

The Golden Pool

By Robert W. Chambers

So the doctor, finding his patient's quarters untenanted for the first time in many months, hastened downstairs and out to the veranda, where he discovered a lean, soldierly looking young fellow clad in fishing coat fussing with rod and reel.

"Oho, my enterprising friend!" he said. "What mischief are you hatching now?"

"I'm going to try for your big trout in the Golden Pool," said his patient calmly.

This unlocked-for energy appeared to embarrass the doctor. His grim mouth tightened.

"Don't go now," he said; "it's too late in the morning."

"I'm going anyhow," retorted his patient.

"Don't be obstinate; that fish won't rise till evening."

"I know it, but I'm going."

"Against my orders!" demanded the exasperated doctor.

"With pleasure," replied the young man gayly.

"And it's your own doing, too. Do you remember what you said last night?"

"I said I saw a big fish rising in that pool," growled the doctor.

"Exactly; and that has done more to brace me up than all your purple pills for peculiar people."

"Don't go to the Golden Pool *now!*" said the doctor with emphasis. "I have a particular reason for making this request."

"What reason?"

"I won't tell you."

"You're after that fish yourself! No, you don't!"

"That's idiotic."

"Well, anyhow, good-by."

"You shan't!" exclaimed the doctor wrath-fully. "Give me that rod!"

But his patient clung to the rod, laughing.

"Now what the devil possesses you to make for the Golden Pool at this particular minute?" demanded the vexed doctor. "You've been an invalid for a year and more, and up to this moment you've done what I told you."

His patient continued to laugh—that same light-hearted, infectious laugh which the doctor had not heard in many a month, and he looked at him keenly.

"All the same, you're not well yet, and you know it," he said.

"My aversion to women?"

"Partly."

"You mean my memory still fails me? Well, then, what do you think happened this morning?"

"What?" inquired the doctor sulkily.

"This: I went out to the stables and recognized Phelan and Riley! How's that for a start? Then"—he glanced across the lawn where an old gardener potted about among the petunias—"there's Dawson, isn't it? And this is my own place—Gleniris! Isn't it? Besides," he added, "my aversion to women is disappearing; I saw a girl on the lawn from my window this morning. Who is she?"

"Was she dressed in white?" asked the doctor.

"Don't remember."

“You never before saw her?”

“No—I don’t know. I didn’t see her face.”

“So it seems you can’t recollect the back of a relative or a neighbor! Now what do you think of yourself?”

“Relative? Nonsense,” he laughed; “I haven’t any. As for the neighbors, give me time, for Heaven’s sake! I’m doing beautifully. There are millions of things that set me thinking and worrying now—funny flashes of memory—hints of the past, vague glimpses that excite me to effort; but nothing—absolutely nothing—yet of that blank year. Was it a year?”

“More; never mind that!”

“How long was it?” asked his patient wistfully.

“Sixteen months.”

“You said I was shot, I think.”

“No, I didn’t. You think you were, but it was done with a Malay kris. Now, what can you remember about it?”

The young man stood silent, fumbling with his rod.

“And you tell me you’re cured!” observed the doctor sarcastically, “and you can’t even recollect how you got swiped with a Malay kris!”

“I might if I could see the Malay—or the kris.”

The doctor, who had begun to pace the veranda, halted and glanced sharply at his patient.

“The best way to remember things is to see ’em? Is that your idea?”

“I think so. It’s true I’ve seen Phelan many times without remembering him, but to-day I recognized him. Isn’t that good medicine?”

The doctor thought a moment, fished out his watch from the fob pocket, regarded it absently, and came down the steps to the lawn, where his patient stood making practice casts with his light bamboo rod.

“I’ll tell you why I didn’t want you to go to the Golden Pool,” he said.

“Well, why?”

“Poachers,” replied the doctor, watching him. “They fish in the pools, and they use your canoe, and they even have the impudence to go bathing in the Golden Pool. . . . I didn’t want you to worry.”

“I think the poacher I catch will do the worrying,” said the young man, laughing. “Is that all?”

“That is all. Go ahead if you want to. If you run across that girl invite her to dinner. She’s a friend of mine.” And the doctor walked off, shoving his hands deep into his capacious pockets.

His patient reeled in the line, smiling to himself, and started off across the meadow at a good swinging pace. He entered the forest by the meadow bridge, where a lank yokel was mowing grass.

“Mornin’!” ventured the native, with a doubtful grin of recognition.

“Look here,” said the young man, halting in the path of the scythe, “ought I to know your name? Tell me the truth.”

