

The Law of the Solitudes

Life for a Life is the Primordial Way When it Comes to a Hunter and a Cub

By ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

THE morning mists had not yet fully lifted from the lake. The sombre shadows between the great firs had not yet been chased away before the fleet-footed streamers of the dawn. Throughout the vast wilderness of lake and rock and forest rested the mysterious "Ghost-hush," the name given by the Algonquins to the breathless silence that grips the solitude when night dies and day creeps up above the border of the world from some beyond.

Low down above the firs hung a canopy of angry cloud threatening yet motionless as the needles of the giant pine stretching upward to it. By and by the white mists twisted upward a little, a breeze swept the feathery foliage of the trees, a shaft of orange and crimson light pierced the forest. Slowly day grew up from the eastern canopy and with it came life and sound.

Standing on the shore of a little, rock-girt lake, head low down between her massive shoulders, the great bear looked towards the lighting skies. Between her forepaws she held a salmon trout just captured from the warm, spawning-shallows of the lake. Beside her, round ears lifted enquiringly, sharp nose pointed towards the fish upon which he hoped to feed, stood her three-months-old cub. He whimpered now, and with a clumsy paw scratched his mother's shaggy side. She turned and bestowed a rough caress upon his wistful face, then once more resumed her old attitude. He whimpered and growled a little, which at once brought the mother out of her pre-occupation. She brushed him roughly aside with her head, and turning the fish over on its back, cut a long incision down its belly with a sharp claw, and with a jerk threw its entrails from it. Then she threw the disembowled salmon to the cub, who lost no time in setting his sharp teeth into it.

Now, throughout the forest rang the cries of birds and the chatter of wee, furred creatures. Along the shores the reed-nesters called and twittered to each other. High in air a flock of geese swung on booming wings westward towards the swale lands of the vast solitude.

Great head swaying from side to side, small eyes flashing from time to time towards the cub intent on his meal, the big bear stood sniffing the breeze. Suddenly she twisted about, and with a sound that was half grunt, half growl, gazed intently towards a thicket of cedars some two hundred yards down the shore. The next instant the surprised and indignant cub was sent sprawling far among the dense pines that lined the shore, and as the mother bounded in beside him there rang out the sharp "tack" of a rifle.

DOWN through the shadowy, dank-smelling forest loped the old bear, pausing now and again to gently nose the panting cub, who was vainly striving to keep pace with her. Not until they were far into the thickest part of the spicy pine woods did the mother slacken speed; then she slowed down to a shambling walk.

Once she paused and, facing about, looked long towards the shore, which she and her cub had quitted none too soon. Her coarse neck-hair stood erect, her ears were laid back flat against her head, and her long teeth showed in a snarl. Back there was the thing that had instilled terror into her heart and shattered the harmony of her life. For five seasons she had striven to avoid, to out-manoeuvre it, but never to harm it. She wanted only to keep far away and hidden from it. She hated it much; she feared it more. For five seasons it had pursued her, throwing whining pellets that spelt death. Well indeed did she know this; had it not robbed her of her cubs each season since it crossed the swale-paths of her domain? Once, too, that stinging death which coughed fire had found her as she fed on the roots of the uplands and had bitten deep into her side and made her weak and uncertain. Well, indeed, it was for her that it was in the late fall, so that the thick layers of fat she had put on against the long winter's fast protected her vital parts from the leaden pellet of the trapper.

To-day, for the first time, she felt a desire for vengeance, and as she looked back through the darkened aisles of the forest, deep down in her massive chest she rumbled a challenging growl which sent a timid rabbit, feeding on the spruce-buds close by, leaping in terror to his dark burrow on the uplands. When she swung about on the path again there was a baleful fire in her little eyes, and her long claws ripped tiny wedges of black earth from the moss-land as she walked.

Far into an almost impenetrable thicket she led



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her weary cub. She nosed it tenderly as it sprawled out on the dank ground, red tongue, lolling from wide-open mouth, and breath coming in little panting gasps. She licked its face and neck, turning it over in spite of its whining protests, so as to wash it thoroughly. This completed to her satisfaction she turned slowly about, sniffing the breeze from all directions. The baleful gleam of fury still rested in her eyes.

The weary cub, conscious only that he had been led outside the danger zone into the thicket in which he had first looked on the light of day from blue, watery eyes, stretched himself out on the moss and fell almost immediately asleep. After a time the great bear paused in her nervous swaying and let her head fall until her black muzzle touched the silken hair of the little one. Carefully she nosed him from the base of his round ears to the tips of his soft feet, smoothing each crumpled tuft of silken hair down on his fat, wee body in maternal tenderness. At length she raised her head again and drew in a long, whistling breath. She was satisfied. The thing that coughed fire had not harmed her little one.

Once more she looked towards the lake, but the baleful light that had blazed from her eyes had gone. That something, deep within her, which had urged her to turn back and give battle to the thing which for season after season had robbed her of her cubs, was silent. That fury which so transforms the creatures of the wild into death-dealing things passes quickly. And with rage passes also all remembrance of hurt. To the higher creatures only belongs the right to remember; the love of vengeance.

