

A WINTER DAY IN NEW- FOUNDLAND

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THE telephone rang, and I picked up the receiver. The Hello was familiar and buoyant, and I cut right in without apology: "Michael, if you are going to suggest anything in the way of duty, I'm deaf and dumb and rheumatic; but if you are going to suggest a day somewhere as far as we can get from town, my sight and hearing are unimpaired, and I'm as supple as a boy." And the telephone cleared its throat and said: "My thought doth walk with thine in one intent."

"We're far from the blue Aegean and the towers of Ilium," I replied, "and the pleasures of my company do not resemble those you would garner from the fair Helen. Moreover. . . ." He too was rude: "Get you a trout line, some pieces of raw meat, a lunch, an axe, all the clothes you can carry, and meet me at the eight-thirty Trespassy Branch train, and I'll give you such a day as Helen never gave Paris."

It was a brave offer, and I accepted it.

I had not lived long in St. John's, the capital of Newfoundland, but I had fallen in love with the city, the country, and the people.

Outdoors, the February day was full of wind and sunshine, blue sky and snow-drifts. When I turned away from the telephone, my setter, Val, was standing in the door silently regarding me with outward sadness. But I knew that he inferred an outing from the quality of my voice, and that behind his mournful eyes he was all excited.

"Yes, Val, I'm off for the woods, and you shall come, but keep quiet about it." He swallowed a bark: "Well, let me out or I'll burst." So I opened the door and he informed the street of his high fortune.

Jake, the engine driver, leaned out of his cab as I passed up the platform. "Is it Middle Pond Crossing you'll be getting off at to-day, sir?" "It is, Jake, and it's a trout or two I'll be giving you if you don't overrun it letting us down this morning and picking us up tonight." "Sure, I'll remember, and God send ye luck."

The fussy little narrow gauge train drew out of the station, left the main line at Waterford Bridge, panted up the grade to

Petty Harbor, and set out over the wide barrens for Middle Pond Crossing.

I had never lived where it was legal to fish trout through the ice, and the experience was new. My friend Michael (now sitting opposite me enjoying the morning paper and a briar pipe) is a noted hunter and fisherman in his unprofessional hours, and we were frequently companions.

Hunting and fishing are the best tests of human nature. Other forms of sport are good in their way, but they have not enough of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune to prove what a man is in the inward parts.

The car was noisy with Newfoundland noise, which is to say that over and above the usual chatter of country people returning home, there was un-selfconscious devil-may-care drollery. Life is uncertain and hard in the tide-rip and the ice-pack, but it is not as hard as the sharp point of Celtic wit with which the Newfoundlander meets it.

So, by the time Jake pulled the whistle cord for Middle Pond Crossing, everyone in the car knew all about us and our plans, and we stepped off laden with the blessings of all the saints, and as the little train, sending up swelling rings of steam into the frosty air, pulled away across the white wilderness, windows were jerked up and heads were put out, and God and St. Christopher and good luck were evidently in league on our behalf.

The train rumbled away into silence, and we picked up our packs and looked around. A stranger would have wondered why that particular spot should be called Middle Pond Crossing, for there was no sign of either a crossing or a pond. The pond (a lake is a pond in Newfoundland) was a mile away across the barren, sleeping under a foot of ice, and this was called a crossing because an old trapper's trail leading from the coast to the hinterland crossed the railway here. The trail was buried under the snow, and the only thing to mark it was a row of stakes set up in the bog, the tops of which showed above the drifts. They are as useful in the summer fogs as in the winter snow storms. Following the trail in a fog or storm, you remained at one till you sighted the next. If you lost them, you were lost. To-day they stood out black and upright against the snow like a file of soldiers at attention, clear to the black spruce thicket on the further side of the barren.

I knew this locality in the summer and autumn, but not in winter. I had a little hunting and fishing lodge over in a grove by a chain of ponds, and I hunted and fished there in the seasons of gun and rod. Val knows the region better than I, every square foot

of it. He remembers the day when, only half trained, being ordered to retrieve a ptarmigan I had brought down in a birch thicket, he disregarded the command, dashed past the thicket and disappeared over the brow of the hill, leaving me raging at his disobedience. He was gone several minutes, but returned with a big cock which, upon being put down at my feet, promptly ran off and was retrieved again. I apologized to Val that day, and have trusted him ever since. Val is headstrong, but he holds a master's degree in his profession, and I hope that he is as firmly convinced that I am a gentleman as I am that he is.

