

RETURN

How They Two Recovered Youth and Happiness

By ARTHUR E. McFARLANE

DURING that week almost every one else was out after 'lunge. It was probably for this reason that, on Thursday, George Vanderdecken went down to the Ragged Rapids for black bass.

The Raggeds broke white across the Wistassining, in the midst of the thick, second-growth pine woods, some three miles below Little Pickerel Lake and two above the Steel City Club-house. Their galloping waters possessed as much of the disorderly picturesque as their enclosing shores did of pure sylvan beauty. But, because they lay in a deep bend of the river, the road across the portage which they necessitated passed almost out of hearing of their lusty, all-bemuting roar. In the regular bass season they were frequented enough. At other times only an occasional sketcher or camera enthusiast was wont to make them visitation.

This not being the bass season, Vanderdecken expected to be alone. He beached his canoe above the first chute, climbed the bank, and pushed on down through the thorn and juniper scrub. Another dozen paces and he was parting the last screen of cedars that overhung the shore below.

Poised ankle-deep in mid-current was a young woman. Her hair had blown across her face; and, with rod nipped under arm, she was standing lance-straight against the wind, trying to twine the flying wisps into their place again. She wore a drooping canvas hat, a raw-silk shirt-waist with elbow sleeves, and a kilted grey outing skirt, which—doubtless because she was tall and large of limb—did not give her the customary effect of dumpiness. From below it there came the coal-like glinting of a pair of small rubber boots. She turned to spring her line again, and then Vanderdecken saw that she had a fine, breezy, sun-and-tan beauty.

At this moment, too, she caught sight of him. And not only did she show no nervousness: she watched his approach with a kind of bright, impersonal recognition, as if to say, "No doubt you also belong to the club, even if as yet I haven't met you." Then she quietly returned to business. With a muscular ripple of well-rounded triceps and shoulder-blades she made another cast.

He liked that. And girdling up his waders, he struck out into the thrust and whirl of the river. He could see now that she was standing on the edge of the "Bowl," a great, twenty-foot, central eddy, brimmed about with water-washed limestone. He started for the shoal rocks on the other side of it, keeping always well up-stream so that she might not misunderstand him.

He had all but reached his position when the "chute wind" caught him and flicked off his hat. He slapped out for it with his jointed steel, but it circled impishly away. There was no time to go around, and the "Bowl" was much too deep to cross. And then he became aware that the lady was moving rapidly along her arc of the watery ledge. Her skirt went in to the hem, but she recovered the battered felt, with all its millinery of feathered barbs, and held it out to the owner on her split bamboo.

That also George Vanderdecken liked. "Jove!" he shouted, above the tumult of the falls, "you're mighty good! Almost every fly I brought down with me is on it!"

"Nothing at all. You'll find you'll have the best of uses for them, too!"

Once more she sent her silk twisting and looping far down the main current. And, in a zipping flash, she had another bass.

FOR a long minute it fought fiercely to and fro through the dark-green swirl she had hooked it in. Then the line swung out, and the spitting fin of water drove through the hurrying "racers" straight up-stream. Next moment it was veering sharply, and, as if by direct intention, cut sheer athwart George Vanderdecken's bows!

It was sudden enough, but his gaff-net twitched with eagerness. "May I?"

She laughed and nodded.

He gathered in the fish, dropped it into the creel, and held up one finger.

"It's the tenth!" she cried, almost with the rush and exhilaration of the rapids themselves. "Mr. Davidson wanted me to go up to the lake with him and troll, but I told him I'd rather stop off here and catch something!"

Ten minutes more and a bass on his line was

sweeping down by her. Manifestly it was her turn to make the capture. But he could feel that it was a big one, and started to her aid.

He was within a yard of her when his foot went down the slope of a weedy boulder, and in a moment he was floundering. As if it were entirely a matter of course, she flung out an arm and clipped fingers with him. Her hand was as firm and cool as an apple, and of the vigour of a man's. But the look of almost scolding nervousness she bent upon him till he was in safety again was feminine enough.

During the hour of glorious fishing which followed, other and kindred incidents took place. In all of them the lady showed well-nigh as little restraint as does that ideal woman who reigns at times over every man's secret imaginings. It was an experience wholly new to Vanderdecken, and by now he did not merely like it. It seemed better to him than good cigars, or a new gun, or bass-fishing itself. It was reminiscent of something, too. Every minute he felt that more and more. But of what was it reminiscent? At the end of another half-hour his inability to say had become a constant tantalization.

Both creels full, they journeyed in to shore together. The shimmering rainbow fays poised and flitted above the frilling eddies, and even so did the elf-light seem to flash again and again over Vanderdecken's memory lens, but all too instantaneously for the sensitizing plate to grasp and hold it.

In truth, had he not been perplexing himself so absorbedly, he might have noticed that in her eyes, also, memory was at work—and not with any shadow pictures, either.

IN the cool lee of a big waterside basswood she dropped her trappings. "I hardly think I'll be going out again. Mr. Davidson was to return at noon, so he ought to be here at any time."

The shore was broken into a series of tiny, shallow bays. Vanderdecken began to pile flat stones across the mouth of one of them. "I mayn't go out again myself," he said; "but I always make a sort of pound to keep my fish in, even for a little while. If you'll just sit down and take it easy, I'll dike off half of it for yours."

