

Santa Fe, N. M.
Sent Sam Rodden
Jan. 9, 1944

Sent to Sam Rodden, Santa Fe
Jan 9-44

1 picture -

WINNIE, THE BADGER

by

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One day we were on our way from Bend to Burns, rolling slowly along, casting our eyes over the barren, empty desert, just wishing for a glimpse of something alive. If only a motionless hump of yellow sand would stir and slither along, the deceptive lights and shadows finally turn it into a flattened and sneaking coyote, that canny dog of the desert and spirit of the wild. When traveling these heat-shimmering wastes, it was always a disappointment not to see a coyote, for like the magpies and the ravens he also combs the highways for the little flattened forms, the Jacks and cottontails lured to their doom by the glowing eyes of autos traveling in the dark. But the best time to see the desert folks is at dawn when the wide spaces are still and cool and the red sun is just peeking over the rim.

Stopping at a silent and dreary little gas station, we stepped out to stretch our legs and breathe the smell of the dusty sage. On the far edge of the road something moved. A grayish blur flattened out, then a head with a pointed nose rose inch by inch toward the entrance of one of the ever present holes in the desert. A coyote stalking his squirrel breakfast! The nose crept closer, when all at once a big shaggy head lunged up with a snarl. Not a squirrel, but the angry eyes of a badger challenged the invader.

The coyote reared back and sat on his haunches for a minute, then he flourished his bushy tail, squatted flat in front of the badger and taunted him with sharp snaps of his jaws. The badger retaliated with an explosion of grunts and hisses, then settled flat with his nose on his long black claws. His tormentor frisked and flourished about in front of him like a pup teasing a cat, each time a little closer. It was just a morning frolic of a bumptuous coyote, but the badger had no imagination and refused to join in. At last, getting peevish, he flounced his whole furry weight out of the hole straight at the yellow dog, who fell backward, picked himself up,

turned tail and started running straight across the desert. A kicked-up puff of sand was the last we saw of him.

We crossed the road to interview the stodgy badger ourselves and see what kind of a reception he would give human beings. He had crawled a little out of the hole and was sitting on his haunches as if meditating on breakfast himself. He met us with a hollow rumble and hisses, whirled about like a miniature tank, his stubby legs and long claws kicking up the sand behind him like a smoke screen. He scratched backward down his hole, his black and white streaked face and beady eyes glaring up at us. It was to be war to the finish.

But we had no weapons to war with. All we could do was to press him closer, get a little better acquainted, learn a little more about him. Finally we stopped in front of the hole and stood watching him. The minutes passed. The stillness over the desert was like death itself. At last the shaggy form flopped out of the hole, turned squarely about and commenced digging "like a badger," piling up a mound of sand underneath him. He ignored us. Every once in a while he ducked his head down, reached under with his feet and scooped the dirt away from under him, screwing about and pushing it further away behind him. Like a steam shovel he kept at it until the hole began to look deep and black.

A movement of boots electrified him to flop square about and face us with an expression as if he had forgotten us in his obsession of hurrying to dig his foxhole deep enough to hide away. The sun was glaring hot by this time, the stillness over the desert profound. It was time for us to be on our way and leave him to his life in the desert, perhaps to scramble out and continue his hunting for a breakfast of flea-infested squirrel or other rodent.

Some time later a tame badger was sent to us by a woman who said she was moving to a large city and could not keep Billy in a cooped-up apartment. We accepted him, as we do all kinds of wild children, hoping to finish our knowledge of his race, and anticipating another adventure in animal

friendship. We got it.

We opened Billy's box to an angry hissing and grunting that was a little bit disturbing. But, of course, he had been cooped up too long. He would be all right when he was let out and got a breath of fresh air. He needed only a chance to dig in the cool earth. We had forgotten that his mistress had said not to let him dig. We introduced him to a mole hill. The dirt flew as it never had done before in our garden. He was already half under ground when one of us stooped down to get a better look. In a flash he backed out and lurched forward for a convenient ankle. Taken un-awares, all one could do was to jump quick and step high. The flight across ~~the~~ the garden was mostly in the air, two legs astraddle Billy with flashing teeth nipping at first one leg and then the other. Once at a safe distance from his hole, Billy ambled back to his digging. Tame badger, my eye! There wasn't any tame badger.

A year or so later when motoring in Arizona with a camera outfit, we stopped at another lonely little gas station with a sign on it, "Two Gun Tommy." While the cameraman was attending to the gas, I stood at the corner of the station trying to get in the shade. I leaned my arm on an old box, gazing off at the heat waves. Suddenly I felt something tightening around my neck and a furry thing pressed against my face. I turned my head and looked into the yellow eyes of a big badger.

For a minute I was petrified. I couldn't move. I almost felt ugly teeth slashing my cheek, and the blood running. The hairy legs and long claws hugged me tighter. I was almost strangled. Then the wide, flat muzzle came around and nuzzled my face, rubbing my nose and forehead, snuggling up close, gurgling and crooning. Slowly my senses came back, but I still froze, not believing my eyes and ears. It couldn't be a tame badger. There wasn't such a thing.

My partner appeared from behind the car and started to speak to me. He stopped short and looked aghast. The badger stepped over on his shoulder

and treated him to the same siren caresses. I whispered, "Don't stir. It's a miracle! It may end suddenly!" But it didn't end. The station man came up and saw our astonished faces. He laughed till he doubled up. "That's what I keep Winnie for," he said. "She's the most unique advertisement in the game. She scares everyone to death, and when they come to, all of'em want to buy her. But none of'em has got money enough to do it. I didn't try to buy her, but if I could have stolen her I would cheerfully have done it. There WAS such a thing as a tame badger.

The badger inhabits the plains country of the United States from Indiana west to the Sierras and from our southern border across the Canadian line. He can be easily distinguished by his flattened-out body and short legs. The long white-fringed hair that falls from his sides, and his short tail give him the appearance of a turtle as he moves along. From his sharp nose a white line extends back across the top of his triangular-shaped head to his shoulders. Between the eye and the small ear are striking patches of black and white. In the North he hibernates in the winter like the squirrel, and has a litter of three or four young in the spring.

I took a good look at Winnie before we left. Instead of the grayish salt-and-pepper color of Billy, the northern badger, she was a warm tawny tone, deepening into real ochraceous underneath. And she was warm!