

# THE OLD FELLER'S FISHIN'

B y A R T H U R E . M c F A R L A N E

Drawing by Tom O. Marten

AS we stepped off at the raw, red station in the Algoma cedar bush, Mat's dusty democrat came into view through the open doors of the baggage-room, and the old fellow himself waved us the hand of genial recognition from a group he was taking leave of at the steps of the next car forward. The party consisted of three tanned young men in picturesquely soiled and battered fishing raiment, and a grey-haired old couple, evidently their father and mother. And it was with the old gentleman that Mat was chiefly concerned. By the pile of valises and suit cases, still awaiting the toss of the baggage-man, were two shapelessly bulging oat-bags which experience told us were heavy with ice-and-sawdust-packed 'lunge and black bass; and it was plain that that ancient sportsman was fondly and nervously determined to see those two bags safely aboard before he embarked himself. But apparently Mat finally overruled him; for, with a travelling satchel in one hand and a green-baize-covered bundle of rods in the other, he managed at last to drive him reassuringly behind the others into the train. A moment later Mat was out again, and, hurrying up the platform, arrived at the baggage car in time to "take ends" with the "agent" and heave the second sack thumpingly after the first. Then, as the train began to pull out, he came back in his striding run, waved his weather-browned slouch hat in an awkward gayety of farewell at the young men lounging in the vestibule, and caught the old gentleman's tremulous fingers through the window. His parting quaver of thanks he shook off with vigorous depreciation, and received the radiant gratitude of the tearfully proud little old lady beside him with kindly shyness. And till the last car was well past the platform he beamed after them broadly and lovingly. It was as if they had been two little children of the city and he a country grandfather bidding them good-by after the most joyous of holidays. It was not hard to see that he had been very good to them—and on the sixteen-mile drive out to the Forks we were to hear the story.

Mat gave us our annual welcome in a long grip apiece, assured us that all was well with him and that the fishing had never been better. Then we slid our satchels, rods and minnow-pails into the back of the democrat, and two minutes later we were bowling swiftly northward over the new government road. Waters was first to come back to the "one subject." "So all the bass in the Wistassining aren't caught yet?" he asked tentatively.

Mat slowly turned himself sideways in the front seat and thoughtfully grasped the grey Wednesday stubble on his wrinkled jaw. "Well, I reckon, now, not to exaggerate, there's mebbe one or two left."

"The crowd you've just seen off seem to have got their share, all right, all right," said Gunn. "You didn't let them hike out that six-pounder you've been saving up for me, did you?"

The old boy's shoulders went straight up in a sudden, silent chuckle. "By jinks, now, Mr. Gunn, mebbe there you're aimin' better than you think for. They certainly did get some fish. Not to go too close into details, they weren't more than a thousand pounds inside the legal limit, I should say. And the old feller caught the best of them, too. That's what he did. And I don't think catchin' fish ever filled any man's heart fuller of solid happiness, neither. I know I never got more pure joy out of helpin' any man catch 'em."

"Who are they—more New Yorkers?" "Pretty near. They come from York State—Albany City. Hutcheson their name is, except the young feller with the mustache; his name's Rogers, and he's a son-in-law. The three boys were up here last year—come the week after you left and when they begun makin' arrangements to strike north again this summer the old feller took a notion that

he'd come along, too. He'd stayed with his daughters the year before, and now he guessed he'd go a-fishin' with the men. And of course the old lady was bound to go along with him. Well, the sons, they're really good fellers, and they got right up and encouraged them in it. They picked the old man out a rod and tackle of the best, wrote on to me, and laid out to just make him one of the boys again. If they'd actually thought of him as old, and acted smooth-handed with him accordin', it might have saved a lot of needless heartburnin'.

"For the old feller couldn't seem to catch any fish, and they, treatin' him exactly like one of themselves, couldn't seem to roast him enough over it. You boys don't need to be told how it is when the crowd gets in at night and starts countin' up and comparin' catches. Fishin' puts all of us on the

would be clean lost and gone. The wife tells me I might as well face it now as later, and not mind how they take it. But—to give in that I'm playin' out—well, it's too mortal hard an own-up for me just yet a while. And with old Mr. Hutcheson I knew it must be a hundred times harder; for with me it was only a matter of the body, and with him it was the head. Every night I could see it was cuttin' him deeper, and more and more I felt I ought to get out and help him. But what with my hay only bein' about half in' and my not knowin' just what to say to him anyway, I held back and kept my mouth shut.

