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# When the Suckers Run

An Intimate Description of a Northern Spring

By C. DUNCAN SMITH

SPRING had come at last to the wooded slopes that lay about Conjuring Lake. Before the steady advance of the northward, swinging sun the bitter frosts had finally relaxed their grip. The last thin ice was gone from marsh and lake and stream, the last vestige of snow had disappeared from the thickets, and in the open, sun-kissed places on the hillsides patches of tender green were beginning to show. The air was yet damp and chill in the early mornings and at dusk, but at mid-day, when the sun was high, there was a langorous softness in the breeze that came pulsating out of the south, breathing its promise of warm sunshine and summer days to come. It bore also a subtle fragrance, elusive, yet pungent and penetrating, the mingling odours of damp earth and sprouting grasses, the fresh, clean smell of willow buds and spruce needles and bursting sap. There was a witchery about this bland air and delicate aroma of the springtime; it stirred the blood to restless impulses and vague, indefinable longings.

The forest world was full of the sights and sounds of returning life. Hither and thither among the dry grass clumps and the underbrush scurried the small, furtive kindreds, like the dainty, white-footed woodmice and the little, striped chipmunks, revelling in the genial spring sunshine or dodging fate in the shape of some bloodthirsty mink or weasel. In the upper world of the tree-tops birds flitted, and innumerable red squirrels frisked about and chattered volubly to each other about the affairs of squirreldom. Here and there a few feathered warblers, the advance guard of the approaching hosts from the south, were tuning up for their spring mating songs. At intervals, from the dense, willow thickets down by the lake and from the thick, scrubby patches on the upland, came the measured drumming of the partridge. The birch and poplar groves were populous with flocks of noisy, black-flapping crows that shocked the pleasant air with sudden outbursts of raucous clamour as they argued over the advantages and defects of possible nesting places. And when, at times, there came a temporary lull in all these varied sounds, one was vaguely conscious of a faint, mysterious whispering in the air—a subdued rustling, as of unfolding leaves and buds, and growing things thrusting upward through the soil—the first, faint stirrings of the wilderness, awakening from its long winter sleep.

WHEN the snow had gone it had gone quickly and with its going had come days of rain, till all the dun-coloured land was drenched and sodden with moisture. The numerous little ponds and sloughs, unable to accommodate the unwonted influx of water, gradually spread out and flooded the low-lying meadows, transforming them into wide-reaching, grassy lakes. And Conjuring Creek, in the summertime but a tiny brooklet, was now a wide, yellow-brown flood, swirling and foaming over its obstructing snags and boulders as it bore its burden of rain and snow water down to the placid bosom of the lake. Where it ran through the woodland its swift current stealthily undermined the overhanging banks and washed and gurgled musically about the roots of the willows and saskatoon bushes that lined its shores.

One pleasant morning, after the rain was over, and the sun, struggling through the thinning clouds, was beginning to moderate the chill dampness of the air, the waters of the creek were suddenly alive with a host of small-mouthed suckers—big, coarse-scaled fish—that came thronging in from the lake. In countless shoals they came, swimming steadily up against the current, urged on by a blind impulse to seek their spawning beds. They penetrated far inland, into the little ponds and sloughs, into the wide, reed-choked marshes, out into the grass-grown expanses of the

flooded meadows. It was an almost unprecedented run. So thickly at times did they throng the creek that some of their numbers, either crippled or weaker than their fellows, were forced out into the shallows, where they flopped about and gasped for a time and finally turned belly-up among the greening grasses, there to await the coming of some scavenger of the wild.

On the flanks and in the rear of these journeying hosts, and mingling among them in savage companionship, came scores of hungry jackfish and pike, gorging themselves upon the easy prey. But they were not the only enemies that the travellers had to contend with. Almost all of the furred and feathered hunting kindreds knew about this annual migration of the suckers and were not slow to take advantage of what they considered a special dispensation of Nature in their behalf. Here and there, where the creek ran through the open meadows, a fish hawk hovered and wheeled above the amber flood, suddenly dropping with a mighty splash into the water, to rise again on heavily beating wings, clutching in his talons a squirming, struggling victim that flashed silver-bright in the sunlight. In almost any of the sheltered nooks along the shore the snaky, dark form of a mink might be seen taking easy toll from the passing hordes. Clamorous cawing crows infested the nearby trees or patrolled up and down the open shores, on the lookout for stranded fish or the remnants of some other forager's meal. And in the cool of the morning a big lynx had come down to the brink, and scooping out several of the finny wanderers with his huge paws, had banquetted royally upon the unaccustomed fare.

