

THE OLD HOUSE ALONG THE STREAM

By GARRETT EVANS

The grass had only just been cut and there was the fine scent of the "new mown mead"; outside the study windows were the bright colours of flowers. The bird life at Mtunzini is extraordinary too; and below, the sea was smooth and blue.

Leaving home, the drive up into the Berg was painless. We arrived after dark: it had taken us four hours. There was some wind blowing through the grass and pines by the place and a lot of cattle lying around. We unloaded and stowed our gear. It was an attractive old place built about the turn of the century and largely unlined in the past few years. There was a marvellous atmosphere about it all. The house was deserted for the same old reason: the old people couldn't work the land any longer and the new generation had moved into the cities. The house reminded me of a small deserted farm I had the shooting on near Exeter. There one found much the same sort of house but there were overgrown apple orchards where the ivy berries and apples attracted large numbers of pheasant and woodpigeon. The countryside in the Berg was more open though, and Devon has no mountains.

We built a fire in the main fireplace as it was chilly. The living room warmed up quickly and I began to work on a few exam. papers that I had to correct that weekend. After a good dinner it was fine sitting there with my books and papers. There was the reflection of the fire and the candles on the glass in my hand. There was the pleasant smell of dust and smoke throughout the house. The wind fortunately died down outside in the pines. We turned in: the beds were comfortable but cold as hell for the first few moments.

The dawn was largely red with blue hills such as one sees in the Karoo. The countryside looked dry and the colours were remarkable. There were small white clouds moving against a sky soon grey, blue and orange. The autumn colours of the countryside were a beautiful mellow blend of reds, greens, browns and yellows. It was an area painters would find attractive.

The water in the stream was low with the continuing drought. We saw a few trout and caught none. My companion had frequently hooked 20 or more in a day. We were a little worried by even a lack of small fish in the water. Following the stream down a

canyon we saw some birds and dassies but beautiful countryside like this should have much more wildlife in it. After the Transvaal, Natal seems beautiful and green but empty.

That afternoon and evening there was some rain in the dry countryside. There was a strange light that gave everything an unreal quality. The rain striking the pasture splashed up in thousands of jets, flashing silver in the filtered sunbeams. Later by the glowing pools in the near dark there was an autumn richness that made one particularly conscious of time there by the running water. Along the stream the pools and trees took on an almost oriental appearance. At sunset and after, the willow branches and the sky's colours were reflected in the water: falling drops caused large crystalline rings on its surface. It was wonderful there beneath the mountains to pass a few hours at the evening rise. How different from Derbyshire or Devon, where one walks by mossy walls and lanes among the growing shadows, listening to the stream's flow. Then there had been the splashing of water on stone and chaffinch song.

It was good to get back to the house, to have a hot shower, change into dry clothes and sit by the fire. Even marking again was a pleasure under such circumstances. It was an excellent old house with a nice feel about it. There were a number of pictures of horses and cavalry officers in what appeared to be the 1920's and 30's. Outside in front was a large stone sundial, and cut into its lichen-covered base was a tribute to a son of the family who had fallen in North Africa. The old people had just moved into the town, and Gavin, the chap who had brought me there to fish with him, was afraid for this place he had fished since childhood. There was talk it would now be let to a Johannesburg syndicate. There was big talk of building an airstrip, etc. My friend feared the stream would then be fished out and stew ponds installed for plastic people to catch plastic trout. Too often lately that's been the pattern. But perhaps it wouldn't be leased at all.

We lolled in front of the fire till fairly late: the next morning there were large numbers of turtle doves calling in the surrounding trees. Driving back we saw lots of francolin and guineas in the general area. Bird shooting would be starting soon. Gavin began talking of an old man who had taught him a great deal about trouting and the closely related sport of bird shooting. One talks easily in a car travelling along. I thought it all sounded rather like Robert Ruark's book *The Old Man and the Boy*, that classic, possibly one of the finest things ever written on the subject of fishing and field sports.

It had been a wonderful, albeit troutless, weekend. The place was excellent, one could see that quickly enough, and the rains would come again to straighten things out. Gavin, usually quiet and restrained, went prattling on. I, usually garrulous, remained quietly driving. We missed a Zulu goat, there was the gagging of geese by a farm stream. I sat dreaming in the sunshine and was once again on a pleasant farm stream near the village of Adelsheim in Germany: it was the early 1950's and I was standing with the old man casting for trout on a glowing pool in the early evening light.