

BASS FISHING ON RIDEAU LAKE.

I HAD reached forty without having cast a line, an unusual experience in this country among men who have any means or leisure. When a boy, armed with hook and line and limber rod, cut from the bushes, and with a worm for bait, I essayed to lure the trout and other small fishes from a stream near my paternal home. I would angle for hours, noting in the clear water whole swarms of little fish surrounding my hook and nibbling the bait at will. Terrible jerks made I, but to no purpose. Weary and vexed at ill luck I was induced to surrender my rod to a little darky boy about half my size, who would forthwith begin pulling up the fishes by the dozen. I took a violent dislike for fishing. It was clearly not an intellectual diversion. It seemed unworthy of a man possessing any mental endowments.

Then came college life, the study for a profession and its pursuit. Laborious literary labours were interlarded, and thus the years passed. Boyhood gradually merged into manhood and youth crept along until the gray hairs and thin patch and the rude awakening of the fortieth birthday gave solemn warning that the vernal equinox was passed and life would know no more the odours of its first spring. During all these busy years, entirely absorbed in the pursuit of knowledge, fame and fortune, I looked with pity upon the deluded mortals who were wasting their time and energies on any such paltry and purposeless pastime as fishing. Among the mere pleasure-loving crowd I regarded these excursions as the fitting complement of an aimless life; but when I saw strong-minded men, possessing brains and ability and advancing rapidly in business, professional practice and public life, deliberately collecting together an elaborate kit and gear and starting out on a fishing excursion, I could not help feeling that they were the victims of a mild form of insanity.

This bit of very unimportant autobiography is given merely as a prelude to a narrative—a sort of quiet and sombre background for the little picture that is to follow.

During the summer of 1889 I was urged by a friend residing near Brockville, Ont., to come for a visit, and among other inducements offered was a week's fishing on the Rideau Lakes. He had just discovered the beauties of this region and its merits, and had erected a hotel on one of the numerous islands, with the intention of making the place a favourite summer resort. If my dear friend could have known of the good-natured contempt that such a proposition awakened in my mind I fear his invitation would not have been given. But, to shorten matters, I was finally induced to go to Brockville for a little visit, but with many misgivings and painful anticipations of boredom. Out of good nature, and to avoid the appearance of churlishness, I also consented to go to the lake one Tuesday afternoon, spend the night at the hotel, and the next day start for home. With secret cunning I inwardly reflected that this would preclude the possibility of protracted boredom.

Off we started one Tuesday afternoon late in August. The day was beautiful. We took the new line of railway from Brockville—the Brockville, Westport and Sault Ste. Marie—and in a short time were at Westport, a little town situated at the head waters of the Rideau system of lakes. It was now dusk, and entering one of those charming little steam yachts that are so common along the St. Lawrence and its tributary waters we had a pleasant sail of ten miles and then landed at Long Island, and were soon made comfortable in the hotel—one of the model summer structures of the period, built, as usual of boards nailed to a frail framework—no shingles without and no plaster within. As you lie on a very comfortable bed, moonlight or sunlight works away in through little apertures in the wooden walls, and your fellow guest in the room above makes his presence felt on the board floor over your head a trifle more distinctly than if he were in your own room. Broad verandahs of course surround the house, and it is altogether an ideal summer lodging. I spent my first night in the deliberate pursuit of absolute rest and pleasure, it having been determined before retiring that we were to be up at 5.30 in order to indulge in one fishing tour before I took my departure. I accepted this as a compromise, and felt an inward sense of pride and self-complacency at this tribute to my good nature and self-sacrifice.

The morning broke radiantly clear, as only an August morning in Ontario can break. There was not a cloud in the sky, but the sun's brilliant rays were tempered by a thin, dreamy haze, which so often lends a subdued charm to the beauties of an early autumn morning. I did not need to be awakened; and, taking a hasty bath and throwing on my clothes, I stepped out on the verandah. The scene was truly superb. Long Island stands in the centre of the lake, and all about and in every direction are smaller islands covered with rich foliage, and here and there are newly-built summer cottages that wealthy persons have erected. These are the advance guard of numbers which will appear when the beauties and advantages of the place become better known. My host soon appeared, together with the genial Dr. M., who accompanied us on the tour. Turning to the water's edge, I saw the boatman already at work making the preparations necessary for the fishing excursion. Presently the rods were brought forth, and reels adjusted, the lines prepared and the hooks attached.

