

UNDER THE SHADE OF THE TREES

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AT the evening rise it's unusually pleasant drifting before a breeze, gently dipping an oar and moving silently under the overhanging pines and bluegums. Frequently then I find myself thinking back to the moorlands in the North and West of England where I would sit under the trees at the end of the day packing trout in ferns: a layer of trout, then a layer of ferns. On the lakes and streams where I do most of my trouting here in South Africa it's much the same. Often there are the same steeply rising banks of moss-covered rocks and trees. Best of all, there frequently is the same sound of water on stone. There's a magic about such settings; little wonder that there were many religions that once peopled springs, lakes and streams. There is still magic in the solitude and sparkle of water and in the filtered sunlight. On my favourite water there are large numbers of trout in the ripples too, giving a good excuse to be there. Looking down, the plants and stones under water are struck by the sun; on the surface there are floating bits of blossom and seed. Above, one can see intricately formed insects moving in the sunbeams. What a pleasure to move through such surroundings.

The local lake is called the Dap Naude. There's a good stream above and below it. It looks like a lake in Germany or Sweden, or a Scottish loch. That is should be in Africa is surprising to visiting friends. The area is hill country with a fairly heavy rainfall; there are vast pine forests and a great deal of tree farming. It is totally unspoiled fishing in this part of the world; I rarely see another angler. Approaching the place I can see my lonely rowboat on the bank far below. The water generally is smooth except for the rings of the rising trout. The lake is used for drinking water and is crystal clear: sitting in the boat after pushing off, the bottom is clearly visible at 25 feet. This was once one of the finest streams in the Transvaal; the building of a dam has done no damage but rather created a far larger breeding space, and the stream above and below remains the same. All the trout here are wild fish. They have bred well over the past century or so for there are too many fish if anything. The angling pressure is light. I have the whole area largely to myself for R10 a year, two rowboats are provided free.

The wildlife of the area probably regard this lake as an improvement to the stream, particularly the ducks, geese, and other water birds. Bush buck, duiker and wild pig can be seen drinking at the edge, and monkeys often climb out on branches over the water.

It's a handy place, not far from where I live, so that it's possible to get away from the daily routine at any time. Not long ago, while sitting at home, I looked up while drowsing over some books; the sensation was of looking up from years ago. Above the fireplace was a trout I'd brought from Devon. It had been seven years ago that sunny July day that I'd waded into the Upper Teign far below Clifford Bridge in the woods. How fine to muse on it now. How glad I am that I took the trouble to have that trout mounted, for that July was the end of a marvellous phase that had lasted several years. But then it's hardly less idyllic here. Pulling the small boat up and

doing a few trout for lunch, I lay back looking at the trees above: some dark green, some far lighter with the sun showing through. It was still the life of Huckleberry Finn.

Earlier that day, setting out at dawn, I rowed between rising columns of mist. I started casting almost at once for the water was covered with rings. Near the usual starting point is a bank made up of thousands of small stones; this slopes down into the water to a depth of about 30 feet. Here the best all-round South African fly, the Walker Killer, is most effective. The browns and rainbows in this part of the world are very partial to a small fresh water crab, and the fly that is meant to imitate it looks most natural moving along among such stones.

While keeping the boat under the shade of the trees it's often easy to look down at the trout as the fly approaches them. That day I hooked and lost one of over two pounds that way. He was in about 10 feet of water as the Walker, on a quick sinking line, came into sight. He took it and turned as I tightened. He wouldn't come up at all and thrashed about over the bottom, eventually tangling the cast on a branch under the water. There was nothing I could do but watch him before he broke loose and cleared off; no doubt the fish was grinning as he swam away. Several big ones went into the creel that day though, and then I turned to my favourite fishing: stalking the small silver ones that feed in the ripples of the open water toward evening. They are never more than half a pound but always in beautiful condition and always a gleaming silver colour. These take either a dry fly or a Walker just beneath the surface. I had ten of them.

Toward the top of the lake where the largest stream enters, the fish seem to gather. By simply letting one's line out and then rowing quietly around many trout can be taken. Trolling, though a lazy method, is great fun and must be done with a close eye on the rod as the fish hit hard and a number of rods have been taken.

Strangely, the trout seem most concentrated in the bed of the original stream now concealed by the lake. Perhaps this is because those places are deepest.

In this water most of the trout are rainbows. The browns stay in the faster water above and below the lake. The rainbows also seem to stay just along the edges.

Not using the oars much and drifting quietly with the wind along these shady banks almost always pays off. A sinking line is essential as the best fish are deep. In the evening it's possible to change to a floating line and use the dry fly. Later in the season the insect life seems to increase enormously and the bulk of this falls from the trees. The trout are then more active on the surface. The flying ants are sometimes blown out over the water in swarms, causing a furious rise everywhere. To catch a trout on a dry fly is always more fun and the dry fly usually requires more skill.

Having grown used to small streams where one wades and a trout is easily run up on a sandbar or the bank, I started fishing from a boat without a net. This proved to be a great error. Also, handling a boat while casting took some learning. I still prefer small moorland, woodland or hill streams. They are more a living thing, and I have found many here, but now I also see that a larger body of water can have character and variation as well. I've seen this lake change several times during a day as a result of light, cloud formation, wind, weather and so forth. The weather is generally changeable; several times it was necessary to spend an hour or so sitting under the boat pulled up on one of the banks and used like a lean-to while thunder rolled and the rain beat down. My springer spaniel then huddles next to me, looking out and shivering. She

obviously enjoys sitting up under there, but prefers to be out on the water in the bow watching out for ducks, geese, small buck and monkeys. She always spends a good deal of time too, peering down into the depths and always grows excited when a trout is hooked and dashing around.

Coming back in the evening with a number of plump trout is a fine feeling, particularly when rowing with a gentle breeze, the water a sea of shimmering purple and red. Then, moving just ahead of night, there is generally the scent of the pines and bluegums and frequently the Hadedá Ibis calling high overhead as they come in to the roost.