



Fishing around the Monaro

Douglas Stewart



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Fishing around the Monaro

A selection from *The Seven Rivers*

Douglas Stewart

Illustrated by Margaret Coen

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Foreword

ANYBODY who starts to read this book and thinks it is vaguely familiar, will, if he has read *The Seven Rivers*, be quite right. It is made up from the Australian chapters of that book of my trout fishing reminiscences. I do not, I hasten to add, particularly object to the New Zealand chapters which were also in *The Seven Rivers*, still less to the land where my fishing began. Those chapters are omitted simply because my publisher wanted a book located around the Monaro—and New Zealand seemed rather a long way from it.

I don't quite know what the chapter on the Duckmaloi is doing in the selection, since that river of many memories is away over towards Oberon and Bathurst in western New South Wales; but some of the waters of the Monaro do at least get a mention in it and perhaps, like the chapter called "The Fish That Got Away", it will serve as an introduction to the more serious business of fishing around the Monaro—a district which, whatever the maps may say, is here to be interpreted as anywhere from Brindabella to Kosciusko and Kiandra.

The book isn't intended to be a guide to the fishing in those areas. It could hardly be that, since the Snowy Mountains Authority has taken the liberty of shooting some of my best beloved streams into tunnels or drowning them in its dams. Nor is it a how-to-do-it book, for I have never really bothered very much about that. You buy the right gear from a proper fishing-tackle shop; put on any dry fly you think likely; learn by practice to cast it without getting hooked in every bush along the stream; and keep out of

sight—and that is about all there is to it. It is a book written, as I said in the foreword to the original edition, simply for the pleasure of going fishing again in retrospect along my favourite rivers. I hope that other fishermen will also enjoy walking along them.

Douglas Stewart

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Acknowledgments

"The Fish That Got Away" was first published in the *Bulletin* and "The Badja" in *Blackwood's*. All chapters are reprinted from *The Seven Rivers*, Angus and Robertson, 1966.

1



The Fish That Got Away

OF COURSE it is always the biggest and best fish that get away; and anyone who maintains otherwise and disbelieves an angler when he says he has lost a trout of half a ton knows not the running streams and the wiles of their inhabitants.

They get away simply because they are so big, these monsters that haunt our dreams. They leap, and the hook tears out. They race for rapids and waterfalls, down from one pool to another fifty yards away, and the frail cast breaks when you try to check them. They are old and cunning and live among snags from which no angler can extricate them. They have been hooked before and know the perfect procedure for circumventing you.

Or do they? Certainly it seems so. At Fred's on the Badja—Fred's is the name of a pool; and the Badja is near Cooma—a fine big rainbow who knew exactly where he was going rushed straight under a submerged rock-ledge, instantly cut the cast, and left me sorrowing to this day. I hooked a three-pound brown trout in the Tangatara in New Zealand long ago and he dashed upstream from his pool and climbed a fallen tree. Nobody can tell me he did not know it was there. He knew precisely what to do. When hooked, climb a tree.

Sea fish, it seems, do not have such good memories. At the mouth of the Awakino where the river curves through the black sands to meet, past the headland, the creaming breakers of Taranaki's west

coast, I caught a kahawai (the fish miscalled "salmon" in Australia), and in a little rock-pool I had half a dozen live herring, themselves apparently little disturbed by their recent transfer from the river, swimming about for bait. These are the kahawai's natural food; and when I caught my kahawai and put him in the pool he at once, obviously without a thought for the experience of taking a hook, being dragged ashore and travelling a hundred yards or so over the sands, set about chasing those herrings up and down and around the pool until he had gobbled the lot.

Apparently the one thought in his fishy brain, if it can be called a thought, was that kahawai eat herring. I had to knock him on the head and operate on him to retrieve my bait. And I got from him, for good measure, an extra supply of bait in the shape of three or four more herring which he had previously devoured in the ocean.

Of course any fish of the ocean is but a poor relation of the trout, coarser in habit, dimmer in wit. There are trout, sometimes, that seem to be similarly short-memored; but if trout have no recollection of having been hooked, how is one to explain the conduct of those titans which have clearly grown too wise to rise to a bait?

There were four or five wonderful brown trout, six-pounders each of them, if not more, at which, when I lived in New Zealand, we used to gaze from the road-bridge over the Kaupokonui every Sunday on our way out to fish the more generous waters of the Tangatara, the Mangahume, or the Waiau. Nothing, when we tackled them, would induce those fish to move: no fly, dry or wet, no spinning Devon or Wisden, no "creeper" from under a stone, not the fattest worm from the fowlyard.

Had they been hooked a hundred times and become utterly scornful of all the clumsy mechanisms of fishermen? Could they instantly detect in their dim underworld the sheen of an all-but-invisible gut cast, the shaft of the tiniest brown hook? Was it, as I am more inclined to believe, that we never tried them with the right bait at the right time? Or was it, since they lived immediately below the Kaponga dairy factory and fed on curd—a deplorable habit of Taranaki trout—that they were so bloated with this degenerate diet that they were never interested in anything else?

One answer is as good as another; but there they remained for years, those colossal, shadowy fish in their pool below the cliff, sombre, mysterious, and uncatchable.

And how they do haunt the mind, these fish that were never landed! In fishing it is as in any other art: mankind demands a conclusion to its dramas so that, at least within the limited area selected for the battleground, the universe may make sense. The hero and the heroine of the romantic novel must be married; the master criminal must be caught and, offstage, hanged; even Hamlet must kill the king at last: and the fish, if he is not to wander for ever in limbo, floating loose to the surface of dreams, must be brought to the net; and, I think, for we partake of the nature of the cat—not to say the lion—must be not merely grassed but brought home to be admired and devoured by the spouse and the children.

Even a sea fish, if it is large or lost in circumstances sufficiently bizarre, haunts the mind like an unfinished symphony, like "Kubla Khan", with romantic unfulfilment.

I remember a gigantic coral-cod, twenty pounds, perhaps, or sixty for all I know, which my stepmother, Anne Stewart, from our tourist launch rocking in the swell off an outcrop of the Barrier Reef, heaved up inch by inch until, just as it was near enough to the surface for us to glimpse, it straightened the hook and, ghostly and gigantic, sank back to the depths again like the Old Man of the Sea.

I remember some fish unknown, a kingfish I always hoped, for I have never caught one of that noble tribe, which, superbly powerful and heavy, raced away with my line through the blue waters off Red Head at Russell until it reached that point I dreaded where (to my eternal shame) there was a tangle on the reel; and, straining prodigiously on the line for a moment while I waited for the inevitable to happen, snapped the strong cuttyhunk and away. I remember a Thing, lolling in the surf near Lake Cathie, on the New South Wales north coast, too big to reel in; and the hook, at last, pulling out.

I remember a stout snapper at Kawhia, not an outsize fish for those waters but a twelve- or fourteen-pounder all the same, which, when it broke free and swirled back into the ocean, came near enough to taking me with it. . . .

Round the point from the Beacon at Kawhia was a tiny bay, sheltered by rocks from the tide, and there, filling in time till slack-water at the heads, I hooked my snapper. The deep water, where an occasional fish would wander past on its way to the harbour mouth, lay over a steep sandbank; and in the excitement I hardly noticed

that my hand-line was cutting deeper and deeper into the sand as I pulled one way and the snapper the other. It cut in so deep at last that it stuck fast, just where the topmost of my three hooks was tied. The fish was anchored to the sandbank.

I could see it weaving in the green water, huge and pale. Instead of giving it some slack line, when I daresay it would have pulled itself clear, I heaved on the line till I broke it at the point where the hooks began. I said goodbye to that fish; but there he still was, incredibly, swirling about on the bottom hook, still anchored to the sandbank. I rushed waist-deep into the water, plunged my hand down to grab the line bristling with hooks, wrenched it free of the sand, and for a moment stood holding the fish on the line at the edge of the bank. He looked enormous; it was like holding a wild horse.

Then with a mighty flurry, wrenching at the line in my grasp, he straightened the hook out and disappeared into the green depths; and it was only then, or afterwards recapturing him on the edge of sleep, that the interesting possibility occurred to me that if he had heaved just a fraction harder, making the line slip in my hands where I grasped it between the top hooks, he might well have hooked me too; and both of us could have gone together from the sandbank.

How you would fight your way back to the shore, hooked to a twelve-pound snapper in deep water, I don't quite know; but—like some of the big-game fishermen who have occasionally got themselves tangled with a swordfish at Russell—it would have been a great catch for the fish.

But if a snapper or a potential kingfish, hooked by blind chance in the obscure immensity of the ocean, can thus sometimes make himself memorable, how much more so is the solitary trout, whose capture, if you are not just insipidly dangling a worm, is the drama of one man against one fish, seen rising or feeding in his clear element and fished for with all the skill and finesse at your command—scared by a single rash movement, the stumble of a foot, the shadow of the rod, a crinkle of the cast or the tiniest splash of the fly upon the surface; capricious in his choice of food; needing infinite care, in the midst of all the excitement, to bring to the net with your light tackle; never safe even then, until he is lifted clear out of the water without fumbling or clumsiness, then unhooked with a firm grip in his gills

well up the bank away from the rushes through which he can still wriggle back to the river . . . always notable in his capture and doubly so if you lose him.

What is the most harrowing way in which you can lose a trout? One that caused me quite exceptional agony was a fish that simply rose once to look at the bait and then was seen no more. It was in the Tangatara one golden morning; and it was the hugest fish that ever I lost. It was so big that I don't even believe in it myself. And yet I saw it.

I dropped my worm that morning into the head of a small pool, just above the shallows where the cattle crossed; and, as I watched the bait go slowly turning in the current to where the pool deepened against the yellow clay bank, something so enormous rose up, floated up, loomed up leisurely from the bottom, with mouth agape, with brown fins gently wavering on the vast pale spotted body, that I could hardly believe it was a trout. Ten pounds, twelve pounds, I could not have denied that it was a twenty-pound fish—such things are possible. And as it rose, steadfast and unbelievable, there was no doubt whatsoever that it meant to take the bait.

Somehow I moved. I twitched the rod with the slightest involuntary movement; the worm twitched with it, just the slightest jerk away from the mighty jaws that were even then closing upon it; and down, slowly down, without flurry as befitted his dignity, but irrevocably down and down, fading out of sight again, sank that great fish for ever.

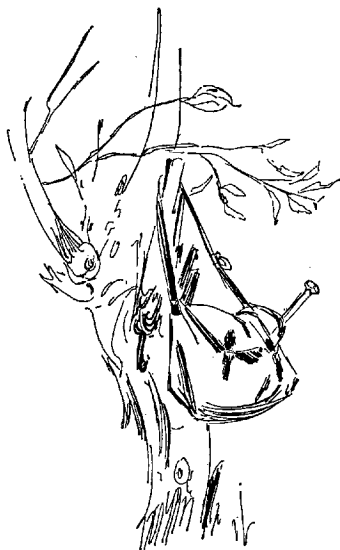
I cast again and again. I crept upstream and—reputedly an infallible device—simulated a flood by stirring mud into the current, down which I let my worm float as if newly washed in from the bank. I tried what flies I had; I tried the minnow. But never again that day or any other day could I rouse that triton from the depths.

But can you really claim to have lost a fish that you never even hooked? It is a point that adds to the agony.

Perhaps one has more right to be grieved by those fish that go further than this vision of the Tangarakau and, momentarily before you lose them, take the worm, the fly, or the spinner, and calmly spit it out again; or, hooked for one wild second, break free in the first leap: like that delectable rainbow I lost high up the Awakino, the day I caught a six-pounder.

I do not, I am relieved to say, claim this fish to have been a twenty-

pounder. But whether he was two pounds lighter than my six-pounder or, as I swore at the time in the first agony of losing him, two pounds heavier, he was a notable fish; and the way he appeared and vanished makes him a peculiarly poignant memory: for, away up there among the ranges, wading down the silver waters through the bush, I floated a locust lightly down the current and, just where the stream divided at a big rock, bang went the locust, high in the air behind the rock as the reel screamed leapt the beautiful shining trout—and that, as he tossed the hook out, was the end of him. . . . A four-, a six-, optimistically an eight-pounder, silver and rosy as the rainbow from which he



took his name, who looked at me once over the top of a rock: so I remember him.

Again, there are the fish, whether large or merely respectable, that you lose in freakish circumstances: like the three-pound brown which Fin Maslin hooked with a bee from the bridge high above the huge green pools of the Maunganui and which he lost most lamentably, for no visible reason, after he had played it from the bridge and clambered down the cliff into the water to lead it upstream to a landing-place; and like the three-pounder I myself lost in the Tangarakau when it

raced downstream in a swirling, flood-yellowed rapid and dived through a barbed-wire fence.

And again, it is quite satisfactorily painful, up to a point, to lose someone else's fish for him through some folly in beaching or netting: like the four-pounder in Pound Creek, which lies so heavily upon my conscience, for it was David Campbell's fish and I knocked it off his line for him.

Pound Creek, running flat and shallow and tiny between its tussocks to join the Badja at Countegany, was supposed to be teeming with trout. Perhaps at times it was, if the fish came up it from the river to spawn; or perhaps that was only a legend born of the fact that one quite uncatchable six-pounder was always to be seen in the first pool you came to, while another big fish, about four pounds, also utterly immune from temptation, invariably leaped clean out of the water, half a dozen times during the day, from the gleaming round reedy pool which was the next you encountered.

The stream, so far as my experience goes, never lived up to its promises; but there was one pool, far downstream across the boggy flats and broken-down granite spurs, where I have taken, on occasion, a few pretty fish: and it was there, where the long pool lay under the high red bank, sandy at the run-in and wide among reeds and watercress at the tail, that David Campbell hooked his four-pounder. So far as I remember when, perched above the stream on a tall granite boulder, he brought it flapping to the backwater beside his rock and asked me to net it for him, I simply scooped it into the net and then tipped it out again. Well, I always did think that was "my" pool.

