

# ST. NICHOLAS:

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## FOR YOUNG FOLKS.

CONDUCTED BY

MARY MAPES DODGE.

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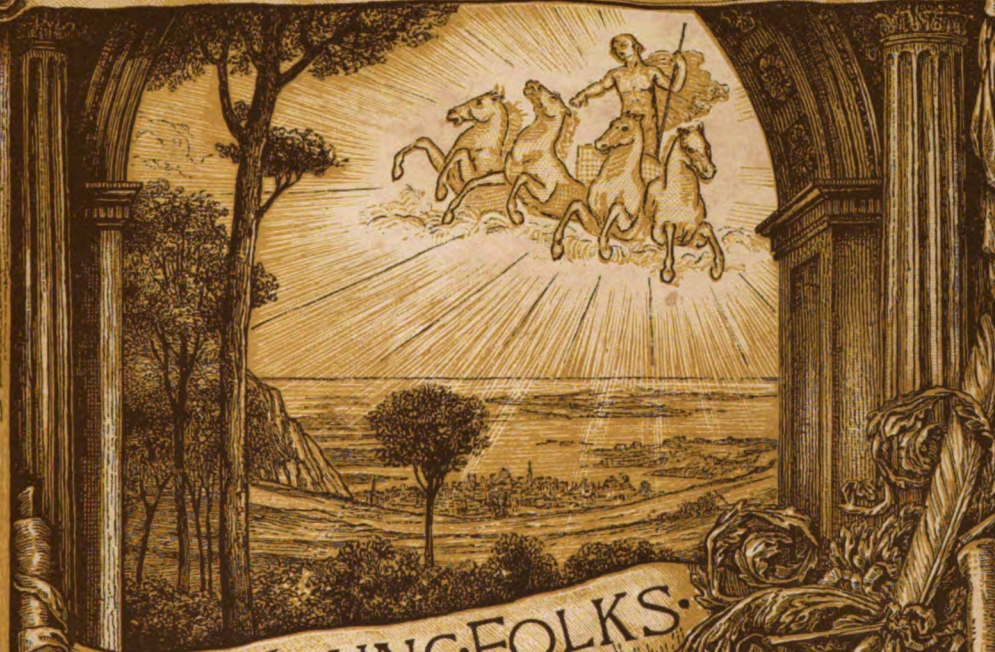
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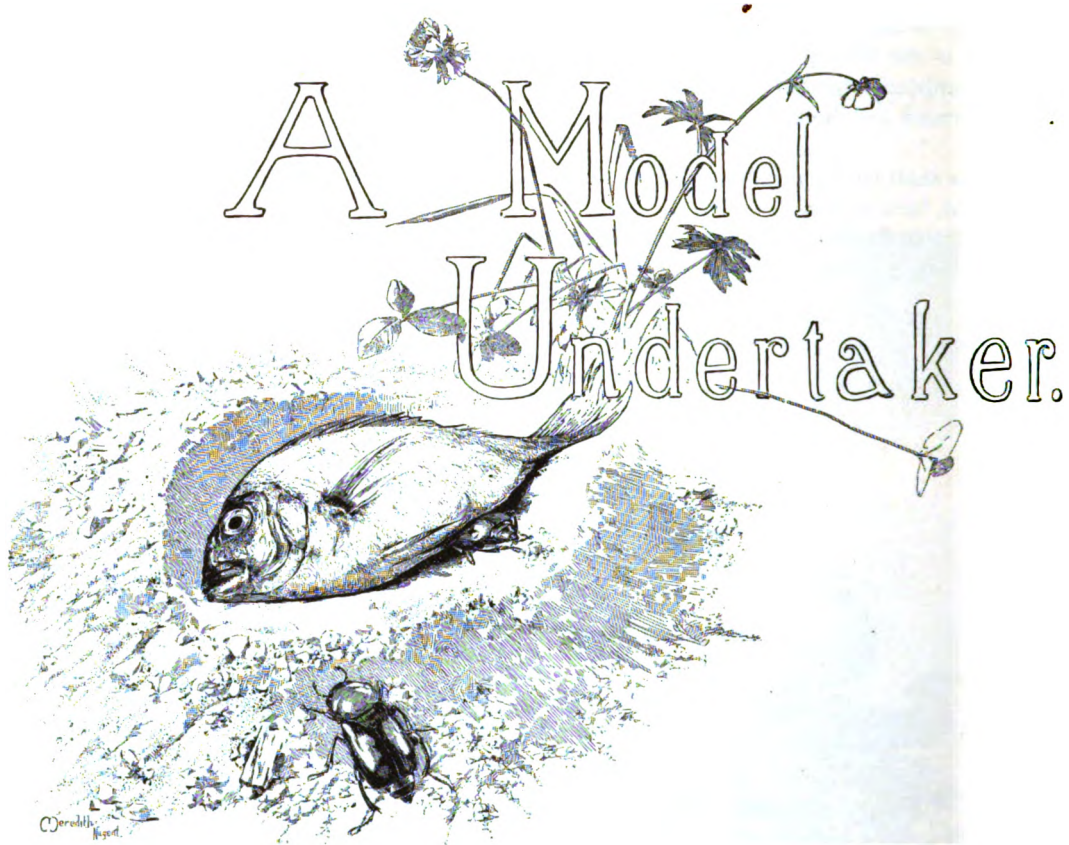


