

# THE STRANGE TALE OF A FISH

Quite Disposing of the Old Adage, "There's as Good Fish in the Sea as Ever Came Out of It."

By MADGE MACBETH

THE chill of a September evening mingled with the deepening shadows and closed round two water-stained, earth-grimed travellers in the bush. One was short and squat; his coarse black hair rose stiffly from a bronzed forehead and fell in streaks over his piercing eyes. They were the eyes of a natural woodsman, and the rest of his rather ordinary features proclaimed him a typical habitant. His costume was the usual thing, also; a red flannel shirt opened over a massive chest burned beyond all semblance to human skin, his trousers—relics of some extravagant city-bred—were of a cut much in vogue five years ago, but had lost something of their original appearance owing to much heterogeneous patching, beside which they had palpably belonged to a tall, spare man. Reefs were taken with cord, safety pins and whatever usable articles came to hand, but the fact remained, that even so, there were spots through which it was evident that Pierre was of a brunette hue.

The other man was tall and slight, as fair as three weeks of September sun would permit, and he was a lover of the forest though not born to a woodsman's life. He stepped lightly and surely under his load, and kept close behind Pierre, who was carrying the canoe. They were portaging.

"How much farther, Pierre, old top?" asked Dick, casting a hungry eye through the lace-work of leaves toward the sky. Great banks of copper-coloured clouds piled against one another, here and there merging into an angry red. The morrow promised to be hot.

"We've got to catch our supper, remember, and I could eat most anything outside a jelly fish!"

Pierre grinned and shrugged under the canoe.

"M'sieu has hunger, hein? I tell M'sieu a depecher one hour past."

"Well, I couldn't hurry, you old idiot! I had to get that fish or croak. And to think," he groaned, "to think that after all, it was only a five-pounder."

"It is not bad, M'sieu," flung back the guide.

"Sure thing. At any other time I wouldn't turn up my Roman member at a game little trout like him, my boy. No, sir! But before I go back this year, I've got to beat the record, Peter. I may not be here again for some time—it looks as though I had done most of my fishing round these parts. Comprenez? I've simply got to catch a regular whale within the next couple of days. How do you say it—un gros poisson—you know—comme ça!" And Dick Bartlett measured off a space in the air the length of which a cod might well have envied.

So situated that he could not see the gesture, Pierre's mind caught another part of the sentence, and he remonstrated.

"You not come long wit' me nex' year—for why? You lak one nodder man for guide, hein?"

"Huh! I should think not—a couple of nots, Peter!" cried the young man, hastily. You are the candy guide around the club, by ten miles!" He made the statement with the appreciative look which usually accompanies a slap on the back. "I've got no kick coming in that direction—pas de tout! But—but—the romantic fact is—you see I am shortly to be married."

AS nearly as possible Pierre wheeled under the canoe.

"You mek marry wiz lady that no lak feeshing—yes?"

"Like fishing? Well! You ought to see her! Why, about a month ago, before I was able to get away, she and her father sneaked off to the Tecumseh Fishing Club, where she caught a trout that would have made you wonder. With another mosquito inside its little Mary it would have weighed five pounds and a half! She's got a wrist that's simply made for casting, and it's as steady as Gibraltar—you can take that from me. Why fish—?" he broke off, and after a moment continued. "It's her mother, you see. She doesn't appreciate the simple life. She thinks roughing it is vulgar. As long as she can keep her from the woods, she doesn't give my little girl a chance at the rod and line. Madame always manages to have a couple of house-parties, or yacht-manages to have a couple of other parties on hand just at fishing time. Like enough next year we will be

dragged on a personally conducted tour round the globe—or something."

Pierre did not understand all of this long explanation, but enough to insinuate the following question:

"Mais, M'sieu—will not mademoiselle be de woman of M'sieu?"

Dick laughed.

"Nothing surer! Just the same, old cock, you can take it from one who has suffered, it will be no cinch to get away from white flannels and the latest thing in haberdashery."

"Mon Dieu!" breathed the guide, with deep sympathy. "How many days you got lef' for to feesh?"

verence of the natural woodsman for beautiful, silent places.

He saw a small lost lake indeed—hardly more than a pool, into which, at one end, water flowed in little white cascading ripples from over a couple of fallen logs, and out at the other end almost imperceptibly, so cunningly had twigs and leaves banked themselves into a sort of natural dam. He saw the reflection of red and copper clouds, offset by the blacky-green of spruce and balsam, and it was difficult to distinguish between the shadow and the reality when it came to the alder bushes growing close down to the edge. Their leaves, perfect in the mirroring surface, flecked the water occasionally, with a sibilant rustle, and now and again a dead, bronzed leaf would flutter down and float about, idly.

