

The Ladies of the Lake

By Robert W. Chambers

At the suggestion of several hundred thousand ladies desiring to revel and possibly riot in the saturnalia of equal franchise, the unnamed lakes in that vast and little known region in Alaska bounded by the Ylanqui River and the Thunder Mountains were now being inexorably named after women.

It was a beautiful thought. Already several exquisite, lonely bits of water, gem-set among the eternal peaks, mirrors for cloud and soaring eagle, a glass for the moon as keystone to the towering arch of stars, had been irrevocably labelled.

Already there was Lake Amelia Jones, Lake Sadie Dingleheimer, Lake Maggie McFadden, and Lake Mrs. Gladys Doolittle Batt.

I longed to see these lakes under the glamour of their newly added beauty.

Imagine, therefore, my surprise and happiness when I received the following communication from my revered and beloved chief Professor Farrago, dated from the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, whither he had been summoned in haste to examine and pronounce upon the identity of a very small bird supposed to be a specimen of that rare and almost extinct creature, the two-toed titmouse, *Mustitta duototus*, to be scientifically exact, as I invariably strive to be.

The important letter in question was as follows:

To

Percy Smith, B.S., D.F., etc., etc.,
Curator, Department of Anthropology,
Administration Building,
Bronx Park, N.Y

My Dear Mr. Smith.'

Several very important and determined ladies, recently honoured by the Government in having a number of lakes in Alaska named after them, have decided to make a pilgrimage to that region, inspired by a characteristic desire to gaze upon the lakes named after them individually.

They request information upon the following points:

1st. Are the waters of the lakes in that locality sufficiently clear for a lady to do her hair by? In that event, the expedition will not burden itself with looking-glasses.

2nd. Are there any hotels? (You need merely say, no. I have tried to explain to them that it is, for the most part, an unexplored wilderness, but they insist upon further information from you.)

3rd. If there are hotels, is there also running water to be had? (You may tell them that there is plenty of running water.)

4th. What are the summer outdoor amusements? (You may inform them that there is plenty of bathing, boating, fishing, and an abundance of shade trees. Also, excellent mountain-climbing to be had in the vicinity. You need not mention the pastimes of "Hunt the Flea" or "Dodge the Skeeter.")

I am not by nature cruel, Mr. Smith, but when these ladies informed me that they had decided to penetrate that howling and unexplored wilderness without being burdened or

interfered with by any member of my sex, for one horrid and criminal moment I hoped they would. Because in that event none of them would ever come back.

However, in my heart milder and more humane sentiments prevailed. I pointed out to them the peril of their undertaking, the dangers of an unexplored region, the necessity of masculine guidance and support.

My earnestness and solicitude were, I admit, prompted partly by a desire to utilize this expensively projected expedition as a vehicle for the accumulation of scientific data.

As soon as I heard of it I conceived the plan of attaching two members of our Bronx Park scientific staff to the expedition—you, and Mr. Brown. But no sooner did these determined ladies hear of it than they repelled the suggestion with indignation.

Now, the matter stands as follows: These ladies don't want any man in the expedition; but they have at last realized that they've got to take a guide or two. And there are no feminine guides in Alaska.

Therefore, considering the immense and vital importance of such an opportunity to explore and report upon this unknown region at somebody else's expense, I suggest that you and Brown meet these ladies at Lake Mrs. Susan W Pillsbury, which lies on the edge of the region to be explored; that you, without actually perjuring yourselves too horribly, convey to them the misleading impression that you are the promised guides provided for them by a cowed and avuncular Government; and that you take these fearsome ladies about and let them gaze at their reflections in the various lakes named after them; and that, while the expedition lasts, you secretly make such observations, notes, reports, and collections of the flora and fauna of the region as your opportunities may permit.

No time is to be lost. If, at Lake Susan W Pillsbury, you find regular guides awaiting these ladies, you will bribe these guides to go away and you yourselves will then impersonate the guides. I know of no other way for you to explore this region, as all our available resources at Bronx Park have already been spent in painting appropriate scenery to line the cages of the mammalia, and also in the present exceedingly expensive expedition in search of the polka-dotted boom-bock, which is supposed to inhabit the jungle beyond Lake Niggerplug.

My most solemn and sincere wishes accompany you. Bless you!

FARRAGO.

II

This, then, is how it came about that "Kitten" Brown and I were seated, lone midgeful morning in July, by the pellucid waters of Lake Susan W Pillsbury, gnawing sections from a greasily fried trout, upon which I had attempted culinary operations.

Brown's baptismal name was William; but the unfortunate young man was once discovered indiscreetly embracing a pretty assistant in the Administration Building at Bronx, and, furthermore, was overheard to address her as "Kitten."

So Kitten Brown it was for him in future. After he had fought all the younger members of the scientific staff in turn, he gradually became resigned to this annoying *nom d'amour*.

Lightly but thoroughly equipped for scientific field research, we had arrived at the rendezvous in time to bribe the two guides engaged by the Government to go back to their own firesides.

A week later the formidable expedition of representative ladies arrived; and now they were sitting on the shore of Lake Susan W Pillsbury, at a little distance from us, trying to keep the midges from their features and attempting to eat the fare provided for them by me.

I myself couldn't eat it. No wonder they murmured. But hunger goaded them to attack the greasy mess of trout and fried cornmeal.

Kitten was saying to me:

"Our medicine chest isn't very extensive. I hope they brought their own. If they didn't, some among us will never again see New York."

