

and vividly barred with black. Its dainty, fine-clawed, handlike feet were bright black. But the most striking thing about it was its face, which was very light grey, with a large black patch around each eye like an exaggerated pair of spectacles. The eyes themselves were extraordinarily large, dark, and lustrous, and glowed with a startling, almost impish intelligence.

The raccoon was not given, as a rule, to day-time prowlings, his preference being for moonlight rather than sunlight. Nor, usually, was he given to haunting the sinister recesses of Black Swamp. But he was a wanderer, and capricious as all vagabonds, and he had somehow discovered that there were crawfish in the brook where it flowed through the swamp. He was an ardent fisherman, deft and unerring with his handlike claws. But to-day his fishing was unsuccessful, for never a crawfish was so considerate as to come his way. He saw the suckers and trout gathered at the middeeps of the pools, but he was too impatient, or not really hungry enough, to wait for them to come near shore. While he was watching beside the big pool wherein the bear had recently fished with such success a wood mouse unwarily came out of its hole just at his feet and was captured before it had time to see its peril. This prize contented the raccoon. Having nibbled hardly the half of it, he ran up the bank. After a pause he turned aimlessly into the still turmoil of the trunks and roots. As the luck of the wild would have it his erratic progress brought him presently to one of the great buttressing roots of the tree of the hornets. He mounted it, of course, followed it nearly to the base of the trunk, and stopped abruptly at sight of the bear.

The bear, who had but recently finished his meal of fish, was lying half asleep on the dry tamarack needles between the roots. He had well eaten, but the sting in his mouth still fretted him, and his mood was ugly. His great head was moving sullenly, ponderously, from side to side. Ominous, and dark, and ill shapen, he looked strangely like a portion of the swamp come alive. The raccoon scrutinised him with eyes of bright, mischievous disdain. The bear, looking up, caught sight of him, and aimed a treacherous blow at him with his tremendous, armed forepaw. Light as a feather the raccoon avoided him. It was as if the very wind of

the blow had swept him from the place of danger. The bear grunted at his failure, and fell to licking his paw. The raccoon, who had slipped around the tree, mounted another root and gazed at his rude assailant impishly. Then, glancing upward, his liquid eyes detected the pendant grey globe of the hornets' nest, pale in the gloom.

The raccoon knew that inside of every hornets' nest or wasps' nest, at this time of year, was a mass of peculiarly succulent larvæ and immature insects. If this grey globe had been a wasps' nest he might, perhaps, have attacked it at once, his long hair, thick skin, and skill in protecting his eyes enabling him to brave, without too great cost, the stings of the ordinary "yellow jacket." But he noted well the formidable insects which hummed about this nest; he knew the powers of the black-and-white hornet. Having stared at the nest for several minutes he seemed to come to some decision. Thereupon he tripped off delicately over the tree roots to the brook to resume his hunt for crawfish.

IT was by this time getting far along in the afternoon. As the gloom deepened at the approach of twilight the bear went to sleep. The darkness fell thicker and thicker till his breathing bulk could no longer be distinguished from the trunk beside it. Then, from narrow openings in the far-off tree tops, fell here and there a ray of white moonlight, glassy clear but delusive. Under the touch of these scant rays every shrouded mystery of the swamp took on a sort of malignant life.

About this time the raccoon came back. In that phantom illumination, more treacherous than the dark, his wide eyes, nearly all pupil, saw as clearly as in the daylight. They gleamed elfishly as they took note of the sleeping bear. Then they glanced upward toward the hornets' nest, where it hung just crossed by one chill white pencil of a moon ray. Softly their owner ran up the tree. At the base of the slim branch—hardly more than a twig, but alive and tough—which held the nest of the hornets the raccoon stopped. He wanted the contents of that nest. But he did not want to test the prowess of its guardians, which were now, as he well knew, all within, too heavy with sleep to fly but as competent as ever to sting. After some moments of deliberation he bit the twig through and let the nest

fall. Then he scrambled hastily down the tree as if eager to see what would happen.

His purpose, perhaps, in dropping the nest was simply a wanton impulse to destroy what he desired but could not have. Perhaps he thought the nest would roll into a shallow pool at the other side of the tree, and so drown its occupants, after which he might rifle it at his own convenience. Or, possibly, he calculated that that would happen which presently did. The nest fell, not into the water, but between the upcurled forepaws, and very close to the nose, of the slumbering bear.

The bear, awakened and startled by its light fall, growled, and bit angrily at the intruding nest. At the same time, with an instinctive clutch he ripped it open, not realising just what it was. The next instant he knew. With a *woof* of rage he tried to crush it and all its envenomed populace within. But he was too late. The great hornets were already swarming over him, crawling, burrowing deep into the fur about his face and neck and belly. Furiously they plunged and replunged their long, flame-like stings. Clawing, striking, snapping, grunting, whimpering, he rolled over and over in desperate effort to rid himself of the all-pervasive attack. But the foes he crushed had already left behind their poison in his veins. For a few moments his monstrous contortions went on, while in a glassy patch of white light, on the trunk above, clung the raccoon, gazing down upon him with liquid, elfish eyes. At length, quite beside himself with the torment, he reared upon his hindquarters, battling in the air. Then he plunged forward and went scrambling headlong over the slippery black jumble of roots.

