

CHAPTER VII

THE PESTS OF THE SWAMP

ONE day as Bob was returning from the Anchorage Mr. Brown, jogging home in his green road-wagon, hailed him with a:

“’Lo there, Leach. Want a lift?”

The fish-dealer was, according to his neighbors, “as close as the bark of a tree, ’n the inside bark at that.” Giving lifts of any description without sufficient recompense was certainly not his custom, and even a small friendly act like this struck Bob as unusual. He accepted the invitation, however, and climbed to the well-cushioned seat, wondering whether it was due to any special reason. Mr. Brown did not leave him long in doubt.

“I hear you’re getting to be quite a fisherman,” he remarked genially. “You’re sure getting to be some of a man, and you look like you could do a man’s work.”

He stole a sidelong glance at Bob, whose broad shoulders overtopped his own by several inches.

"I reckon I'm growing some," said Bob, sliding down a little in the seat.

"I never saw a boy grow faster." Mr. Brown's tone implied a compliment. "And what's more, there's nothing weedy about you. You hold it. You thicken as well as lengthen, and that's what I like to see in boys or fish. I like 'em deep-bodied."

Bob was too embarrassed to reply, and after a short pause the fish-dealer resumed.

"What I'm after is this: Fish never was so high, or fishermen so scarce. Why, there's four boats quit running within a week, for some fool reason or other. Seems like the more folks can make the less they want to work. Now you're a worker if I've heard right. How is it?"

"I reckon I'm ready to make money in the right way if I have a chance," said Bob.

"You've got the chance," said the fish-dealer, laying a mahogany-colored hand on Bob's knee. "I've got a boat that's doing nothing but growing grass on her bottom. All the fixings with her, too. Now you take her off my hands on

shares or hire her straight out; I don't care which so long's you get busy and bring in some fish. You've been mulleting, I reckon?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Bob.

"Well, then, you take her. Pick up a good man to go second, and we'll both make a smart thing out of it. You won't find me hard to make terms with."

In spite of this agreeable assurance Mr. Brown did what he could to get all the best of the bargain; but Bob was no fool. His quiet manner covered a good share of shrewdness and a great deal of determination. At the outset he named the sum which he was willing to pay for a season's use of the boat, and no arguments could budge him. Finally the fish-dealer, rather than lose a promising customer, yielded, and not without some admiration for what he considered to be a piece of sharpness almost equal to his own.

"Well, you can have her at that," he said. "Come over and sign the papers tomorrow. I always like things down in black and white. The boat's ready and waiting. You can take her on the spot."

Bob had said nothing about a helper but there

was no doubt in his mind as to whom he wanted. If Jim would take the place, it was his. Jim had been his loyal friend ever since that first meeting on the bridge, and Bob was not the boy to forget his friends. He was as pleased at this opportunity to do Jim a favor as he was in realizing his own long-cherished hopes of engaging in the fishing business for himself.

It was pleasant to see Jim's delight after he realized that the offer was not a joke. His round face shone, and he fidgeted to be off on the *Emmie E*.

"You're right good to me, Bob," he said. "I'll work hard for you, I will."

Bob slapped him affectionately on the back.

"You talk like you think you are the crew," he laughed. "There ain't any on this boat, only a couple of captains."

It so happened that the fishing fleet had come home with their fares that evening, and when they put forth in the fresh morning the *Emmie E's* brown sail was well in the van. She was in perfect trim. What is more, she proved herself a good sailer. Bob and Jim, happy and hopeful, ignored the gradually darkening sky and

the increasing vigor of the wind. In comparison with the *Mudhen* the new boat seemed as stiff as a church.

Towards noon, however, as they neared the head of the lagoon they were forced to take in a couple of reefs. The run was nearly at an end, but the wind was blowing a gale, and the shallow water was ridged with sweeping, foam-capped waves. It was exhilarating, but it was ominous weather for fishing, and as the boats came one by one into the small cove in front of the camp the owners snuggled them down with unusual care, and some of the wise ones bridled their crafts with a pair of anchors.

"Looks like she'd started in to blow a norther," remarked Reese when they had all gathered in the long bunk house. "I didn't like the look of things when we came along. Nary a duck in sight."