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BY T. D. WITHERSPOON.

It was on the bank of the Rowanty, one of our pleasant little lowland streams, that I made his acquaintance. I had been sitting for more than an hour watching the play of the silver minnow on my hook, waiting in vain for the enticement of some unwary fish. Meanwhile there had been lying only a few feet from me, on the hard path which the fishermen's feet had worn along the stream, a little fresh-water bream, called by the anglers on the Rowanty the "red-throat," because of the rich crimson coloring of its throat and breast. Too small for the fisherman's basket, and too large to be used as bait, it had been thrown out on the shore to die; and there it lay, a chubby, finny little specimen, four inches in length, its crimson breast exposed to the hot sun.

Attracted by its beauty, I was watching it, when I detected a motion of the dead form, so

distinct that it could not be mistaken. Drawing nearer to find the cause, I saw the short stout antennæ of a beetle protruding from beneath the body of the red-throat, and two great goggle-eyes peering at me, as if to say, "This is my business. Will you let me alone?" So then I knew what was making the fish stir, and I determined to watch the little worker.

No sooner had I seated myself than the two antennæ were withdrawn, the goggle-eyes disappeared, and the motion was renewed. Putting my face near to the ground, and looking under as the fish was lifted from the earth, I saw the disturber, a bluish-black beetle, an inch or more in length, with thick short legs, and stout blunt antennæ. He was lying on his back, his feet braced against the body of the fish above him, his six stout legs thrusting upward with quick alternate motions, as he lifted the upper

part of the fish slowly until the head was more than an inch from the ground, and only the tail touched the earth.

The bug then stopped as if to take breath, and I could n't blame him, for he must have been lifting at least twenty times his own weight. But the busy feet quickly began to ply again, and it was evident that he was trying to move his burden from its place. He edged it around slowly until its head was at right angles to the path. Then he made a strong effort to thrust it forward, in the intensity of his zeal lifting the lower part of his body entirely from the ground, so that he stood upon his head. It was in vain, however. The friction at the other end was too great. There was not even a hair's breadth of progress. At length the overstrained muscles began to relax. The head of the fish came slowly down. The effort had failed. Again and again it was renewed, each time with a slight change of posture, but all in vain. The fish did not stir. What should the beetle do?

Well, like a prudent workman, he took time to think. Our Atlas, who had failed to carry the world on his shoulders, came out and walked around his burden as if to inspect it, and while he was doing so I had a good opportunity to inspect him.

One good look, and I knew who he was, for he has been fully described in Jaeger's "Life of North American Insects." Jaeger says: "A large black head, with antennæ terminating in orange-colored knobs; a round black thorax, and orange-colored, truncated wing covers, with undulating black bands crossing the middle of both wings."

By this time I knew what he intended to do. He is a professional undertaker, as his two scientific names indicate. In the cabinets of naturalists he is sometimes labeled *Necrophorus*, which is compounded of two Greek words, and means a bearer of the dead, and sometimes *Vespillo*, a Latin word, said to mean one who carried out the poor at evening time for burial.

His office, then, is to bury the dead. He does not wait to be sent for. He does not work for hire. Wherever he finds the body of a dead bird, or mouse, or fish, or frog, or other small animal, he sets himself to the task of giving it a decent burial. For this service he has been

noted since the days of Aristotle, who makes honorable mention of him; and though he has never attained to the celebrity of his first cousin, the sacred beetle of Egypt, who was for many ages an object of worship, he has always maintained a good reputation, and been in high respect with the naturalists—which is far more than can be said of the *Dermestidae*, another set of beetles, his cousins, who make such havoc among the preserved insects and stuffed animals in our museums.

There are some very interesting stories told of these undertakers, or "sexton beetles," as they are also called.

