

A Fish Tale



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I doubt seriously whether I might narrate a fish tale to equal the assorted fabrications that have passed as credible performances to be found amongst the lore of this ancient pastime. Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction, but often enough those immense voids between the spreadings of two hands leave one's imagination strained in its capacity to invent new truths from old fictions. Our fish tale, while mostly truthful, pales before fiction, yet we would hope to alleviate the 'tediousness of boredom'

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through these simple measures that tend to discourage its onset.

The telling of a fish tale harbors its own share of excitement, in that, as part of our travel upon the waters of the earth we had planned and expected to glean some goodly amount of bodily sustenance from the sea; as well as maintain a low-level of monetary expenditure on store-bought foodstuffs. In addition we were possessed with the especial desire to serve our omnivorous palates, which fresh sea food accomplishes to the highest degree - without exception. Supposedly, we would be travelling in salmon waters, and although we had cruised in other salmon waters on many occasions previously, we had never managed to snare one of this class of piscatory life. I'm sure we were only halfhearted fisher people; we were unwilling to sustain a trolling speed for many hours, or mooch amidst a myriad of other fisher people, when in comparison we could 'jig for cod' in privacy, in the proximity of some reef, landing supper, sometimes in a matter of minutes.

Fresh rock cod and fresh salmon both compete favorably for the delectation of one's palate. In addition our usual fare generally included oysters and clams, always in plentiful supply*. We were able also to set traps for both Dungeness and rock crab, and if we wanted to procure a tasty morsel from the deep, we could try our luck and patience at shrimping. We would have been sorely disappointed and given cause for much soul-searching if we had been unable to procure some salt water morsel to accommodate our daily mealtime expectations.

* Until recently, that is. Environment Canada has permitted heavy harvesting of some species of clams through exclusive commercial leases, and has granted many more oyster leases as well; both, of course are being harvested from those places where they show the greatest tendency to flourish. However, during this, our glorious adventure, learning of the intrusion of *Gonyaulax* (Red Tide)** into these coastal waters, it became all the more imperative we develop our fish-catching techniques if we desired more than 'cod' in our diet.

'Jigging for cod' is a euphemism for "goin' out an' ketchin' a fish". Often one speaks of 'rock cod' since it is amongst the rocks one pursues these sometimes ugly armored beasts. In fact, one might land one of a whole array of these critters who earn names of their own: Ling, Red Snapper, Quillback, Canary Rock Fish, to name a few, and Kelp Greenling, the unarmored relative of the Ling, who live, as their name suggests, amongst the kelp.

While their names vary and while the taste of fresh-caught cod does not diminish, there existing many ways to prepare these piscine delights, one, after a time, might begin to empathize with one's feline friends who receive a steady diet of overcooked tuna parts. Surely one could accommodate such a steady diet

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by arriving at the dinner table in a properly famished state; we never pushed the experiment to extremes, the need never having arisen. Our aim was to augment, rather than diminish our appetite, by varying our diet. Not only did we anticipate the 'catching' of salmon, but achieving that same end with Halibut and King Crab, which lie in the offing as we progressed Northward.

Trolling for salmon became a discouraging chore. Occasionally we had imagined we spied some salmon jumping, but were abandoned to an illusion of merely suspecting their presence; most likely these were sockeye or chum, which are mostly averse to the charms of man's artificial lures. We would attempt to troll through the so-called 'herring balls', thoroughly announced by the fluttering noisome aggregation of sea birds, milling and diving into the schools of herring trapped and driven near the surface, by the salmon, we had supposed; but in fact, this same feat could as well have been accomplished by a school of dogfish or mackerel or by a bevy of diving birds. Our suspicions favored the diving birds, since we had not seen the schools of fish or had not snared the elusive salmon.

It was equally possible we were not travelling anywhere near the path of the migrating salmon, and were equally none too savvy in catching the residuals. In the beginning we endured a long 'dry' spell, long enough and time-consuming enough to nearly discourage me entirely. But, as in all endeavors, persistency yields its own dividends. Perhaps in May and June we had been too early as well as in the wrong place. Perhaps the elusive fish was well-enough fed not needing to fall prey to our temptations.