At any rate, out went the trout; and, grieving for his loss, down with a mighty splash, waist-deep into the water, leapt the poet. I did myself once catch a trout in New Zealand by sitting on it—I fell over when trying to beach it with my foot—but exactly what Campbell hoped to accomplish by jumping on his four-pounder in deep water I have never been able to determine. However, it was a memorable sight, like a waterspout. . . . I take it as one of the noblest acts of forgiveness in human history that all Campbell remarked when at length, dripping like a grampus he emerged from the depths, was, "Oh well, I was getting a bit sorry for that fish, anyhow."

But far sadder than lost fish that belong to someone else—most grievous and most beautiful of all except for the occasional glimpses of a dream-fish like the monster in the Tangarakau—are the really

big fish you lose after you have fought them long enough to be reasonably hopeful of landing them.

I do not know which of the two fish—David Campbell's in the long pool where Micalong Creek meets the Goodradigbee at Wee Jasper, or my own in the vast glittering circle of Fred's in the Badja—was really the bigger (mine, I trust): but Lord, what fish they were!

Never shall I forget David Campbell, purple with cold, elated with a defeat that was infinitely more worthwhile than most victories, wading back to the bank and the rum after (with brief intervals for food and sleep) two whole days in the icy waters of that mountain stream pursuing a single trout. It was—all fair-minded men must admit—at least an eight-pounder. And fish were scarce that time at Wee Jasper. He spotted it beside a rock, far out in waist-deep water, and for those two whole days he fished for it. He tried it with every fly in his box—as I, lower down the stream, was trying every fly I had on a modest three-pounder, until at last, late on the second day, it took a March Brown. And so, too, at last, did Campbell's big one rise to a fly, and leapt, and flashed in the afternoon sun, and raced up the pool and circled and leapt and raced again; and then, for no good reason and when its capture seemed fairly sure, broke free and was gone.

I had not fished for my own immortal giant in Fred's for two solid consecutive days; but I had known him longer than that, and so lamented him all the more.

I knew his habits. I had watched him feeding along the fringe of waterlilies by the shore, or at the top of the pool where the stream rippled out from the overhanging tea-tree and suddenly widened into a waterhole shining and enormous. I had fished for him before—with never the remotest sign of interest from him—following him and trying to anticipate his rises as he cruised along the lily-bank. I suspected that he lived on water-beetles. I knew he was a big fellow—though who could have dreamed, who could have dared to dream he was as big as all that?

I fished for him that last bright morning, seeing no rise but knowing where he ought to be. I crept up to the edge of the backwater and dropped my Tup's Indispensable over the lilies; and with one almighty swirl he took it—and there he was racing across the pool, that magnificent seven-pound rainbow, only a few ounces lighter than David Campbell's, if that; leaping, surely an eight-pounder if



not more—six times in all he leapt, with my heart in my mouth each time for fear I should lose him; rushing away out over the perilous submerged rocks, across to the far bank where the dangerous wattles dipped their branches into the water, back to the centre of the pool with such a weight and drag on the line that I was certain the cast would never stand it; leaping again with his gigantic body silver over the blue water, racing off once more until there was barely ten feet of line left on the reel—and I had no backing.

Slowly he began to come in, inch by inch, ounce by ounce—I really do think he may have been up to ten pounds, but hardly more. I was afraid of the snags near the edge—nasty-looking submerged logs; I was afraid of the waterlilies; I wondered how ever I could fit him into the net.

But I needn't have worried about any of those things; for when he was so close that I could see him plainly, swimming in about six feet of water, a colossal shadow, dark-backed and silver-flanked, suddenly the line went slack.

And that was my fatal mistake. I thought he was off, and he wasn't. He had taken a sharp little run towards me, incredibly swift and sudden, and when I swung back the rod to pull the fly out of the water he was still on. But one wag of his head, with the grip of the hook

loosened by that momentary slackening, and he was gone indeed. I sat on the bank and I shook.

If only I had not let the line go slack—if only I had allowed for his great power and speed even when he was coming to the net. . . . But the sun shone on the white sally-gums and the wide blue pool; and was I so sorry after all that he had got away? He was the most wonderful fish I have ever lost; and roughly, I should say, a twelve-pounder.

2



The Duckmaloi

THERE were good trout in the Duckmaloi and it ran through beautiful country; but I must say the first time I saw the place it gave me the horrors.

The trouble was, I was a newcomer: doubly a newcomer, for I had not been long in Australia, and I had never before stayed at the guest-house from which we fished. It takes a few years to learn to cherish the more formidable particularities of Australia; and it is a truly terrible experience to arrive for the first time at any guesthouse, even so kindly an abode as was Richards'. You don't know what time the meals are, and where the lavatory is. And all the other guests seem to have known each other for years; and when you arrive they *look* at you. Looking at newcomers was, in fact, a favourite occupation for those who did not ride or fish at Duckmaloi. They used to sit on the veranda all day, on those ancient leather armchairs, and stare at all the guests who came hopefully down the red road in the Richards' car or the mailman's rattling cart. It gave them something to do; and someone to talk about.

Then there was the heat. The valley of the Duckmaloi, a hundred miles from Sydney over the Blue Mountains and twenty miles out into the ranges from the bleak flat township of Oberon, lay folded between the mass of Mount Bindo to the right and the lower hills rolling away from the Fish River Creek to the left. The sun hung over it like a white eaglehawk and struck down mercilessly. There was no escape from it—except perhaps in one awful retreat under the high-propped weatherboard house where there were some broken

chairs, a broken iron bedstead, and usually a few fowls expiring in their dustbaths. Once, when it really was too impossibly hot to fish, I spent some days under the house, reading *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. I never really got through that dismal masterpiece; but I did, in desperation, try. . . . On the veranda, if you preferred sitting and watching for the mailman—he came about three o'clock every second day—you slowly and steadily cooked. Out on the long slope down to the river where a friendly garage-man from Sydney took me the first day to introduce me to the fishing, a mile over ploughland, bare grass-roots, and fallen timber, it was hot enough to knock you down.

There were also the flies. Duckmaloi was a great place for flies. They were those little bush-flies that ride by millions on your back and leave you with a concerted buzz of disappointment the minute you enter a house. I never thought them as insanitary as house-flies; and just as well, for if you ever grilled a chop in the open they swarmed upon it from all directions and, no matter how vigorously you waved it in the air to make it at least difficult for them to perch on it while you snatched a mouthful, you generally ate, on an average, at least two or three dozen a day. They had a habit of flying down your throat and choking you if you opened your mouth to speak and, in a pardonable search for moisture in that dry country, they loved to nestle in your eyes. The horses thrust their heads into the bushes to escape them and so, often enough, did we. If you wore a fly-veil you could not—or so I have always thought—see the snakes properly.

For Duckmaloi was also a great country for snakes—brown snakes, black snakes, tiger snakes.

We met our first, a nice medium-sized black snake, among the fallen logs on the track down to the river. I daresay there was a snake under every fallen log, and the brushwood fence, over which we clambered warily into that final paddock, was certainly infested with them. The serpent took refuge in a hollow, burnt-out stump; and Horrie, the garage-man, who was also an expert bushman and afterwards taught me many things about the small creatures which inhabited that apparently lifeless countryside and empty water, cut a forked stick and neatly pinioned it. Then he proposed to seize it by the tail and crack it against a log. I suggested—sensibly, I still think—that it would probably bite him. Horrie, after some cogitation, agreed that it probably would. So after various futile attempts to get at it with a stick, we left it to bite us another day.

We hadn't been ten minutes at the river before another snake came slithering through the tussocks, and later in the morning there was a really beautiful black snake with a red belly coiled and sleeping peacefully in the long water-grass at the stream's edge. Next day, down near the crossing by Gearon's, forcing our way through the straggling wet undergrowth after a thunderstorm that had soaked us to the skin and sent a fresh current of life through the baked landscape, we saw, simultaneously, three snakes quietly weaving their way across our track. It was good weather for hunting frogs, I suppose; but they looked very much as if they were hunting fishermen. To a newcomer from New Zealand, these were quite an appalling sight. The three stray specimens on the first morning were enough to make it almost impossible to walk. And how fish without walking? What is to be done with rod and fly—or I am afraid it might have been rod and worm in those days—when one is standing paralyzed with fear on a tussock heap?

In a sensible stream you could walk the clear shingle at the edge and at least see what you were treading on. Afterwards on the Duckmaloi (the same day that my wife sat on a black snake in a tussock when she was settling down to paint) I did see a tiger snake stretched in full view across a clear grassy patch, drinking from a little pool. But the Duckmaloi had few clear patches of grass, and no shingle at all. In a sensible stream, again, you could avoid the snakes by wading; but the Duckmaloi wasn't wadable.

And in the end it wasn't the heat or the flies or the snakes but the nature of the river itself that so disgusted me that first day. For if you are a fisherman you love water: and what was there to love in that lukewarm brown trickle, sluggish and muddy as a drain, creeping through the ragged grey tea-tree or somnolent in big brown pools? Where was the dance of a rapid? Where, in that hot silence, broken only by the low roar of the flies when you disturbed them from your back, was the music of running water?

And where were the fish?

I don't know how many days Horrie and I tramped that useless, ugly stretch of water between the sandy swimming hole and the bigger hole upstream beyond which, dwindling to a yard in width, the river disappeared in a tangle of willows; how many times we sat at these pools futilely dangling a worm or, dropping an equally hopeless fly, investigated the inch-deep snake-infested rocky runnel be-

tween them; how many times we wandered downstream to where, below the ruined old pisé homestead of some early settler, the stream turned wide and shallow and laid its flat waters to sleep amongst quite unfishable bulrushes; how many times, filled with new hope, we slithered down the mountain across the road from the guesthouse to the willowy valley where the Fish River Creek (in which never in my life have I seen a fish) ran green and clean at least, but just as useless as the Duckmaloi, from pool to pool among the tall grasses; how many times, down the clay road in the heat, we trudged the two miles to the foot of the ridge where the Creek met the Duckmaloi and became—with a most resounding falsehood—the Fish River (a most hopeless place to fish, anyhow, because the miners from Lithgow used to camp there at week-ends and, so it was rumoured, slay any fish that *were* there with dynamite); or how many times, to make an end of this catalogue of hot, blank, useless days, we pushed further down the Fish River through the scrub and the briars to the pool below Gearon's farmhouse where the dogs rushed down and bit us and the snakes slithered all round us. The one thing certain is that in all those peregrinations we caught only one trout, a small one of about a pound—and the man who caught that was (I suppose I should have rejoiced; but I do not remember being particularly pleased with his good fortune) Horrie. It is difficult to be sincerely enthusiastic about other people's fish, until you have caught one yourself.

Yet, there were fish enough. The Duckmaloi teemed with them, in fact. There were thousands of them. Down at the junction of the two rivers, where we usually finished at night because we were fishing from clear paddocks or from the roadside, and didn't have to trample on so many snakes, the water, as fishermen say, simply boiled with trout. After the long hot days, when the fish were too stupefied to eat, the evening rise was superb. Everywhere you looked there were hungry trout gulping down the white moths that swarmed out of the tea-tree, the big blundering hawk-moths, the lacewings fluttering past like miniature aeroplanes with their double wings, the buzzing beetles, the long-horned caddis-flies, the gnats, flying-ants—the myriad insects that, waking like the trout in the dusk, stirred that languid riverside to life. In the shallows flickering with sunset, small fish leapt clean out of the water. Every yard or so of the long pool downstream, bigger fish, or fish that reasonably seemed to be bigger, broke the still surface with their rings of light. In dark places under over-

hanging bushes there were mysterious and alluring splashes. The only problems were what fly to use and which fish to fish for. It was bewildering and stupendous.

And it was also beautiful. The sunset lay rosy on the pool, and under it, as the dusk deepened and the ridges changed from blue to dark blue to black, lay Mount Bindo's gigantic reflection. Bats wheeled in the glittering air; and all along the river, with the boomp-ing of the bullfrogs calling to each other underwater and the innumerable shrilling of the tiny red and green and brown and bronze-coloured frogs that lived under every stone, in the wet grass and under every river-loosened clump of clay and tussock, began the most remarkable frog-chorus I have ever heard. The last wild calls of the kookaburras rang from the ranges; from the tips of the tallest grey ringbarked trees, gilded with the last of the light, the magpies sounded their sweet flutes. The infuriating bush-flies went to bed. Whatever had seemed drab and dry and commonplace and non-descript about the river during the day changed utterly with the night. It was deep wild mountain country, the valley full of birds and frogs, the Duckmaloi full of trout.

It would have been better, of course, had we been able to catch those trout. It is possible, being a fisherman, to be so maddened by one's inability to hook a single fish when there are dozens rising all round you, as not even to notice the sunset; and those fish were very hard to catch—impossible, in fact. It may have been that phenomenon which fishermen so often encounter on the most promising and exciting evening, that of all the myriad insects upon the water there is only one species which the fish are taking, and that is one you cannot find in your fly-box; but I rather think that these were nearly all very small fish—too small to take a fly. We used to see them nibbling the feathers of the Coachman or dragging it underwater in a quite futile attempt to swallow it. No fish. No good. What was the use of the country's turning beautiful at dusk if you still couldn't catch a fish?

And then at last, inevitably, for if you keep on fishing you must sooner or later get a fish, triumphantly I caught a trout: about a pound and a half, or let us say two pounds; a little bigger than Horrie's, anyhow. "I thought you were about due to get one," said Horrie generously. I thought so too: due and over-due. But there it was: and, flapping on the grassy bank, gleamed in the dusk like the moon.

Extraordinary how one small fish can change the universe!



Even knowing the reasons, I have been puzzled from that moment to this how I could ever have found the Duckmaloi—or the prospect of trout fishing in Australia—unattractive. That I should actually have found it repellent moves me to the most profound apologies. The valley of the Duckmaloi was the most magnificent country. Golden and brown and lit with the green of oats and willows, it lay basking between its mountain ramparts. The soft blue heat-haze smouldered among the ironbarks. Eagles patrolled it by day. At night the plover flew over, uttering their sharp, metallic cries like the sound of a knife on steel. The gum-trees around the guesthouse glittered with dew and stars.