"No use to go out tonight, anyway," said Red Simonson. "We might's well get the fire going and take it warm and easy. This wind's sure cold."

The big stove soon drove the chill from the bunk house and the men gathered round it with

glowing pipes. The heat brought out a few torpid mosquitoes, "just to make things seem more natural," as big Sandy Goulden remarked with an oath. Sandy was always a grumbler, and the prospect of bad fishing weather had put a keener edge to his temper.

"Seems to me you're powerful fussy, Sandy," drawled Jeppson. "You ought to walk across Black Point after a spell of rain if you want to know what mosquitoes mean. That's their earthly Heaven, sure."

"They say you can't range cattle there," remarked one of the men. "The skeeters just naturally eat 'em up."

"I reckon that's true enough," said Jeppson. "I went there once with a fellow from New York and they pretty near ate me up, and I'm plumb full of quinine, too. The other fellow wouldn't have got out alive 'cept for me, I reckon."

"Go ahead," "Tell the yarn," cried several smokers.

"Well," began Jeppson, "I was guiding for this New Yorker, as I told you. His name was Cobb. He had an idea that he must kill a b'ar

before going back North. B'ars stay pretty well hid up during the winter, but along about spring they begin to stretch and come out of their holes, yawnin' and hungry. When the turtles start to laying along the beaches, b'ars is busy folks. That's the best way to get 'em. Jes' dig a blind in the sand, near where the turtles have been nesting, and lie out in it on a moonlight night. If you don't get a shot at a b'ar then, I reckon there ain't any in that county.

"I told Cobb that sometimes, between the heat and the mosquitoes and the sand-flies, b'ar-hunting meant more trouble than fun, but he didn't care. He was a right gritty chap. What he wanted was a b'ar's skin—never mind the cost.

"It began to rain about then, and kept it up for ten days on end. We didn't try to go out. Jes' lay round our camp on the river shore, catching a few fish now and then, and spending the rest of the time drying our clothes before the fire.

"When the rain broke, Cobb fretted to be off. We started right after supper, and sailed down the river into Broadbill Creek. She's a

pretty wide creek, and runs back into the marsh for two miles or more without a turn. Then she bends quick to the left, like a doubled-up arm, and runs three miles farther, ending in a round pond, like a clenched fist.

“ We left the sailboat at the turn, that being as near to the beach as we could get by water. It was a cloudy night, and looked as if it might rain again. It was hot, though. Hot and sticky. And the walking was bad; all niggerheads and wallows with tall saw-grass, that kept you from seeing where you were stepping.

“ Cobb kept slumping down into the muck-holes and almost leaving his rubber boots behind when he dragged his feet out. That marsh mud's just like glue — and smells about as bad. I wore leather shoes. I'd tried a rubber pair once, and knew when I had enough.

“ We did three miles of this, and then the ground began to grow firmer and the grass shorter. Presently we struck sand and felt the wind off the ocean.

“ We crossed a couple of dune ridges, and came out on the beach. The tide was coming in. We could see the white rim of it a long

way on either side of us. There was just enough moonlight peepin' through the clouds to show us that, and to touch the tops of the waves with a whitish glare. But it looked pretty dark to shoot b'ars.

“ ‘This is fine,’ said Cobb. ‘It’s so mysterious and — and sort of uncanny. Jes’ hear those herons off in the marsh! Like horns!’

“ It didn’t take long for us to scoop a shallow hole in the sand, jes’ deep enough to lie in comfortable. I’d been up and down the beach a little way and seen plenty of turtle sign, so I knew we were well placed. I was sure of it a moment later when something black and round loomed up at the edge of the water. I pointed it out to Cobb.

“ He gave a jump and grabbed his rifle.

“ ‘Is it a b’ar?’ he whispered.

“ ‘No, not exactly,’ said I. ‘It’s a loggerhead, and she’s bigger than any b’ar you ever saw. She’ll weigh eight hundred pounds if she weighs anything.’

