

## TWENTY-THREE

### SAWBACK AND THE SPORTING PROPOSITION

Tex plays riffs all up and down the scale of language in this piece in a virtuoso register worthy of English satirist P.G. Wodehouse. The Indian fishing story trades on stereotypes about Aboriginal people as fascinating and yet uncultured, certainly, but it also gently lampoons the “sportsmanlike” fishing of the white protagonists with a slightly grudging nod to the efficiency and practicality of Aboriginal food-gathering. One senses here a form of reverse Romantic sensibility about the Noble Savage but this time the “Siawash” [aboriginal people], ironically called “noble aborigine[s],” are the really sensible ones; while white fishermen insist on “sporting” conduct in an impractical way.

—AG and JR

i. See note 34 on page 27 for a discussion of the term “Siwash.”



## SAWBACK AND THE SPORTING PROPOSITION

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By N. Vernon-Wood

I'M CLEANING UP the winter's accumulation of empty cans, deer bones, an' other assorted detritus from around the cabin door, when Sawback Smith rides up.

"Beats all what a man finds when the snow gets to meltin', don't it Tex?" he grins. "You're lucky I ain't the Warden feller. Countin' them deer hocks an' hooves that're showin' up, I'd deduce that you shure overplayed your legal limit on venison durin' the winter."

As a matter of fack, them bones come out of only two deer, both of which was obtained as legal as my Pilgrims knowed how, an' Sawback knows it, and he knows that I know he knows it.

"Which only proves you've got a low suspicious nature," I reply. "Two thirds over half of them shanks an' hocks was drug over by my hound Herman from other an' adjoinin' stump ranches. That dog is quite a collector."

"He must be to freight a pile of bones that big, an' your nearest neighbor fourteen miles south. Lissen, d'you know what day it is, feller?"

"What's it matter?" I ask. "I know that winter's quit dallyin' in the lap of spring. I seen a pair of blue birds yesterday, an' there's a gaggle of geese on the west slough."

"Do tell! Well, there's also a fardel of fish down where Skookumchuck Crick empties into the lake. I dunno about you, but I'm fed up on lean venison, so I rid over to see if you'd consider postponin' your various

inutile pursuits, an' concentrate on decoyin' the odd Cristivomer outer his native element. Today's the 14th of May, you benighted old bullhead, an' lake fishin' opens tomorrow."

"Lightenin' Lucifer!" I exclaim. "I'd plumb lost track of the days. Wait'll I burn this heap of bones so's it won't cause any onmerited suspicion should the Warden blow by, an' I'll catch up my Goldie mare, an' be right with you."

Next mornin' we leave Sawback's dugout before dawn had even commenced to crack, and make the ten or so parasangs to the mouth of Skookumchuck in less'n three hours, which is right good goin' when you consider we got a pack pony loaded with various housekeepin' utensils, a tepee, an' a pair of 90 x 90 flea bags.

We pick out a camp spot, an' while I'm cuttin' a set of tepee poles, Sawback unpacks an' turns the cayuses out to graze. It don't take very long for two men who have hit the trails together for more years than either one will admit, to throw up a camp. We got the bough beds laid, the grub boxes set up on poles by the fire, an' a pile of dry jackpine split by the time the old Haymaker was well over the peak of Mt. Toby. Then Sawback starts draggin' a peculiar lookin' doohickus out of a canvas bag.

"Whatin'hell you got there?" I ask.

"This," says the old misanthrope, "is modern man's answer to the need of a portable sampan. It's capable of transportation by pony, pack board, or under the seat of the family flivver. It's a newmattick boat, which when inflated draws two inches of water an' supports 600 pounds, weighs less'n a sleepin' bag, an' comes complete with a pair of paddles an' pump. I left the paddles to home, seein' we can whittle a pair with the ax, an' the pump is—blazes to blazes! Where is the pump?"

THIRTY-FORTY YEARS of amblin' up an' down our rugged frontier, consortin' with cow persons, prospectors, an' construction stiffs, have made me what you can safely call a connisoor of invective, recrimination, an' vulgar abuse, but listenin' to Sawback as he lay on his belly, blowin' into that rubber raft is a revelation. I wouldn't have believed any hundred-eighty pound hombre could find enough wind to blow into that craft, an' between whiles improvise such an avalanche of malediction an' imprecation. But he done it.

Sawback's feelin' sort of superfluous by the time he's got the wherry inflated, so I done the cabinet work, an' carved out a pair of paddles from a

cedar. Even that don't please the old weasel. He claims I should've spelled him off on the puffin' act, but I explain that my boughten teeth made that some difficult an' besides, I'd never be able to think up the necessary objurgations.

So we boil water, an' after swillin' about a gallon of "guide" tea that would have slipped the hair off'n a brass monkey, we shove the caique into the drink, an' start to do what we come for.

I'm usin' a Colorado spinner, with a strip of meat, an' Sawback pins his faith on a medium size meat hook, tastefully decorated with a field mouse an' half a pound of lead.

"You got to go deep for 'em," he says. "Them lakers'll be down thirty-fourty feet."

