



A RABBIT CHASE ON ICE.

BY HERMAN RAVE.

ALL night it rained and froze. I could hear through the slightly-opened windows, the steady drip, drip, drip, and the low, clattering sound of the swaying branches, like the rattle of glass-pendants on a chandelier. Toward morning the rain ceased and it turned very cold.

When the sun rose there was fair-land spread out before me. But it meant that every step would be full of peril, and to reach town, by any usual means, almost impossible.

Such a scene! Every tree a shimmering apparition of indescribable beauty, every blade of grass, every weed scintillating with many-faceted ice-diamonds; even the ugly old fences became beautiful with crystalline pendants, and the level fields, as far as eye could reach, one vast glare of shining, blinding whiteness.

The landscape was a symphony in white, gray and black, with touches of most delicate gold and blue and russet. A soft, pearly mist floated toward the southwest, and our orchard hung on the hillside like a cloud, strangely beautiful with its filigree of twigs in silver and black. It seemed to hover so lightly over the icy ground, that one would not have been a bit astonished had it risen and drifted away.

The whole seemed as unreal as a dream.

No one but myself appeared to be abroad, and, as I walked out to the gate, not a sound was to be heard but the crackling of ice particles under my feet. Every step meant the risk of a fall, and how to get down the hill to the creek, and up again on the other side, was a problem. To walk it seemed impossible, and to drive a smooth-shod horse over that glassy, icy road, altogether out of the question. The fields were equally as impracticable as the road, so I stood and wondered, and pondered, holding on to the gate to keep from slipping. I wanted to go to town, but I forgot all about it a few minutes later.

The low, mellow note of a horn sounded through the stillness of the morning. It came from across the beech woods,

where the pike curves away to the north-east and skirts willow thickets and briary patches. Some one was out hunting, and hunting with a pack of hounds, for I could hear their baying and my nerves tingled to the music.

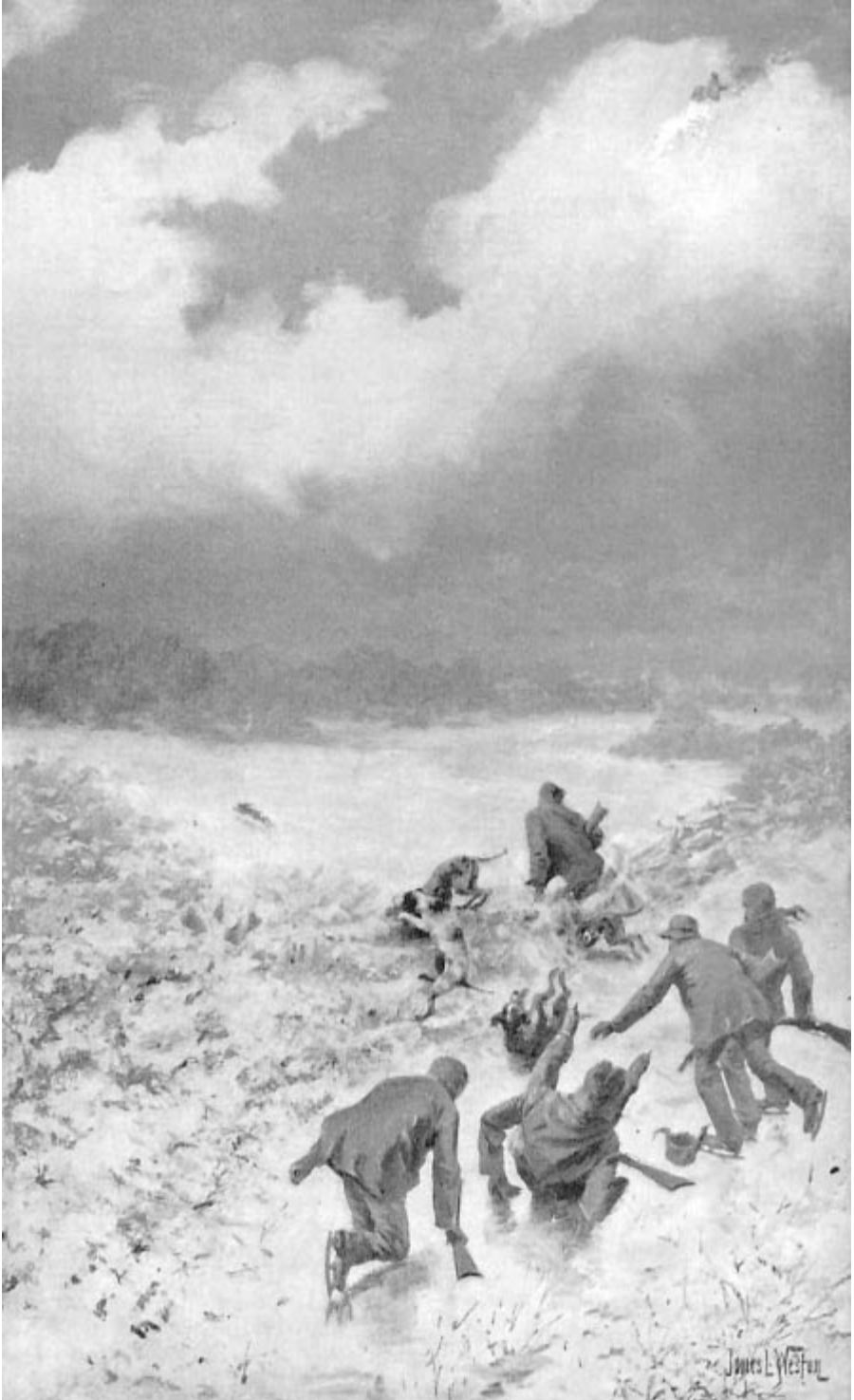
The sound of the baying came nearer and nearer, and the chase, if such it was, headed my way. But how in the world did the hunters get over the icy surface?

