

## BLACK-BASS FISHING IN MAINE.

BY ARTHUR PIERRE.



AM going to tell of black-bass fishing in Maine, where the bass do not grow much over six pounds, except in newspaper accounts, and where the fly-fisher is not sufficiently numerous to teach the natives to look down on the humble troller. Yes, I confess it with shame, in trolling for black-bass I have passed many delightful hours and procured many a string of fish that have been a source of secret envy to less fortunate companions.

Early one morning in July I walked rapidly along a country road on my way to fulfill an appointment to "go a-fishin'" with no less a personage than Jack Pike, the blacksmith and general factotum of a little Maine village. I had long been a secret admirer of this worthy, for I had heard prodigious tales of "Jack's luck" and had gazed with unconcealed admiration at the trim lancewood rod and dainty tackle that ornamented a chosen corner of the dingy smithy.

Decidedly a blacksmith who so far defied the traditions of the place as to fish for bass with a seven-ounce lancewood instead of yanking out pickerel with a fifteen-foot pole, was a *rara avis* whom it was well worth while to cultivate. Since then, in numberless tramps through the backwoods, and in expeditions over secluded lakes and along unknown streams, I have often proved the value of the wit and wisdom that came from one of the kindest hearts that man was ever blessed with. He was not without learning also, and his occasional discussions of the topics of the day showed a keen insight into public affairs and human nature.

As I approached the shop the rhythmic blows of the hammer told me that Jack was evidently improving his time while waiting for me. As I came up to the open door, however, he stopped and threw the hammer away with a sigh of relief.

"I'd 'bout given you up," he said "an' started in to fix Mose Harper's mowin' machine, but I guess it's just as well I didn't." Then, on my half-hearted request that he keep right on working and we wait until another day, he continued:

"No; I sot out to go a-fishin' to-day, and I'm a-goin.' Besides, I'll be doin' that durn fool a real kindness not to fix his ol' machine. If he gits that done to-day, he won't know any better 'n to go an' mow down a lot o' hay, an' we're goin' to hev rain 'fore night just as sure as my name's Jack Pike. But, I reckon, we better be a-movin', fer it won't be long 'fore every durn fool in the village will be here with a hoss to shoe. They allus come when I want to go a-fishin'."

With this naïve bit of philosophy, he started through the fields to the lake, and I obediently followed. We soon reached the lake, but just as we were pushing off, a hoarse voice from the direction of the village came floating over the trees.

"J-a-a-ck! Oh, Ja-a-a-a-ck!" Jack looked at me with a dry smile.

