

IN NATURE'S EYES A HERO

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The minute he awoke on that April morning, Stephen Mills sensed something peculiar in the atmosphere—a strange silence in the valley, as if Mother Nature were holding her breath. After quickly pulling on the same soiled jeans, old tee-shirt, muddy boots, and greasy jacket that he had worn the day before, Stephen stepped cautiously through the doorway of his small cabin. The sun was seeping through the dark green roof of the forest in narrow, slanting rays that fell to the ground. Not a leaf was stirring, nor were any birds chirping; the only sounds to be heard were the twigs crunching beneath his heavy boots. Knowing that animals often sense approaching danger, he wandered further from his cabin looking for signs of an upcoming storm or forest fire. Suddenly, he stopped short. A few yards ahead behind a fallen log he saw two little pink ears standing straight up and a pair of frightened eyes staring at him. The animal remained perfectly motionless, and when he took a step forward, Stephen realized why. There, with its two back legs crushed in an old, rusty weasel trap forgotten by some careless hunter, lay a baby rabbit. Nature kept silent, permitting death to come in peace.

Remembering the thirty-six years behind him, Stephen Mills felt that he had neither contributed anything to life nor done anything that could give him a sense of worth or pride. In his younger days the profession of writing had intrigued him, but it seemed that the more he wrote, the more critical became the ratings. His last book had really said something to America, he thought, but the publishers had thought otherwise. Finally, out of sheer disgust with the way people had treated him, he took a vacation in the wilderness of northern Maine to sort out his feelings and come to some conclusion about the direction of his life. Because it was now nearly time for him to return to New York City, and he had not yet found the answer to his dilemma, he had become rather depressed.

When he saw the baby rabbit lying behind the log, Stephen merely turned away, thinking of his own problems and why there were no sounds in the valley. Before he had gone far, though, his thoughts returned to the baby rabbit. He saw the utter cruelty of the situation. Why should the poor, defenseless rabbit have to die because

of a human being's carelessness? It had just as much right to life as did he himself. Turning around again, he saw the frightened eyes of the animal still watching him. Approaching the log very slowly, Stephen tried not to excite the rabbit into attempting to free itself, making the damage worse. Kneeling he pried open the blood stained trap with one hand and very gently lifted the baby rabbit out with his other. Nestling the rabbit into the crook of his arm, he slowly made his way back to the cabin, being careful not to move the delicate legs. As Stephen Mills crossed the threshold, he felt a breath of wind upon his cheek.

