IV.

C. G. D. Roberts's "The Heart of the Ancient Wood."*

The first feeling of *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* is its freshness. It fairly claims appreciation upon this score, notwithstanding that other recent and notable fiction has gone before it in a similar direction. There is no apparent necessity for any comparison between this new story and the *Jungle Tales* or the *Biog-*

*The Heart of the Ancient Wood. By Charles G. D. Roberts. New York: Silver, Burdett & Company. $1.50.

raphy of a Grizzly. The three authors seem, it is true, to have been moved by the same recognition of the brotherhood of all creatures and by the same strong love of nature. But their methods are distinctively different and the results achieved are distinctly unlike. With Mr. Kipling and Mr. Thompson the beasts come first, and from a long way off: some from a mythical region, lying beyond the jungles of India; few from a more familiar country than the heights of the Rocky Mountains. And with both these writers the woods show usually only behind the beasts and seem still more distant. With Professor Roberts it is the contrary. In his new work the woods and nature—the smell of the earth, the sound of the leaves, the sight of green shadows sifting down—come first. The opening pages fetch the very breath of the primeval forest "waiting in wide-eyed stillness" for the movement of a creature either beast or human. Who knowing the woods has not felt this?—"the tense, alert, mysterious expectation" of the forest's silence. In *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* it is broken soon enough. Beasts begin to stir at once, the tread of man is heard in the opening pages, for the wood is always as much alive as the world. The interest of the animal life of the story is not less than that of the human, and the work is full of both. But it is the wood itself that first weaves the spell—fresh as the scent of the wild grape—and holds it to the end.

Next to this, beauty may, perhaps, be named as a characteristic of Professor Roberts's new book. It has a beauty that changes, but increases with the passing of the seasons in the development of the tale. There is beauty in the earliest pale green that fringes the clearing around the cabin in which lives Kirstie, the forsaken, with Miranda, her fatherless child. Before this beauty may be seen, it would almost seem that some loveliness might be felt in hearing the first indeterminate whisper breaking the white stillness of the winter wood as if it were the soft "speech of the leaves conferring, or the sap climbing through the smaller branches." So that the beautiful sights and sounds grow together with the swelling buds into "the musical rushing of the stream; the foam and clamour of the shallow rills; the deep, black, gleaming pools, with roots of larch and hemlock overhanging; the sullen purple and amber of the eddies, with their slowly swirling patches of froth." It glows with the arrival of summer, when "the midsummer heat of the outside world came filtering faintly down into the cool vistas of the forest, and here and there a pale-blue butterfly danced with his mate across the clear shadow, and the aromatic wood smells came out more abundantly than their wont at the lure of the persuasive warmth." There is still an increase of beauty under the round October moon, when "the air that washed the endless vistas of green-brown shadow was of a marvellous clarity, not blurred by any stain of dust or vapour, . . . making the far branches seem near and the near twigs unreal, . . . hinting some elfish deception in familiar things." The beauty seems greatest when the moonlight falls on the snow, where "the long white fingers of the phantom light reached down the dissolving arches."

Moreover, there is beauty in the spirit of the story as well as in its environment and its physical aspect. The character of Kirstie—brave, strenuous, patient Kirstie—is no less noble than her face. Miranda as a child and as a maiden is an airy, fairy creature of fawn-like beauty, as exquisite in person as in soul. Dave also is good to look upon, his stalwart body showing the counterpart of his honest, earnest, simple nature. Even the beasts have finesse as well as outward beauty. They not only "killed in curves" and "eluded their enemies in lines of beauty," "their manners were always beyond reproach." They have ideals of gratitude and honour. "They know the difference between swiftness and haste. The fiercest of them moved with aristocratic grace and poise." And Kroof, the bear, "the most human of all the furry wood folk, the most versatile and largely tolerant," evinced now and then a nobility that many world-folk might well imitate.

Kroof's individuality becomes, indeed, a ruling influence of the beautiful, simple poetic story—a story of a mother, a maiden, a hunter and a great brown bear. It is Kroof who is the first and the strongest link between Miranda and the wood-folks. And there is something so

eminently natural, so practical, so humorous in Kroof's character, that her relation to Miranda and to the whole story becomes not only delightful, but really convincing. Most of the humour comes through Kroof, and there is much of it, of a most sweet and wholesome kind. And yet it is also through Kroof —who changes the idyll into a comedy now and then—that the ultimate tragedy comes, as it usually comes into most lives through the things that have made us happiest and through those whom we have loved best. But in this strenuous ending the prose poem holds as far from the usual as in any other part of the work, and at its close no less than in its beginning the whole has the charm of complete freshness.

Nancy Huston Banks.