I stole a furtive glance at the unfortunate women. There was *one* among them—but let me first enumerate their heavy artillery:

There was the Reverend Dr. Amelia Jones, blond, adipose, and close to the four-score mark. She stepped high in the Equal Franchise ranks. Nobody had ever had the temerity to answer her back.

There was Miss Sadie Dingleheimer, fifty, emaciated, anemic, and gauntly glittering with thick-lensed eye-glasses. She was the President of the National Prophylactic Club, whatever that may be.

There was Miss Margaret McFadden, a Titian, profusely toothed, muscular, and President of the Hair Dressers' Union of the United States.

There was Mrs. Gladys Doolittle Batt, a grass one—Batt being represented as a vanishing point—President of the National Eugenic and Purity League; tall, gnarled, sinuously powerful, and prone to emotional attacks. The attacks were directed toward others.

These, then, composed the heavy artillery. The artillery of the light brigade consisted only of a single piece. Her name was Angelica White, a delegate from the Trained Nurses' Association of America. The nurses had been too busy with their business to attend such picnics, so one had been selected by lot to represent the busy Association on this expedition.

Angelica White was a tall, fair, yellow-haired girl of twenty-two or three, with violet-blue eyes and red lips, and a way of smiling a little when spoken to but let that pass. I mean only to be scientifically minute. A passion for fact has ever obsessed me. I have little literary ability and less desire to sully my pen with that degraded form of letters known as fiction. Once in my life my mania for accuracy involved me lyrically. It was a short poem, but an earnest one:

Truth is mighty and must prevail,
Otherwise it were inadvisable to tell the tale.

I bestowed it upon the New York *Evening Post*, but declined remuneration. My message belonged to the world. I don't mean the newspaper.

Her eyes, then, were tinted with that indefinable and agreeable nuance which modifies blue to a lilac or violet hue.

Watching her askance, I was deeply sorry that my cooking seemed to pain her.

"Guide!" said Mrs. Doolittle Batt, in that remarkable, booming voice of hers.

Ma'am!" said Kitten Brown and I with spontaneous alacrity, leaping from the ground as though shot at.

"This cooking," she said, with an ominous stare at us, "is atrocious. Don't you know how to cook?"

I said with a smiling attempt at ease:

“There are various ways of cooking food for the several species of mammalia which all-wise Providence—”

“Do you think you’re cooking for wild-cats?” she demanded.

Our smiles faded.

“It’s my opinion that you’re incompetent,” remarked the Reverend Dr. Jones, slapping at midges with a hand that might have rocked all the cradles of the nation, but had not rocked any.

“We’re not getting our money’s worth,” said Miss Dingleheimer, “even if the Government does pay your salaries.”

I looked appealingly from one stony face to another. In Miss McFadden’s eye there was the sombre glint of battle. She said:

“If you can guide us no better than you cook, God save us all this day week!” And she hurled the contents of her tin plate into Lake Susan W Pillsbury.

Mrs. Doolittle Barr arose:

“Come,” she said; “it is time we started. What is the name of the first lake we may hope to encounter?”

We knew no more than did they, but we said that Lake Gladys Doolittle Batt was the first, hoping to placate that fearsome woman.

“Come on, then!” she cried, picking up her carved and varnished mountain staff

Miss Dingleheimer had brought one, too, from the Catskills.

So Kitten Brown and I loaded our mule, set him in motion, and drove him forward into the unknown.

Where we were going we had not the slightest idea; the margin of the lake was easy travelling, so easy that we never noticed that we had already gone around the lake three times, until Mrs. Batt recognized the fact and turned on us furiously.

I didn’t know how to explain it, except to say feebly that I was doing it as a sort of preliminary canter to harden and inure the ladies.

“We don’t need hardening!” she snarled. “Do you understand that!”

I comprehended that at once. But I forced a sickly smile and skipped forward in the wake of my mule, with something of the same abandon which characterizes the flight of an unwelcome dog.

In the terrified ear of Kitten I voiced my doubts concerning the prospects of a pleasant journey.

We marched in the following order: Arthur, the heavily laden mule, led; then came Kitten Brown and myself all hung over with stew-pans, shot-guns, rifles, cartridge-belts, ponchos, and the toilet reticules of the ladies; then marched the Reverend Dr. Jones, and, in order, filing behind her, Miss Dingleheimer, Mrs. Batt, Miss McFadden, and Miss White—the latter in her trained nurse’s costume and wearing a red cross on her sleeve—an idea of Mrs. Barr, who believed in emergency methods.

Mrs. Batt also bore a banner, much interfered with by the foliage, bearing the inscription:

EQUAL RIGHTS!
EUGENICS OR EXTERMINATION!

After a while she shouted:

“Guide! Here, you may carry this banner for a while! I’m tired.”

Kitten and I took turns with it after that. It was hard work, particularly as one by one in turn they came up and hung their parasols and shopping reticules all over us. We plodded forward

like a pair of moving department stores, not daring to shift our burdens to Arthur, because we had already stuffed into the panniers of that simple and dignified animal all our collecting boxes, cyanide jars, butterfly nets, note-books, reels of piano wire, thermometers, barometers, hydrometers, stereometers, aeronoids, adnoids—everything, in fact, that guides are not supposed to pack into the woods, but which we had smuggled unbeknown to those misguided ones we guided.