I wonder now that I could ever have felt uncomfortable in that house—except for one night when I shared a room with a deaf dentist from Sydney, who snored so loudly he nearly blew the house down. But it really was the most hospitable place. The food was excellent; and there was always fresh cream.

If there were a lot of people there, as sometimes there were, and they were not fishermen, which is a disadvantage, that had its compensations, too. You mostly had the river entirely to yourself. Only once, though occasionally I took out amateur fishermen and even

girls, who walked ahead of you and scared the fish or stood behind you and got hooked when you were casting, was I ever really bothered by a rival fisherman at Duckmaloi. This was one of the times when Horrie and I had yet another shot at the tiny Fish River Creek—it *should* have had fish in it, that captivating little water with its deep unexpected pools and its clear straight tunnels through the grass. There was even a fisherman's guesthouse on it, Porter's Lodge. Maybe Mr Porter's patrons knew how to fish it. Anyhow we caught no trout in it the day the intruder was there, nor were we likely to. He was a spinner-fisherman—not that I could scorn the spinner-man in those days—whom we had actually brought down from Richards' to spend the day with us: a bristling, bullet-headed man who wore the most enormous boots; and my most abiding impression of him is of these great boots plod-plodding rapidly and determinedly past us while we tried to keep ahead of him. For we, that day, were fishing dry-fly; and a spinner-man, heaving his great hunk of metal into the water and churning up the pools, must keep behind the delicate fly-man, or he will scare all the trout. We tried to keep him behind us; he would not stay. We tried to keep him with us, fishing each pool after we had put our flies across it; he forged ahead. We tried to make him take pool and pool in turn; he raced ahead. So we tried racing through the tussocks to get quarter of a mile ahead of him; but plod, plod, plod on those vigorous boots, swinging his beastly spinner, every time, after we had had about ten minutes' fishing, he caught up and forged ahead; so once again we had to take to the tussocks and run for it. It was a very athletic afternoon.

Now I come to think of it, one other of the guests from Richards' whom I remember with the same vividness, must also have been a fisherman; but he was a nice fellow, this stocky, straw-headed, newly married young man with his nondescript small bride, and found his own stretches of water to fish in; and he stays in my mind for a particularly delightful dream he innocently related to us one morning at breakfast. I don't know whether any of us—there were half a dozen men there at that time, and only the one woman—had really been eyeing his wife; I shouldn't think so. But he told us he dreamed that all of us had hooked the one trout, but he was the one who landed it, because he "had it by the tail". A rude story, if Freud is right; but I liked its innocence. That same young man had his sturdy, middle-aged father staying with him at the guesthouse, a farmer or some

kind of tradesman, I think, and he remains memorable, too, because he used to thump insects. Those were the nights when we all used to join in a game called "Up and Down the River", a most appropriate game for fishermen, which consisted of a combination of just about every card-game you could think of, from poker to five-hundred; sitting all together round the long table in the lounge-room while the mopokes called across the valley and every kind of insect imaginable swooped in out of the night to try to commit suicide in the soft white petrol-lamp in the centre; and every time a moth or a beetle landed within range on the table, thump went that old gentleman's middle finger. I suppose he killed fifty a night: not that that made any appreciable difference to the insect population of Duckmaloi. It may have been a kind of sport, like fishing; but I think he felt, rather, that the insects were impudent. Beetles should be kept in their place.

People are people, even if they are not fishermen. There was a lot of human nature to be observed at that guesthouse; and a lot of merri-ment, too, as on the night they tied a bell under the bed where a pair of honeymooners were to sleep. To this day I share the misery—and wish I had done something about it—of the spinster from Sydney: thirtyish, dark-haired, pale, obviously longing for her holiday: who arrived one baking hot afternoon, took a swift gulp of the superficial discomfort of the place and, as I might well have done myself on my first arrival, departed next day with the mailman: sitting up so straight in his cart, so proud, so pale, so distressed, so inconceivably embarrassed, as slowly, like a tumbril, the vehicle floated her down the road and out of sight. If only she had stayed two days—one week—to get the feel of the place!

Of all the nights at that pleasant, homely establishment, one stands out supremely. But that was a different matter from "Up and Down the River". It was too beautiful to stay indoors; and, very likely, too hot. But the fierce glaring day had gone. The air was soft and warm; and the full moon was up. It was a night so full of enchantment that the whole world refused to go to sleep. There were the frogs, of course, filling the valley with their melodious uproar that, now deep, now shrill, rose at intervals to a scream of batrachian delight. The crickets trilled by millions. But that night, while my wife and I walked along the road through the radiant countryside, the cicadas, too, who ought to be singing only in the sunlight, woke and clamoured in every tree. The kookaburras blew their trumpets on the

mountain; and, with notes as sweet and fluid as the moonlight itself, the magpies sang on the bare timber. How magical the day's birds sound by night; and how fantastically beautiful this earth becomes when every cranny of it is filled with soft light, and all its creatures sing!

It was on such a night, on a good many nights of moonlight or star-shine—though never another quite like that—that, coming home late over the saddle across the mountain, we used to watch the flying possums, the phalangers, dropping silently through the air into their favourite blossom-tree, a yellow-box, I think it was. Their fur was silver when we turned the torch on them; their eyes, a soft opaline blue if you see them by day, glowed red like rubies. They never showed the slightest fear of us. They seemed to keep the same timetable not only night after night but year after year, coming at the same time in the same season to that one tree out of all the thousands that grew there; for they were always there as we came up through the bush, and we saw them for three or four years in succession. Once, near the guesthouse, the great tabby cat slew one and left it on the roadside; a dreadful crime, yet forgivable because that cat was a mighty hunter and used to come marching proudly back to the house early most mornings with his head high and a rabbit in his mouth. A very proud cat he looked; though it may have been partly the necessity of holding up the rabbit that made him hold his head so high.

There were fireflies, too, along that track to the saddle: not many; not often; but sometimes just two or three, green and ghostly, moving like tiny stars between the trees.

The truth was, of course, that there were miles more of that countryside to explore and to fish than we had investigated in that first disappointing and unadventurous fortnight. It always takes two or three trips for you to get to know a place; and always—for some mysterious reason—for surely you always know how to fish—two or three trips to the same water before you really begin to catch trout. Even in those dull waters we fished the first few days, there were, had we but known it, things besides snakes worth seeing, and fish worth catching.

There were bass. Everyone called them bream. These were a surprising fish. One expects to catch trout in a trout stream, or at least I did, not having been trained to find anything else, except, in New Zealand, eels, which fortunately were usually too slow to take a fly or

even a worm if you kept it moving. But here, even in the swimming pool, were these curious bass, up to two pounds in weight, covered with an armour of big golden scales, and looking like a rather ugly snapper. They were good eating, too, with clean white flesh. The locals said that if you caught one you would catch a dozen or twenty, for they moved and fed in schools; and so, perhaps, if you fished in the local technique, lighting a bonfire at night, to the light of which they would be attracted, you would. I never fished for them that way, never having cared for night fishing, but it was very pleasant to dangle a worm for them in the shade of a willow or wattle on days when it really was too hot to move, catching two or three in a morning and sometimes, by a most regrettable accident, picking up a trout at the same time.

For there were trout as well as bass even in that uninteresting stretch of water nearest the guesthouse. The first I saw in the swimming pool darted up through the water behind a wall of tea-tree and took an enormous Coch-y-bondhu I was trying out in desperation—so startling me that I instantly pulled it out of his mouth. In a little runnel below the pool, flowing sweetly past a grassy bank, I watched a small trout of about a pound snap up a yellow butterfly; and put on some yellow fly myself, and got him. In the next pool upstream there was another trout I remember well, because it required an intricate and really rather pretty bit of fishing to hook him—a backhanded looping cast to put the fly under the tea-tree where he was rising.

Once, in flood, that despised bit of water became captivating, because in every pool from the old pisé house to the swimming pool and on through the willows to the big bend around the foot of the spur, platypus—sometimes two or three to a pool—were swimming; floating among the froth and fallen willow leaves and watching you with their beady black eyes or diving in the brown water with that oily swirl that so often misleads you into thinking that the father of all trout has risen. The floodwaters must have been bringing them a feast of worms and drowned insects to tempt them from their burrows. Nothing is better in fishing than those moments when the river displays its secret life to you; and the platypus, lying flat in the water and watching you, fearless unless you move too abruptly, is the most delightful of all its creatures—though I have enjoyed meeting wombats in odd places and once spent one of the happiest mornings of my life, on the Badja River, near Cooma, watching a pair of yellow-

bellied water-rats playing chasings around a half-submerged log: in and out and round about, rippling and gleaming through the sunlit water like an incarnation of its fluid delight.

It was that same flood in the Duckmaloi that gave me, too, one of the most curious and remarkable day's fishing I have ever experienced. A couple of days earlier I had had an amusing morning on the river with a fisherman from Sydney; upstream from the platypus pools, near where the old fossicker lived alone in his hut. Under the threat of imminent storm we were fishing that enormous pool where some scoundrel had a wire-netting fish-trap (which, alas, never had any fish in it when you pulled it up to take advantage of his scoundrelism). The Sydney visitor was a very dismal little man with a large, vigorous wife, leathery and weatherbeaten, who professed—and with reason—the greatest admiration for him. "If there's a fish about," she said, "my husband will catch it." And her husband would have, too. Silent, small, finicky, inconceivably brilliant in his technique, he was standing at the foot of a high bank that made normal casting impossible. A trout rose right across on the far side of that great green pool.

The fisherman's fly, instead of uselessly banging against the cliff behind us, as any ordinary mortal's fly would have done, rose spiraling straight above his head, up and straight up with every flick of his wrist, until he had enough line out to reach the fish; then down, delicately down, straightening as they fell, the long delicate spirals sped across the pool to the trout. For some reason or other he missed the fish; but it was a wonderful piece of artistry.

Then five minutes later, accompanied by a mighty crack of thunder, down came the rain. And it rained and it rained and it rained and, as we crouched for shelter against the cliff, the river swelled and turned muddy before our eyes. "Oh," said the Sydney man dismally, "there'll be no more fishing for a week." Useless to tell him that at least you could fish for bass; useless to say that perhaps it would clear in two or three days. He was an impassioned pessimist and, true to his convictions, packed up and departed that night. I hope that, wherever he fled to, it stayed fine.

The Duckmaloi was a bad river in the rain—and you always get rainstorms at one time or another on any trip to the mountains. A river that runs high and clear in flood remains more or less fishable; a river that turns to mud like the Duckmaloi is useless. The trout go down to the bottom and stay there. But the Sydney visitor was wrong,

all the same. Within two days, though still full and discoloured, the stream had cleared enough at least to be worth exploring; and all along the edges, in a way I have never seen before or since, the trout were feeding voraciously, lying with their dorsal fins out of the water and gobbling the drowned insects. All you had to do to catch them was to drop them any kind of fly at all. It was most interesting fishing, though, dropping the fly among the froth and fallen leaves, right against the bank where the current, slower at the edges, flowed among rushes and tussocks and bushes still half-submerged by the flood; and it was strange and intriguing thus to be fishing over what was normally dry land. The trout, when eventually I cleaned those I had caught, were full of little water-snails. That is what they had been eating those two days when the river seemed unfishable; and so perhaps you could still get fish, even in the height of the flood, if you used a sinker and something that looked like a water-snail, or a big wet fly, or a worm. . . .

It was, in fact, on that same stretch of water between the fish-trap and the platypus pools—and a noble stretch this was, too, close, rocky and wild, crowded between a high round shaly spur on one side and the mass of Mount Bindo on the other—that my good friend Dr Bruce Hittmann cured me for ever of the worm: an appropriate enough feat for one of his profession.

A little too high up in the world—he was a Macquarie Street specialist—to stay at a guesthouse where you might meet people who weren't fishermen (or who fished with worms) Dr Hittmann took a room at the hotel at Hampton, on the rim of that plateau from which, filled with miles of blue light, opens the superb chasm of the Jamieson Valley. With him came Harry Andreas, who had been a pioneer of both the trout fishing at Taupo in New Zealand and the swordfishing at Russell. Andreas was a fascinating fisherman to watch. He had reached the stage of perfectionism, of meticulous attention to technique, which all good anglers should attain in old age; where the right fly, the right gear, and the right and proper way to fish were infinitely more important than merely catching trout. He carried an iron tripod for boiling the billy in the correct manner. He had his line wound on an elaborate line-winder to let it dry out properly. He had some special gadget for undoing the knots in his cast—both nylon and gut will snap if there is a knot. He wore, as

Dr Hittmann did, too, correct riding-breeches and leather leggings to ward off the snakes. He had the most dazzling array of dry flies, something to match every conceivable insect that might be on the water.

The trout were rising when we got to the Fish River—striking across country from Hampton to the big waters downstream from the Duckmaloi country—but by the time poor Andreas had erected the tripod and started the billy boiling, and unwound the line from his line-winder, and greased it, and unravelled the knots in his cast, and selected his fly, and got himself dressed to fish, the rest of us had brought in four trout and the rise was over. It is a mistake to be too finicky. All the same, I don't think any of us would have got any trout that day had it not been for Andreas's expertise; for it was he who suggested, the river being high and discoloured, that something large and bright was indicated—an Alexandra or a Butcher—and both of these flies did the trick. From that day to this, when I have to fish a flooded river, I remember old Andreas and the Alexandra. I have cause to remember Bruce Hittmann with gratitude, too, for he used to tie his own flies and once gave me a large, impossible-looking bit of ginger fluff with which, one glorious sunny day over the saddle from the guesthouse, I caught—wading out deep in the warm summer water and casting far across the big pool to a trout that was rising in an awkward little nook under a grassy bank—a fine three-pound brown.

