for Ottiga to come out. Ottiga followed for a way, then stopped as Raggles ran up to him. When they were about a rod apart on the beach they approached each other cautiously, dog-nose and otter-nose both sniffing feverishly. In a moment their noses touched, and before Ottiga could move, Raggles jumped gleefully in the air, leaping right over Ottiga's back. Then the fun began. Up and down the sand they ran and round and round the pilings. Ottiga would jump into a boat and hide until Raggles found him. Then out slid Ottiga, rushing off to cavort with Raggles on the dock, while Freddy, the little boy, laughed and squealed at their antics.

Every afternoon without fail the games of hide-and-seek and tag took place. As soon as school was out Freddy would hurry to the dock with Raggles to meet their otter friend and play their games. Freddy's family and friends often came to watch too, but Freddy was the only one that Ottiga would allow to come close while their game was going on. All summer and well into the fall Ottiga stayed at Torch Lake, happier than he had been for many months. Even after the ice formed on the lake Ottiga stayed on, unwilling to leave his terrier friend.

On Thanksgiving Day Freddy and all his family went to a hockey game. There was no one around except a new watchman, who for some days had been observing Raggles' and Ottiga's frolics with greedy eyes. He coveted Ottiga's beautiful coat of fur and was plotting to take it for the money it would bring. On Thanksgiving Day he decided that his chance had come. In the late afternoon when Raggles ran down to the dock he was followed closely by the watchman. Ottiga whistled a greeting from the water, and soon he and Raggles were wrestling and running joyfully. The watchman crept up to the dock
as stealthily as he could. Ottiga saw him, but he had learned to feel no fear of man-scent on these docks. Many friendly men had come to watch his play during the past four months and had done him no harm.

When the watchman had approached as near as he dared, he pulled his revolver from its holster. He took careful aim at the graceful form of the otter, but just as he pulled the trigger Raggles and Ottiga changed places. Poor Raggles received the bullet in his head. In a flash Ottiga jumped off the dock, dived into a hole in the ice, and swam away under the ice before the man' could aim at him again. The watchman was aghast at what he had done. He knew that if his employer, Freddy's father, ever learned the truth his job was gone. In furtive haste he carried Raggles' body to the house and threw it into the hot fire in the furnace. Then he returned to scrub the blood off the dock in the cold November twilight.

It was not until the following morning that Freddy first missed Raggles. He called and called, but no Raggles appeared. The watchman was questioned, but he knew nothing, so he said, of what had happened to the dog. Freddy and his father searched high and
low without success. Finally they noticed a damp spot at the end of the dock, and, looking closely, they found traces of blood. At first Freddy's father was convinced that Ottiga had killed Raggles and dragged him under the ice to his den. But Freddy could not believe that possible—he had watched the otter and the dog in loving play too often.

They continued their search, going over the dock minutely, and Freddy's father made a discovery that told him plainly what had happened. In the upright end of the last plank of the dock he found a bullet hole, and around the hole were a few white hairs. From this clue the whole story became obvious; and when confronted with the evidence the watchman confessed.

The mystery was solved and Ottiga cleared of suspicion; but that could not bring Raggles back to life. Ottiga never again returned to the docks. When he swam away that afternoon, he escaped under the ice to his nearby nest, an old muskrat burrow on the lakeshore. The next evening he left Torch Lake forever. In the cold days that followed he swam to Portage Lake, across to the mouth of the Sturgeon River, and up the river to Otter Lake, where he decided to spend the winter. Mourning the death of his terrier playmate, Ottiga was lonelier than ever; but he had learned a new lesson. Not all men were evil, as he had thought when he knew only trappers; and not all men were good, as he had been misled into believing that summer; but each man had to be judged separately by his own actions.

V. Enemies

Later that winter Ottiga learned that not all dogs were friendly. One clear February day as he was lying by a large air hole in the ice, sunning himself, he saw a big hound tracking on the ice. He was snuffing along the trail over which Ottiga had traveled that morning from the inlet to the outlet of Otter Lake. Alert and wary, Ottiga watched the hound’s approach with mixed feelings. He knew this stranger might be hostile, but he felt a pang of longing when his keen nose brought him dogscent. If only this dog would play with him as Raggles had! The hound was so absorbed in following the otter spoor that he did not see Ottiga till he was very near the air hole.
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Suddenly the wind brought him Ottiga's fresh scent, and, spotting Ottiga's dark form against the ice, he broke into a run. He was barking loudly—not a friendly greeting, but the unmistakable cry of the hunter who has sighted his quarry. Ottiga was frightened and dived into the water. He came up in the middle of the air hole, a few feet from the edge of the ice. The hound could not reach him, but he continued his fierce barking and growling.

By now Ottiga knew that the hound was a deadly enemy, but even so he could not resist the impulse to play. He swam up almost within reach of the dog's jaws, but just as they snapped at his head he dodged away, leaping through the water like an acrobat to show off his skill. Ottiga teased the hound in this way till the dog was in a frenzy. Then Ottiga would suddenly porpoise clear out of the water onto the edge of the ice about a rod from the dog. Wild-eyed, the dog would rush to the attack, but Ottiga was always too quick for him—he was here, he was there, he was everywhere at once, and the hound couldn't touch him. The big, ungainly creature slipped and scrambled awkwardly on the ice, while Ottiga's long low body and the special horny calks on the bottom of his webbed feet enabled him to run and frolic gracefully without slipping.

It was fun for Ottiga, for he was confident the hound could not harm him. But just as he was feeling most gleeful and thinking up some fine new stunts he caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure crawling on the ice. Ottiga plunged into the water under the ice. After a moment he decided to take a peek to see what was happening. As his nose came over the edge of the ice the dog's master—for it was he who had come crawling over the ice—swung at Ottiga with an ax he was carrying. He missed Ottiga's nose but clipped off some of the whiskers under his chin.

Now Ottiga was really frightened. He dived and came up in the center of the air hole, where he stood treading water and screaming in fear. But there was no one to answer his call for help. Far away he saw the line of the shore where he could find safety in his underground burrow. It was a long way to swim under the ice, not knowing where he would find air holes to come up for breath, but there was no other way to safety.

Taking a mighty breath, Ottiga dived beneath the ice and headed through the dark waters for the shore. He swam swiftly, thrusting all four legs backward in powerful strokes, his eyes wide open, watching for any air holes. His specialized otter lungs would allow him to stay under water for about five minutes, but it would be much longer before he could reach the shore. As he swam he noticed that on the under surface of the ice there were often clusters of little bubbles, and on an impulse he rose and put his nose among them. Joyfully he found that he could breathe! His instinct had been right—they were air bubbles trapped beneath the ice; and now he knew that no matter how far to the shore, the many little caches of air would enable him to reach his den.
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When Ottiga reached the shore he swam under a long edge of hollow ice and into the warm, dry nest that he had made for himself in a burrow underground. Tired out, he curled up for a good sleep; but very shortly he heard a snuffling and a scratching and the voice of the hound dog as he tried to dig through the ice above the entrance to the den. Ottiga just curled up tighter in his nest. Let him scratch and bark, he thought, and he settled himself for a long, peaceful nap.

But there was no sleep for the weary young otter. Soon he heard the hunter chopping at the ice with his ax. Ottiga slid into the water and waited just outside the burrow entrance. He watched quietly as daylight entered through the hole the man was chopping. When the hole was big enough the hound stuck in his head, smelling and barking at Ottiga’s nest. Ottiga could not resist the temptation to reach over and nip the hound’s intrusive nose. The hound retreated hastily, blood streaming from the bite on his nose, and howled at the top of his voice. The man chopped furiously, making the hole still larger; but Ottiga was already swimming away under the ice.

A short distance up the shore from his nest there was an old, unoccupied beaver run that went back into the bank about eight feet. Ottiga hoped he would be able to sleep here undisturbed, but it wasn’t long before he was awakened again by scratching and barking. The hound had followed along the shore and caught a whiff of Ottiga’s scent through a crawfish hole that opened into the beaver run. Very shortly the hunter also arrived and started to cut through the ice at the entrance of the run.

By this time Ottiga was really annoyed with this meddling old hound who wouldn’t let him sleep. He was so busy screaming insults at the dog snuffing through the crawfish hole that the man had chopped clear through the ice before Ottiga realized that the hunter intended to block him in and then kill him. In order to escape Ottiga would have to pass directly under the hole in the ice. He scurried for the entrance. Looking up, he could see the hunter waiting, ax poised, for him to appear. Gathering his courage, Ottiga
made a dash for the water. Luckily for him, a small pulp log lay across the run where the hunter had chopped through the ice. This kept the man from getting a good swing with his ax as Ottiga ran under the hole and escaped.

Ottiga swam straight across the lake, using his newly learned technique for under-ice travel. Every few yards he came up to breathe the air bubbles that gathered oxygen out of the water and lodged on the under surface of the ice. He swam and swam until he reached a sandbar below the inlet of the lake. Here the ice was lodged in such a way that there was a space between it and the water. In a dry spot between two logs Ottiga made a nest, and here at last he slept his weariness away, undisturbed. The hunter had not given up his search for Ottiga, but though he combed the whole lakeshore with his hound, not another fresh scent could they find. This time there was no crawfish hole to betray the otter's hiding place.

When Ottiga woke up early that evening he knew there was little safety or pleasure left for him in Otter Lake. That night he left the lake, following the Sturgeon River and traveling most of the way under the ice. Where he could he ran along the shore behind the sheltering hollow ice. He found plenty of food-frogs, suckers, and a few crawfish-and about eight miles up the river he came upon an unusually fine pool. He stayed there several weeks, never yielding to the temptation to return to Otter Lake. Sometimes he would go on short trips up the river to Sturgeon Falls, sometimes up a small stream to Silver Mountain. High up on the side of this mountain beavers had built three different dams, each nearly twenty feet high. This would have been a lovely otter playground, but Ottiga smelled man-scent nearby. An Indian had set traps for the beaver, and Ottiga was wise in obeying the rule he had set for himself long ago. Sadly he went back down the little stream bed to the river.

VI. Happy Meeting

In the days that followed Ottiga's loneliness grew more and more unbearable. The solitary habits he had adopted to avoid danger while he was still an orphaned baby had undoubtedly saved his life many times over. But it is not an otter's nature to live alone, and the playfulness and affection that had made Ottiga's childhood so happy made him yearn for a return to family life.

For many months Ottiga had watched for signs of other otters on his woodland journeys, always hoping to find a playmate and companion. Every ten or fifteen miles along the streams there were pulling-out places-wayside stations that every otter and many other animals used. Here, usually at a bend in the stream, the otters would climb out of the water to take a shortcut over land, stopping on the way to roll themselves dry in the sand or slide down the steep stream banks. At each pulling-out place Ottiga sniffed eagerly at the scents of other otters and scratched together a pile of dry leaves on which he left his droppings, his own sign to show that he had passed by.
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Ottiga never lost hope, but nowadays few otters roamed the woods and streams. Man, in his greed for fur and his false fears that otters ate his fish, had killed as many as he could; and the otter's slow growth to parenthood meant that only a few babies were born each year. Even so Ottiga often found otter signs along the forest trails, and sometimes, in a quiet swamp or down a rippling creek, he would catch sight of a whole otter family—father, mother, and young cubs—hunting and playing. His heart would pound with excitement, and his yearning chuckle would call out across the water. Usually he was doomed to disappointment. The wary father would be suspicious of this strange young male and, sending Ottiga an unfriendly warning, would lead his family away.

This year as spring came on the days seemed more lonesome than ever. Ottiga was three years old now, a fully adult male, and it was high time he had a family of his own. His heart was heavy as he watched the blackbirds and bluebirds returning to make their nests for the summer. The geese and ducks too were flying north. Obeying again his inner urge to travel, Ottiga struck out overland to the first small stream that led to the southeast. He traveled through lake after lake, never staying longer than a day at each. Early in April he reached the middle branch of the Ontonagon River. The days were beautiful. Each seemed lovelier than the one before, and he was reminded time and time again of his childhood home near Schlatter Lake.

One cool bright day the sun was sifting through the pines. All the old memories flooded through his mind, and as he drifted sadly in the Ontonagon he wished with all his heart for someone to play with, someone to chuckle to and to share his nest. As he came to the deep pool in the river that lies north of Watersmeet, Michigan, he saw a disturbance in the water. Some animal had just dived in—probably a stray beaver or muskrat. Ottiga was on the alert, keeping perfectly still. In a moment the prettiest, sleekest female otter he had ever seen crawled out on a log with a frog. Her name, though he did not know it then, was Beauty. She was so interested in her catch that she didn't notice Ottiga in the
upper end of the pool, but before long the wind eddied and she caught a whiff of his scent.

She stopped eating. She looked around. Overcome with joy, Ottiga chuckled and swam to where the beautiful female otter was sitting, unsure how she should treat this stranger. Forgetting all about her frog, she suddenly dived into the water and swam downstream. Beauty leaped and twisted, trying to keep out of Ottiga's reach, but he kept right at her side. She became frightened and screamed at him, but Ottiga chattered otter small talk to reassure her. A moment later she forgot her manners altogether and tried to bite him. Ottiga did not retaliate. He talked very quietly as Beauty ran out on a shallow bar and stood at bay.

Now Ottiga pretended he wasn't interested in Beauty. He chuckled and swam nonchalantly back to the pool. This bothered Beauty more than if he had persisted in chasing her. She ran to the bank and watched Ottiga intently as he climbed out on the log where she had been eating the frog. She could not help noticing how handsome he was-nearly five feet long with a beautiful, well-proportioned body and strong-arched, graceful back. His sleek dark brown fur glistened in the sunlight. Beauty stood up and watched him with intense interest. She was a year younger than Ottiga, and about half as big, weighing twenty-five pounds to his forty-five, but she was just as supple and sleek as he, and a trifle darker and finer furred. Standing there looking at each other by the woodland pool, they were the two prettiest otters in the state of Michigan.
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Ottiga dived into the water and crossed to the bank where Beauty was still standing, watching. This time as Ottiga approached Beauty answered his friendly chuckle and did not run away.

She watched entranced as Ottiga stretched out, rubbing himself dry in the pine needles, first rolling on his stomach and then on his sides and back, chirping sweet nothings all the time. Beauty advanced timidly toward him, but he seemed not to notice. Then she came closer and began to roll in the pine needles and leaves by his side. Ottiga nudged her with his nose. Filled with happiness, Beauty ran about in circles, then tucked her forelegs up to her chest and slid down the bank into the water.

Ottiga slid down after her, and both otters dived and came up together in midstream. Beauty nudged Ottiga's nose. For a moment they kissed each other tenderly, nuzzling and chuckling in the water, and then they were seized with a frenzy of play. They left the water and ran on the bank. First Ottiga would lead, then Beauty. They chased each other in and out of the water, frolicking like porpoises as they leaped and dived in the cold sparkling pool.

In their happiness at being together they forget all the sadness of the past, though Beauty, like Ottiga, had spent many lonely hours. She had lost her brothers and sisters much the same way Ottiga had lost his-to trappers. Then her mother had borne another litter of cubs, and Beauty had had to make her way by herself. Now that Ottiga and Beauty had found each other, however, all hardships and lonesome days were forgotten. Each had found a loyal, true mate. The sun shone, the birds sang, and pussy willows nodded in joy to see these otters so happy.

VII Two Otters Together

Ottiga and Beauty played until it seemed as if they must be exhausted, and then they played some more. They followed north on the Ontonagon, obeying every happy whim to detour along the small side streams. These led them into numerous lakes, and they wandered from lake to lake and from pond to pond. It was a summer of perfect happiness. As the golden days went by they worked their way back south, crossing the watershed into the region of the headwaters of the Wisconsin River. Traveling always
farther away from Watersmeet, they found lakes without end-blue lakes clear as crystal, mysterious, murky lakes fringed with reeds, lakes so large they could not see across them, and tiny lakes like jewels hidden deep among the pines. In almost all of them otter food was abundant.

Fall found Ottiga and Beauty in the upper reaches of the Wolf River, in the northeast part of Wisconsin. Crawfish were more plentiful than ever here, and there was nothing to mar their pleasure. Nothing, at least, until the trappers began to set their traps. But Ottiga and Beauty were trap-wise by now. Tragedy had taught them both many lessons in survival. They were very careful where they stepped when they came out of the water, and their keen noses and ears were always alert for any unusual smells or disturbances. They seldom stayed two days in one spot, knowing that it was safer not to; but that was no hardship to them. The running streams and lapping waves were always calling them on, and they loved their vagabond life.

They seldom traveled very far in any one night, but they were always on the move. Sometimes they slept under big, overhanging trees, in a hollow space washed under the roots during high water or flood time. Other nights they just slept rough, in a grass or leaf nest in the bushes. When they found an old beaver house or a hollow log or tree, that made a perfect resting place.

In late October they found a large cedar swamp with a deep, languid stream meandering through. The other streams and lakes were freezing, but this stream stayed open through November and was full of crawfish. It was a real wilderness Eden. Deer and rabbit trails crisscrossed between and under the low-hanging boughs of the cedars. Many kinds of wild life lived in peace and plenty in this swamp--until the last of November when the hunting season for deer opened. As soon as the shooting began many of the deer took refuge in the very heart of the swamp. There the marshy ground was covered with a tangle of deadfalls, and the standing trees grew so densely and their limbs hung so low that one could not see far. The only opening was a narrow meadow through which the creek wandered with many turnings.