When the big bear moved slowly off among the trees there was no anger in her heart towards the trapper who was her mortal enemy. Her cub was safe. She was hungry. There were tender roots to be had for the gathering on the highlands beyond the valley. And so she passed on, perfectly content, down across the valley crowned with noble soft-woods and on to the slope where kingly hard-woods grew.

LAROSSE, the half-breed, had sworn that sooner or later he would slay the bear of the upland.

For five falls and winters now he had done his best, but always something had occurred to keep the prize from his hands. True he had killed her cubs, but that was nothing; sacre! a little splash of a pelt worth no more than a pair of rat hides was that of each cub he had stolen from the great bear of the firs. No, what LaRosse wished was the skin of the biggest black bear his greedy eyes had ever seen, and he had seen many in the Canadian woods.

And this morning he had missed her again, he who, with his Winchester, could cut a growse's throat at fifty paces, had missed the big bear fairly and squarely, and he cursed softly at the thought, and his swarthy cheeks reddened and his black eyes gleamed as he stood watching the swaying bushes through which old bear and cub had passed like swift shadows.

It did not occur to the trapper, that in attempting to kill the mother bear at this season, he was violating the sacred law of the Solitudes. It would have made no difference if it had occurred to him. To him,

no wild thing had a right to its life, and he had grown to look upon this particular bear as his rightful quarry. He had pitted his man-cunning against her brute-sagacity, and, thus far, had lost. But his time would come yet, and then, sacre! but it would be good to see her big frame crash down and the jets of red blood leap from her wounds, and watch her great head sag as she weakened. LaRosse had grown to hate the big bear because she had outwitted him. Being a man, he differed from the wild brute in this regard; the bear did not hate the trapper. She loved her young and her life. She sought only to avoid him.

LAROSSE, as he gripped his Winchester and walked slowly down the shore to where the bears had vanished in the timber, did not pause to consider that to kill the great bear now, in the summer season, was to simply sacrifice life ruthlessly, that the big pelt, undoubtedly worth many dollars in the autumn, would be next to worthless now. He was not thinking of monetary gain; his one consuming desire was to bring the mother bear and cub low.

He paused before the thicket and peered closely at the trees. A white spot on the trunk of a cedar showed where his bullet had gone high. He struck the mark, childishly, with his rifle stock. It was the French blood in him that made him do this. His Indian blood led him softly, like a weasel following the trail of the rabbit it knows cannot escape

it into the timber where the blue-white lights rested, and on towards the end of all things as far as he was concerned.

It was not easy for the trapper to find the spoor of the fugitives—that's what they were in his eyes, things which belonged to him by all the rights of the Solitudes trying to escape him—well-practised as he was in the art of following tracks, which to the uninitiated would be next to invisible. But find it he did, at last, and the grin on his thin lips broadened and the fire in his beady eyes deepened as, with bent body and rifle cocked and ready he moved softly forward.

High up on the brow of a scraggy hill, standing between the light-green sweep of pines and the deeper green of the hard-woods, the big bear fed contentedly and blinked her small eyes appreciatively at the sunbeams straining through the trees. To her the whole world of the Solitude was sweet and tranquil. Occasionally she threw her head up and with a quick intake of breath gazed down towards the cedars, where her tired cub lay hidden. Perhaps her marvelous intuition prompted her that danger menaced it.

She had finished feeding and was standing on hind legs and reaching high up the trunk of a green buttonwood that she might leave the marks that lesser bears would see and respect, when to her alert ears was borne the sharp "tack" of the thing that spit death, and with a fierce growl she dropped on all fours and went crashing down the hill-side. Well she knew that the thing had spoken in the cedar thicket and the golden sunlight turned to blood-red mist, and the fury which had slumbered in the shaggy chest leaped to life again and cried "destroy."

DOWN the hill and across the valley sped the great bear, up the opposite hill and into the heavy forest of coniferous trees she plunged like a gigantic fury and straight on with snorting breath to the clump in which she had hidden her young. Straight into the heart of the thicket she launched her heavy body, then gripped the black earth with long claws as she sensed the fact that the singing death had reached it before her.

Lying stretched on the moss, red tongue hanging, little round head sagging pitifully on its breast, lay the dead body of the cub. One wee paw was still curved towards the tongue, as though he had been striving to relieve the itching and burning gums, inflamed by the grinders that were striving to break through.

With a cry that was almost human in its woe, the mother bear reached down and turned the dead cub over with her nose. Then she stood still with mouth half open, ears pressed close back against her head. She was striving to locate the slayer of her young, and as she drew in short, whistling breaths her thin nostrils opened and closed like valves.

Suddenly, with a gurgling growl, she fairly hurled herself towards another clump of cedars some twenty-five yards distant. As she bounded forward, from the cedar clump, the rifle of the trapper

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