And, to make room for our scientific paraphernalia, we had been obliged to do a thing so mean, so inexpressibly low, that I blush to relate it. But facts are facts; we discarded nearly a ton of feminine impedimenta. There was fancy work of all sorts in the making or in the raw—materials for knitting, embroidering, tatting, sewing, hemming, stitching, drawn-work, lace-making, crocheting.

Also we disposed of almost half a ton of toilet necessities—powder, perfumery, cosmetics, hot-water bags, slippers, negligees, novels, magazines, bon-bons, chewing-gum, hat-boxes, gloves, stockings, underwear.

We left enough apparel for each lady to change once. They'd have to do some scrubbing now. Science can not be halted by hatpins; cosmos can not be side-tracked by cosmetics.

Toward sunset we came upon a small, crystal clear pond, set between the bases of several lofty mountains. I was ready to drop with fatigue, but I nerved myself, drew a deep, exultant breath, and with one of those fine, sweeping gestures, I cried:

“Lake Mrs. Gladys Doolittle Batt! Eureka! At last! Excelsior!”

There was a profound silence behind me. I turned, striving to mask my apprehension with a smile. The ladies were regarding the pond in surprise. I admit that it was a pond, not a lake.

Injecting into my voice the last remnants of glee which I could summon, I shouted, “Eureka!” and began to caper about as though the size and beauty of the pond had affected me with irrepressible enthusiasm, hoping by my emotion to stampede the convention.

The cold voice of Mrs. Doolittle Batt checked my transports:

“Is that puddle named after *me*?” she demanded.

“M-ma’am?” I stammered.

“If that wretched frog-pond has been christened with my name, somebody is going to get into trouble,” she said ominously.

A profound silence ensued. Arthur patiently switched at flies. As for me, I looked up at the majestic pines, gazed upon the lofty and eternal hills, then ventured a sneaking glance all around me. But I could discover no avenue of escape in case Mrs. Batt should charge me.

“I had been informed,” she began dangerously, “that the majestic body of water, which I understood had been honoured with my name, was twelve miles long and three miles wide. *This* appears to be a puddle!”

“B-b-but it’s very p-pretty,” I protested feebly. “It’s quite round and clear, and it’s nearly a quarter of a mile in d-diameter—”

“Mind your business!” retorted Mrs. Doolittle Batt. “I’ve been swindled!”

Kitten Brown knew more about women than did I. He said in a fairly steady voice:

“Madame, it *is* an outrage! The women of this mighty nation should make the Government answerable for its duplicity! Your lake should have been at least twenty miles long!”

Everybody turned and looked at Kitten. He was a handsome dog.

“This young man appears to have some trace of common-sense,” said Mrs. Batt. “I shall see to it that the Government is held responsible for this odious act of insulting duplicity. I—I won’t

have my name given to this—this wallow!—” She advanced toward me, her small eyes blazing: I retreated to leeward of Arthur.

“Guide!” she said in a voice still trembling with passion. “Are you certain that you have made no mistake? You appear to be unusually ignorant.”

“I am afraid there can be no room for doubt,” I said, almost scared out of my senses.

‘And on top of this outrage, am I to eat your cooking?’ she demanded passionately. “Did I come here to look at this frog-pond and choke on your cooking? *Did I?*”

“I can cook,” said a clear, pleasant voice at my elbow. And Miss White came forward, cool, clean, fresh as a posy in her uniform and cap. I immediately got behind her.

“I can cook very nicely,” she said smilingly. “It is part of my profession, you know. So if you two guides will be kind enough to build the fire and help me—” She let her violet eyes linger on me for an instant, then on Brown. A moment later he and I were jostling each other in our eagerness to obey her slightest suggestion. It is that way with men.

So we built her a fire and unpacked our provisions, and we waited very politely on the ladies when dinner was ready.

It was a fine dinner—coffee, bacon, flap-jacks, soup, ash-bread, stewed chicken.

The heavy artillery, made ravenous by their journey, required vast quantities of ammunition. They banqueted largely. I gazed in amazement at Mrs. Doolittle Barn as she swallowed one flap-jack after another, while her eyes bulged larger and larger.

Nor was the capacity of Miss Dingleheimer and the Reverend Dr. Jones to be mocked at by pachyderms.

Brown and I left them eating while we erected the row of little tents. Every lady had demanded a separate tent.

So we cut saplings, set up the silk, drove pegs, and brought armfuls of balsam boughs.

I was afraid they’d demand their knitting and other utensils, but they had eaten to repletion, and were sleepy; and as each toilet case or reticule contained also a nightgown, they drew the flaps of their several tents without insisting that we unpack Arthur’s panniers.

They all had disappeared within their tents except Miss White, who insisted on cooking something for us, although we protested that the scraps of the banquet were all right for mere guides.

She stood beside us for a few minutes, watching us busy with our delicious dinner.

“You poor fellows,” she said gently. “You are nearly starved.”

It is agreeable to be sympathized with by a tall, fair, fresh young girl. We looked up, simpering gratefully.

“This is really a most lovely little lake,” she said, gazing out across the still, crystalline water which was all rose and gold in the sunset, save where the sombre shapes of the towering mountains were mirrored in glassy depths.

“It’s odd,” I said, “that no trout are jumping. There ought to be lots of them there, and this is their jumping hour.”

We all looked at the quiet, oval bit of water. Not a circle, not the slightest ripple disturbed it.

