

The Grip in Deep Hole

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wrenching with all his force at those oozy curves, striving to drag them apart. They gave a little, but not enough to release the imprisoned foot. Another moment and he had to lift his head again for breath.

After some minutes of rest, he repeated the choking struggle, but, as before, in vain. He could move the jaws of the trap just enough to encourage him a little, but not enough to gain his release. Again and again he tried it—again and again to fail just as he imagined himself on the verge of success; till at last he was forced, for the moment, to acknowledge defeat, finding himself so exhausted that he could hardly keep his mouth above water. Drawing down a stiffish upright branch of the sapling, he gripped it between his teeth and so held himself upright while he rested his arms. This was a relief to nerves as well as muscles, because it made his balance, on which he depended for the chance to breathe, so much the less precarious.

As he hung there pondering, held but a bare half inch above drowning, the desperation of the situation presented itself to him in appalling clearness. How sunny, and warm, and safe, to his woods-familiar eyes, looked the green forest world about him! No sound broke the mild tranquility of the solitude, except, now and then, an elfish gurgle of the slow current, or the sweetly cheerful tsic-a-dee-dee of an unseen chickadee, or, from the intense blue overhead, the abrupt, thin whistle of a soaring fish-hawk. To Barnes it all seemed such a safe, friendly world, his well-understood intimate since small boyhood. Yet here it was, apparently, turned smooth traitor at last, and about to destroy him as pitilessly as might the most scorching desert or blizzard-scourged ice-field.

A silent rage burned suddenly through all his veins, which was well, since the cold of that spring-fed river had already begun to finger stealthily about his heart. A delicate little pale-blue butterfly, like a periwinkle-petal come to life, fluttered over Barnes' grim upturned

face, and went dancing gayly out across the shining water, joyous in the sun. In its dancing it chanced to dip a hair's-breadth too low. The treacherous bright surface caught it, held it; and away it swept, struggling in helpless consternation against this unexpected doom. Before it passed out of Barnes' vision a trout rose, and gulped it down. Its swift fate, to Barnes' haggard eyes seemed an analogue in little to his own.

But it was not in the woodsman's fiber to acknowledge himself actually beaten, either by man or fate, so long as there remained a spark in his brain to keep his will alive. He presently began searching with his eyes among the branches of the poplar sapling for one stout enough to serve him for a lever. With the kind of a stick in his hand, he told himself, he might manage to pry apart the jaws of the trap and get his foot free. At last his choice settled upon a branch that he thought would serve his turn. He was just about to reach up and break it off, when a slight crackling in the under-bush across the stream caught his ear.

His woodsman's instinct kept him motionless as he turned his eyes to the spot. In the thick leafage there was a swaying, which moved quickly down along the bank, but he could not see what was causing it. Softly he drew down a leafy branch of the sapling till it made him a perfect screen; then he peered up the channel to find out what the unseen wayfarer was following.

A huge salmon, battered and gashed from a vain struggle to leap the fall, was floating, belly upward, down the current, close to Barnes' side of the stream. A gentle eddy caught it, and drew it to the pool. Softly it came drifting down toward Barnes' hidden face. Among the twigs of the poplar sapling it came to a halt, its great scarlet gills barely moving as the last of life flickered out of it.

Barnes now understood quite well that commotion which had followed, along shore, the course of the dying salmon. It was no surprise to him whatever when he saw a huge black bear emerge upon the yellow sandspit and stand staring across the current. Apparently, it was staring straight at Barnes' face, upturned upon the surface of the water. But Barnes knew it was staring at the

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