

Illustrated by Warwick Reynolds.

When Reynard came to Fernside

When chickens are scarce, a nice plump rabbit will ease the pangs of hunger of Master Reynard. But rabbits are slippery individuals to catch, as a new-comer to Fernside quickly discovers.

A Delightful Nature Story

By CLIVE R. FENN.

THINGS went along at a comfortable jog-trot at Fernside until one winter night, when the soft mists over the lea were silvered by the Hunters' Moon, when Quickear, a particularly smart fox, popped over the creaky wooden bridge which crossed the brackish stream and gave a sniff—a highly intelligent and appreciative sniff.

Quickear had never been in that part of the country before. Strange as it is to relate, he, perhaps the most chivvied fox in the southern counties, he who had shown a clean pair of heels to the hounds more times than he cared to remember, was completely baffled by the appearance of the place. There was something special and not unpleasant about the air—a rabbit whiff. Even as he paused in a reedy clump, Quickear caught sight of a gay little rabbit which perked its knowing head over a tiny mound on the mossy bank and surveyed the new-comer.

"Oho, what have we here?" muttered Quickear, making a dart.

Whitetail, the rabbit, hitched himself backwards, gave a cry, and was gone. He

had heard of fine animals called foxes, which go out racing with strings of keen-scented hounds, and with huntsmen in pink in close attendance. But until that moment Whitetail had regarded the whole thing as so much hearsay. Buckeye, a venerable rabbit of the district, had often talked of a grand run he had had long ago with a fox in full cry, but this was one of the stories one only half believed, you understand.

This time, however, there was no mistaking the fact. You could never have missed Quickear, presuming you had a nose at all.

Quickear had gone rather hungry that day, and he had missed the route home. He reasoned that there were worse things than a rabbit, and he made a dart, being a fellow full of energy. But he missed Whitetail by inches. The rabbit was on home ground, and he was gone like a streak of lightning, racing for the family burrow. Arrived there, he told his story, and was not believed, just as it is with most good stories. Whitetail's mother was vexed over supper details, for some friends had dropped in without being asked. Whitetail was chided, and sent off to bed with only a bit of cold

cabbage as his share; but he knew he had seen the fox, and that was that.

Meantime, Quickear loped on through Fernside, which was a large district, the whole place owned by a certain old Professor Beringer. The news of his visit soon spread, and there was a tremor of agitation in rabbit circles, for rabbits thrive in the place in question. Fernside was a rabbit sanctuary, as for all other animals—bar foxes. There had never been any foxes, so far. The learned professor never gave them a single thought; but as he stood at the door of his log hut in the forest that night he saw Quickear shoot by.

"This is most interesting," he said to himself.

The fox considered it more exciting than merely interesting, for he had not realised the presence of the long, low hut where the professor lived, and the sudden flash of light shocked his nerves. He did not dally. It occurred to him that the shadowy figure seen for a second might be someone unsportsman-like enough to lie in wait for a fox with a gun. Quickear had had some; in fact, he'd been hit once by a charge of shot, and the result had been a bobbed effect in the region of his brush for at least a week.

The professor was pleased to see the newcomer, for he was a bland, kind-hearted gentleman, ready to welcome anything on four legs. This weakness of his, though amiable enough, made him highly unpopular with all the farmers of the region. May-

be if the professor had troubled to think the matter out, he would have been less easy in his mind over the appearance of the fox; but he was a bit of a dreamer, and as he went to bed, he reflected that perhaps there would be a chance now of studying the character of Reynard, just as he had dived into the subject of rabbit life—namely, what a rabbit eats, what it thinks about; in fact, all the mysterious matters a deeply-read biologist likes to know.

That night while the rabbits slept the snow fell.

Whitetail was up early, feeling peckish after his light supper off shop-soiled cabbage. No sign of the fox that morning. All was peace. Whitetail kissed his paw to a chum who was valsing out of the next burrow but one.

"Nice morning!" he cried.

"Nice!" growled rabbit No. 2. "You call it nice!"

"Well, isn't it?" snapped Whitetail.

"You haven't heard the news, then? Everybody's talking about it! There's been a fox, and he ate poor old Buckeye last night."

