



—“We once more set out in our jeep.”

WITH THE BROWN TROUT IN ITALY

By John Galbraith

WHEN we were first stationed in Southern Italy in the vicinity of Bari our thoughts often turned towards the streams back at the Cape. Then we would look at the Blue Appenines in the distance and wonder if, perhaps, there might be some trout there. However, our searches for a trout stream were in vain. The local peasants had always the same story: “The trout are in the north—in the Alps,” but the Alps, at that stage of the war, might have been on the moon for all the good they were to us!

A few months later we moved into beautiful mountainous country on the river Volturno—densely wooded slopes, together with clear sparkling mountain streams.

Here at last we felt we would find the Italian brown trout. “Ah, yes,” said the local folk, “here there were trout, but the ‘Tedeschi’ (Germans) have bomba—and now no trout.” This was a bitter blow, but by now we had more or less resigned ourselves to the inevitable and were fly-fishing in the Volturno for the local fish, which ran up to about two pounds and were not unlike the Clanwilliam yellowfish. We had one genuine professionally-tied fly, a Teal and Yellow, but he was kept in reserve in case we ever *did* actually find a trout stream! Our usual fly was a home-tied affair; the wings consisted of various assortments

from poor unfortunate local chickens—feathers having a bronze tint being quite the best, the body being black sock wool tied around the shank, and the tail a small thin strip from our red shoulder tabs. This all added up to a savage-looking Zulu fly—gone very wrong!

One evening one of my sergeants burst into my tent and produced, lo' and behold! a brown trout of about half a pound. We could hardly believe our eyes, but after a fusillade of questions we elicited from the now rather stunned N.C.O. the fact that he had seen the trout floating dead on the surface of the main river, killed, he supposed, by one of the many hand grenades thrown in by the Italians every day—their one and only method of catching fish in the neighbourhood. Well this, of course, redoubled our determination to catch at least one trout, the question being just exactly from which of the many mountain streams this fish had come?

AN ISOLATED COMMUNITY

The most likely lead seemed to be an isolated upland mountain valley, which had a stream rising from a natural amphitheatre of mountains which topped the 6,000 feet mark. The very next week-end we once more set out in our jeep, and after negotiating a truly magnificent mountain pass we found ourselves in a different world to that existing in the river valleys below, and in Southern Italy in general. There were two villages by the names of Gallo and Letino, the latter being at the head of the valley and close to the stream for which we were making. The mountain folk in these two villages, we learned from the English-speaking farmers (several of whom had worked for the Ford Company in the States), had descended from Greeks and Turks who had settled in the district some 500 years ago. They had remained here quite undisturbed by the surrounding people, and had retained all their old customs. They were so isolated, in fact, from the outside world that many inhabitants of these villages had never been out of this tableland with the one steep pass as its only outlet. The men were clad in black velvet waistcoats with white lace collars and cuffs, and black knee-breeches buttoning at the knee. The women were very picturesque with either white blouses or short brocaded velvet coats, and full heavy skirts of bright-coloured wool. These skirts were green if the woman was unmarried, red if married, and black if a widow, so the local men knew just where they stood after the first glance! On Sundays, to the accompaniment of tolling bells, they formed singing processions as they filed slowly up to a monastery overlooking the village from a cliff above.

We found the stream to be very low, clear, and having practically no flow; very like some of our Cape streams in midsummer. We worked really hard that day, even venturing to use our precious Teal and Yellow! True, some sort of fish had a wild and violent rise at midday—not that this availed us at all—and we were just about to give up in disgust as the evening shadows began to lengthen when I had a tiny little rise and tug. Frantic in case I lost my only chance of seeing what the fish were, I played him as if he was a two-pounder! On landing him safely I had the immense satisfaction of seeing a four-inch fish—but all those four inches were brown trout!

During the next two weeks we had a lot of rain and were unable to visit our mountain valley. Instead, we chased poor unfortunate roosters hither and thither, trying to supplement our stock of wild and woolly Zulus. When we managed to get there again we found an extraordinary change—our little trickle had become a brimming, sparkling stream, and the trout went for our home-made flies as though they had no other interest in life. We must have had every one of sixty trout that day, but all but about six were returned to the stream. They were small, few being over threequarters of a pound, but the Teal and Yellow accounted for a fine fish of about one pound and four ounces. They

were quite the scrappiest trout I have ever met, possibly because the water of this stream was always very cold; and, quite obviously, they had never seen a trout-fly before and made a concerted rush every time one fell near them.

This mountain valley had the most gorgeous autumn colours I have seen, extremely vivid, and lasting ever so much longer than they do out here.

During the autumn we met an old man who spoke English, and his son who had been a sergeant-major in the Italian army. This couple owned an old house with a stone barn attached, down by the river, and the old man invariably extended hospitality to us. Whenever he met us he would enquire if we had caught any trout as yet by saying: "Hullo, my boys, have you caught any fish?" and if the answer was in the negative he would exclaim, "Oh, My God. Oh, My God!" and suitably cross his breast.