With these two lords of the angle, the day after our excursion to the Fish River, I fished the Duckmaloi in the stretch between the fish-trap and the platypus pools. It was good fishing, too, though I kept losing fish because I had not then learned to tie the proper knot for a nylon cast—exasperating when you have worked out how to catch a big trout under the willow at the tail of the pool, by casting right across the current and letting the fly wheel round to him, to hook him and have him instantly snap free! But, losing them or not, the fish were there; and the dry flies snaked out prettily over the water. The sun shone; the water ran green and dappled under the willows or sparkled in the shallows. I had made friends that trip with some novice from the guesthouse—not a fisherman at all; just a bloke who had borrowed a rod and thought he'd have a go at the trout—and, taking pity on his inexperience, I had been instructing him in the art of the worm. Tom, if that was his name, was much too modest to fish

with Hittmann and Andreas; in fact I had warned him not to dream of producing a worm in that majestic company. He just tagged along with us. But he was there—and so was I; and both of us wishing that we had dug a hole deep enough to disappear in for ever—when, coming to a grassy knoll at the end of the spur and seeing the excavations we had made a day or two earlier, the torn-up sods lying naked for the whole world to observe, Dr Hittmann said with ineffable disdain, "Some fella's been digging for worms!" Never, never again! Not the grasshopper, nor the witchetty grub (not that I have ever been able to find one), nor the freshwater mussel which I once tried out with no success at all in the Black Hole over the saddle, nor the cicada which sometimes served me so well in my misspent youth in New Zealand, nor the mud-eye, nor the drowned dragonfly (with which once in the Badja I caught nothing at all), nor the hawk-moth (which I tried desperately to make stay on the hook one night in the Duckmaloi below the old pisé house when the trout were so eager that they leapt into the tea-tree bushes after the big soft creatures swarming that night in thousands), nor the frog (which I never could bear to use anyhow, though deadly deeds were done with it on Taupo), nor the "gentle" so beloved of Izaak Walton but scorned by all anglers of the Antipodes—never, never again any form of live-bait fishing.

Some fella, some *fella*, had been digging for worms! That is how dry-fly purists are made. The worst of it was—or nearly the worst of it, for nothing could surpass the horror of that accusation and the discomfort of the air of innocence we had both instantly to assume—was that Tom had been doing pretty well with the worm and had caught two nice trout in the first run he fished the first morning I took him out: while I caught nothing. It is no doubt because he got me into that awful scene with Dr Hittmann that I recall with a slightly malicious amusement the occasion, a few nights later, when Tom got himself lost on the spur going back to the guesthouse from



the same reach of water. At least, he thought he was lost. For some inexplicable reason, as we were climbing the spur in the dusk, he decided we must go in totally the opposite direction; down to the river again and across up the other side: which, as I stressed with increasing emphasis, would take us up the side of Bindo and into the wilderness indeed. We had one of those dangerously tense little scenes, on the verge of a quarrel and heaven knows what sort of a mess, that blow up so quickly in a panic, until I persuaded him to climb just a hundred yards or so further to the top of the spur; whereupon, glittering before us like a lighthouse in a storm, shone the distant lamps of the guesthouse—right where they always were. It was just the sort of thing a worm-fisherman would do. . . .

I am glad, all the same, that I had not been cured of the worm on that incredible day, a year or two before Dr Hittmann's visit to Duckmaloi, when Horrie and I caught twenty fish in a morning in one little pool of the Fish River. This was in that most beautiful country which we had learned lay over the saddle that rose from the junction of the Duckmaloi and the Fish River Creek.

Downstream from the junction, the Fish River, as it now began to be called, took a long elbow bend past Gearon's farm and round the base of a spur—ragged country, and not many fish so far as I ever found out: though one day, fishing (alas) with a spinner, I had an exciting five minutes with a two-pound rainbow that dashed round the far side of a little island in midstream.

I also had in that same place an even more exciting five minutes with the most frightful snake I have ever seen—seven feet long it was, so Horrie told me; I was too terrified to think of measuring it. It was a gigantic brown snake, looking exactly like the fallen brown gum-branches it lay among, and when I nearly trod on it it reared up as high as my waist and hissed in horrid defiance. I did not like it at all.

The good fishing and the good water, where the river ran clear and green and deep, with shingle banks and wadable rapids, just as a trout stream ought to be, winding through timbered hills and grassy flats, paralleled all the way by the track of cobblestones where the Chinese fossickers in the early days had built a water-race to aid them in their search for gold, lay five or six miles from Gearon's, a full day's fishing before you got to it. But if you climbed the saddle as we

learned to do, sometimes walking, sometimes riding on horseback, and later, when the engineers had made a road of a kind to construct a pipe-line for the dam at Oberon, perilously driving over by car, you dropped straight down onto good fishing . . . and into that wild country where by night we saw the flying possums and the fireflies, and by day the bush was filled with the clear calls of the native thrush.

A country full of bright water and happy creatures—of small ticking locusts and louder shrill cicadas, and honeyeaters that sang along the river all day and dipped from the wattles to splash their green wings in the pools. I remember it best in one season of searing drought when the hills around the guesthouse were teeming with thousands of rabbits—quite appalling to see; the whole hillside, eaten down to bare granite sand, would move in one verminous mass as you came over the skyline—and when all the life of that stricken countryside had crowded into the river valley to survive. We would see, vanishing in the scrub along the far bank, the dark backs of wallabies in flight; or the black snake stretched out full length on the grass; or, snorting and crashing in the scrub, a couple of the wombats that had their great burrows in the sand there; or, most curiously, we would watch hundreds of exhausted bees crawling about on the wet sand at the brink of the water, waiting for water and the cool of evening to revive them. We listened to the high clear calls of the thrushes and the honeyeaters; and to the happy singing small locusts and the trilling of the grey warbler. Bushfires smoked on Bindo; the cattle stood knee-deep in the stream, chewing great strands of water-weeds; and the mad old bull, hobbled with a chain that never seemed to hamper his roving, used to come blundering and clanking through the bushes and frighten the life out of us. We grew expert, when it was too hot to fish, at observing the small life of the stream that rejoiced in the summer weather: the little bronze lizards—skinks—which would dive into the water at our feet and come up triumphantly with a tadpole gripped in their tiny jaws; and which, so we found, could be tempted and tamed with a crumb of cake, but better still with meat. There were mussels living their dim lives among the water-weeds; and the minute sticks inhabited by the larvae of the caddis-flies which you could see fantastically moving about on the sandy bottom and which, when gently squeezed, would exude a startled little insect's head; and, most fascinating of all, there were the ugly small dark-

grey mud-eyes, larvae of the dragonfly, that crawled out onto a stone and slowly, slowly, if you had all morning to watch, wriggled out of their hard skins, jerked out the soft silk of their wings to dry in the sunlight and then suddenly, in one dazzling crystalline flash, took to the air and were dragonflies.

The engineers making the pipe-line had built a causeway over the river at one place so that their jeeps could cross and climb, for some mysterious purpose, the high far hillside; and in this season of low water, the trout, so we found, could not get through the tunnels they had left for them. I had always believed—and still do—that except in winter when they go upstream to spawn, trout always stay in the one place. It is a fact that, day after day and year after year, you can always find a favourite fish, if you can't manage to catch him, in the spot where you know he lives. But they must, nevertheless, do quite a bit of travelling; for the quite absurd concentration of trout in the shallow, insignificant, altogether unimpressive little pool below that causeway could only be explained by the assumption that migrating fish were blocked there. Perhaps it is the smaller fish that travel, while the big fish, secure in a good feeding-spot, stay put. Certainly, none of the trout below the causeway was more than about a pound in weight. But there, anyhow, they were; and all you had to do was to drop in a worm, hook your fish at once, pull it out as quietly as possible, drop in another worm and catch another. So there we sat on the grassy bank in the sun, dangled our worms and, that morning, caught twenty trout between us. When we seemed to have cleaned out the pool Horrie climbed into the branches of the willow-tree that blocked the top end of it near the causeway, and, from a hole amongst a tangle of roots and driftwood, pulled out a nice fat bass. No fish in the Duckmaloi indeed! I think that was the most surprising little pool I ever fished in my life.

But this was disgraceful fishing. And so, too, was that most curious rainy day lower down from the causeway towards the Black Hole when, fishing with a spinner, I found that every pool was alive with big fish, all on the move and all apparently feeding, but the only type of lure which seemed to interest them was the swivels on my trace which, inexplicably, they would follow with intense curiosity through the water and then, not attempting to bite at them, knock them with their noses. The spinner—Devon, Wisden or fly-spoon—never seemed any use at Duckmaloi, though once I did see a local fisherman with

an enormous spoon, a rod like a telegraph pole and a five-pound rainbow in his bag. . . . But it is possible that some smaller lure, the size of a swivel, looking perhaps like some tiny immature fish . . . ?

We did, I hasten to say, have great days with the fly, too, at Duck-maloi.

It was in fact on that river that a girl, a mere girl, nondescript and anonymous, one without the slightest knowledge of fish or flies or insects, a Presbyterian minister's daughter who happened to be staying at the guesthouse and used to come fishing with me for the walk—for she was a nice soul, and athletic—made for me the great discovery of my life, the one piece of expertise which I can contribute to the art and craft of angling: Tup's Indispensable.

We were fishing, the girl and I, at a pool below the old pise house in the waters I had thought uninteresting (the ruined house, too, had its charms, for once I saw a mother swallow whose fledglings were trapped in one of the rooms, fly in again through the door out which she had escaped, and lead her fluttering brood round the room and along the corridor and through the kitchen to safety). We were fishing, I say, this noble girl and I, in the pool below the house and, though trout were rising, I was not catching them. What were they taking? There were plenty of insects about but nothing that seemed of any particular interest. They were taking, said this most observant and intelligent girl, who had been closely watching the water while I tried fly after fly in vain, "a small grey fly".

The only small grey fly I could find in my box—and I didn't even know its name then—was Tup's Indispensable. I tried it. There were two nice fish rising in the centre of the pool, near where it curved round the tea-tree to the tail. They both ignored the fly, prettily though it floated on the surface right over them. Then, by chance, it sank. Instantly the first fish took it; and in a few minutes I had landed the second as well. As simply as that are made the discoveries which change the course of history!

I have caught, I suppose, hundreds of trout since then on the Tup's. I have taken, or lost, all my biggest fish on it. It is always the first fly I try in the morning and the last which, towards dusk, for it seldom seems to work in the evening rise, I reluctantly change for something darker or whiter. It is not always valid, for obviously there is no sense in fishing with a blue-grey Tup's when there is a hatch of white moths or hawk moths, red ants or black ants, caddis or the black

spinner. I am not sure that it works in the very high country of the Snowy—though that may be because when I have fished up there it has usually been the grasshopper season and for that the March Brown or Hardy's Favourite seem about the most acceptable offerings. But by and large, any stream and any season, and at any time of the day except dusk (and even then occasionally) the Tup's will do the trick.

It is not a very distinguished looking fly. Just small and grey, as its discoverer said; or rather, small and bluish grey, with a blue and fawn hackle (no wings) and a touch of yellow at the thorax, an abdomen of soft pink. I am not well enough up in entomology to say precisely what insect it represents; but it is a creature that, if you watch closely enough, you can see almost every day on the rivers, small and grey and rising in spirals above the water, usually in the late (but not too late) afternoon. It is a kind of "nymph"—that is, the newly hatched insect rising through the water to take to the air for the first time—and for that reason, though sometimes the trout will take it floating, is best fished wet, six inches or so below the surface. It usually seems to be tied rather clumsily and insensitively in Australia—the yellow and pink too garish—and when I was at the height of my Tup's Indispensable period, before I shifted my headquarters to the Snowy, I used to have them sent over from New Zealand: from my fishing days in which country that first astoundingly successful specimen at Duckmaloi must have been a survivor.

Then, too, there was the discovery we made about the Black Ant: one day when these excited creatures, dressed in their shining wings for their brief nuptial flight and the founding of the new colonies, were swarming in myriads over one of the big pools across the saddle.

Fish were feasting on them everywhere, ringing the pool from end to end as if hail were falling in the sunlight. It was a day to catch a great bag of trout. But not one trout could we catch; and both Horrie and I had plenty of Black Ants in our fly-boxes. Then, by chance, we found out what they wanted. It was a Black Ant tied with a red tag at the tail; that infinitesimal spot of red—and they say that trout don't see colour!—made all the difference. I forget how many we caught—half a dozen or so between us, as quickly as we could pull them in, until, in the tea-tree or in fish that broke the cast, we lost the only two red-tied Black Ants we had. Horrie caught one more fish

on a Zulu, which also is a black fly with a red tag, but the Zulu has a striped body and they weren't really keen on it. It was one of those discoveries one stores in the mind for use ever after: when the black ants are hatching, use a Black Ant with a red tag.

One other fly we discovered at Duckmaloi was the Olive Green Dun. It was a big winged fly and whizzed over your head like an aeroplane when you made a cast; and a pretty fly, too, very appropriate in colour for that country, over the saddle, of green pools and green honeyeaters. We did very well with it one changeable Easter season; but it was not as dramatic a discovery as the Tup's or the Black Ant and what I chiefly remember that time for was the sudden cold rains, and how Horrie would light little fires all along the river to warm his hands, and how, drowned at the mouths of their tunnels, we found the enormous golden-brown pupae of the bent-wing Swift Moths that hatch always on a stormy night at Easter. Sometimes we came upon the bodies of the great moths themselves, with stiff translucent wings and brown bodies as big as sparrows. There was, too, one gloriously sunny day that trip when the Captain of Industry who had come to fish with us—an immense man who carried on his back an immense rucksack crammed with fresh lettuces, spare fishing gear, quart-pots and a glove for handling them—charmed us by wading naked all day in the shallows where only the tiniest fish could be. "I've been having the fun of Cork!" he told us delightedly when we came back at lunchtime from fishing the deeper water downstream; and he had, too—he'd caught twenty little trout in the morning.