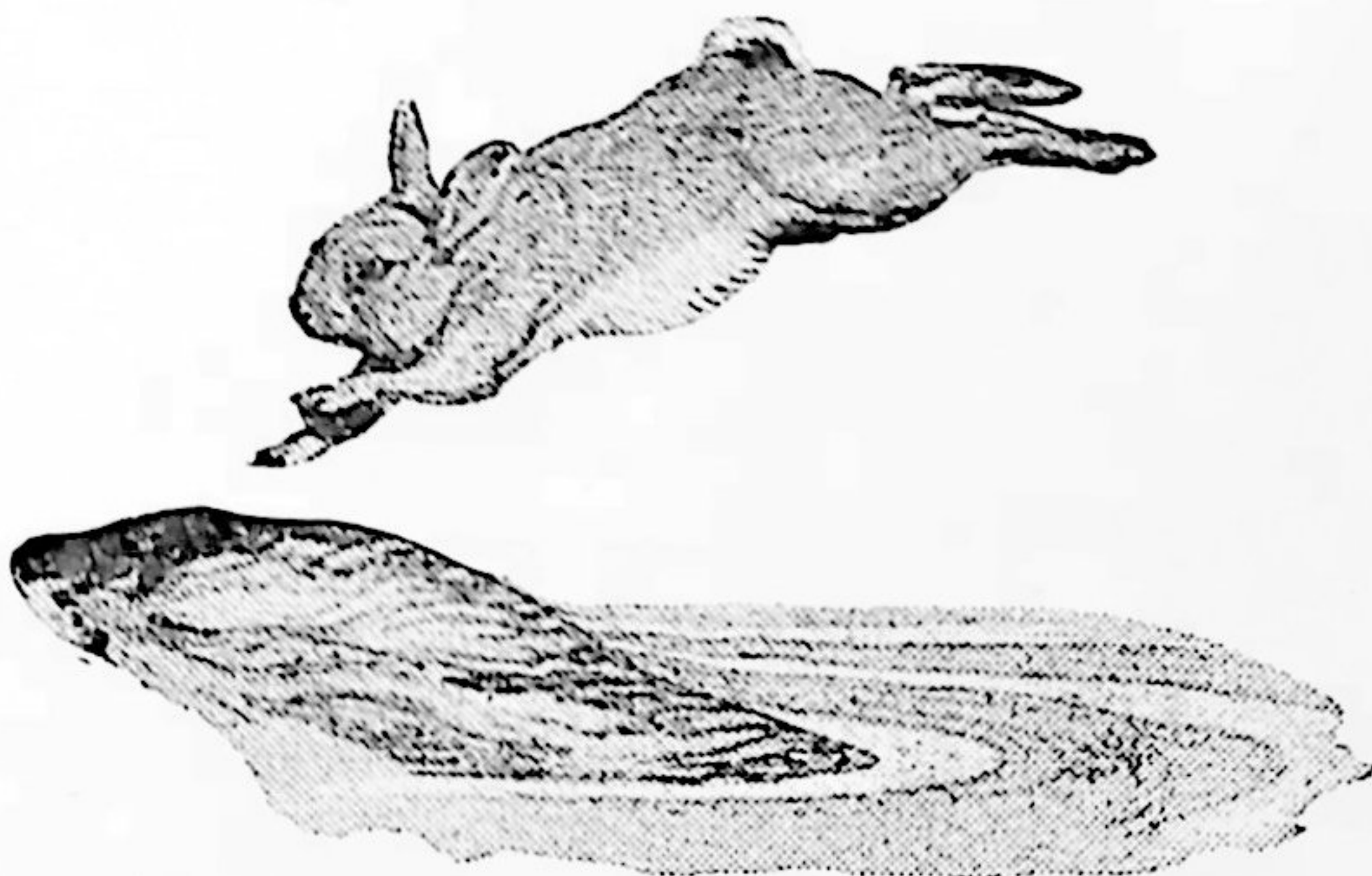
"Poor fellow!" cried Whitetail, with a shiver.

He referred to the rabbit, not the fox, it must be understood.

Fernside simply quivered with excitement, and Whitetail listened in awe and trembling. For all that, his interest was strangely stirred, and he felt a shade perky, too, for his report of the previous day had been laughed at. Now there was no laughter! They say that the wise consider in silence. Whitetail was not wise, but he was curious, and it struck him, as he darted off across a common stretch and bounded lightly across the narrow brook, that it was up to him, having seen the visitant once, to see him again. That would add to his sense of importance.

