

LEVEN GARNISH

By John Ness

Paradoxically, fishing memories which remain freshest are those days when there has been a deviation from the constraints of "purism".

One such glorious day was an invitation to accompany two policemen from the Lothian force on a trip to Loch Leven. Jock confirmed that he had reserved a boat. It was agreed that we would rendezvous at the wharf at 8.15 a.m. the following Sunday.

My wife, Joyce, and I arrived early at Kinross. While I unpacked the car, Joyce enquired about the boat. No boat had been reserved in Jock's name. However, there were spare craft available and she hired one in our name for the day.

Meanwhile Jock and Hamish arrived. And our first lesson!

Joyce explained to Jock that his booking had not been actioned and that she had accordingly hired a boat.

Jock looked mildly alarmed and commented: "Oh lassie, no ever give yir ane name lest the craft founder on ye".

Both policemen were clearly scandalised over the extravagance implicit in Joyce's confession that she had taken out a daily insurance to cover just such a contingency.

The Scot penchant for few words had resulted in over-victualling. Both Jock and Hamish had provided lunch and drinks for four; after all Joyce and I were visitors. To avoid imposing on police generosity, Joyce had also provisioned for four. Our few carry-packs of pilsner generated furtive glances between the two policemen. They had both brought a generous supply of a concoction known locally as "Wee Heavy".

Jock coaxed the engine to life. We slipped moorings and headed for Loch Leven Island. And our second lesson.

Hamish's comment: "That wand'll no be man enough for yon fish", condemned the 6 Hardy Smuggler as inadequate. Hamish explained that "yon fish" could be large. The previous Sunday, Hamish had been on terms with a 6 lbs. 4 ozs., "tae the ounce", fish at Linlithgow. It seems the fish had been foul hooked and had broken Hamish. To the obvious question, Hamish explained that on the Tuesday he had been assigned to anti-poaching duty which included visiting Loch Linlithgow. An indignant bailiff reported that an angler had landed a fish of 6 lbs. 4 ozs., "to the ounce". The bailiff added that the fish had earlier been foul hooked. And two gentles were still impaled on the fly!

We hove to and drifted under the lee of the island. Jock was casting a long line supported by a freshening northerly wind. Our proximity to Leven Castle prompted Joyce to recount the incarceration and sufferings of Mary, Queen of Scots. Hamish's comment: "The auld bitch was afore my time", brought us back to the present!

Hamish pondered the island, the rising north wind and the lop on the water and pronounced: "There'll be no fish the day. The Loch's dour".

A long spell of casting confirmed Hamish's prognosis. We drifted south while Jock and Joyce tried their luck, also without success.

Hamish had an excellent pair of boots; strong but light, they had well bonded non-slip nylon soles. These were knee boots, but it would be worth enquiring whether the manufacturers offered a thigh wader specification. We could find no manufacturer's mark. I asked Hamish where he got them.

In reply, Hamish asked: "Do ye ken yon Fishmonger?". He named an Edinburgh establishment which had provided the citizens' needs for decades. I knew the place.

Hamish continued: "The shop was on my night beat. A kened the monger was awa' Aberdeen for herrings or kippers. These boots were on the doorstep. Weel, the monger's assistant was 'doing' the monger's wifey. Now that was no right. The assistant was breaking the Holy Commandments! Aye, yon boots are bonny! They fit well too!".

Hamish evidently rationalised that the Commandments were listed in descending order of

heinousness and that it was acceptable to invoke the eighth Commandment as retribution for violation of the seventh.

We drifted down the Loch, each casting for a spell, but without success.

Jock started the engine. We hove to under the lee of St. Serf's Island for lunch.

During lunch the sun broke through. Hamish delved in his tackle bag and produced a very smart set of Polaroid sunglasses. I decided not to question their origin.

Discussion followed as to whether it was worth fishing. Hamish inclined to the negative. Joyce, ever the Scot, pointed out that we had rented the boat for the whole day. She was reluctant to waste the hiring fee. Jock's pragmatism prevailed: "We'll no catch fish wi'out lines in the water!"

