

The GRIP in DEEP HOLE



Copyright 1903 by
DENE K. JAMFON.

By CHARLES
G. D.
ROBERTS

THE roar of the falls, the lighter and shriller raging of the rapids, had at last died out behind the thick masses of the forest as Barnes worked his way down the valley. The heat in the windless underbrush, alive with insects, was stifling. He decided to make once more for the bank of the stream, in the hope that its character might by this time have changed so as to afford him an easier and more open path. Pressing aside to his left, he presently saw the green gloom lighten before him. Blue sky and golden light came low through the thinning trees; and then a gleam of unruffled water. He was nearing the edge now; and because the underbrush was so thick about him he began to go cautiously.

All at once he felt his feet sinking; and the screen of thick bushes before him leaned away as if bowed by a heavy gust. Desperately he clutched with both hands at the undergrowth and saplings on either side; but they all gave way with him. In a smother of leafage and blinding, lashing branches he sank downward—at first, as it seemed, slowly, for he had time to think many things while his heart was jumping in his throat. Then, shooting through the lighter bushy companions of his fall, and still clutching convulsively at those upon which he had been able to lay his grasp, he plunged feet first into a dark water.

The water was deep, and cold. Barnes went down straight, and clear under, with a strangled gasp. His feet struck, with some force, upon a tangled, yielding mass, from which he rose again with a spring. His head shot above the surface, above the swirl of foam, leafage, and debris; and spatteringly he gulped his lungs full of air. But before he could clear his eyes or his nostrils, or recover his self-possession, he was stealthily dragged down again. With a pang of horror he realized that he was caught by the foot.

A powerful swimmer, Barnes struck out mightily with his arms and came to the surface again at once, rising beyond the shoulders. But by so much the more was he violently snatched back again, strangling and desperate, before he had time to empty his lungs and catch breath. This time the shock sobered him, flashing the full peril of the situation before his startled consciousness. With a tremendous effort of will he stopped his struggling, and contented himself with a gentle paddling to keep upright. This time he came more softly to the surface, clear beyond the chin. The foam, and debris, and turbulence of little waves, rashed about his lips, and the sunlight danced confusingly in his streaming eyes; but he gulped a fresh lungful before he again went down.

Paddling warily now, he emerged again at once, and, with arms outspread, brought himself to a precarious equilibrium, his mouth just clearing the surface so long as he held his head well back. Keeping very still, he let his bewildered wits compose themselves and the agitated surface settle to quiet.

He was in a deep, tranquil cove, hardly stirred by an eddy. Some ten paces farther out from the shore the main current swirled past sullenly, as if weary from the turbulence of falls and rapids. Across the current a little space of sand-beach, jutting out from the leafy shore, shone golden in the sun. Up and down the stream, as far as his extremely restricted vision would suffer him to see, nothing but thick, overhanging branches, and the sullen current. Very cautiously he turned his head—though to do so brought the water over his lips—and saw behind him just what he expected. The high, almost perpendicular bank was scarred by a gash of bright, raw, reddish earth, where the brink had slipped away beneath his weight.

Just within reach of his hand lay, half submerged, the thick, leafy top of a fallen poplar sapling, its roots apparently still clinging to the bank. Gently he laid hold of it, testing it, in the hope that it might prove solid enough to enable him to haul himself out. But it came away in-

stantly in his grasp. And once more in this slight disturbance of his equilibrium, his head went under.

Barnes was disappointed, but he was now absolutely master of himself. In a moment he had regained the only position in which he could breathe comfortably. Then, because the sun was beating down too fiercely on the top of his head, he carefully drew the bushy top of the poplar sapling into such a position that it gave him shade. As its roots were still aground, it showed no tendency to float off and forsake him in his plight.

A very little consideration, accompanied by a cautious investigation with his free foot, speedily convinced him, being a practical woodsman, that the trap in which he found himself caught could be nothing else than a couple of interlaced, twisted branches, or roots, of some tree which had fallen into the pool in some former caving-in of the bank. In that dark deep wherein his foot was held fast, his mind's eye could see it all well enough—the water-soaked, brown-green, slimy, inexorable coil, which had yielded to admit the unlucky member, then closed upon the ankle like the jaws of an otter trap. He could feel that grip—not severe, but uncompromisingly firm, clutching the joint. As he considered, he began to draw comfort, however, from the fact that his invisible captor had displayed a certain amount of give-and-take. This elasticity meant either that it was a couple of branches slight enough to be flexible that held him, or that the submerged tree itself was a small one, not too steadfastly anchored down. He would free himself easily enough, he thought, as soon as he should set himself about it coolly and systematically.

Taking a long breath he sank his head under the surface, and peered downward through the amber-brown but transparent gloom. Little gleams of brighter light came twisting and quivering in from the swirls of the outer current. Barnes could not discern the bottom of the pool, which was evidently very deep; but he could see quite clearly the portion of the sunken tree in whose interwoven branches he was held. A shimmering golden ray fell just on the spot where his foot vanished to the ankle between two stout curves of what looked like slimy brown cables or sections of a tense snake body.