So, as I have said, we took a look around. We also looked at each other—and laughed. We were dressed regardless of convention. Those who travel in the Newfoundland winter would better be. The wind blew straight from (Michael said it smelled of) Labrador. Fine particles of ice swept endlessly across the snow covered plateau, glittering in the sun like tiny diamonds. Little puffs of snow rose up like smoke from our snow-shoes and disappeared. A pair of blue wing ducks, lone wandering but not lost, swung out from their line of flight. Val heard the brief music of their wings, and eyed them with pleased interest. He glanced at me to get my mind on the subject of ducks....“Nothing doing in that direction....rabbits are taboo....snipe are gone....wonder what about ptarmigan....If ptarmigan are *verboden*, what shall I do?” He had not long to wait. Just where the trail entered the thicket, a sudden thunder of wings and a brace of ptarmigan, white as the snow from which they had been watching us, climbed the wintry sky. We had come down wind, and even Val was taken by surprise. His lithe body snapped into rigidity. His eyes, suddenly full of fire, sought mine. “Too bad, old chap. I know just how you feel, but not to-day.” He relaxed. I knew what he was thinking, and comforted him, and presently he was engrossed in the myriad enchanting odors from which our nostrils are forever barred.

The trail divided here, one way leading off to my cabin, and the other to the pond. We took the latter, descended a ravine and came to Beaver Pond Brook. The wind had swept the snow down the ravine, and the pools were frozen over with ice of glassy clearness. The water-falls between the pools were moulded into rough stairways leading up the ravine. The black spruces leaned over the stairways and swayed slowly up and down under their weight of snow, and the white birches stood up very straight in their silver dresses. I knelt on the stairs and listened to the tinkle of the brook under the ice. Then we went down the brook and across

the frozen pools. As we crossed the largest of these, I saw a shadow flit away from my feet—A trout? In February? In Newfoundland? I put down my pack and told Michael to wait a while. I lay down on the ice and peered down into the pool. There was a slow movement of water; tiny grains of sand at the bottom about two feet away were slowly tumbling over one another. Little particles of moss and small seeds went slowly past. Over there under the bank the water was deeper; I moved over and lay still. Presently a dark grey shadow moved slowly out from under the bank and swam toward me. It was a brook trout about fifteen inches long, lithe and lovely. He was feeding on something, I could not tell what. He delicately sampled some bits of moss and rejected them. He swam with slow and consummate grace, in a succession of rhythmic curves like a waltz of old Vienna. Over and over again he repeated the movement, to what music I know not. Apparently these were his bachelor quarters, for I saw no other. I moved a hand—like a silver arrow he was gone.

“Now,” said Michael, “if you will lend a hand, I’ll show you how to fish trout through the ice.” So I lent a hand. We left the brook, crossed a marsh, and walked out a few hundred yards on the lake. Michael lined a big rock and a tall rampike, cross lined another rock and a stump, and said, “If there are any fish to be had, they are about here. The water is deep.” He threw off his pack and sheep-lined coat, took his axe, drew a circle on the ice about eighteen inches in diameter and told me to chop a hole of that size at the top with a six-inch opening at the bottom. We chopped four holes. Then he took a bag of corn meal from his pack and poured about half a pound of meal into each hole. “That will attract the trout. They will come to feed on it, and will take our bait later on.”

A clump of willows on a point of land gleamed like gold in the sun. We went over and cut a bundle of twigs. From these we made some tip-ups by tying one twig across another. To the shorter end of the upper one we attached our lines, which we baited with pieces of meat. By placing the tip-ups carefully across the holes, when a trout pulls at the baited hook, the long end of the twig to which the line is attached tips-up and signals the watcher he has a fish on his hook. All this was pretty cold work for our bare hands, and I was glad when it was done. We baited our hooks, and left the lines lying on the ice till we were ready to fish.

