

AT THE FOOT OF THE RAINBOW

GENE STRATTON-PORTER



At the Foot of the Rainbow

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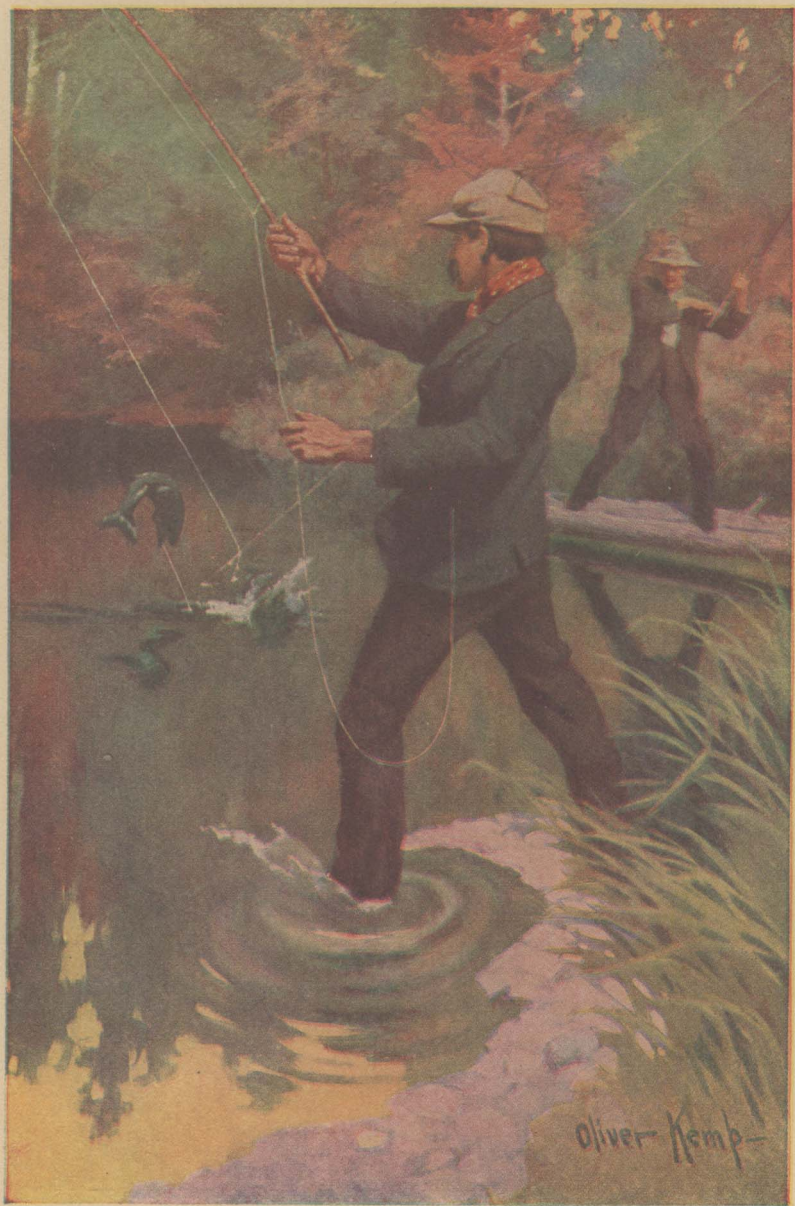
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"Mary Malone . . . slid the heavy bolt into place" (see page 18)



"She shook with strangled sobs until she scarce could stand alone"
(see page 122)



"The Black Bass leaped clear of the water"

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THE RAT-CATCHERS OF THE WABASH



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CHAPTER I

THE RAT-CATCHERS OF THE WABASH



HEY, you swate-scented little heart-warmer!" cried Jimmy Malone, as he lifted his tenth trap, weighted with a struggling muskrat, from the Wabash. "Varmint you may be to all the rists of creation, but you mane a night at Casey's to me."

Jimmy whistled softly as he reset the trap. For the moment he forgot that he was five miles from home, that it was a mile farther to the end of his line at the lower curve of Horseshoe Bend, that his feet and fingers were almost freezing, and that every rat of the ten now in the bag on his back had made him

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thirstier. He shivered as the cold wind sweeping the curves of the river struck him; but when an unusually heavy gust dropped the ice and snow from a branch above him on the back of his head, he laughed, as he ducked and cried: "Kape your snowballing till the Fourth of July, will you!"

"Chick-a-dee-dee-dee!" remarked a tiny gray bird on the tree above him. Jimmy glanced up. "Chickie, Chickie, Chickie," he said. "I can't tell by your dress whether you are a hin or a rooster. But I can tell by your employmint that you are working for grub. Have to hustle lively for every worm you find, don't you, Chickie? Now me, I'm hustlin' lively for a drink, and I be down if it seems ninessary with a whole river of drinkin' stuff flowin' right under me feet. But the old Wabash ain't runnin' 'wine and milk and honey,' not by the jug-full. It seems to be compounded of aquil parts of mud, crude ile, and rain water. If 'twas only runnin' Melwood, be gorry, Chickie, you'd see a mermaid named Jimmy Malone sittin' on the Kingfisher Stump, combin' its auburn hair with a breeze, and scoopin' whiskey down its gullet with its tail fin. No, hold on, Chickie, you wouldn't either. I'm too flat-chisted for a mermaid, and I'd have no time to lave off

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gurglin' for the hair-combin' act, which, Chickie, to me notion is as issential to a mermaid as the curves. I'd be a sucker, the biggest sucker in the Gar-hole, Chickie bird. I'd be an all-day sucker, be gobs; yis, and an all-night sucker, too. Come to think of it, Chickie, be domn if I'd be a sucker at all. Look at the mouths of thim! Puckered up with a draw-string! Oh, Hell on the Wabash, Chickie, think of Jimmy Malone lyin' at the bottom of a river flowin' with Melwood, and a puckerin'-string mouth! Wouldn't that break the heart of you? I know what I'd be. I'd be the Black Bass of Horseshoe Bend, Chickie, and I'd locate just below the shoals headin' up stream, and I'd hold me mouth wide open till I paralyzed me jaws so I couldn't shut thim. I'd just let the pure stuff wash over me gills constant, world without end. Good-by, Chickie. Hope you got your grub, and pretty soon I'll have enough drink to make me feel like I was the Bass for one night, anyway."