One day Ottiga and Beauty played gaily as they were feeding, sliding on the ice across the bends of the creek where the edges were frozen. It had snowed since early morning,
and all the world was white. The fresh snow sent them into a delirium of joy, and they slid, played tag, and rolled in the snow without a care in the world. Beauty would roll on her back, kicking her feet in the air, and Ottiga would slide into her, charging fiercely, as if he were going to bite and shake her. As they rolled and wrestled with each other, Ottiga gave deep, guttural growls while Beauty squealed wildly, pretending that he was hurting her terribly.

When they tired of this game Beauty tunneled away under the deep snow, disappearing completely, until she suddenly poked her head up to the surface and sat up laughing at Ottiga, who made a great show of searching for her everywhere. Soon they rolled into the water, where islands of floating snow bobbed along on the current and made little mounds to hide behind. The snow had almost ceased falling, but the game went on.

Beauty and Ottiga were facing each other, treading water with their hind webs and wrestling, making believe they were biting each other, when Ottiga, alert for danger even in his play, spied a strange figure standing in the meadow about three rods distant. As he looked it moved just a little, and quick as lightning he snorted a warning and ducked under the water. Automatically Beauty ducked too, and not a split second too soon; for just at that moment a bullet hit the water beyond them with a heavy impact.

What Ottiga had seen was a deer hunter aiming his gun at them. The hunter had followed three deer tracks into the swamps, hoping to get a shot at one of the two large buck deer who were following a doe. The hunter crept through the soft snow, advancing very carefully. The swamp was frozen enough to hold his weight, and he took one slow step at a time, watching down the narrow opening among the trees for a sight of one of the bucks.

The hunter heard the otters playing before he saw them, and he could not imagine what was making all that noise. Even after he caught sight of them he did not recognize what kind of animals they were. But, like all too many hunters, he decided to shoot them anyway, hoping the fur might be valuable. Either greed or a kind otter Providence persuaded him to try to kill both animals with one shot. In the moment that he waited for a better aim, Ottiga and Beauty sensed danger and escaped.

They dived deep. Swimming under the water for a great distance, they followed the winding creek farther and farther into the swamp. At last they came to their den, a large hollow cedar tree, the only entrance to which was under water. Here they knew they were safe from man. The swamp was almost impenetrable with its jumble of low, snow-laden cedar limbs, the jam of down timber, and the new growth that was springing up in the maze of fallen logs. Not even the wisest woodsman could have found them in that bog.
Ottiga and Beauty chuckled to each other when they were cuddled up in their nest, but neither one could hear a sound. The terrible impact of the bullet hitting the water so close to their ears had temporarily deafened them. For several weeks they kept close to their den, staying in the densest part of the swamp, and gradually their hearing returned.

In mid-December the weather grew much colder, and Beauty became restless. She felt strange stirrings in her that she did not understand, but somehow she knew that she wanted to find a larger burrow, warm and dry and with several entrances, and protected from all the other creatures of the forest as well as from man. One night she and Ottiga left their den and crossed the tangled swamp, and after traveling several miles as the crow flies they were back near Pine Lake at the headwaters of the Wolf River.

VIII. Four Furry Babies

One chill, still day in early February a red fox was running along a fallen log deep in a rocky pine woods. Suddenly he heard a squeaking and mewing. He stopped and cocked his head, wondering what it could be. It seemed to be right under his feet, coming from a little knot hole in the log he was standing on. He smelled at the knot hole, hoping for a tasty mouse dinner, but it wasn't mouse smell that came to him. The squeaking seemed louder now. Mr. Fox sniffed harder and scratched with his paw, trying to make the knot hole larger.

The squeaking ceased; there was a pause, a rustle, and a rumble. Out of the far end of the hollow log an otter poked her head. It was Beauty, and in her eye was a strange new gleam. After one glance she started for the fox without a sound.

But Mr. Fox was too interested in the curious smells and sounds that came from the log to notice her. He did not realize what was happening until he heard the breaking of the
crust of snow. He looked up just in time to see a black streak charging his way. Beauty was a bare six inches from his feet, her teeth bared in a furious scream, when the fox jumped hastily aside. He didn't like the look of those fierce teeth one bit, and with his dreams of a mousy tidbit cruelly shattered, he loped away over the snow.

When he was a safe distance off Mr. Fox sat down on his haunches to think the whole thing over. It must be otter babies that he had smelled in the hollow log! Well, well. He knew he wouldn't like the taste of otter anyway, but even if he did, he had just learned that stealing them from their mother would not be easy. It wouldn't be like digging out a mouse nest. The mother otter weighed half again as much as he did, he calculated, narrowing his shrewd yellow eyes; and he'd just had a small sample of how she could fight. Her legs were short and she could never run as fast as Mr. Fox, but her body was all muscle and limber as a willow wand. She could tie herself into knots and turn in her skin, and it would take a powerful enemy to hold her down.

Mr. Fox soon came to the conclusion that he would much rather live on good terms with his new otter neighbors. He had often seen otters along the streams, and they had always seemed like jolly folk. Sometimes he had felt envious and wished he might join in their play. Once he had approached so close to an otter party that one of them had almost run into him, but even so the otter had not offered to bite. He had just snorted in alarm, and all the otters had splashed into the pool. Soon they had poked their heads out, first one and then another, snorting, ducking under the water, and gradually had begun to play again.

Now that he came to think of it, Mr. Fox was sure that only yesterday, as he was traveling along the rapids of the Wolf River hunting for dead fish, he had seen this mother otter's mate. About three miles from the log where Beauty had couched her babies Ottiga had been busy rolling rocks on the rapids, fishing for crawfish. Mr. Fox had sat on the beach watching, hoping Ottiga would catch a big sucker and leave part of it for him. But Ottiga wasn't sucker-minded that morning. He had other delicious otter food on his menu—crawfish and caddis flies. Though it was the wrong time of year for crawfish to be plentiful, a few had denned up in the rocks where a spring flowed into the rapids, which made the water warmer here than at most places.

Ottiga had known what the fox was waiting for. When he had caught a fine blue crawfish with big pinchers he had grabbed it across the back and walked to the bank where Mr. Fox was sitting. Carelessly dropping the crawfish, he had rolled in the snow. He hadn't even growled when the fox had leaped on the crawfish, which was stiffened with the frosty weather, and gobbled up the sweet morsel. Ottiga had paid no attention at all, just rolled and rubbed good-naturedly in the snow. When Mr. Fox remembered that, he was sure he couldn't ask for nicer neighbors than Ottiga and Beauty.
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Meanwhile Beauty had returned to her babies in the hollow log. As she crawled back in everything was as quiet as could be. A stranger looking into her den would have seen only a pile of leaves, but Beauty knew that right in the center of that mound of dry, rotted wood, moss, and leaves was a precious treasure. When she left the nest to chase the fox away she had covered the babies with leaves and grass. Now she pushed the covering away, and joy shone in her eyes as she looked down at four of the dearest little bundles of fur a mother ever had.

The otter cubs were four days old and about as large as baby kittens. There were three brothers and a sister. They had broad, blocky little heads and faces and big wide mouths. Beauty couldn't see their mouths, though, unless she turned them on their backs, for their mouths seemed to open under their heads. Whiskers grew on each side of their chins, and a tuft of whiskery eyebrows over each eye. Each one had a little black nose and tiny ears like minute half-moons on the side of his head. Like baby kittens, they were blind at birth, and their eyes would not open until they were thirty-five or thirty-six days old.

Their fur was downy soft and mouse-gray in color, and they each had a stubby, triangular tail about two inches long. Their short chubby legs had five clawed toes on each foot and webs between the toes of all four feet. Their hind legs were longer than their front legs, and on the heels of each hind foot they had some very special otter equipment. This consisted of four rough, hornlike calks on each heel. Nature provides these calks for the otters so they will not slip on the ice or while walking on slippery rocks and logs in swift streams. No other water animal has this surefooted method of traveling over slippery places.

Beauty settled down in her nest, circling around her four babies. As she nestled down, she curled up like a doughnut with the four little cubs in the center where the hole of the doughnut should be. The cubs woke up, mewing, and a little chilly at first because Beauty had pushed away the leaves that had covered them. But Beauty placed her head over the hole in the doughnut and no more cold air reached them. With her body heat they were as snug as could be, and soon they started nursing hungrily. As they sucked, Beauty watched over them tenderly. Blackhawk, named for a famous Indian chief, was the biggest cub. Tomah, whose name meant "an Indian counselor," was nearly as large
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as Blackhawk, and so was their sister Olaita, "the Indian princess." Little Necedah--which means "yellow water"--was the smallest cub of the lot. Though Beauty loved all her babies with all her heart, she gave her greatest care to little Necedah. He seemed to need extra encouragement to live and grow, and his mother always gave him the choicest place to suck.

As soon as the cubs had all the milk they could hold, Beauty gave each one a bath. Using her tongue, she cleaned and smoothed each little otter's fur. The cubs thought this was quite unnecessary, and they would squeak their displeasure and try to hide from their mother's sight. When one of them tried to squirm away, Beauty would place her paw on the reluctant cub and hold him so he could not move. That made the cub squeal all the louder in protest, and it was this squeaking and squealing that Mr. Fox had heard in the log. When Beauty had finished washing each cub she smelled him carefully all over to be sure there were no spots that she had missed.

When it was Necedah's turn to be cleaned Beauty was very careful to wash as gently as possible. Somehow he seemed frailer than the others, and Beauty knew she must pamper him a little to help him grow big and strong. Soon, when it was warm outside and the thawing waters flowed again, the family would be starting on long journeys and crawfish hunts. Then all the cubs, and Necedah especially, would need tough muscles and sturdy backs and legs to make their way safely along the rushing streams and woodland trails.

IX. Beauty and the Beast

Day followed day, and the cubs grew steadily. It did not take too much, milk to satisfy the babies, for otter's milk is ten times as rich as cow's milk. Even before their eyes were open the cubs were very playful. After their mother had fed and washed them they would lie on their backs and wriggle their feet in the air, opening their mouths and
pretending to bite one another. But they had no teeth as yet, and their bites didn't hurt a bit.

Sometimes Blackhawk would seize the end of his mother's tail and chew and growl as he played with it. This delighted Beauty. She would pretend to pounce on Blackhawk and hold his head right in her mouth; but she was so gentle she hardly ruffled his silky fur. Olaita would clap her paws and play pattycake, chuckling her delight even when Beauty washed her. Olaita never protested against her bath as her brothers did, for she liked to be clean and sweet-smelling. Sometimes Tomah, Blackhawk, Necedah, and Olaita would play with one another's tails, pouncing and biting fiercely as if they were dangerous enemies.

Not long after the cubs had eaten and played a bit, they would drop off to sleep. Then Beauty would slide out of the nest, unwinding the doughnut as she did so. After nosing some leaves and moss over her offspring she would lie down near the door of their home for a little fresh air-on stormy days inside the log, and on sunny clear days on top of the log in the sun.

As soon as dusk had fallen, and after feeding and cleaning her babies for the last time that day, Beauty would slip out to the stream. About half a mile from the den was a spot where there were plenty of crawfish, frogs, and mud minnows. She would dive and swim in the water, bathing and eating her fill, and then hasten home. Sometimes she caught a glimpse of Ottiga in the twilight, farther up the stream, and they would chuckle softly to each other. But Ottiga did not approach too closely. He knew that the cubs needed all Beauty's attention right now, and he stood guard over his family from a distance.

Early one morning when Beauty was returning from her second feeding trip for that night she was alarmed by the baying of a hound on her trail. This trip she had gone farther away from home than usual in her search for food, and a stray tramp hound wandering through the woods had come upon her track. For a moment Beauty's heart stopped beating as she realized how close he was behind her. Then she ran through the snow as fast as she could for home, thinking only of her precious babies.

Beauty reached the log a scant minute ahead of the hound. She popped in the door and ran to the babies' nest. Everything was undisturbed; the cubs were sleeping peacefully under their blanket of leaves. Beauty did not stop to push the leaves away but ran right back to the entrance. Just as she reached it the hound pushed his big scarred head into the opening.

In a flash Beauty clamped her teeth on his nose and held on for dear life. The hound snarled and squalled in pain. He writhed and pulled, trying to loosen Beauty's hold and yipping for mercy. But Beauty clamped her jaws all the harder, bracing her feet and refusing to give an inch. The hound pulled and pulled with all his rangy strength; being
twice the size of Beauty, he was finally able to tear loose. Now he was really angry. He leaped around the opening, barking more fiercely than ever with the lust to kill, enraged by the pain of his sensitive, bleeding nose.

He jumped to the top of the log and ran along it, looking for another entrance big enough for him to get through. Then he smelled the babies through the knot hole in the log. He scratched and bit at the hole, baying at the top of his voice.

Beauty had been lying low inside the entrance to the log, but when the cubs woke up and began to whimper she couldn't stand it any longer. She flew out of the door to drive this monster away for good. The dog saw her as she streaked over the ground and jumped aside to avoid her onslaught. But he did not run as the fox had done the month before. Instead he turned to attack Beauty with the determination of a killer.

On his first lunge the hound failed to get a hold. He charged again. Beauty did not try to dodge but seized the first thing she could fasten her teeth to—his long, dangling ear. The hound shook his head violently in anger and pain and soon tore loose. He made another leap for Beauty, gripping her by the loose skin of her back. Heedless of the pain, Beauty twisted her supple body under her skin and fastened her teeth in his nose again.

His nose was badly lacerated, but the hound would not stop fighting. The desire to kill overcame the pain he felt, and he merely loosened his hold on Beauty long enough to shake his head and rip loose from that nose grip. Then he charged once more, determined this time to shake the life out of the mother otter.

Beauty was tiring fast from this strenuous fighting. Because she was a nursing mother, she was not at the peak of her strength, and now it seemed as if she could not survive
another assault. She crouched exhausted but still defiant in the trampled, blood-spattered snow. She was waiting for the final struggle when she saw a black streak rushing at the hound. It was Ottiga, flying to defend his mate and the babies he had never seen. From far down the stream he had heard the baying of the hound and, fearing that his family was in danger, had sped in their direction, swimming like lightning through the water and running on the banks when rocks and ice slowed up his swimming.

Ottiga had never seen his children, but they and Beauty meant all the world to him. At their birth he had moved out of the burrow to make more room for them and to keep watch for possible danger; but he had never wandered far from their nest, waiting and hoping for the day when they could all be together on the streams. Now he fairly flew over the ground to defend his mate and his young. Ottiga did not take time to call to Beauty. He did not even stop to snort a battle cry. He charged like a cannon ball, clenching his teeth on the dog's lips. Taken by surprise, the cowardly hound yipped in terror.

With new energy Beauty jumped on the dog's back, biting him in a dozen places at once. They rolled over and over in the snow, the two otters punishing the hound soundly with their powerful jaws and teeth. By this time the dog had even forgotten to snap. All he wanted was to get away. He couldn't understand where this fierce big otter, who weighed almost as much as he did, moved so quickly, and bit so painfully, had come from. The dog had ceased howling and was just waiting for a chance to run. When Beauty, exhausted, finally released her hold on the hound's ear, Ottiga was thrown off balance and the hound rolled against a tree. At once the dog leaped to his feet and ran off as fast as he could, his tail tucked up and loose snow flying out behind his galloping paws.

If he had looked back he would have seen that neither otter was following. Blood was running in his eyes, and his sight and senses were blurred. When he saw a porcupine on a log far, far along the trail he let out a howl and ran faster than ever, thinking the otters had caught up with him. He ran and ran until he had covered five miles or more before he stopped to rest. Exhausted and thoroughly chastened, he crawled into a shallow cave to lick his wounds and muse upon the dangers of otter hunting.

As soon as the hound left, Beauty returned to her babies, sore and tired. When she crawled into the log they all stood up on their wobbly hind legs and tissed at her fiercely. They had been disturbed by the sounds of the fight and the smell of the dog, and they were ready to do battle to defend themselves. Beauty quieted them with a soft chuckle and curled about them fondly. In a moment their fighting spirit had vanished as each little cub suddenly realized how hungry he was.
While the babies nursed, a ray of sunshine came through the knot hole in the log and played on little Necedah. He stopped sucking and tried to catch the sunbeam with his paws. With a thrill of joy Beauty realized that he could see! The cubs’ tiny eye-slits were beginning to open at last, and soon their bright brown eyes would be discovering the wonders of the woodland. Beauty was specially happy that Necedah's eyes were opening first, for that seemed to mean he was catching up with his stronger brothers and sister.