****** That insidious minute and highly toxic marine organism that becomes concentrated in filter-feeding bivalves; Hah!, being immune to the toxins themselves.

We might have questioned our tackle; questioning one's 'gear' would be natural enough after consulting other fishermen. There might be a majority opinion if one was to take the trouble to find out, but all in all, it seems if the fish are 'biting' or in a feeding mood, they appear fairly responsive to any flashy lure, and when they are not disposed to feeding one might play music for them only to fail in his mission.

A brief visit to any tackle shop will soon convince anyone that he has much to learn concerning the mythology of the fishing lure. While one may gab the gab enthusiastic extolling the merits of his favorite, of which there as many as there are fishermen,

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fishing is for the dedicated and the persistent. Oh surely, myth is but a resource, and reassuring; a fair concurrence of opinion will flatly agree that a hook is vital to any apparatus.

The art is to lure the beast from its safer havens, hoping to inveigle the beast into believing he would be better served by ingesting the morsel dangling from the end of a nylon filament, verily attached to some device manipulated by the sensitive human hand which in turn is directed by that acute human brain, albeit, alimentary canal. The names of the lures are rife and gather new designs and nomenclature as each season opens; the names in themselves are both frightening and alluring: '**Crocodile**', '**Buzz Bomb**', '**Tom Mac**', '**Hoochie**', and '**Bucktail**' to name a minuscule number. Some fishermen will use only live herring fastened in a special herring jig that will secure the bait in a certain configuration of archedness, thus assuring a defined spin (simulating a wounded herring) to be attained at a specific trolling speed (now, that is real 'angling'). There are equally a host of spinners and flashers that enlist the prejudices of each angler, as though their choice was the lodestone, or rabbit's foot, of the Universe. The trick is to entice the beast wherever he be. And if that doesn't frustrate your decision making, some fishermen would not troll without a down-rigger or diver. One of the latest devices to amaze your appreciation of craftiness, if not one of the piscine species, 'Hoi!', if you even deem it credible, consists of a hollow translucent plastic chamber in the shape of a fish, into which may be inserted a chemiluminescent plug that glows. Necessarily a hook is attached somewhere to this device.

One day they'll send down a full orchestra; some ingenuity would be required in devising a place to attach the hook; of course the drums, tubas and french horns would require some additional ingenuity of design to assure their collapse once the pisciform creature tripped the light fantastic.

To most of you it will not appear any great revelation that Man had been fishing long before he had been recording history. While some were handy with parables, others used weirs, spears, nets and handmade hooking devices, along with imprecations and incantations instead of flashy lures and finesse. Still, in all, where fish, as a food, is a way of life rather than a profitable enterprise, or a matter of sport, one's tactics employ an economy of means; the subtleties of Buzz Bombs, Flashers, rotating live bait and chemillumilures would conjure a luxury of questionable utility, lest it be to convince one his money and leisure-time were spent in a prescribed and socially accepted manner.

Not qualifying to elaborate any further upon these angling

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mysteries, but only to relate the adventures themselves in all their primitive style, this style not to serve as embarrassment to all the artful anglers, but to indicate that we survived despite our lacks.

Our entire sojourn Northward through British Columbia offered little promise in our luring and snaring of the salmon. Truly we believed only the expert could persuade the beast. Obviously we further conjectured we possessed all the wrong gear and lacked the necessary patience. We managed the disgraceful practice of mining from the sea our usual catch of rock cod, flounder, crab, even some abalone, and in one case an octopus which held in its embrace a three-pound starry flounder.

As previously mentioned we sought to be alone in our anchorages and usually succeeded, but on occasion we shared a cove with a fisherman or another pleasure craft. On one rainy blustery day, while sharing an anchorage with an apparent fishing boat, we observed what appeared to be a float streaming away from the other boat. Charline, having retrieved the device, returned it to its owners whom we learned had just pitched it overboard, as fishing boats are wont to do with all discardable materials; in this case the floating object had been an empty freon canister. The 'fishing' boat was in fact a shrimper - and Aye!, you have already divined, we were given a bagful of reject shrimp (er... too small for the markets, but ample in our view) for our evening meal. Surely now - what a repast. Fortune had made some arrangements for us; this was not to be the first or last 'handout' we were to receive from the giving and overburdened heart of Man.