We scanned the nearest shore carefully, and selected a little valley leading down to a cove. “Now we will make our rest-room,” said Michael. First we cut down spruces and built a high wind-

screen, in the lea of which we made a long and wide spruce-cushioned chesterfield. In front of this we built a big fire of dry juniper logs, and our rest-room was complete. At least I said it was, but Michael said it wasn't complete till we had fried trout, brown bread, coffee and honey.

Having made our fire, we left it to burn down to frying coals, and went out on the pond and lowered our lines into the water. "Now God be with us," said Michael.

I freely admit the orthodox fisherman who seeks the streams in maple blossom time, and flings his hackle lightly here and there like a whisper in a dream down the ripples of a shining river, knows a palpitating joy that is unknown to others. I cannot deny to the citizen who reclines on the bank of a river, watches his float till it bobs under and then flops a fish over his head into the bushes behind him, a certain satisfaction. Respectable persons have told me they enjoy that sort of fishing.

Here was something different from both. There was nothing exciting about it—the actual fishing was dull. You waited till your stick tipped up, pulled in the line and took an inert fish off the hook. Trout are not as lively in February as they are in May, and fight half-heartedly. I don't know why. You yourself are not as lively in February as you are in May. All life is torpid in winter. It may be that man is upsetting the balance with his gay defiance of kindly Night and Frost, and should, when Christmas is over, go with the trout, the bear and the moose, into retirement. Spring will lead us back, when the pussy-willow comes and the wild goose honks. Did not divine Persephone remember her loved Sicily?

So we ran from hole to hole when the willow twigs tipped up, and pulled in our fish. They were clean and firm, Middle Pond being clear and sweet. When the sun stood midway in his low arc across the southern sky, we cleaned a pan full of trout and retired to our rest-room. Cooking on such an occasion is to the fraternity of fishermen a high ritual. This sacred fire links me with the past and the future. I regard it with the same fascinated eye that my ancestor bent upon it beside an Alpine stream, and as I busy myself in this sanctuary of winter woods with the details of the meal, it becomes a sort of sacrament and I become a pursuivant of some high and mystic heraldry.

The fisherman's fire must be just right. That is, there must be a sufficient depth of coals to hold the heat till the fish is cooked. They must be genuine coals and not blazing faggots; the smoke of one faggot will destroy the flavor of anything. You may use either butter or bacon fat. Trout take about twenty minutes to

fry. You need not split a pound trout. Fry it till it is crisp on both sides, because fish should be well cooked. We boiled our coffee in a copper kettle. I have carried it for twenty years, and it tells many lovely tales of many lands. All woods kettles should be of copper, never of tin.

When the fish was done, we threw logs on the fire, sat on our spruce chesterfield in the shelter of the wind screen and ate fried trout, brown bread and butter, and finished with honey, buttered rolls and coffee. Then we lighted our pipes.

One of my fisher friends once told me that he eats a good meal in order to smoke afterwards. I concede that no meal is complete without a smoke, but I think he went a little far. I am sure Elijah enjoyed his cake baked on the coals and his cruse of water under the juniper tree in the wilderness more than the pomegranates and spiced wines of Jezreel—and Elijah did not smoke.

Little eddies of fine snow danced down the ravines, spun across the white surface of the pond and disappeared like ghosts. Far away to the north the mountains stood sharp against the sky, and in the middle distance the limitless barrens slept under the snow.

The fire was warm and our couch was comfortable. I told Michael about the day in May that Larkin came out here with me. We were lucky that day, and Larkin said he would send some fish to his friends in town by the evening train. If the wind is right, you can hear the train whistle for Broad Cove five miles away, and that gives you twenty minutes to reach Middle Pond Crossing from here and signal the train. Larkin was having a nice fight with a big trout among the lily pads when I heard the train whistle for Broad Cove. He said All Right; just a second and he would land the grandfather of the Middle Pond trout. And he did, but not in a second. The result was that when we ran up the hill and came out on the bog, we could hear the train puffing up the Long Pond grade. I told him he couldn't make it. He told me he could. He grabbed the string of fish from me, hitched up his waders and started to run. Now running in a Newfoundland bog is a heartbreaking feat in the best of conditions; but when you are carrying a heavy string of trout in one hand and holding up your waders with the other, it is something to remember. Larkin had very long legs, and I could be of no help, so I sat down and watched the race against the train whose oncoming labors as it puffed up the grade grew louder every moment. If Jake at the throttle only knew, he could manage to delay making the grade, but he held the throttle wide open, and I

