

BLACK SWAMP

A Little Drama of the Forest World with a Tragic Ending

By CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

THE brook, which had rattled down so gaily with many a laughing rapid and clattering white cascade from the sunlit granite terraces of Lost Mountain, fell silent and hung back as it drew near the swamp. Wheeling wide in slow, deep, purple-dark eddies it loitered for some hundred yards or so between dim overhanging ranks of alder, then sank reluctantly beneath a great arch of mossed cedar roots and was straightway lost in the heavy gloom.

Within the swamp the huge and ancient trunks of cedar and tamarack crowded in a sort of desperate confusion. Of great girth at the base, some towered straight up, seeking to get their tops out into the sunlight, under those sparse patches of far-off, indifferent sky. Others slanted ponderously and laid upon their neighbours the responsibility of supporting their burden of massive branches. Yet others, undermined in youth by some treachery of the slough, lay prone above the water holes for a portion of their length, and then turned skyward, ineffectually, as if too late awakened from their sluggish dreams. The roots of the trees were half uncovered—immense, coiled, uncouth, dull-coloured shapes, like monsters struggling up from the teeming primeval slime. Brook and swamp, trunk and tree wallowed together.

In truth, there was a suggestion of something monstrous in all that the eye could see in Black Swamp. The heavy, indeterminate masses of mud, or patches of black water, lying deep between and under the contortions of the roots; the thick, grey rags of dead cedar bark; the rotting stumps, some uprooted and half engulfed in the inert morass; the overpowering, windless shadow, which lay thick, as if no sound had ever jarred it; above all the gigantic tangle of trunks and roots, stagnantly motionless, with the strained stillness that is not of peace, but of a nightmare. From a branch of one of the sullen trunks hung a globe of lightest-grey, papery substance, with a round hole in the bottom of it. In and out of this hole steadily moved two venomous streams of black-and-white hornets.

SUDDENLY it seemed as if the spirit of the monstrous solitude had taken substance and was moving among the inert shapes of root and trunk. A massive, fur-clad beast, dull black in colour, with high, humped haunches and heavy, shapeless limbs, its hind feet grotesquely semi-human in outline, its head swinging low on a long, clumsy neck, came picking its way with a loose-jointed gait over the jumble of roots. With little, twinkling, deep-set eyes it peered beneath each root, investigated each crevice in the ancient bark, looking for grubs and beetles, which its great paws captured with amazing, though awkward-looking, dexterity. For so huge a beast as the great black bear, which could pull down an ox when the need arose, to busy himself in the hunting of grubs and beetles seemed one of the whimsicalities of Nature, who pursues her ends indifferently through mammoth or microbe.

Near the tree of the hornets the bear found a half-rotten stump. Sniffing at it with instructed nose he decided that it held grubs. Clutching at it with his long, hooked claws he tore away one side of it, revealing a mellow-brown, crumbly interior channelled by wood grubs in every direction. Those which were in view on the erect portion of the stump he first picked out delicately and devoured with satisfaction. Then he turned his attention to the big slab which he had ripped away, and which lay on a hummock of firm ground at his feet.

But the bear was not the only connoisseur of grubs in Black Swamp. Some dozen inches before his nose a particularly fat maggot was squirming in the shallow remnant of its chamber, dismayed at its sudden exposure to the air. The bear was just on the point of picking it up when it was pounced

upon by one of the great black-and-white hornets as a hawk might pounce on a rabbit. Pricked with the tip of the hornet's sting the fat grub lashed itself out in one convulsive squirm, and then lay still. Straddling over it the hornet rolled it together cleverly, then, plunging her mandibles into its soft body, proceeded to drain its juices.

For some moments the bear had watched this performance with curious interest, his little eyes twinkling wickedly. Now, he had had enough of the show. Stretching out one mighty paw he laid it down deliberately on the hornet and her prey. For a moment he left it there as if his act had been one of considered punishment. Then, withdrawing the paw, he eyed the flattened insect, and proceeded to swallow her and her victim together.