How true it is that those who seek fame run many risks!

Whitetail went in quest of adventure, and he found it—tons more than he bargained for. A



Hotly pursued by Reynard, Whitetail flashed across the stream, but he could not throw off his pursuer.

surprising thing had happened after he had gambolled across country and put a mile at least between him and his friends. He was just beginning to think life was proving a bit dull when he saw a vivid splash of colour a dozen yards from him. The colour was red, and it showed up plainly against a wall of bracken, which was still green. This spot of colour was the fox.

Quickear was lying prone and feeling extremely bad-tempered. The fact was he had qualms. The pain was considerable. He was suffering from too much Buckeye, for the old and seasoned rabbit, which had furnished a late supper for Reynard, held the open record for toughness. The fox had eaten the ancient bunny with all the misguided enthusiasm which is frequently brought to bear on a supper for which there has been a lengthy wait.

Quickear suddenly heard a scuffling in the near neighbourhood, and lazily opened one eye. He spied another rabbit staring at him wild eyed, as if fascinated.

"That one'll be tender enough, anyhow!" thought Quickear, making a quick spring.

All Whitetail's courage evaporated on the instant.

He bolted, with Quickear behind him taking up the running in good style. Down the hillside they went, Whitetail looking for cover; but cover there was none. The fox felt his keenness increasing. A nice young rabbit might make him forget Buckeye.

Whitetail dashed on to the level, then flashed across a stream, but he could not throw off his pursuer. Quickear dropped into a steady gallop, and as he was gaining on his quarry, he was not worrying, not even when the swift little rabbit tore up to rising ground again.

"Oh, I wish I had done as mother told me and stopped at home!" sighed Whitetail.

Too late! There was no help coming. The rabbit was already badly winded, and far too frightened and all of a shake to see where he was going. Ahead lay a big, dis-used quarry pit, but Whitetail did not know of this. He simply bounded on, a little lump of terrified fur, up the steep side of the hill. Here and there in the hollows the

snow lay deep. Whitetail felt the hot breath of the fox behind, or imagined he did.

The fact was Reynard was uncomfortably near! The fox did realise what was just ahead, namely, the jagged edge of the black quarry, with a stiff drop of hundreds of feet to the boulders below.

"I shall have the little beggar here!" panted the fox as he raced on.

The rabbit was almost done! He flew along a narrow ledge cut in the face of the quarry, with Quickear at his heels. Then Whitetail's fluttering heart almost stopped beating.

Right in the middle of the narrow path crouched Titmus, the steely-eyed stoat, handsome in his winter coat of white ermine, but cruel and relentless—the most dangerous enemy of all rabbits!

Whitetail, caught thus between two fires, completely lost his head. Behind was the fox; in front, barring his path, was the stoat! What was a hunted rabbit to do? There was only one chance, and instinctively he took it, and leaped over the edge of the precipice!

With a terrified squeal, Whitetail shot forward into the blue! His two enemies held fast right at the edge. They had lost the day—or rather, the rabbit.

Down flew Whitetail—down, down! The fall seemed endless, but his luck was not right out. He landed at last on a point of rock which jutted out of the towering stone wall of the deep quarry. Bruised and giddy, he tried to get a foothold, but could find none, and the next moment he had bounced off this precarious resting-place, to drop to the bottom of the quarry, where luckily a thick patch of broom helped to break his fall. Though scared out of his wits, he was not much hurt. Anyway, he managed to scuffle out and pull himself together.

But this was not accomplished in a hurry. The rabbit had been through the biggest scare of his life. His very earliest recollections were intimately concerned with the inveterate enemy of the rabbit race, namely, the stoat. He knew from his mother that never was any mercy to be looked for from

this unscrupulous foe, and he shivered beneath his fur as he reflected on his escape.

For a time he just rested while his nerve returned, and it was a bit slow in coming back. One could fool a fox, but it was quite another matter with the stoat, whose cunning was matchless. So Whitetail lay in cover and laid back his ears, making himself as small as possible in the tufty growth. Even a ray of wintry sunshine did not restore his spirits all at once. He was not himself. He wanted to get back home to his snug burrow, and yet he felt a trifle timid about facing his mother. That wise old rabbit would scold him, Whitetail knew, as sure as anything, for she was skilled at chiding. And what she would say would be true enough. He had made a terrible mess of things.

