



For all his rage the mink kept his wits about him. He knew the owl for one of his most dangerous adversaries

## A BASKET OF FISH by Charles G.D. Roberts. Illustration by Paul Bransom



FRESH and tender, the light of the mild spring afternoon caressed the little abandoned clearing in the wilderness. At the back of the clearing, beneath a solitary white birch tree just bursting into green, stood a squatter's log cabin, long deserted, its door and window gone, its roof of poles and bark half fallen in. Past the foot of the clearing, with dancing sparkle and a crisp, musical clamour, ran a shallow stream some dozen yards in width, its clear waters amber-tawny from the far-off cedar-swamps in which it took its rise. Along one side came the deeply rutted backwoods road, skirting the clearing, and making its precarious way across the stream by a rude bridge not lightly to be ventured after dark. Over all the faces of the lonely backwoods world was washed the high, thin green of the New Brunswick Maytime, under a sky of crystal cobalt dotted with dense white fleeces.

Before the ruined cabin stood a light wagon, its wheels and polished body bespattered with mud. In the open back of the wagon, thrust, well under the seat to be in shade, lay a large wicker fishing-basket, with a tuft of grass sticking out through the square hole in the cover. Some ten or a dozen paces distant, tethered beneath the birch tree, a sorrel horse munched the last remnants of a bundle of hay, and whisked his long tail to keep off the flies.

FROM behind a corner of the ruined cabin peered craftily a red fox. He eyed the wagon, he eyed the horse beneath the birch tree, he scrutinized the whole clearing, the road, and the open stretch of the stream. Then his narrowed, searching gaze returned to the wagon, and to the fat basket in the back of the wagon. At length he stepped forth, mineingly, into full view, trotted up, and sniffed inquisitively. As if in doubt, he raised himself on his hind legs, with his forepaws on the tire of the nearest wheel, and took a long, satisfying sniff. Yes, undoubtedly there were fish in the basket, fresh fish,—trout, in fact.

He wanted those fish exceedingly. It seemed easy enough to get them. He shifted his forepaws to the back of the wagon, and studied the situation.

Why should he not climb up and help himself? The sorrel horse, catching a whiff of his pungent scent, looked around at him suddenly, and snorted. But what did he care for the disapproval of the sorrel horse? All horses, submissive and enslaved, he held in profoundest scorn. He would have those trout, whether the horse liked it or not. And anyhow, he saw that the horse was tethered to the tree. He settled himself back upon his haunches to spring into the wagon.

THEN a new idea flashed into his cunning red head. No one who valued fresh-caught trout at their full worth would leave them thus unguarded, unless for a sinister purpose. They were surely left there as a trap. The fox wrinkled his nose with mingled regret and disdain. He knew something of traps. He had once been nipped. He was not to be caught again, not he. What fools these men were, after all! His satisfaction at having seen through their schemes almost compensated him for the loss of the expected meal. He drew back, sat down on his tail, and eyed the wagon minutely for a while. Then he trotted away into the forest again to hunt wood-mice.

But it was just here that the red prowler's cunning overreached itself. The basket in the wagon was full of trout. And there was no trap to be feared. He might have feasted to his heart's content, and incurred no penalty more serious than the disapproval of the tethered horse, had he not been quite so amazingly clever. For even among the wild kindreds the prize is not always to him of nimble wit.

The trout were there in the basket simply because the fishing had been so good. The two fishermen who had driven out from town, in the grey of dawn, over those fifteen miles of bad backwoods road, had fished the stream upwards from the bridge throughout the morning. At this season the trout,—fine, vivid fish, of good pan size,—were lying in the open, dancing runs and about the tails of the rapids; and they were rising freely to almost any bright fly, though with a preference for a red hackle. Toward noon the fishermen had returned to the clearing to lunch beneath the birch-tree and to feed and water the horse. They had emptied all their catch into one basket, stowed the basket under the wagon-seat, then

started off again to fish the finer reaches of the stream, with its wide poles and long, sunlit rapids, below the bridge. Good fishermen, but not expert woodsmen, they had no idea that, here in the solitude, they ran any risk of being robbed of their morning's spoils.

Soon after the departure of the over-crafty fox, a backwoods tramp came by with a ragged little bundle slung from the stick on his shoulder. His eyes lighted up at sight of the unguarded wagon from town, and he understood the situation at a glance. In the front of the wagon, by the dashboard, he found a lunch-basket,—still half-full, as the fishermen had provided themselves for another substantial meal. He hurriedly devoured about half the contents of the lunch-basket, transferred the rest to his dirty bundle, and with huge content lighted a half-burned cigar which one of the fishermen had left lying on a log. Next he investigated the fishing-basket. Half a dozen of the finest fish he took out and strung upon a forked twig. This he did not regard as stealing, but merely as the exaction of a small and reasonable tribute from a Society which had of late neglected to feed him any too well. Puffing his cigar butt in high good humor, he went over and made friends with the horse, feeding it a few handfuls of fresh grass. Then, with the string of fish dangling beside his bundle and flapping against it as he walked, he resumed his solitary journey, picked his way over the dilapidated bridge, and vanished into the fir forest beyond. The horse, feeling rather lonely, neighed after him.

AN abandoned clearing or a deserted log cabin, something to which Man has set his hand and then withdrawn it, seems always a place of peculiar fascination to the creatures of the wilderness. They have some sense, perhaps, of having regained a lost dominion. Or possibly they think, from these, his leavings, to learn something significant of Man's mysterious over-lordship. In any case, the attraction seldom fails.

The tramp had not been long gone, when a new visitor arrived. Up from the fringing bushes along the stream's edge came furtively a little, low, long-bodied beast, in shape (Continued on Page 7)