As soon as the babies were fed and asleep Beauty went outside to roll and rub in the cool, soothing snow. The icy rubdown helped to get the sting out of the bites she had received from the dog. Ottiga had been waiting patiently and just a little wistfully for Beauty to come out, and now he scampered over to her, chuckling his love and kissing and nudging her affectionately. Beauty rubbed noses with him happily, and they sniffed each other eagerly, getting acquainted again after their six weeks' separation. Ottiga respected Beauty's responsibilities as a mother, but it was a long and lonely time since they had played together. Now he persuaded Beauty to take a little holiday; and when they had bathed and soothed their battle wounds they romped and rolled for half an hour, as gay as six-months-old youngsters.

\[X\]. Swimming Lessons

After the battle with the hound, whenever Beauty left the nest Ottiga stayed nearby. He never went to feed until Beauty was there to protect the babies, though it was often a great temptation to join her and swim and fish together in the stream. Nevertheless Ottiga was content. He was glad that Beauty was allowing him to stay closer to the family, and he waited eagerly for the day the cubs could leave their nest and learn to know their father. Now and then Beauty and Ottiga would remember their battle with the hound and anxiously sniff the still, cold air to be sure he had not returned. But they
need not have feared. The dog never came back to that part of the forest, and whenever he smelled an otter track he ran the other way.

The days lengthened, and by the middle of April spring birds were beginning to call in the trees. The cubs' eyes were fully open now, and they had a wonderful time exploring their log home. Some of the log's roots were hollow, and several hollow limbs extended from the trunk. These made wonderful hiding places for the frisky youngsters, and they ran and chased each other till the old log quaked beneath their feet. One end of the log, near the roots, served as the cubs' toilet, and they ran there whenever necessary, keeping their nest and play area tidy and clean.

The cubs' teeth soon began to appear—needlelike molars in the backs of their mouths, two above and two below, and sharp cutters in front between their fangs. When they were eight weeks old Beauty began to bring frogs and crawfish for them to chew on. They liked these additions to their milk diet, and it was good exercise for their jaws to crunch the shells and bones.

One evening Blackhawk followed Beauty out of the log when she went for food. The entrance to their home rested on a rock, and Blackhawk found it easy to scramble and tumble down to the ground. When he was safely down he began to look around. He was startled to see how big and strange everything looked. The snow was almost melted, and the unfamiliar rocks on the ground and the towering pine trees frightened him. He chirped in terror, calling for his mother.

Beauty heard the piercing call and came running back, passing Ottiga who was coming to investigate too. Beauty picked Blackhawk up by the loose skin of his neck and deposited him in the log again, chuckling and scolding all the while. She warned the cubs in otter talk not to come out of the log until she was there to protect them, for she feared some owl or hawk might swoop down and pick them up.

All the cubs were eager now to see the wonders Blackhawk had seen. At the end of April, when it was sunny and warm and all the snow was gone except for little piles where drifts had been, Beauty called to the cubs to follow her outside. Little Necedah seemed afraid at first, but after a little coaxing he tumbled out with the rest. At first their eyes were dazzled by the sunshine, and the rocky ground covered with pine needles felt strange under their feet. But soon they became used to it and frolicked in excitement among the tall pines and the slim white birches. With a whole new world to play in, the cubs scampered about in joy, exploring every rock and bush and chasing one another's shadows. Tomah found a pine cone that he rolled around and around. He tried to make it go straight, but no matter how carefully he pushed it with his paw it would always roll in a circle. Tomah never could figure out why, even when he was a grown-up otter.
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Every day after that they gamboled outside around the log, playing hide-and-seek among the many pine stumps and in the holes and caves beneath the tree roots. Sometimes Ottiga would join them, full of love and pride as he watched these four little cubs that he had fathered. The youngsters soon came to know and love him as they did their mother, and they went wild with excitement when he joined in their play. Beauty would lie above them on the log, watching for danger. If anything strange appeared she would snort an alarm, and at that call the little otters scampered for the shelter of the log.

One day Olaita thought it unnecessary to obey her mother's warning. For the first time Beauty became angry with her cub. She ran to her daughter and nipped and shook her in punishment. Surprised and subdued, Olaita ran hastily into the log, followed by her mother, still chirping and scolding. Beauty knew her cubs' very life depended on being alert and obedient to every warning, and she made this lesson clear. Olaita never failed to obey her mother again.

The beautiful spring days followed one after another. The peepers called from the swamps in the evening, and the sun shone warmer on the pine needles each day. Ottiga and Beauty felt the time had come when they should find a new home where they could all be together. About a mile from the log Ottiga found a lovely pool in a swamp with a stream passing nearby. Near the pool was a large rock with a roomy woodchuck burrow under it. Ottiga decided that this would be a fine new home for the family, and Beauty cleared away the debris and made a nest for the cubs to hide in when danger approached.

The day they moved, the cubs received their first lesson in swimming. Ottiga and Beauty led them a little way through the woods till they came to the stream. The water flowed gently over rocks and pebbles and sparkled in the sunlight. Blackhawk and Olaita plunged right in without a second thought, but what a surprise they got! They found
they couldn't walk on water the way they could on land. Their heads went under, and they struggled up gasping and sputtering. Blackhawk somehow got back to shore by himself, but Beauty swam to Olaita's assistance when she heard her cry for help. Beauty nosed her toward shore, chuckling encouragement and keeping Olaita's bobbing little head above the surface. Tomah and Necedah watched it all with great misgivings, staying well back from the water.

When all four cubs were on the bank-Blackhawk and Olaita looking very bedraggled and still sneezing the water out of their noses-Beauty began to hunt for food along the shores of the pool. She would swim underwater around the edges of the pool, feeling with her stiff, sensitive whiskers around the submerged tree roots and tiny crevices in the banks. If there were any crawfish or frogs hiding there-and there usually were-she would feel them even if she couldn't see them, and she would snap them up in her mouth. Her whiskers never failed her, for no matter how long she stayed under water they never softened or gave her false information.
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Meanwhile the cubs ran up and down the shore, playing merrily and disinclined to try this swimming business any further. But they were getting hungry too, and as soon as Beauty found a frog or crawfish she would cry "Unhunh! Unhunh!"--a drawn-out call that meant, "Come, babies, I have something good to eat!" The cubs would run eagerly along the shore to where she had the tidbit. When one of them reached out for it, Beauty would release her hold. The frog or crawfish would start to hop or crawl away, often heading out into the pool again, and the hungry cub would be tempted into the water to catch it. Ottiga stayed nearby in the water, and if the crawfish got too far away he would pounce on it and bring it back to the cubs.

In this way Beauty and Ottiga gradually coaxed Blackhawk and Olaita back into the water, and once the cubs found they could stay afloat by stroking with their broad, webbed feet, they splashed around delightedly. But Necedah and Tomah still were timid, and though they looked longingly at the crawfish Olaita and Blackhawk were gobbling, they didn’t dare swim out after them. Beauty coaxed and coaxed, but they hung back fearfully on the shore, chirping plaintively.

At last Ottiga swam over. Taking Necedah by the nape of the neck, he pulled him gently into the water, chuckling encouragement all the time. At first Necedah cried and struggled, but when he felt how cool and soft the water was, and found that his father was holding him up, he decided that this was lots of fun. He stopped being afraid, and when Ottiga began to duck him Necedah just held his breath each time and thought it was a lovely game. He relaxed and started splashing with his legs and tail, and before he knew it Ottiga had let go and he was swimming by himself. Ottiga nuzzled him proudly, swimming beside him in the pool, and Necedah was the happiest little otter that ever learned to swim.

Bursting with pride and excitement, Necedah swam over to where Tomah still stood forlornly on the bank. He chuckled to him joyfully, urging him to come in the water, but Tomah would not accept the challenge. He ran back and forth along the shore, feeling terribly left out. Finally Beauty took Tomah by the neck as Ottiga had taken Necedah, and, chirping pitifully, Tomah was carried into the water. Beauty soothed and reassured him with quiet otter talk, and soon he forgot his fears in the pleasant feeling of the flowing water.

Before long Tomah was splashing about with the others, and all four cubs had mastered their first swimming lesson. It would be many months before they were as expert swimmers as Ottiga and Beauty, but they were able to follow along the stream by easy stages to their new home in the muskrat burrow.
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Once they were settled in the burrow they spent more and more time in the water. Every day they splashed and frolicked in their front-yard pool. Their swimming muscles grew stronger as they dived and rolled in the water, wrestling with one another and chasing water bugs. But they were happiest of all when Ottiga swam with them. They would dive under him, crawl on his back, bite his nose, and try to duck him. Ottiga would pretend they were drowning him, sending up great strings of bubbles as he went under. Then with a leap he would shoot way out of the water and circle around the cubs as fast as he could. They couldn't keep up, of course, but when he came by they would try to tag him. Suddenly Ottiga would quietly disappear beneath the water, and the cubs would search and search before they found him back under the banks, fishing and rooting with an innocent air as if he had no idea they were looking for him.

After swimming for a time the whole family would go to the bank to dry off in the leaves and moss. Sometimes they would roll in the sand under a ledge of rock. Rubbing in the dry sand slicked up their fur and stimulated the oil glands that helped their fur shed water. But mostly they rolled for the fun of it and because it felt so good after a long swim.

Under one ledge was a big stack of dry leaves that the wind had blown there the fall before. Blackhawk would dig into the leaves, peek out, and grunt at Necedah. As Necedah dashed toward him, he would leap out, scattering leaves every which way, and be off. But it was hard going in the loose leaves, for the harder they ran the deeper they sank into the great, leafy mass, sometimes dropping entirely out of sight.

When the cubs tired of this game they would run on the forest floor, making big circles around the trees. They dodged and twisted, darted and turned, and when one was caught they would all pile up in a fat, squirming heap, nipping and squealing in delight. Beauty and Ottiga would sometimes join in this game, but they would tire of it long before the cubs. Then they would lie nearby, fondly watching the youngsters play. At frequent intervals the cubs would run to where their mother and father lay sunning themselves. They would jump over them, playing leapfrog, or cuddle up alongside their parents, who kissed and nuzzled them and told them what fine little otters they were.
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The cubs would nudge their parents back, chattering happily. They played in the warm sun until their strenuous exercise sent them off to sleep.

XI. The Long Journey

The otters stayed at this pond for two weeks. Meanwhile Ottiga made extended trips up and down the Wolf River, looking for a more permanent place to live. Once he was gone for more than two days in his search. The cubs were overjoyed when he returned, but after chuckling and playing with them a bit he and Beauty spent much time in serious otter talk.

That night they left their home and started down the Wolf River. They traveled by easy stages and fed leisurely along the way. When they came to the fast rapids on the river the noise frightened the cubs. Beauty left the water and walked along the shore with the young ones, but Ottiga leaped and swam through the falls and churning water. Watching his father's skillful swimming, little Necedah felt very brave and decided to swim with Ottiga. As he left the shore the swift water swept him off his feet. Tumbling over and over down the stream, he rolled and bumped against the rocks, half the time under the water and nearly choked to death. He could not straighten out to swim in the roiling water no matter how he tried. Whenever the current tossed him to the surface he would get a breath of air and chirp in fright.

It seemed like a very long time before Necedah found himself in a quiet eddy where he could swim again. Battered and bruised and with a nose full of water, he swam to a log that was lodged in midstream. Fast water flowed on each side of the eddy, and he didn't see how he could ever get to shore.
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By this time Ottiga had caught up with Necedah. He called to him to follow as he struck out for shore, but Necedah clung to the log, terrified and chirping all the louder. Ottiga returned, nuzzled him, then took hold of the skin of his neck and, holding him carefully, swam to where Beauty was anxiously waiting with the rest of the cubs. Dazed with relief, Necedah lay quietly stretched out on the bank. He expected his mother to punish him for his disobedient escapade, but Beauty evidently believed he had been punished enough, for she just nosed him gently and kissed his face, happy to have her smallest cub back safe and sound.

At the foot of the rapids they all entered the river again, swimming and drifting and letting the water carry them downstream. At some places the water was very swift and deep, not rocky and shallow as at the rapids. Here the cubs found that they could travel faster than they had ever gone before. It was thrilling to glide so swiftly through the rushing channels, and they could not understand why Ottiga and Beauty were not as
excited as they were. Blackhawk and Tomah dashed along, porpoising wildly over and under their mother, who refused to be hurried from her own steady pace. Necedah found this water safer than the rapids, and he joined in the race too, chasing Olaita in the swift current that carried them faster than their paws could paddle.

At many places the river turned and twisted, making big bends or hairpin curves. At each bend Ottiga and Beauty would climb out of the water at the pulling-out place, and after inspecting the leaf piles and leaving their signs they would lead the cubs across the overland shortcuts. Often they saved a mile or two of travel by water by walking a quarter of a mile or so by land.

At each pulling-out place there were paths or crossings where otter, mink, beaver, and other animals had made their shortcuts for years, maybe for centuries. Some of the paths were worn a foot or two deep into the forest earth and might have told many tales of woodland history. Some of the crossings were less than three or four rods long, but by following them the otters could shorten their traveling time by hours.

Over a week later they arrived at the new home Ottiga had found for them. It was a small wooded island in the Wolf River, located in Langlade County. The island was about three hundred yards long and eleven yards wide. A big pile of driftwood and logs had lodged on the head of the island during high water, and the otters made temporary nests in this driftwood. From the log pile they could dive into the water without being seen and swim under a steep bank on the east side of the island to an unoccupied muskrat run that entered the bank under a sunken log.

The tunnel sloped up under a big pine tree and widened out into several large rooms where the otters could sleep. There were a number of runs extending into the bank at different levels. One angled off and entered the water about a rod and a half below the main entrance, and since this opening was disguised by a mass of loose roots, it made a perfect secret doorway. The muskrats who had used this den had been trapped the fall before, so Ottiga and his family were not dispossessing anyone by moving in.

This island had everything to make it an ideal otter home. A large creek joined the Wolf River just above the island, so there was plenty of food to be found. The first day the otters arrived they were tired and hungry, but the cubs could not resist exploring the log jam and driftwood pile right away. There were dozens of hiding places where playful otters could play hide-and-seek. Olaita found she could scramble up to the top of the log heap and her brothers could not find her at all. They would scurry about, chasing one another, till all at once Olaita wasn't to be found. The other cubs ran wildly, expecting to find her around each corner and behind each log, but they could not locate her until she chattered at them from her perch.

Soon Beauty called to them, giving the signal for food. The cubs ran as fast as they could to an overhanging bank at the foot of the drift pile. Ottiga had caught a big pickerel for
their supper. They had never seen a pickerel before, and as they crowded eagerly around it the big fish flopped heavily and frightened them.

Beauty bit the fish back of the neck, severing its backbone, and then began tearing its skin near the tail. Tomah grabbed a bite there, following his mother's example, and soon all the cubs were chewing on the fish. Each one would tear off a chunk with his strong little teeth, lift his muzzle straight in the air, and crunch the morsel up carefully, skin, bones, and all, enjoying every bit.

The pickerel was over two feet long so there was plenty of food for all. Beauty and Ottiga watched their offspring with pride as they ate all they could hold. After the cubs had had their fill, Beauty and Ottiga ate what was left, even the backbone, leaving only the head of the fish. After this feast the cubs found they were tired and sleepy, but before going to bed they swam once more in the pool under the drift pile. When all the remnants of the meal were washed away from their fur and whiskers, they crawled out on the bank and rubbed themselves dry.

The cubs were preparing to curl up in a bed of leaves in the drift pile when Beauty called to them to follow her. Ottiga and Beauty had decided it would not be safe to sleep under the drift pile during the day, for they did not yet know what dangers this region might hold. Beauty swam out to the east bank, where she dived into the entrance of the muskrat den, followed by Blackhawk and Necedah. Olaita and Tomah were a little way behind, and they milled about on the surface of the water, wondering where their mother and brothers had disappeared to.
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Ottiga watched anxiously from the log jam, but soon Beauty swam out again, surfaced, and called to the two cubs. With Tomah and Olaita clinging to her sides with their paws, all three dived again, and Beauty showed them the secret entrance to the muskrat den.

Inside it was dark but quite roomy, and on a ledge in the passageway Necedah and Blackhawk were waiting for them. They climbed up the sloping burrow until they came to a large cavity lined with grass and leaves under the roots of a tree. Other passages led away from this chamber, but much as they wanted to, the cubs were too tired to explore them this morning. They bedded down with their mother for a good long sleep. Olaita, curled in a circle, sucked the end of her tail, and Blackhawk sucked on one of his front paws. Tomah sucked on Beauty’s ear, while Necedah just got a bit of her fur. In two minutes they were all asleep.

Outside in the brilliant light of the June morning Ottiga waited till he was sure his family was safely settled. Then he swam downstream a bit to where a big old maple tree had tipped over into the river. He made his nest in a hollow under the roots and, curling up in his sentry post, slept the sleep of contentment.

XII. A Family at Play

The sun was still high in the sky when the cubs awakened from their slumber. One by one they stirred, yawning and doing their stretching exercises. Each cub extended his front feet, raised his head with a mighty yawn, lengthening his neck, and curved his body in a beautiful depressed arch. Then they were ready to examine their new home.

One burrow led under a big root and far away from the water, almost twenty-eight feet from the river. About twenty feet from the nest where they had slept the cubs could see
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a little light coming through from above. They investigated and found an opening between two fallen trees. Scrambling out, they found thick brush everywhere around them, and pine and birch trees soaring above their heads. It was a wonderfully secluded hideout. They scampered back into the hole and ran to awaken their mother, coaxing her to come and see what they had discovered. Pretending that she didn’t know, Beauty followed as they led the way, grunting and chuckling her satisfaction at the brush-protected playground they had found.