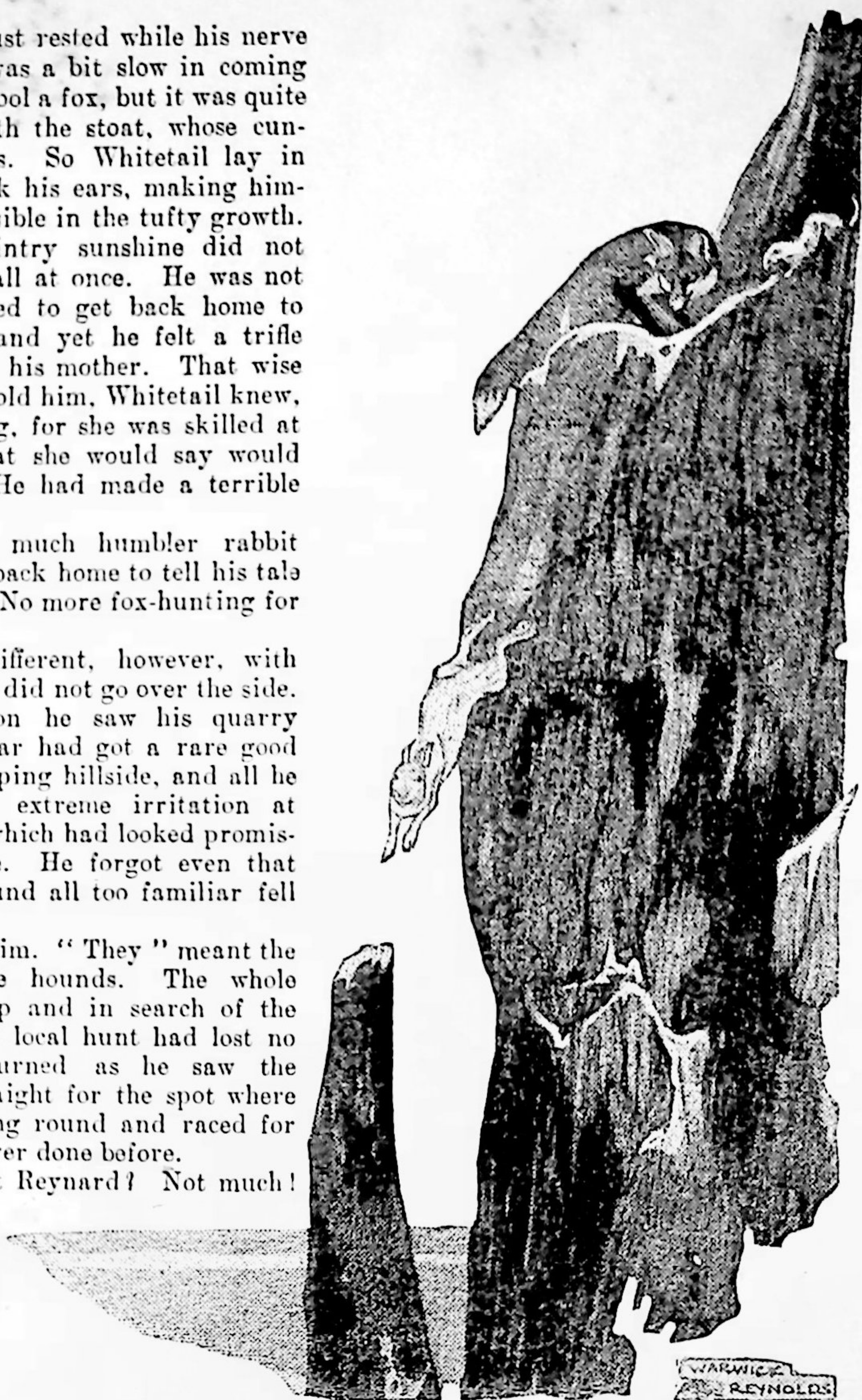
It was a very much humbler rabbit who made his way back home to tell his tale—a rabbit's tale. No more fox-hunting for him!