THE great beast's first impulse, one may guess, was simply that of flight, of mad effort to escape from foes whom he could not cope with. Having no heed of his direction the blind guidance of trunk and root led him around in a rough circle till he came almost back to the tree of his fate. Between him and the tree, however, lay a spacious patch of morass, fairly firm on the surface, but, underneath, a slough of viscous mud. His eyes almost closed by the stings, the bear plunged

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A MUMMER'S THRONE

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CHAPTER IX.

A PLOT WITHIN A PLOT.

BEFORE any further questions could be asked, the queen was back again. From beneath the long train thrown over her arm she produced a bottle and glass together with a plate of sandwiches. Florizel noted these with a gleaming eye. Presently the colour came back to his cheeks; he gave a deep sigh of satisfaction as he drained the last sip of the foaming amber in the glass.

"I am another man now," he said. "After all, there is not very much harm done. Did you begin to imagine that I had deserted you, Fritz?"

"I—I am afraid so," the king stammered. "I was a blind fool, Florizel. It seemed to me that I was absolutely alone in the world. I did not care what happened. But in one sense my eyes were clear enough—I saw what was coming."

"You saw the danger from Rutzstin, then?"

"I did. Each day he grows more insolent. He opens my correspondence. He forbids me to go here and there. I am a prisoner in my own palace. The very guards about the place pay more deference to my chancellor than they do to me."

"The man is mad," Florizel said. "His brain has been going for a long time. Your marriage was the crowning blow—it meant the destruction of all his fondest dreams. He has played on your indifference. He has arranged matters so that all Montenana looks upon you two as frivolous creatures given over to the pursuit of pleasure. He had hopes of a peaceful revolution, but that has not materialised. Now he is going to strike in another way. Schenteim is in Rusta with two thousand of his hillmen. They are scattered all over the town, but they are ready to rise at a given signal."

The king started; he smote his forehead despairingly.

"I am a murderer!" he cried. "I have murdered the sweetest and dearest woman who ever gave her heart to a blind man. My sweetheart, I have betrayed you—I have betrayed you to death as surely

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as if I had laid hands upon you. And I could have got you away so easily a little time ago. Any excuse would have been sufficient. And now—"

His voice broke and he was silent. There were tears in his eyes as he held the queen's hand to his lips and kissed it. Her smile was brave and steady.

"What does it matter," she asked, "so that we are together again? Believe me when I say that this is the happiest moment I have known since we came here nearly a year ago. My mistake was in believing that I was born to be a queen, in thinking that the stage was the same as life itself. But to take you away—"

"But I want to go—now. If I could only—my dear Florizel; is it possible—"

"I was coming to that," Florizel went on. "The sword hangs on a thread."

"I know it. But when is it going to fall? Can you tell me that?"

"Yes, I am here for the purpose. It was because they thought I knew too much that they kidnapped me and took me into the mountains. I had a friend amongst them, or it would have gone hard with me. But I learnt everything. The blow falls from the ramparts here. A hundred picked men will overpower the guard, if they need overpowering, and then the castle will be taken. Rutzstin will be here, and so will Schenteim and a dozen of his confidants, passing as your guests. After the performance of the play is over they will induce you to enter the anteroom by the side of the stage, and then—my dear friends, I cannot possibly say any more!"

The queen was the only one who maintained the least composure.

"Then it will be our turn," she said calmly. "You are sure of your facts, Florizel?"

"Madame, would that I were mistaken. I could only get back here in time to warn you of the inevitable. I had to pretend to escape from the

hills. I dropped into a ravine as if a shot had been the end of me. My friend followed and pretended to put a couple more bullets into my carcase, and went back with the news that I was finished. How I got here, Heaven only knows. If I could do anything, if I could lay down my life—"

"Dear friend, there is no need," the queen said softly. "I have seen all this coming. My great drawback was that I did not know when. And, sooth to say, I did not care. It seemed to me that I had lost more than life already. But I was going to give my liege a chance. By a strange coincidence our foes have fixed upon to-morrow night. The dramatic performance here was no mere chance, for I have been planning my scheme for weeks. The great trouble was that I could not see my way to getting all our enemies together in one spot. They have been good enough to save us all that anxiety. Fritz, is the yacht ready?"

The king started at the inconsequence of the question.

"The yacht is always ready, dear," he said. "The mischief is that I am not allowed to use it."

"You are quite certain that you can rely on your crew?"

"You need not worry about that, Nita. My captain and crew are all English."

"Ah, I had forgotten that. No treachery to be found there! Now I shall leave it to you to see that steam is up any time after midnight to-morrow. There will be something like thirty or forty fugitives besides ourselves. These, of course, represent the full company from the Oderon besides the supers who represent the stage army in the play."

"The yacht would accommodate a hundred," the king said.

"Oh, there will be no necessity for that many," the queen smiled. "Fritz, you will not regret—"

"Regret!" the king exclaimed. "What is there to regret? What am I but a mere puppet, a monkey chained to the organ of my master! A pinchbeck king, with straw sticking out of my broken boots! If you had not come into my life it would have been

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