“ You wouldn’t believe how cautious that old loggerhead was. She lay just at the edge of the water for ten minutes, pretending, probably,

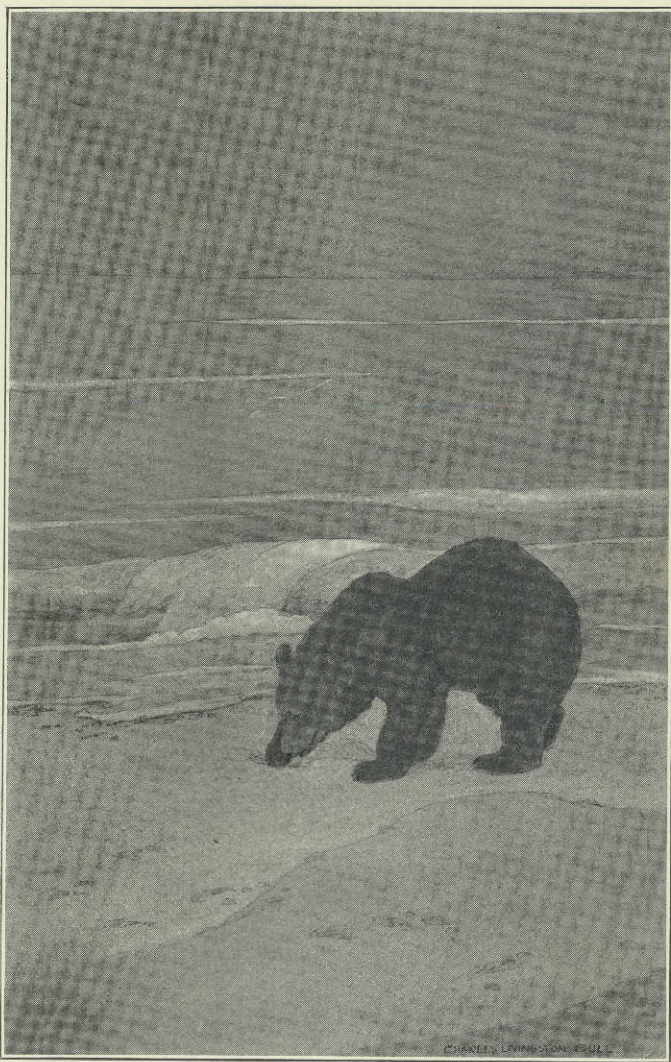
that she was a bit of driftwood. By and by she began to move up the slope, like a haystack being pushed along by jerks. We could hear the hiss of her slow breathing and the scrape of her flippers on the sand.

“ Presently she found the right spot, and round she went like a wheel, scraping out a hole about as big as our blind. It took her half an hour to lay her eggs. After she got one layer down, she’d scrape sand over it, and then lay another on top of that.

“ ‘ This is better than b’ar-shooting,’ said Cobb. ‘ Ouch! That’s the second mosquito that’s got home on the back of my neck. There goes Madam Loggerhead. She ought to have a numerous family.’

“ ‘ If a b’ar don’t get ’em,’ I said, ‘ she’s liable to have some progeny, sure.’

“ And then I heard something pad-padding along in the darkness. It wasn’t the loggerhead. She made a swishing with her flippers like a broom on a floor, and besides, she was close to the water when I heard it. The next moment I saw her big shell slip into the sea and disappear.



"THE BEAR HAD UNCOVERED THE FIRST LAYER OF EGGS."

“It was a b’ar I’d heard, and probably he’d been watching the loggerhead’s performance for some time, for he made straight for the nest. Cobb saw him, and drew in a sharp breath. The critter looked as big as an ox in the moonlight.

“I nodded to Cobb, and we stuck our rifles over the blind. The b’ar had uncovered the first layer of eggs, and was sweeping them into his mouth with both paws, making a noise like a hog at a trough, as the warm yolks ran down his throat. B’ars are wild over turtle eggs. I’ve seen ’em clean out one nest, and then, when they happen on another, vomit the first meal up, so’s they could have room for the second. Leastways I suppose that’s why they did it, though it may have been because their stomachs were overloaded.

“When I thought the time was right, I nudged Cobb with my knee and we fired. We hit the b’ar sure enough, but the light was so poor we didn’t hit him in the right place. He came plumb for us the next moment with a nasty snarl. Cobb fired another shot at him, which turned him off to the right, and we heard him go into the reeds with a crash. I was using a single shot rifle,

and couldn't slip in another cartridge in time to fire, myself.