The cubs played for a while, chasing around and around through the brush, over fallen logs and under the trees. Beauty warned them not to run overland toward the river but always to go through the back passageway and out the tunnel under the river bank. She knew that if they ran out through the brush they would leave signs that possible enemies might read as they traveled along the river bank, and discover their home.

Soon the cubs remembered that they had not finished exploring the muskrat den, and they let Beauty lead the way back to the main bedroom under the tree roots. From there three passages led out. One sloped down to a hidden side door—that was the way they had entered from the river. One led straight down to a bedroom just above the waterline, and from this room a burrow led underwater directly to the outside door. Just inside the door another burrow led up to the second and third-floor rooms—for there were three levels altogether in this big rambling mansion. The third passage from the main bedroom led sharply to the right and sloped down to a river entrance. Anyone looking from the outside along the bank would know that there was a door here and probably would think it the otters’ main entrance. But if an enemy trying to molest them watched outside this door, he would have a long and futile wait, for the otters never used this passage. It was just a blind. Instead they could run out the side door and slide into deep water unobserved. From each level of the dwelling a passage led to the side door, their escape hatch, so that they need never be caught without a safe exit.

At first their new home seemed very complicated to the cubs, but they soon became acquainted with all the passages and rooms. They had great fun playing tag and chasing one another through burrow after burrow. Sometimes Blackhawk and Tomah would cut across through the side burrows and head Necedah and Olaita off as they chased after them. Then the four would pile in a heap, squealing, tumbling, and pretending to bite and shake one another. Sometimes as they raced past Beauty she would seize one or another of her youngsters and tussle with them playfully.

After a spell of this indoor frolic all the cubs would run to Beauty and coax her to go swimming. None left the house in the bank until she gave permission, and they were honor bound to wait until she led the way. Then they followed after her, one after the other, head to tail. As they slid out the passage into the water they would surface at once. For a few minutes they would stand still, treading water quietly as one large and
four small dark heads sniffed the breeze, looked cautiously about, and listened for danger.

It was early evening, and the tree frogs were singing their shrill, reedy song. Quietly Beauty and the cubs swam across the river, still head to tail, their sleek brown backs arching and diving in unison as they crossed the current. When they reached the sloping bank just below the big drift pile the cubs scurried out under the driftwood to continue their game of tag and to dry their fur. The game had hardly started, however, when Beauty called them back. Ottiga was on the west side of the drift pile, waiting for them all to come with him in search of breakfast.

Hungry and eager, the cubs followed Ottiga and Beauty as they swam upstream, Blackhawk, Tomah, Olaita, and Necedah all in line behind their parents, all six heads and backs rolling in and out of the water in perfect time. A little way upstream a man fishing for trout at an eddy saw them coming toward him through the dusky twilight. His jaw dropped open, and he crouched in terror as he watched this strange brown sea serpent weaving up the river, coiling smoothly in and out of the water. It seemed to be at least fourteen feet long, and as Ottiga led the way toward the bank the fisherman was sure the serpent was coming after him. He let out a mighty cry, dropped his rod, and ran away as fast as he could through the woods. That night in town he had a wonderful story to tell, but fortunately he had been so frightened and excited that never again could he find his way back through the swamps and underbrush to the place where he had seen this monster.

When the fisherman screamed the startled otters dived as one and scattered under the water. When they surfaced they were widely separated. They came up cautiously, showing just their noses and eyes above the water and floating motionless as they listened to the fisherman crashing through the brush away from the river. Then Ottiga raised his body straight up, well out of the water, trying to look over the bank. Soon everything was quiet again. Ottiga called, Beauty answered with the same low-pitched chirp, and then the four cubs completed the roll call. They resumed formation and continued their journey to the foot of the rapids, where they found an abundance of large crunchy crawfish to feast on. By the time they had eaten all they could hold, darkness had set in.
In between snacks Blackhawk, Necedah, Tomah, and Olaita tried to see who could swim the farthest up the rapids. They would head into the swift water, swimming with all their might until the torrent tumbled them back into the eddies and smooth water below the rapids. Olaita was the first to reach a log about three yards from the foot of the rapids. She found a partly submerged rock where she was able to get a good grip with the calks of her hind feet. This gave her the extra push necessary to snag the top of the log with the claws of her front feet. Triumphantly Olaita crawled out onto the log, enjoying her perch in the raging waters and calling to the others to come. It was five minutes or more before Necedah found a way to join her, and then Tomah and Blackhawk soon followed. The four of them balanced and clung to the slippery old log, laughing their chittery otter laughter while each one tried to push the others off into the turbulent water. It became a contest to see who could stay on the log the longest.

Gradually the log loosened under their play, and all of a sudden it rolled and tipped them all off into the rushing water. The log drifted about in circles, floating very fast to the foot of the eddy, where the whirl slowed its progress; then the eddy turned and floated it back toward the rapids.

The cubs climbed on again, turning sputtering somersaults as the slippery log rolled over. At times it would be sucked into the boil of the eddy and disappear from sight with all four cubs hanging on tight. Blackhawk was very proud of himself when he learned to keep his footing on the log even as it rolled, treading surefooted on the rounded, turning surface.

In a little while Ottiga and Beauty joined in the game, and with all six otters piling on the log and tussling with one another it soon sank out of sight beneath them. Then all the cubs piled on Ottiga's back, grabbing his fur with their paws and teeth and pretending that he was another slippery brown log. Ottiga dived to the bottom of the river with all of them hanging on. For a moment nothing could be seen but many little air bubbles rising to the top of the water and a great churning and heaving of the river surface. Then up they bobbed, otters, log, and all, laughing and snorting and splashing as much as the rapids.

When they were tired from this strenuous play the whole family floated lazily down the current in the moonlight, back to their island with the driftwood pile. They found a nice sandy place on top of the bank where they rolled and dried off. Ottiga rolled so vigorously he sprayed sand all over the cubs, and Necedah and Olaita chewed on his whiskers to rebuke him. Ottiga grunted and ran off around the top of the island, pretending he was trying to get away from them. When they had nearly caught up to him he jumped to the bank and slid down the steep muddy slope into the deep pool below.
Excitedly Necedah tried to slide as Ottiga had done. Ottiga had folded his front feet under his body and stretched his hind feet out straight behind. Necedah tried this, and it seemed to work; but halfway down he felt he was going too fast. He pushed his front feet out and tried to brake himself, and as a result he flipped head over heels into the water. Now Beauty slid down the bank at the same place, whizzing along on her sleek flat stomach and showing them how it should be done. The other three cubs tried to imitate her, sometimes tumbling awkwardly but squealing happily all the time.

Over and over they slid down the slide, shot into the water, swam to the bank, and ran to the top to start over again. It wasn't long before the cubs learned how to fold their forelegs smoothly under their bodies so that they slipped quickly and easily down the chute. The youngsters plumped into the water with great white splashes, but Ottiga and Beauty were so expert that they could shoot down the slide and into the river with just a whispering swish and a gentle ripple of the water. The more they slid the wetter and slipperier the slide became, and the more slippery it got the faster they could slide. In a short time the otter family had worn a smooth groove in the steep muddy bank, and this trough held their bodies as they scooted to the water.

**XIII. Danger Ahead**

One happy day followed another for Ottiga and his family. When the cubs tired of sliding they had the driftwood pile to play in, and there always seemed to be new places to discover and hide in. Whenever they became exhausted they would curl up for a short nap. Then they would have a luncheon of crawfish, or perhaps Ottiga or Beauty would
catch a big sucker for a change of diet. In the warm early evenings many caddis flies hatched from their cocoons, and as these flitted about the cubs would chase them on the bank and over the water, fascinated by their erratic flight. Now and then they would actually catch one and eat it with great relish.

This pastime almost cost Olaita her liberty. One warm misty evening the otters were swimming serpentine fashion up to the rapids, breaking rank now and then to catch a few minnows, which were very plentiful. As they rounded a bend of the stream Olaita saw a pretty colored moth drifting in an eddy offshore. Very craftily she dived below the surface and swam toward the moth with the utmost caution, almost motionless as she drifted with the current so as not to frighten the creature into flight. She gauged her distance properly, and with a sudden dart she rose and grabbed the moth.

But this moth didn't behave like others she had eaten. It stung her mouth terribly. She tried to spit it out, but it wouldn't let go. Olaita cried for help, and Beauty and Ottiga rushed to assist her. None of them realized that Olaita had hooked onto a fisherman's fly, for even Ottiga had never encountered one of these before. Olaita swam furiously and fought to get away, but the harder she pulled the more her mouth hurt where she was hooked. Gradually the fisherman's line drew her closer to the shore, while Ottiga and Beauty swam frantically around her.

Meanwhile the fisherman stood on the bank, evidently enjoying the unusual game fish he had taken. As soon as Ottiga realized the man was there and that he was in some way responsible for his daughter's torture, he rose up in the water at the man's feet, snorting and screaming in anger. This startled the fisherman, and for a moment he backed away from the water, allowing the line to spin off his reel. Feeling a freedom of movement, Olaita began to swim toward Beauty, who was calling piteously and coaxing her baby to follow her away. But almost at once the fisherman started to reel in again, and Olaita was drawn inexorably back toward the bank.

Beauty, wild with anxiety but not knowing how to help, watched her suffering, struggling cub being pulled away. She couldn't understand what was happening, but her instincts prompted her to seize Olaita with her teeth and paws and try to pull her back into the river. Beauty's added weight on the line, fortunately, was enough to tear the hook loose from Olaita's mouth, and suddenly Olaita was free. Mother and cub dived out of sight, and soon the whole family was safe together in their den. Poor Olaita's mouth bled and was sore for several days, but she was young and healthy and soon recovered from her painful experience.

During the evenings that followed the otters swam to the crawfish grounds at the foot of the rapids only after it was fully dark. More and more they avoided going out in daylight, for fishermen now came along the banks every day. Even in the early evenings there were often two or three fishermen fishing for trout at the foot of the rapids.
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Ottiga and Beauty watched the invasion of their territory with sadness and anxiety, and it wrenched their hearts to realize that they must move their family from this wonderful playground.

Beauty especially hated to leave, for she knew it would be hard to find another place as nice as their island home. The driftwood pile and the slide, the abundant crawfish grounds, and the spacious muskrat burrow had all been ideal for her family. But the safety of all of them was at stake, and she agreed with Ottiga that they must move. That day while the cubs were asleep Ottiga swam off down the river to look for a new home.

If Ottiga had left on his house-hunting trip a few days earlier, his family might have been spared the sad events that followed. Already many fishermen had seen the otters swimming and playing in the river; and though some of them enjoyed the sight and wished no harm to these woodland creatures, other fishermen blamed the otters when they failed to make good catches of fish.

For many years people believed that otters lived chiefly on fish, thus spoiling the sport of human fishermen. It was true that there seemed to be fewer and fewer fish in the lakes and streams, even though state fish and game departments planted millions of baby trout and game-fish fingerlings each year. And because otters were sometimes seen in the fishing streams—one or two old woodsmen might actually have seen an otter with a fish in its mouth—everyone jumped to the conclusion that otters were destroying the nation's fish.

No one troubled to watch and study the otters carefully, or to observe their food habits and understand the pattern of their lives along the waterways. If they had, they would have seen that ninety per cent of the otters' food was crawfish—those wily, lobster-like dwellers of the streams and ponds that breed and multiply by the millions. And if the woodsmen and fishermen had watched closer, they would have found that it was these sly old crawfish-along with various water snakes—that were gobbling up the planted baby fish.
Fishermen always thought that crawfish were food for bass and trout; and so they are, when the fish are full-grown. But for every fine big game fish that feeds on crawfish there are thousands and thousands of baby fish that the crawfish kill in infancy. The occasional sucker or pickerel that the otters eat would never be missed by the anxious fishermen. But because they could see the otters, scarce though they have become in recent years, the fishermen blamed them for the lack of fish. They never suspected the crawfish that teemed in hidden crannies in the banks and shores.

Because of this misguided belief and their eagerness to keep all possible fish for themselves, the fishermen persuaded the Wisconsin Fish and Game Department to declare open season on otters in Langlade County, where Ottiga and his family were living on their island. It was ruled that otters were predators and that anyone might kill them by trap, gun, or any other means at any time of the year.

Ordinarily the poor woodland fur-bearers have only thirty to sixty days out of each year when they must be careful about traps. But here in Langlade County in early July, many months past the regular trapping season, it was legal to set traps for the unsuspecting otters. Old fathers and yearling youngsters, nursing mothers and their helpless babies—all could be legally murdered because of an old, false, woodland superstition.

XIV. The Capture

As soon as the fishermen spread the word that otters had been seen near the island in Wolf River, a trapper who trapped through that region decided to try his luck at catching them. He knew that since it was summertime the otters' fur would be thin and worth little money, but the resort owners of the area offered him a reward for each otter he could catch. In their ignorance they were afraid the otter family would destroy all the fish, and then no more fishermen would come to their camps.
The morning after Ottiga left to search for a new home, the trapper waded the river on a sandbar to the lower end of the island. Beauty and the cubs were curled up asleep in the muskrat burrow, and the trapper moved so quietly that no sound disturbed them. Always staying in the water so that his scent would be washed away, he moved to the otters' slide, then to the pulling-out place where they always ran up the bank. He set his first trap just above the water's edge, digging a shallow set just large enough to hold the trap. He spread a clean cloth on the ground to hold the sand that he dug out of the hole. In this way he could carry the extra sand away with him and leave no trace of his digging.

Then the trapper set a double-spring trap. He was careful to place the springs parallel to the way the otters traveled as they climbed out of the water. He dug a trench to hold the chain so that it too would be covered and out of sight. Finally he drove an inverted forked stake through the ring of the chain so that when an otter was caught it could not pull itself to the water and drown. If it had been the season for prime fur, he would have staked the trap in the water to drown the otter as soon as possible: but now he hoped to catch the otters alive.

After staking and setting the trap he took a large grape leaf he had with him and placed it over the trap pan. This was to keep the dirt from packing under the pan and stopping it from springing. He was very careful to smooth out the sand over the trench and chain, even covering the stake, which he had driven down out of sight in the bank. He set other traps where the otters had made pathways on the logs and banks. Working from the water and burying the traps well, he left no odor whatsoever to disturb and warn the otters. He was careful to leave everything looking just as he had found it, and when he had finished he left the same way he had come.

That evening Beauty and the cubs awakened earlier than usual. Beauty was restless. She led her cubs up the island, hoping to find Ottiga with news of a fine safe haven with
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plenty of food, so that they might move immediately. But Ottiga had not returned, and the woods and waters seemed very quiet.

The cubs were playing tag around the driftwood pile. Blackhawk was It, running, diving, and climbing on top of the logs. When Olaita came close to him he headed for the slide on the lower end of the island with the three others in hot pursuit. Through the brush and over fallen branches they ran, chuckling joyfully.

When they came to the slide Blackhawk whizzed down it like the wind, swimming far out under the water before he surfaced. He treded water with just his nose and bright little eyes sticking out, watching merrily as Olaita, Necedah, and Tomah searched for him. Two swam downstream, while Tomah headed upstream and soon caught Blackhawk's scent.

He dived toward Blackhawk, but Blackhawk dashed for the runway up the bank. He took one step on shore, and a trap snapped on his foot.
Poor Blackhawk squealed in pain and fright, trying to pull his foot out of the metal jaws. Instinctively he struggled toward the water, longing to dive to try to loosen the wicked thing that pinched his foot and held him fast. Now Tomah was by his side, but at first he did not notice anything wrong. He was still excited about the chase, and he jumped on Blackhawk gleefully, thinking his struggles were part of the game. But Blackhawk bit Tomah's nose and cried in terror. By this time Beauty had reached his side, and she saw immediately what had happened. She remembered her brothers' fate on the Ontonagon River, and she became frantic with anxiety.

Trying to be calm, Beauty called to the other cubs to go to the top of the bank and stay there quietly without moving. Then she returned to Blackhawk. In his panic he even bit his mother as she came near him, not realizing that she was trying to help him. But Beauty talked and chuckled to him soothingly, and soon Blackhawk grew quiet. Beauty tried to help him pull himself to the water, but the trap hurt his foot so terribly he could not pull hard. He had struggled and jumped about so much that the tendons and muscles of his left front leg, where the trap had clamped over his toes, were all bloody and bruised. The sharp jaws of the trap had nearly cut one toe off and smashed two others. Desperately Blackhawk and Beauty both bit at the trap, and soon their mouths were bloody. At last Blackhawk lay exhausted, crying piteously and begging his helpless mother for release.

Just then Ottiga arrived. He was heartbroken at finding such a tragic welcome for his return. He joined Beauty in her effort to bite and pull Blackhawk loose. Every effort caused new twinges of pain to travel up poor Blackhawk's leg, but as his parents chuckled gently to him he remained quiet. Ottiga tried to dig up the stake at the end of the chain, but nothing yielded. Before long the other cubs began to chirp anxiously, unable to hide their fright. They wanted to come and help too.