THERE were others, too, bidden by Nature to the feast, that had not yet arrived. Down a narrow, sun-flecked pathway that led toward the creek, came lurching a great, black, shaggy-haired bulk, ominous and terrifying. The big bear was evidently in a hurry, but huge and awkward looking though he was, he slipped along among the trees as noiselessly as a shadow on the broad, soft pads of his feet. He was an old male, rank and rusty coated, and lean with the terrible leanness that comes of prolonged famine. His shaggy hide clung closely about his ribs and his backbone stood out in a well defined ridge, along which the coarse hair was thinning away. And he did not look particularly sweet tempered.

Lured by the blandishments of a prolonged but premature thaw, he had crawled out of his den some weeks earlier and had found the world a cold, inhospitable place. For scarcely had he emerged when the frost gripped the land again, and out of the north came a howling storm of sleet and snow, the last gusty breath of winter. In the bitter cold that followed for a time he wandered aimlessly up and down the pallid aisles of the forest, fierce hunger gnawing at his vitals and naught to satisfy it. For rabbits were few and far between and the succulent young roots and tubers that were his usual spring diet were hard to come at, being obtainable only in the most sheltered spots after digging down through the deep snow. Had it not been for his discovery of an extensive patch of last year's blueberries in the heart of the swamp, things would have gone hard with him indeed. But roots and dried berries were not the kind of food to appease his ravenous hunger or put new life into that giant frame. It was flesh he craved—warm, red-blooded and satisfying. And better even than flesh he loved fish, fresh and firm from the ice cool waters of spring.

That morning, while he was poking about in the gloomy depths of a tamarac swamp, searching for early fundoids, the message had come to him

that now the suckers were running in Conjuring Creek. Abandoning his fruitless quest, he lost no time in answering the call. He set off through the woods at a lurching trot, swinging his great head from side to side as he went. At the edge of each open space he would halt for an instant and test the air with loud sniffings, then plunge on straight ahead, apparently heedless of who might see or hear. And as he went, the lesser creatures of the wild, whether the hunted or the hunting, drew aside discreetly into the underbrush to let him pass. For was he not the Master of the Forest?

It chanced that the path he took led him close by a little clearing that lay about the rude log buildings of a backwoods farm. While he was yet some little distance away there came to his ears the manifold sounds of the farmyard, the intermittent cackling of fowls and the fretful squealing of pigs, punctuated now and then by the strident screaming of geese or the soft lowing of a cow mothering her new-born calf. Came also on the faint breeze many mingling odours, some of them menacing and repellant, others rich and enticing, tantalizing to his famished appetite. When he came to the rough snake fence that barred out the encroaching forest, he followed along it for a little ways where the brush was thick, stopping occasionally to peer wistfully between the bars. But finally he turned away and resolutely resumed his interrupted quest. Not for him, except as a last resort, was the perilous expedient of robbing the farmer.

As he drew near to the creek the faint aroma of fish stole up to greet him and he broke into a shambling, loose-jointed gallop. An eager light came into his little pig-like eyes and his great chops slavered in anticipation. But when he reached the edge of the gentle slope that led down to the water he saw something that caused him to halt abruptly and draw back into the shelter of the bushes.

His intended fishing place was already occupied. Perched on the end of an old log that jutted out into the stream, a young lad from the farmhouse was busily engaged in spearing suckers. Never dreaming that any danger might menace in a neighbourhood so close to the farmyard, he plied his spear diligently as the teeming shoals went by, and his task being an easy one, he already had a goodly pile of the finny quarry lying behind him on the bank. Standing guard over the spoils, a yellow haired, cock eared pup of uncertain breed was watching the proceedings with lively interest.

ORDINARILY the bear would have slipped away without betraying his presence and gone to his fishing at some other point, for he was not by nature a trouble hunter. Indeed, when well fed and indolent, he was a bit of a coward at heart and preferred to follow the line of least resistance, especially in his encounters with man. But now, with the fever of famine in his veins, he was in a decidedly ugly temper and in no mood to brook any interference in the immediate satisfying of his hunger. His drawing back into the bushes had been but the momentary impulse of his habitual caution. Now, as he surveyed the slight figure below him that stood between him and his prospective meal, something snapped in his brain and his little eyes went red with rage.

Instinct warned him that man was a dangerous creature to meddle with, but now, as his wrath swelled rapidly, instinct was forgotten. He saw only that this particular man-creature was very small and unformidable-looking, and moreover, he was poaching on what he considered his own private preserves. He decided that he would give battle to the presumptuous stranger—that he would annihilate him. With a sudden, coughing grunt, he burst through the thin screen of the bushes and charged down the slope.

The yellow haired mongrel was the