It was vastly different, however, with Quickear. The fox did not go over the side. To his mortification he saw his quarry vanish, but Quickear had got a rare good purchase on the sloping hillside, and all he suffered from was extreme irritation at losing a breakfast which had looked promising in the extreme. He forgot even that annoyance as a sound all too familiar fell on his ear.

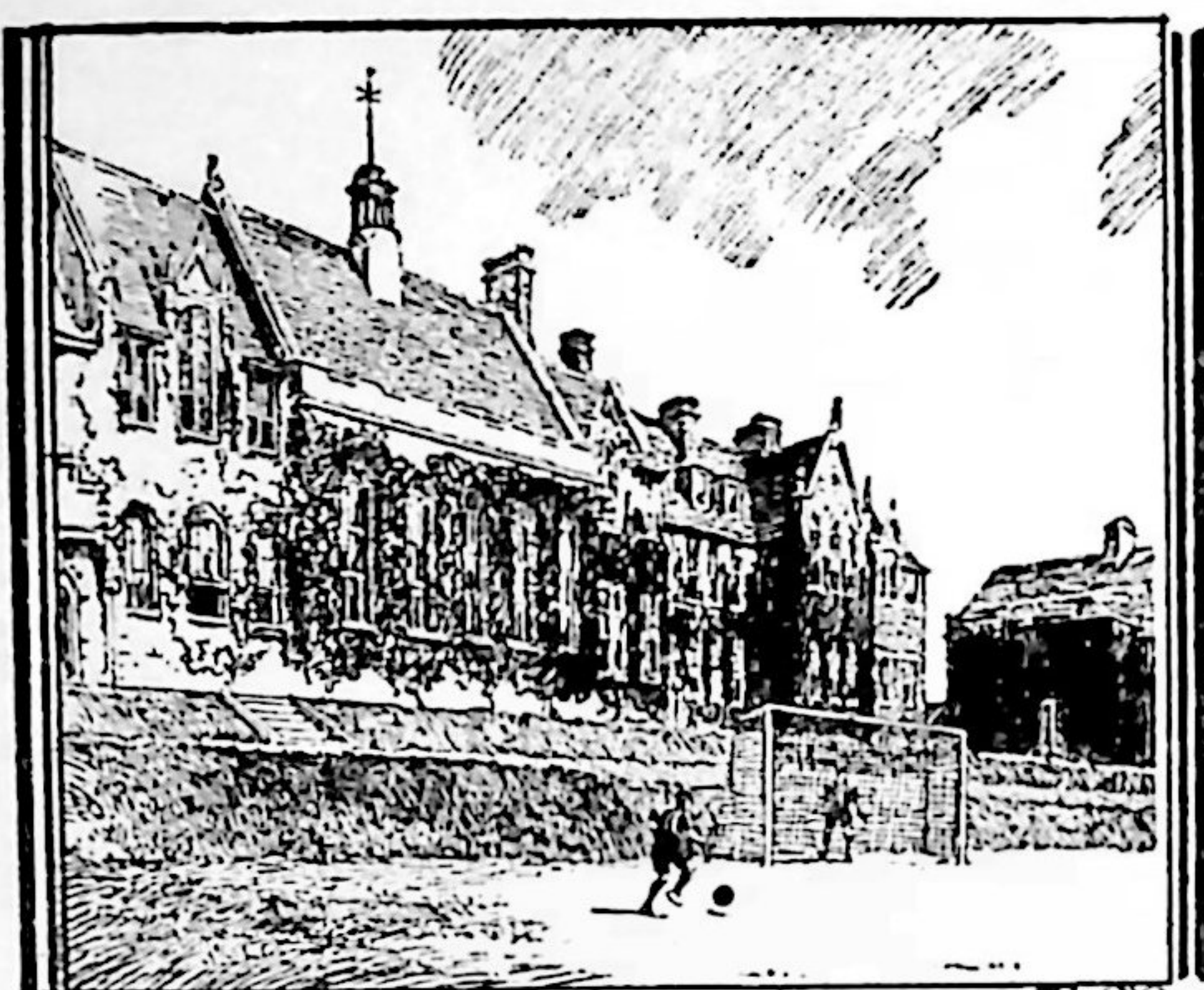
They were after him. "They" meant the huntsmen and the hounds. The whole countryside was up and in search of the marauder, and the local hunt had lost no time. Quickear turned as he saw the hounds tearing straight for the spot where he stood. He swung round and raced for safety as he had never done before.

