

# The Octopush

By Stephen Crane

Four men once upon a time went into the wilderness seeking for pickerel. They proceeded to a pond which is different from all other sheets of water in the world excepting the remaining ponds in Sullivan County. A scrawny stone dam, clinging in apparent desperation to its foundation wandered across a wild valley. In the beginning, the baffled waters had retreated to a forest. In consequence, the four men confronted a sheet of water from which there up-reared countless grey, haggard tree-trunks. Squat stumps, in multitudes, stretched long, lazy roots over the surface of the water. Floating logs and sticks bumped gently against the dam. All manner of weeds throttled the lilies and dragged them down. Great pine trees came from all sides to the pond's edge.

In their journey the four men encountered a creature with a voice from a tomb. His person was concealed behind an enormous straw hat. In graveyard accents, he demanded that he be hired to assist them in their quest. They agreed. From a recess of the bank he produced a blunt-ended boat, painted a very light blue, with yellow finishings, in accordance with Sullivan aesthetics. Two sculls whittled from docile pine boards lay under the seats. Pegs were driven into the boat's sides at convenient row-lock intervals. In deep, impressive tones, the disguised individual told the four men that, to his knowledge, the best way to catch pickerel was to "'skidder' fur 'em from them there stumps." The four men clambered into the beautiful boat and the individual manoeuvred his craft until he had dealt out to four low-spreading stumps, four fishers. He thereupon repaired to a fifth stump where he tied his boat. Perching himself upon the stump-top, he valiantly grasped a mildewed corn-cob between his teeth, laden with black, eloquent tobacco. At a distance it smote the senses of the four men.

The sun gleamed merrily upon the waters, the gaunt, towering tree-trunks and the stumps lying like spatters of wood which had dropped from the clouds. Troops of blue and silver darning-needles danced over the surface. Bees bustled about the weeds which grew in the shallow places. Butterflies flickered in the air. Down in the water, millions of fern branches quavered and hid mysteries. The four men sat still and 'skiddered.' The individual puffed tremendously. Ever and anon, one of the four would cry ecstatically or swear madly. His fellows, upon standing to gaze at him, would either find him holding a stout fish, or nervously struggling with a hook and line entangled in the hordes of vindictive weeds and sticks on the bottom. They had fortune, for the pickerel is a voracious fish. His only faults are in method. He has a habit of furiously charging the fleeting bit of glitter and then darting under a log or around a corner with it.

At noon, the individual corralled the entire outfit upon a stump where they lunched while he entertained them with anecdote. Afterward he redistributed them, each to his personal stump. They fished. He contemplated the scene and made observations which rang across the water to the four men in bass solos. Toward the close of the day, he grew evidently thoughtful, indulging in no more spasmodic philosophy. The four men fished intently until the sun had sunk down to some tree-tops and was peering at them like the face of an angry man over a hedge. Then one of the four stood up and shouted across to where the individual sat enthroned upon the stump.

"You had better take us ashore now." The other three repeated: "Yes, come take us ashore."

Whereupon the individual carefully took an erect position. Then, waving a great yellow-brown bottle and tottering, he gave vent to a sepulchral roar.

“You fellersh—hic—kin all go—hic——ter blazersh.”

The sun slid down and threw a flare upon the silence, coloring it red. The man who had stood up drew a long, deep breath and sat down heavily. Stupefaction rested upon the four men.

Dusk came and fought a battle with the flare before their eyes. Tossing shadows and red beams mingled in combat. Then the stillness of evening lay upon the waters.

The individual began to curse in deep maudlin tones. “Dern fools,” he said, “dern fools! Why don’tcher g’home?”

“He’s full as a fiddler,” said the little man on the third stump. The rest groaned. They sat facing the stump whereon the individual perched, beating them with mighty oaths. Occasionally he took a drink from the bottle. “Shay, you’m fine lot fellers,” he bellowed, “why blazersh don’tcher g’home?”

The little man on the third stump pondered. He got up finally and made oration. He, in the beginning, elaborated the many good qualities which he alleged the individual possessed. Next he painted graphically the pitiful distress and woe of their plight. Then he described the reward due to the individual if he would relieve them, and ended with an earnest appeal to the humanity of the individual, alleging, again, his many virtues. The object of the address struggled to his feet, and in a voice of far-away thunder, said: “Dern fool, g’home.” The little man sat down and swore crimson oaths.

A night wind began to roar and clouds bearing a load of rain appeared in the heavens and threatened their position. The four men shivered and turned up their coat collars. Suddenly it struck each that he was alone, separated from humanity by impassable gulfs. All those things which come forth at night began to make noises. Unseen animals scrambled and flopped among the weeds and sticks. Weird features masqueraded awfully in robes of shadow. Each man felt that he was compelled to sit on something that was damply alive. A legion of frogs in the grass by the shore and a host of toads in the trees chanted. The little man started up and shrieked that all creeping things were inside his stump. Then he tried to sit facing four ways, because dread objects were approaching at his back. The individual was drinking and hoarsely singing. At different times they labored with him. It availed them nought. “G’home, dern fools.” Among themselves they broached various plans for escape. Each involved a contact with the black water, in which were things that wriggled. They shuddered and sat still.

A ghost-like mist came and hung upon the waters. The pond became a grave-yard. The grey tree-trunks and dark logs turned to monuments and crypts. Fire-flies were wisp-lights dancing over graves, and then, taking regular shapes, appeared like brass nails in crude caskets. The individual began to gibber. A gibber in a bass voice appals the stoutest heart. It is the declamation of a genie. The little man began to sob; another groaned and the two remaining, being timid by nature, swore great lurid oaths which blazed against the sky.

Suddenly the individual sprang up and gave tongue to a yell which raised the hair on the four men’s heads and caused the waters to ruffle. Chattering, he sprang into the boat and grasping an oar paddled frantically to the little man’s stump. He tumbled out and cowered at the little man’s feet, looking toward his stump with eyes that saw the unknown.

“Stump turned inter an octopush. I was a-settin’ on his mouth,” he howled.

The little man kicked him.

“Legs all commenced move, dern octopush!” moaned the shrunken individual.

The little man kicked him. But others cried out against him, so directly he left off. Climbing into the boat he went about collecting his companions. They then proceeded to the stump whereon the individual lay staring wild-eyed at his “octopush.” They gathered his limp form into

the boat and rowed ashore. "How far is it to the nearest house?" they demanded savagely of him. "Four miles," he replied in a voice of cave-damp. The four men cursed him and built a great fire of pine sticks. They sat by it all night and listened to the individual who dwelt in phantom shadows by the water's edge dismally crooning about an "octopush."