Great days, in fine weather or wet! The greatest, in a sense, was the day of the monster: for that was a fish indeed, and if it did not turn the scales at more than four pounds, that is a pretty fair trout; and anyhow I never believed those scales. I first saw him, on my second trip to the Duckmaloi, one sunny morning on my way down to the junction. He was at the head of a pool by the roadside where a little creek ran in; and in the mouth of that creek, in about a foot of clear water, he was chasing water-beetles; round and round the shallow little creek-mouth, a curiously pale, silvery fish, shouldering the water aside as he moved, colossal in the sunlight. I was above him on the roadside; in full view of him; I dared not move a step. It seemed impossible to cast a fly downhill over the stones and bushes, landing it, as it must be landed, without a splash or an error of any kind right

in that tiny pool where he swam; yet it had to be done; and that, inspired, with just the right length of line out, the fly dropping gently through the air, neither falling short in the tussocks nor reaching a yard too far and hooking the tea-tree on the other side of the pool, I did. The great trout, unimpressed, swam under my fly and continued chasing water-beetles.

He chased them in the same spot for four years, and every year I fished for him.

Once, in the dusk, having sneaked down into the long grass at the edge of the stream, I fished for him in the company of a small snake which rippled across the pool to greet me and disappeared among the grasses at my feet—a slightly disturbing experience. And then, one other night, stealing quietly into that same water-grass and dropping a Tup's Indispensable gently over the brink, I got him. What a commotion in that little pool. What surging and splashing and what a weight on the thin cast as he leapt. What problems with the snag in the creek-mouth. What perils in that grassy island in mid-stream! and what a strange fat silvery monster in the water-grass when at last, bulging out of the landing net, he was captured. When I gutted him, I found intact inside him a large bullfrog.

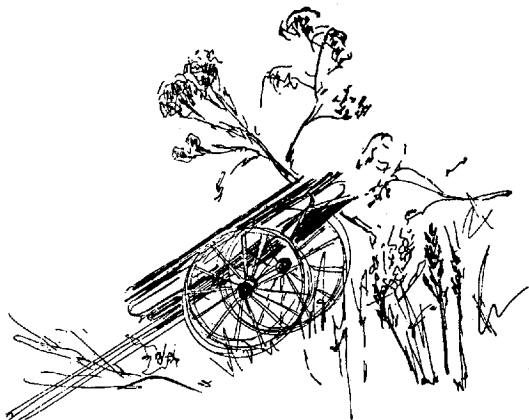
It was a night, I suddenly noticed, full of the music of frogs, shrilling or profoundly plonking. It was a night of huge silver stars. The air smelt of cool water and dry grass. There were moths. Ahead of me down the road rose the saddle of the far magical country of the phalangers and the Olive Green Dun. To the left as I turned for home lay the great dark bulk of Bindo where the eaglehawk towered by day and the white clematis hung its stars among the timber. On



the ridge to the right, hanging above the Fish River Creek, the white sally-gums and the black sally-gums moved their glittering leaves in the breeze. And back at the guesthouse, up the long dusty slope of the road, there were, I knew, the most delightful people who would admire, and subsequently eat, my tremendous four-pound trout. The Duckmaloi, you might say, had proved itself.

3

The Badja



How complex a blending of landscape and rivers and weather, of people and wild creatures and trout, are the attractions of any place where you go fishing.

I used to love the road into Countegany from the turn-off near Cooma, winding twenty-six miles through a tunnel of crowding white sally-gums; with here and there a patch of dead ring-barked timber ghostly with lichens or glimmering with bright green moss; with rocky hillsides to the right where at any moment you might hope to see a kangaroo; and, through the dark she-oaks to the left, glimpses of the lower waters of the Badja gathered in long glimmering pools where you might, and often did, see a trout rising.

The house at Boggy Plains, when at last you reached clear country after the steep climb up from the causeway over the creek by Andy's Flat, was practically invisible. Smothered in tall green broom-bushes, bright with their yellow blossoms, which had multiplied and run wild since some early settler had first planted them as a wind-break, it lay below the level of the road, and all you could see of it was the red corrugated-iron roof, buckled and flattened by years of winter snow.

It was a house full of character. It belonged wholly and perfectly to the hillsides of granite boulders and flowing clean spring waters. It spoke in the one breath of the golden flowering of summer and the

white weight of the winter. Its crumbling walls and its dark creaking interior murmured inarticulately of the first settlers, maybe a family from Ireland, who had built it and lived in it for generations. The gunroom, with its ranks of nails driven into the walls for you to rest your rod on overnight without the bother of taking it to pieces, spoke with most pleasant clarity of fishing.

It was a house of white-washed pisé, long and low with a veranda running the full length of the front of it in true colonial style. Whoever long ago had dug a site in the hillside and rammed the clay between boards to make its foot-thick walls, had built it at different levels, so that when you walked out of the kitchen into the sitting-room you fell down three steps: which, after dinner, was likely enough to happen. The bedrooms, which opened onto the veranda, had only one small dark rattly window, so that you left the door open at night for air, snakes, and bats to come in. I never did in fact find a snake in the bedroom, but Molly Snow once killed a copperhead on the veranda. We used to chase the bats out, when they became obstreperous, with a landing-net.

We sometimes had bats in the sitting-room as well as in the bedrooms, but the sitting-room door was usually tight shut to keep out the cold upland winds, and the only animal regularly haunting that room as we sat by the great log fire at night was the household cat, which Molly used to lock up in the ceiling to eat the rats. It thumped and miaowed uncannily above our heads.

In the dining-room, where Jack Snow with his long straight nose and staring black eyes presided nightly at the head of the long table, there burned another great log fire, and I liked the story Jack used to tell about that fireplace. Boggy Plains, or Countegany as the whole district was called (you pronounce it Count-a-guinea) was a wild, hillbilly sort of place in those days, a wilderness of mountains and high tussocky plains farmed by a few scattered settlers living miles off the road in habitations more invisible and inaccessible even than Jack Snow's. The road in to Cooma was difficult at the best of times, often impassable in the winter. There was little entertainment for the adults, except an occasional trip into the saleyards at Cooma or a rare woolshed dance when shearing had cut out. For the shy bush children, who disappeared into the scrub or peered at you with bright eyes from behind their mothers' skirts when you visited one of the farmhouses, there was nothing. It occurred to some fishermen who



were staying with Jack Snow one Christmas that they would wake up the plains of Countegany. They would give a great Christmas Eve party at Snow's, and invite the whole neighbourhood. Particularly would they invite the children. They would make the old house resplendent with streamers and balloons. They would feed the kids jellies till they burst. They would have a present for everyone. The chimney above the old white-washed smoke-blackened fireplace in the dining-room was enormous. The largest and most benevolent of the fishermen would dress up as Santa Claus and climb on to the roof and, at the mystic and holy stroke of twelve, slither down the chimney and give the children assembled round the fireplace the surprise of their lives. He did, too. When he came crashing down with his sack and his beard and his flaming red robe and hood, and a cloud of soot behind him, they thought he was the devil and screamed and lit out for the bush. Most of the rest of that night was spent in looking for them up in the cowshed or down in the scrub by the river where they had hidden themselves.

The dining-room was notable, too, as it should have been, not

merely for Jack Snow's stories, but for Molly's dinners. Molly was jolly and plump and rosy-cheeked, more like a lass from Devonshire than the traditional lean brown wife of an Australian farmer. Whether the meal was a chicken from the fowlrun on the hillside, or one of the red-nosed Muscovy ducks that used to dabble in the creek behind the cowshed, or lamb from their own flocks, or pork or beef from the butcher in Cooma, or a baked trout from the Badja, all her dinners were magnificent; and they were served, with truly heroic patience on Molly's part, at whatever hour you chose to come in from fishing. And we came in late enough, too: maybe nine o'clock when we had been fishing the evening rise on the easy waters of the Luncheon Pool downstream, ten or half-past ten when we had done that long climb back through the moonlit sally-gums from the Pockets. There would be just time for two whiskies by the fire, and then it was dinner-time. It is the fisherman's constant problem: how do you fish the evening rise and turn up in time for dinner? Molly had the perfect solution. If there was one disadvantage in this noble system, it was our fault, not Molly's: and it was her dumplings. Dumplings, some kind of suety construction with jam or stewed apples, were Molly's masterpiece. They were large, they were weighty, they were good; and they would soak up cream like magic. There was always plenty of the most glorious thick fresh cream. But however much cream you poured onto those dumplings, they soaked it up and it vanished; so you poured more cream on; and more. Then, exhausted with the long day's fishing, you fell straight into bed . . . and the dumplings, with their great creamy fists, began to pummel you. . . .

The best place in the house, however pleasant were the fire and the dinner-table, was the veranda. It did have its disadvantages. If it was rarely invaded by snakes, it was made hardly less perilous by a frightful species of green bulldog ants, an inch or more in length, which ceaselessly patrolled it. The ants had a notion that something edible, possibly human, lived on the veranda, and used to send their scouts one by one, like angry emeralds, up the concrete steps to see what it was. If, as was the case with me on one or two trips to Countegany, you were guarding a very small child, you had to pick up these diabolical creatures and toss them back down the steps, whereupon they would shake themselves in a puzzled sort of way, and climb up again. . . .

But straight across from the veranda, magnificent to the eye, the

gigantic hump of Mahony's Mountain heaved itself out of the tussocky flats. Who Mahony was I don't know; perhaps he was the first settler, an emigrant from Ireland, who built the old house where we lived. Whoever he was, that is how the mountain was always named, not the conventional Mount Mahony, but Mahony's Mountain. It gave it a curiously personal quality; it was not just a name on a map but always, for all time, Mahony's private property. And, though it was no snow-clad alp, it was a very nice lump of the earth to own. Its great long curving ridge filled the whole sky. Magpies sang their carols at dawn from the silvery timber in its clearings. Eaglehawks patrolled its crest and, when the magpies swooped up to attack them, circled higher and higher above its summit until they lost themselves in blue space. When the afternoon light picked out each individual tree with the bark new-peeled from the trunk, its mighty candlebarks stood out like shafts of gold. The wild chorus of the kookaburras rang out from its gullies at dusk. Black night crowned it with stars. Whenever you looked, wherever you looked from the veranda, there was Mahony's Mountain. One rainy and drizzling day when the weather was too miserable for fishing I climbed the mountain with Jack Snow, and found it, under the huge silent wet trees, lit from bottom to top with wildflowers—buttercups, pale-green mysterious nodding greenhoods, starry gold bulbine lilies, such masses of wild violets, both the blue-and-white and the big plain purple kinds, that if you were going to walk at all you had to walk on violets; and finally, right on top of the mountain, like a wicked little king of the flowers, the yellow double-tail orchid, *diuris maculata*. It was the most wonderful mountain.

A most curious thing to see away up there was the remains of a fence. There were also grass-covered hollows and weedy mullock-heaps of quartz where prospectors had dug for gold. Wherever you go in Australia, no matter how remote the place, you will always find that some optimist has been there before you and fenced or fossicked the wilderness. Whoever it was who dug for gold on Mahony's Mountain had long been forgotten; very likely it was Mahony himself; but the man who built the old fence was Davy Thomas. Davy, who was still a neighbour of Jack Snow's, had been "struck be lightnin'" in his youth, so he would explain when he came over to help with the dipping. The lightning had knocked him off his horse, and he was never quite the same man afterwards. He still felt the

electricity, unexpectedly, "in me teeth". So Mrs Thomas, his young wife, had had to help him build the fence for whoever then owned the property; and became a legend of Countegany, bundling her babies into an iron-wheeled pram and pushing them before her up the steep flowery mountain where she swung an axe all day in the heat like a man, and felled the timber and built the fence with Davy. Mrs Thomas, with all those years behind her, used to come over and help Molly Snow with the housework sometimes; and we would see her stalking along the veranda with a broom, very tall, very lean, very dark, secret and black-looking and beautiful like an eagle. She had a peculiarly mysterious air, as if she knew more than anyone else about Countegany.

She was not the only wild creature we saw from that veranda. Sometimes a flock of wood-ducks, those curious birds more like a small goose than a duck, would feed like domestic poultry in Jack Snow's clover paddock. Sometimes a calf would come to drink at the old iron water-trough that stood just outside the fence. Sometimes, to Molly's consternation, Jack would let his newly-dipped sheep in, brown and dripping and clamorous, to "mow the lawn" for him; and then we would stand guard over Molly's three brave gerberas. Sometimes a fox would come down out of Mahony's Mountain after the rabbits and trot purposefully along through the tussocks. Sometimes, rarely, there would be kangaroos. Often we would watch the strange grey freezing sea-mist, when it had driven us home from fishing, come rolling over the mountain, blotting out the ridge and the trees and the flats until you could not see as far as the front gate, and the whole world was lost and hushed. Though it was inland country, not far from the Snowy Mountains, and the thought of the ocean seemed utterly alien to it, Countegany was in fact quite close to the coast. It was mountain plateau, and at its rim the ridges and rivers fell down to the salt water. Quite regularly, two or three days a week, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, this strange grey breath of the ocean floated over the rim of the plateau and, every moment growing huger, colder, and more dense, rolled over the country like a tidal wave and drowned it. It was quite possible, unless you had the river to guide you home, to get lost in it. The minute the first chill premonition of it reached the river all fishing was finished for that day. The fish went down to the bottom and stayed there. All you could do was pack up and go home—if you could find your way.

When it was not blotted out by the fog, the best thing you could see from the veranda, for after all we went there to fish, was the river itself: the never-to-be-forgotten Badja (so called, it was said, because the first settlers, finding it frequented by wombats, called the wombats "badgers" and then, changing the word to something that looked more aboriginal, named the river after them); the deep dark tranquil Badja that, flowing almost imperceptibly through this high flat marshy country, gathered itself into long glittering pools, and ran a step or two and paused to dream in another mighty pool, or sometimes, astounding itself, tumbled headlong down a granite gorge, then quietly recovered its breath and once more fell to sleep; the soft slow-running Badja, fringed with blossoming tea-tree and the silver or olive-green stems of its two kinds of sally-gums, ringing with the calls of thrushes, inhabited by enormous trout!

