

## DOWN TO EARTH

# *The Great*



# *White Owl*

ALAN DEVOE

THE MIDWINTER of the year, for a countryman in New York State or New England, or for that matter in nearly any part of the country but the southernmost, is a bleak season.

The hundreds of species of bright birds that make the green summertime lively and musical have long ago disappeared in autumn migration. We are left with only a handful of hardy ones . . . downy woodpeckers hammering away at the frozen bark, chickadees with rumpled feathers being whipped and blown around like withered leaves in the cutting wind, drab tree sparrows huddling on ice-sheathed twigs as the temperature drops and drops. There are no moths and butterflies now, no hum of insect-wings, no woodchucks and chipmunks to animate the familiar pasture. There is

small stir of life in this leaden-skied bitter landscape. A countryman looks out through the peephole he has rubbed in his frosty windowpane upon stretching fields of frozen whiteness in which he may see no creature moving.

Because of the snow, of course, we know that we are still companioned by living things around us, for the record of their tracks is there. We can go out on one of these sub-zero mornings, when the snow squeaks under our boots and our breath hangs in a cloud around us in the still air of sunrise, and can make sure that actually, however it may seem, the planet has not died during the night. Here, across this white expanse of pasture, runs a trail of Y-shaped patterns that inform us, however winter-killed the world

may look, that in fact a rabbit was prancing this way during the dark hours. Here, from the trunk of this old shagbark hickory to that snow-mounded old stone fence over there, we can discern a tiny filigree. We are advised that the white-footed mice are still astir in the nights, under the star-twinkle. What's this little hum-mocking and ridging in the snow-crust, among the twisted apple trees in our old orchard? Dig down a little and we find a tunnel, under the snow. It's the pathway of meadow-mice, moving from tree trunk to tree trunk, to nibble away, invisible, at the bark below the snow-line. No, we are not alone. But the evidences are largely pretty indirect ones, like these. Animaldom, what remains of it — what has not gone away on migration, or sunk into the stuporous sleep of hibernation in deep burrow and rock-cranny — mostly makes itself known to us only by hint and suggestion. What we *see* of it, in the warm flesh, may be only those half-dozen lean black crows, sailing without a sound down the bitter wind over the snow-bowed hemlock tops.

WHEN THE WORLD is like this, bone-white, icy, silent — when it takes no very fanciful man to think his world of woods and fields has turned to a tomb — there is an extraordinary and special excitement attaching to the moments when some creature does suddenly

present itself for our inspection with a burst of aliveness, bigness, color, or hot animality. Even a bluejay, appearing abruptly in this world of shrouded cold, shocks us with a blazing blueness we could never have seen in summertime; and when the jay cries its ringing, rasping cry, it can be as exciting a sound as if suddenly there had been heard the blare of life in a boneyard. We stand in the white dead world and suddenly — pouf! — there is a flying of snow under that hemlock over there, and a rabbit is off and away in a burst of livingness. In this season, so small an event can shake a man to his marrow. Occasionally, there may be a much larger event; and we are nearly undone. We are making our way along a snowy trail amid the cedars in the dusk, and all at once there is a great creature over yonder, just slipping away among the shadows. We can see the tawny flanks, the tufted ears, the great cat-prints in the snow. There is a mist of cat-breath in the icy air, and rank cat-smell hovering. We have surprised a lynx. Or sometimes, very rarely in most places, there may be a more tremendous encounter still. There can be no country naturalist, however seasoned a veteran, who is not excited by it. We may meet the Great White Owl.

This is the snowy owl, the Arctic owl. The place where it customarily lives is in the very far north. Snowy owls occur right up to the edge of

the northernmost polar seas. Their home is the endless Arctic barrens and tundras. Labrador, Ungava, Mackenzie . . . it is in such lands of the world's winter that the snowy owl lives. Gigantic, spreading sometimes five and a half feet from wing-tip to wing-tip, this monstrous bird of the north is as white as the everlasting snows to which it is accustomed. Only some gray-brown barings, like so many ripples in the surface of a wind-blown snowfield, break its whiteness. The fierce, hooked owl-beak and the powerful talons are dark, nearly black; the great owl-eyes gleam piercing yellow. An Arctic owl is such a creature as a fanciful god, having in mind to create a bird which should be the very spirit of wild winter loneliness, the very symbol of icy power and arctic immensity, might have summoned into being out of the boreal depths of creative fantasy.