It was, beyond question, a nasty-looking trap; and Barnes could not blink the fact that he was in a tight place. He lifted his face above the surface, steadied himself carefully, and breathed deeply and quietly for a couple of minutes, gathering strength for a swift and vigorous effort. Then, filling his lungs very moderately, the better to endure a strain, he stooped suddenly downward, deep into the amber gloom, and began 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 fall 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 desperateness 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 fishhawk. 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-scoured 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

searching with his eyes among the branches of the poplar sapling for one stout enough to serve him for a lever. With the right 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 cracking in the underbrush 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 falls, was floating, belly upward, down the current, close to Barnes' side of the stream. A gentle eddy caught it, and drew it into the pool. Softly it came drifting down to-



The animal threw himself shoulder high from the water and hurled himself with all his strength.

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 fibre 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

ward 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 sandpit 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 dead salmon. His heart jumped sickly with sudden hope as an extravagant notion flashed into his

brain. Here was his rescuer—a perilous one, to be sure—vouchsafed to him by some whim of the inscrutable forest fates. He drew down another branchy twig before his face, fearful lest his concealment should not be adequate. But in his excitement he disturbed his balance, and with the effort of his recovery the water swirled noticeably all about him. His heart sank. Assuredly, the bear would take alarm at this and be afraid to come for the fish.

But to his surprise the great beast, which had seemed to hesitate, plunged impetuously into the stream. Nothing, according to a bear's knowledge of life, could have made that sudden disturbance in the pool but some fish-loving otter or mink, intent upon seizing the booty. Indignant at the prospect of being forestalled by any such furtive marauder, the bear hurled himself forward with such force that the spray flew high into the branches, and the noise of his splashing was a clear notification that trespassers and meddlers had better keep off. That salmon was his, by right of discovery; and he was going to have it.

The bear, for all the seeming clumsiness of his bulk, was a redoubtable swimmer; and almost before Barnes had decided clearly on his proper course of action those heavy, grunting snorts and vast expulsions of breath were at his ear. Encouraged by their sound, shot thus close along the surface of the water. Perforce, Barnes made up his mind on the instant.

The bunch of twigs which had arrested the approach of the floating salmon lay just about an arm's length from Barnes' face. Swimming high, his mighty shoulders thrust up a wave before him which buried Barnes' head safely from view, the bear reached the salmon. Grabbing it triumphantly in its jaws, he turned to make for shore again.

This was Barnes' moment. Both arms shot out before him. Through the suffocating confusion his clutching fingers encountered the bear's haunches. Sinking into the long fur, they closed upon it with a grip of steel. Then, instinctively, Barnes shut his eyes and clenched his teeth, and waited for the shock, while his lungs felt as if in another minute they would burst.

But it was no long time he had to wait, perhaps two seconds, while amazement in the bear's brain translated itself through panic into action. Utterly horrified by this unexplainable attack from the rear and from the depths, the animal threw himself shoulder-high from the water, and hurled himself forward with all his strength. Barnes felt those tremendous haunches heaving irresistibly beneath his clutching fingers. He felt himself drawn out straight, and dragged ahead till he thought his ankle would snap. Almost he came to letting go, to save the ankle. But he held on, as much with his will as with his grip. Then the slimy thing in the depths gave way. He felt himself being jerked out through the water—free. His fingers relaxed their clutch on the bear's fur, and he came to the surface, gasping, blinking, and coughing.

For a moment or two he paddled softly, recovering his breath and shaking the water from nostrils and eyes. He had an instant of apprehensiveness, lest the bear should turn upon him and attack him at a disadvantage; and by way of precaution he gave forth the most savage and piercing yell that his laboring lungs were capable of. But he saw at once that on this score he had nothing to fear. It was a well-frightened bear, there swimming frantically for the sandpit; while the dead salmon, quite forgotten, was drifting slowly away on the sullen current.

Barnes' foot was hurting fiercely, but his heart was light. Swimming at leisure, so as to just keep head against the stream, he watched the bear scuttle out upon the sand. Once safe on dry land, the great beast turned and glanced back with a timid air to see what manner of being it was that had so astoundingly assailed him. Man he had seen before, but never man swimming like an otter; and the sight was nothing to reassure him. One longing look he cast upon the salmon, now floating some distance away; but that, to his startled mind, was just a lure of this terrifying and perfidious creature whose bright gray eyes were staring at him so steadily from the surface of the water. He turned quickly and made off into the woods, followed by a loud, daunting laugh which spurred his pace to a panicky gallop.

When he was gone, Barnes swam to the sandpit. There he stripped, wrung out his dripping clothes, and lay down in the hot sand to let the sun soak deep into his chilled veins.