HANGING out over the pool was a broken balsam bough, at the very end of which a kingfisher stood, his head cocked on one side, looking suspiciously at the intruders.

"Golly!" whispered Dick, again. "What a pool! Get out the kit, Peter. Here is where I shall stay until I have got the roi d'epingle!"

Pierre chuckled.

"You lak—hein? M'sieu catch leetle feesh for supper. To-morrow get beeg one that live under the log—there, eh?"

"D. V. and W. P.," agreed the young sport, fervently.

While Pierre was making camp on the trail, and while the red and copper gave way to opalescent tints of mauve and blue and pink, into which glory a single yellow star fell out and gleamed, Dick caught two inquisitive little fish who should have been in beddie-bye long since. Without compunction, he and Pierre ate them, together with large quantities of bacon, flap-jack, richly floating in maple syrup, and tea. Then, after a soul-satisfying pipe, night closed down upon the hushed woods with nothing but a few dying embers to testify to the presence of human beings near the little lost lake.

At four o'clock the next morning, shivering in two great woolly sweaters, one foot immersed in the icy waters of the pool, Dick Bartlett stood close to the balsam log and cast temptingly, for the King Pin. He had studied the flies decorating his hat-band a long time before choosing, and almost unconsciously he decided with which other lure he would replace the leader in case his first morning brought in no return. He lifted his hand, suddenly the line and its three flies whipped over his head, perilously near, yet free of the alder bushes, and back again, the leader lighting delicately where the shadow of a leaf made a black spot on the pink-tinted water. Just a little behind it, and a shade over in the water, a Silver Doctor settled, and the tail fly, trailing a little, was designed to tempt the most epicurean palate. It was a beautiful, vivid blue "Belle."

For hours he sat, waiting. A small fish bit, a chipper young thing. His terrified flirts churned the still water into an angry cream, and to land him required no little skill.

Pierre, with the net, grunted approval. "Pour djiner," he muttered, making well-placed thumps on the fish's head with his hunting knife. "Couply pounds an' more. Yes!"

AS the sun spread long, pink fingers across the sky and warmed the wakening earth, as it rose higher and tried to peep down into the heart of that shadowed little pool, a tired girl opened great blue eyes and looked round her pink and silver bedroom. A maid was moving noiselessly about, glancing toward the bed now and then. She had the air of hoping to disturb the sleeper, without actually waking her. But as soon as the blue eyes opened ever so sleepily, she spoke.

"Your mother's up and dressed this long time, Miss Mildred." There was reproach in the tone. "You know you've two more fittings at—"

"Oh, hang the fittings, Cora! Hang the wedding cake ten stories high, and the orange blossoms, and the miles of red carpet and awning! Hang the lugubrious congratulations, the crush of critical, scented people, half of whom will envy and half who

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"Mon Dieu!" whispered the guide. "C'est le Roi! You get him!"

Illustration by Arthur Lismer.

"Two. And I've got to beat the five and a half pound trout—do you understand?"

"M'sieu!"

Pierre stopped up short, turned the canoe over and lowered it deftly to the ground. "If it please M'sieu—we will not portage. Non! I know a place—it is not for the stupid! Not many feesh! But I have seen one—Mon Dieu—how do you say? The roi d'epingle! Oui!"

He signified about half the canoe's length with his arms.

"The roi d'epingle, eh?" Dick burst into a laugh which caused consternation in the tree-top nurseries. "Lead me to him, Peter! I should like to have a try at the King Pin. Where is he to be found?"

"At de P'sie Lac Perdjee."

The guide ran his gimlet eyes over the trail, pushed a bush aside here, lifted a branch there, and without waiting for his M'sieu, disappeared from sight. In a moment Dick heard his voice seemingly close at hand. But there was no sign of his squat body to be seen.

Bartlett broke through the bush as the guide had done, but found himself in a dense tangle of trailing vines and rotting stumps. He called and was answered by a low, musical wail. Following the sound with difficulty, he was brought up against a low swinging bough which formed a natural curtain over what turned out to be a sylvan tunnel. There, bulging at the other end of it, stood grinning Pierre.

"La P'sie Lac Perdjee!" he whispered, standing aside as Dick pushed through.

"My—stars—and—garters!" muttered the young man in a hushed voice, and with the instinctive re-