I was presented with the gear that I was to use and started with the rest of the party for the boats, feeling certain every moment that I would either break the rod by some blundering or contrive to get the hook neatly

imbedded either in my clothes or flesh; but we got safely on board the boats. My host and I occupied one, the doctor and his friend the other. Each boat was admirably fitted up with all conveniences. Two heavily-cushioned seats were prepared for the fishers, while the boatman sat in the bow and rowed, and had, in addition, the care of a kettle of live minnows, our bait, and a landing net, which was to contain the many trophies of our prowess. Thus it was that for the first time in my life I started on a fishing excursion. The boatman gave his first pull at the oars. "What a piece of hopeless idiocy," thought I, "and for grown-up men!" My hope-respect was well nigh extinguished, and the minutes were counted until it should be safely over and I once more back to sensible pursuits and among rational beings.

We soon reached the "fishing ground." Massie—that was our boatman's name, and he was a thorough expert—dropped his oars. The tin can was opened, a bright and lively minnow was fastened to the end of my hook, and, following the example of my host, with a sigh of self-contempt I threw the line out. I saw it sink into the water, and as Massie said it was deep and we should require thirty or forty feet of line, I began mechanically to pay it out. The click of the revolving reel was the only sound that broke the impressive silence of the sun-illuminated waters. Thus sat we, my friend's line on one side of the boat, my own on the other, and I smiled to myself as I recalled the epigrammatic definition of fishing by some cynic: "A fish at one end of the line and a fool at the other," the only thing wanting, in my thought, being the fish.

Aye! What was that? Heigho! Something tugging at my hook. Quick as a flash I was upon my feet. "You've struck him," cries Massie, perfectly cool. How could a person be cool in such a case as the thought that darted through my brain. How can I describe everything that was crowded into that one moment? The little rod in an instant was bent and the whole hidden depths of the lake seemed to be in commotion. Instinct instantly taught me to keep the line taut, and so I began furiously to wind up the reel. I had at least forty feet out, a few feet had been wound in, when the enemy made a plunge, and to save my rod the line was paid out again. Then I began to reel in once more. I just held him and slowly wound in the line. Soon, at a little distance from the boat, I saw him—a perfect beauty! His next move was towards the surface, and with a sudden dash he leaped out of the water and into the air. My! Now I feared I should lose him. I kept a steady grip and he passed through the acrobatic ordeal without escaping me.

I resumed my work of taking in line. He tugged away gallantly and then made a dive under the boat; but, with an instinct years of education could not have instilled, I instantly adjusted the rod to the changed conditions. My foe was evidently getting tired of the struggle. Click! went the winding reel. He was drawing near the surface. Again I could see him at a nearer view.

"A beauty!" exclaimed Massie, as he seized the landing net. Click! went the reel, but who could repeat the wild monologue I kept up during this intoxicating performance? Every second was bringing him nearer the surface. The landing net was already in the water and near to the struggling beauty. I gave him a little tip and Massie dexterously got beneath him. In a flash I saw him safely landed, and gave forth a shout that echoed to the remotest recesses of this isle-studded lake.

Thus was landed my first fish—a beautiful fat black bass weighing four pounds! Oh, what a revolution! How life had changed in five short minutes! The cold cynic of forty winters—where was he? Gone! and in his place stood an enthusiast, his eyes beaming, his heart palpitating with delight, his pulse dancing, and his whole soul alive with rapture. What cared he for law or politics? What matter it that constituents might grumble, newspapers rave, and opponents inveigh? Begone, vain world! What are all the dreams of ambition, the yearnings for power, the thirst for fame? Did he not recall the well-worn lines of—*I think—Oliver Wendell Holmes?*

Ah, what are the treasures we perish to win
Compared with the trout we first caught with a pin?

To veteran fisherman all this will, no doubt, seem turgid and ridiculous; but, perchance, memory will enable them to go back to the sunny hours of childhood when they felt the ecstasy of the first fish. Multiply these sensations in a man of forty and then be charitable.

The morning wore quickly away, and this bass was not my sole trophy. Again and again the delightful sensation of a tug at the end of the line was repeated, and one after another, a fine collection of black bass was safely deposited in the tin drawer which was fitted up as a receptacle in our boat. My host is an experienced fisherman, an enthusiast, and has always been regarded as both expert and lucky. But, by one of those concatenations of events that no fellow can understand, though he diligently dangled his line, he got nothing, while I was keeping Massie continually employed with his landing net and the fastening of fresh minnows on my hooks.

Eight o'clock came and we started for home and breakfast. We reached the little landing cove almost simultaneously with the doctor and his companion. They had had some luck, and got a few small ones, but nothing compared to mine; and as we walked up to the hotel, Massie bearing before us my pan of stunning big fish, there was not a prouder or happier man in the Dominion of Canada.