Now Ottiga and Beauty did not know what to do. They hated to leave little Blackhawk alone, but they were afraid the other three cubs might be caught in other traps. They knew all too well that one trap nearly always meant more, and deep in their agonized hearts they knew that Blackhawk was caught so fast they could not get him loose. Reluctantly the parents led the three other cubs down river, their hearts heavy with grief. They swam sadly about a mile downstream until they came to an overhanging bank where the young ones could hide and be safe temporarily. There was plenty of food to be found under the bank, and Ottiga caught a sucker for the cubs. Neither he nor Beauty could bear to eat, but Tomah, Olaita, and Necedah were growing cubs, and hunger overcame their grief.

As soon as they began to eat, Beauty could not resist swimming back upstream. In her hurry she ran on the bank and cut sharply across bends to get back to Blackhawk as fast as she could. He was still in the trap, but when he heard his mother's chirp he answered almost happily. Just then a frog jumped off the bank within his reach, and he seized and
ate it. In spite of his fright he was feeling hungry, and he chuckled his joy that his mother had returned.

Beauty brought him several crawfish to eat, but when his hunger was satisfied he was conscious again of his terrible pain. His leg was swollen, and one of his front teeth had broken off where he had bitten the wicked trap. Hopelessly Beauty again called him to follow her, but valiantly as he tried he couldn't get any farther than the end of the chain. He was able to get just close enough to the water so he could get a drink, but not far enough to pull the trap and his foot into the water to assuage the pain and inflammation.

By now dawn was approaching. The sun rose on a sad day for the otter family, and even the birds seemed quieter than usual. Suddenly Beauty heard a twig break in the woods. She dived quickly into the water and surfaced under some weeds. She saw the trapper cross the stream and go to where Blackhawk was fast in the trap. Blackhawk screamed in fright as the man advanced, but in a moment he had been thrust head first into a large sack the trapper carried.

In her grief and anger Beauty forgot all fear. She swam back to the island and ran up the bank, screaming defiance at the trapper. The man struck at her with a stick he was carrying. Then, as she charged to help Blackhawk, whose muffled cries came from the sack, the man pulled a revolver. Beauty was just a yard away when he shot at her, but Blackhawk, struggling fiercely and almost forcing himself out of the sack, spoiled his aim. The loud report and the crash of the bullet close to her body recalled to Beauty the dangerous experience she and Ottiga had had in the cedar swamp the winter before. She dived into the river and came up under the overhanging tree where Ottiga used to sleep on sentry duty.

Beauty watched the trapper tie the sack about Blackhawk's body, leaving only his trapped foot sticking out. With heavy mittens on his hands, the trapper opened the springs of the trap, releasing Blackhawk's foot. Blackhawk slid to the bottom of the sack, but his foot seemed to hurt more than ever as the blood tried to return to his mangled toes. He chirped miserably while the trapper reset the trap, splashing water over the bank to remove his scent after he had smoothed away all signs of disturbance. After looking at his other traps nearby he carried the sack across the river to the main bank, just below the cave where Beauty was hiding.

Beauty heard Blackhawk's piteous chirps for help. She followed through the brush, circling the trapper frantically and chirping shrilly to Blackhawk. The trapper drew his gun and fired again, but missed her in the underbrush. After that Beauty stayed farther away but kept up her chirps to reassure her youngster. Soon they came to a clearing on a small road where the trapper had parked his car. He tossed Blackhawk in one corner of the car and started the motor. The motor backfired furiously, and this so frightened
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both Blackhawk and Beauty that they ceased to call to each other. The car pulled away with a terrifying roar and in a moment disappeared down the lonely little road in a cloud of dust.

XV. Downstream to Safety

In terror Beauty ran back through the woods, unable to understand what horrible monster had carried Blackhawk away. When she reached the river she plunged in and swam to where Blackhawk had been caught. But she did not crawl up on the bank. The island looked desolate and strange, nothing like the happy playground it once had been. Chirping softly and piteously, she swam downstream. Before long she found the rest of her family. The three cubs were curled up, asleep, beside Ottiga in a hollow far under the bank. Beauty kissed each one tenderly and nuzzled Tomah where he lay curled at Ottiga's head.

But she could not sleep. She prowled restlessly about, and Ottiga's sad caresses could not comfort her. Early in the afternoon before the cubs were awake she swam back one final time to their island home. Hoping against hope that somehow Blackhawk had returned, she roved the banks. Instinct or Providence led her to avoid the traps still hidden all about, but she searched the whole grounds thoroughly, calling for her lost one. She swam to the old muskrat burrow, the spacious home where they had been so happy. She ran through each room and passageway. She slipped out the back door to where the cubs had played tag in their arena under the trees. But wherever she went no answering call greeted her. Turning sorrowfully to leave, she heard a rustle in the brush. On investigating, all she found was a big groundhog looking for a den to live in. At last Beauty ceased her calls, and as the evening darkened she slid dully into the river and swam away.

When Beauty returned Ottiga and the cubs had awakened and were catching crawfish and minnows. Ottiga saw at once that her search had been in vain, and when she called to him urgently to come away at once, he led the cubs after her unquestioningly. He knew that her anxiety now was for the safety of the rest of their youngsters, and he made no protest when she set a fast and desperate pace down the river. The whole family swam steadily, without food or rest, until Necedah began to chirp plaintively. He was lagging behind and could not keep up with the others, though he was swimming his
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best. Beauty swam back to him and chuckled gently, slowing her pace to his and relaxing for the first time since the terrible accident.

By midnight they had covered ten miles. The cubs were both hungry and weary, so they stopped on a gravel bar to feed and rest. The cubs wiped themselves dry on a spot of sand and then slept for an hour. When Ottiga and Beauty awakened them, they continued their journey downstream. Crossing overland at every possible bend, they gained many miles on the shortcuts.

Toward morning they found a large hollow log. One end was buried in the bank and the other lay in the water. Ottiga led the way into the underwater entrance, and inside was a nice nest of moss. The five otters slept a sleep of exhaustion; even Beauty found temporary relief from her grief. It was dusk when they awoke, not gay and carefree as they had used to waken but with a pang of sorrow for their playful Blackhawk.
For breakfast they found and ate a great many crawfish. But Beauty was still determined to take the family away from this dangerous region as fast as she could, and she soon urged them to start off again. A week later they were nearly a hundred miles downriver from their island home; but by taking each possible shortcut along the age-old otter trails they had cut their actual mileage to less than sixty miles. The ancient otter crossings often had only leaf-pile signposts to mark them and no clear-cut paths to show the way; yet even in this unfamiliar country Ottiga's instincts always told him which way otters always went to shorten their journeys or to avoid some dangerous obstruction.

South of Shawano, Ottiga led the family over two long overland crossings. On the second shortcut he went several miles ahead, looking for the shortest way back to the river, while Beauty and the cubs followed on his track. It was easy for them to smell exactly where he had gone, for otters can often follow other otters by scent even though the trail is many weeks old.

Ottiga was crossing a ridge that sloped down toward the river when he saw a cabin below him in the moonlight. He followed the trail carefully, watchful for a dog. As he came nearer he smelled mink—many minks from the strength of the odor, for the man living here had a mink farm. The old otter trail led too close to the house for safety—man had moved into this territory not very long ago—and Ottiga started to circle away into the woods. The next moment he stopped, one forefoot lifted and his head raised eagerly. He had smelled an otter. He rose up, straining to get another whiff. In a moment the faint summer breeze brought the smell again. Yes, it was an otter, and the scent was so familiar and dear that Ottiga's heart leaped wildly. He was sure he could smell Blackhawk somewhere very near.

**XVI. Blackhawk Finds a Friend**

When the trapper drove off with Blackhawk in his car he did not stop to collect his bounty from the resort owners but headed straight south for his home on the Wolf River west of Lunds. He was feeling a little ashamed of himself for trapping a halfgrown
baby, and he could not help admiring young Blackhawk’s spunk and the courage and devotion that the mother otter had shown. When he remembered the grief and terror in Beauty’s eyes as she had called to her helpless cub his conscience was uneasy.

As he drove the long miles to his home the trapper decided to try to raise Blackhawk in captivity. He already had twenty minks that he had saved when trapping, and he thought he might add to his income by raising otters. He had realized as he ran his trap line that in recent years all fur-bearers had been getting scarcer. Then, too, he thought the otter might become tame and make a pet for his young children.

When the trapper reached home he took a small pen about two by three by eight feet, which he used for mink, and put a box in the pen to serve as a nest. He took Blackhawk from the trussed-up sack and placed him in the enclosure. At first Blackhawk was very
frightened. He tried desperately to get out, but though the wire was not strong Blackhawk was unable to fight. His paw was so sore he could not scratch, and his broken tooth ached fiercely. Overwhelmed with pain, hunger, and loneliness, he cowered in the box, crying for his mother.

Finally the trapper put a dish of bread and milk in the pen, and when he was out of sight Blackhawk ran over to it. He lapped the milk eagerly, assuaging his thirst, and then he held some of the moist bread in his mouth. It seemed to stop the pain in his injured jaws, and in a little while he fell asleep. The next day the trapper's children crowded around the cage. At first Blackhawk squealed at them in fright, but he soon realized they meant him no harm. The oldest girl spoke soothingly to him and poked a frog she had caught through the wire. He ignored the frog at first, but when it leaped to get away his hunger overcame his fear, and he caught and ate it.

Several times that day the children brought frogs, minnows, and crawfish for him to eat. They dropped them in a water dish that had been placed in one end of the pen. Blackhawk began to watch for their tidbits, for he was a growing otter and he felt empty all the time. An otter digests his food within an hour, and all his life Beauty had kept him well supplied with milk and, later, crawfish. So Blackhawk looked forward to the children's visits as the only bright spots in a terrifying new world.

At night his loneliness for his family grew almost unbearable, and he called and cried for them again and again. Looking out on the moonlit river and back toward the sheltering woods, he repeated endlessly his mournful chirps. In the daytime, when the children fed him, he felt a little better. But even though they brought him all the live food they could catch, it was never enough.

Blackhawk's mouth and foot began to heal very soon, for a healthy young otter recovers from wounds rapidly. On the third day, to the great delight of the children, he gently took food from their hands. The oldest girl, whose voice he came to love, held several
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minnows in her hand. Blackhawk took one, then nuzzled her hand open to get the others, not grabbing greedily as the mink did.

On the fourth day, as Blackhawk was eating the frogs and polliwogs the children had brought, Marcel, the oldest girl, reached in and stroked his back. Blackhawk did not cringe, for he realized she would not hurt him. By the time he had been penned for a week he began to call for the children to come to feed him. One day as Marcel opened the door of the pen to put in his food, Blackhawk jumped out. He did not realize how close he was to freedom then, for he was so hungry he could think of nothing but food. He followed Marcel's hand right back into the cage to get his bread and milk. When he had finished he began to play for the first time since he had been caught, running from one end of the cage to the other as the children ran back and forth outside.

The next day Marcel asked her father if she couldn't let Blackhawk out. Her father watched her pet and feed Blackhawk. Then he told her to sit on the edge of the cage, open the cage door, and see what Blackhawk would do. Marcel did as her father told her, sitting quietly on the pen. Blackhawk was surprised to find his door open, but he did not realize that escape was possible. He had already learned to love Marcel, and his first move when he ran out was to pull himself up into her lap. He lay on his back as she stroked his stomach, and soon he reached up to nibble and kiss her cheek. He had been used to love and cuddling all his life, and now it seemed only natural to kiss the little girl who had been kind to him. This made Marcel so happy she gave Blackhawk a quick little squeeze, and he nuzzled her face again, chirping contentedly.

The following day Marcel took Blackhawk into the house. At first he was a trifle alarmed at all the strange sights and smells, but he lost all fear as the children sat quietly on the floor and offered him food. When he had eaten, one of the children rolled a ball on the floor, and soon he was chasing the ball with them in a merry game. If in the excitement
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Blackhawk became frightened he would scurry under the cook stove, where there was a four-inch space to hide in.

But no matter how much he enjoyed playing in the daytime, at night he was always lonesome for Ottiga and Beauty and the other cubs. He loved the children, but life with them could never be as free and joyous as the life he had known. He spent many sad and wakeful hours thinking of his island home, the driftwood pile, ‘and the slippery slide. Most of all he would remember how Ottiga had played with him and brought him food, and how his mother had comforted and fought for him in his distress. His night cries would grow even louder and more mournful; and Marcel, lying in bed listening to his plaintive chirps, would pity him and long to give him his freedom.

XVII. Escape

The night that Ottiga approached the trapper's cabin on the old otter crossing a faint summer breeze was stirring across the river and through the trees. It was this breeze that brought him Blackhawk's scent, and as he strained his senses in hopeful excitement he heard a sad and mournful chirp repeated again and again. Eagerly Ottiga crept toward the fence where the call seemed to come from. The breeze eddied now, and he could smell nothing but mink. Then a faint odor of otter came to him again, and-Ottiga gave a soft inquiring chirp. All was quiet for a moment, till suddenly a joyous chirping and chuckling broke out just behind the high board fence. Ottiga was sure at last that it was Blackhawk.

Blackhawk could hardly believe that his father was so near. Wild with joy, he called repeatedly, begging his father to come. Ottiga was running along the fence now, searching carefully, and soon he found a hole beneath it that he could crawl through. In no time at all he was beside Blackhawk's cage, and the two ran back and forth, chuckling their joy and rubbing noses through the wires. Blackhawk was so happy he rolled on his back with his feet in the air, but Ottiga began at once to try to get Blackhawk out. At first
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he scratched and tore at the wire with his paws, but when he found that did not help he
took the wire in his teeth and pulled at it. The wire was strong enough to hold
Blackhawk, but it could not resist Ottiga’s powerful jaws. In a minute Ottiga had torn a
hole in the wire large enough for Blackhawk to squeeze through.

By this time the trapper’s dog had heard the commotion and had started to bark. The
trapper thought he was barking at the moon or at the mink, and, rolling over in bed,
called sleepily, "Shep, be quiet!" Shep stopped barking. He could not understand why
his master brought home all these strange wild animals and kept them alive. But he was
forbidden to go near the mink or bark at them, so undoubtedly he must not bark at this
big otter who had just slipped into the yard. Who knows if Marcel heard the new otter
voice mingled with Blackhawk’s and guessed what was happening? If she did, she lay
quietly and raised no alarm, loving the otter baby enough to let him have his freedom.

Ottiga and Blackhawk slipped through the hole under the fence and were off. Ottiga led
the way back through the woods, retracing his trail across the ridge back to a pond
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where Beauty and the three cubs were taking time out for a snack. Beauty caught
Blackhawk's scent before they had reached the pond. In a frenzy of joy she ran to meet
them, and nuzzled and kissed her lost child as if she could not believe he was real.
Blackhawk chuckled with happiness to see his mother again, and for a little while he just
wanted to be cuddled and babied. Beauty examined him anxiously, but he looked
almost as fat and healthy as the other cubs. Only his broken tooth and deformed paw
remained to remind them of his sad adventure. The other cubs greeted him with joy and
great excitement, snifffing him eagerly all over. The many strange odors on his coat
fascinated and confused them, but they decided he was still the same playful brother
they had known.

Ottiga joined in the joyful nuzzlings and chitterings, but he was anxious to be off. He
knew they should get as far as possible from this part of the countryside, for the trapper
would undoubtedly search the river and nearby ponds and lakes, hoping to find
Blackhawk again. When the family's excitement had calmed down a little Ottiga led
them in a wide detour around the trapper's cabin into a big swamp, then hit the old
otter line back to the river.

They traveled steadily that night, but their pace was slower than usual because
Blackhawk's foot was still sore. It did not bother him when he swam, but when they
went overland it gave him pain. Nevertheless by morning they were over five miles from
the trapper's cabin and fairly certain to be safe from his search. At dawn they ate a big
pickerel that Beauty caught for their supper, and then curled up to sleep in an old
beaver house in a wild cranberry bog.

The twenty-foot house had been chopped open at the top by trappers, but there was
plenty of room to nestle inside on the old beaver nests. Blackhawk curled up happily
with his head on Beauty's neck, while Ottiga made a rough nest on the moss under the
cranberry bushes nearby, sleeping out as he usually did so he could warn his family if
any danger threatened.

Early in the warm July evening Ottiga woke up and began to catch crawfish. There were
a lot of little ones here, about an inch long, as well as old ones. When Beauty and the
cubs woke up they joined him in the search. As the otters paddled about the crawfish
scurried for cover under the grassy bank. Then the otters dived under the cool green
water and pushed their heads under the grass roots until they felt the crawfish crowd
about their whiskers. Then they simply opened their mouths and scooped the crawfish
in. They also swallowed snails, water bugs, and some dirt, but the dirt didn't bother
them a bit. It was all grist for the otters' stomachs, for they like roughage.

After eating all they could the cubs began to play. They were delighted to have
Blackhawk back with them again, and he was in high spirits with his newly regained
freedom. Because he had been penned and unable to rub in sand and leaves, his fur was
rough, dry, and brittle. He rolled and scratched himself every few minutes. But soon the oil glands at the base of the hairs were active again, and his double layer of fur became as smooth and waterproof as it should be.

Both Beauty and Ottiga were still possessed by an urge to get their precious cubs away from this region where so many accidents seemed to befall them. As a result they seldom stayed longer than overnight at any one place. Not only the need for safety but also the call of their ancestors urged them to travel. The lure of open lakes and swiftly moving waters was irresistible, and already the cubs were feeling that same wanderlust. It is deep in an otter's nature to be a carefree vagabond, and even when food is plentiful in one pond, their gypsy souls drive them on to the next lake, to a farther stream, to distant, unknown waters.