Jimmy hurried to his next trap, which was empty, but the one after that contained a rat, and there were footprints in the snow. "That's where the porrage-heart of the Scotchman comes in," said Jimmy, as he held up the rat by one foot, and gave it a sharp rap over the head with the trap to make sure it was dead.

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"Dannie could no more hear a rat fast in one of me traps and not come over and put it out of its misery, than he could dance a hornpipe. And him only sicond hand from hornpipe land, too! But his feet's like lead. Poor Dannie! He gets just about half the rats I do. He niver did have luck."

Jimmy's gay face clouded for an instant. The twinkle faded from his eyes, and a look of unrest swept into them. He muttered something, and catching up his bag, shoved in the rat. As he reset the trap, a big crow dropped from branch to branch on a sycamore above him, and his back scarcely was turned before it alighted on the ice, and ravenously picked at three drops of blood purpling there.

Away down the ice-sheeted river led Dannie's trail, showing plainly across the snow blanket. The wind raved through the trees, and around the curves of the river. The dark earth of the banks peeping from under overhanging ice and snow, looked like the entrance to deep mysterious caves. Jimmy's superstitious soul readily peopled them with goblins and devils. He shuddered, and began to talk aloud to cheer himself. "Elivin muskrat skins, times fifteen cints apiece, one dollar sixty-five. That will buy more than I can hold. Hagginy! Won't I be

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takin' one long fine gurgle of the pure stuff! And there's the boys! I might do the grand for once. One on me for the house! And I might pay something on my back score, but first I'll drink till I swell like a poisoned pup. And I ought to get Mary that milk pail she's been kickin' for this last month. Women and cows are always kickin'! If the blarsted cow hadn't kicked a hole in the pail, there'd be no need of Mary kicking for a new one. But dough is dubious soldering. Mary says it's bad enough on the dish pan, but it positively ain't hiltly about the milk pail, and she is right. We ought to have a new pail. I guess I'll get it first, and fill up on what's left. One for a quarter will do. And I've several traps yet, I may get a few more rats."

The virtuous resolve to buy a milk pail before he quenched the thirst which burned him, so elated Jimmy with good opinion of himself that he began whistling gayly as he strode toward his next trap. And by that token, Dannie Macnoun, resetting an empty trap a quarter of a mile below, knew that Jimmy was coming, and that as usual luck was with him. Catching his blood and water dripping bag, Dannie dodged a rotten branch that came crashing down under the weight of its icy load, and stepping

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out on the river, he pulled on his patched wool-lined mittens as he waited for Jimmy.

"How many, Dannie?" called Jimmy from afar.

"Seven," answered Dannie. "What for ye?"

"Elivin," replied Jimmy, with a bit of unconscious swagger. "I am havin' poor luck to-day."

"How mony wad satisfy ye?" asked Dannie sarcastically.

"Ain't got time to figure that," answered Jimmy, working in a double shuffle as he walked. "Thrash around a little, Dannie. It will warm you up."

"I am no cauld," answered Dannie.

"No cauld!" imitated Jimmy. "No cauld! Come to observe you closer, I do detect symptoms of sun-stroke in the ridness of your face, and the whiteness about your mouth; but the frost on your neck scarf, and the icicles fistooned around the tail of your coat, tell a different story.

"Dannie, you remind me of the baptizin' of Pete Cox last winter. Pete's nothin' but skin and bone, and he niver had a square meal in his life to warm him. It took pushin' and pullin' to get him in the water, and a scum froze over while he was under. Pete came up shakin' like the feeder on a thrashin' machine, and whin he could spake at all, 'Bless

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Jasus,' says he, 'I'm jist as wa-wa-warm as I wa-wa-want to be.' So are you, Dannie, but there's a difference in how warm folks want to be. For meself, now, I could aisily bear a little more hate."

"It's honest, I'm no cauld," insisted Dannie; and he might have added that if Jimmy would not fill his system with Casey's poisons, that degree of cold would not chill and pinch him either. But being Dannie, he neither thought nor said it.

"Why, I'm frozen to me sowl!" cried Jimmy, as he changed the rat bag to his other hand, and beat the empty one against his leg. "Say, Dannie, where do you think the Kingfisher is wintering?"

"And the Black Bass," answered Dannie. "Where do ye suppose the Black Bass is noo?"

"Strange you should mintion the Black Bass," said Jimmy. "I was just havin' a little talk about him with a frind of mine named Chickie-dee, no, Chickie-dee, who works a grub stake back there. The Bass might be lyin' in the river bed right under our feet. Don't you remimber the time whin I put on three big cut-worms, and skittered thim beyond the log that lays across here, and he lept from the water till we both saw him the best we ever did, and nothin' but my old rotten line ever saved him? Or