"But along toward the end of the week, when one night he hadn't fin or scale to show for his day, and heard about it accordin', and him and me was walkin' up slow from the landin' in the dusk about a stone's throw behind the others—'They're good boys,' he comes out all of a sudden in a kind of achin' burst—'they're good boys, and I know it's only natural for them to have their joke—but they're about made it plain to me that I'm not good for anything any more. I should have stayed at home and sat with the women. It's where I belong, now.'

"That was just about all I needed. 'Well, Jerusalem, Mr. Hutcheson,' I says, 'this hot weather must be gettin' the better of you. You've got the excuse of not knowin' either black bass or the Wistassining, but that's all the excuse you have got, and you needn't try to get behind any other.'

"'I'm a played-out, weak-headed old man,' he says, 'and that's all there is to it.'

"'All right,' I says; 'if you are, so am I, too. But I reckon we've neither of us quite lost our grip just yet. And if you'll let me come along with you to-morrow and show you the river—you to supply the brains and fishin' part of it—mebbe you'll decide that you've been talkin' about side-trackin' yourself about twenty years before your time.'

"'Maybe, maybe,' he answers, mighty sick-hearted; 'but I guess the truth about me is that I've been side-tracked now for long enough, without even brains enough left to see that. And the sooner I get to the scrap-heap the better.'

"'Quite so,' I says; 'quite likely that's the truth about me, too. But all the same I reckon it's worth while puttin' our heads together for one day anyway, just to make dead sure of it. This is the age of young men and great combinations, so they say. Mebbe if we two old fellers make a little combination of it to-morrow we'll learn

a thing or two. Will you take me?"

"He said 'Yes' to it, but I could see the heart in him was dead and water-logged. And that night I heard the old lady doin' her best to comfort and spirit him up, too. But she didn't seem to be able to do any good, and only made herself completely miserable. I tell you I was so mortal sorry for them I couldn't half sleep. And I swore to myself: 'Old feller, you'll get bass to-morrow if there's one left in the Wistass. And as for the hay, well, it ain't good farmin', but I'll take the risk of leavin' it to the Creator. I reckon this week He's thinkin' more on old men that can't catch fish than He is on clover and timothy.'

"So next mornin' at dawn I went up to the Board of Works boom and netted a good pailful of big shiner minnies. And comin' back I stopped off at Kelly's Ma'sh, and added a dozen or two frogs, just for luck. Crabs I could get best where I was goin'. And when I got home, while the wife was fixin' up the lunch for us—with a spider and tea-pail for cookin' on the rocks—I hunted out my rubber thigh-boots and some spare old togs. When I stuffed them into the bow of the shallop I overhauled the old feller's tackle kit. He was well enough provided, but I added a couple of Devon bait and a card of No. 3's—gut—to be on the safe



"He'd dig his heels into his rock, and grip to it, and fight him over to me inch and foot."

"Lordy! the Wistass'll never see the like of it again."

same footin', and the feller with the short string—no matter who he is—has got to stand for it.

"But I could see plain enough—though they seemed to be daft blind to it—that he was a long, long way from takin' it as it was meant. He smiled through it all some way or other, but it was a vine-gared knife to him none the less. For he was just enterin' on those years when an old man begins to doubt and dread he ain't keepin' all his faculties—when he's forever strainin' his ear pitiful' open to hear every little word and hint that he ain't, and if what he fears is slowly beginnin' to be true—I tell you, now, that doesn't make it any easier to bear. I'm just gettin' old enough to guess what that is myself. Mebbe I'm not showin' any great outward signs of weakness, but I own to you, boys, that I haven't got the power and speed in me now that I had ten years ago. And when my lads, Jack and Lige, come home after harvest to help me lay up the winter's firin', and I take an end of the cross-cut saw with one of them while the other splits—often and often now, toward the middle of the afternoon I'd give the whole bush lot pretty near to be able to quit off for a restin' spell. But, by jinks, I don't let myself take it just the same. If I did it would seem to me as if the whole good from all the fath-er-in' and whalin' and teachin' I've ever give them