

FISHERMEN

*Catch mist salmon
& trout*

It is May. The world is stretching and yawning in the morning of the year after its winter sleep, and the voices of the fishermen come up to me where I sit on the bank above the river. Astonishingly clear and near seem the sounds as I look down on the little boats and the pigmy figures of the men. The rattle of oars seems almost at my side, noticeable in the humming undercurrent of other noises and half silence. Young and green and gurgling, the river itself rushes along at a perilous pace, full-banked and unmindful of rocks or sharp turns ahead. The clean-washed, silvery leaves of the cottonwoods flutter excitedly up the slope; and the gummy little buds glisten as if they were varnished, filling the air with a heavy sweetness like that of new wax in the bee hives. Just below me on the sand, a brown bee tumbles and rolls as if he is sleepy and still muddled in his mind but eager to be abroad. Out over the swirling surface of the water, a veil of gauzy insects billows up and down on the breeze, this way and that, dancing and weaving to the whims of the wind, then settling for a moment like mist on the swift white water. A streak of light flashes into the air; golden and red spots glint on a slim, shimmering form. The rainbow trout has struck, leaving the hovering wraith of insects shortened.

trout

mayflies

But what of the fishermen, and what of their catch? By all the signs of the season and the welling enthusiasm within them, this is their day, whether they catch

rainbows or sunsets. A string of rowboats anchored across the eddy rocks with the current. And it's the big Chinook they are after, not his small spotted neighbor, the trout. It's the great, gamy, shrewd-eyed tyrant of the spring run, the silvery salmon flushed with the warm glow of red blood for whom the (greedy) fishermen trail out the long line and the glittering spinner. And here I see the little boats hang above the green depths hour after hour from dawn 'till sunset tints the water to lure the king salmon to his death. And here the gulls gather clamoring and screaming for the bits that belong to them.

I know that this big fish is a sporting fighter, but it takes little scheming to catch him. The old legend says "a trout for wit, and a salmon for weight." Born at the headwaters of a stream, one that is tributary to his own river, on a sandbar over which the shallow water flows in almost limpid clearness, he lives a number of months as a fingerling until he attains length and strength enough to start on the first of the two great journeys of his life. He has not seen his mother and father for some time. In fact, he has never known them.

Having laid some two or three thousand pink eggs on the sand and entrusted their hatching to the warmth of the sun and the water, Mother Salmon has weakly and painfully ended her days; and Father Salmon has followed her. Pale and half lifeless with hooked noses and scarred bodies, they have floundered about the shallow pools and finally floated off down stream. Their work has been done.

Red. Time
story Lane.

parents none felt the need of such.

But down to the sea go the brood of baby fish, prey for all the big maws along the highway of the river, the squawfish, the pike, and that glutton, the bloated Dolly Varden trout, an interloper that enters these waters by mistake. Squirring and wriggling in toward the secluded edges, dodging the probing fingers of the crawfish ready to pull them into dark corners and devour them, the little fish scuttle along by degrees on their downward way. Not all of them - in fact, very few - ever reach the salt water. For all of them are now possessed by a hunger not to be satisfied by caddis flies or gauzy insects. The tang of the sea has come up to them. ^{TP} And for five years, or thereabouts, the little remnant lives in the ocean, some feeding about the under-sea banks, others ranging along shores not far from the mouth of their stream; a few, for what reason I know not, roam to far shores. At the end of this time, along with many others, the big, full-fleshed fish forge into the entrance of their native river with an unerring sense of location. For a month or two, this homing fever drives them up-stream to surge ^{against} and fight all obstacles in their path, jumping barriers, leaping step by step up roaring cataracts, on to the headwaters, perhaps to that very sandbar which I see lying warmly under the sun, where they were born. The spawning instinct is upon them. By thousands and thousands they crowd the big and little rivers of the Northwest. And where the salmon are, there will ever be fishermen.

I sit looking down at the picture framed by the leafy screen of trees, now soft and transparent as the setting sun shines through them and down onto the surface of the river, changing it into a shifting, shimmering lake of light. The current laps against the sides of half a dozen boats, throwing black shadows behind. Rings of blue smoke from peaceful pipes trail into the evening air. A line twitches.

"Hold her, fisherman!" sings a voice. "Quana!" screams a gull hanging on deft wing above and cocking a quizzical eye on the catch.

Pure gold flares behind the hills and etches their rims. Cool purple drops down the slope among the firs and cottonwoods. The river turns green and deep and still, with only patches of paling light between. The fisherman's day is done. Does it matter whether the big Chinook lies ~~dead~~ in the bottom of his boat; or whether, for this day of his, he has caught only sunset clouds and purple shadows and the river passing by?

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