

The Deer

"He's probably gone to the woods, this time," their father said. "Maybe he won't come back. After all, he's a wild creature, and it's a natural thing to do if he hears a mate calling."

But the children hunted and whistled and were heart sick when they couldn't find any trace of their pet.

The next day in the afternoon, a package was left on the cabin door step. No one saw it delivered. My grandmother, curious to know what the soiled paper contained, opened it in the shed. Two meat roasts met her astonished eyes. She thought, "Some parishioner has butchered a calf and sent us some of the meat." The family was constantly receiving donations of the kins from members of my grandfather's congregation.

There was a note enclosed with the meat. She opened it and read: "Your deer won't forage in my garden any more."

Grandmother felt such anger that she thought she would faint! She gave a little scream, and the children, thoroughly frightened, came running. She sobbed: "That's Benny! Mr. Atkins killed him!" Then the children screamed too.

"Oh, how could he--how could he--how could anyone be so mean!

It was hours before the family could get over the shock and the horror of the senselessly cruel thing their neighbor had done.

Next morning the children went to school with heavy hearts and reddened eyes. The news spread like wildfire--everybody (but Mr. Atkins) had loved the gentle deer, and little else was talked about all day.

As the children were walking home from school, Mr. Atkins came down the path directly in front of them.

"That's the MEAN MAN," a child exclaimed! The crowd took it up and followed him down the street yelling, "Mean Man, Mean Man" in rhythmic scorn. Mr. Atkins hurried his steps and seemed glad to take refuge in his house.

From that day on, every time the man appeared on the streets, first one or two, then a dozen children, took up the refrain, and "Mean Man, Mean Man," followed him everywhere he went. Even the adults adopted the slogan, and the name Atkins was lost completely.

It is said that he became a haunted soul. I know that in a very short time he left the village permanently. I also heard that the story followed him to the next town, and life was made miserable for him there too.

My grandfather, usually so gentle and mild, never reproved the Children for their persecution of the unfortunate man. I think he felt the punishment was deserved.

My mother, in later years often talked of Benny, his cute tricks, and endearing ways. She would say: "It was bad enough to kill our pet, but to be so heartless as to send us his meat to eat was unbelievable. We would have felt like cannibals!"

"The wolves destroy deer, of course," she continued, "but they haven't had the chance to learn the Christian laws of compassion and understanding. Poor Benny! Victim of a human wolf!"