"Sit down—fiddle-de-de! Do I look so anemic?" She rolled back her sleeves a little more—evidently she was a swimmer, for the tan did not end at the soft hollow of her elbow—and began to build out a causeway from the other side. Again Vanderdecken received that memory flash.

She had almost finished when she looked curiously around at him. "Shall I tell you something?"

"Why, yes, if you will—?"

"Well, I've done just this same thing years and years ago, when I used to spend my summers in the country and go out fishing with a little boy cousin of mine."

"You did? Why—why—Jove!—of course I know now! I had a small cousin in the country, too. We used to fish together in a creek back of her father's farm." The memory streamed into his mind again with the pouring quiver of the biograph. And he stood looking at her as if he expected to see her hair suddenly become corn-coloured, and her eyes turn from brown to hazel. She was not the same. For the matter of that, his small cousin was now a sedate little "housemother" in East Orange. But the thing itself had been the same! "I know now," he kept repeating. "Of course I know."

"It came back to me again and again this morning," the girl said, smiling. "It was pretty good fun, wasn't it?"

"Fun? It makes me feel as if I'd been traveling through the bad lands ever since!"

"Tell me, did you make all-day expeditions of it?"

"Always, unless it rained. And did he occasionally try to fall in—and you saved him first and lit into him afterward?"

"Well, if I did, he always richly deserved it. And, in your case, did you ever give the lady any thanks for saving you?"

"I don't believe I ever did! And what about your hair? Wasn't it everlastingly getting into your eyes?"

"I never could keep a hair-ribbon for two days together! It used to get into his, too, and generally just when he had a bite! And then he'd be simply furious. How did you do about your dinner?"

"Look here"—in his ardour he fairly commanded her—"you arrange to come up again to-morrow, resolved to stay till the afternoon, and I'll show you then exactly what we did about our dinner!"

She met his eyes with the same tumultuous impulse. "I'd just be afraid to tell you how much I'd like to! But—but—I guess I couldn't very well explain to Mr. Davidson. And if I came without telling him, you'd think it sneaking of me."

He gazed at her, boyishly honest, and his face began to fall. "Yes—I suppose— No, now, by jinks, I *wouldn't* either! For you'd be coming as a kid and not as a grown-up at all. It needn't make any difference what particular stupid person either of us is now. We are offered this chance to be our proper selves again. I only want you as that hair-ribbonless ten-year-old who'd never heard the name of Davidson."

"Do you really mean that? Cross your heart?"

"Cross my heart!"

"Very well, then," she smiled out bravely, "I shall come! In that case, though"—her colour rose again—"I'll have to ask you to go away now, before he calls for me on his way home."

Five minutes later he had reached the head of the chute and was pushing off his canoe. From out on the portage road there lifted in a long, cheerful, but peremptory yodel. Undoubtedly it was Davidson, who was even at that moment approaching.

"DID your creek run out of the bush into flats, with big beeches every little way along it?"

"There were big beeches overlooking the two best ponds we had. We used to lie down behind their side roots, and the fish couldn't see anything but our rods and noses."

"I know! I know! I used to take off those red hair-ribbons of mine so as not to scare them. It was then that my hair would get into his eyes and make him so raging."

Again they had been fishing for two ecstatic hours. Again the falls bellowed from behind their drifting screen of pearly mist. Again the rainbow fays shimmered and poised, and the obstreperous wind and the sun talked to them in joy.

He hooked another bass—an unusually large one. As he let it flop into his creel, he looked at her with challenge. "Huh, I guess he's the maziest yet!"

She took it up on the instant. "Well, I bet he ain't as big as that one I caught yesterday!"

"Ah, you on'y say that because you know it's too late to measure them up."

But her own line was again on the jerk. "There, you see, I've got another. I'm ketchin' the *most*!"

"Well, an' good reason, when you're always fishin' in my place as well as your own! Every time my cork bobs you go and scrouge over beside it!"

It was not merely a case of "beside it" this time, but on the other side of it. Their tackle was crossed, with two bass on!

"First cut!" he yelled ferociously.

"But what did you let him come over where I was for?" she shrieked as venomously back.

"Well, that doesn't make any diff, does it? It's the fellah that hollers 'First cut!'"

"Aw, you always say that! And, there now, my line's broke—and the hook an' lead gone and everything!"

"Aw, gee, no, it ain't, is it? Aw, jiminy, I didn't mean to! Don't yuh care. I'll lend you mine for a while, and then I'll fix yours up better'n ever! I'll give yuh that mud-cat I caught, too! But don't yuh care!"

SHE was not shedding tears. But, for the time, their fishing was ended. It was almost noon, however; and there was fun ahead which they were ready enough to get to.

In addition to his regular kit, he had brought down a hatchet, a big tin can, and some small sundries in a dunnage-bag.

"In the first place," he said, "we need a stove."

"A stove?"

"So you've forgotten how to make a stove? Then I'll have to show you all over again."

About a hundred yards up the shore, sheltered by a clump of cedars, a spring jetted from the bank. And all about it lay a drift of granite "hard-heads." "Here's where that range goes up," he announced, and proceeded to roll three big, smooth-faced boulders together for the back and sides. The lady helped him fill in with smaller stones and clay; and presently they were in possession of something so far superior to the steel-and-nickel article of commerce that it seemed insulting to call it a stove at all.

"What'll you cook on, though?" she asked. "We used to do ours on an old pie-pan."

"Huh! Pie-pans is like getting your dinner at home! I've got to fix the fish, first. But if you'll