XVIII. The Blithe Travelers

Ottiga and Beauty knew not where, but travel they must. They journeyed happily night after night, the four cubs following down the winding Wolf River at an ever stronger pace. They ate when they were hungry and played at the slightest excuse; but every morning they had covered a few miles more, shortcutting around dams and towns and
the scattered farms along the river. The perfect summer days were peaceful and serene, and soon they had forgotten the anxieties of the past.

The cubs were more than six months old and getting bigger every day. Necedah was still a few inches shorter than the others, but none of them could match his suppleness in the water. He darted and turned as fast as any fish, and Blackhawk and Tomah had great trouble catching him. Tomah had a gay and venturesome spirit, and it was often he who thought of new games or led the others into mischief. Olaita grew more dreamy and gentle as she grew older, but in a rousing tussle she could more than hold her own. Blackhawk was the biggest still, just as he had always been; and ever since his experience in the mysterious world of men the others looked up to him a bit, as if he were a wise older brother.

When the family reached Lake Poygan they crossed its broad waters and continued on the lower Fox River, crossing overland between Princeton and Montello to Buffalo Lake. Here they found an abundance of all the foods that otters love - polliwogs, frogs, and all manner of bugs and crustaceans. Many water birds had found this well-stocked larder too, and as the otters swam across the lake they heard the loons laughing in the moonlight. In the early morning the terns wheeled and glided overhead, sometimes swooping down playfully as if to seize an otter cub. But the cubs were not afraid, and they would stand up straight in the water, chittering noisily till the teasing terns flapped lazily away.

Early in August the otters made their last overland crossing and came over the watershed into the Wisconsin River just below Portage. Here they found a broad and quiet waterway flowing peacefully beneath the hot summer sun. For the first time in many weeks Ottiga and Beauty slackened their pace and moved more leisurely. Here on the sandy bottom lands were green, soft-wood forests-giant elms, basswood, and lindens, and along the river banks poison ivy and wild grapevines grew in luxuriant tangles.

The cubs discovered the fun of running on the many sandbars and catching minnows in little pools of water on the beaches. They had plenty of time to explore and investigate now that they were traveling more slowly, and sometimes Blackhawk or Tomah would swim boldly ahead of Ottiga and Beauty, trying out the role of leader. But they would soon be distracted by an enticing-looking slide along the bank, or by the urge to turn some backward somersaults, and off they would dash with the other cubs, forgetting everything except the game at hand.

Gradually they worked their way past the mouth of the Baraboo River, down Wisconsin Lake, and around the Wisconsin Dam. From there on it was mostly wild country--a few settled districts here and there, but mainly a tangled, island-studded wilderness with the broad, slow river flowing undisturbed through mile after mile of scrubby bottoms and, farther back, rolling, oak-covered hills.
More and more often they found recent otter sign, and finally, beyond the swamps near Mazomanie, they met a mother otter with three cubs sliding on a steep river bank. Ottiga's cubs were thrilled to find new playmates, and Ottiga and Beauty chuckled greetings to the mother as the seven cubs dashed about in excitement. They romped on the bank in the thick weeds and took turns sliding on the fine long otter slide at the pulling-out place. In their eagerness Blackhawk and Necedah did not notice that the weeds they had chosen to hide in were nettles, and when they began to feel a painful burning on their sides and stomachs they could not understand it. They rolled in the weeds, trying to relieve the sting, and the nettles burned them worse than ever, penetrating clear through their wet fur.

They squealed in pain, and Beauty came running, calling for them to come back to the path. She coaxed them, chirping, into the water, and after a time the cool water soothed their poor stung bodies. After that they were careful not to leave the crossings again, for the crossings had been constantly used by the woodland animals since early spring, and the nettles had not had a chance to grow.

The other otter family was living in a series of muskrat dens and overhanging trees, all interconnected with a maze of hidden runways. The river bank had caved in, leaving a long scar where the sand had washed away. The exposed tree roots and projections of sod made a long narrow cave where the otters could sleep and play without being seen from above. The water was deep and quiet here, and the otters could dive right out of bed to catch their breakfast, for there were crawfish by the thousands in the river and in the pools.

Ottiga and Beauty settled their family at the upper end of the long overhanging bank, and though the cubs were still excited about their new companions they soon dropped off to sleep. Olaita twitched and mewed, dreaming happily about the girl cubs she had met that day, while Blackhawk made fierce grunts under his breath, reliving a strenuous wrestling match. When all was quiet Ottiga slipped away. Choosing a small island just across from the bank as his watch tower, he too settled down to slumber.
XIX. Sleek's Story

The sun was still two hours high in the western sky when the otters were awakened by a new arrival. Sleek, the father of the family that lived here, had returned from an exploring trip. He grunted his surprise as he smelled a strange family so near his home. When Beauty's cubs saw him they were frightened, but he chuckled softly, watching them with kind, expressive eyes. He was a beautiful otter, almost as large as Ottiga, but the cubs noticed when he came out of the water that he only had three legs. His left front leg was completely missing.

When Ottiga swam over to greet his host, Sleek went to meet him, running and swimming as gracefully and surely as though he had no handicap. He and Ottiga became friends at once and spent a long evening hunting and swimming together.

Sleek had lived on the Wisconsin River all his life, and he had lost his leg in a trap not fifty miles from here. He had been a year old then, living with his parents and sisters along the Wisconsin shores. That winter the traps seemed to be everywhere, and one night as he was pulling out on the bank his left front foot tripped a large double-spring trap. It had been wired to a tree near the water, and as Sleek struggled he dived into the river to try to escape the terrible pain. Most of the river was covered with ice, but at this point a spring creek emptied into the river, and the warmer water attracted frogs, hibernating crawfish, and schools of carp and suckers. It was an ideal winter feeding ground for otters, and the trappers must have known it.

Sleek ran up and down the bank as far as the wired trap would allow him to go. His mother started to come to him, but she was caught in a trap set farther down the bank. When she dived into the water the trap on her foot caught on a root of a sunken tree.
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and she was drowned. Sleek called for help, struggling until he was exhausted. He rested
and fought alternately until daylight came, and then, unable to continue, he huddled in
a ball to keep warm.

The trapper woke him when he came to pull Sleek's poor drowned mother from the
water. As the trapper advanced along the shore, holding a club with which to kill him,
Sleek leaped for the river with a strength born of boundless terror. He felt a terrific
wrench on his trapped leg and then he was free to swim. The wire that held the trap
fastened to the tree had broken, and Sleek swam away with the heavy trap still
clutching his leg.

He kept under the water, surfacing near the edge of the ice only when he had to come
up for air. Farther down the river he managed to pull himself out on the ice, but the
trapper was following him along the shore and approached once more with his club.
Sleek dived into the water again, swimming painfully downstream under the ice until he
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came to an old beaver run in the opposite bank far down the river. His fur was waterlogged and he was utterly exhausted as he crawled out of the water. The vicious trap still gripped his foreleg above the knee joint, and his leg was swollen and throbbing with unbearable pain.

Sleek crawled into the den, rubbing weakly in the sand to dry himself as well as he could. As he rubbed, the chain of the trap wrapped about a broken root, and he was too weak to pull it loose. Caught on the root and facing a prospect of slow starvation, Sleek was too sick to care. He dozed off into a fitful, painful sleep, awakening now and then to pull and jerk feebly at the chain.

By now Sleek's leg was so swollen the flesh covered the jaws of the trap. He whimpered with pain, crying like a baby, but no help came. His body was burning with fever, and he had no food or water; but a small ledge of ice extended into the den, and this he licked to soothe his parched throat. The trap had snapped so hard that the bone of his leg was smashed to bits close to his body, and by the second day the broken bone had shoved through the flesh and fur.

Luckily Sleek had had plenty of food to eat before he was trapped. He had been a fat healthy young otter, and now his body drew on the surplus fat he had stored, keeping up a faint spark of strength. On the fourth day his repeated feeble efforts succeeded in breaking the root that held his chain, and he became free to move about the den. Weakly he crawled far back in the beaver run, and there he found a few hibernating crawfish and frogs. He ate them avidly but they did not satisfy his hunger, which now was even greater than the pain in his trapped leg.

After his meager meal Sleek fell into a dazed, feverish slumber. He slept fitfully for three days, too sick to know what was happening. Gangrene had set in around his swollen shoulder where the trap jaws had cut off all circulation of blood; the hide and flesh were rotting away in the warm air of the beaver run. His body grew more and more gaunt every day, and fever and hunger steadily sapped the strength he had laid up.

On the tenth day when Sleek woke up he was feeling a little better. The fever seemed to be subsiding at last. He made a great effort and pulled himself to the water to drink, but just as he reached it the treacherous trap caught again on two roots, holding him fast. Wild with despair at this new disaster just as he was regaining hope, Sleek pulled against the horrible trap with every ounce of strength left in his weakened body. Suddenly there was a strange ripping noise, and he was free--free not only of the roots but of the trap as well. His poor mangled leg had finally pulled loose, leaving just a dangling piece of skin close to his body.

Strangely Sleek felt almost no pain, but at first he could hardly hop about. He had become so used to the weight of the trap that he could not balance himself without it. But when he hobbled and rolled into the water at the entrance of the den, he found he
could swim almost as well as ever. He had always swum with his front feet folded close
to his body before, pushing himself through the water with his hind feet and the motion
of his body. The loss of one front leg did not hinder him too greatly in the water.

With his last remaining strength Sleek swam slowly along the shore, desperately hungry
and longing for a safe place to rest. A little way down the river he came to a shallow
spring-fed slough leading into a bay. As he slid in along the sandy bottom of the clear
water, he found several muskrat burrows entering the bank. He heard a rustling and a
splashing coming from one of them, and he hopped weakly over to see what was
making the noise. The water was boiling with small fish that were rising out of the water
for air-masses of bullheads, carp, and quillbacks. With almost no effort at all Sleek was
able to catch all he could eat, and for the first time in days he ate his fill.

When he could eat no more he crawled into one of the muskrat dens, and there too he
found more food than he could eat—frogs and crawfish were wintering there by the
hundreds. Sleek decided to stay there until he was completely well; he did nothing but
eat and rest while his leg healed. Before two weeks had passed his wound had healed
completely, leaving only a scar in his fur where his leg had joined his body.

Sleek never saw any of his family again. When he was well and strong and had learned
how to live a three-legged life, he traveled for many miles up and down the river, always
searching for his father and sisters. But they must have been trapped too and failed to
escape. Like Ottiga, he spent two lonely years before he found happiness with a mate
and family of his own.

XX. Further Adventures

Ottiga and Sleek had become fast friends when they swam back in the warm August
darkness to join their families. Sleek's three cubs were overjoyed at the chance to play
with their father again, and he led all the youngsters in a merry free-forall. Blackhawk, Necedah, Tomah, and Olaita were so excited they porpoised and somersaulted in the water like young maniacs, and Sleek's cubs added to the happy turmoil.

All seven of them were chasing Sleek, but he could dive, swim, and leap from the water much faster than they. Sometimes as they were about to catch him he would dive to the bottom of a pool in the river that was over twelve feet deep, swim along the oozy bottom, leaving only a chain of bubbles on the surface to show his whereabouts, and surface in a drift pile at the lower end of the pool. Beauty's cubs had no idea where to look for him, but his own cubs had played this game before, and it wasn't long before they found his hiding place.

Sleek showed them another game too. A large cottonwood tree on top of the bank had been uprooted by a storm, and it had fallen across an island. Sleek would run up a limb of the tree, up the main trunk, and finally scramble to the very top of the roots, which rose about twelve feet above the bank. The otters had made a slide down between the roots of the tree to the steep bank, and then down the bank into the pool. The slide, including tree, roots, and bank, was over twenty feet long, and much the longest and steepest that Ottiga's cubs had ever seen.

The little otters followed Sleek up the tree, and his cubs went winging down the incline after him. But Blackhawk, the next cub to reach the top, cowered in fright when he looked down at the water. The slide looked much too high and steep. Chirping in protest, he crawled carefully back to the ground. Sleek's girl cubs squealed and laughed, daring their playmates to try the slide. At last Olaita decided that what these girl cubs could do, she could do too; screwing up her courage, she clambered up and made the long slide down. When she found out how much fun it was she urged her brothers to join in the game.

They were still dubious, however. They would run up to the top of the roots, slip down the first half of the slide back to the ground, but then break their slide and run to another part of the bank to continue into the water. In time they surely would have gained enough confidence to join Olaita and the others; but they had stayed here only a few days when their parents decided they must move on.

Ottiga and Beauty knew that eleven otters were too many to live in comfort and safety in one place. Sleek and his mate and cubs needed all the food available in this area. Then, too, the parent otters felt that their cubs would mind better if each family lived alone. That evening Ottiga and Beauty and the four cubs said good-by to their new friends and continued their journey down the river.

The otters took time out along the way to play on the many sandbars. When the Sauk City Dam several miles up the river was open, the water was high for many miles below it, but toward morning the sluiceways were usually closed and the water level would
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fall. When this happened minnows and even large fish would be caught in little pools on the sandbars or in shallow water, and the otters had no trouble at all catching all they could eat. They did not eat many, though, unless they were very hungry, for as long as there were crawfish to be had they much preferred them.

They passed Mill Creek, the Spring Green wagon bridge, and then a nice wild area along the river. Islands studded the quiet river waters and offered tangles of grapevines, poison ivy, ash, cottonwood, basswood, and swamp oak that made wonderful hideouts and sleeping places for the otters. On one island they found three bachelor otters living together. They were all about a year and a half old, and since otters do not mate until their second or third year, these young males had set up housekeeping together for the summer.

The bachelors were very glad to have company, and they were anxious to show off their island home. On the west bank they had a series of ponds and sloughs to swim and feed in, connected by a path that led through heavy stands of poison ivy, nettles, and brush. They had several deep slides down the island banks, and on the lower point of the island a regular diving tower. This was not a slide but a high jumping-off place that hung above a pool of water over sixteen feet deep.
The bachelors enjoyed performing for the cubs, showing them how they could dive off the bank nose first, striking the water with hardly a splash. All the cubs—even Olaita this time—were afraid to try this game, no matter how the bachelors urged them to follow. One of the young males caught a medium-sized buffalo fish as he dived into the water, and he brought it proudly to shore, inviting the visitors to eat.

The cubs ate a bit to be polite, but they were full of crawfish and much more interested in playing and exploring. They raced madly around the sandbars, chasing their hosts and one another, and for a time even Beauty joined in the games. Often, though, she stopped and watched anxiously when the yearling otters became a little rough in their play; but the cubs never complained or whimpered a bit.

Ottiga had gone ahead to try to find a home for them, and the next night he returned with news of a fine little creek full of crawfish that led off from the river farther on. After a nap Ottiga led his family off in the early morning, swimming down the left bank of the river. Olaita and her three brothers raced along the shore on the firm sand, their shining brown backs arching gracefully in the sunlight. Soon they came to an extralarge sandbar at the mouth of Snead Hollow, and here Ottiga led them away from the river and up Snead Creek.

As they crossed the swamp from pool to pool crawfish scurried away in every direction. In the water the cubs swam through swarms of crawfish, feeling them crowded up against their bodies and in their whiskers. There were crawfish of every size, from an inch to three inches long on up to big red six-inch whisky-suckers. The otters ate crawfish till they were bursting, and still the creatures swarmed around them, crawling out on shore by the hundreds. Ottiga and Beauty had seen many fine crawfish grounds before, but never so many as they found in the bottoms adjoining Snead Creek.

After eating all they could the otters continued east, following the meandering Snead Creek. At dusk they came to a fork in the stream, and after following the right fork for a mile or more they reached an old otter crossing over a hill. Across a highway, along a woody ridge, down into a hollow, and into another tiny creek they went, emerging at last into Otter Creek. Here they found plenty of cover, nettles and ragweed and yellow goldenrod. The other side of Otter Creek was pastureland, but it was a quiet secluded region with many hiding places.

Ottiga found an old woodchuck hole under a big elm tree on the bank, and this made a cozy spot for the family to sleep. They slept most of the next day, waking in the evening to swim in the cool dark water and hunt for crawfish. There were many crawfish on the banks and bottom, but there were snapping turtles who were feeding on the crawfish too. The turtles would bury themselves in the mud along the shore with only their heads sticking out. They lay quietly in wait until a crawfish or minnow swam within their reach, and then their horned beaks darted out and snapped up their prey.
The cubs soon learned to avoid the big snappers, for they were ill tempered and would just as soon nip an otter paw as not. The cubs found that they could smell where the turtles were hidden even if they couldn't see them, and they kept well away. Sometimes just for fun Beauty would dig under the mud and tip the turtles over on their backs. They didn't like this teasing, and they would strike at Beauty with their snakelike heads; but she always dodged their angry thrusts.

One noon when the cubs awakened they coaxed their mother to take them over the bank and into the pasture to a pond a little distance from the creek. They fished here for a while in the late summer sunshine, then followed a path to another pond farther along at the foot of a sloping cornfield. There were lots of crawfish and polliwogs in this pond, and the cubs splashed and squealed as they hunted.

