

## **RIVER MAGIC**

**BY**

**KEN MAREK**

**THE ALUMINUM CANOE RODE QUIETLY ON THE DARK CURRENT OF THE RIVER. MY FATHER AND I WERE BEGINNING THE FIRST DAY OF OUR ANNUAL JUNE FISHING TRIP ON THE FOX RIVER. PREVIOUS TRIPS HAD TAUGHT US THAT SPRING RAINS COULD LEAVE THE RIVER HIGH AND THE COLOR OF DARK TEA AS A RESULT OF THE RUN-OFF OF TANNINS FROM SURROUNDING SWAMPS AND FEEDER CREEKS. THE FISHING COULD BE GOOD THEN, BUT WADING COULD BE DIFFICULT, EVEN DANGEROUS, SO WE HAD DECIDED TO TRY FISHING BY FLOATING A STRETCH OF RIVER FROM THE FOX RIVER STATE FOREST CAMPGROUND DOWN TO THE VILLAGE OF SENEY.**

**THE PREVIOUS DAY'S DRIVE TO THE MACKINAC BRIDGE HAD SEEMED LONGER THAN USUAL, PERHAPS BECAUSE BOTH OF US HAD BEEN DRAINED BY MONTHS OF STRESS AT OUR RESPECTIVE JOBS. BUT ONCE WE CROSSED THE BRIDGE AND DROVE OUT OF THE TOURIST TRAPS NEAR THE BRIDGE ON US-2, WE FELT-AS WE ALWAYS DID-THAT WE WERE IN ANOTHER COUNTRY, ONE WITH NOT ONLY A DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHY BUT A DIFFERENT PACE OF LIVING. TALK OF WORK CEASED, AND WE BEGAN TO RELAX AS WE ROLLED ALONG THE UNSPOILED NORTH SHORE OF LAKE MICHIGAN AND THROUGH THE SECOND GROWTH FORESTS, WET LANDS AND THE OCCASIONAL OPEN FIELDS, VIBRANT WITH A MIXTURE OF ORANGE AND YELLOW HAWKWEED AND WILD DAISIES.**

**A TURN NORTH ONTO M-77 BROUGHT US TO A STORE IN THE VILLAGE OF GERMFASK, WHERE WE WOULD MAKE FINAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE FLOAT TRIP. WE WERE GREETED WARMLY BY THE STORE OWNER, MR. GILLMAN, WHO SUGGESTED THAT HE COULD BRING THE CANOE IN THE MORNING, PICK US UP AT OUR RENTED CABIN IN SENEY, AND HELP US LAUNCH AT THE CAMPGROUND. HE FURTHER EXPLAINED THAT WHEN WE REACHED THE HIGHWAY 28 BRIDGE IN SENEY AT THE END OF THE FLOAT, I COULD WALK BACK TO OUR CABIN, CALL HIM TO LET HIM KNOW WE HAD ARRIVED, AND DRIVE OUR CAR TO THE BRIDGE TO PICK UP DAD AND OUR GEAR. MR. GILLMAN WOULD FETCH THE CANOE LATER.**

**AFTER THE SHORT DRIVE NORTH TO SENEY, WE CHECKED INTO OUR CABIN AND ORGANIZED SOME OF OUR GEAR FOR THE NEXT DAY. FOLLOWING A LATE DINNER AT A RESTAURANT IN SENEY, WE TURNED IN EARLY. MAYBE IT WAS THE STRESS OF RECENT MONTHS OR THE ANTICIPATION OF THE NEXT DAY'S ADVENTURE, BUT WE SLEPT FITFULLY AND WOKE EARLY. SO EARLY, IN FACT, THAT WE HAD BREAKFAST,**

WASHED THE DISHES, ORGANIZED THE REST OF OUR GEAR, RIGGED OUR FLY RODS, AND EVEN GOT OUR WADERS ON BEFORE MR. GILLMAN ARRIVED AT THE DESIGNATED TIME.