As a matter of fact only a few days later, in Prince Rupert, while refueling our iron sail and while Charline waited in line for the water hose, in order to fill our water tank as well, an elderly native Indian fisherman, a paunchy cheery fellow in baseball cap and suspenders, the current possessor of the source of water, aware of her presence, catching her aright, inquired, "You want a fish?" to which she replied, "No, I'm waiting for the water". Not too distantly, another younger Indian sitting on the transom of a fishing boat, into which the water was presently being directed, obviously overhearing the brief conversation, jibed in, "Nah, she doesn't like fish!".

Hah! you might not break her concentration initially, but to insinuate she does not like fish is certain to penetrate her desire for a water hose. "Yes! I want a fish!"

It so happened a whole Indian family was operating a gill netter upon which every available horizontal surface was strewn with the orange-pink flesh of the sockeye salmon, the weather

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being warm, sunny, and sufficient for drying the flayed fish.

A freshly caught sockeye salmon! It was presented to Charline cleaned and headless, the headlessness having something to do with fishing regulations which we didn't quite understand. However, there was easily four pounds of a beautifully orange-colored flesh remaining, and to this day the tasting of that particular aquatic treasure retains a special place in our memories as being amongst the most delectable repasts Man could ever include as part of his cherished cuisine and as a good reason as any for continuing with life on this earth.

I did not find this manner of obtaining salmon objectionable, and indeed it seemed the general plentifulness in those parts caused it to seem in excess. When the salmon were running up the streams from out the ocean the catches in the nets were sometimes stupendous. While the whole notion of excess is not true since the maw of 5,000,000,000 (updated to 6,000,000,000) stands as a challenge to any part of the earth's bounty, without the existent control of the Fisheries, the resource would become a quickly depleted lament, so efficient is purported the fishing fleet. If allowed, and if all the fishing boats, the seiners and gill netters, were to catch at will, it is not inconceivable they could virtually end the salmon fishing industry in one season; to say the least they could make it unprofitable for several successive seasons.

Yes, I prolong the agony, keeping you in suspense, regarding that momentous event. Yes there is a first time, for love-making and for a deprived angler to catch her first salmon. By this time we were in Alaskan waters in the middle of June; surely we must be nearing nature's bounty. Alas! o'er famed, these climes for their swimming pots of gold; we shall not be denied.

However, as a brief interlude, not an unwelcome one, and one not to be forgotten, while anchored off in the boonies, it was time to try shrimping; why not, if they had the audacity to call the place Shrimp Bay. A short distance away a lake lie undisturbed, a lake to which an arrow pointed in our chart book, the end of the arrow bearing the message 'Cutthroat Trout'; located in a supine wilder-ness, as an added attraction. Charline wandered off with her fly rod and flies to cast about, only snaring a couple of little ones which she didn't bother to keep. And need I mention our shrimping did not yield but a scant amount, hardly enough to compensate one for the expended energy in raising the trap from some fifty fathoms below. On the following morning the shrimp trap revealed even less life in the briny deep. While I was hauling the trap and debating what next to do, a fishing boat that

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had anchored the previous day came along-side as it was leaving, its Captain engaging me in friendly banter, inquiring after my success. Having little to relate, the Captain informed me I wasn't deep enough, that he himself had placed half a dozen commercial traps at the head of the bay in sixty-five fathoms. He indicated he and his family were vacationing, the shrimping being a casual enterprise, his main catch consisting of black cod for which he went to sea during the winter season.

The conversation turned to trout and my spouses' meager catch. Alas!, the Captain provided the remedy; as before he stated "Ye have once again cast your gear in the wrong place. Why, only last evening...." Shortly thereafter we parted company with amiable 'Farewell's.