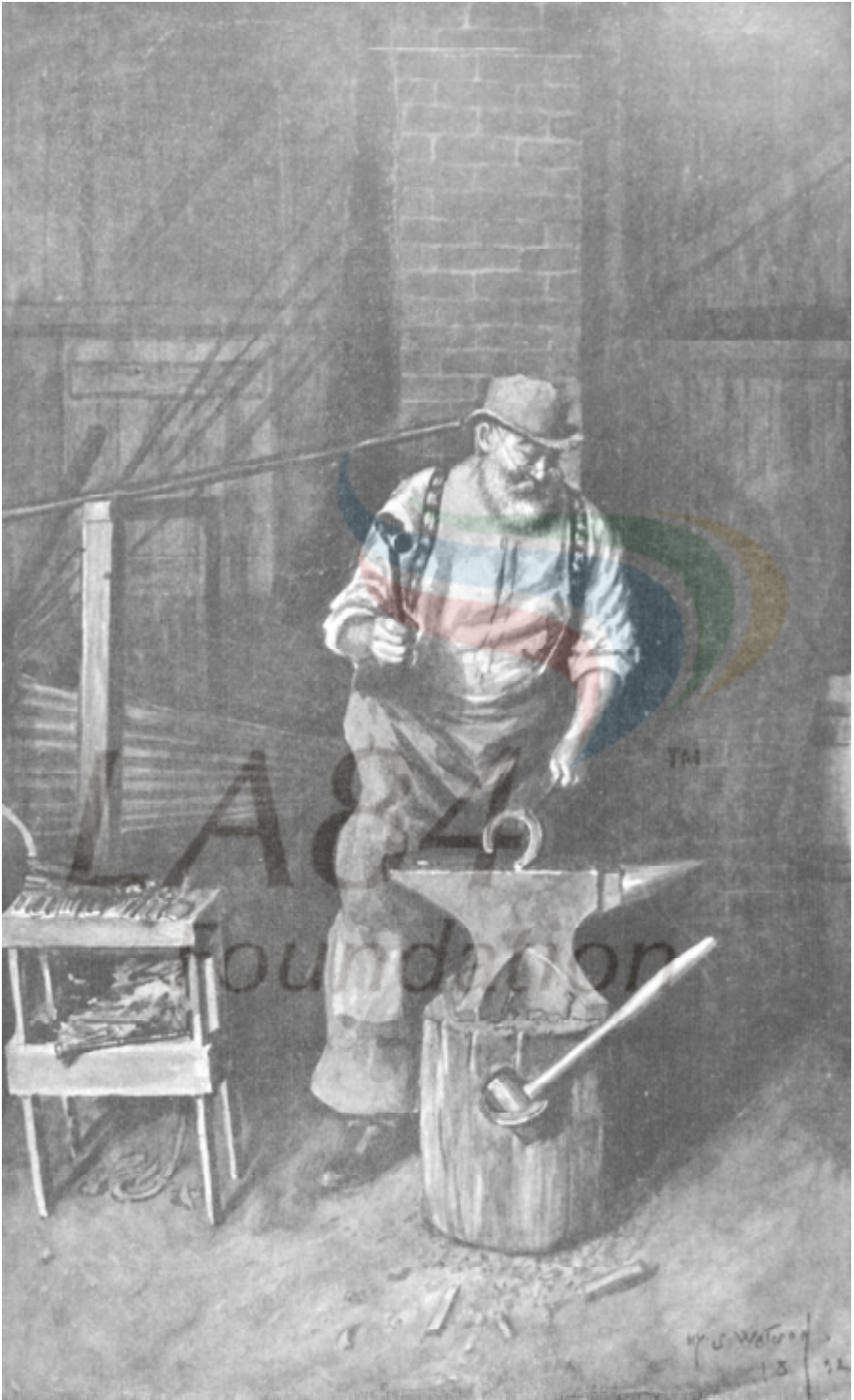
"There, that fool jest knowed I wanted to go a-fishin' to-day, and he came 'round early so I'd have to fix his blamed ol' mowin'-machine, but I ruther guess we fooled him."

Just then a pensive bull-calf in the next pasture answered the persistent seeker after "J-a-a-a-ck!" with a plaintive "Pa-a-a-a!" ending in that divine guttural trill that only a healthy bull-calf can successfully accomplish.

The situation was not without humor, and as Jack rowed silently but rapidly away, he murmured partly to himself:

"Two of a kind. Two of a kind, an', I reckon, the young un has got the most sense."

As the last, lingering echoes of the bull-calf died away, I got out my line and began to troll for black-bass, Now, don't think you know all about trolling, my friend learned in piscatorial sport, for perhaps you don't. Trolling for black-bass is a science. I thought I knew it all, but when I had rigged my tackle, under Jack's direction, I felt like



"THEY ALLUS COME WHEN I WANT TO GO A-FISHIN'." (p. 376.)

a novice. In the first place, I took a three-yard double leader and fastened to it four flies, selected by Jack from my fairly well-filled book. If I remember rightly, he chose a "Ferguson," two "polkas" and a "grizzly king." At any rate, subsequent experience has taught me that these are among the best for trolling in that region. Fastening the leader to a light oiled-silk line (size F), which ran smoothly from a multiplying Hendryx click reel, fastened firmly on a seven-ounce lance-wood, which Jack had pronounced a "purty good pole," I was ready for business. I dropped the cast overboard, and let it run out behind the boat until fifteen or twenty yards were missing from the reel. I wanted to stop then, but Jack wouldn't hear of it, until over a hundred feet were trailing along behind us.

I had caught bass before, but I must say that I felt a little scared when I thought of the "gleaming eight-pound warrior" of the newspapers at the end of that delicate contrivance. However, I will warn every one that, in spite of the veracity of a truthful and unprejudiced press, eight-pounders were never quite in my line, or rather on my line.

Jack was now rowing very slowly along the shore, keeping the boat out far enough for my flies to just escape the occasional lily-pads that frequently grow along rocky and sandy shores. Pretty soon a series of little twitches told me that something was fooling with the cast. Then the twitches became sharper, and every now and then they were strong enough to run a foot or so of line off the reel. A look of disgust had gradually spread over Jack's face.

