

PERSIMMON JIM
the 'Possum

PERSIMMON JIM the 'Possum

by
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ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR

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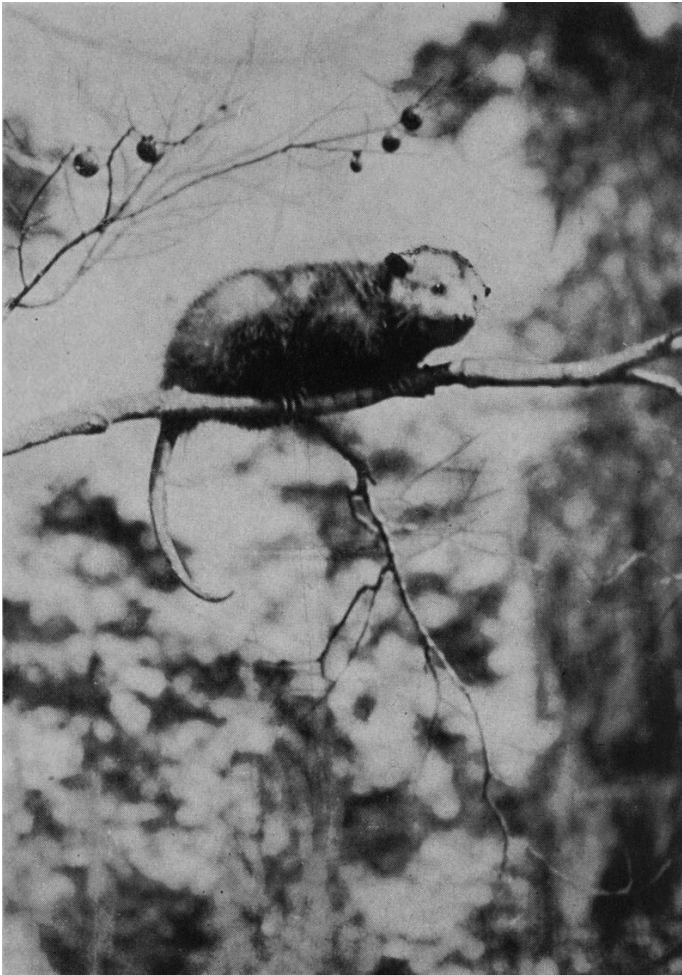
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To Elizabeth



"Climbing among the branches of the persimmon trees
and watching the luscious fruit as it ripened"

PREFACE

THE opossum is the last member, remaining in North America, of that once numerous and very curious group of animals, known as marsupials, which carried their young, after birth, in pouches under their bodies. It is a cousin of the Australian kangaroo, and represents an ancient form of animal life lower than the types now populating the greater part of the world.

It has been found that the opossum brain is much smaller than that of other animals of similar size, and that its relationship to the egg-laying reptiles is a close one. But, be that as it may, this little creature has proved itself to be more able than other wild animals to cope with man. Its intelligence is of a kind not always understood, and its life in the woods an interesting one.

As a pet, however, it is not much of a success, for daytime it dedicates altogether to sleep.

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Disturb its dreams and it will only gap good-naturedly and, at first opportunity, go to sleep again. The young ones, however, at the age when they begin to make sallies from their mother's pouch, are without doubt the cutest of all the little woods brownies. Little larger than mice they can climb and scamper about in a manner most surprising; but their moments of play are rare, for they are full of a dignity which, in anything so young and sprightly looking, is nothing short of ridiculous.

The trick of feigning death, or "playing possum" as it is called, is so remarkable that it deserves minute description. When escape by running or climbing is impossible and danger from man or dog is very threatening, the opossum usually drops on its side voluntarily, or lets the first touch of the enemy knock it over in a position exactly like that of death. Rough treatment or the ordinary attack of a dog will not injure it because its posture, although apparently unstudied, is in reality the

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right one to enable fluffy fur, thick skin and the heavy layer of fat on its body to protect its ribs and vital parts. Strangely enough, too, the shifting of the apparently dead little beast to a position more vulnerable is a difficult matter for an enemy. It knows how to resist this without visible effort.

Its mouth hangs open, its eyes become glazed, there is no sign of heartbeat or breathing; but, let the dog or man turn his back and walk a short distance away; then suddenly the dead one scrambles up a tree or to a safe hole! He is slow, but a good gauger of distance, and rarely waits longer than necessary for his get-away.

From four to nine little ones comprise the average family, though opossums have been known to have seventeen young in one litter. Sometimes, indeed, the faithful mother is taking care of very tiny young ones in her pouch while an older lot is still being guarded and led about, or even carried on her back.

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The character, Persimmon Jim, is based upon the fragmentary history of an exceptionally large opossum who for years lived on a farm in the southern part of New Jersey. His counterpart, however, might be found in any eastern state, from New York to Florida, for fortunately his tribe is still a fairly numerous one, its range wide. Persimmon Jim, however, was unusually courageous. In all his encounters he was ready to fight to the end, instead of "playing dead" when hard pressed.