Many snowy owls live all year 'round in the far north, wintering even in the northern extremity of Greenland. Fitted, if not by the Eskimos' dark creative gods of the cold, at any rate by evolution, to survival in the treeless open sweeps, they make their "nests" (merely a scraped place in the hillocky tundra) on Arctic islands in the May or June of the year; and for the rest of the seasons — for they raise only one brood of owlets annually — devote themselves to an endless hunting for lemmings, arctic mice and hares, and

sometimes the far-northern ptarmigans and the sea-ducks that frequent patches of open water amid the sheet-ice.

AN ARCTIC OWL, necessarily, has a keen day-vision, for the northern "day" can be a very long one; and it goes beating across the barrens, peering for a stir or a scurry, as readily in light as in darkness. Its huge-winged body is feathered against the most intense cold, feathering extending down even to protect its talons. As long as there is a minimum supply of the small northern animals on which it depends for subsistence, the white giant of the north is fitted to thrive in its lonely world of white, far-stretching desert.

In the fiercest time of midwinter, however, many snowy owls straggle southward. When there are long periods of raging bad weather in the northland, or when small creatures there are decimated by epidemic disease or other factors, the giant white owls may come south in far more than their usual numbers; and they may travel so far south as suddenly to startle an outdoorsman in South Carolina, Georgia, or a Gulf Coast marsh in Texas. (Snowy owls have sometimes turned up in Bermuda, looming impossible in their gigantesque white wintriness amid the blazing lilies and bougainvillea). It remains a rare thing, except in those years of such a mass southward owl-movement as ornithologists call

an "invasion," for the great white owls to present themselves in the winter landscape even of New York State or New England; but still, a certain number of times each winter, it does happen; and when it does . . . it is worth a countryman's while to have endured the whole bleak, blizzardy deadness of the season for the excitement to be derived from the encounter.

WE'RE TRAMPING ON SNOWSHOES, perhaps, across the white lifeless world of our Forty-Acre on a February morning; and we have given up all expectation of seeing any stir of life in this frozen waste. Then suddenly, way over there by the edge of the birch-copse . . . what's that? Is it just a snow-hummock, perhaps the whitened mound where last summer the fat woodchuck had his den? We squint across the glare and stand motionless and watch. Abruptly, the hummock moves a little. A second later, and we have been observed. There lifts from the snowfield a gigantic bird, white as the snow, fabulous, not to be believed. It rises on heavily beating owl-wings, tilts against the sky, flaps circling over and around us to have a look at us with its gleaming yellow eyes. We are motionless; which is to say, in the understanding of any wild thing, harmless. The great white owl beats across the pasture, veers, hesitates in air, and plumps to earth again. If we

have our field-glasses, we can see the curious and characteristic stance of the bird as it rests on the crusted snow. An arctic owl isn't without the ability to perch, as for instance a chimney swift is, but its homeland is a treeless place and so it is by nature a bird of the open stretches and likes to rest directly on the earth. Its stance is curiously tilted forward, so that it seems as though leaning on its white breast for support.

With luck, if our great owl does not too much suspect us, we may see it make a catch; for its yellow eyes readily see meadow-mice or deer-mice that elude our notice. It pins a mouse against the snow-crust with its dark talons, plucks and frets at it briefly, and then usually bolts it. It isn't common that one of the great owls pounces on a bird; but, if it does, it deals with that prey differently. It worries and rips at the caught bird persistently, stripping away feathers, tearing meat from bone, and then it eats only the flesh, leaving the rest. A moment later, and giant white wings have mounted into the winter sky again, and then a great shape has dwindled away over the tree-tops, and we are left standing in the dead desert-world of winter once more, nearly incredulous.

In the midwinter, a lonely time, all animal adventures take on a special sharpness and eventfulness. If we have the adventure of an encounter with a snowy owl, we are not likely to forget it too soon.

## *Draughts of Old Bourbon*

FOR  
A SECOND



## WHISKY REBELLION

*James Monroe Madison*

FOR the sake of both its present and its future, what this country needs is a rebellion. A real knock-down, drag-out, oath-hurling, skull-cracking rebellion. I'm not advocating such a rebellion, you understand: a man can get thrown into the oubliette now for suggesting violence toward the government of the United States. On advice of counsel I'm only *stating the need* for rebellion, not actually advocating it. But Americans are getting too tired, too old, too complacent; we need to revive our tradition of violence; we ought to demonstrate that we still can get mad.

The healthiest sort of rebellion always is one against taxes. Producers against the blood suckers. Free men against the dad-burned bureaucrats. Patriots against the revenuers. The Boston Tea Party. The Virginia revolt against the Stamp Act. There is something fine and inspiring about a man grabbing his shillelagh and rushing out and beating hell out of a tax collector. This nation was born of such spirit.

And the best tax rebellions are those against whisky taxes. Whenever a free man no longer gets mad over a new whisky tax, he's losing his spirit; and whenever a free peo-