

A BASKET OF FISH

By Charles C. D. Roberts

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much like an exaggerated weasel, but almost black in color. Its head was almost triangular; its eyes, set near together, were bright and cruel. It came half-way across the meadow, then stopped, and eyed for some time the tethered horse and the deserted wagon. Seeing nothing to take alarm at, it made a wide circuit, ran behind the cabin, and reappeared, as the fox had done, at the corner nearest to the wagon. From this point of vantage it surveyed the situation anew, a little spark of blood-red fire alternately glowing and fading in its eyes as its keen nostrils caught the scent of the fish.

Satisfied at length that there was no danger within range, the mink glided up to the wagon. The horse it paid no heed to. It circled the wagon a couple of times in a nervous, jerky run, its head darting this way and that, till its nose assured it beyond question that the fish it scented were in the wagon itself. Thereupon,—for the mink lacks the fox's hair-splitting astuteness and does not take long to make up its mind,—it clambered nimbly up through one of the wheels, and fell straightway upon the fish-basket.

NOW the tramp, courteous in his depredations, had taken thought to refasten the basket. The mink was puzzled. The hole in the top of the basket, though he might have squeezed his head through it, was not large enough to let him reach the fish. He began jerking the basket and pulling it about savagely. The back of the wagon consisted of a hinged flap, and the fisherman had left it hanging down. The basket, dragged this way and that, came presently to the edge, toppled over, and fell heavily to the ground, on its bulging side. The fastening came undone, and the cover flopped half-open. The mink dropped down beside it, flung himself upon it furiously, and began jerking out and scattering the contents, tearing mouthfuls from one fish after another in a paroxysm of greed, as if he feared they were still alive and might get away from him.

The basket emptied and his first rage glutted, the mink now fell to the business of making a serious meal. Selecting a fish to his taste, he ate it at great leisure, leaving the head and the tail upon the grass. Then he picked out a larger one, as if he regarded the first as merely an appetizer.

As he gnawed luxuriously at the silver-and-buff, vermilion-spotted titbit, an immense shadow floated between him and the sun. He did not take time to look up and see what it was. It was as if the touch of the shadow had loosed a powerful spring. He simply shot from his place,—at such speed that the eye could not distinguish how he did it,—and in the minutest fraction of a second was curled within the empty fishing basket, which still lay on its side, half open. A pair of long, black, sickle-curved talons, surmounted by thickly-feathered grey shanks, clutched at the place where he had stood.

Furious at having missed her strike, the great horned owl, that tigress of the air, flapped up again on her soundless, downy wings, and swooped suddenly at the basket, as if trying to turn it over. As her talons clawed at the wickerwork, feeling for a hold, the head of the mink, on its long, snaky neck, darted forth, reached up, and struck its fine white fangs into her thigh.

But the great owl's armour of feathers, though it looked so soft and fluffy, was in fact amazingly resistant. The mink's long teeth reached the flesh, and drew blood; but he gained no grip. That steel-muscle thigh was wrenched from his jaws, leaving him with an embarrassing mouthful of down. He jerked his head

into cover again, just as the bird made another lightning clutch at him.

For all his rage, the mink kept his wits about him. He knew the owl for one of his most dangerous rivals and adversaries. He knew that he could kill her if once he could reach her throat, or get his grip fixed on one of her mighty wings, close to the base. But that if kept him prudent. He was too well aware that in an open combat he was more than likely to get his neck or his back into the clutch of those inexorable talons,—and that would be the end of him. Discreetly, therefore, he kept himself well within the basket, which was large enough to hold him comfortably. He snarled shrilly through the little square hole in the cover, while his assailant, balked of her prey and furious with the smart of her wound, pounced once more upon the basket and strove to claw an entrance. A chance blow of one of her pounding wings drove the lid—the basket being still on its side—completely to. The sorrel horse under the birch tree swung round on his tether, and rolled his eyes, and snorted, deeply scandalized at such goings-on about his familiar wagon.

It was just at this point in the mink's adventure that the fox returned to the clearing. He had had rather poor luck with the wood-mice, and his chops watered with the memory of those trout in the wagon. Something of an expert in dealing with traps, he made up his mind that he would try to circumvent this one.