The author of that very entertaining work, "Population of an Old Pear Tree," says, "One of these beetles has been known to bury an animal forty times its own size without any assistance." Mr. Wood, in his "Illustrated Natural History," says, "Two of these beetles have been known to cover up a sparrow within a few hours, and so unwearied are they that if several are placed in a vessel filled with earth, and kept constantly supplied with dead frogs, mice, etc., they will continue to bury them as long as the supply is kept up." M. Figuiet, in his "Insect World," tells us: "In fifty days four beetles had buried in a small space of earth four frogs, three small birds, two fishes, one mole, and two grasshoppers, besides part of a fish and two morsels of the lungs of an ox."

So you see these grave-diggers are not only stalwart but industrious. I had reason to expect great things of my workman.

He was in trouble. The ground in the path was too hard to dig with such tools as he had. The fish must be moved at least two feet to find proper soil. How could it be done? That evidently was perplexing his little brain, for he seemed to stop and think. At length a bright idea struck him. He would do what every sensible man ought to do when he gets into business trouble. He would go home and consult his wife. At least I supposed that to be his conclusion, for he flew away and returned after a brief interval accompanied by another beetle, a little smaller and more delicate of organization than himself. It was certainly good of her to leave her domestic duties and come to help him. And, while the old adage, "Two

heads are better than one," is always true, it was especially so in a case like this, where each head had to serve as a fulcrum.

The two were soon at their post. They first ran around the body, until they met. Then they seemed to be conferring for a moment. Next they passed under the body at opposite sides and began to lift. The head rose slowly again, and then both the toilers could be distinctly seen at work. Our original friend was lying on his back, as at first, with feet in the air, lifting the upper part of the fish from the ground. His mate was just behind him, standing upon her hind feet, her fore feet, antennæ and mandibles wedged between the scales of the fish above her while she was thrusting forward with all her might to push along the fish as her mate lifted. All in vain! There was still no advance. Again there seemed to be a conference. Then the head rose again, lifted as before; but when it had reached its utmost height, she reared herself upon her hind feet, braced herself so as to receive upon her head the whole weight, and thus set free the other beetle, who ran around behind the fish, turned his back to it, worked himself backward under the fan of the tail until he was almost concealed from view, then buried his orange-colored antennæ in the earth, humped his back, gave one resolute thrust, and away went red-throat, "little wife, and all." The movement had been so sudden that his companion was taken quite unawares, but though she was thrown some distance with the weight of the whole fish upon her, she did not seem at all discomfited, but was out and up on her feet again, evidently delighted that more than an inch of progress had been made.

Thus, inch by inch, these two patient toilers carried their load, sometimes lifting as I have described, sometimes tugging with their horny forceps, sometimes pushing and thrusting with every posture and method. In a half-hour they had made less than a foot of progress.

Two hours later, when I returned from a fishing jaunt along the stream, they had reached the edge of the path, where there is a steep decline for eighteen inches toward the stream, and below it a soft bed of sandy loam. As it was the hour appointed for luncheon, and my

comrades had not yet come, I waited to witness the burial, or at least the steps toward it.

In a few minutes the edge of the steep declivity had been reached. One beetle was on his back under the fish, pushing with all his might. The other was in front tugging with her teeth. Suddenly, as the verge was reached, the fish toppled; a miniature avalanche was set in motion, and down to the bottom went the three, the fish on top, the two sextons underneath. Thus they came to the grave, preparation for which had been made in my absence by clearing away leaves and small sticks, and by probing to see that there were no roots or large stones.

The body being now in place, excavations for its burial were immediately begun. Each of the beetles passing under began to dig away the soil and to thrust it backward with the feet. Soon, all around the body, at the distance of an inch or so from it, reminding one of the hasty intrenchment about some military camp, rose a little embankment of finely pulverized earth, which had been dug with the strong forceps that served as picks, and thrown back with the six horny feet that supplied the place of shovels. The body gradually sank as the embankment slowly rose, the head lingering longest above the original level.

I returned from time to time to watch the progress of the burial. When the shadows of evening were falling, and I returned for the last time, a portion of the head was still visible, all the rest being under the earth. In a few hours more the little red-throat was lying three or four inches under the ground, as neatly and carefully buried as if some man had done the work.

"What noble, unselfish fellows they must be!" I think I hear you say.

Not so unselfish, though, after all; for when the little fish has finally been laid at rest many small white eggs will be deposited in the body. In about a fortnight the eggs will hatch. The larva proceeding from each egg will find its proper food in the body of the fish; and after feeding upon it for a month, until fully grown, will leave the dead body and go several inches deeper in the ground, where it will form a cocoon. There it will sleep for four weeks more, and then come forth a fully equipped beetle.