“It must be deep,” remarked Brown.

We gazed up at the three lofty peaks, the bases of which were the shores of this tiny gem among lakes. Deep, deep, plunging down into dusky profundity, the rocks fell away sheer into limpid depths.

“That little lake may be a thousand feet deep,” I said. “In 1903 Professor Farrago, of Bronx Park, measured a lake in the Thunder Mountains, which was two thousand seven hundred and sixty-nine feet deep.”

Miss White looked at me curiously.

Into a patch of late sunshine flitted a small butterfly—one of the *Grapta* species. It settled on a chip of wood, uncoiled its delicate proboscis, and spread its fulvous and deeply indented wings.

“*Grapta californica*,” remarked Brown to me.

“*Vanessa asteriska*,” I corrected him. “Note the anal angle of the secondaries and the argentiferous discal area bordering the subcostal nervule.”

“The characteristic stripes on the primaries are wanting,” he demurred.

“It is double brooded. The summer form lacks the three darker bands.”

A few moments’ silence was broken by the voice of Miss White.

“I had no idea,” she remarked, “that Alaskan guides were so familiar with entomological terms and nomenclature.”

We both turned very red.

Brown mumbled something about having picked up a smattering. I added that Brown had taught me.

Perhaps she believed us; her blue eyes rested on us curiously, musingly. Also, at moments, I fancied there was the faintest glint of amusement in them.

She said:

“Two scientific gentlemen from New York requested permission to join this expedition, but Mrs. Batt refused them.” She gazed thoughtfully upon the waters of Lake Gladys Doohittle Batt. “I wonder,” she murmured, “what became of those two gentlemen.”

It was evident that we had betrayed ourselves to this young girl.

She glanced at us again, and perhaps she noted in our fascinated gaze an expression akin to terror, for suddenly she laughed—such a clear, sweet, silvery little laugh!

“For my part,” she said, “I wish they had come with us. I like—men.”

With that she bade us goodnight very politely and went off to her tent, leaving us with our hats pressed against our stomachs, attempting by the profundity of our bows to indicate the depth of our gratitude.

“*There’s a girl!*” exclaimed Brown, as noon as she had disappeared behind her tent flaps. “She’ll never let on to Medusa, Xantippe, Cassandra and Company. I *like* that girl, Smith.”

“You’re not the only one imbued by such sentiments,” said I. He smiled a fatuous and reminiscent smile. He certainly was good-looking. Presently he said:

“She has the most delightful way of gazing at a man—”

“I’ve noticed,” I said pleasantly.

“Oh. Did she happen to glance at *you* that way?” he inquired. I wanted to beat him.

All I said was:

“She’s certainly some kitten.” Which bottled that young man for a while.

We lay on the bank of the tiny lake, our backs against a huge pine-tree, watching the last traces of colour fading from peak and tree-top.

“Isn’t it queer,” I said, “that not a trout has splashed? It can’t be that there are no fish in the lake.”

“There *are* such lakes.”

Yes, very deep ones. I wonder how deep this is.”

“We’ll be out at sunrise with our reel of piano wire and take soundings,” he said. “The heavy artillery won’t wake until they’re ready to be loaded with flap-jacks.”

I shuddered:

“They’re fearsome creatures, Brown. Somehow, that resolute and bony one has inspired me with a terror unutterable.”

“Mrs. Batt?”

“Yes.”

He said seriously:

“She’ll make a horrid outcry when she asks for her knitting. What are you going to tell her?”

“I shall say that Indians ambuscaded us while she was asleep, and carried off all those things.”

“You lie very nicely, don’t you?” he remarked admiringly.

“*In vitium ducit culpæ fuga,*” said I. “Besides, they don’t really need those articles.”

He laughed. He didn’t seem to be very much afraid of Mrs. Batt.

It had grown deliciously dusky, and myriads of stars were coming out. Little by little the lake lost its shape in the darkness, until only an irregular, star-set area of quiet water indicated that there was any lake there at all.

I remember that Brown and I, reclining at the foot of the tree, were looking at the still and starry surface of the lake, over which numbers of bats were darting after insects; and I recollect that I was just about to speak, when, of a sudden, the silent and luminous surface of the water was shattered as with a subterranean explosion; a geyser of scintillating spray shot upward flashing, foaming, towering a hundred feet into the air. And through it I seemed to catch a glimpse of a vast, quivering, twisting mass of silver falling back with a crash into the lake, while the huge fountain rained spray on every side and the little lake rocked and heaved from shore to shore, sending great sheets of surf up over the rocks so high that the very tree-tops dripped.

Petrified, dumb, our senses almost paralyzed by the shock, our ears still deafened by the watery crash of that gigantic something that had fallen into the lake, and our eyes starting from their sockets, we stared at the darkness.

Slap—slash—slush went the waves, hitting the shore with a clashing sound almost metallic. Vision and hearing told us that the water in the lake was rocking like the contents of a bath-tub.

“G-g-good Lord!” whispered Brown. “Is there a v-volcano under that lake?”

“Did you see that huge, glittering shape that seemed to fall into the water?” I gasped.

“Yes. What was it? A meteor?”

“No. It was something that first came out of the lake and fell back—the way a trout leaps. Heavens! It couldn’t have been alive, could it?”

“W-wh-what do you mean?” stammered Brown.

“It couldn’t have been a f-f-fish, could it?” I asked with chattering teeth.

