

# IN THE WAKE

BY LEWIS CLARKE

Philip squatted on the warm wharf planks and heard the Collingwood slowly turn in the channel and back in towards the dock, in front of him but a little down from where he sat holding the fish line between his fingers. He heard the clang of the engine room gong and the squeal of steel plates as the ship slid along the pilings. There were many people on the steamer this trip—more than there were Tuesday, or even the Saturday before, when the ship was bound down from the Soo in the height of the tourist season. There were sharp cries from the Indian stevedores and the thunder of a hand truck as lumber, fish, and staples were shuttled from boat to dock. There were the sounds of greeting as new people arrived to Alconac and as old inhabitants returned.

Philip heard the steel cables saw impatiently against the bollards as the steamer rolled gently in the wake of a passing tug. Then the big whistle blew and its note reverberated from the surrounding hills. The cries and the sharp sliding noises of the loading increased in intensity. Then he could hear the sound of the steamer's screw pushing the water up under the wharf and he could sense the widening void between the ship and the dock. She blew once more for the railroad swing bridge just above the town. Almost as quickly as she was gone, the buzz of dockside conversation died and soon the silence returned.

The Indian returned to his fishing and felt a tug on the end of the fish line. The tug returned, strong and insistent. A large fish. A grandfather fish. The same fish that had pulled on the line earlier that morning when Philip had first come down to the water. The same fish that had hung warily under the wharf for three summers. But, being an old fish, he was careful and did not want to be caught and slit open on the warm wharf planks to later sizzle and pop in Philip's frying pan, to fill the room of Philip's shack with a warm, delicious odor.

Philip pulled in the line to feel if the worm was still there. He had to be watchful, for it was mid morning and there were other fishermen on the wharf now; fishermen from the cities with expensive fly casting equipment that threw their hooks far out into the channel and pulled their bait slowly, seductively through the water. Often the fishermen from the cities stopped to talk to Philip and admire the size of his catch, but he could hear no footsteps on the dock now. They were there, though, up and down the whole length of the wharf, smoking cigars or pipes and talking fish among themselves. When they stopped, they always asked Philip how he managed to catch such large bass with only a small hand line that cost twelve cents in Alec's store across the dusty street.

Then he shrugged his shoulders and stared across the water and said that he couldn't tell, perhaps it was all luck. He didn't tell them that the largest of the fish swam close to the pilings of the wharf, between the boats and the dock, and rarely ventured out into the open channel. But it took patience to catch them—they were wary and had lived a long time. Philip felt the tug again and his fingers took in the slightest bit of tension on the line so he could set the hook if the fish chose to take the bait. But the fish—it was the big one—had wandered off again.

Philip played with the big fish for the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, jerking the line when he felt the more impetuous nibbles of the smaller, eager fish, and saving his few worms for the large one, should he choose to take the line. Even so, he had rebaited the hook several times before he heard footsteps creaking on the planking beside him. The man was smoking a cigar, but there was no sound of fishing tackle with his walk.

"You must have been fishing here all day. I saw you fishing when I came off the boat this morning."

"Yes," Philip answered, turning towards the man cautiously so that he would not foul the line on the dock stringers. "I heard the steamer . . . the Collingwood . . . come in at nine. I was here then."

"Say, you're blind, aren't you?" said the man. Then, afraid that he had injured Philip's feelings, he added in a softer tone: "I didn't notice when I got off the boat. Are you blind in both eyes?"

"Yes."

The man settled himself on a nearby bollard and spoke as softly as his rather gruff voice would permit. Philip imagined him wearing a white shirt and a large, straw hat. "I'm sorry," he said, as if he would continue the conversation.

Philip sensed that the man wanted to talk. "Yes." And he added solemnly, as though repeating a rehearsed phrase, a memorized verse, "I was blind in one eye when I was born. I was born without sight in that eye. Then, when I was nineteen, I was chopping wood and a chip flew from the log and hit the other eye. I was blinded in that eye also. The Indians do not have hospitals."

