

A Wager on the Wistassining

By ARTHUR E. McFARLANE

WE had never been to Williamson's Brook, and although Matt protested that it was only some eleven miles, new ways have ever been long ways, and we were ready enough to rest when we had reached the Stone Road. And that Stone Road crossing offered us a place of much, if melancholy, interest to rest at. For there, eight years before, when both the new railroad and canal were still under construction, two dynamite carters met at the four corners, refused to turn out for each other—and left behind them considerably more of moral lesson than of souvenir.

It was the memory of such painful episodes as these which commonly moved our old Algonian fishing guide and keeper of "The Forks" to the recounting of other events of like sadness and edification. He was now reminded of the case of two ill-fated sporting gentlemen, "Slimmy" Sparks and his brother-in-law, "Willie" Hotchkiss.

"You see," he explained, "from the very start-off I didn't take to them. I won't tell ye who was so plum crazy as to steer them up here—they came on passes—and I won't hurt a good Ontario town by tellin' where they came from. But anyways they came *early*, and early they showed what size of fishin' sports they were!

"Before I'd much more'n got them into the democrat at the Junction, they were askin' me about rates. I told them, of course, that outside of the fixed price for board, I charged by the room, half for the single ones what it was for the double. And you boys know that the single rooms I've got are pretty shameful shelf-and-cupboard accommodation *even* for one; but I had to make the partitionin' so, if I wasn't to turn some mighty nice people away. Well, these two said they guessed they'd just take a single room between them. And that *ratted* me. But there was nothin' I could do only double my boat and 'personal guide' prices to them, and as they couldn't *know* I'd done it, there was mighty little satisfaction in that.

"But soon enough I was wishin' I'd made it a hundred dollars an hour. I reckon the pair saw that they ticketed themselves for a couple of 98-cent hand-me-downs, and they immediately started in to save their faces by givin' me to understand what a brace of bold, bad men they were. When they weren't spoilin' good fishin' with a run of the cheapest kind of drummer's yarns, they were remindin' each other of how much money they'd lost on that sellin'-plater, or this particular jack-pot, or how drunk they'd been at some other time. Or else it was how, that day at the Woodbine, they'd just made every bookie lay right down!

"And then the time they'd had with the money afterwards! Sparks'd nudge Hotchkiss, and then they couldn't sit up in the boat at rememberin' of it.

"But *that* wasn't a patch on the time they'd had after they'd made the killin' in 'Porcupine.' And Hotchkiss'd give it back to Sparks in the ribs, and say: 'Oh, you're a *nice* boy, "Slimmy," you are!'

"And 'Slimmy'd say: 'Oh, I don't know, my Willie-out-of-Sunday-school, I'm not the only grease-spot on the collar!' and then they'd both roll around some more.

"Now, like most people, I don't know but what I might be made to confess to a sneakin' fondness for a *real* bad man. But you can always tell a real bad man by the fact that he don't talk about it none; and it's generally the case, too, that he don't even show it.

"But I tell ye they got a heap of pleasure out of all that remissin' they done in my behoof; for it ain't every day, now, that you get a good, green old moss-back who's just a-gapin' open-mouthed to swallow all you can chuck into him. However, by the end of the second day, when they'd probably

figgered it out that by then I'd likely showed them all the best fishin' places, they told me they wouldn't need me any longer. Durin' the next few days I could only enjoy their society from a distance. And, before the week that followed, the only case where I had to do with them was on Sunday.

"For, of course, they had to get playin' poker right under the wife's nose in the side porch. Well, she being raised Methodist, and old-style Methodist, too, that madded her in a minute worse than two weeks of rain with the clothes undried. And I had a time, I tell ye, to keep her from streakin' straight out to them with the broom, upsettin' their table, and sweepin' their whole outfit of chips and cards off into the knot-grass. But by reminding her that they were strangers within our gates, I got her to let me do a little reasonin' with them first. Well, gentlemen, when I saw the size of their stakes, I