“No! *No!* It was as big as a Pullman car! It must have been a falling star. Did you ever hear of a fish as big as a sleeping car?”

I was too thoroughly unnerved to reply. The roaring of the surf had subsided somewhat, enough for another sound to reach our ears—a raucous, gallinaceous, squawking sound.

I sprang up and looked at the row of tents. White-robed figures loomed in front of them. The heavy artillery was evidently frightened.

We went over to them, and when we got nearer they chastely scuttled into their tents and thrust out a row of heads—heads hideous with curl-papers.

“What was that awful noise? An earthquake?” shrilled the Reverend Dr. Jones. “I think I’ll go home.”

“Was it an avalanche?” demanded Mrs. Batt, in a deep and shaky voice. ‘Are we in any immediate danger, young man?’”

I said that it was probably a flying-star which had happened to strike the lake and explode.

“What an awful region!” wailed Miss Dingleheimer. “I’ve had my money’s worth. I wish to go back to New York at once. I’ll begin to dress immediately—”

“It might be a million years before another meteor falls in this latitude,” I said, soothingly.

“Or it might be ten minutes,” sobbed Miss Dingleheimer. “What do *you* know about it, anyway! I want to go home. I’m putting on my stockings now. I’m getting dressed as fast as I can—”

Her voice was blotted out in a mighty crash from the lake. Appalled, I whirled on my heel, just in time to see another huge jet of water rise high in the starlight, another, another, until the entire lake was but a cluster of gigantic geysers exploding a hundred feet in the air, while through them, falling back into the smother of furious foam, great silvery bulks dropped crashing, one after another.

I don’t know how long the incredible vision lasted; the woods roared with the infernal pandemonium, echoed and re-echoed from mountain to mountain; the tree-tops fairly stormed spray, driving it in sheets through the leaves; and the shores of the lake spouted surf long after the last vast, silvery shape had fallen back again into the water.

As my senses gradually recovered, I found myself supporting Mrs. Batt on one arm and the Reverend Dr. Jones upon my bosom. Both had fainted. I released them with a shudder and turned to look for Brown.

Somebody had swooned in his arms, too.

He was not noticing me, and as I approached him I heard him say something resembling the word “kitten.”

In spite of my demoralization, another fear seized me, and I drew nearer and peered closely at what he was holding so nobly in his arms. It was, as I supposed, Angelica White.

I don’t know whether my arrival occultly revived her, for as I stumbled over a tent-peg she opened her blue eyes, and then disengaged herself from Brown’s arms.

“Oh, I am *so* frightened,” she murmured. She looked at me sideways when she said it.

“Come,” said I coldly to Brown, “let Miss White retire and lie down. This meteoric shower is over and so is the danger.”

He evinced a desire to further soothe and minister to Miss White, but she said, with considerable composure, that she was feeling better; and Brown came unwillingly with me to inspect the heavy artillery lines.

That formidable battery was wrecked, the pieces dismounted and lying tumbled about in their emplacements.

But a vigorous course of cold water in dippers revived them, and we herded them into one tent and quieted them with some soothing prevarication, the details of which I have forgotten; but it was something about a flock of meteors which hit the earth every twelve billion years, and that it was now all over for another such interim, and everybody could sleep soundly with the consciousness of having assisted at a spectacle never before beheld except by a primordial protoplasmic cell.

Which flattered them, I think, for, seated once more at the base of our tree, presently we heard weird noises from the reconcentrados, like the moaning of the harbour bar.

They slept, the heavy guns, like unawakened engines of destruction all a-row in battery. But Brown and I, fearfully excited, still dazed and bewildered, sat with our fascinated eyes fixed on the lake, asking each other what in the name of miracles it was that we had witnessed and heard.

On one thing we were agreed. A scientific discovery of the most enormous importance awaited our investigation.

This was no time for temporising, for deception, for any species of polite shilly-shallying. We must, on the morrow, tear off our masks and appear before these misguided and feminine victims of our duplicity in our own characters as scientists. We must boldly avow our identities and flatly refuse to stir from this spot until the mystery of this astounding lake had been thoroughly investigated.

And so, discussing our policy, our plans for the morrow, and mutually reassuring each other concerning our common ability to successfully defy the heavy artillery, we finally fell asleep.

III

Dawn awoke me, and I sat up in my blanket and aroused Brown.

No birds were singing. It seemed unusual, and I spoke of it to Brown. Never have I witnessed such a still, strange daybreak. Mountains, woods, and water were curiously silent. There was not a sound to be heard, nothing stirred except the thin veil of vapour over the water, shreds of which were now parting from the shore and steaming slowly upward.

There was, it seemed to me, something slightly uncanny about this lake, even in repose. The water seemed as translucent as a dark crystal, and as motionless as the surface of a mirror. Nothing stirred its placid surface, not a ripple, not an insect, not a leaf floating.

Brown had lugged the pneumatic raft down to the shore where he was now pumping it full: I followed with the paddles, pole, and hydroscope. When the raft had been pumped up and was afloat, we carried the reel of gossamer piano-wire aboard, followed it, pushed off, and paddled quietly through the level cobwebs of mist toward the centre of the lake. From the shore I heard a gruesome noise. It originated under one of the row of tents of the heavy artillery. Medusa, snoring, was an awesome sound in that wilderness and solitude of dawn.