"What do you do—fish all the time?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't you work?"

"My brother works. I can't work. I fish."

"What do you do in the winter?"

"Fish through the ice. There is a good place to fish through the ice here."

"Since you do so much fishing, you must know all about it." The man paused and then added casually, "I mean you must know about the good places to fish and what size hooks to use and all of that stuff." The man blew a cloud of fragrant cigar smoke in Philip's direction. "I'd really like some good fishing," he said. Philip didn't quite know whether the man wanted information, as so many of the other vacationing men did, or whether he was after something else. He said nothing.

"I just retired and came up here to take life easy and do a little fishing," the man continued. "Always wanted to fish. Read about it. Never took a vacation in my life. Never! That's why I sold more insurance for the company than any other two of their salesmen. They came and asked me about it. 'They said 'Parkman' (C. J. Parkman—that's me. Used to carry a bunch of cards around when I was working, said 'C. J. Parkman, District Salesman' on 'em, but I had to leave 'em when I retired.) They'd say, 'Parkman, how come you sell more insurance than anyone else in the office?' And I'd tell 'em 'work. Hard work!' That's the only way to get anything done in life. Go into it headfirst! Dive into it! Work till you're dead tired and then work some more. That's why I sold more insurance than any of the rest of them did."

"But don't you work any more?"

"No, they have this rule, see. Says a man's got to retire when he reaches sixty-five. That's me. I'm sixty-five. I could have worked another five, ten years, but they got this rule and a man can't do nothing when the company's got a rule like that. Wife died, too. That was two years ago last August. So I looked through all the travel literature. Tried to find a place where there was good fishing. A place that

wouldn't cost too much. Not a place that'd bleed a man dry. This was the best place I could find. Fishing's supposed to be the best anywhere. So I came here."

He shifted his weight on the bollard; Philip heard the movement and decided he must be rather heavy-set. "That's why I came down to the dock to find out all about the fishing, soon as I got my stuff put away in the little cabin I rented. Never waste any time, I say. That's why I sold more insurance than any of the others. Still be selling more, too, if they didn't have that damn regulation."

"They always have them," Philip said.

"What about the fish? How many did you get?"

Philip shrugged. "None, yet."

"None! And you been here fishing since morning?"

"Since seven."

"And you haven't gotten a one! The travel folder and the people on the boat said that Algonac had the best fishing around."

"I have enough fish for this week. Any more and they would just rot and be no good. I live with my brother and he fishes, too."

"Then why waste the time?"

"There is nothing else for me to do. If I catch a good one, then the others on the dock will pay me for it and pay me also for saying nothing and letting everyone think that they caught it. I need cigarettes."

"Well, I see. That's smart."

Philip pulled in the line and rebaited the hook.

"I tell you what. I'll go up and get some tackle and come down here tomorrow and then you can tell me where the big ones are. OK? Will you be here tomorrow morning?"

"I am always here," said Philip.

"See you about seven o'clock," said the salesman.

Then Philip fished quietly, uninterrupted for the rest of the afternoon, until the long shadows crept across the water and the dock was no longer warm in the sun. Finally, Thomas, his younger brother, came down to the wharf to walk beside Philip and steer him slowly home.

The next morning, after Thomas left him on the dock and he had dropped his line down between the pilings, Philip felt the hard tug, a quick but persistent pull; but when he tried to set the hook, the fish was gone. Soon the dock began to warm and C. J. Parkman was there. The Indian smelled the cigar before the salesman spoke.

"Well, boy, here it is a fine, sunny morning and I'm all set to go fishing. Got all the gear right here. Bought it at the store soon as I got up. Man told me just what I needed. Said he'd been selling fishing gear for twenty years, so I took his advice."

Philip moved in the line, sensing that the big fish stood still in the water, idling its fins, waiting. Finally he spoke:

"The fish are not biting too well this morning. They bite best when there is no sun, when it's raining. They bite best when the wind is out of the West or South."