“I cal’late yew orter,” replied the yokel. “I’ve been chorin’ for yew close tew ten year.”

A shadow fell over the master’s lean face, and he went on through the underbrush, muttering to himself, passing his thin hand again and again across his forehead.

“Oh, well, I’ll stick to it,” he said aloud; “a man can’t dance on a broken leg nor think with a broken head; they’ve got to be mended first—well mended.”

Walking on through the fragrant forest, the shadow of care slipped from his face again, leaving it placid once more. The scent of the June woods, the far, dull throbbing of a partridge drumming

in leafy depths, the happy sighing of a woodland world astir, all these were gentle stimulants to that sanity toward the shadowy borders of which he had so long been struggling from the region of dreadful night.

Spreading branches, dew-spangled, slapped his face as he passed; the moist rich odor of clean earth filled throat and lungs; a subdued, almost breathless expectancy brooded in the wake of the south wind.

When he emerged from the forest and entered the long glade, mountain and thicket were swimming in crystalline light; ferns hung weighted with dew; the outburst of bird music was incessant.

Far in the wet woods he could hear the river flowing—or was it the breeze freshening in the pines?

Listening, enraptured, boyish recollections awoke, and he instinctively took his bearings from the blue peak in the east. So the Ousel Pool lay to the west. He would fish that uncertain water later; but first the Golden Pool, where the great trout had been seen, rising as recklessly as a minnow in a meadow brook.

Now, all excitement and expectancy, he waded on, knee-deep in drenched grasses, watching the soft mothlike flutter of the bluebirds among the iris. They had always hovered over this spot in June, he remembered now. Truly summer skies were healing him of his hurt; he recognized the belt of blue-beech saplings all crossbarred with sunlight, and he heard the familiar rush of waters below.

Suddenly, beyond the sprayed undergrowth, he caught a glow of color, a glimpse of that rich sunny foliage which gave the Golden Pool its name; and now the familiar water lay glimmering before him through the trees, and he began the descent, stepping quietly as a deer entering a strange covert.

At the water's edge he paused, cautiously; but there was no canoe lying under the alders. Memory halted short, then began groping backward through the years.

Where was the canoe? There had always been one here—in his boyhood and ever since—up to that obscured and cloudy space of time—He dropped to his knees and parted the leafy thicket with his hands. There was no canoe there, nothing except a book lying on a luncheon basket; and—what was this?—and this?

He stared stupidly for a moment, then rose and stepped through the thicket to the edge of the water. A canoe glittered out there, pulled up on a flat, sunny rock in midstream, and upon the rock lay a girl in a dripping bathing dress drying her hair in the sun.

Instantly an odd sense of it all having happened before seized him—the sun on the water, the canoe, the slim figure lying there. And when she indolently raised her hand, stifling a dainty yawn, and stretched her arms luxuriously, it seemed to him the repetition of a forgotten scene too familiar to surprise him.

Then, as she sat up, leisurely twisting her sun-bronzed hair, a chance turn of her head brought him into direct line of vision. They stared at one another across the sunny water.

For one second the thought flashed on him that he knew her; then in the same moment all that had seemed familiar in the situation faded into strangeness and apprehension, and he was aware that he had never before looked upon her face.

Yet, curiously enough, his long and melancholy aversion to women had not returned at sight of her. She had risen in surprise, wide dark eyes on him; and he spoke immediately, saying he had not meant to disturb her, and that she was quite welcome to use the canoe.

Her first stammered words annoyed him. “Did the doctor—come with you? Are you—are you alone?”

"I suppose the entire countryside knows I have been ill," he said; "but I'm perfectly able to be about without a doctor." He began to laugh. "But those are not the questions. The questions are what are people doing in these woods with luncheon baskets and summer novels, and how am I to fish this pool if people swim in it; and how am I to fish at all if an attractive stranger takes possession of my canoe?"

"I—I had no idea you were coming here," she faltered. "I bathe here every morning, and then I lunch here and read."

He laughed outright at her innocent acknowledgment of the trespass.

"I have a clear case against you," he said. "Haven't you read all my notices nailed up on trees? 'Warning! All trespassers will be dealt with to the full extent of the law'—and much more to similar effect? And do you know what a very dreadful thing it is to be dealt with to the full extent of the law?"

"But—I am not—not trespassing," she said. "Can you not remember?"

"I'm afraid I can't," he replied, smiling; "I'm afraid I have a clear case against you. The doctor warned me that trespassers were about."

"Did he know you were coming *here*?" she asked incredulously.

"He did. And I'm afraid somebody has been caught *in flagrant délit!* What do you think?"