I was unscrewing the centre-plug from the raft and screwing into the empty socket the lens of the hydroscope and attaching the battery, while Brown started his sounding; and I was still busy when an exclamation from my companion started me:

“We’re breaking some records! Do you know it, Smith?”

“Where is the lead?”

“Three hundred fathoms and still running!”

“Nonsense!”

“Look at it yourself! It goes on unreeling: I’ve put the drag on. Hurry and adjust the hydroscope!”

I sighted the powerful instrument for two thousand feet, altering it from minute to minute as Brown excitedly announced the amazing depth of the lake. When he called out four thousand feet, I stared at him.

“There’s something wrong—” I began.

“There’s *nothing* wrong!” he interrupted. “Four thousand five hundred! Five thousand! Five thousand five hundred—”

“Are you squatting there and trying to tell me that this lake is over a mile deep!”

“Look for yourself!” he said in an unsteady voice. “Here is the tape! You can read, can’t you? Six thousand feet—and running evenly. Six thousand five hundred! . . . Seven thousand! Seven thousand five—”

“It *can*’t be!” I protested.

But it was true. Astounded, I continued to adjust the hydroscope to a range incredible, turning the screw to focus at a mile and a half, at two miles, at two and a quarter, a half, three-quarters, three miles, three miles and a quarter—click!

“Good Heavens!” he whispered. “This lake is three miles and a quarter deep!”

Mechanically I set the lachet, screwed the hood firm, drew out the black eye-mask, locked it, then, kneeling on the raft I rested my face in the mask, felt for the lever, and switched on the electric light.

Quicken that thought the solid lance of dazzling light plunged down through profundity, and the vast abyss of water was revealed along its pathway.

Nothing moved in those tremendous depths except, nearly two miles below, a few spots of tinsel glittered and drifted like flakes of mica.

At first I scarcely noticed them, supposing them to be vast beds of silvery bottom sand glittering under the electric pencil of the hydroscope. But presently it occurred to me that these brilliant specks in motion were not on the bottom—were a little less than two miles deep, and therefore suspended.

To be seen at all, at two miles’ depth, whatever they were they must have considerable bulk.

“Do you see anything?” demanded Brown.

“Some silvery specks at a depth of two miles.”

“What do they look like?”

“Specks.”

“Are they in motion?”

“They seem to be.”

“Do they come any nearer?”

After a while I answered:

“One of the specks seems to be growing larger. . . . I believe it is in motion and is floating slowly upward. . . . It’s certainly getting bigger. . . . It’s getting longer.”

“Is it a fish?”

“It can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“It’s impossible. Fish don’t attain the size of whales in mountain ponds.” There was a silence. After an interval I said:

“Brown, I don’t know what to make of that thing.”

“Is it coming any nearer?”

“Yes.”

“What does it look like now?”

“It *looks* like a fish. But it can’t be. It looks like a tiny, silver minnow. But it can’t be. Why, if it resembles a minnow in size at this distance—what can be its actual dimensions?”

“Let me look,” he said.

Unwillingly I raised my head from the mask and yielded him my place.

A long silence followed. The western mountaintops reddened under the rising sun; the sky grew faintly bluer. Yet, there was not a bird-note in that still place, not a flash of wings, nothing stirring.

Here and there along the lake shone I noticed unusual-looking trees—very odd-looking trees indeed, for their trunks seemed bleached and dead, and as though no bank covered them, yet every stank limb was covered with foliage—a thick foliage so dark in colour that it seemed black to me. I glanced at my motionless companion where he knelt with his face in the mask, then I unslung my field-glasses and focussed them on the nearest of the curious trees.

At first I could not make out what I was looking at; then, to my astonishment, I saw that these stank, gray trees were indeed lifeless, and that what I had mistaken for dank foliage were velvety clusters of bats hanging there asleep—thousands of them thickly infesting and clotting the dead branches with a sombre and horrid effect of foliage.

I don't mind bats in ordinary numbers. But in such soft, motionless masses they slightly sickened me. There must have been literally tons of them hanging to the dead trees.

"This is pleasant," I said. "Look at those bats, Brown."

When Brown spoke without lifting his head, his voice was so shaken, so altered, that the mere sound of it scared me:

"Smith," he said, "there is a fish in here, shaped exactly like a brook minnow. And I should judge, by the depth it is swimming in, that it is about as long as an ordinary Pullman car."

His voice shook, but his words were calm to the point of commonplace. Which made the effect of his statement all the more terrific.

"A—a *minnow*—as big as a Pullman car?" I repeated, dazed.

"Larger, I think. . . . It looks to me through the hydroscope, at this distance, exactly like a tiny, silvery minnow. It's half a mile down. . . . Swimming about. . . . I can see its eyes; they must be about ten feet in diameter. I can see its fins moving. And there are about a dozen others, much deeper, swimming around. . . . This is easily the most overwhelming contribution made to science since the discovery of the purple-spotted dingle-bock, *Bukkus dinglii*. . . . We've got to catch one of those gigantic fish!"

"How?" I gasped. "How are we going to catch a minnow as large as a sleeping car?"

"I don't know, but we've got to do it. We've got to manage it, somehow."

"It would require a steel cable to hold such a fish and a donkey engine to reel him in! And what about a hook? And if we had hook, line, steam-winch, and everything else, *what* about bait?"

He knelt for some time longer, watching the fish, before he resigned the hydroscope to me. Then I watched it; but it came no nearer, seeming contented to swim about at the depth of a little more than half a mile. Deep under this fish I could see others glittering as they sailed on darted to and fro.