AT THE STATE FOREST CAMPGROUND, WE SLID THE CANOE DOWN A CRUDE STAIRWAY OF RAILROAD TIES AND THEN SECURED OUR GEAR FOR THE FLOAT. THE FLY RODS RESTED OFF TO THE SIDE ON THE FLOOR OF THE CANOE, AND EVERYTHING ELSE (INCLUDING A CANVAS CREEL, RAIN GEAR, OUR SHOES, A FOLDING WIRE GRILL, TWO SMALL DELMONICO STEAKS, SEVERAL SLICES OF DARK RYE BREAD AND A STICK OF BUTTER--THE FORMER THREE WRAPPED TO KEEP DRY--SOME SILVERWARE AND TWO PLATES FROM A CAMPING COOK SET, A TREATED CARDBOARD CONTAINER OF CHARCOAL BRIQUETTES, A CANTEEN OF WATER, TWO BOTTLES OF BEER AND A SMALL WWII FOLDING SHOVEL BORROWED FROM DAD'S BROTHER NORB) WAS STASHED IN NORB'S WWII DUFFEL BAG, WITH ITS STRAP FASTENED OVER THE CENTER THWART OF THE CANOE.

UNDER A LOW, OVERCAST SKY WE PUSHED OFF, AND SPENT MOST OF THE FIRST HOUR JUST GETTING A FEEL FOR HANDLING THE CANOE IN THE RIVER'S DECEPTIVELY STRONG CURRENT AND TIGHT TURNS THAT WERE SOMETIMES JAMMED WITH BRUSH OR FALLEN TREES. ONCE WE WERE CONFIDENT AS A TEAM, WE BEGAN TO LOOK FOR AREAS WHERE BOTH OF US COULD GET OUT OF THE CANOE AND WOULD HAVE SOME GOOD WATER TO FISH. LUCKILY, WE BEGAN TO FIND STRETCHES WHERE THERE WERE LONG GLIDES THAT WERE SHALLOW ON ONE SIDE AND DEEP ALONG THE OPPOSITE BANK. FOR THE NEXT TWO TO THREE HOURS WE FISHED THESE RUNS, TAKING TURNS WADING UPSTREAM OR DOWNSTREAM FROM WHERE THE CANOE WAS TIED UP OR BEACHED. THE ACTION WAS SLOW, BUT WE MANAGED TO LAND--AND RELEASE--FOUR OR FIVE SMALL BROOK TROUT.

DURING THIS TIME WE HAD WATCHED THE SKY GETTING DARKER, AND EVENTUALLY A FINE MIST SETTLED INTO THE RIVER VALLEY. THIS SEEMED TO BE THE TIME TO FIND A PLACE FOR LUNCH. IN AN UPCOMING TIGHT BEND TO THE LEFT, WE COULD SEE A SORT OF NATURAL BENCH UNDER SOME MATURE CEDAR TREES ON THE RIGHT BANK, SO WE PULLED HARD TO BEACH THE CANOE. I PUT THE BEER IN A LITTLE BACKWASH AGAINST THE RIVER BANK, AND WE CLIMBED UP TO THE BENCH WITH OUR RAIN GEAR AND THE FIXINGS FOR LUNCH. THE FOLDING SHOVEL MADE IT EASY TO REMOVE LEAVES AND TWIGS FROM THE AREA AND MAKE AN INDENTATION FOR THE CONTAINER OF CHARCOAL. DAD LIT THE CARDBOARD CONTAINER AND WE SAT BACK TO WATCH IT IGNITE THE BRIQUETTES. THE OVERHANGING CEDARS KEPT US--AND THE CHARCOAL--DRY.

SOON ENOUGH IT WAS TIME TO PUSH THE LEGS OF THE WIRE GRILL INTO THE FIRM GROUND AND COOK THE STEAKS. WHEN THEY WERE ALMOST

DONE, I WENT DOWN TO RETRIEVE THE BEER WHILE DAD PUT SLICES OF THE RYE BREAD ON THE GRILL TO TOAST. WE SAT CROSS-LEGGED UNDER THE CEDARS AND ENJOYED A MEMORABLE LUNCH WHILE WATCHING THE RIVER CURL INTO THE BEND BELOW.