"Well this gear will get them whether they want to bite or not. That's what the man at the tackle store told me." The fishing gear rattled noisily as Parkman set it down upon the wharf.

"They bite best when the wind is from the West or South," Philip repeated.

"They'll bite, right enough. Why, I've spent . . . . .," and C. J. Parkman filled the better part of five minutes with a long discourse on the advantages of fly rods, dry and wet fishing lures, bait casting, "swimming minnows", gaff hook, and landing nets. "And these boots. They're the best part of it. Why they come right up to your waist and you can wade right up in water that deep and keep dry as a bone, too. Wade right off the shore anywhere without having to sit on a dock. This tackle box! Why there's enough room there for all the gear a man might need. Look at the size of it! If I'd had more money, I'd have filled the whole thing up, right to the top."

Philip tied his line to a nail and felt the large new tackle box carefully. He lingered on the smoothness of the enameled finish. There were many compartments in several trays, all filled with sharp hooks or reels or spools of line. There were boxes with weirdly shaped lures in them, whole sections filled with lead sinkers and weights, and three fish knives of peculiar shapes. Some of the contents felt strange to Philip's touch, but he did not ask its purpose. For a moment he was envious, and wished that the new, shiny box and the rods were his instead of the salesman's.

"I was wondering," said Parkman, after he had explained about his preparations, "I was wondering if you would go with me and sort of act as a guide. I've hired a boat with one of those motors on the back, so I can go anywhere I want to, but I'm still not sure of the best places in spite of what the man at the store told me. Perhaps you could help me out. I'd be willing to pay the going rate for a guide."

Philip returned to his line and pulled it in to see if the bait was still on the hook. It was. He flipped the water off his hand while

C. J. Parkman stood on the dock behind him with a whole box full of expensive tackle. Philip wished he could go. He imagined what it would be like in the open boat with the water flying by and the roar of the motor and the spray blowing back in his face with the wind. It had been a long time since he had been out in a boat. He thought hard about going; he almost started to reach for the handline, to pull it in.

"No, I couldn't guide for you. I don't know where the fish are. The fish move with the current; sometimes they are here, and the next day they have moved to there, and later they are somewhere else. It is true that there are good places and bad places, but these things change too. I haven't been out in a boat for a long time: I don't know where these places are any longer. Besides, I wouldn't guide for you. All the others—the tourists and the others—they would laugh and point at us and say that there are two blind men in a boat and that one is blind for thinking he can catch fish with the other."

The Indian fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

"I do know that this dock is the best place around; better than any of the others. Thomas, my brother, guides the fishermen. He says that this place is as good as any. So do Samuel and George, who also guide. I knew it too, when I could see and find these things out for myself. I don't tell the others about the dock when they ask me. They think that I only stay here because I am blind and cannot go out in a boat. That way they do not disturb the fishing and the dock stays the best place. Besides, they would not know how to fish from it. But I am telling you this. You have paid a lot for your new fishing tackle and will be disappointed if you do not catch fish."

"But the man in the store told me that you have to have a boat to catch the large fish. Anyway, I already paid for the boat and I want to try it first."

Suddenly Philip felt sorry for the salesman, who stood in his heavy wading boots with his expensive tackle. If he doesn't catch fish here, thought Philip, he will be unhappy and leave and try some other town. He will try anywhere where they tell him the fishing is good. But they will always tell him in such a way that he will have to rent their boats or buy their tackle. They will not tell him the truth. Philip wanted the salesman to stay.

"Listen," he told the man, turning his face towards him. "There is a big fish down under the dock. A huge fish. Perhaps it is the biggest fish in this part of the Island. It is the biggest fish that I have ever felt. From the way he pulls on the line, I can tell. I never

felt a fish like him. He moves; he comes and goes under the pilings of the dock. I have felt him now for three summers. For three and a half summers. I know him every time he pulls on the line. I am waiting for him. I know he is there, and some day I shall catch him!" Philip set his unseeing eyes on the dock. "You have all that fine tackle. Try it off the dock. Right down here where I have been fishing, by this piling. It will take a long time with my little hand line. I have to wait until the weather is right and he is hungry. I have waited a long time. I thought I had him hooked several times. If you try with your new tackle, you will have a better chance. You will probably catch him if I tell you where to put the line. With your new rod, you will be able to set the hook quickly, before he slips away. He has come several times today. Please try off the dock here. This is the best place."