One blinding, baking December day when it was too hot to sit on the veranda and far too hot to think about fishing, and we lay and idled away the hours in the shade of the plum-trees at the side of the house, suddenly we saw the big shining circle of the Sally Hole, a hundred yards or so downstream, dimpled with the rings of rising trout; and when I stood on the veranda to get a better view there were more fish rising in the gleaming reaches towards the Rock Pool, for as far upstream as we could see. When I got to the river it was boiling with fish. It was a marriage feast of the red ants. The air was full of wings, the water was full of trout. Never have I seen so many fish! They rose in that fierce noon when the temperature was somewhere near a hundred; all afternoon when the silver slanting light made the water unbearable to look upon, they rose and they rose and they rose: in the Sheepwash Pool where the yabbie-holes in the grassy bank always looked so much like the lurking-places of snakes; in the shallows by the concrete causeway over the road; in the Dead Hole; in the sandy pool on the corner where the thrush sang in the willow and a big fish lived out of reach in a tiny frothy backwater against the far bank; in the shallow bend at the tail of it where my daughter saw the black snake wriggling across the water-weeds; in the Rock Pool where Jack Snow caught a four-pounder early one morning and thereby proved that his Coch-y-bondhu was just as effective as my indispensable Tup's Indispensable; in the long canal-like straight back towards the Sally Hole where the raft called the *S.S. Boggy Plains* was moored and where by night some monster

that was either a platypus or the biggest trout ever heard of used to thump and splash like a crocodile—everywhere that searing, sizzling afternoon hundreds of trout were rising for the red ants.

And out of them all I caught . . . I caught one lean, miserable specimen of a rainbow, less than a pound, from the Dead Hole. On another day it might have been an interesting enough capture, for in that dark deep sinister pool, its waters perhaps tainted by the big trees that had fallen into it, there weren't supposed to be any trout at all. But one lean little rainbow for that afternoon of the red ants! It was disgraceful; and Jack Snow, when I got back, told me so. The simple truth was, I didn't have in my fly-box a decent imitation of the red ant. How can a fisherman be such an imbecile? You must always, as I learned at Duckmaloi, have a Black Ant in the box, ready for the one day in the year or the one day in ten years when you strike the wedding flight of that variety; and you must never, as I learnt with agony at Countegany, fail to carry a supply of the Red.

Straight after that, it snowed. Snow in December would be surprising anywhere in Australia; here, after the heat-wave, it was incredible. How beautiful it was when we woke in the morning to find the whole valley lying white, and a grey haze over the ribbon-gums loaded with snow on Mahony's Mountain, and the white flakes still spinning and floating down into the dark-green gully between the clover-paddock and the road along the ridge. How enchanting it was, when we built a snowman on the lawn before breakfast and decorated it with my father's curved cherrywood pipe. How bleak and curious it was to fish the grey sleety river, as I did for a while, without noticeable results, just to see if the patter of snowflakes would mislead the trout into thinking the winged ants were falling on the water again; and to see, anyhow, how it felt to be fishing in the snow. And how cruel it was. I walked over the white paddocks with Jack Snow—an appropriate name he had, for a farmer on that high plateau!—to see how his sheep were getting on; and, there, over the hillside across the road, were thirty of them lying stark and frozen against the fence. They must have been making for the shelter of the rocky gully where the hillside in the next paddock dipped down into a creek-bed; and, reaching the fence, piled up against it and perished. I admired Jack Snow very much on that occasion. He didn't say one word about the heavy financial loss this meant to him; only, later in the day, got his tractor and dragged the carcasses out of sight.

So, Countegany was memorable for many different things: for the old house and its legends; for the little separate white-washed cottage of the cool-house, where Molly Snow churned the butter; for the water-race in which, for some mysterious purpose, Jack kept captive a three-pound rainbow trout; for the black Polled Angus cattle at rest in the shade of the sallies; for wood-duck in the clover, and black duck flying at dusk; for the blue and crimson lowries in the orchard; for fog and snow and thunder, and strong winds rushing through the valley, and the stars by night and the sun by day that glittered with unparalleled silver intensity out of the steeps of pure mountain air. But the two things for which it was really remarkable were trout, and snakes. I never had such fishing anywhere else in Australia; I never trod on, jumped over, slew, or sneaked horror-stricken away from so many millions of serpents.

Out of the general writhing mass of them, black snakes, brown snakes, tiger-snakes and the small vicious copperheads, I recall three with particular vividness: the first for no better reason than I saw it on the first morning of my first visit to Countegany . . . after, on our arrival on the previous afternoon, we had plodded so innocently through the clover, the long grass, the tea-tree, and the tussocks by the river. It was just a nice, well-meaning, reasonably sized black snake sunning itself in the sparkling morning on the broken granite at the head of the Luncheon Pool (where Jack Snow had caught one of his four-pounders in the backwater and where the trout rose so tantalizingly against the reeds on the far bank) . . . just a snake. But there is always something peculiarly dampening in your first meeting with a snake in any new fishing spot. You know there must be snakes, because there are always snakes; but you prefer not to see them; then you don't have to think about them. And when you do see the first of them there is always that moment of shock, that curious feeling of betrayal, as if the bright water and sunny rocks have played a singularly dirty trick on you. And the feeling stays with you. I never saw that snake again after I futilely whanged at it with a stick that first morning; I fished the head of the Luncheon Pool many a day; but I never really liked the place; I always expected it to bite me.

The second snake was the beast which David Campbell and I saw early one morning when we had rashly got out of our comfortable beds to see if the trout, too, were awake in the cold and the dew and

the mist. They weren't. But on the tussocky flat just across the river from the house, at the base of Mahony's Mountain, stretched full length across the narrow sheep-track we were following, there was the snake. I cannot really explain why I found this incident so inexpressibly comic. I jumped; and, like one sheep after another, Campbell jumped too. But I jumped clean over the snake, which was the only thing I could do when it was right under my foot; whereas Campbell's great leap, seeing that he was behind me on the track, should by rights have landed him precisely on top of the snake. How he missed it I don't know. But I laugh every time I think of the two of us bounding along that sheep-track in the dawn, and Campbell poised in mid-air with the snake sliding under his boots.

And the third snake—the third snake was the one that lived in the creek behind the cowshed. That holiday, because my wife was busy painting the landscape, I was guardian and entertainer most of the time to a very small child. I tried to make it sleep so that I could go fishing, but it bounced out of bed onto the veranda and played with the green bulldog ants. I took it to the ford below the Sally Hole and we built a small dam and sat in it. I rescued it from the fowlhouse, where it was bailed up by a broody Muscovy duck. I took it over the hillside across the road, where we gathered the buttercups, the little pink and white pincushions and the purple wild violets and threaded them into the quoits on the veranda to make some weird kind of floral tower. I took it to the concrete crossing where the road met the Badja, and we set fire to the tussocks to clear the snakes away, and built dwarf cottages of the rounded river stones for the mermaids—it is not generally known that there were mermaids in the Badja. I took it, bouncing on the back of Jack Snow's tractor, far across the hills into the sucker forest where, in a hollow tree-trunk walled with earth by the white ants, we found the door of fairyland; which, at the magic words "Open Sesame!", opened, or almost opened, to reveal the long corridors and ballrooms lit with sparkling jewels where the people with their shining wings danced with each other like cicadas. And I took it, small and naked as a skinned rabbit, bathing in the creek behind the cowshed. There was no possible cover for a snake at that pool. There was the sandy shore from which we entered, the grassy bank cropped short by the cows, and the clear water. And, on the grassy bank, there grew a solitary dock. And while for a minute I was a few yards down the creek, collecting an old tin to

catch tadpoles in, out of that solitary dock, from under its three or four wide green leaves, a yard from where the small naked rabbit frolicked in the water, slowly, with a tiny rustle, there manifested itself the most monstrous red-bellied black snake I have ever seen. And it began to glide, with God knows what intent, whether just to escape or whether to make a meal of rabbit, straight towards my offspring in the water. Horror! When we had fled to a safe distance away on the hillside I stopped to watch; and the snake swam across the pool where the child had been, then paused and seemed to nose about on the sand where we had camped. I don't know if a snake would, in fact, eat a very small child. I doubt it. I never heard of such a thing. But that really did seem to be its intention. I had no regrets whatever when Jack Snow came down from the cowshed and finished that one off with a length of fencing wire.

It must have been a tribute to the size of the snake or the nastiness of the occasion for Jack to condescend to use such a weapon. Normally, Jack just used to stamp on snakes. It was one of the great sights of the Badja.

Jack was an intrepid fellow in his way. He had served in the Air Force during the war and had had to bail out over Italy. He still did it sometimes. In the middle of the night, when all the old house was silent, you would hear a crash and a thump on his bedroom floor, and that would be Jack, bailing out over Italy. I think he got into the habit of stamping on snakes simply because, when there were so many of them at Countegany, you were practically walking on them all day anyhow. And of course you don't usually carry a wire fence with you when you are walking over the paddocks, and any stick you can find always breaks. So Jack just stood on them. You'd see him across the river or just ahead of you on the track, suddenly start marking time, lifting up his long bony legs and raising his knees above the tussocks, left, right, left, right, like a soldier, and that would be Jack Snow stamping on a snake.

He had a theory that his boots were sufficient protection for him, since snakes always struck downwards at the ankle, and if one did happen to have a go at his leg its fangs would get entangled in the loose cloth of his trousers; and anyhow if you did get bitten and didn't have a knife, all you had to do was to lance the wound with a sharp blade of grass. . . . Everyone, hearing these preposterous ideas or, worse, actually seeing him go left, right, left, right, pounding

away in the tussocks, would say, of course, that sooner or later a snake would get him . . . and, sooner or later, one didn't. No snake ever bit him, though many would have liked to; he just kept on pounding away, the champion snake-stamper of all time.

As for the fish, they were everywhere. And everywhere along the ten miles or more of the Badja that you could conveniently reach from Jack Snow's we fished for them. We fished at Andy's Flat, away downstream where Jack led us miles over the timber-strewn hillsides, loping unconcernedly over the wilderness of fallen logs as if the country were breeding some kind of human kangaroo; and there, among the green cherry-trees growing around the site where Andy, whoever he was, had had his habitation, we saw the reddest of red foxes; and there we waded waist-deep all day, catching fish, in the delectable straight rippling waters where, on one famous occasion, a fisherman named Lee had caught twenty-two trout in an afternoon, and had put them all back. He fished for fishing, not for fish.

We fished the long mysterious gorge up from Andy's, thought not to be worth fishing but secreting fine large pools. We fished the pool above the gorge where, one wild rainy day when there was no hope of a fish, I did get a trout, and a fine fish too, in the run-in against the high stony bank where grew one solitary specimen of the delicate,



lilac-tinted alpine mint-bush. And the curving pool above it where trout lay near the fallen tree, and where the sandy bank was always delicately furrowed by the trail-marks of snakes. On upstream, through the thick tea-tree which it was so tempting to by-pass, we fished the pool against the cliff; and there I learned how right Jack Snow was when he said that, on those clear bright Countegany days, fish would rise only when a cloud-shadow fell across the water; and there I learned, too, when a brief rise to some brown-winged insect that looked like an Egyptian felucca took place one day in a cloud-shadow, that the right fly for that insect was neither the dry Hardy's Favourite nor the wet, but the dry allowed to sink an inch or so below the surface.

We fished, but mostly at evening, the Luncheon Pool, where the long quarter-mile straight of deep water, filled with rosy clouds and golden light in the sunset, would be ringed from end to end with rising trout, dozens of them, scores of them, hundreds of them. That was the pool, too, where there was always one monstrous, uncatchable fish, right in the shallow at the tail, who used to dash upstream out of your way with a bow-wave like a battleship. And it was at that same pool that once I perceived the explanation, or so I think, of that phenomenon which so troubled the naturalist Gilbert White: the subaqueous hibernation of swallows. White sometimes suspected, in common with other naturalists of the eighteenth century, that swallows spent the winter under water; hibernating, like clusters of bats, in caverns beneath the surface of the river. It was a pleasant but dubious legend, and White spent a lot of time arguing with himself about it. Well, I was watching the swallows hunting insects one glittering evening at the Luncheon Pool. They were wheeling everywhere above the water, they gathered in a flock, and suddenly, instantly, there was not a swallow to be seen. They had not flown away, or I should have seen them go; nor was there a tree or a cave anywhere where they might have taken shelter. Had they, then, all dived together under the water to start hibernating? There was one small, ragged tea-tree bush, so insignificant that you would hardly notice it, hanging low over the water's edge; and that was where they had all gone; like a flash; like a dark flash instantly extinguished.

Whether it was wild life, whether it was fish, whether it was merely water, there was no pool of that lovely river that did not hold something worth remembering. Up from the Luncheon Pool, in the next

nondescript piece of water, hardly worth fishing it seemed, a small pool in a small gorge, there was one glorious night when the white moths were pouring like a soft blizzard out of the tea-tree bushes, and I caught three fish one after another with, of all things, the White Moth. It was supposed to be impossible to take a trout with the White Moth at Countegany, even when the real insect was hatching by the million. The imitation they took that night had a small tinge of pink on the body. Maybe that was the explanation. Whoever tied that fly was a genius.

Except occasionally at dusk, when the thing that seemed to be a crocodile, a bunyip, a platypus, or the father of all trout splashed and thundered in it, we didn't fish the Sally Hole too often, for we felt that, since it was visible from the house, Jack rather liked it to be left intact as a proof of just how many fish there were in the Badja. But just across from the Sally Hole there was a nice place of dry land, and there I had some of the most remarkable fishing I ever had at Countegany. It was a benevolent stream, the Badja. When it flooded, it never got dirty. The clear waters simply brimmed over the paddocks, and Jack always swore that you could go fishing anywhere over his farm and catch trout. He said he had caught them from the fence in the potato paddock. So, firmly disbelieving him, one day in the flood I crossed the Badja by means of the *S.S. Boggy Plains*, and strolled round the base of Mahony's Mountain back towards the Sally Hole; and dyspeptically dropped a dry fly among the tussocks in a nasty-looking hollow filled with floodwater; and instantly caught a three-pound brown trout, and instantly lost another. Jack was a truthful man; and if he had said, after that, that he had caught a trout on the roof, during exceptionally heavy rain, I should not have doubted him.