For a few moments I stood and listened. Then I saw a number of hounds bouncing over a rail fence, and the dark figures of men following not far behind, issuing out of the woods.

Down toward the creek headed the pack—one, two, three, four, five beauties—and now I could see what they were after. It was a rabbit, forced from its form in the briary thicket, and running for dear life along the creek bottom. And the men—why, they were on skates! On skates! It was the very idea! Why had I not thought of it before? I made a dash for the house, fell two or three times, jolted every bone in my body, but the steel runners were under my feet in a jiffy; and out to the gate, into the road, I flew, just as the hounds swept past, yelping and baying, sliding and slipping, falling and running, the men, five of them, close behind, each carrying a gun and sailing up the hill with the impetus gathered on the descent beyond the creek. As they came they called to me to come on and join the chase. So away we went, down the road, after the hounds and rabbit, the steel under us hissing and singing with the speed.

Now the rabbit and the pack managed to run I hardly know, but they did, and every once in a while we could see bunny, a small dark ball, slipping along swiftly, just ahead of the leading hound.

Straight along the road he went, for a quarter of a mile, then swerved, dodged through the fence and took to the fields, the pack losing time and falling over one another in the efforts to scale the top rail. We caught up with the dogs and tumbled over the fence awkwardly,



Painted for *OUTING* by Jas. L. Weston.

"THERE WAS A TANGLE OF HOUNDS AND MEN." (p. 352.)

for skates are not made to climb fences with, and there was a tangle of hounds and men, trying to get on their feet; but the hounds won, and on they dashed again, first slowly, then gathering impetus and surety of motion.

The rabbit had gained nearly an eighth of a mile. Away we went after the pack, laughing, shouting, yelling like mad. Talk of snow-shoeing after big game. Why, the poor things can't run in the deep snow, and the hunter himself makes comparatively slow speed, while we were racing after our quarry at a terrific gait, with all the excitement of climbing over fences and through weed-patches or other obstructions with guns in hand, sometimes going down with a bone-breaking thump, and sliding and whirling along on our backs for yards before we could regain our feet. Riding to hounds and fox was not "in it."

The ice flew in sparkles from the steel as we swept over a level meadow, then wheeled into a cornfield, gliding along more carefully and watching the guns as we crossed the rows or followed them. It seemed as if surely some one would get a bad fall at the pace.

"Wow! Wow—oo—ou—oo," sang the hounds as they slid and tumbled and ran, but bunny gained on us in spite of efforts and baying. Past a woods he raced, but could not turn into it or double on account of the smooth, gliddery surface, and straight on hallooed the chase, over a half of mile of level ground, blinding white with the sunshine upon it, and then the country dropped down toward a creek.

We saw the incline, but there was no stopping, no halting, no turning at the gait we were racing. Master Rabbit struck it first, and away he went as if shot out of a cannon, the hounds close behind. Down went the leader! down went the next! until they all sailed along in a bunch, pawing and kicking, yelping and struggling against fate, down over the smooth surface toward the bank and the stream, some ten feet below, and there they pitched out of sight; but we knew they were safe, for we heard them almost immediately again baying in pursuit.

But we also had struck the incline and while we could, guns were unbreeched and cartridges taken out, for there was no telling what sort of a tumble there might be to the bottom.

With a shout we started down abreast, feet close together, swifter and swifter, swifter and swifter, until the very breath seemed to be snatched away before it could be inhaled. The keen air stung and prickled our faces like tiny needles. There was not a sound heard but the whizzing of the skates, nothing seen but the glistening ice-path ahead! It was a tremendous pace. It seemed minutes, it was seconds. There was the edge of the bank!

"Look out!"

Every one bent knees for the jump. Then came an indescribable sensation of falling, flying, and sliding. a rattle and clank of gun-barrels, skates and ice, and six men struggled to their feet, some grunting and rubbing themselves, but nobody badly hurt.

Zigzagging, swaying along with even motion, we gained the crest. Then the rabbit led us a short dash, straight through a sedge-grown field, the brittle, frozen, ice-covered grass shivering into showers of brilliants about our feet.

Out of this we wheeled into a clear, glassy field. Runny was turning, and we could see him flying away at his best speed—a last effort—into a woods on the left, the hounds not more than fifteen yards behind, bunched and yelping furiously. After them we glided, dodging branches, skirting thickets, tripping over twigs, some one falling every now and then to shouts of laughter. There was no time to wonder at the ice-covered splendor of the great gray trees, for we were losing ground, stumbling through this difficult terrain; but the chase was nearly over, the game tired, and as we emerged from the woods it was plain to be seen that the hounds were gaining rapidly.

We made the steel ring over the level, shouting, as we flew, to be in at the death; but the rabbit missed a leap across a ditch, rolled back, and the hounds were upon him.

The sport was over, the horn sang out a mellow note of triumph, far and wide, over that wonderful, vast skating rink, and with rhythmical strokes we sped toward home, certain that we had enjoyed a most novel and rare sport, such as may not fall to our share again within a lifetime. But next day we were without doubt the stiffest, sorest, most demoralized crowd in creation, and—the ice was melting.