"But I already paid for the boat," said Parkman, feeling the urgency in the Indian's voice. "I want to try the boat in deep water. I'll come back later, maybe, and try here."

"This is the best place," Philip said.

"I don't believe it. The tackle store man was right. I'll try the boat in deep water. Sure you won't come?" Parkman asked.

"I can't," Philip said.

Then C. J. Parkman was gone, his wading boots tripping heavily along the wharf.

Later Thomas came down the dock and sat beside Philip. He lit a cigarette and handed it to his brother. Philip leaned against the bollard.

"Are there no fishermen to guide today?" Philip asked in his native Ontario.

"The weather is not good for fishing."

"No, it is not good today."

Philip sat and smoked, silently, while Thomas looked across the channel, to where a towboat was churning up a wake as it pulled a log boom towards the railroad bridge. Suddenly he caught his brother's arm.

"A tug is coming by here with a tow of logs."

"Yes. I can hear it. It's the *Ben Hosack*."

"But there is a funny thing out there, too. A man in a white shirt is fishing in the steamer lane from a rowboat."

"I know that man," said Philip. "He was on the dock."

"What sort of a fool is he, then, to be fishing in the steamer lane? And now he's standing up! He is a fool!"

"He does not know how to fish," said Philip. "He never fished before—he's just retired."

"He does not know how to do anything or he'd sit down and take up his oars," said Thomas.

The steam tug blew for the railroad bridge.

"He shouldn't stand like that in a rowboat," said Thomas.

He watched as the tug passed close by. For a moment man and boat were lost behind the superstructure and dense black smoke. When they reappeared, the boat rocked violently in the wake of the tug. The white-shirted figure staggered to keep his footing.

"Ah," said Thomas. "The tug caught him in her wake and overturned his boat. He will know better than to fish in the channel next time."

Suddenly the line pulled hard through Philip's fingers, slacked, and pulled hard again. The line hurt as it slipped through his hand. He passed it to his brother without thinking.

"What is he doing," said Philip, standing. "I wish I could see him! Tell me quickly, Thomas, what is happening?"

"I can't see him. Wait! The boat is filling with water. He must be on the other side. No. There he is! The current has carried him beyond the boat. He should have stayed with the boat."

"How far away is he?"

"Not far. He's trying to swim towards the boat."

Philip stared across the water while Thomas untangled the fish-line and pulled the big fish towards the wharf.

"He's gone now. I can't see him. He must have been pulled under, or else he's a poor swimmer. They are starting from the shore now, but they won't get there in time."

"It was those boots he had on," said Philip.

"What?"

"It was those damn boots," he said, in English. "They filled with water and he couldn't swim."

"They'll have to drag the channel for him."

Then Thomas lifted the fish to the dock while his brother stared vacantly across the channel. The fish thrashed violently on the wharf and almost fell again to the water. Thomas caught it quickly with his foot.

"Give me a hand, dammit," he said to Philip. "It's your fish."

Only when the hugh bass was limp on the wharf, its head laid open and its tail flapping weakly against the planks, did Philip turn

his back on the water. He ran his hand over the scales and put a finger in the fish's open mouth. A small crowd of fisherman had gathered and were talking in excited tones to Thomas.

"Tell them that it was your fish," he said to Philip in a low voice.

"What's the difference?"

"You should have landed it instead of watching that rowboat. What sort of a fool was he, anyway, to fish in the channel?"

"He was no fool, I think."

"What?"

Philip shrugged. "He was retired." He knew he could not explain. "Let's take the fish and go home," he said.

---