The crawfish crawled out on the grass as the otters chased them, and soon two big white birds sailed in to take advantage of the crawfish and frogs that the otters had routed out. These white birds were egrets. They were rare in that part of Wisconsin, but this pair had been flying by and were attracted by the cubs' squealing. The cubs were not a bit afraid of these long-legged, long-beaked birds. On their travels they had often seen big blue herons standing quietly in the water, waiting to spear a fish or crawfish; and they felt sure these egrets would be as friendly as the herons.

The egrets landed right in the pond and began to strike out at the crawfish and frogs as they swam frantically away. When the frogs leaped out on the ground the egrets followed, and otters and egrets chased their dinner together. If a frog escaped an otter cub's quick pounce, it was sure to be caught soon after in an egret's spearlike bill.

Beauty and the cubs were having so much fun they forgot it was daylight and a time for caution. As they called to one another a farmer plowing in the field above the pasture heard the commotion and came to investigate. He tied his horses to the fence and quietly advanced toward the pond. As he came to the brow of the hill he stopped, delighted at the pretty sight the otters and the egrets made.

The farmer had been there only a moment when Beauty caught sight of him. She snorted a warning, and as the egrets flew away on great white wings she ran across the pasture toward the protection of the creek. The cubs followed at once, but already the farmer was running to cut off their escape. When the cubs found him looming suddenly in their path, they crouched in confusion and terror. Paralyzed with fear, they lay almost as dead, with only a faint quivering to show they were alive and apprehensive. The farmer knelt beside them, handling each one curiously but gently.

When Beauty realized her youngsters were not following her she circled to the top of a little rise in the land and chirped anxiously. When she saw the farmer turning the cubs over on their backs she ran at him, distraught; but he spoke to her in a soothing voice, saying, "I won't hurt your babies, old girl. It would be safer to do your feeding at night,
but night or day don't fear me, because I am your friend." In a moment the farmer got up and started slowly toward the cornfield, watching as Beauty ran to her cubs and herded them worriedly back to the creek.

This new excitement was too much for Beauty, and she was afraid to stay any longer on Otter Creek, though there was plenty of food and cover there, and it was a pleasant, quiet place. When Ottiga heard of their adventure he agreed that they must move on. After a short nap in the late afternoon they started to retrace their path back to the Wisconsin River. They followed many shortcuts and by morning they had reached a small island covered with brush and grapevines a short way above the mouth of the creek. Here they slept rough for the day, curling among the sheltering brambles. Already the worry that had prompted their new journey was forgotten, and their spirits were gay and carefree at the prospect of new travels and new byways to discover.

XXI. The Rattlesnake

Early that evening the cubs began to play and search for food. They frolicked gaily in the long August twilight until Beauty called to them that it was time to continue their journey down the broad Wisconsin River. But Ottiga, whose wise, bright eyes and keen nose and ears had been studying the countryside carefully, had arrived at a new decision.

It was many weeks since they had left their island home on the Wolf River, and they had been traveling downstream most of the way. Now, for the first time on their long trip, Ottiga urged that they turn back upstream instead of following down the current. As they had passed down the river he had seen many swamps and side streams that he felt sure would lead to real otter country-havens both in winter and summer, where few humans would bother them and food would be plentiful.
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Ottiga and Beauty talked it over in otter language, nudging and chuckling at each other, while Blackhawk, Necedah, Tomah, and Olaita, not worrying in the least, rolled in the sand. At last, after several false starts and much fatherly chuckling from Ottiga, they were off. With Ottiga in the lead and Beauty just behind him, followed closely by four happy cubs, they began to swim upstream through the warm summer darkness.

The cubs found the going harder than when they traveled with the current. Wherever they could they would climb out on the sandbars and run along in the shallow water instead of swimming. But there were many stretches where the river banks were steep and there were no sandy bars or beaches to run on. Then the cubs had to swim with all their strength, stretching every muscle to make progress against the current. It made their travel slower, but it was fun to push hard with hind webs and tail and feel themselves surging forward through the flowing water. On and on they swam, past the quiet river banks, six lithe dark otters head to tail. Undulating through the water one after another they looked like a bigger sea serpent than ever, for now the cubs were nearly as big as Beauty.

Soon they came to a marshy swamp back from the river shores. Ottiga and Beauty led the cubs into the many pools of the swamp, and what a time they had catching crawfish and polliwogs and young frogs that jumped every which way! But there were other woodland creatures after this plentiful supply of food. At one pool they found a big mother raccoon with six babies catching frogs and crawfish. The little coons with their black-masked faces followed their mother about and stood ready to grab any bit of food she caught for them.

Mrs. Coon had her own clever system for catching crawfish. She would stop at a crawfish chimney—a hollow tube of mud that extended above the crawfish burrow—reach down it with her hand as far as she could, and pump her hand up and down in the chimney. This made a great disturbance and turmoil in the water, awakening the crawfish at the bottom of the hole. Angrily he would swim and crawl up the chimney to see who was knocking so rudely at his den. The first thing he knew he had found Mrs. Coon's fingers and was pinching them as hard as he could, or else Mrs. Coon's fingers had found him and had him by his claws.

Either way suited Mrs. Coon. She would close her hand and pull the luckless crawfish to the top of the chimney, and the baby coons would pounce on him for their breakfast. It was a sure but slow way to get a meal. Sometimes as the mother coon pumped away in
the crawfish chimney, patiently waiting for the bite she knew would come sooner or later, she would look idly away across the swamp as if she were terribly bored with crawfish and thinking of something else entirely.

The otters thought that Mrs. Coon's way of catching crawfish was very funny. They liked their own way much better—rooting for them with their noses and feeling for them with their whiskers. They liked to vary their diet with frogs too, and the cubs particularly enjoyed chasing them as they hopped through the long marsh grass.

Not long afterward, while the cubs were catching their breakfast, some of the frogs they were chasing hopped away toward an old fallen log, hoping to hide under the loose bark. Intent on his quarry, Tomah rushed off after a frog that was hopping very fast. He ran around the end of the log and suddenly, before he realized what was happening, he had run into something. When he saw what it was his heart leaped in terror—he had collided with a big rattlesnake who was catching frogs behind the log. The big snake had just struck out at the frog Tomah had been chasing, and for the moment the snake's long, powerful body lay extended, unable to strike again until he had recoiled. Tomah had escaped the venomous fangs by a hairbreadth.

Tumbling backward, panic-stricken, Tomah sounded an alarm. Immediately all frog-chasing ceased. Ottiga and Beauty came running, the other three cubs grouped closely behind their parents. The father and mother smelled the rattler even before they reached Tomah, and they knew they faced a fight to the death. The rattler had coiled now, ready to strike, and was making an angry buzz as he vibrated his rattles at top speed. Ottiga and Beauty snorted a warning, and Tomah, temporarily out of danger, ran to join his brothers and sister. They huddled in fear in a tight little bunch.

Now Ottiga and Beauty circled the snake, cautious and alert, all their senses attuned to the snake's slightest movement. They circled slowly, careful to keep about a yard distant from the wicked head. As they moved they snorted to each other and to the cubs, warning each one to be cautious and to keep up his courage. The snake's head turned warily, following their every movement; but the two otters had him at a disadvantage. It was too hard to keep both otters in sight as they circled around him, one always opposite the other, waiting, waiting for him to make a move. He became more and more excited, and his flat, triangular head turned frantically.

Suddenly the snake could stand the tension no longer. With a vicious, flashing movement he struck at Beauty. Acting with all her otter instincts Beauty dodged, and immediately, quicker than the eye could follow, Ottiga leaped on the rattler. He grabbed it right back of its head, biting it with his powerful otter jaws. At almost the same moment Beauty seized the snake's tail just above the rattles.

Now the snake had no power to coil and thrash, and Ottiga quickly finished the struggle. He crushed the rattler's head to a pulp. Even after the snake was dead Ottiga and
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Beauty ran a little way, holding and shaking the snake stretched out between them, till they were sure no life was left in the body. They dropped it then, glad the terrible fight had ended. Calling to the cubs to follow, they left this dangerous territory, running up the bottoms from pond to pond.

As they followed the mink and muskrat trails back to the river the cubs kept close to their parents. All of them watched carefully for snakes. The cubs had often seen Ottiga kill water and bull snakes, making short shrift of them with no help at all; but they realized that a rattlesnake was a different creature altogether, a snake that it paid to let alone unless there were two or more otters to make the attack.

Several times before they reached the river Ottiga caught a characteristic sweetish odor in the air as they passed near places where rattlers were coiled. There was a rattlesnake den in the nearby river bluffs, and that night they were down in the swamps, feeding on frogs and insects. Ottiga and Beauty were glad when they got back to the river at last, for rattlesnake haunts were no place to spend a peaceful evening.

XXII. A Friend in Need

The next night the otters continued their journey upstream, passing landmarks that had become familiar on their downriver journey. They skirted the island of the three bachelors, chuckling moonlight greetings as they passed, and soon they came to an enticing-looking creek mouth that emptied into the placid breadth of the Wisconsin. This was Mill Creek, and as they detoured up it they came to a swamp and a series of ponds just across from a shot tower in a park. The shot tower was a well-known landmark in that region. In it gunshot pellets were made by dropping molten lead from a height into cold water.

The cubs were tired from their night's journey, and they were happy to curl up in a hollow under the roots of an old elm tree that stood on the banks of Mill Creek. Whenever they woke up briefly during the day they could hear the laughter and shouts of the children playing in the park on the bluff across the bottoms.

It was mid-afternoon and the bullfrogs were chunking peacefully when the cubs crawled out of bed, ready to look for something to eat. Ottiga had already slipped off to explore
the creek, so Beauty and the cubs followed his trail. At a narrow inlet that led to a backwater pond they found him listening intently to a noisy splashing. The sound seemed to come from the upper end of the bay, and Ottiga and Beauty stood up, treading water, to get a better view. At the far end of the pool the water was boiling-with carp. It was their spawning time, and they had come to this shallow bay to roll and propagate their species. Filled with curiosity and hungry for their breakfast, the otters swam cautiously closer.

When they were near the rolling carp Ottiga and Beauty charged in to catch one. It took the two of them to hold the thrashing six-pound fish. Beauty fastened her teeth on the carp’s nose and Ottiga held its tail as they swam back to shore where the hungry youngsters waited. The cubs pounced on the fish and held it down while they ate its fins and tail. They had not finished it all before the excitement of the carp convention drew them back. The cubs swam into the boil determined to catch and hold a carp of their own. But big and husky though they had grown, they were not yet experienced or strong enough to hold the frenzied fish. All four cubs would seize one carp, but with a powerful wriggle and leap it would be loose and away before they knew what had happened.

The whole family was having a wonderful time, and in the excitement they did not notice the approach of a big, stray police dog. He was a wild, lone outlaw who spent his days chasing and killing young rabbits, woodchucks, and raccoons. He too had been attracted by the splashing of the fish, but when he saw the otter cubs playing he decided they were even choicer prey. The lust to kill was in his brain, and he rushed furiously into the roaring, swarming water. He was charging toward the frolicking cubs when Ottiga first saw him, and with a piercing scream of warning Ottiga rushed to head him off.

Blackhawk and Olaita half ran, half swam through the shallow water, trying to escape from this terror, while Tomah and Necedah plunged beneath some lily pads and swam to the farthest bank. They came up under a buttonwood bush and, huddling in fright, hid there motionless, only their noses, camouflaged with green algae, sticking out of the water for air.

Ottiga and Beauty closed with the dog at the edge of the thrashing water. As the dog leaped for Beauty she clamped her powerful jaws on his nose, and Ottiga jumped for his body, clenching his teeth in the dog’s chest and legs. But this dog was not as cowardly as the hound dog they had fought in the Wolf River woods. In his eagerness to kill he ignored the pain of the fierce otter bites and, pressing his head down in the soft mud, tried to get a body hold on Beauty to shake the life out of her. Wild with fury Ottiga leaped for the big dog’s throat, but his teeth, though powerful, were not sharp enough to do vital damage to so large an enemy.
Luckily for the otters they were not the only ones after carp that afternoon. A commercial fisherman who was camped on the bank of the Wisconsin had rowed up the creek looking for some carp to spear, smoke, and sell to his customers. Just after the dog's attack he had reached the bay where the carp were spawning, and his sympathy and admiration were aroused by Ottiga's and Beauty's valiant struggle. Beauty's despairing screams, hair-raising in their rage and fear, pierced his heart. He seized his fish spear, jumped from his boat, and ran along the bank to where the dog was rapidly nearing his chance to kill.

Ottiga and Beauty did not see the fisherman until he was almost upon them, splashing through the water, brandishing his spear and shouting at the dog. But the fierce animal was thoroughly aroused, and it was not until he felt the sharp prongs of the fork in his hide that he turned from the otters and crouched with bared teeth, threatening to attack the otters' savior.
An Otter’s Story

As the fisherman advanced fearlessly, clubbing the dog with his spear and driving him back into the woods, Ottiga and Beauty hastily rounded up their frightened cubs. They swam as fast as they could back to the creek and down the creek to the river, keeping under water for many yards at a time and streaking along with powerful, looping thrusts of their backs and all four feet. They did not stop to thank their rescuer or even to wonder at his kindness; but the fisherman understood, and all the thanks he needed was the sight of Ottiga and Beauty hastily nuzzling their unharmed youngsters and the flash of six dark otter backs diving away to freedom and safety.

XXIII. Storm and Sorrow

Back in the familiar waters of the Wisconsin River, Ottiga and Beauty set a leisurely pace for several days. They continued to travel up the river, but they made many stops to rest, for they were both stiff and sore from their fierce battle with the dog. They basked side by side on the sunny banks, glad to lie quietly together and let their bites and bruises heal.

At first Blackhawk and Tomah, in their thoughtless, youthful high spirits, leaped about and teased their parents constantly to come and play with them. But finally Ottiga became impatient with their merciless pestering and gave Blackhawk a sharp little nip on the nose. Blackhawk squealed in hurt surprise, but after that the cubs played quietly by themselves until their parents called them.

More and more now, as the otters made their way up the wide, soft-flowing river, Ottiga and Beauty would let the cubs strike on ahead or make brief little detours on their own. Ottiga knew the cubs needed more independence as they grew, and maybe he remembered how early he had been forced to make his way alone. The cubs were
nearly as big as their mother now, and though they often still delighted in acting like silly babies, they had learned much otter lore and many otter skills.

Through the end of August and early September Ottiga and his family journeyed unhurriedly up the river, reveling in the golden days and quiet moonlit nights. The air was sweet with the odor of ripe wild grapes and berries, and here and there the sumac was turning scarlet. When they came into the broad blue expanse of Wisconsin Lake they explored its shores for days on end, denning at dawn in a deep sandy cave far back in the bank and swimming, sliding, and fishing for the abundant crawfish all night long.

The cubs found wonderful sport in chasing the schools of big rock sturgeon and carp, but when they were really hungry they returned to the crawfish along the shores. All through September the otters stayed in Wisconsin Lake; but as the night air grew cool and the white mists gathered along the shores in the chilly dawns Ottiga and Beauty began to think about winter quarters.

They decided to head south and west again, back down the Wisconsin to the flat river bottoms where they had found so many crawfish, and where surely they would find food in the long cold days ahead. It was an unusually warm day late in September when Beauty decided that they should be on their way. In the late afternoon they left the cave, swimming straight out across the lake. Over in the west dark storm clouds were piled on the horizon, and flashes of lightning appeared at intervals, still faint and far away but rolling slowly closer.

Ottiga watched the storm-clouds with uneasiness, chuckling his anxiety to Beauty. He would have preferred to wait until the storm was over and night had fallen; but Beauty was eager to press on. The cubs porpoised merrily along after Beauty while Ottiga
followed watchfully in the rear. They had only gone a little over a mile down the lake when Ottiga suddenly gave a snort of warning. Several motorboats were anchored just ahead, beyond a sandy reef, while their occupants fished for pike.

The boats lay so quietly on the water that Beauty had not noticed them till she and the cubs were almost beside them. At Ottiga's cry the otters dived under the water; but the fishermen had seen them and were much excited. Bored with their fishing, they saw a chance for more exciting sport. Pulling up their anchors, they began an otter chase. The sputtering of the outboard motors frightened and confused the cubs, and they became separated from one another and from their parents. They swam desperately, keeping under water as long as they could, but whenever a dark otter head came up for air, the cry "There's one!" rose in the air and a terrifying motorboat would rush through the water toward it.

Ottiga and Beauty swam about in circles, frantically calling and searching for the scattered youngsters and ducking under water only when the boats were almost upon them. At last Beauty saw Olaita making toward the southern shore. Chuckling desperately for the other cubs to follow, she headed after her. Blackhawk heard her, and with a mighty gulp of air he managed to dive beneath a threatening boat and follow his mother without being seen.

But Necedah and Tomah were not so lucky. The motorboats had surrounded them, and they were forced to dive and circle constantly to escape the fishermen's nets. Each time they came to the surface for air they chirped frantically for their parents, but the noise of the motors drowned their feeble cries. Ottiga called to them repeatedly, but he heard no answer; and as the sky darkened with stormclouds and the waves grew rougher in the freshening wind he could see no sign of them in the water.