And on and on, mile after mile towards its source in the marshes, we patrolled the fishable Badja: the long stretch and the pools up from the house to the road crossing, the Sheepwash Pool, where the brown snake lay on the bank just where you clambered over the fence; the long gorge beyond it where I saw and did not catch a very big fish in an unreachable backwater and where, one day of tremendous thunder, David Campbell and I crouched beneath a rock at the water's edge while the lightning flamed around us and the floodwaters swelled up to our feet and drove us out into the storm again . . . and so, by-passing a stretch of river so rough that we never quite

got through it, on by the road to Pound Creek, or Pepper's Creek as some men call it for a reason I have never fathomed, where I dropped David Campbell's three-pounder out of my landing-net and where one day when the rolling mist had put an end to fishing we met at the mouth of his burrow on a rocky hillside the most somnolent gingery old wombat who was either so sleepy or so blind that he couldn't be bothered to move until we tickled his back with a rod-tip.

And so, back where Pound Creek met the Badja, to the Cow-paddock; where I still cherish in my mind the spectacle of Jim Rylie of Michelago up to his waist in the wide water, an immense man with an immense rod trying to cast half a mile of line to reach those unreachable monsters that cruised among the lily-beds; and David Campbell crawling through the steep bush on the far bank to catch, which he did, and then lose, one of those same monsters; and the thunderstorm which, when we had clambered down the gorge at the tail for one very small trout in a rock-pool, came roaring down the river and wet us through and then unkindly turned round and roared back up the gorge and wet us through again . . . and the morning when, acting as guide to some fishermen new to Countegany, I disgraced myself by sneaking upstream and catching three trout on a Tup's Indispensable while they stayed at the Cow-paddock and caught nothing. I was sure they thought I had got them with a worm, if not with a spinner.

And so, at last, to the reedy little circle of the Sawpit Pool where the waters that had crept invisibly through the upland swamps and soaks suddenly, for the first time, became the Badja River.

We fished everywhere, and everywhere we caught fish. And everywhere, on the road by the Sheepwash, among the rocks at Pound Creek, lurking by the logs in the Cow-paddock, we tripped over or jumped over writhing coils of snakes. And the snakes and the fishing reached, as was fitting, their climax in one place together. The Pockets.

The regular inhabitants of Jack Snow's, besides Jack and Molly and the cat, were a strange tribe of elderly fishermen who walked unceasingly, year after year, the flat and easy stretch of water from the Sally Hole past the house up to the Dead Hole and the road crossing. Sometimes, greatly adventuring, they fought their way half a mile downstream to the Luncheon Pool. That was why it was called

the Luncheon Pool. They fished down towards it all morning; they ate their luncheon under the one big ribbony-gum that stood on its clear banks; and then in the afternoon they fished home again. They were not greedy men; they had no wish to slay vast numbers of fish; moreover, they wanted the fishing to continue. So every time they landed a trout they gently returned it to the water. Year after year, with great goodwill, they caught the same fish all over again. They got to know every trout in the river, some of them even by name. The Pockets were just too far for them; we had the fishing there to ourselves: three lonely wild pools, plus Fred's, lost in a fold of the hills between the waterfall that tumbled down from the Cow-paddock and the gorge upstream from the Sheepwash.

There were three ways in to the Pockets, and each of them was a mighty long walk. You could drive in a jeep, as once we did, across the paddocks on the near side of the Sheepwash, and over the hills to the sucker forest where the door of fairyland stood; and then, leaving the jeep there, hike down the clear wide boggy slopes to the Bottom Pocket glittering small and blue in the distance. That had one disadvantage: exactly where in the sucker forest, that wide-stretching, all but impenetrable thicket of thin white sally-gums—exactly where, in the forest and the gathering dusk, did you leave that blessed jeep? We did find it in the end; but not without that nasty feeling of panic you get when you have temporarily mislaid the universe. Then, leaving your transport at an invisible spot marked X along the road, you could take to the hills and the marshy uplands bright with bulbine lilies and a dwarf golden guineaflower, and break out through a bushy ridge right onto the Top Pocket. Or, best of all, because it also gave you Fred's to fish, and most strenuous of all because the climb down the mountain from Fred's was a hot long steep way down and a very long hot steep way back, you could strike into the paddocks where a fence-line met the road, cross the Badja by crawling and swinging through the tea-trees over a cluster of rocky islets, and follow the river down to Fred's, and on to the water-worn granite plateau where once I took a trout that rose for a dragonfly while we were having lunch; and so, over the brink of the world, down to the three Pockets, Top and Middle and Bottom, shining afar in the scrub.

Fred's was always called just Fred's. Not Fred's Pool, or Fred's Paddock, and not Fred Anybody's Pool; just Fred's. And a most noble piece of water it was, the biggest pool in the whole Badja I should

think, the great wide oval of it lying bright and motionless between the rough hills across the river and the green cleared paddock from which we fished. There were always fish in Fred's. They lay in the shallow run-in. They lay off the lily-bed beside it, where I lost my superb six-pounder. They lay among the rocks in the centre and grievously broke your cast. They rose, invariably they rose, all day over the submerged rocks in the deep hole near the tail, where you fished for them either by standing against the high bank and hooking yourself up ten thousand times on the brier and the tree behind you, or by lying prone on top of the tall granite boulder that jutted out into the water and dropping your fly straight down as if fishing from a wharf. In the great year, the year of the drought when you could wade far out and really get at those waters, we fished the tail of Fred's from the far side and had such fishing among those sunken rocks, then with their brown tops showing above the water, as has never been heard of before or since.

And, down from Fred's, the Pockets.

I must admit that once at the Pockets I had one of the worst day's fishing I have ever had in my life. There are the great days, the rare days, the days you live for and fish for, which every fisherman knows; the days when nothing goes wrong, when you have exactly the right fly, when you cast and strike with such beautiful, delicate precision that really you respect yourself; when you never let a fish wrap itself round a rock or a sunken log, when your cast never breaks and your rod-tip never foolishly drops out of its ferrule, when you never fumble with your landing-net and when, superb in confidence, you catch every fish you see. There are also the dreadful days. This was the dreadfulest of all dreadful days.

God forgive me, I had had slightly too much claret with dinner the night before. It is an unforgivable thing to do on a fishing trip. The sun shone, the water sparkled, and I was not quite comfortable. In fact, I was hot. When I hooked a good one in the run-in at Fred's, I lost it for no reason at all. When I struck another beauty among the rocks in the centre it got under a rock and took my whole cast with it when it departed. The only other cast I had was, as I perceived when I hooked the next one, beside the big rock at the tail, rotten. Well, you can still fish after a fashion with the stronger, thicker remnant of a rotten cast; but what can you do when the river, in one of its high clear floods, is running so full that, after you have climbed

down in the baking heat through the horrid dry bush and over the horrid rough rocks to the Pockets, you can't get over the usual crossing under the tea-tree bushes? Everybody knows that you have to fish the Pockets from the far side; and here you are, in the heat, with a broken, rotten cast, with snakes probably crawling up your trouser-legs, and with something suspiciously like a hang-over, marooned on the wrong side among briers and tea-tree, all vilely in flower, with a nasty high bank of rough speckled rock behind you, making casting totally impossible. Why, in God's name, do we go fishing anyhow?

David Campbell was with me that day. He had already, quite unforgivably, caught three fish in Fred's.

The river was high. The river was deep. The river was swift and dangerous. There was no possible way of crossing it. The crossing, as I have carefully explained, as I explained then to Campbell, was drowned. And anybody who tried to get over the river by leaping from point to point where a series of smooth, rounded, slippery granite boulders, six feet or more apart, did suggest a crossing that perhaps a chamois might manage, would certainly be drowned himself. So over the Badja, leaping from boulder to boulder, Campbell went. "You just keep going," he said to me in memorable words later.

And, doggedly if not so daringly, I kept going myself. A fish began to rise on my side of the river and, all among the tea-tree and the briers, I fished for it. And not one fly, of a dozen I tried to tempt it with, would it look at. Across the river, fishing from the very rock which in better days had always been regarded as my inviolable property, Campbell hooked a trout—reasonably small, I was glad to observe—and having no landing-net, played it to a standstill, then leant head-first down the rock, got his fingers through its gills and held it up for me to admire. It was hotter than ever. The rocks blazed with light, the water glared. A bird of some kind began making unpleasant noises in a tree. "Listen to that thrush!" called Campbell.

I gave up. I dismantled my rod and, deciding that if Campbell was going to be drowned when he jumped back over the boulders there was nothing I could do about it anyway, I climbed the hideous mountainside back to Fred's. "I got over at the tail," said the poet when he found me eventually sitting at peace under a black sally in the green paddock, enjoying the pleasures of not fishing. "I got that one you were fishing for," he added, as a sort of casual afterthought. And showed it to me. . . .

But that was in another year. And it was in yet another year, at cold silver-glittering Easter, that I stood on the plateau above the Pockets and saw not a single fish stirring in all that magnificent water. Huddled into the hills it seemed then, waiting for the winter snow.

The great year, the year of the drought, was the first year we ever fished the Pockets. Nobody had been near them, nobody had touched them, nobody had disturbed either the fish or the snakes for five years, so Jack Snow told us. And I believed him. As we came out of the bush onto the Top Pocket the first thing we saw was a great heap of driftwood piled up by the winter floods; and, as we approached it to make our way down the stream, three enormous black snakes slithered simultaneously into its horrible interstices: over which, gingerly, we stepped. And gingerly we stepped thereafter, and with reason, for there were many snakes at the Pockets. And many trout.

It was the drought that did it; the drought and the isolation. The high swamps and soaks and springs were dry; the tributary creeks were dry; and all the wild life of Countegany, whether fox or rabbit, currawong or kangaroo, skink or water-dragon or snake, had concentrated at the life-giving Badja. The river itself was half dry, so that the trout too were concentrated in the pools and could be seen and reached where they sheltered by lily-beds or sunken rocks normally too far out in deep water to approach. And nothing came there to disturb this concentration of life, whether on land or in water; no human footfall, not even cattle to trample the scrub along the banks or wade out and chew the water-grass. There was nothing all day but bird-calls, snakes, and trout.

We had a fly called the Burrinjuck Wonder; at least I think that was its name, for the Burrinjuck Wonder is the nearest equivalent to it I have since been able to find. It was a local fly sold in Yass and Canberra for fishermen who frequent the Goodradigbee and the Burrinjuck Dam; a big, orange-bodied thing with a long tail, which may have represented a wasp. Of course we lost our stock of them that season, and the official Burrinjuck Wonder has never seemed quite the same thing; but while our supply lasted, whatever the fly's true name may have been, it certainly worked wonders for us.

I forget how many fish we caught with it. Chiefly I remember the delight of wading those remote calm pools all day, with the hot dry bush all round us and the brown water so cool around our waists;



and the fascination of seeing those enormous trout, three- and four-pound rainbows, swimming around the rocks or shaking the narrow leaves and little white cups of the water-lilies as they slid and fed beneath them; and the long, lovely walk home, after the day's fishing, through the white sallies silvered with the moonlight.

We caught so many fish that we put back everything under two pounds; and still came home with such a bag of three- and four-pounders that we didn't know what to do with them. We used to put them in the farmers' letter-boxes and then ring up the farmers from Jack Snow's when we got home to tell them to go and pick them up. We ate them fried for breakfast, and soured for lunch, and baked with parsley sauce for dinner. We caught so many trout that one day I said to David Campbell, "I don't see any point in catching fish after fish like this. I think I shall become one of those old codgers who spend half the day studying the stream and tea-tree bushes and the insects on the water to find out what fly to put on; and get so interested in that that they hardly bother about fishing at all." Words which, on barren days since then, Campbell has unkindly recalled to me.

One day that royal season I was perching on a rock which jutted out from the bank into the Top Pocket. It was the very rock, incidentally, from which Campbell caught the small fish on my day of despair. I had adopted it as my favourite station, partly because I could always get a fish from it in the lily-bed downstream, and chiefly (I am ashamed to say) because it was away from those scrubby banks, a nice clear rock where the snakes couldn't get at you. Jack Snow, tired of catching trout, was sitting on the bank behind me. There was

a huge black snake curling against his back. "Jack," I said calmly, very proud of my self-possession, "stand up quietly and step straight forward into the river." The snake seemed to be trying to wrap itself round him like a boa-constrictor, or nuzzling against him like a kitten. Perhaps it just wanted to wriggle up his back to have a look at his face. "Eh?" said Jack. "Why?" And, seeing the snake, stood up with perfect tranquillity and stamped on it. There was a very nasty commotion for a while, but Jack won. "Yes," he said when I was telling the story at dinner that night, "it must have looked funny all right. There was something funnier, though. I didn't tell you at the time because I didn't want to interrupt your fishing. There was another snake, a copperhead, coiled up in a crack of the rock just behind *you*."

4

Prosser's



HEAVEN knows how long that ramshackle boarding-house which we called "Prosser's" had stood on the top of the world at Rule's Point. Maybe it had been an inn of the coaching days when weary and terror-stricken travellers, having breasted the mountain-side up from Talbingo, paused for refreshment, as well they might, before going on to Kiandra. Maybe the heroic settlers of the Miles Franklin country, having somehow clambered with their horses out of the lost valley of Brindabella, poised there for a while, as if in the sky, before dropping down the other side of the range to Tumut. Possibly it dated right back to the gold-rush days at Kiandra and had seen the great tide of the miners flow up the road and back again; leaving in the end no more to mark their enterprise than a cluster of gravestones on the hillside, the windy great oval of the Three-Mile Dam and, in the township itself, a few grey cottages even more dilapidated than Prosser's, and some families with Chinese names.