Presently I raised my head and sat thinking. The sun now gilded the water; a little breeze ruffled it here and there where dainty cast's-paws played oven the surface.

"What on earth do you suppose those gigantic fish feed on?" asked Brown under his breath.

I thought a moment longer, then it came to me in a flash of understanding, and I pointed at the dead trees.

"Bats!" I muttered. "They feed on bats as other fish feed on the little, gauzy-winged flies which dance oven ponds! You saw those bats flying oven the pond last night, didn't you? That explains the whole thing! Don't you understand? Why, what we saw were these gigantic fish leaping like trout after the bats. It was their feeding time!"

I do not imagine that two more excited scientists ever existed than Brown and I. The joy of discovery transfigured us. Here we had discovered a lake in the Thunder Mountains which was the deepest lake in the world; and it was inhabited by a few gigantic fish of the minnow species, the existence of which, hitherto, had never even been dreamed of by science.

“Kitten,” I said, my voice broken by emotion, “which will you have named after you, the lake or the fish? Shall it be Lake Kitten Brown, or shall it be *Minnius kittenii*? Speak!”

“What about that old party whose name you said had already been given to the lake?” he asked piteously.

“Who? Mrs. Barr? Do you think I’d name such an important lake after *her*? Anyway, she has declined the honour.”

“Very well,” he said, “I’ll accept it. And the fish shall be known as *Minnius Smithii*!”

Too deeply moved to speak, we bent over and shook hands with each other. In that solemn and holy moment, surcharged with ecstatic emotion, a deep, distant reverberation came across the water to our ears. It was the heavy artillery, snoring.

Never can I forget that scene; sunshine glittering on the pond, the silent forests and towering peaks, the blue sky overhead, the dead trees where thousands of bats hung in nauseating clusters, thicken than the leaves in Valembrosa—and Kitten Brown and I, cross-legged upon our pneumatic raft, hands clasped in pledge of deathless devotion to science and a fraternity unending.

‘And how about that girl?’ he asked.

“What girl?”

‘Angelica White?’

“Well,” said I, “*what* about her?”

“Does she go with the lake on with the fish?”

“What do you mean?” I asked coldly, withdrawing my hand from his clasp.

“I mean, which of us gets the first chance to win her?” he said, blushing. “There’s no use denying that we both have been bowled over by her; is there?”

I pondered for several moments.

“She is an extremely intelligent girl,” I said, stalling.

“Yes, and then some.”

After a few minutes’ further thought, I said:

“Possibly I am in error, but at moments it has seemed to me that my marked attentions to Miss White are not wholly displeasing to her. I may be mistaken—”

“I think you are, Smith.”

“Why?”

“Because—well, because I seem to think so.”

I said coldly:

“Because she happened to faint away in your arms last night is no symptom that she prefers you. Is it?”

“No.”

“Then why do you seem to think that tactful, delicate, and assiduous attentions on my part may prove not entirely unwelcome to this unusually intelligent—”

“Smith!”

“What?”

“Miss White is not only a trained nurse, but she also is about to receive her diploma as a physician.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“When?”

“When you were building the fire last night. Also, she informed me that she had relentlessly dedicated herself to a eugenic marriage.”

“When did she tell you that?”

“While you were bringing in a bucket of water from the lake last night. And furthermore, she told me that *I* was perfectly suited for a eugenic marriage.”

“*When* did she tell you *that*?” I demanded.

“When she had—fainted—in my arms.”

“How the devil did she come to say a thing like that?” He became conspicuously red about the ears:

“Well, I had just told her that I had fallen in love with her—”

“Damn!” I said. And that’s all I said; and seizing a paddle I made furiously for shore. Behind me I heard the whirr of the piano wire as Brown started the electric reel. Later I heard him clamping the hood on the hydroscope; but I was too disgusted for any further words, and I dug away at the water with my paddle.

In various and weird stages of morning *déshabillé* the heavy artillery came down to the shone for morning ablutions, all a-row like a file of ducks.

They glared at me as I leaped ashore:

“I want my breakfast!” snapped Mrs. Batt. “Do you hear what I say, guide? And I don’t wish to be kept waiting for it either! I desire to get out of this place as soon as possible.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I intend to stay here for some time.”

“What!” bawled the heavy artillery in booming unison.

But my temper had been sorely tried, and I was in a mood to tell the truth and make short work of it, too.

“Ladies,” I said, “I’ll not mince matters. Mr. Brown and I are not guides; we are scientists from Bronx Park, and we don’t know a bally thing about this wilderness we’re in!”

“Swindler!” shouted Mrs. Batt, in an enraged voice. “I knew very well that the United States Government would never have named that puddle of water after *me!*”

“Don’t worry, madam! I’ve named it after Mr. Brown. And the new species of gigantic fish which I discovered in this lake I have named after myself. As for leaving this spot until I have concluded my scientific study of these fish, I simply won’t. I intend to observe their habits and to capture one of them if it requires the remainder of my natural life to do so. I shall be sorry to detain you here during such a period, but it can’t be helped. And now you know what the situation is, and you are at liberty to think it over after you have washed your countenances in Lake Kitten Brown.”

Rage possessed the heavy artillery, and a fury indescribable seized them when they discovered that Indians had raided their half ton of feminine perquisites. I went up a tree.