A WINTER'S TALE

At the advent of winter we were about to move further north, so we persuaded our colonel to allow us a week-end up in the valley, chiefly, I think, because he liked trout for breakfast, and we had generally managed to achieve that! A heavy fall of snow had transformed our valley into a world of white. The river banks were inches deep with snow. We had excellent fishing on the Saturday afternoon, and then made preparations for the night with a certain amount of foreboding. The barn with its store had a fireplace, so we elected to lay out our bedrolls there. We had hardly finished when bedlam broke out suddenly on the other side of the barn! We rushed out just in time to see the old farmer's pig with our best trout in his mouth speeding over the darkening field,



—*"the old farmer's pig with our best trout."*

hotly pursued by the farmer's son—while the old fellow, in a perfect frenzy of rage, was hobbling around on his one stick and slapping with the other at any unfortunate chicken within reach, all the time shouting "Uno Bastardo! Uno Bastardo"—the meaning of which I won't bother to translate. I might add that the trout was restored to us eventually, changed both in shape and weight.

That night was certainly some experience! If we left the door open the icy blast was not far short of fatal; if the door was closed the fire just about suffocated us with smoke—the chimney having been blocked by snow. How we

lasted out I know not, but we did, and awoke next morning to find that further snow had fallen during the night. However, the day was bright and clear, and with the river running strongly we were all set for a great day's fishing, helped along by a glorious breakfast of frizzled trout from the pan! Shortly after starting we were all in trouble, as after a few casts we were unable to make the line shoot or, for that matter, to go through the rings at all. On examination we found that the water on the line, as we retrieved, simply froze in every ring, and the line would be firmly iced to the rod! As for the landing of a fish—well, we had no net, so we had to use our hands, and after a fish had been secured it took about five minutes to restore some feeling to those members!

We had only two home-made rods between the three of us, and we made an arrangement by which if you either touched or caught a fish you had to hand over immediately to the fellow who was without a rod at the moment. Very often a rod would change hands after each cast, particularly during the mid-day and evening rises. These trout invariably struck so hard that we always felt that "this time it was a big one!" but they all ranged between six and twelve ounces, except two which were over the pound. Larger fish were there, no doubt, and we actually heard of trout of two and a half pounds and four pounds being taken, but our "Heath Robinson" flies never quite rose to the mark of fooling one of those old warriors.

All three of us have vowed to revisit this unspoilt old world in the mountains, with its friendly folk, glorious scenery and scrappy trout, but next time with a Hardy rod and a blue dun to meet the big fellows! But don't ask us directions to the stream—it will always remain a jealously guarded secret—can you blame us?

THE FALL OF THE MIGHTY

Whilst on the subject of trout fishing I feel that the relation of an experience which befell a friend of mine in the Alps will not come amiss.

He had been appointed as temporary Town Major at a small town close to the Swiss-Italian frontier, situated in a mountainous valley abounding with small lakes and fast-flowing streams. He was duly welcomed as a saviour by the local Mayor and other town dignitaries, and settled down to try to straighten out things such as rations, transport, billeting for troops, etc.

After several days of (according to his version) hard work he summoned the Mayor to his presence and asked if there was any trout fishing in the neighbourhood, and was informed that the best stream flowed past the village itself and that it was full of trout! Of course, that completely overshadowed the prospect of work for that afternoon, and he told the Mayor that he would go fishing after lunch, and would definitely not be interviewing anybody.

Eagerly my friend, accompanied by batman, climbed into his jeep and set out for the stream, but he was a trifle dismayed when he found that the entire population of the village was sitting quietly on the banks awaiting him. On his arrival they all rose just as silently to their feet. Realising that it was too late to beat a hasty retreat, he strode to the stream's edge and tied on a fly. At the first cast all the villagers sat down again without a murmur and watched the South African Commandante with the greatest of interest. I might add that all the fishing here was done by spinning, so that fly-fishing was something quite new to them.

After a few fruitless casts my friend had the grave misfortune to hook a sunken snag in a foaming rapid. Nothing daunted, and acting as though getting hooked-up in a rapid was an occurrence essential to fly-fishing, he braved



the icy cold white water. He found the snag without much difficulty, but, whilst endeavouring to free the fly—horror of horrors!—he lost his footing and sat down with a mighty splash in the very middle of the rapid, and only just managed to save his cap which was making off with the current. He got to his feet and fairly glared at the assembled multitude, trying to detect just one person with a grin so that he could give vent to his rage. They sat as if made of marble—not a flicker of expression was evident on any face—not a sound from them. My friend staggered out soaked to the skin but still determined

—*“horror of horrors, — he lost his footing.”* to put up a show, and gallantly fished for another hour and a half, nearly stiff with cold. As he climbed into his jeep every person there assembled rose again and stood in complete silence as the Commandante drove off.

A few months later, when he was handing over the reins of Town Major, the Mayor invited my friend to attend a farewell lunch given in his honour. At the conclusion of this affair the Mayor made a long speech thanking him and extolling his virtues for having looked after them all so well. He ended his speech by turning to my friend and saying in Italian: “There is one other thing for which we all wish to really thank you, and that is for giving us our first real laugh since the Germans marched in!”