"We've run through a herd of them good fer nothin' perch, and you've got one on every hook."

Upon reeling in I found he was indeed a true prophet, for on the first three hooks were three perch gasping with astonishment at their sudden introduction into polite society. The fourth hook, however, held a small bass not more than four inches long. As he seemed thoroughly ashamed of himself, and looked duly penitent at being caught in such company, I tossed him overboard, but the perch were consigned to an old starch-box with the following rather enigmatical remark from Jack:

"Round here folks think them's good

enough fer hogs. Shouldn't wonder if you caught some more." I fancied there was a slight emphasis on the "you," but as Jack seemed as solemn as the occasion demanded, I concluded I was mistaken.

I let out my line and we went on near the shore in perfect silence, excepting the faint cawing of crows in a distant pine, and the shrill peep of an occasional snipe that was picking up his breakfast along the sand flats we passed. The water was still, and the trees and rocks on the shore were caught and held in perfect reflection. The morning sun, just rising over the tops of the pines that stood along the shore in dark array, cheered me and robbed the air of its chill. The subdued ripple of the oars as Jack silently and slowly forced the boat through the pictured, woods, lulled me into a dreamy reverie in which every thought was of peace and pleasure. The magic charm of the woods was upon me, and everything seemed to happen with the delightful irrationality of a dream. I realized then as never before that all the charm of a day's fishing is not in the sport itself.

But my dreaming came to an abrupt end as I suddenly felt a sharp tug, and then my reel began to shriek its sharp warning. The change from repose to action was instantaneous. There was no need of Jack's quick "Look out!" I was looking out, and, standing up in that little boat, was engaged in a battle royal with that glittering flash of silver that now and again showed itself so very far away.

Well, yes, I suppose, Mister Cynic, that any fool *can* catch a fish, and that it is a little thing to make a fuss about; but let me put you into a combination with a light rod, a long line, and a three-pound chunk of perversity called a black bass, and if there are not times when you are willing to back the bass for all you are worth, call me no fisherman. And if you do not feel every nerve in your body tingle with excitement as the fish plunges in every direction and never seems to be coming nearer the boat, then you are indeed a cynic, and really very much to be pitied.

Slowly I reeled the bass in, but not without considerable reluctance on his part, and with no little firm persuasion on mine. Jack had meantime set the boat with steady, easy strokes, away

from the shore, and soon I had the fish in deep water and away from all obstructions. For the next fifteen minutes I think I experienced nearly every feeling that the human soul can know, from the ecstasy of delight when the excited fish flashed into the air before my very eyes, to the dull anguish of utter despair as the line slackened and I thought I had lost him.

Of course I didn't lose him. If I had, he would have weighed more than three pounds. No man ever loses a fish as small as that. It is against the unwritten rules of the brotherhood, and it is worthy of note that we all observe those unwritten rules, even if the decalogue suffers a little. I presume that Jonah exaggerated the size of his *companion du voyage* when he was safe on dry land. But then Jonah had good reason to speak well of that fish. It would take a mighty mean man to undervalue a fish under such circumstances.

Finally the rushes grew less frequent and shorter, and then as the bass passed slowly by, too much exhausted to make more than a feeble protest, Jack slipped the landing net under him and soon he lay on the bottom of the boat. I sank back into the seat with a sigh of delight, and then with an attempt to look as though I was in the habit of catching three-pound bass every day in the Frog-pond, I observed, as carelessly as possible, "Hum! Not quite as big as I thought he was. Weigh about two pounds, or two and a half, perhaps?"

"Oh, he'll weigh more'n that," said Jack; "good deal nearer three an' a half. But I'll weigh him as soon's you git your line out agin."

"How are you going to weigh him?" said I, as indifferently as possible.

Now right there Jack gave additional proof that he was not an angler, but simply a fisherman, by taking a pair of balances from his pocket and weighing my bass. "Jest a shade under three an' a half," he announced, with a magisterial air, and I received the verdict with much the same air as a sweet girl graduate receives her blue ribboned diploma.

My line had soon run out again, but it hardly reached the limit when another vicious tug and whirl of the reel brought me to my feet again. This time it was two smaller ones, and they made a very pretty fight, at times leaving the

line almost slack when they were pulling against each other, and then making the rod bend as they started off together.