"In a pig's pocket they will," I argue. "It's plenty cold yet, an' you know dang well that they don't go down till it warms up."

"I know dang well they're down right now," Sawback says, his black hair bristlin'. "Lissen; I'll make you a sportin' proposition. If you kin catch a fish off'n the top of the water afore I kin from deep down I'll give you this blasted blow-up boat, free an' clear. But if you cain't, you gotta puff it full of yore hot air for the rest of this safari an' any an' all others we make together this season. Does that appeal to yore sportin' instincks?"

"It do," I says, quick as I can open my yap. "As the sayin' goes, yore hooked sucker!"

We're driftin' slowly down the lake, about 50 feet offshore. The water is still an' calm as a silver platter, except where a hell-diver is submergin' an' breaking out half a mile away. Not a rise in a hundred acres. Sawback lets out more line, an' I change to a Phantom minnow with lots of no success.

"You can say what you like," I tell Smitty, "But the Siawashes have the right system about this here lake fishin'."

"Which is what?" he asks. "Like lettin' the squaws do it?"

"No, like I seen 'em one time up the Cariboo. There's a stretch of drink called Long Lake, which shure describes it. It's 4 miles long, an' about 500 yards wide. The red brethren wait till it's froze enough to hold a horse, an' then pick out a narrer gut, 'bout half way up the lake. Then the squaws whittle out a few holes where they'll do the most good, an' set nets. Meantime the noble aborigine gathers a flock of cayuses, an' when the gals have done the manual labor, half a dozen bucks climb their war ponies an' hightail down the shore, drivin' a remuda of loose mustangs ahead. Then they fan out an' come down the lake like a cat shot in the tail with a skillet,

an' the thunder of 30 or 40 set of hooves on that ice sounds like the drums of Tophet.

"Every trout in that vicinage spooks up the lake ahead of the ruckus, and lands in the nets. Then the damsels gut 'em and set 'em out to freeze. I seen a cord an' a half of fish piled in every wood-shed on the reservation."

Which Sawback doesn't believe, only it's true. I seen it done, though I didn't take no hand in sech unспортin' proceedin's myself.

BY LATE AFTERNOON we've drifted about four miles with no luck a tall, so we decide to paddle back an' take on a little nourishment, which we did. An' after loadin' up on lean venison, we sort of sit around smokin', watchin' the lake. As a successful fishing trip, it's a mighty good sit downer.

"Mebbe the thus an' sos will start feedin' about sundown," I suggest.

"They might at that," says Smitty. "What say we leave it lay until around seven o'clock, an' then give 'em another whirl?"

We carry the lung developer up to camp, an' loaf around the blazin' fire. Pretty soon Sawback begins to snore, an' I climb onto my hind legs an' prowl, to keep from makin' it a duet. Along about dusk, I heard a "plop" out in the water, an' I snooker down to investigate without wakin' the sleepin' beauty.

Lightnin' fishhooks, but they's forty-'leven rises in sight in one look! I injun back to camp, hopin' to slip one over on the sleepin' beauty. He looks the picture of masterly inactivity, so I sneak the paddle an' tackle down to the shore, an' come back for the coracle.

In a couple of minutes I'm swallowed up in the gloom, makin' wide casts with a burnished copper spinner an' a triple hook. I'm recoverin' about the third cast, when somethin' hits. Waitin' a second, I set with a flip of my rod rip. Whee-ee! goes the reel, an' Namaycush heads across the lake. When I've got him stopped, an' am crankin' to beat the band, I sort of notice that the pneumatic punt ain't feelin' just so, but I'm busy with what feels like a saw-log with a gift for divin'. There's a couple of right sizeable splashes alongside, an' I can just see enough to slip a hand under a gill, an' jerk my unwillin' passenger topside. He's a fish in any man's language, an' I bust him between the eyes to discourse his floppin' around, decidin' at the same time to paddle in an' wake up Smitty. I've won this aerated ark, so I might as well let the old billygoat know that from now on he goes yachtin' as my guest.

Seems like the craft don't surge ahead like it should ought to, an' I see

that it ain't as bloated as it might be, so I put my back into paddlin'. I'm just sailin' into the circle of light from the campfire, when that danged dugout heaves a languid sigh, an' folds up under me. I'm settin' in three feet of turrible cold water, with a dead trout tryin' to float into the front of my shirt, an' listenin' to raucous an' vulgar bubblin' from the bank.

After I'm half dried out, I says, "Well, I got the first fish anyway, so I guess I'll put my brand on that dang boat after we salvage it in the mornin'."

"Hell, I can't see no fish," says Sawback, "an' if you ask me, your low unsportin' intrigue of leavin' me sleepin' while you snuk off, makes all bets off."

Next day I rescue the submerged shallop, an' checkin' it over, I notice that the valve is loosened just enough to cause a slow leak. I don't give Sawback the satisfaction of accusin' him of malfeasance, but I'm wonderin' if he was asleep while I was takin' my tackle an' the paddle down to the lake.

Some guys'll do anythin' just to win a lousy bet.

*National Sportsman*, May 1938, 14 and 26