I said to myself, 'to hell with this shrimping, I'll see what First Mate has to say about trying her fly fishing again, whereof the kindly Captain has suggested'. Of course, there would be little question regarding her eagerness. Rowing her ashore, I accompanied her to that specified place, a river pool forming the last stage of the emptying lake before it divided and plummeted headlong into a pair of falls to the sea below. She remained there the greater part of the day, while I took my leisure hither and yon, to retrieve her at a specified time.

EIGHT!, Eight beautiful trout, ranging in size from thirteen to eight inches, all lined up like a xylophone - such a repast! And was there ever a happier angler? I think not. Who needs salmon? Yes, its the honor of it all, is it not? If it is a dishonor not to catch a salmon, is it not then an honor to catch one, or is the catching of salmon so ordinary hereabouts as to earn one little more than a pinkish morsel? I remember on one occasion, during one of our summer vacation cruises, being out in the dinghy, bottom fishing (jigging for cod) when a huge power cruiser passed by slowly, stopping a short distance away. The people aboard had been fishing and were pulling up something from out the deep. It eventuated to be a fair-sized red snapper - a rather nice catch I'd say. Having brought the beast aboard, the partying fishermen posed for picture-taking pleasantries - Lol!, to our great disbelief and chagrin they heaved the dead beast overboard. Waste not, want not!

Hah!, we are nearing the momentous event, and as prelude I mention our anchorage the evening before, in order to properly prepare the psychology of the situation. The anchorage was surrounded by a small community. Another resident sailboat, a liveaboard, left his permanent mooring passing close by, hailing us, inquiring after our store of fish to which we shamefacedly

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admitted scant amount. As a matter of pathos, Charline's log states "We had a famine dinner of egg-rice, fresh broccoli and cheese!". Our sad admission warranted the query "We're going out, shall we catch you one?" Well doubtlessly the world miraculously abounds and redounds to our service; we needed be aught but a mere presence; 'Are we then royalty?' or just another who must accept his blessing?

"Sure" we said as 'off' they went. Not everything comes to pass, we supposed, for when they returned, after some time, it was near darkness; their return path was markedly distant from us, more distant than needful if all they wished to do was avoid a collision. Nary a hail or word came forth, while we merely looked on, in secret, anticipating some sign, in passing, or a visit in their dinghy, once they had safely moored. Not a word, not a sign. The heart was in the right place; it was just too feeble to make muster. Thy will be done. Our royalty shall not be dishonored.

You, patient reader, have suffered long enough. As long as we, no doubt, in attempting to accomplish our end; we now meet in this place.

The next morning we exited that civilized place to continue our Northing. We wheeled the rudder to starboard, heading eastward through Ernest Sound, trolling the while, being inspired by the presence of some fishing boats doing likewise, some distance off.

Well, you see, even though you have waited a lifetime for such a moment, when it comes, you are not prepared to believe its actual occurrence. I suppose if a whale had taken the lure, leaping like Moby Dick, high from out the briny deep, the event would achieve the proper theatricality to accord the anticipation invested therein.

Instead of some thrilling exclamation announcing the most momentous event in a salmon angler's life, there came forth this muttering, "I think I've got a fish". Yes, indeed, it was a fish, a Chinook, a Spring, a black mouth, a King. And the usual fumbling of the excited novice came to pass. No, we didn't lose it, but we certainly gave the beast his opportunities, having once secured it in the net, only to have it escape with its thrashing and thrusting, but not to gain its freedom, for it was well hooked, and soon netted again.

Alaska Fisheries demand the return to the sea of any Chinook under twenty-eight inches in length, caught between June 15th and November 15th. The fishermen debate this as an arbitrary rule claiming they have caught many a fish under twenty-eight inches that weighed a good deal more than those

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longer than twenty-eight inches in length, pressing the argument that weight ought determine, if there is to be a determination. And they further argue that a wellhooked fish brought aboard is so abused as to be considered a poor survival risk if returned to the sea.