BUT the hornet was not quite dead, for the rotten wood was soft and full of unevenness, and this insect, with its burnished, black body barred with creamy white, was no mere peppery little "yellow-jacket" wasp, but the great hornet of the woods whose sting can pierce the hide of the moose. No sooner had the bear picked up the dangerous morsel than he spat it out again with a *woof* of surprise and ground it into nothingness with an angry sweep of his paw. Then he fell to shaking his head, clawing awkwardly at his mouth, and whining a fretful protest at the sting. Lumbering down to a swamp hole close by he plunged his muzzle again and again into the chill black mud. After a brief period of this treatment he returned to the stump and went on with his banquet of grubs, stopping every now and then to shake his head and grumble deep in his throat. When another big hornet, catching sight of the feast, pounced upon a grub he smashed her and ground her up instantly without caring how many tasty morsels were annihilated in the process.

When the stump had been quite torn to pieces and every maggot extracted from it the bear moved on to the tree of the hornets. He did not notice the nest, for he did not take the trouble to look up. If he had done so, being in a rage against the

venomous tribe, he might, perhaps, have had the rashness to climb the tree and declare a doubtful war. As it was, he noted only that between two great roots, which sprang out like buttresses from the base of the trunk, there was a space of dry earth, covered with the minute elastic needles of the tamarack. Here he threw himself down with a grunt and fell to rubbing his face awkwardly with his thick forepaws.

BUT he was restless, the old bear, either because the grubs had not satisfied his hunger or because the sting of the hornet still rankled in his jaw. Almost immediately he got up on his haunches and stared all about, sniffing, with his nose in the air. The monstrous confusion of roots and trunks monotonously repeating itself as far as he could see through the shadow appeared to offer him nothing worth his attention. But presently he lurched forward as if he had made up his mind what to do. Shambling grotesquely, but picking his way above the slime as delicately as a cat, he kept on for perhaps a hundred yards. Perhaps his nostrils had caught, across the stagnant air, the tang of running water. It was running water that he came to—for the brook, though often foiled, often diverted, often turned back upon itself and almost lost, had succeeded in saving for itself a clean channel through the water holes and chaos of the swamp.

Just at this point the brook ran through a dark, but living pool—brown, but transparent, with here and there a gleam of elusive light, as in the eyes of some dark-eyed women. To this pool, and others like it strung here and there through the swamp, had gathered many fish—trout, suckers and chub—fleeing the too direct rays of the high midsummer sun.

Lumbering down the sticky bank the bear squatted himself on his haunches close to the edge of the water and stared at it fixedly. After a time his eyes began to discern the fish which thronged in its deep centre. Having assured himself that the fish were there he lay down on his stomach in a hunched, shapeless position, with his face close to the water and one paw unlifted. It looked like a difficult position to hold, but the bear held it, motionless as one of the great roots, and quite as inert looking, till by and by some of the fish, which had been frightened away by his coming, swam slowly back to the weedy edges to feed. These fish were suckers, weed eaters, thick bodied and sluggish in movement, very different from the swift, ravening trout. A spark flashed into the deep of the bear's eyes as he saw them coming, but not so much as the edge of a nostril quivered. A big sucker, with a snout that overhung and opened and shut greedily, came nosing the mud close up under his face. With a lightning scoop the waiting paw descended, and the fish, amid a noisy splash, was hurled out upon the bank half stunned. Before it could recover itself enough to flop the bear was upon it. Picking it up between his jaws he carried it lazily back to that dry couch he had found beneath the tree of the hornets, there to be eaten at his leisure.

WHILE the bear, ponderous, sullen, was mauling and mumbling over his meal in that uncouth solitude there came, moving briskly down the brook's margin, a gay little figure that seemed an embodied protest against all the dark and enormous formlessness of the Swamp. It was as if the world of sunlight, and swift motion, and bright vitality, and completed form had sent in its herald to challenge the inertness of the gloom.

The tripping little figure was about the size of a fox, and with the long, pointed, inquisitive muzzle of a fox. Its abundant fur was of a cloudy, irregular, yellowish grey, darkening at the tips and shading to almost black along the back. Its tail was long, light,