But did they get Reynard? Not much! Quickear went to earth in a copse, and lay low till nightfall, when he limped back to his own country, vowing he had had enough of Fernside.

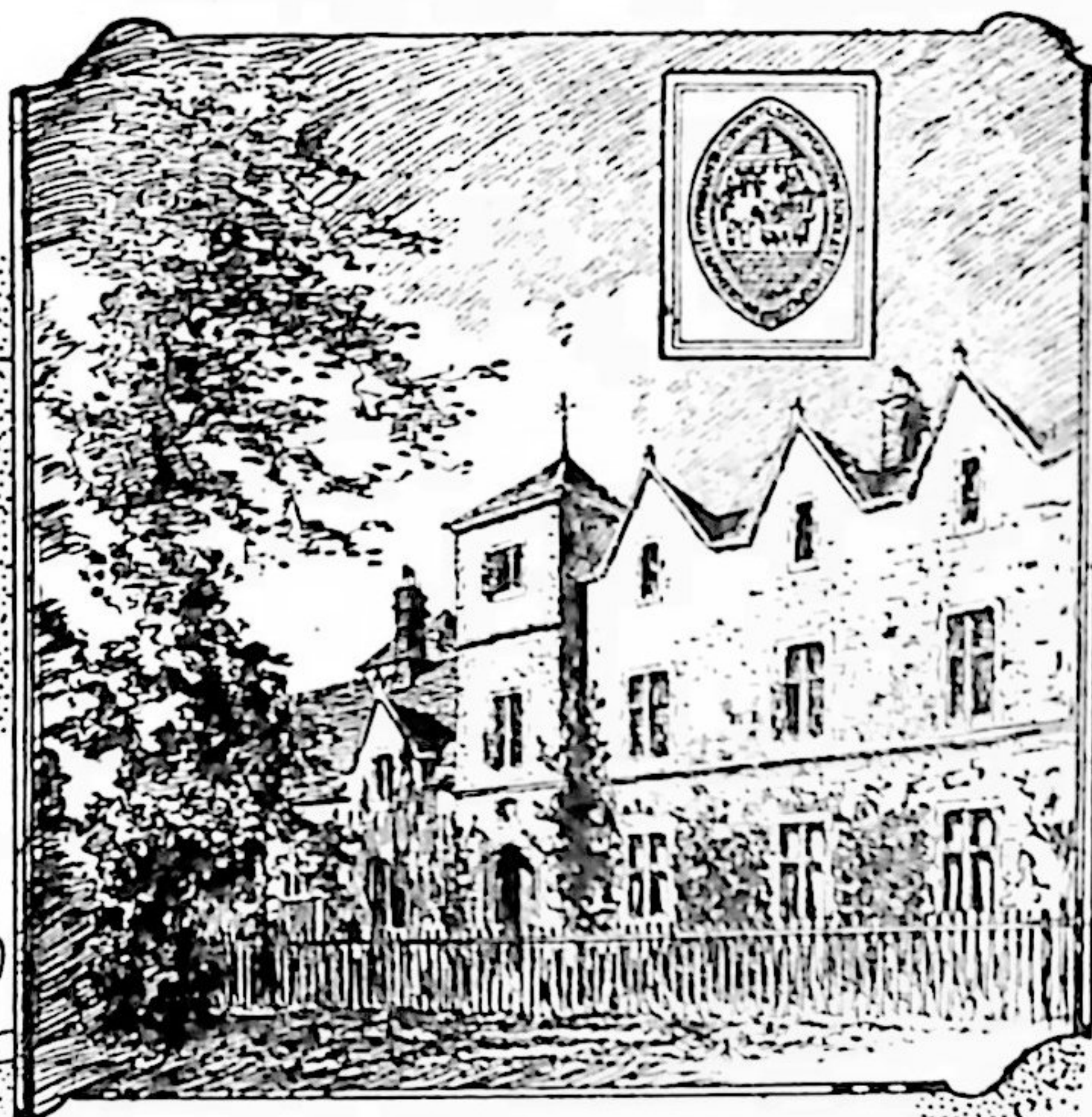
THE END



Caught between two fires, Whitetail, with a terrified squeal, leapt over the edge of the precipice! Down, down he hurtled towards a point of rock.



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