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"With a pang of horror he realized that he was caught by the foot."

The Grip in Deep Hole

By Charles G. D. Roberts

THE roar of the falls, the lighter and shriller raging of the rapids, had at last died out behind the thick masses of the forest as Barnes worked his way down the valley. The heat in the windless underbrush, alive with insects was stifling. He decided to make once more for the bank of the stream, in the hope that its character might by this time have changed so as to afford him an easier and more open path. Pressing aside to his left, he presently saw the green gloom lighten before him. Blue sky and golden light came low through the thinning trees; and then a gleam of unruffled water. He was nearing the edge now; and because the underbrush was so thick about him he began to go cautiously.

All at once he felt his feet sinking; and the screen of thick bushes before him leaned away as if bowed by a heavy gust. Desperately he clutched with both hands at the undergrowth and saplings on either side; but they all gave way with him. In a smother of leafage and blinding lashing branches he sank downward—at first, as it seemed, slowly, for he had time to think many things while his heart was jumping in his throat. Then, shooting through the lighter bushy companions of his fall, and still clutching convulsively at those upon which he had been able to lay his grasp, he plunged feet first into a dark water.

The water was deep, and cold. Barnes went down straight, and clear under with a strangled gasp. His feet struck, with some force, upon a tangled, yielding mass, from which he rose again with a spring. His head shot above the surface, above the swirl of foam, leafage, and debris; and sputtering he gulped his lungs full of air. But before he could clear his eyes or his nostrils, or recover his self-possession, he was stealthily dragged down again. With a pang of horror he realized that he was caught by the foot.

A powerful swimmer, Barnes struck out mightily with his arms and came to the surface again at once, rising beyond the shoulders. But by so much the more was he violently snatched back again, strangling and desperate, before he had time to empty his lungs and catch breath. This time the shock sobered him, flashing the full peril of the situation before his startled consciousness. With a tremendous effort of will he stopped his struggling, and contented himself with a gentle paddling to keep upright. This time he came more softly to the surface, clear beyond the chin. The foam, and debris, and turbulence of little waves, seethed about his lips, and the sunlight danced confusingly in his streaming eyes; but he gulped a fresh lungful before he again went down.

Paddling warily now, he emerged again at once, and, with arms outspread, brought himself to a precarious equilibrium, his mouth just clearing the surface so long as he held his head well back. Keeping very still, he let his bewildered wits compose themselves and the agitated surface settle to quiet.

He was in a deep, tranquil cove, hardly stirred by an eddy. Some ten paces farther out from the shore the main current swirled past sullenly, as if weary from the turbulence of falls and rapids. Across the current a little space of sand-beach, jutting out from the leafy shore, shone golden in the sun. Up and

down the stream, as far as his extremely restricted vision would suffer him to see, nothing but thick, overhanging branches, and the sullen current. Very cautiously he turned his head—though to do so brought the water over his lips—and saw behind him just what he expected. The high, almost perpendicular bank was scarred by a gash of bright, raw, reddish earth, where the brink had slipped away beneath his weight.

Just within reach of his hand lay, half submerged, the thick, leafy top of a fallen poplar sapling, its roots apparently still clinging to the bank. Gently he laid hold of it, testing it, in the hope that it might prove solid enough to enable him to haul himself out. But it came away instantly in his grasp. And once more, in this slight disturbance of his equilibrium, his head went under.

Barnes was disappointed, but he was now absolutely master of himself. In a moment he had regained the only position in which he could breathe comfortably. Then, because the sun was beating down too fiercely on the top of his head, he carefully drew the bushy top of the poplar sapling into such a position that it gave him shade. As its roots were still aground it showed no tendency to float off and forsake him in his plight.

A very little consideration, accompanied by a cautious investigation with his free foot, speedily convinced him, being a practical woodsman, that the trap in which he found himself caught could be nothing else than a couple of interlaced, twisted branches, or roots, of some tree which had fallen into the pool in some former caving-in of the bank. In that dark deep wherein his foot was held fast, his mind's eye could see it, all well enough—the water-soaked, brown-green, slimy, inexorable coil, which had yielded to admit the unlucky member, then closed upon the ankle like the jaws of an otter trap. He could feel that grip—not severe, but uncompromisingly firm, clutching the joint. As he considered, he began to draw comfort, however, from the fact that his invisible captor had displayed a certain amount of give-and-take. This elasticity meant either that it was a couple of branches slight enough to be flexible that held him, or that the submerged tree itself was a small one, not too steadfastly anchored down. He would free himself easily enough, he thought, as soon as he should set himself about it coolly and systematically.

Taking a long breath he sank his head under the surface, and peered downward through the amber-brown but transparent gloom. Little gleams of brighter light came twisting and quivering in from the swirls of the outer current. Barnes could not discern the bottom of the pool, which was evidently very deep; but he could see quite clearly the portion of the sunken tree in whose interwoven branches he was held. A shimmering golden ray fell just on the spot where his foot vanished to the ankle between two stout curves of what looked like slimy brown cables or sections of a dense snake body.

It was, beyond question, a nasty-looking trap; and Barnes could not blink the fact that he was in a tight place. He lifted his face above the surface, steadied himself carefully, and breathed deeply and quietly for a couple of minutes, gathering strength for a swift and vigorous effort. Then, filling his lungs

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