The sight that met his shrewd eyes as he emerged warily from the cover of the fir woods amazed him. He halted to take it in thoroughly. He saw the basket lying on the ground, and the angry owl clawing at it. The fish he did not see. He concluded that they were still in the basket, and that the owl was trying to get at them. This particular kind of owl, as he knew, was a most formidable antagonist; but with his substantial weight and his long, punishing jaws, he felt himself much more than a match for her. His eyes flamed green with indignation as he watched her trying to steal the prize which he had already marked down for his own. He darted forward on tip-toe,—noiselessly, as he thought,—and made a long leap at the flapping, dusky wings.

But the ears of an owl are a very miracle of sensitiveness. They can catch the squeak of a mouse at a distance which, for ordinary ears, would make the sharp clucking of a chipmunk inaudible. To the bird on the basket the coming of those velvet footsteps were like the scamper of a frightened sheep. She sprang into the air without an effort, hung for a moment to glare down upon the fox with her hard, round, moonpale eyes, and then sailed off without a sound, having no mind to try conclusions with the long-jawed red stranger.

THE fox was surprised to find the trout lying scattered about the grass, some of them bitten and mangled. What, then, was in the basket? What was the great owl trying to get at, when the precious fish were all spread out before her? Curiosity dominating his hunger, he stepped up to the basket and sniffed at the hole in the lid. Instantly there was a shrill, vicious snarl from within, and a wide-open, triangular mouth, set with white teeth, darted at his nose. He drew back hastily, and sat down on his tail, ears cocked and head tilted to one side, to consider.

It puzzled him greatly that there should be a mink in the basket. Tip-toeing cautiously around it, he saw that the lid was slightly open, so that the mink could come out if he wished. But the fox did not want him to come out. What the fox wanted was fish, not a fight with an adversary who

would give him a lot of trouble. By all means, let the mink stay in there.

Keeping a sharp watch on the lid of the basket, the fox backed away cautiously several feet, lay down, and fell to devouring the trout. But never for an instant did he take his eyes off that slightly moving lid. He lay with his feet gathered under him, every muscle ready for action, expecting each moment to find himself involved in a desperate battle for the prize he was enjoying. He could not imagine a fiery-tempered personage like the mink tamely submitting to the rape of his banquet. He felt sure that in the next second or two a snaky black shape, all teeth and springs and venom, would dart from the basket and be at his throat. He was ready but was not hankering for trouble.

Meanwhile, there behind the basket lid, the mink was raging irresolutely. It galled him to the marrow to watch his big, arrogant, bush-tailed rival complacently gulping down those fine fat trout. But,—well, he had himself already eaten one of the trout, and a good part of another. His hunger was blunted. He could rage within reason. And his reason admonished him to keep out of this fight if it could be managed. He knew the whipcord muscle underlying that soft red fur, the deadly grip of those long, narrow jaws. There is no peace-counsellor like a contented belly. So he snarled softly to himself, and waited.

The fox, having swallowed as much as he could hold, stood up, stretched himself, and licked his chops. The look which he kept upon the basket was no less vigilant than before, but there was now a tinge of scorn in it. There were still some trout left. But he wanted to get away. He snatched up the two biggest fish in his jaws, and trotted off with them to the woods, glancing back over his shoulder as he went.

BEFORE he had gained the cover of the fir trees, the mink glided forth, planted his forepaws on the remaining fish, and stood staring after him in an attitude of challenge. Had the fox returned, the mink would now have fought. But the fox had no thought of returning. There was nothing to fight about. He had got what he wanted. He had no rooted objection to the mink having what was left. He trotted away nonchalantly toward his burrow under the roots of an old birch tree on the hill.

The mink stuffed himself till he could not get another mouthful down. There were still a couple of trout untouched. He eyed them regretfully; but he had not the fox's wit or providence to carry them off and hide them for future use. He left them, therefore, with a collection of neatly severed heads and tails, to mock the fishermen when they should return at sunset. He was feeling very drowsy. At a deliberate pace, quite unlike his usual eager and darting movements, he made off down the clearing toward the water. Beneath the bank was an old musquash hole which he was well acquainted with. Only the other day, indeed, he had cleared out its inhabitants, devouring their litter of young. He crawled into the hole, curled up on the soft, dead grass of the devastated nest, and cosily went to sleep.

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