I suppose it must be said we were doing everything incorrectly and violated the rules, but regardless, Charline maintained, "In no way will I deliver this fish to the sea. It is my very first; the jinx is over; I shall partake of this fish as if it was the blessed sacrament". June 26th, 1980 marks the memorable event.

Even if the creature had been put in traction it would not have been possible to elongate it enough to measure the required length. It weighed four pounds. Had we elected to play by the rules, returning the salmon to the sea, it having been wellhooked on all three barbs of a treble hook, its mouth severely rent during its struggles, it, as the fishermen speculate, may not have survived. Charline wasted no time in performing the necessary autopsy and dissection, committing the 'cuts' to ice.

An Abe and Al, a twenty ounce ball weight, streaming a gold hoochie; we found a herring lodged in the salmon's gullet. Had we streamed a potato, what then?

At last, contentment for the fisherwoman.

Surely this was only the beginning; with a few short bad spells, we managed to continue catching our share of 'fish' for the balance of our six-month journey, which ended in October; our last catch happening on September 26th, an eight pound Chinook caught at the entrance to Roscoe Bay in Desolation sound (using a Tom Mac). Our largest catch was a twelve pound Silver hooked during mid-September as we crossed Knight Inlet near Mamalillaculla.

Our biggest single haul of sea food however was gleaned from another cruising sailboat in William Henry Bay located on Lynn Canal.

There were two boats anchored in William Henry Bay some distance apart, ours and theirs. We both seemed to be casting about for bottom fish from our respective decks; I, while Charline was ashore with the dogs. I had hooked a few sizable tom cod and what I guessed were pollock, returning them to the water hoping for something more respectable (er..delectable). The other crew was also casting for anything and might have welcomed the tom cod I was being so particular about, when I heard a commotion issuing therefrom, observing a struggling person with bent pole and taut line, fighting an unseen force below. After some time - I would estimate between five to ten minutes, they

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managed to get the unseen to the surface and discovered they had hooked a large halibut. "It's a halibut, It's a Halibut, It's a big one - Wow!".

In attempting to land it aboard the high-sided cruising sailboat the whopping underwater beast thrashed a violent noisome exit alongside and against the boat only to be allowed to return to the water, still snared however, while the Skipper prepared another strategy for capturing this apparent monster, in tact. While doing so, the piscibeast, perhaps sensing his doom, renewed his struggle, requiring the line securing him to be lengthened, allowing him to play out his fate in the deep. Meanwhile the Captain devised a gaff hook which in the end became the restraining and hoisting weapon while a truncheon was utilized to stun or 'cold-cock' the animal, enabling his great weight, estimated at one-hundred pounds, to be hauled aboard to receive the 'coup de grace'. We were witness to a good part of the eventual disposition of the halibut, our curiosity compelling us to rush over to observe more closely this rather exciting event. We had never seen anything quite like it before and may never again.

Well, obviously o'erburdened with more fish than they ever could ingest before wholesale spoilage had set in, the good people, in the process of disembowelment and dismemberment, or rather, riving into manageable pieces, while the beast was suspended by its tail from the boom o'erhanging the cockpit, dropped a fair portion, a cross-section, into a plastic sack to be handed to these curious Oooh! and Aaah! onlookers.

In returning to Atavist we weighed the bulk, discovering we had 'netted' fifteen pounds of what eventuated into exquisitely delicious (what other morpheme could apply?) halibut steaks generously apportioned - and a plentiful supply of them, needless to say.

Such, such are the joys of travelling afar, afar!. And such are the rewards to the palate, which the local fish market cannot provide. Had not my instincts instructed me there was another more delectable beast than tom cod to be found in William Henry Bay? It was also our very first halibut, and if events followed precedent, it would not be long before we caught one for ourselves.

One further comment needs to be added to the scrolls. Whatever disposes mankind to kindness and generosity, with no strings attached, seems multiplied in the expanse and bounty to be found in these remote regions. I know not what more I may add to elucidate this phenomenon, but only wish, as we all do wish in this life, for such goodly and heart-warming behavior to be exported to the meaner more calculating frontiers of civilization.

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