He stood there, amused, curiously noting the play of emotions over her delicate features. Consternation, dismay, had given place to quick resentment; that in turn died out, leaving something of comprehension in her perplexed face.

"So he sent you to catch a trespasser?" she said.

"I was coming to fish. Well, yes; he said I might find one."

"A trespasser? A stranger?" She hesitated; there was hurt astonishment in her voice. Suddenly her face took a deeper flush, as though she had come to an unexpected decision; her entire manner changed to serene self-possession. "What are you going to do with me?" she asked curiously.

"I'm afraid I can't put you in jail," he admitted. "You see, there's no punishment for swimming in favorite trout pools and spoiling a man's morning sport. Now, if you had only thought of catching one of my trout I could arrange to have you imprisoned."

"Please arrange it immediately, then," she said, lifting an enormous trout from the canoe and holding it up by the gills with both hands.

"Good Lord," he gasped, "it's the big one!" And he sat down suddenly on a log.

Her smiling defiance softened a trifle. "Did you really wish to catch this fish very much?" she asked. "I—I never supposed you would come here—to-day."

"The enormity of your crime stuns me," he said. "First you invade my domain, then you abstract my canoe, then you swim in my favorite pool, then you catch the biggest fish that ever came out of it."

"No," she said, "I was not such a goose as to swim first. I caught the fish first."

"Recount to me the battle," he said with a groan. "Fish like that only rise once in a lifetime. Tell me how you—but that's useless. It was the usual case of a twig and a bent pin, I suppose?"

She smiled uncertainly, and lifted a rod from the canoe.

"By Jove, that looks like one of my rods!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get it?"

Her eyes were bright with excitement; she shook her head, laughing.

"Are you in league with my doctor? Who are you?" he insisted.

"Only a poacher," she admitted. "I creep about and lurk outside windows where doctors talk in loud voices about big trout they have seen. Then—I go and catch them."

They were both laughing now; she standing beside the canoe, rod in hand, he balanced on a rock opposite.

Yet, even while laughing, his thin face sobered, darkening as though a gray shadow had crept across it.

“Are you a neighbor of mine?” he asked. “If you are, you will know why I ask it. If you are not, never mind,” he added wearily.

She shook her head. His face cleared.

“I thought you were not a neighbor; I was certain that I had never seen you—as certain as a man can be awakening from—from illness, with his mind—his memory—shakyaalmost blank.” He bent his head, gazing into the water. Then he looked up. “You know the doctor? I think I saw you on the lawn this morning.

“Are you sure you have never before seen me?” she asked, with a ghost of a smile.

“I thought at first—for an instant—the canoe on the rock, and the sunshine, and you—” He fell silent, groping through the darkened corridors of thought for the key to memory.

In the sunlit hush a rippling noise sounded far out across the pool; then up out of the glassy water shot a sinuous shape, dark against the sun—a fish in silhouette, curving over with a flapping splash. Widening circles spread from a center where a few bubbles floated; the pool became placid once more—a mirror for the tapestry of golden thickets set with the heavenly hue above.

The long-dormant passion which sleeps but never dies awoke in him; the flush on his lean cheeks deepened as he turned and looked across the pool where the pretty intruder stood watching him, an eager question dancing in her eyes.

“I’d like to try,” he said. “Do you mind?”

“Tell me what to do.”

“Paddle very quietly over here—very carefully and without a splash. Can you do it?”

She loosened the canoe noiselessly, a lithe figure in her wet brown skirt and stockings. The mellow glow enveloped her as she moved into the shadows; and she seemed, in the soft forest light, part of the woodland harmony, blending with it as tawny-tinted shadows blend.

The canoe slipped into the pool; she knelt in the stern; then, with one silent push, sent it like an arrow across the water. He caught and steadied the frail craft; she stepped from it and sprang without a sound into the green shadows beside him.

He was muttering to himself: “I’ve forgotten some things—but not how to throw a fly, I think. Let us see—let us see.”

She stood motionless as he embarked, watching him raise his rod and send the tiny brightly colored flies out over the water. The delicate accuracy seemed to fascinate her; her dark eyes followed the long upward loop of the back cast, the whistling flight of the silken line, the instant’s suspense as the leader curved, straightened out, and fell, dropping three flies softly on the still surface of the pool.

As the canoe drifted nearer, nearer to the spot where the trout had leaped, the sharp dry click of the reel, the windlike whistle of the line, grew fainter. Suddenly, far ahead of the floating flies, a dark lump broke the water; there came a spatter of spray, a flash of pink and silver, and that was all—all, though for two hours the silken line darted out across the water, and many feathered flies of many hues fell vainly across the glassy mirror of the Golden Pool.

