

THE DEER

The little fawn which was rescued the night my grandfather was chased by wolves became an adored member of the family. The children named their new pet "Benny". He followed them like a playful puppy. He seemed content to stay around the house, until one day when the spots had faded and his coat was a soft, rich brown, he disappeared for several hours. The children were worried. Hunters were always ranging through the woods in search of game, and Benny, being so friendly, would be an easy target.

However, the next morning Benny was home again, eager for breakfast, and the children rejoiced.

One day, Sara, my mother, running her hand over the soft head, felt a hard lump, and on closer inspection found the first faint signs of horns! All the children had to examine this new growth and speculate on how long it would take to produce real antlers--Benny assumed a new importance in their eyes, especially since he was the only pet deer in the village.

Grandfather was concerned for Benny too, and finally with the help of the boys and a willing neighbor or two, constructed a fence, which enclosed enough space to give Benny good exercise, but would keep him from wandering too far afield.

The fence worked perfectly for awhile--until suddenly one morning, Benny (having grown to mature size) smelled maple syrup. Benny was crazy for the sweet syrup. Practically every family in the settlement tapped enough of the maple trees in their yards of the nearby woods to provide them with a fair supply of sugar or syrup for winter use. In the early spring the air was redolent of the sweet sugar smell as sap was boiled down in out-of-doors primitive vats.

When Benny sniffed his favorite fragrance in the first spring after the fence had been erected, he took one flying leap and cleared it with no effort at all and appeared at the back door of the cabin for the tidbit which had always been waiting for him.

Benny was fed and put back behind the bars. But he might as well have been left outside, once he found he could clear the hurdle and wander whenever the notion seized him. The family worried again. However, everybody in the little community knew that Benny belonged to the Reverend Benedict's children and if the creature was found browsing in the succulent vegetables in their gardens, they shoo-ed him off and were more amused than annoyed.

All but one crabby old man--it was reported that he had threatened to shoot the deer if the animal was found in his vegetable garden again.

The children renewed their vigilance and carried extra fresh vegetables and sweets to their pet so he wouldn't be tempted with forbidden fruit, beyond the fence enclosure.

One morning early, though, Benny was missing again. The word spread quickly and not only the Benedict children, but their little neighbors started out on a search.