

# AUTUMN DAYS ON THE STERKFORTEIN

BY GARRETT EVANS

In the garden a cricket was calling in the last few rays of autumn sunlight. The geese were working their way along the side of the house where the first frosts hadn't yet injured the grass. With the change in the seasons the trout are now feeding more or less frantically. It seemed sensible to stop sulking in the hut in the garden and catch a brace for dinner. It's wonderful having what is very likely some of the best trouting in Southern Africa on the doorstep. One can be on the water in fifteen minutes; ten, if one pushes it hard.

They're in the grass along the edges, feeding on the small olive-coloured water daffs there. They flush them from the roots of the grass and then strain them through their gills. One can wade but a boat is clearly best. The wading areas are limited as the local farmers finally objected to people on their land; this after a series of unfortunate incidents. One's not allowed on the water either without an outboard motor. After seeing a surface as smooth as a mirror transformed within minutes into a raging sea, one appreciates the wisdom of that rule easily enough. Going up to the second big cove, one is faced with great distances. It's much like Scotland or Alaska there. In the afternoons it's wise to keep an eye out for the storms one can watch rising in the Berg. Some weeks ago I was caught out rather badly while crossing some open water. My small son and I were lucky to reach the shore. We spent most of the night there on the bank, under the up-turned boat with the sound of rain and hail drumming on the hull and the roar of the waves a few feet away. There was soft, dry grass under there and we were warm and comfortable. I calmed the boy by telling him the story of Robinson Crusoe. We enjoyed the whole thing no end, and were able to pull out sometime in the early hours of the morning. My wife, understandably, was more or less hysterical by then.

It's a big place, the water's about nine miles long and growing. The trout are big too. The average size is just under two pounds at the moment. They're growing as well. The water's rising and engulfing new food and trace elements all the time. The trout are more like salmon, or what we called in the West Country, "peal" or sea trout. They're big and fast, and fight like hell. They're firm and pink fleshed. They're the finest trout I've ever seen. One moves quietly along in a small boat, perhaps twenty feet from the shore, watching along the edge of the grass for a bulge, or a dimple, for a tail or a dorsal fin. The fish don't rise so much as wallow there. It's best to move silently, drifting before the breeze. A wet Parson's Glory, Size 12 seems best; a Walker's Yellow Nymph isn't quite as good. The fish are taking in water often only inches deep. It's not stream fishing but it's marvellous fun.

Now casting into the grassy shallows, I notice a cobra frogging, and then another big trout is hooked. The line rushes through the water making that hissing sound. These fish actually strip line off the screaming reel. Formerly I'd only read about such things. It's best to play them on the reel too, for they're tricky. The trout comes in; on a two-ounce rod this takes time. He's in the net, the priest descends and he's in the creel.

At the beginning of autumn I've had nearly twenty of these big fish in a day. That lot would have weighed around thirty-five pounds if I'd kept them. Apparently as one grows closer to death, one often acquires more respect for life. There is, it would seem, a type of Buddhism that develops with the onset of middle age; in the hunter, in the fisherman. With me, it means more fish are being released. Writing to a fishing crony near Exeter, I carefully described the liberation of a three-pounder. This person always regarded me as a frightful liar, but now believes my lies to have reached psychopathic proportions. Releasing trout is good for the soul, as well as for the next season's fishing. It is a *beau geste* in a world that badly requires such gestures. It's escape we seek as much as fish; pilgrimages to sanity and a lost serenity, shafts of Mozart amidst the cacophonies of our contemporaries.

The season's drawing to an end. Standing out in the mealies just before dark, there's a quiet, lonely type of desolation. There's a thrilling sort of loneliness beneath the mountains. I recalled an almost engulfed ant hill of a few days back, with all the ants out on top rushing about. It was rather like a city overtaken by some natural catastrophe. One has to watch out for ant hills underwater in the shallows for they often break sheer pins with considerable ease. It's months before these structures dissolve.

In the mealies, I continued to indulge myself in a wistful vision. The moon was

coming up over the mountains. Ghostly regiments of dry mealie stalks rattled in the breeze. It would be months now before the return of the warm summer days. On summer mornings my springers would leap from the truck, to crash into the water. Often then, they'd put up a hundred or more swallows and martins that had been dozing there in the sun along the fence and along the bank of the landing. It was fine to stand there in total solitude, shouting under that explosion of small, swift, graceful birds by the water's edge, with the distances, in every direction, stretching far away. But now there's frost and the swallows and martins have largely left. Still, there are good hatches of fly on the sunny afternoons. The veld is changing colour, the guinea-fowl are regrouping in their respective coveys. The young blesbuck are now not so easily distinguished from the adults. The teal are flying in, their numbers increasing. There are large numbers of waders of various sizes; also crane, ibis, goose and, unfortunately, cormorant.

Between the cormorants and the barbel, a heavy toll of trout are getting picked off. Trout with wounds on the side from cormorants aren't at all unusual. There have been bags of trout in which fifty per cent have such wounds. Several times large barbel have chased hooked fish whilst they were being reeled in. Once after a good fight I had a two-pound trout lying in the grass by the boat in a few inches of water. Turning round to pick up my net, I turned back to find the fish gone and the line running out quickly. It took about fifteen minutes to get the trout back. The barbel couldn't be moved with the light flyrod. But he'd run when the outboard motor was started again and again. The trout eventually floated up, much gummed and pulled about. It should be possible to keep the cormorant and barbel numbers down. But they'll require a bit of regular attention.

This corner of the Free State is a pretty part of the country — open but with mountains almost always in sight. Out over the water, mountains are particularly prominent. Often I move along collecting pieces of driftwood from the edges of the water. Frequently these are just the right log size for the fireplace. They keep turning up after every storm. There's a long row of them on one side of the house. Now with the cold nights it's starting to be moved into the fireplaces.

Today was lovely and typical of autumn. As evening came on I lazed in the boat. There were half a dozen fat trout in the creel and the low "chinking" of Blacksmith plovers along the shore. Various columns of insects were rising like smoke into the air, and all around that sup-sup sound as trout took spent spinners off the surface. Autumn is clearly a time of reflection. I'd been in this area almost exactly a year now. The previous autumn I'd had no boat, and took a fairly dim view of the dam. The winter had been spent bird shooting with the spaniels on the farms in the vicinity. Like the trouting, the bird shooting is excellent. Then, with the trouting, the summer had been wonderful. I've had the use of several boats. One, a pram dinghy, the tender of a friend's yacht, is a delight with a little 2 h.p. Yamaha on it. A perfect little boat for going quietly right into the grass after trout. One needs a long handle on the motor so as to sit just in the centre and keep the bow down. Everything needed: net, priest, fly box etc. is then within easy reach. It's a fine little boat with great character. One can sit, or better lie, in it reflecting, meditating, contemplating.

As I may have said before, this has been an excellent season, certainly as any on Dartmoor or the Upper Teign, better than the ones on Jeremiah's Run in the Blue Ridges of Virginia. Once in a while I hear from friends in those places, friends unseen for ten years or more now. There is about such letters, the sound of a lonely horn in the woods, a long way off.