The opossums, strange to say, need no laws to protect them, other than those of fair play. Their peculiar abilities carry them through and make for them in most communities staunch friends, who link them with all that is romantic in the mysterious night life of the woods, and who know that they do more good than harm in this world of ours.

Nearly everyone enjoys tales of the fox, the rabbit, the 'coon, the squirrel, the skunk, and the 'possum. What would these stories be without the

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quaint personality of this weird little "left over" from a once mighty race? He is still one of our neighbors, but a most humble one, for he comes, in his quiet way, only to the back door and is happy when occasionally he gets any gleanings from the dinner table.

Some of the old ones become scalawags. Yes, Persimmon Jim might be called one of these.

J.W.L., BETHAYRES, PA.

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PERSIMMON JIM

the 'Possum

CHAPTER I

PERSIMMON JIM

FARMERS who lived along the banks of Goose Creek near the Pine Barrens could tell many tales of an old opossum they called "Persimmon Jim." Whenever a chicken was found missing it was he who was blamed, or when some night prowling animal fooled the hunters and their dogs, it was he who was made the hero of the story.

On Goose Creek the pine woods and gloomy cedar swamps shut in the fields. The little chicken farms were rather lonely places, and there was not a great deal of outside news to discuss at meal times or in the cold evenings before the fire. So the

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interesting stories of this old warrior 'possum who could not be caught or driven away, became an entertaining feature of home gatherings.

This was a chicken-raising country, therefore any animal that might eat chicken was an enemy to all. He had to be destroyed. Yes, Persimmon Jim must go; but how to make him go was the question. Many a boy, full of confidence, set traps and worried over the problem, for the one who could say he had caught this uncannily clever creature could see himself at once a hero. But Jim lived on.

The 'possum had reason to know that the hand of everyone was against him. Still, something kept him always in the neighborhood. Was it that the big fellow really loved the little valley? He had been raised there and certainly he knew much more about it than the farmers who, under the laws of mankind, owned the ground and wanted to oust this wild creature from

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his home.

Sam Collins was one of these farmers.



Left Front
Foot

He raised fine white leghorn hens, but he also had the only herd of cows in the Goose Creek Valley and sold milk to his neighbors. Sam Collins was a wise and a hard worker, but Ed Johnson, the colored man who took care of Sam's five hundred hens, knew even

more than he did about farming.

Ed Johnson had a gun; he also owned a long-legged black and white mongrel that was supposed to hunt 'coons and 'possums. Needless to say, therefore, Johnson became the greatest enemy of Persimmon Jim and of all others of the so-called "varmints" on Goose Creek.



Right Hind
Foot

The story of Jim really started at the point where a

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newcomer in that district, a farmer named Ben Slown, told his nextdoor neighbor, who happened to be Sam Collins, of the loss of four half-grown pullets, and learned for the first time of the existence of the ‘possum whose kind he thought he had left behind when he moved from his former place in the center of the Pine Barrens. Then and there Jim acquired another dangerous enemy. Farmer Slown did not stop to consider whether something else might have been the thief; the one word “‘possum” from Sam Collins was enough for him. He vowed vengeance.

Anyone hunting for Persimmon Jim on this warm day in May, might guess that he would be hidden in some dark hole or in a hollow tree far in the swamp, where he could think over his sins and tremble if he heard anything approaching. He might look for him in the old stone drains around the fields, but never in the hay-loft of Ben Slown’s barn. Yet there is where he

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was, curled up comfortably in a pocket he made for himself by boring down into the hay. Not even a dog could find him there. Yes, Jim was a wise old fellow and perhaps even a match for Ed Johnson.

Jim of course knew something about mankind. When quite young he and his sisters and brothers had been caught in a trap with their mother. The little ones, scarcely larger than mice, could have escaped, but they would not leave the old 'possum and so were found and taken to a farmer's house for pets.

Jim and one of his little sisters were later given away to a neighbor and were then kept in a big attic room where Jim, who remained as wild as ever, hid himself in a new place every day. Often he could not be found at all. And so, sharp little fellow that he was, he learned something about the hiding game which helped him later.

His sister became tame, but he disliked

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being handled and fought against it with all his might. Always he was watching for a chance to escape, and one night he found the attic window open and climbed out on the roof. Here he could see the fields and the trees close at hand, but could not get down to them, and so had to spend the following day in hiding behind the chimney while search was made for him all over the house.

When night came he was still free but almost thirsty and hungry enough to return to the attic. However, he once more explored the roof and, after a time, found the lightning-rod. On this the little fellow managed to climb down to the ground, using his tail as a brake. With the pleasant feel of cool grass under his tired feet, he wandered off in a lonely way to the farmer's garden, stuffed himself with strawberries and crawled underneath a pile of boards for the day. Thus began his adventures.

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This farm, with the big attic and the strawberry patch, was the one which years later was bought by Farmer Ben Slown, who did not know that with it came a 'possum.