She was still standing in the same place when he returned. He drew a long deep breath of disappointment as he stepped ashore, and she echoed his sigh. The tension had ended.

“Showed color, but wouldn’t fight,” he said in a low voice. “Biggest trout I ever saw.”

“Can’t you possibly do something?” she asked tremulously.

“Not now; I must rest him. You can’t force a fish like that by persistent worry. There’s a chance he may come again; he’s not serious yet. I dare not bother him for an hour or two.”

He looked into her sensitive face; then, suddenly conscious of its youthful beauty, he fell silent, reeling in his wet line inch by inch.

Through the heated stillness dragon flies darted; the mounting perfume of brake and fern, the almost imperceptible odor of earth and water, seemed to envelop him in a delicate spell, soothing, healing, while pulseless moments drifted away in the smooth flow of a summer hour.

The rod slipped from his hand; his musing eyes rested on her. She was seated on a mossy log, head bent, slender stockinged feet trailing in the pool.

“All this has happened before,” he said quietly. But there was no conviction in his voice.

She raised her dreamy eyes, the color came and went in throat and cheeks; through her half-parted lips the breath scarcely stirred.

He rose with a restless laugh, and stood a moment, his thin hand pressed across his forehead. Her eyes fell, were lifted to his, then fell again.

“Can’t you help me?” he said wistfully.

“Can you not remember?” she breathed.

“Then we—we have known one another. Have we?”

“I once knew a friend of yours—a close friend—named Escourt.”

“Escourt,” he repeated blankly.

And after a long silence he turned away with a gesture that seemed to frighten her. But into her face came a flash of determination, reddening her cheeks again.

“It does not matter,” she said; “nothing matters on a summer day like this. . . . I did not mean to trouble you.”

He turned in his steps and stood looking at her. “You say my friend’s name *was* Escourt? Is my friend dead?”

“Please don’t let it matter.”

“It does matter. I—it is a fancy, perhaps, but the name of Escourt was once familiar—and pleasant. It is not your name, is it?”

“Yes,” she said.

At last he began fretfully: “That is the strangest thing in the world. I have never before seen you, and yet I am perfectly conscious that your name has haunted me for years. Escourt—*Escourt!*—for years, I tell you,” he went on in a sort of impatient astonishment; “ever since I can remember anything I can remember that name.”

“And my first name?” Flushed, voice scarcely steady, she avoided his troubled gaze.

And as he did not answer, she said: “You once knew my husband. Can you not remember?”

He shook his head, studying her intently.

“No,” he said in a dull voice, “I have forgotten; I have been very ill. The name troubles me; it is strange how the name troubles me.”

“If it troubles you, let us talk of other things, will you?” she asked, almost timidly. “I did not think to awaken the memory of anything sad.”

“It is not sad,” resting his sunken, perplexed eyes on her; “it is something intimate—almost part of my life that I seem to have forgotten—” His hand sought the same spot over his right eye. “What were we doing when you interrupted everything?” His wandering glance fell on the canoe and the rod lying in the bottom, and his face cleared.

"I ought to be worrying that trout again," he said. "You won't go away, will you?"

"No; but I wish you would go," she said, laughing; "I'd dress if you would give me half an hour."

"You won't go—you will wait?" he repeated almost childishly.

"Yes, I will wait."

She shook her head, watching him embark; standing there looking out across the water where the paddle bubbles marked his course long after the canoe had vanished around the curved shore of the Golden Pool.

Suddenly her eyes filled; but she set her lips resolutely, groping with white hands for her knotted hair; the heavy shining twist, loosened, fell, veiling face and shoulders—a golden mask for sorrow and falling tears.

It was high noon when his far hail brought her to the water's edge, and she answered with a clear, prettily modulated call.

"Do you observe?" she asked, as he climbed the bank; and she made a little gesture of invitation toward a white napkin spread upon the moss.

A jug of milk, lettuce, bread, and a great bunch of hothouse grapes—and a hostess in a summer gown, smiling an invitation; what wonder that the haggard lines in his visage softened till something of the afterglow of youth lay like a ray of sun across his face.

"This is perfectly charming," he said, dropping to his knees beside her. "I—I am very happy that you waited for me."

She sat silent for a moment, with lowered eyes, then raised them shyly. "Let us eat bread and salt together, will you?—that nothing break our friendship."

"From your hands," he said.