When the tumult had calmed sufficiently for them to distinguish what I said, I made a speech to them. From the higher branches of a neighboring tree Kitten Brown applauded and cried, “Hear! Hear!”

“Ladies,” I said, “you know the worst, now. If you keep me up this tree and starve me to death it will be murder. Also, you don’t know enough to get out of these forests, but I can guide you back the way you came. I’ll do it if you cease your dangerous demonstrations and permit Mr. Brown and myself to remain here and study these giant fish for a week or two.”

They now seemed disposed to consider the idea. There was nothing else for them to do. So after an hour on two, Brown and I ventured to descend from our trees, and we went among them to placate them and ingratiate ourselves as best we might.

“Think,” I argued, “what a matchless opportunity for you to be among the first discoverers of a totally new and undescribed species of giant fish! Think what a legacy it will be to leave such a record to posterity! Think how proud and happy your descendants will be to know that their ancestors assisted at the discovery of *Minnius Smithii!*”

“Why can’t they be named after *me?*” demanded Mrs. Batt.

“Because,” I explained patiently, “they have already been named after *me!*”

“Couldn’t *something* be named after me?” inquired the fearsome lady.

“The bats,” suggested Brown politely, “we could name a bat after you with pleasure—”

I thought for a moment she meant to swing on him. He thought so, too, and ducked.

“A bat!” she shouted. “Name a *bat* after *me!*”

“Many a celebrated scientist has been honoured by having his name conferred upon humbler fauna,” I explained.

But she remained dangerous, so I went and built the fire, and squatted there, frying bacon, while on the other side of the fire, sitting side by side, Kitten Brown and Angelica White gazed upon each other with enraptured eyes. It was slightly sickening—but let that pass. I was beginning to understand that science is a jealous mistress and that any contemplated infidelity of mine stood every chance of being squelched. No; evidently I had not been fashioned for the joys of legal domesticity. Science, the wanton jade, had not yet finished her dance with me. Apparently my maxixe with her was to be eternal. *Fides servanda est.*

* * *

That afternoon the heavy artillery held a council of war, and evidently came to a conclusion to make the best of the situation, for toward sundown they accosted me with a request for the raft, explaining that they desired to picnic aboard and afterward now about the lake and indulge in song.

So Brown and I put aboard the craft a substantial cold supper; and the heavy artillery embarked, taking aboard a guitar to be worked by Miss Dingleheimer, and knitting for the others.

It was a lovely evening. Brown and I had been discussing a plan to dynamite the lake and stun the fish, that method appealing to us as the only possible way to secure a specimen of the stupendous minnows which inhabited the depths. In fact, it was our only hope of possessing one of these creatures—fishing with a donkey engine, steel cable, and a hook baited with a bat being too uncertain and far more laborious and expensive.

I was still smoking my pipe, seated at the foot of the big pine-tree, watching the water turn from gold to pink: Brown sat higher up the slope, his arm around Angelica White. I carefully kept my back toward them.

On the lake the heavy artillery were revelling loudly, banqueting, singing, strumming the guitar, and trailing their hands overboard across the sunset-tinted water.

I was thinking of nothing in particular as I now remember, except that I noticed the bats beginning to flit over the lake; when Brown called to me from the slope above, asking whether it was perfectly safe for the heavy artillery to remain out so late.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Suppose,” he shouted, “that those fish should begin to jump and feed on the bats again?”

I had never thought of that.

I rose and hurried nervously down to the shore, and, making a megaphone of my hands, I shouted:

“Come in! It isn’t safe to remain out any longer!”

Scornful laughter from the artillery answered my appeal.

“You’d better come in!” I called “You can’t tell what might happen if any of those fish should jump.”

“Mind your business!” retorted Mrs. Batt. “We’ve had enough of your prevarications—”

Then, suddenly, without the faintest shadow of warning, from the centre of the lake a vast geyser of water towered a hundred feet in the air.

For one dreadful second I saw the raft hurled skyward, balanced on the crest of the stupendous fountain, spilling ladies, supper, guitars, and knitting in every direction.

Then a horrible thing occurred; fish after fish shot up out of the storm of water and foam, seizing, as they fell, ladies, luncheon, and knitting in mid-air, falling back with a crashing shock which seemed to rock the very mountains.

“Help!” I screamed. And fainted dead away.

* * *

Is it necessary to proceed? Literature nods; Science shakes her head. No, nothing but literature lies beyond the ripples which splashed musically upon the shore, terminating forever the last vibration from that immeasurable catastrophe.

Why should I go on? The newspapers of the nation have recorded the last scenes of the tragedy.

We know that tons of dynamite are being forwarded to that solitary lake. We know that it is the determination of the Government to rid the world of those gigantic minnows.

And yet, somehow, it seems to me as I sit writing here in my office, amid the verdure of Bronx Park, that the destruction of these enormous fish is a mistake.

What more splendid sarcophagus could the ladies of the lake desire than these huge, silvery, itinerant and living tombs?

What reward more sumptuous could anybody wish for than to nest at last within the interior dimness of an absolutely new species of anything?

For me, such a final repose as this would represent the highest pinnacle of sublimity, the uttermost zenith of mortal dignity.

* * *

So what more is there for me to say?

As for Angelica—but no matter. I hope she may be comparatively happy with Kitten Brown. Yet, as I have said before, handsome men never last. But she should have thought of that in time.

I absolve myself of all responsibility. She had her chance.