SHORTLY AFTER WE FINISHED LUNCH, THE TEMPERATURE SEEMED TO RISE AND THE MIST TURNED INTO A LIGHT RAIN. CONTENT, DRY AND RELAXED, WE COULD HAVE EASILY LEANED BACK INTO THE UPSLOPE OF THE BANK AND DOZED OFF, BUT SOON THE WARM RAIN TRIGGERED A HATCH OF INSECTS. SEEMING TO MATERIALIZE FROM NOWHERE, A FLOCK OF CEDAR WAXWINGS ARRIVED TO ATTACK THE BUGS. WE COULD HEAR THEIR HIGH-PITCHED LITTLE SQUEAKS AS THEY FLUTTERED OVER THE RIVER, OCCASIONALLY LANDING ON THE BARE BRANCHES OF A DEAD TREE ON THE OPPOSITE BANK. WHEN TWO TROUT BEGAN TO RISE TO THE HATCH, WE WERE ENERGIZED. QUICKLY WE DOUSED THE FIRE WITH WATER FROM THE CANTEEN, SHOVELED DIRT OVER THE COALS AND PACKED IT DOWN, FOLDED THE GRILL AND PICKED UP THE OTHER REMAINS FROM LUNCH. IN JUST A FEW MINUTES WE WERE FLOATING THE RIVER AGAIN.

THE RAIN AND THE RISE OF FISH PROVED TO BE SHORT-LIVED, AND SOON WE ENTERED A FASCINATING BUT CHALLENGING STRETCH OF RIVER. NOW THE STREAMSIDE TAG ALDERS AND CEDARS WERE EVEN MORE DENSE, AND THE RIVER NARROWED, BECOMING DEEP AND VERY DARK FROM BANK TO BANK. IT WAS AS IF WE HAD FLOATED INTO THIS PASSAGE FROM HEMINGWAY'S "BIG TWO-HEARTED RIVER": "AHEAD THE RIVER NARROWED AND WENT INTO A SWAMP. THE RIVER BECAME SMOOTH AND DEEP AND THE SWAMP LOOKED SOLID WITH CEDAR TREES, THEIR TRUNKS CLOSE TOGETHER, THEIR BRANCHES SOLID. IT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE TO WALK THROUGH A SWAMP LIKE THAT. THE BRANCHES GREW SO LOW. YOU WOULD HAVE TO KEEP ALMOST LEVEL WITH THE GROUND TO MOVE AT ALL. YOU COULD NOT CRASH THROUGH THE BRANCHES. . . NICK DID NOT WANT TO GO IN THERE NOW. HE FELT A REACTION AGAINST DEEP WADING WITH THE WATER DEEPENING UP UNDER HIS ARMPITS, TO HOOK BIG TROUT IN PLACES IMPOSSIBLE TO LAND THEM. IN THE SWAMP THE BANKS WERE BARE, THE BIG CEDARS CAME TOGETHER OVERHEAD, THE SUN DID NOT COME THROUGH, EXCEPT IN PATCHES; IN THE FAST DEEP WATER, IN THE HALF LIGHT, THE FISHING WOULD BE TRAGIC. IN THE SWAMP FISHING WAS A TRAGIC ADVENTURE."

THE FOX'S STREAMSIDE TAG ALDERS WERE THE ONLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEMINGWAY'S DESCRIPTION AND WHAT WE WERE SEEING. CHOKING THE BANKS AND OFTEN HANGING INTO THE WATER, THE ALDERS MADE THE RIVER SEEM EVEN DEEPER, NARROWER AND MORE OMINOUS. INDEED, FISHING THIS STRETCH COULD HAVE BEEN A TRAGIC ADVENTURE. NOT ONLY WOULD IT HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE TO MOVE ON THE BANKS, IT WAS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO EVEN GET OUT OF THE CANOE. OCCASIONALLY WE WOULD SLIDE OVER TO THE EDGE OF

THE FLOW AND GRAB HOLD OF THE ALDERS. THEN I WOULD PLUNGE MY EIGHT-FOOT FLY ROD INTO THE WATER DOWN TO ITS CORK HANDLE—AND NEVER TOUCH BOTTOM. WE KNEW THIS WAS PRIME WATER FOR LARGER BROOK TROUT, BUT HOW WERE WE GOING TO FISH FOR THEM?