The fishermen too were growing concerned about the approaching storm; but just as they were preparing to abandon the otter chase and make for shore one of the men succeeded in catching Tomah in his net. Squealing piteously, Tomah struggled against the meshes. As he was lowered into the boat he threw himself at his captor. The man flinched in alarm, and Tomah slipped out of the net. He scrambled up the gunwale of the boat and in a flash slithered over the side into the water.

The storm broke at last, and rain poured from the ominous black skies in torrents. The fishermen hastily headed their boat for shore and reached the beach just in time to avoid being swamped. Out on the lake the lightning played in brilliant flashes, and the thunder and the roar of the wind and waves mingled in a terrifying uproar.

The storm raged till early morning, and when the water finally calmed and the clouds cleared away the otter family was sadly scattered. Ottiga had managed to follow Beauty,
Olaita, and Blackhawk to the southern shore shortly after the storm broke, but his heart was sick at the thought of his two missing youngsters. Long before dawn he was swimming back and forth near where the boats had been, calling repeatedly for Tomah and Necedah. All was quiet; there was no answer of any kind; and far above the stars looked down remotely.

Beauty ran along the shore with the two other cubs, wailing and chirping in despair; and when Ottiga came sadly back he joined her hopeless search. They sniffed everywhere for the cubs' scents, but the rains and pounding waves had washed away all possible traces. A short way down the lakeshore they found the beached motorboats, and as Ottiga and Beauty nosed anxiously through them their hearts sank in complete despair. Tomah's scent was in one of the boats, and that meant he had been captured.

With new urgency Ottiga sniffed the sand, the banks, and all the underbrush, trying to pick up Tomah's trail. But there was no scent of him anywhere else, and no sign of Necedah at all. With heavy hearts Ottiga and Beauty turned away, griefstricken at their conviction that Tomah had been captured and killed and Necedah drowned without a trace in the storm.

But there were Blackhawk and Olaita still to care for. Ottiga and Beauty tended their living youngsters while they mourned their dead; and it was a sad and depleted family that swam down the Wisconsin River toward their winter quarters. Blackhawk and Olaita had no will to play, and Beauty and Ottiga ached with their memories—Tomah, who was so gay and mischievous, and Necedah, who had been the frailest baby of them all.

**XXIV. The Lost Brothers**

When Tomah struggled over the gunwale of the boat into the stormy waters he could hardly see a foot ahead of him. He struck out blindly with no idea of direction,
swimming for his life. As he fought the waves he still called piteously; but soon he had no strength to spare for that. For what seemed like hours he struggled through the water, washed from his course by mountainous waves and buffeted by wind and current.

When at last he reached shore he had no idea where he was; but it seemed so unfamiliar that he struck out along the edge once more, hoping to find his parents farther on. He swam on through the thunderous, pouring darkness, chirping whenever he was able. He heard no answer, but he kept on hoping. Surely Ottiga and Beauty must be around the next bend, beyond the next waves, not too far away.

Almost without rest, Tomah swam and ran along the shore until the storm had died away. By dawn he was at the mouth of an unfamiliar river, flooded with rain and bounded by steep, tree-lined banks. He realized now that he was lost and that his family had somehow disappeared. He was so exhausted from his night-long struggles that he could not even feel afraid. Half-dead with fatigue he crawled into a hollow beneath an overhanging elm, and in a moment he was deep in sleep.

Late in the afternoon Tomah woke up to the sound of urgent chuckling, and as he opened sleepy eyes he found his brother Necedah nuzzling and kissing him, frantic with joy. Unable to believe his eyes, Tomah sniffed and smelled Necedah all over, overcome with happiness to have found one of his family. After much anxious otter chattering Tomah learned that Necedah had been blown by the storm in the same direction he had, and, finding Tomah’s scent, he had followed him up the river to where he lay asleep.

The brothers slept curled together in the hollow until it was dark, and then, driven by hunger, they started up the shores of this strange river. They could not help believing that their family had been captured by the fishermen; but even so their sad little hearts kept hoping that maybe somewhere just ahead Ottiga and Beauty were waiting for them, and this faint hope kept up their spirits.
An Otter’s Story

The two cubs traveled up the Baraboo River all that fall, living on crawfish and an occasional carp and sleeping in rough hollows or under the tangled grapevines. When snow fell they were above Reedsburg near Wonewoc, and there they found an old muskrat burrow that sheltered them all winter.

It was at a pulling-out place near their burrow that the cubs met another otter who was wintering in that region. This was an old male otter called Neptune, a real patriarch about eighteen years old. Neptune had worked his way down from the Wisconsin tributaries, fathering several families on the way but always losing his mates and children to trappers or in other accidents. His fur was frosted with white hairs now, but in spite of his age he could outswim any otter that Tomah and Necedah had ever seen, even their father. Neptune's scarred old heart was touched by these two young orphans, and he soon took them under his wing. He let the cubs have a share of his food, and often he joined them as they played sliding games on the ice and coasted on their stomachs down the snowbanks.

Neptune also knew secrets that few other otters knew. One secret was where the large, leather-backed or soft-shelled turtles wintered. He would swim along the shallow sandbars where the water was about two feet deep. Soon he would stop and root in the sand, and before long out would pop a leather-back turtle. Neptune would push the sluggish turtle through the water like a plate, then carry it onto the ice. There he killed it and tore the meat out of the shell, eating only the liver and entrails.

Tomah and Necedah soon learned to do the same, for turtle meat, filled with vitamins, made a satisfying and healthful change in their winter diet. Neptune showed them where minnows and carp schooled all winter in the deep unfrozen pools, and the fish were easy to catch when the icy water had slowed their movements. When the cubs felt like a dinner of frogs, they knew they could find them hibernating where the river banks were springy.

One January day while the two cubs were fishing with Neptune at a wide place in the river Neptune caught a big carp through an air hole in the ice. He brought it to the top of the ice and was eating its fins with relish when a big bald eagle soared over. The eagle spied the fish and, being very hungry, screamed jealously at Neptune. Neptune did not even bother to scream back—he just kept on eating; but the two cubs dived hastily into the water and watched with just their eyes and noses peeking over the edge of the ice.

The eagle had found little food that day, and he wanted Neptune's fish. He swooped toward the carp and caught it in his huge sharp talons. But Neptune was not to be frightened that easily. He hung onto the fish grimly as the eagle attempted to fly away with it, and the bird soon discovered he could not lift both Neptune and the fish off the ice. Croaking and grunting, the two antagonists slithered across the ice together, the eagle's wings beating furiously as he tried to rise into the air.
Soon the eagle's wings began buffeting against Neptune's hoary old head, and this made Neptune really angry. He released his hold on the carp's head to charge the eagle, but the instant he let go the eagle lifted the fish off the ice and sailed up to the top of a scrub oak tree. There above the rocky bluff he ate his breakfast, screaming mockingly at Neptune between bites. Muttering angry otter talk, Neptune went back to the air hole to catch another carp.

Often during the long cold winter nights Tomah and Necedah thought sadly of their parents and their brother and sister. They had each other to play with and to cuddle up to in the muskrat burrow, but that was not the same. They longed to hear the mild sweet chirping of their gentle mother, and to watch their big handsome father diving and gliding as he foraged for the family. They remembered the fun they had had playing with Blackhawk and Olaita through mile after mile of Wisconsin waters. Then they would grow sad and listless, lying quietly in the burrow while the blizzards raged outside, wondering what had become of their beloved family and whether they would ever see them again.

As spring returned slowly to the woods and streams the snows turned to cold rains, and the cold rains to warm rains. Each sunny day the sun rose a little earlier, a little farther to the north. Soon the rain and sun had melted the snow and the frozen forest floor, and the fragrant leaf mold gave like a water-soaked sponge beneath the otters' feet. With spring the cubs' spirits rose. The coming of cold weather had brought the loss of their family, but now that the sun was returning, somehow they felt that their family might come back to them too. So many old friends were returning now—the ducks winging north through the valleys, spring peepers calling again from the swamps, the birds' morning chorus swelling louder each dawn as more and more summer residents arrived. Tomah and Necedah could stay no longer in the muskrat burrow; eager and impatient, they yielded to the otter urge to travel.

Tomah and Necedah were frisky yearlings now, full-grown except for the few extra inches and considerable muscular development that complete maturity would bring. Necedah was still an inch or two shorter than Tomah and slimmer through the body; but he could swim circles about his slower brother when he really wanted to show off. They took plenty of time to frolic and play as they traveled, and all along the way they found all the crawfish they could eat.

At first they headed southwest from the Baraboo River, crossing many little streams and marshy ponds along an old trail. Below Yuba they came to Pine River, and as they journeyed south along it they searched eagerly at each pulling-out place for signs of their parents or sister and brother. Often they found otter sign, and once or twice met other otters, but never a trace of their own beloved family.
An Otter’s Story

All along the way they met other woodland animals playing or hunting through the cut-over woods and along the river banks. Many deer lived in these woods, and the expectant mothers were roaming the brush, looking for secluded spots to bear their young. Tomah and Necedah watched curiously as a father beaver coaxed his three yearling kits away from their old home so that the mother beaver could raise her new litter undisturbed.

One morning before Tomah and Necedah had found a place to sleep they heard a shrill yapping and chattering from a tree not far from the river. They listened curiously, then decided to investigate. Climbing up the bank, they saw that high in a big cottonwood tree a pair of flickers were fighting a large gray squirrel. The squirrel was trying to get into their nest to steal their newly laid eggs. One flicker was in the nest pecking at the squirrel’s eyes and nose every time he came near, while the other hovered in the air and pecked his ears.

Meanwhile a red fox was sitting at the foot of the tree, watching and barking excitedly, hoping that either a bird or a squirrel would fall down and provide him with a meal. The birds’ shrill cries, the squirrel’s angry scolding, and the fox’s hungry yapping made a noisy bedlam for nearly twenty minutes until the squirrel finally gave up and retreated through the treetops, leaving the fox hungry and disappointed.

XXV. Family Reunion

By the end of May Tomah and Necedah had reached the mouth of Pine River, and as they came out on the broad waters of the Wisconsin their hearts leaped with joy and recognition. Here was the country they had journeyed through so happily with their
family the previous summer, and now all their hopes revived. At the first pulling-out place they came to, they sniffed every leaf and bush with eager concentration. With a loud chirp of excitement Necedah called Tomah to a spot he was examining, and as both cubs snuffled intently there came to them the faint but unmistakable scent of Ottiga.

It was an old sign and Ottiga must be far away by now; but at least they knew that he had recently been in this region. Eagerly they watched and sniffed as they proceeded down the Wisconsin River, and at almost every pulling-out place they found Ottiga's scent, a little stronger each time. They pressed on steadily, and at an otter slide below Boscobel they found Blackhawk's and Olaita's scents as well.

Ecstatic now with happy expectation, Tomah and Necedah sprinted down the river, stopping to fish for crawfish only when they were too hungry to continue. They kept expecting to overtake their family beyond each turn of the river, to meet them on the other side of every island, but time after time they met only disappointment.

They were almost at the mouth of the Wisconsin, where it flows into the Mississippi River in the wide, wooded bottoms, when they found on one of the many brushy little islands some very fresh otter sign. It was Blackhawk's sign, there was no doubt about it; and as Tomah chuckled excitedly to Necedah to come and see, a joyful answering
An Otter’s Story

chuckle came from the water below them. Wheeling in surprise, both Tomah and Necedah ran to the top of the bank, and there in the river was Blackhawk, standing up in the water and trying to see who had called.

There was a bedlam of happy otter cries, nudgings, and frenzied leapings about while the three brothers greeted each other. In a few minutes a sleepy Olaita poked her head up over the bank to see what all the excitement was about. Seeing her two lost brothers miraculously found, she ran to them with cries of love and happiness, frisking about them and kissing their noses with sisterly joy. Finally Ottiga himself appeared, emerging from the bank where he had been sleeping.

When Ottiga saw his long-lost youngsters running to meet him, sleek and well and big as life, he thought he was still asleep and dreaming. But Tomah’s and Necedah’s joyful nuzzlings and caresses soon convinced him that they were real. They almost knocked their father over in their eagerness, and in a minute Ottiga was frisking and wrestling with all four cubs at once in a frenzy of boisterous delight. They ran and leaped along the bank,
sliding down the mud slide and somersaulting deliriously in the water till the river boiled with their splashing and the warm May evening echoed their happy squeals.

When the first transport of joy had passed Tomah and Necedah asked at once where Beauty was, and they began to sniff around the island burrows, hoping to find her at any moment. But Ottiga discouraged them. Acting very mysteriously, it seemed to Tomah and Necedah, he made them understand that they must not search for their mother or try to pick up her trail.

Tomah and Necedah were very disappointed and confused, for they were longing to greet Beauty and play with her again along the river shores. But when they asked Blackhawk and Olaita about her, they knew no more than they. Ottiga and Beauty, Blackhawk and Olaita, had spent the long winter together on Telegraph Island in the Mississippi River bottoms. Late in February Beauty had disappeared, and Ottiga had not let Blackhawk and Olaita follow her.

Since then Ottiga had led his two youngsters up and down the lower Wisconsin River, feeding at the abundant crawfish grounds and never straying far from the mouth of the Kickapoo River. Sometimes Ottiga too would disappear, often for days at a time; and then, though they were sorely tempted, Blackhawk and Olaita had known that he did not want them to look for him. They had grown used to living a great deal by themselves; and though Tomah and Necedah bragged about their adventures and their months of independence, Blackhawk and Olaita had become nearly as independent as they.

For many days Ottiga stayed with his four yearling youngsters, joining in their games and hunting expeditions with a spirit as merry and gay as theirs; then one day he was gone, and they saw no sign of him for nearly a week. They missed his companionship and reassuring presence, but they were sturdy young otters now and really enjoyed the feeling of being on their own.

It was a mild June evening when Ottiga reappeared. The four young otters were fishing for crawfish in a swampy slough near their island burrow, and Olaita was scolding Tomah for splashing too much and scaring the crawfish into their holes.

Ottiga swam up to them and, chuckling mysteriously, told them all to follow him. One after another they headed upstream in the summer twilight, excited and curious at Ottiga's strange manner. At the mouth of the Kickapoo River, Ottiga led them up its narrow banks, detouring the stream's many tortuous bends on woody shortcuts. They went steadily up the river, ever deeper into the woods and wild brambly underbrush. At last they came to a small clearing beyond a willow tree, and as Ottiga climbed out on the bank he uttered a soft chuckle. At once there was a joyful answering chirp, and from below a rocky ledge along the stream bank Beauty came running out.
An Otter’s Story

When Beauty saw four big young otters rushing toward her she crouched for a moment in confusion and uncertainty. Then with a chuckling cry of recognition she flew toward her children, nuzzling them and kissing them in a frenzy and smelling Tomah and Necedah from head to tail in overjoyed amazement. She leaped about in delight, running back and forth from one to another and then to touch noses with Ottiga, sharing her happiness with him.

Suddenly Beauty stopped in the middle of a gleeful rolling and ran off, disappearing below the rocky ledge. In a minute she popped out again, more slowly this time, and as she advanced into the clearing again, clucking and fussing like a mother hen, the young otters saw three furry little objects tumbling after her.

With a squeal of joy Olaita ran toward them, her excited brothers treading eagerly on her heels. Proudly and tenderly Beauty nosed the three little fur balls into a straggling row. Looking happily around at all her family, she introduced their new sisters and brother. Ottiga ran back and forth around them all, tenderly touching first one and then another with his muzzle, so happy and proud of his fine big family that he just couldn't help nuzzling them all.

Tomah and Necedah, Olaita and Blackhawk, were overjoyed at these delightful babies, and soon they were squabbling over who was to teach them to swim and who was to take them fishing. The babies themselves were enchanted with all the attention they were getting, and the two little females and the one little male rolled and tumbled and ran in circles till their stubby little legs collapsed beneath them.

The babies were almost ready to learn to swim, and soon the whole family would be able to travel together. The older cubs looked forward with eagerness to many happy hours of playing with the younger ones, and Beauty and Ottiga were filled with content as they watched their two sets of healthy children.
At last Beauty herded the sleepy babies back into their nest below the rocky ledge, and as she led them off Ottiga called to the others to return to their island in the river. Swimming down the Kickapoo in the soft moonlight, Ottiga watched his yearling youngsters fondly. Now they were happy and excited, impatient for the day when Beauty and the babies could join them; but Ottiga knew that they would not be satisfied even then.

These youngsters were too big and lively to be willing to slow their pace to the babies' speed for long; and though they loved their new brother and sisters, and their parents even more, Ottiga knew they would not stay with them much longer. They had tasted independence and the lure of traveling on their own, and already they were impatient when Ottiga moved too pokily to suit them.

It was nature's way, and it was as it should be. The yearlings were growing up, and though they didn't know why, they already felt the need to seek other otters of their own age. By next spring they would be finding mates and starting families of their own; and much as they loved their parents and the new babies, their own independent lives were ready to begin.

Ottiga was wise enough to know these things and accept them; and swimming with the young ones down the river he felt at peace. Soon the family must part again, going its separate ways; but all along the friendly, flowing streams, and now and then among the marshy swamps and blue-eyed lakes, they all would meet, merging their new lives long enough to dive and play together as before.