and Sparks down. And, as it chanced, that night Hotchkiss came in with a pretty good string—for *his* speed, anyway; and Sparks, on his part, had only one or two less. But Sparks must have really lit on a good place that day, for he plainly wanted to get Hotchkiss to bet his money in earnest now. And to everything Hotchkiss said about how he'd coaxed 'em on, and fetched 'em out, and had throwed back all but the biggest, Sparks just kept repeatin': 'Put up or shut up!' Put up or shut up! Which is about the most exasperatin' and the most generally dam'-fool sentence in the English language. And Hotchkiss, what with havin' it rammed into his gullet every time he opened his mouth, was gettin' steadily madder and madder, till, all of a sudden he comes out: 'All right, then—all right! I *will* put up!'

"But *what'll* you put up?' sneers Sparks, 'post-stamps or nickels? He, he! That's about his *size*,' he says to me.

"No,' bellers Hotchkiss, 'it won't be for post-stamps or nickels, either! It'll be for twenty-five dollars; that's what it'll be for! Now are you so brash? Now are you so hot for me to put up or shut up?'

"And certainly that did seem to take all the heat out of Sparks. For a while it was too much for him to talk about, and when he did get words he was half indignant and half incredulous. 'Huh!' he says, 'I suppose there'd turn out to be a ketch, somehow, in the way you've worded it?'

"No there wouldn't turn out to be no ketch in the way I've worded it, neither.'

"Then I bet your game would be to follow me wherever I went and chance winnin' out by just fishin' in beside me—or else you'd use both your rods or something.'

"No, I wouldn't fish beside you, neither. I'd fish down the river where I was to-day. Nor I wouldn't use two rods. Ah-h, *now*,' he shouts to me—'*now*, who's the dead game sport? Look at him tryin' to crawl out leery there, now that I've made it some-*thin'* worth while! Ah-h, put up or shut up, Slimmy! Put up or shut up!'

"Slimmy stood there bitin' at his nails, and no doubt wishin' to heaven that I hadn't been there to hear the dare. 'Gee,' he says, plaintive-like. 'Gee, but you must want to risk a lot of money at once!'

"Put up, or shut up!' repeats Hotchkiss again.

