

# THE DISAPPEARING DORMOUSE

By RUTH TOMALIN

JANE AUSTEN, writing in 1798, numbered "nursing a dormouse" among the childhood pursuits adapted to the dignity of future heroines. Miss Austen's witty tongue was in her cheek, yet one wonders what adventure of her own youth—what ramble in Steventon woods, or what countryman's gift—conjured up that particular phrase.

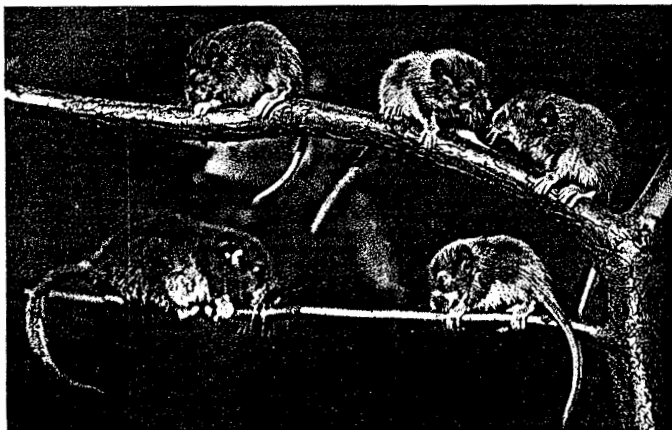
Conkers, mushrooms, bright berries, glimpses of harvest mice and squirrels—these are the heritage of the country child in late Autumn. Yet one of his old enjoyments was missing—at least from southern woods and lanes—in 1945: for where are the dormice?

Fifteen years ago one could go into a certain Hampshire lane in October and quickly find half a dozen round nests, the size of a cricket ball, woven neatly and firmly of brown sedge-grasses. A gentle knock at the briar or bramble in which the nest was set—and a soft yellow nose would be thrust out of the wall. The nests had no entrance-hole. The sleek, harvest-fattened dormouse usually would climb half out of the nest and then pause to listen. The watcher, holding his breath, could stand for a few minutes, absorbing details for diary and sketch-book, noting the tiny fingers, eyes bright as lily-seeds, the honey-blond fur and beautiful, long, downy tail. Before Winter some of these breeding-nests would be deserted for oak-leaf nests in burrows, empty rabbit-burrows in tree-roots or banks being a favourite retreat. Often, however, dormice could be found asleep in mid-Winter in the hedgerow nests.

To take any active wild creature from the woods and to try to tame it is to risk tragedy. Yet the country child of those days could, without disturbing the rhythm of dormouse-life, have the delight of watching one, of handling him a little, and of seeing the deep sleep of Winter turn to the gay agility of April. One had only to wait until December-oblivion had overtaken him—until the enquiring nose no longer answered one's tap—and then carry the dormouse home, nest and all, for the Winter.

My first encounter with a dormouse happened on a stormy March day, when snow lay in icy drifts over the early daffodils. The dormouse, however, was not worried about the storm. Curled in a tight ball, cold and still, he seemed utterly lifeless. Only the little whistling snore which had guided me to his nest assured me that he really was alive. Handling did not waken him. For the first time I saw in close-up that poignant quality of beauty shared by all wild creatures that are white and golden, downy and dark-eyed: fox-cubs, fawns, the barn-owl and the puss-moth, harvest mice and hares. The dormouse was kept in a cool outhouse, so that artificial warmth should not waken him too soon.

The Spring that year was late and cold. It was not until the second week in May that



the dormouse in the ferret cage uncurred himself. Then he was carried back to the woods and set free. Climbing lazily into the bramble-bush wherein I had placed his cage, he nipped off a young shoot, with succulent stem and pale green

A FEMALE DORMOUSE WITH HER YOUNG. (Left) A DORMOUSE ASLEEP FOR THE WINTER



leaves. This he devoured delicately from stem to leaf-tips, holding the titbit in his mouth like a rabbit while he chewed, and guiding it, as does a squirrel, with both paws. I tasted a shoot myself. It was sweet and juicy and the thorns were still soft.

All that Summer I hunted for dormice. They are never easy to find in daylight, but

once or twice I caught one foraging in hazel or briar bushes. The dormouse's love of varied diet may sometimes be unlucky for him. A wild animal will rarely touch anything poisonous, but one September day I found a dormouse writhing on the moss in terrible convulsions. Beside him was a piece of yellow toadstool which he may have been eating. The flesh was pocked with tooth-marks. The dormouse quickly died, but I could not tell whether the toadstool was to blame or not, as I lacked both skill and nerve to carry out a post-mortem.