I continued to troll, with more or less success, until eleven bass had been transferred from the lake to the box in the bow of the boat.

After a while I took the oars and Jack trolled. His first capture was a gigantic chub, that came in with all the grace of an amateur hippopotamus, and looked pretty nearly all mouth as he lay on the bottom of the boat.

"That 'ere fish reminds me a good deal of Mose Harper," said Jack. "If he'd only keep his mouth shet he'd look a blame sight purtier an' git into less trouble. Mose Harper allus has his mouth open and it often gits him inter trouble. Why, one day las' summer Mose came 'in to Deacon Jim Lawrence's store where the boys was all tergether a-waitin' fer the noon mail to be in. Wall, Mose has got the biggest mouth in town, an' jest as he come in the Deacon's boy, Bill, took up a molasses cookie an' took a thunderin' big bite. Wall, the boys all laughed and Mose thought he'd go the young feller one better, so he up an' opens his mouth till he looked a good deal like that chub down there. Wall, the boys all laughed agin and Mose strained his mouth wider still. Pritty soon he began to look start and put both han's up ter his mouth as if ter push it to. But he couldn't do it. The pesky idjut had slipped his jaw back an' it had stuck, an' he stood there jest like that bullock we heard with his mouth wide open. Then he started on the dead run down to the Corners to ol' Dr. Child's bare-headed an' with his mouth wide open. Wall, the boys all started after him an' pritty soon half the village was going down the road tight as they could git, so that ol' Aunt Sallie Butterworth went over into Pelham an' tol' all the folks over there that Mose Harper had gone crazy and run into the woods an' all the men in town was out a chasin' him with pitchforks. Mose was mad as blazes when he heard of it.

"Wall, Mose come to the Doctor's an' flung the door open an' run right in where the doctor was eatin' dinner. The crowd came right in an' stood there behind Mose and those that couldn't git in tramped down all Mis' Child's flower

beds tryin' ter peak in the winder. The ol' doctor is a pritty putchiky old chap, an he was riled, but he tried not to show it an' said as calm as he could:

"Mornin', Mose. Can I do anythin' for you?"

"Mose stood there an' pointed to his mouth and sort of gurgled a good deal like that chub is doin' now. Then the doctor spoke up again rather short-like, 'What's the matter, Mose? Can I help you any?' Mose never said a word but stood there a pointin' to his mouth an' rolling his eyes, an' some of the fellers began to laugh. The ol' doctor thought they was laughin' at him, an' he flared right up and roared to Mose:

"Shet yer mouth, you d— fool,' and with that he hit Mose a slap side the jaw and Mose's mouth snapped to like a snuff-box. Then the fellers stepped in an' explained matters an' it all ended up in a laugh, but I don't think the doctor ever quite forgave Mose. At any rate he sent him a bill of two dollars fer performin' an operation."

By this time Jack was fishing again and was soon rewarded with a lively bass that weighed just two pounds.

We fished by turns all day except when we landed and boiled our coffee and broiled a couple of fresh bass over the coals. Talk about epicures. The man who hasn't eaten a bass fresh from the water and broiled over the coals doesn't know the meaning of good liv-

ing. Of course the sun is hot and the smoke gets into your eyes when you are near the fire, and the wood-flies when you are not, but after all a smoking black bass spread out on a flat rock is a temptation worth enduring.

Night came all too soon and we rowed slowly down the lake in the gathering dusk, tired, hungry and happy. We climbed wearily up the hill to the shop and divided the spoils in the twilight and as I turned away down the road I heard Jack murmur to himself:

"I might a-fixed that mowin' machine fer Mose Harper, an' it didn't rain after all; but then, I guess it's jest as well."

Yes, it was just as well. We had brought home two dozen bass, weighing from half a pound to three and a half. Not a big catch, surely, my brothers from the South and West, where bass grow so big that they cannot turn around in the rivers. No, not a big catch nor very big fish, but they were caught up amidst the gray New England hills where the mountain-tops are photographed on the water, and the silent pines look on with majestic approval. They were caught in the land where the surroundings, rugged and hard, make men that are in keeping with themselves, and it seems to me that even the fish partook of the grim New England character and came up to the boat with that obstinacy and resistance characteristic of New England.



"JACK WAS SOON REWARDED WITH A LIVELY BASS." (p. 320.)