FINALLY WE DISCOVERED THAT WE COULD BEND THE OVERHANGING ALDERS INTO THE CANOE AND SIT ON THEM. THIS HELD THE CANOE STEADY AND LEFT OUR HANDS FREE FOR CASTING. AS LONG AS THE MAN IN THE BOW WAS FIRST TO CAST ACROSS AND A BIT UPSTREAM, ALLOWING THE FLY OR BAIT TO SINK AS IT TRAVELED DOWNSTREAM, THE PARTNER IN THE STERN COULD THEN CAST IN THE SAME FASHION WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT TANGLING WITH THE OTHER'S LINE. AFTER PUTTING A FEW CASTS INTO THE OVERHANGING ALDERS AND ADJUSTING TO THE SPEED AND DEPTH OF THESE "CHUTES," WE BEGAN TO ENTICE SOME HEAVY STRIKES FROM LARGER FISH. SOME WERE INDEED HOOKED "IN PLACES IMPOSSIBLE TO LAND THEM," AS HEMINGWAY SAID, BUT OVER THE NEXT COUPLE OF HOURS WE MANAGED TO LAND SEVERAL TROUT UP TO A FOOT OR MORE IN LENGTH AND SOME SMALLER ONES, KEEPING ENOUGH FOR DINNER AND RELEASING THE REST. THESE WERE CLASSIC FOX RIVER BROOK TROUT, A BIT LIGHTER AND MORE SILVERY IN COLOR THAN BROOKIES FROM MOST UPPER PENINSULA STREAMS, BUT STILL SHOWING THE OLIVE COLORED, WORMLIKE PATTERN ON THE BACK, WITH THE YELLOW SPOTS AND PINKISH-RED SPOTS RINGED IN A SOFT BLUE ON THE SILVER SIDES, AND THE BELLY FINS THAT HEMINGWAY DESCRIBED (IN "THE LAST GOOD COUNTRY") AS HAVING THE WHITE EDGES "WITH A BLACK LINE BEHIND AND THEN THE LOVELY GOLDEN SUNSET COLOR" OF THE BELLY.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON THE FISHING SUCCESS DIMINISHED AS THE RIVER BEGAN TO WIDEN, WITH FEWER DEEP BENDS AND A SLOWER CURRENT. WE WERE HAPPY TO JUST FLOAT NOW, USING THE PADDLES MOSTLY AS RUDDERS AND LISTENING TO THE SONGS OF WHITE THROATED SPARROWS AND VARIOUS WARBLERS. WE HAD NOT SEEN ANOTHER HUMAN BEING SINCE WE LAUNCHED THE CANOE AND DID NOT HEAR A SOUND OF "CIVILIZATION" UNTIL WE PASSED THE TOWNSHIP CAMPGROUND NEAR SENEY AND ROUNDED THE BEND TOWARD THE BRIDGE ON HIGHWAY 28. ONCE WE BEACHED THE CANOE, I CHANGED INTO MY SHOES AND WALKED UP THE HIGHWAY TO THE CABIN OWNER'S HOUSE, WHERE I WAS ABLE TO USE THE PHONE TO CALL MR. GILLMAN IN GERMFAK. AFTER A QUICK STOP AT OUR CABIN TO WASH THE INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH INSECT REPELLENT OFF MY FACE AND HANDS, I DROVE OUR CAR TO THE BRIDGE TO HELP DAD CLEAN THE TWIGS AND LEAVES OUT OF THE CANOE AND LOAD OUR GEAR INTO THE CAR. ALL THIS TOOK ONLY A SHORT WHILE, SO WE WERE SURPRISED TO SEE MR. GILLMAN ROLL UP IN HIS TRUCK.