could see the expanding rings of smoke and steam shooting above the scrub. I looked across the bog at Larkin. He was sitting on a hummock pulling off his waders. The brave lad—he jerked and jerked! Presently he was up and away. But he was a new creature—he had jerked off his trousers, and except for the string of fish and his bare backside, he looked like a marathon runner. I sent him a wild cheer that he never heard. But Jake saw him. He said afterwards that he didn't know at first what the devil it was he did see. But he whistled the brakes on, the panting Larkin threw the fish in the open door, and the obliging baggageman caught them. A head was at every window, and the platforms were full of curious passengers. Larkin stood at attention, carefully facing the train till it disappeared. "Larkin," I said when he rejoined me, "you're a brave lad, but the Lord taketh no pleasure in the legs of a man." "That may be," said Larkin, "but by the jumpin' trout (he always swore by the jumpin' trout) there are those who do."

Michael said that he'd be long sorry to have to take his trousers off to-day anyway, and we'd better get some more trout to take home. I remember saying that would be a good idea, and I remember laughing a little within myself at the memory of that May day, and then the fire sounded far away and the pond receded and faded—and fire and pond and sky disappeared and "You're not much of a winter fisherman," said Michael, throwing down a big string of frozen trout. "You've been asleep."

So I left the snug shelter, and we tended the holes. We got two dozen nice lake trout that day. It didn't seem to matter much what we used for bait if it was edible. I used bacon rind, and found that its toughness saved me the trouble of re-baiting.

Val went off to revisit his old haunts. He would go down the river and look over the Beaver Pond marsh and long for the rich odor of the fat Wilson snipe fresh from the Labrador. He would visit the hillside where one day he ran down wind into a covey of thirteen ptarmigan before his nose informed him. He will remember how he froze there among the birds, and rolled his eyes imploringly at me as I came up, and how they all burst from cover together like a white cloud, and how four of them fell to my gun, and how he retrieved them and how I praised him. He will visit the hollow where we stopped one day for lunch, and I put down my pack on some low bushes in a little hollow, under which a bird was hiding, and it never moved. And he will remember how, looking for a place to lie down, he got its scent and stood on it till Cousins, the guide, happened to see him and said, "By the powers sir, the dog's fetched a stand." And he will remember my incredulity as I said, "You

silly fool Val, there's nothing here." "Yes Master! O Master! There is! There is!" "All right you idiot, put it up then."— A spring! O joy! Out from under the scrub burst a big cock ptarmigan with a wild kuk-kuk-kuk, and flung himself behind a spruce tree. And Cousins and I looked at it with open mouths. And Val will remember, perhaps, how near he came that day to despising his gods.

Oh, he will remember it all and renew it all, and soon he will come loping up the ice, tired and happy to go home.

The shadows of the spruce trees stretch out on the pond. The snow in the hollows is faintly purple, and it is decidedly colder. We gather up our fish and packs, and put on our snowshoes just in time to hear the train whistle for Broad Cove. So it's up the ravine where our bachelor trout waits for the springtime and his bride, and the frozen birch buds wait for the returning sap, and the plaintive brook waits for the south wind. And it's through the thicket where the ptarmigan waits for the red-brown feather on his mate, and across the bog where the small grasses under our snow shoes wait for the returning sun.

And up comes the little train, with curious kindly faces in the windows, and considerately stops in the wilderness to pick up two men and a dog. I hold up some nice fish to Jake who leans down from the cab, and puts his favorite saint's blessing on me. Then we climb into the train, and the passengers crowd about us and learn all about it, and examine the fish, and are happy in our good fortune. And they all talk at once, and the little train rattles down the grades and struggles up the grades, and whistles when we can see no need, and snorts and puffs and rings its bell, and finally stops. And we step out on the frosty platform at St. John's, and the north star and the aurora borealis, whatever the law might say, pronounce a benediction on winter fishing.