“ ‘There goes our b'ar,’ said I. ‘Only he ain't ours.’

“ ‘Come on,’ said Cobb, and he jumped over the edge of the blind like he weighed no more'n Jim. ‘We'll get him yet. I'm pretty sure I hit him with that last shot.’

“ ‘I'm not chasing any b'ar into that swamp,’ I said.

“ Cobb was brushing away the mosquitoes with one hand and holding his rifle with the other.

“ ‘That ain't the way we hunt b'ars in the North,’ he said. ‘When we wound 'em we follow the tracks until we get 'em.’

“ ‘It's too dark to follow him,’ I said. ‘We couldn't find a drove of cattle in there to-night. And then there's the mosquitoes. They'll be bad enough going back to the boat, let alone tramping out of our path to wake 'em up.’

“ ‘We're not afraid of a few mosquitoes where I come from,’ said he.

“ ‘Ain't you?’ I said. ‘Perhaps you think things in this swamp are the same as up North.’

“‘There’s one thing that’s the same everywhere, and that’s pluck,’ said he.

“I ought to have known better, but I flared up then and told him to come on. He didn’t make any reply, but followed me into the reeds with an air that as much as said he wouldn’t be the one to give up first.

“For the first few yards it was easy to follow the track, but as the grass got higher and the ground more broken it came to be pure guess-work.

“I reckoned the b’ar would head for a big hummock about three miles to the south, and I laid my course for this, without paying much attention to signs by the way.

“I’ve been in some places where the mosquitoes were pretty thick, — the Everglades, for instance, — but I never saw anything like the way they were that night in that swamp. As we went slumping and slashing along, our feet stirred them up by millions from the soggy ground, and our shoulders brushed more millions from the reeds. At first they didn’t bother me much, but by and by one or two bit me, and that seemed to set

the others on. It was as if they'd got a smell of blood.

"They pelted against me like dust driven by a wind, pricking at my face with their little hair-like stickers. Of course I used my free hand, but it was like fighting smoke, with your face over the fire.

"They were all over my back and shoulders, too, where I couldn't reach 'em. We wore the thinnest kind of cotton outing-shirts, which didn't protect our skins any more than if they'd been nets.

"I wasn't going to cry baby, though, before Cobb. I kept on as straight for the hummock as I could, with the swarms of insects blinding my eyes. I could hear Cobb splashing and puffing behind me, and I knew he was having a bad time. Sure enough, he stopped presently and called to me.

"'I'll own up I'm a fool,' he said. 'There *are* a few mosquitoes here, and that's a fact. I'm about eaten alive. Let's go back to the boat.'

"I was about ready myself, so we changed our course and headed for the bend of the creek. The ground was very bad, and I had to walk

slowly so that Cobb, who was a heavy man, could keep up with me. The niggerheads didn't seem to have any necks to 'em. When we stepped on one it would twist like a ball under our feet. Sometimes we kept our balance and sometimes we didn't. When we didn't we'd slip off into a bit of knee-high mud and water that sucked so you could hear it.

" Pretty soon we struck a patch of reeds seven feet high. It was like going down into water. I began to have little prickles run up and down my back, and fought the reeds jes' as if I was swimming. It was foolish to waste my strength that way, but I wanted to get my head out. It seemed as if I'd choke if I didn't.

" My head and shoulders were always in a cloud of mosquitoes. Dark as it was, I could see the swarms of 'em, like black nets, hanging about me. I couldn't stop to brush 'em away, and it wouldn't have been any use to try. They stung me everywhere. The skin was drawn tight on my face, and my neck and shoulders burned like fire.

" I felt my nerve giving way. I suppose it was the poison in my blood, but I had hot thrills,

jes' as I have when the 'shakes' come on me, and I began to run. In about a minute I was so turned round that I didn't know where I was.

"I don't know when I dropped my rifle, but I've never seen it since. You could hardly call it running, for I was on my hands and knees in the slime half the time. I tried to keep my mouth closed and breathe evenly, but what air there was in those thick reeds was hot, and I had to gasp to get my lungs full. In a short time I was spitting out little wads of mosquitoes. After a while I jes' swallowed 'em.