One morning in October I saw a nest in the heart of a wild rose-bush. Inside I found a sleepy dormouse which made no attempt to run away as I carefully investigated. Deciding that her Winter sleep must have begun, and that she would therefore be quite happy in the woodshed until April, I carried the nest home and put it in the ferret-cage. As soon as I had done this, however, I found that the dormouse had just produced four young ones.

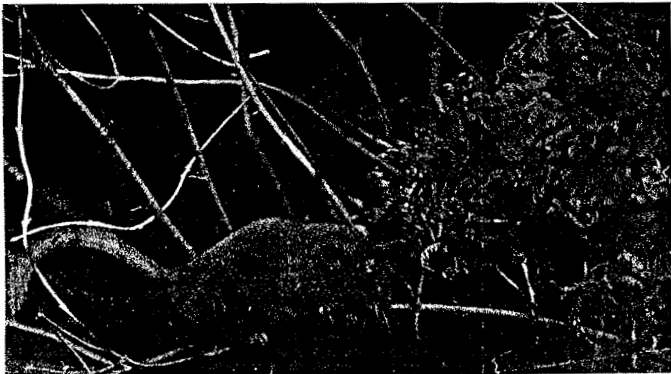
Would a family born so late in the year survive? I knew that they would have little chance in captivity. I picked up the cage to carry them back to the woods, but could not resist the temptation to put in a cautious finger and stroke one of the tiny, blind youngsters—the smallest animals I had ever seen. They were naked, greyish-pink and about the size of a thimble. At this final provocation even the gentle temper of a dormouse reached snapping point. I pulled my finger from the nest with the little mother swinging from it, her white teeth fixed in a ferocious bite.

Soon the mouse, her family and I were on our way to the woods again. The little mother had been offered a meal of hazel kernels and a bundle of fine hay in which to keep her young ones warm. She eyed me warily and I eyed her with respect.

I left the cage under the same rose-bush, opened the door and went away, hoping that the dormouse might still use the cage as a nursery. The short October days kept me away for a week, but on the following Saturday I hurried to the wood. My hopes had not been realised. Ducking under the brambles, I looked into the cage and saw—nothing. The floor had been swept clean. Not a shred of the nest, not a morsel of hay remained.

With thoughts of the depredations of rats and weasels, I stood upright and found myself

(Left) DORMOUSE APPROACHING ITS NEST



looking at a new dormouse-nest. It was made, not of the coarse sedge-grasses of the woods, but of fine meadow hay. I gently shook the bush, and a dormouse poked out its head.

Was it the little mother?

Watching the nest in the following weeks I saw four agile youngsters growing up.

There was little doubt that the dormouse had carried the old nest and the hay, wisp by wisp, from the cage below and had built the new nest above it. She must then have carried her young to it in her mouth as a cat carries her kittens. The nest was beautifully made—as such small homes always are—with each shred of hay in place. The youngsters flourished in the soft weather of St. Luke's Summer.

Since I first held the sleeping dormouse in my hand I had had no doubt that this is the most beautiful and captivating of English wild animals. Now I felt that it must surely be also the most courageous. The heart of a lion beat under the silky fur of the tiny mother dormouse, which not only triumphed over a cataclysm and made a safe new home for her young ones, but defended them with her own bright teeth from the giant who had caused the upheaval.

It is saddening, therefore, to find that my small catkin-coloured friends have disappeared from familiar woods and lanes, and that children

to-day cannot have my own keen pleasure in watching them. For the dormice, like their relatives the red squirrels, have become rare in this part of the country. Perhaps their dis-

sappearance? Their simultaneous loss gives credence to one theory—that the long run of green Winters in the '30s, ending with the first icy Winter of war, weakened both by encouraging them to remain awake in the Winter months. The dormouse seems to hibernate as wholeheartedly as do the snake and hedgehog. The red squirrel appears only on the mildest Winter days, spending long stormy weeks in his drey. Activity at this sleeping time might kill off both, by causing the squirrel to finish his store and the dormouse to squander his well-fed sleekness, thus leaving them without nourishment in the cold weeks of early Spring. By that time pheasants and wild rabbits have long finished Autumn's shower of acorns and sweet chestnuts. Even the hawthorn buds are still closed.

Grey squirrels are often blamed for the disappearance of the red, and these marauders are certainly on the increase in Hampshire, where they strip nut-bushes and orchards. This year they began to ravage cornfields. Some naturalists declare that both

red squirrels and dormice are the victims of an epidemic disease. Penetration of once-lonely woods by large numbers of week-end rambles may, again, be the cause of their migration to quieter parts of the country where the seeker may find them out. The debate continues.



A RED SQUIRREL

appearance is only temporary, yet, this year, whole days of searching have yielded only empty whitethroats' nests in the bushes. There is no sign of a dormouse. Last Winter a gamekeeper found only one nest in miles of woodland.

Where are the dormice? Where are the red