She leaned over, took a tiny pinch of salt between her thumb and forefinger, and offered it to him on a bit of bread. He gravely broke the bread, returned half to her, and they ate, watching one another in silence.

"By the bread and salt I have shared with you," he said, half seriously, half smiling, "I promise to cherish this forest friendship. Let this day begin it."

"Let it," she said.

"Let pleasant years continue it."

"Yes—the coming years. So be it."

"Let nothing end it—nothing—not even—"

"Nothing—and, amen," she said faintly.

Again, unbidden, the ghosts of the past stirred, whispering together within him; echoes of unquiet days awoke, blind consciousness of that somber year where darkness dwelt, where memory lay slain forever.

She sat watching him there on the moss, supporting her weight on one arm.

"I am striving," he said, "to trace my thoughts." There was dull apology in his voice. "All this is not accident—you and I here together. I am haunted by something long forgotten, something that I am almost conscious of. When your voice sounds I seem to be quivering on the verge of memory. . . . Do you know what it is I have forgotten?"

She trembled to her lips. "Have you forgotten?"

"Yes—a great deal. Is it you I have forgotten?"

"Try to remember," she said under her breath.

"Remember? God knows I am trying. Begin with me, will you?"

“Yes; let us begin together. You were hurt.”

“Yes, I was hurt.”

“In a battle.”

“I was hurt in a skirmish.”

“Where?” she whispered.

“Why, on the Subig,” he answered, surprised; “I was in the Philippine scouts.”

He sat bolt upright, electrified, and struck his knee sharply with the flat of his wasted hand.

“Do you know,” he said excitedly, “that until this very instant I have not thought of the Philippine scouts. Isn’t that extraordinary?”

She strove to speak; her breast rose and fell, and she closed her lips convulsively.

He sat there, head drooping, passing his hand repeatedly across the scar over his right temple.

She waited, whitening under the tension. His face became placid; he looked up at her; and a smile touched her wet lashes in response.

The contentment of convalescence seemed to banish his restlessness; her voice broke the silence, and its low, even tones satisfied the half-aroused longing for dead echoes.

So the ghost of happiness arose and sat between them; and she lay back, resting against a tree, smiling replies to his lazy badinage. And after a long while her laughter awoke to echo his, laughter as delicate as the breeze stirring her bright hair.

And afterward, long afterward, when the sunshine painted orange patches on the westward tree trunks and a haze veiled the taller spires, she reminded him of the great trout; but he would not go without her; so together they descended to the stream’s edge.

Floating in the canoe there through the mellow light, he remembered that he had left his rod ashore, but would not go back, and she laughed outright, through the thread of the song she had been humming:

“Fate is a dragon,
Faith the slim shape that braves it:
Hope holds the stirrup-cup—
Drain it who craves it.”

She smiled, singing carelessly:

“Who art thou, young and brave?
La vie est un sommeil; l’amour en est le réve!”

“There is more,” he said, watching her intently.

“How do you know?”

“I know that song. *I remember it, and there is more to it!*”

“Is it this, then?” and she sang again:

“Life is but slumber,
Love the sad dream that haunts it,
Death is thy waking gift;
Take it who wants it!

“Who art thou, young and brave?”

La vie eat un sommeil; l'amour en est le réve!"

He sat for a long while, very still, head buried in his hands. A violet mist veiled water and trees; through it the setting sun sent fiery shafts through the mountain cleft. And when the last crimson shaft was sped and tree and water faded into darker harmony, the canoe had drifted far downstream, and now lay still in the shoreward sands; and they stood together on the water's edge.

Her fingers had become interlocked with his; she half withdrew them, eyes lowered.

"It is strange that our names should be the same," he said.

"Is your name Escourt, too?" she faltered. "Yes; I know it now. . . . I have been ill—very ill. God alone knows what my hurt has done to me. There is a doctor at the house; he's been with me for a long time—a long time. I—I wonder why? I wonder if it was because I had forgotten—even my own name. . . . Who are you who bear my name?"

She swayed almost imperceptibly where she stood; he lifted both her hands and laid them against his lips, looking deep into her eyes.

"Who are you, bearing my name?" he whispered. "Unclose your eyes."

In the twilight her dark eyes opened; she was in his arms now, her head fallen a little backward, yielding to his embrace crushing her.

"Try—try to remember—before you kiss me," she breathed. "I wish you to love me—I desire it—but not like this. Oh, try to remember before—before it is too late!"

"I do remember!—Helen! Helen!"

Her lips on his stifled the cry; a long sigh, a sob, and she lay quivering in her husband's arms.