"WELL BOYS, HOW DID YOU DO?" HE SAID WITH A HOPEFUL SMILE. OF COURSE WE TOLD HIM ABOUT SOME OF THE FISH WE CAUGHT IN THE

AFTERNOON, AND HE REPLIED, "CAN I SEE ONE?" I TOOK ONE OF THE LARGER BROOKIES OUT OF THE CREEL AND HANDED IT TO HIM. MAYBE IT WAS THE EARLY EVENING SUN BREAKING THROUGH THE CLOUDS OR FATIGUE THAT BLURRED MY VISION, BUT I COULD SWEAR TEARS WELLED UP IN HIS EYES AS HE SAID, "AREN'T THEY BEAUTIFUL? THEY'RE LIKE A BOUQUET OF FLOWERS. THEY EVEN SMELL GOOD." HE HANDED THE FISH BACK TO ME, AND DAD AND I HELPED HIM LOAD THE CANOE ON THE TRUCK. HE WAS ON HIS WAY, SMILING.

BACK AT THE CABIN, WE TOASTED THE DAY WITH SOME IRISH WHISKEY, AN EXPENSIVE INDULGENCE THAT WE SAVED JUST FOR THIS TRIP. THEN WE SET ABOUT PREPARING A SIMPLE BUT DELICIOUS MEAL OF THE TROUT WITH SOME IRISH POTATOES AND GREEN BEANS. DARKNESS WAS CLOSING IN AS WE WERE SCRAPING AND STACKING THE DISHES IN PREPARATION TO WASH THEM, BUT THE EFFECT OF THE FOOD AND DRINK AND THE DAY OF PADDLING WAS SETTING IN. WE DECIDED THE DISHES COULD WAIT.

I REMEMBER GETTING INTO BED AND TRYING TO THINK ABOUT WHERE WE MIGHT FISH TOMORROW. THE NEXT THING I KNEW I WAS BEING AWAKENED BY THE SUN SHINING THROUGH THE FLIMSY CURTAINS OF MY BEDROOM WINDOW. I COULDN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I HAD SLEPT SO SOUNDLY. THE UNDERUSED MUSCLES OF MY ARMS AND SHOULDERS WERE STIFF AND SORE, BUT A HOT SHOWER EASED THE SORENESS. I DRESSED QUICKLY AND WENT OUTSIDE INTO AN OPEN AREA TO CHECK THE WEATHER. THE AIR WAS CRISP AND INVIGORATING, THE SKY A CLOUDLESS AZURE BLUE. EVIDENTLY A HIGH PRESSURE FRONT HAD SWEEPED ACROSS LAKE SUPERIOR FROM CANADA, BRINGING WHAT COULD BECOME TWO OR THREE DAYS OF IDEAL WEATHER.

OVER BREAKFAST, DAD AND I DISCUSSED THE TWO "MOMENTOUS" DECISIONS WE HAD TO MAKE ABOUT THE DAY, NAMELY WHAT WOULD WE BRING FOR LUNCH, AND WHERE WOULD WE FISH THE RIVER? THE FORMER WAS EASILY RESOLVED BY CHECKING OUR SUPPLIES, AND THE LATTER CAME DOWN TO EITHER THE WEST BRANCH (OR MAIN STREAM) OF THE FOX UPSTREAM FROM THE INFLOW OF THE LITTLE FOX RIVER, OR THE EAST BRANCH OF THE FOX NEAR M-77. BOTH OF THESE CHOICES WOULD OFFER LOWER, SOMEWHAT CLEARER WATER THAT WOULD BE MORE WADEABLE, SO WE DECIDED TO START WITH THE UPPER WEST BRANCH.

AS WE WERE DRYING AND PUTTING AWAY THE DISHES FROM DINNER AND BREAKFAST, IT HIT ME. SINCE WE HAD LAUNCHED THE CANOE TWENTY FOUR HOURS EARLIER, I HAD NOT ENTERTAINED A SINGLE THOUGHT ABOUT THE STRESS AND WORRISOME SITUATION AT WORK. ALREADY THE RIVER WAS WORKING ITS MAGIC.