"I'd clean forgotten about Cobb until I heard him shout. I reckon he called several times before I stopped. Then I went back to where he was, up to his knees in mud, without the strength to pull himself out. His big, fat chest was heaving under his shirt, and he was making a noise like a clogged engine.

"'I'm blind,' he said. 'Jeppson, I can't see a thing.'

"I pulled him out of the mud and tried to encourage him.

"'Say, have the mosquitoes gone?' he asked.

"That gave me a chill right there. I thought

he was losing his mind. The humming of 'em sounded like the singing of a lot of telegraph wires in a gale.

" 'Don't you hear 'em?' I said.

" 'Why, I thought that was the wind,' said he. 'I can't feel 'em any more.'

"I touched his face with my hand, and it felt wet and hard as stone. His eyelids were puffed and closed.

" 'Be game!' said I.

" 'Game! I'm like that down to the waist,' he said. 'I'm through. I can't go another step.'

"He sank down on a niggerhead, and the mosquitoes swarmed about his head and shoulders like flies about a piece of raw meat.

"An idea came to me to set the reeds afire. The smoke would surely drive away the pests, I thought.

"I felt through my pockets, but there wasn't a match in any one of them. Then I overhauled Cobb's, but he hadn't one, either.

"There was only one thing to do, and that was to get Cobb to the boat somehow. The poison in his system had so sapped his strength and dulled his brain that he wouldn't make an

effort of his own accord. But the trouble was I didn't know which way to turn. I was twitching all over and had lost all sense of direction. One of my eyes was closing, and I was afraid I'd go blind any minute, like poor Cobb.

"I stood there trying to think for what seemed a long time, but couldn't concentrate my mind on anything. I felt as if I'd been skinned, and had salt sprinkled on the raw flesh. But somehow I didn't mind that so much as I did the deep, steady hum of those bloodthirsty swarms. That drove me nearly crazy. It went through me like a fever, and I reckon I got some queer in my head.

"All of a sudden I heard Cobb speaking.

"'Who are you talking to?' he asked.

"'I haven't been talking,' I said.

"'You've been yelling like a madman,'" said he. 'And I thought I heard somebody answer. Ah, hear that! Lead me there, Jeppson. Where there's voices, there must be human beings.'

"It was the deep bellow of an alligator he'd heard. The sound came rolling over the swamp in gusty grunts, and mighty glad I was to hear it. I knew it must come from Broadbill Creek, for

there was no other body of open water — except the sea — anywhere near.

“ I ripped off my suspenders and tied one end of 'em about Cobb's wrist. His hands were so swollen he couldn't have gripped it. Then I led him toward where the old bull 'gator was bellowing.

“ Thank heaven, it wasn't far before I saw the black shine of the water! Cobb was like a drunken man. I don't think he could have gone another hundred yards. When I told him we were close to the boat he pitched right forward, and would have fallen if I hadn't caught him. I had to carry him in my arms the rest of the way.

“ I tell you I felt better when I had the screen doors of the cabin shut behind us. I bathed Cobb with kerosene oil, — his flesh was as white and hard as marble, — and poured some cold coffee down his throat. We had to lie there until nearly morning. Then a breeze sprang up and I sailed the boat home. Cobb was too weak to help me, and it was a couple of days before he got back his strength.

“ ‘ Jeppson,’ he said to me, ‘ I'm going back home as quick as the next train will carry me.

It'll be a luxury jes' to sit on my seaside piazza and let those futile little insects they call mosquitoes in the North sting me.' "

There was a short silence as Jeppson held a lighted match to the bowl of his pipe, which had smouldered out during the relating of his story.

"That's a good one," said Reece, looking around the semicircle of listeners with a grin.

"Plumb artistic," observed Jed Jenkins, smiling still more broadly.

The others laughed; but Jeppson sat unruffled, drawing placidly at his pipe.

"You asked for it and you got it," he said tersely. "Did you want a poor one?"

"You're all right, Jeppson," laughed Red Simonson. "When we do want a poor one I reckon we'll know better than to come to you."