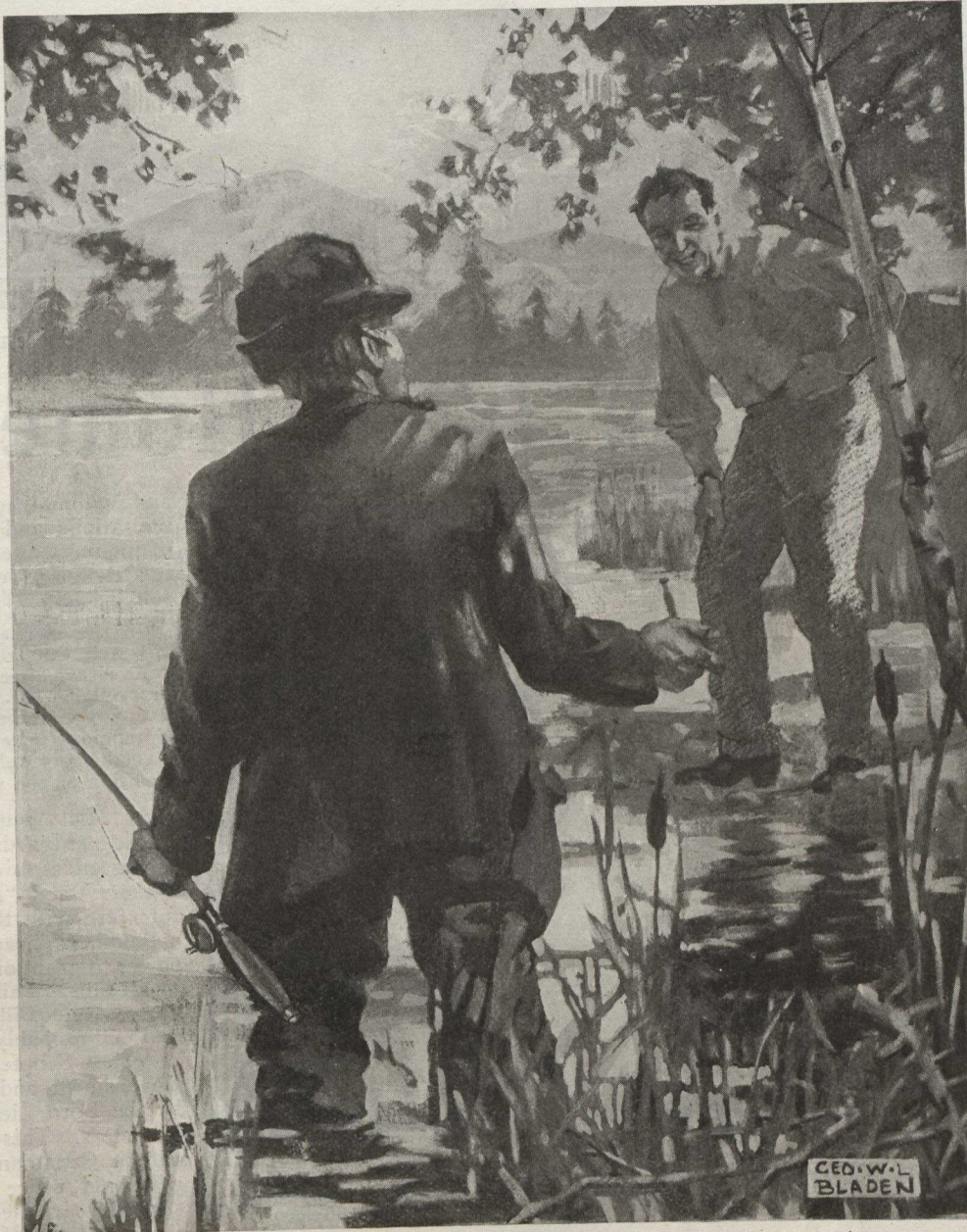
"Very well,' says Sparks, and it was the most desperate, tear-stained voice you'd hear in a ten years. 'Very well, I *will* put up, then. But mind you, Willie, you'll be sorry yet that you put it up to me!'

"And through half that night I could hear them relievin' their minds on each other. I reckon that single bed they had was a heap

sight narrower then than it was in the beginnin'! Well, they both came down to breakfast mighty well sobered. And of the two I believe Hotchkiss felt the sicker over it now, him havin' give' the challenge. I asked them if their bet was still on, and they said of course it was. But they kept lookin' at each other like two fellers that had let themselves in for a duel in their liquor the night before, and had only then awakened to it. They'd locked horns and one of them was bound to lose an antler before they got away again, and both felt mortally certain it was goin' to be *him*, and both blamed the other for it. But there was no gettin' out of it. And off they struck, Sparks upstream like a martyr with a bilin' bad temper, and Hotchkiss down, tryin' to carry it through ja'nty and free-and-easy.

"And Sparks wasn't well out of sight in the bush before Hotchkiss came slidin' back up the hill again—runnin' low like a fox under a fence. I knowed in two shakes what he was after!

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"Eleven! Holy Cripes! So I've caught eleven in the first hour, have I!"

Drawn by George W. L. Bladen.

tell ye I knowed that the Lord couldn't—inside His dignity—let Himself be caught watchin' a game like that at all, and they were safe as far as He was concerned. However, that wasn't speakin' for the wife, and I thought it wise to get them to go out to the straw barn. And even then, when Hotchkiss lost a dollar and a half in one jack-pot, the shoutin' and fierce talk and excitement came right in to us.

"They fished ahead pretty steadily. But they'd brought some cheap whiskey along with them, and that puffed them up into even more thunderin' big sports than ever. There soon wasn't anything around The Forks that they weren't darin' each other to put up their money on. Every night they'd have more hot disputin' over the size and weight of their two ketches than would start the shotgun work over a line fence up here. And they were always goin' to make a most *mighty* big bet on who'd show up the strongest *next* day. But they never seemed to quite get that far!

"Well, by Wednesday, they'd just got raw enough on each other for it to send Hotchkiss up the river