And what an appetite for breakfast! How delightful the fresh air of the morning; how uplifting was the beautiful scenery; how exhilarating the captivating sport! All the cares and worries of life seemed to have been thrown aside by a complete rejuvenation taken place. My heart was light, my spirits were buoyant. Ah, Mr. Brown-Séguard, methinks your elixir of life will prove an ephemeral renewer of youth beside the never-failing joy of a summer holiday, heightened by the exhilarating charms of fishing sport.

After a satisfactory breakfast and a composing pipe, seated on the verandah, in the most comfortable of chairs, my host reminded me that the time was approaching when we should have to take the steam yacht for Smith's Falls in order to catch the train for Halifax.

"I am afraid it will be inconvenient for you to leave to-day," I timidly and insinuatingly suggested. "I know you do not want to lose the whole day's sport."

I thought I saw a wicked smile pass around as I glanced at the faces of the company.

"I see it," said my genial host. "You want to stay another day! By all means. You have not half seen the place. Stop until to-morrow."

He had hit the idea completely. The individual who once counted the minutes that should bring an escape from boredom was now enthusiastically looking forward with consuming eagerness to more of the unspeakable delights of the rod and line. And let it be said here that not the next day nor the day following saw my departure from this interesting spot. Once the sweets of sporting life were tasted, no few hours would suffice to satisfy my growing appetite for more.

I rapidly overcame my long-cherished belief that to abandon my post of duty in the thick of business affairs for a single day would unhook the whole machinery of the universe. Indeed one morning's success with rod and reel converted me from an elderly, serious, plodding worldly worker into a modified savage, content to let men come and go at their own sweet will, while I enjoy the keen thrill of playing a frisky black bass through the clear waters of that Canadian lake. How many men—and among them men of wealth—there are, who live devoid of a true knowledge of the real joys of existence, and probably shorten their days by reason of an inexorable sense of the supreme necessity of their personal attention to all the details of their affairs. If once the door could be opened and they could be induced to look in upon the feast that nature spreads for the weary and overworn in so many places on this great continent of ours, with its lakes and rivers, its forests and its streams, they would soon begin to partake, life would be sweeter as well as longer, and they would presently discover how marvellously well the world manages to wag along without the personal superintendence of any of us.

The trip to Smith's Falls having been abandoned by unanimous consent, of course another fishing excursion was in order. Other grounds were visited. My host and I were companions as before, and once more luck perched upon my rod. My friend managed to secure one fish while I succeeded in getting a half dozen, and back we came to luncheon. We fished with excellent luck in the afternoon until the shades of night began to fall. At last we wound up our reels and prepared to return to the hotel. The sun was down. The day had been clear and warm. As the sun departed and the twilight began to deepen into dusk came the delicious coolness of an August evening. There was scarce a breath of wind and the whole surface of the lake was like one vast mirror. Far as the eye could see were lovely vistas of island and water in every direction, the foliage reaching to the very edge of the lake.

As I lay back in the cushioned seat, the whole scene seemed the most beautiful and uplifting I had ever beheld. Supreme quiet and peace rested over the whole lake, save when broken by the weird echoes of the distant loon. Long Island is divided by an inlet on both sides. Entering either north or south by a narrow passage, one presently opens out into a beautiful little lake within the island completely overshadowed with a luxuriant growth of hardwood. Once upon the bosom of this little inland lake in the gloaming of a summer twilight the scene is beyond description. The mirror-like surface is darkened by the shades of night, and from its unruffled surface is reflected everything near of earth and sky with such perfection that it is impossible even on the most intent observation of material objects, to determine whether you are gliding through water or sky. Everything is unreal and mystic, and all the early dreams of fairy land seem realized.

Suddenly from the tall maples above our heads came the plaintive notes of a whippoorwill. It was the first time I had ever heard the strains of this love-fabled bird, and amid such surroundings and under such influences, is it any wonder that rooms of the heart, long closed and locked with rusty keys, were opened, and the soft and delicious impulses known only when love plays upon the tender chords of youth came back for the moment in great torrents of sentiment? I could not but recall then and there the old song of the whippoorwill, that I had always cherished, but which now filled me with its meaning as never before:

It is said that whatever sweet feelings
May be throbbing within a fond heart,
When listening to whippoorwill's singing
For twelvemonth will never depart.
Oh, then we will meet in the woodland,
Far away from the hurrying throng,
And whisper our love to each other
When we hear the first whippoorwill's song.