I resolved that, fair means or foul, at least one Leven trout would be caught. A twinge of conscience was suppressed by the knowledge that even Fraser Sandeman, in a less desperate predicament, had once resorted to "wums" (cf. "By Hook and By Crook", Ch. XVI).

Hamish's smile confirmed a positive reply to my question. He added: "Aye! Ah've some bonny gentles!"

From his bag Hamish produced a cannister of prime maggots packed in sawdust. I put on a No. 12 Wickhams Fancy wet fly. Hamish demonstrated the importance of dressing the final gentle so that it remained active. The masterpiece was committed.

We drifted south of St. Serf's Island yarning and solacing ourselves with the odd "Wee Heavy". Jock and Hamish continued to cast occasionally.

At about 3 p.m. my rod whipped down. Hamish watched the first run critically.

With obvious disgust he pronounced: "Damned pike! Gie it the rod and bust it, John. We're wastin' time wi' yon."

I expressed doubt as to whether it was a pike. It fought deep and hard for seven to eight minutes. At last I recovered a bit of line and coaxed it towards the surface. Hamish was gazing down the line into the water. Helped by his sunglasses, he was the first to spot the fish. Hamish's reactions were singular.

First, he urged: "John, gang canny! It's a bonny fish."

Hamish then knelt on the thwart, lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed aloud: "Dear God! A ken it's the Sabbath. But, please God, the better the day, the better the deed. Also, God, John's come an awfu' lang way for to catch yon fish. And, dear God, it's a bonny fish. Amen."

Having enlisted the Almighty's assistance in the venture, Hamish disdained my little collapsible net which had been set up during one of the longer runs. He cleared his own net for action. It was a formidable gadget. I had an ignoble suspicion that the net had accounted for many an unhooked salmon. Although the trout still had some fight, it was no match for Hamish and his net. Hamish excused the unceremonious landing with compassion: "Twas a braw fecht! Spare the beastie the suffering!"

It was indeed a bonny fish; 3 lbs. 12 ozs. and in prime condition.

Hamish checked my fly carefully, removed the gentles and dropped them in the water. He explained: "Checking the fish hadnae swallowed a gentle."

Jock and Hamish fished occasionally. Although the wind was still fresh, it had turned into a beautiful afternoon. The surroundings were enlivened by gliders over Scotlandwell and Auchmuirbridge.

Neither Hamish nor Jock had had a rise. Jock started the engine and we returned slowly arriving at the wharf about six. And an embarrassing shock!

The crowd on the wharf, like the Loch, were dour; and nothing is dourer than a frustrated Scot! Ours was the only boat with a return. They were clearly suspicious. One craggy gentleman, immaculately tweeded, demanded to know how the trout had been caught. Mr. McTaggart was obviously the dedicated purist of the local fraternity and accustomed to dominating the catch. And I am an unconvincing and indifferent liar. The situation was delicate.

Hamish defused the problem. He identified himself as one of the Police anti-poaching officers, at once securing respectability, and a psychological advantage. Hamish cofided to the McTaggart: "John here is frae South Africa an' the day he wiped wir eyes. The morn's morn he telled me yon fish lie deep. John rigged a fast sinking line on the wee Smuggler there, and just a wee pinch o' shot on a Wickhams Fancy fly. Aifter lunch an' beyond St. Serf's, John put out a long cast. On a deep, s-l-o-w retrieve the fish struck. And, mind, it was a braw fecht!"

I had some difficulty reconciling Hamish's description with reality. However, the McTaggart seemed satisfied and went off to reassure his cronies.

Hamish accompanied me to sign in the boat and record the catch; officially 3 lbs. 12.5 ozs. To the bailiff's question I replied: "Wickham's Fancy, retrieved deep." This did not conflict with Hamish's fantasy and seemed to satisfy the bailiff. He commented: "The only fish o' the day. And a beauty! Well done, Sir!"

As Hamish and I walked to the cars he whispered: "Well done lad! It was no really a lie! Ye were usin' a Wickhams Fancy! An' ye were fishin' deep!"

With a conspiratorial wink, he added: "Ye were wise no to mention the wee bit garnish!"