Prosser's, if it wasn't perhaps quite as old as that, was old enough. And primitive. The bedrooms, each a narrow little box, opened side by side off a veranda running the full length of the front of the house; and contained iron bedsteads of a remarkable height, instability, and lumpiness. One went to bed by candle-light, and, if wakeful, was entertained by groans, snores, and other revolting noises penetrating

the thin walls from the sleepers on either side. The cold, clammy bathroom was shared by the community of fishermen and stray tourists, and you had to be quick to get it. The dining-room, by some freak of architecture common in old country hotels, and possibly intended for coolness, was a dank dark cavern excavated between the store-rooms and the kitchen, cool enough indeed, but admitting neither light nor air. The long low weatherboard house always looked as if it were just about to fall down. It was not that the corrugated iron roof, buckled by winter snow and summer sun so that it channelled most of the rain into the bedrooms, ever actually blew off; it was not that dry-rot or white-ants ever quite ate away the veranda; it was not that the thin old boards with most of their paint long since peeled off by the weather, ever really melted into thin air . . . but something like that, because of its age and its crumblingness, always seemed likely, very gradually and gently, to happen.

The Prossers themselves could do nothing, or very little, about its woeful state of disrepair, for it was owned by the Kosciusko State Park Trust, or some such body; and the body, whose duty it was to repair it, would never do it. They must have decided that, since it was going to fall to pieces however you tried to patch it up, they would let it. And so year by year, very gradually and gently, it did.

And yet, what a good place it was!

It was irradiated by Mrs Prosser's cooking. No matter at what hour you arrived—like the time we drove over Kosciusko way and the fan-belt broke and, red-hot and boiling, we had to crawl over the hills through the night back to Kiandra where some Snowy River workers, out on the spree, came to the rescue with a new belt; or like that famous night when we stopped at Old Adaminaby for a meal at eight o'clock and the fat boy in the café said simply and finally, "I'm off!", as if being "off" at eight o'clock were an unalterable law of nature—no matter at what hour you arrived starving and exhausted at Rule's Point, Mrs Prosser, like other great fishing hostesses before her, could always find you something to eat. No matter at what time you came in from fishing, and sometimes after the drive home from Kelly's Plains we were very late indeed, there was always a hot dinner waiting for you in that dank dark dining-room; and this was served, for Mrs Prosser understood fishermen, after a decent interval for refreshment by the log fire in the little private sitting-room which we used to hire as an "extra". And what meals they were! Mrs Prosser

was an expert at "sweets". There were always at least three delicious pies and steamed puddings and crisp light meringue-concoctions to choose from, and these were so tempting that we generally ate all three, sometimes one at a time, sometimes all on the plate together. One of Mrs Prosser's specialities, if you asked for it, was cold trout, soured in vinegar, to take with you for lunch by the river; one of the best of all ways to eat trout.

Only one meal at Prosser's was ever a disaster, and that was our own fault, for we asked for it. However exciting it was, after that day in the Gorge at Kelly's, to come home laden with hats full of mushrooms and bags full of trout, these do not make, for breakfast, a desirable combination. In fact . . .

How Mrs Prosser cooked her wonderful meals over the old wood stove in her kitchen, and survived, passes understanding. It was a most comfortable place early in the morning, or in the bleak alpine weather of which Rule's Point had plenty, but one summer's day when we were there Colin Prosser's thermometer on the back veranda said 100 degrees Fahrenheit; when he took it out into the sun, for curiosity, he got some astronomical reading like 120 or 130 degrees; and in the kitchen, where still Mrs Prosser went on cooking all day, it must have been hellish. She was slight, wiry, and indomitable; and when she was not cooking she was dashing about the bedrooms with a broom.

But if Mrs Prosser was energetic, and stoked up the life of the house with fine and nourishing food, and attacked its decrepitude with her broom, everything else around Rule's Point was full of a profound leisure, as if it had taken a deep drink of sunlight and gone to sleep after it; and that was its special charm. It took its pace, maybe, from the steady crumbling of the old house, or from the long motionless red-gold expanse of Kelly's Plains which, stretching from the veranda to the horizon, lay beneath its curious tree-line like the basin of some shallow primeval lake, waiting in timeless patience for the water to fill it again. Nothing ever moved across Kelly's Plains except sometimes, high above it, a crow or a hawk going about its business and once, most memorably, a great bellowing mob of red and black cattle taking the softer route over the grass as they made their way down to Tumut.

There were a pair of robins which had built their nest on the axle of a hay-rake which was parked in front of the veranda; and they

were the busiest creatures in the whole community; darting off to catch a fly or a grasshopper for their four gaping-mouthed young and diving back with it through the spokes of the wheel; perching on the rim of the iron seat for the cockbird to display his crimson breast; twittering for a moment together; then off again for more grasshoppers. We used to hope that no one would drive off with the hay-rake and break up these happy small lives; but there was no need to worry. Whoever had parked that hay-rake seemed to have forgotten it; or maybe he had parked it for robins. Nobody at Prosser's was going to dash off in a hurry and make hay.

Sometimes in that leisurely country I myself forgot that I had gone there to do anything so energetic as fishing. Once for three whole weeks—so it now seems, though surely I went fishing at intervals—I helped Colin Prosser with his shearing. There was none of the usual dust and uproar of a shearing-shed at Prosser's. In fact, there wasn't even a shearing-shed in the proper sense of the term; but a couple of pens in some nondescript old building at the back of the house, and a machine at which only one solitary shearer could operate, if it was in working order, which it usually wasn't. Colin didn't have many sheep, anyhow, and those he did have he couldn't usually find. Sometimes he did manage to muster half a dozen of them and pen them in the shed, and then bravely he would start the machine, if it would start, and vigorously shear half a sheep. Then the machine would break down, and he would spend the rest of the day fixing it. The next day it would rain, and everybody knows you can't shear in the rain. Two or three days later, when the sheep had dried out, we would start again. And the machine would break down. Or Colin would have to go and get a load of wood for Mrs Prosser's stove. Or a fisherman would have engine trouble, or break the tip of his rod; and Colin, who was a wizard with both engines and rods, would obligingly stop shearing and, one way or the other, get them mobile again. Then there was the rodeo in Tumut, and nobody could shear sheep when he had to be riding in a rodeo. Dark-haired, blue-eyed, stocky, bounding with youth and confidence, Colin had energy enough to set against the prevailing somnolence of Rule's Point; but I don't think we ever got as far as shearing more than one whole sheep in those industrious three weeks.

I used to talk, too, perhaps when the shearing machine had broken down, to Mr Prosser, senior. I never knew quite what Mr Prosser's

role in the household was, except, of course, that he was head of it. He owned, as well as a few acres at Rule's Point, a piece of land down Tumut way; and so, I daresay, was kept busy enough, in an unhurried sort-of way, as a farmer. He was a tall, slow, quiet-speaking man, and knew all the lore of the district. He told me once that one winter he had "tracked a fox", following its footprints in the snow, all round the hillside at the back of the house; and there in seventeen different hollow logs, at which the fox had paused, he found seventeen rabbits which the wise animal had stored against the season of scarcity. Apparently, on the day when he tracked it, the fox was inspecting its larders. He also told me, which I had heard before from others, that when the Three-Mile Dam lay frozen to ice in the winter, and all the slopes around it were buried under the snow, the foxes came down to the hidden shore of the lake and dug there for the yabbies in their holes. Mr Prosser told me, too, that in kinder days of summer he had often seen black snakes wriggling along under-water at the bottom of the streams, or coiled there in a nasty writhing mass. I never knew quite what to make of this story, since it is a common legend of the outback which most naturalists would deny; and certainly a snake would have to come up to breathe. But is it quite impossible that a semi-aquatic creature like a black snake would sometimes forage for its food under-water? Snakes do swim, of course; in fact I was once tempted to hook with my fly a small yellow snake that slid out of the tussocks and looked back at me from midway across the Murrumbidgee not many miles from Prosser's, only it looked at me so appealingly, and anyhow I couldn't imagine how, having landed it, I was ever going to unhook it. . . . Snakes do swim, and do dive. Are they then to be found at the bottom of the stream, the very place where the fisherman thinks he is most secure from them? It is an unnerving thought. Sometimes, when I tread on a nasty-looking slippery stick in the water, I remember Mr Prosser, and shudder. Who are we to question what the countryman says he has seen?

There were days during that hot idle summer when I did at least occasionally investigate a piece of fishable water. Partly because I cling to a belief that the shallowest and most hopeless of tributary creeks shelter a monstrous fish that nobody else has ever thought of fishing for, partly because any piece of water should be investigated for its own sake and for what minute life of tadpole and water-beetle

and drinking bird it may contain, I explored with my daughter the creek behind the pigsty at Prosser's. But there were no monsters in that ragged scrap of water twisting down to the Murrumbidgee through its tea-tree and red-berried briers; only a solitary very small trout, about five inches long, which we failed to catch with our hands; and so, instead of energetically fishing, we spent the laziest of days there building a dam for a small boy named Bill, an appendage of the Prossers, who had somehow got himself attached to us. Bill was a disconcerting small boy. After we had initiated him into the art of picking up a stone from one place and setting it down in another, after we had built quite a noble wall and persuaded the streamlet to bank itself up fully six inches deep behind it, and after we had generously christened it, in his honour, "Bill's Dam", Bill said he didn't like dams and wanted to go home. Never mind. I like building dams.

We explored the same creek again, lower down its course, where we crossed it in order to look for kangaroos on the ski-run cut into the bush across the road from Prosser's, on the mountain rampart of Kelly's Plains, but that was an expedition more idle even than poking about behind the pigsty. There were no kangaroos on the clearing; just bush, with the small orange pea-flowers of bacon-and-eggs in bloom; and there were no trout in the creek; there was hardly any creek in it really. With no Bill's Dam and no briers or blackberries to hold up its waters for a moment, it ran flat and shallow between green banks where the cattle had cropped the grass level as a lawn, and was no more than the tiniest tongue of water, licking a granite boulder as it disappeared round a bend. And how beautiful it was! What is there so fascinating about these infinitesimal creeks in the hills, where there is no more to be seen than the hoof-prints of the cattle in the sand, and little dark black-spinners skidding under the shelter of the banks, and the water-beetles minutely furrowing the shining surface as they chase each other for love? Water is life, I suppose; and besides it makes, as Judith Wright has said, "Summer's bubble-sound of sweet creek-water".

We did, too, go fishing . . . if you could call it fishing to wade knee-deep in the silver sparkle of the Murrumbidgee when you first met it half a mile across the plain from Prosser's; where the track crossed the rickety old wooden bridge, always with so much timber missing from its decking that you thought your car would fall through into the river, and where years ago there were said to have been good

trout. I could never really believe, and still don't, that that stretch of the 'Bidgee would not continue to hold good fish. Why not? It was water. It was the Murrumbidgee. It was not too many miles from Kelly's Plains proper, where the fishing was famous. And if, being so near its source somewhere over the plain towards the heights above Brindabella, the river was small and shallow, there were holes about four feet deep where surely a trout could have lurked. I thought everyone despised it merely because it was so close to Prosser's. It was a beautiful stream to fish, glittering and singing over its shingle; it teemed with little trout that kept you interested and hopeful; but it provided after all the laziest and most delightful of all ways of filling in a morning around Prosser's, for not one takeable fish ever showed itself, and in the end you just sat down on the sand and watched the current dance by, or even stripped off, and, in a foot of water, went swimming.

But if life at Prosser's could thus be so pleasantly idle, the real fishing, when we did get round to it, was strenuous and even heroic. This was because I did most of my fishing with David Campbell, who had a singular capacity for turning the most tranquil piece of water into an athletics arena or a battlefield. If the fishing was easy on the side of the river where you were, then the poet was always to be found on the other side. He was continually to be observed perched on inaccessible rocks or crashing through thickets of tea-tree. If there was a crag in sight, he climbed it. If you could fish the water quite sensibly by wading up to your knees, then he would wade up to his neck. If you could fall in, he did. Repeatedly. One of his favourite exercises, when in later years we fished the waters further on from Prosser's and over towards Kosciusko, was to cross to the far side of the Snowy when the over-flow from the Guthega Dam was likely to come pouring down the gorges, so that he could drown himself in the rapids on the way back. "I like river where you can wade out and *battle* with it," he said to me once, as he emerged blue and dripping from the Thredbo, into the slippery granite water-holes of which he had three times plunged full length. And at Prosser's he did considerable battle; and I, perforce, with him.

There was, for instance, the wild black stormy October night when we found ourselves, by some mysterious chance, in the little back upstairs bar of the Royal Hotel in Gundagai, with a shearer and a

shearer's cook. We were heading for Tumut and Talbingo. I was at that time interested in old bush songs, Australian folklore which I was collecting for an anthology; and the shearer's cook, who was a plump dark seedy little man, with a squeaky voice, began to sing a folksong which I had never heard before:

*And a little bandicoot played a tune upon his flute,
Three native bears came down and formed a ring.
The pelican and the crane flew in from off the plain
And amused the audience with a Highland fling....*

"This is marvellous," I said. "Would you sing a bit more? Would you mind if I wrote it down?"

"He's a *Bulletin* man," said Campbell encouragingly to the cook, who was a bit suspicious of me. To be a *Bulletin* man was, in those days, a guarantee that you were interested in the Outback.

"He's not a *Bulletin* man," said the cook, with somewhat unnecessary scorn.

"You wouldn't be having us on, now?" said the shearer, very softly and pleasantly. "You wouldn't be trying to make a goat of my mate in any way?" He was Irish, this shearer; not a very big man, but lean and hard, with red hair and an exceptionally bright blue eye.

"Have another drink," said Campbell genially. "Of course he's a *Bulletin* man. He's collecting songs for a book."

"Then I'll sing you the song," said the cook; and he did; and a most peculiar song it was:

*The goanna and the snake and the adder wide awake
With the alligator danced "The Soldier's Joy".
In the spreading silky oak the jackass cracked a joke,
And the magpie sang "The Wild Colonial Boy".*

"Ah, the little man can sing all right," said the Irish shearer. "He's the grand champion cook and he's the grand champion singer of the Monaro. But the trouble with this little man"—and here he gulped down his whisky and placed the glass with exceeding gentleness on the counter—"is, he won't fight me."

"Oh, the little bandicoot played a tune upon his flute," sang the cook. He had, it appeared, met this situation before. Singing, not fighting, was his recreation.

"Is there nobody then," said the shearer, in a gentle appeal to the bar, "who will give me one little tap in friendship, just for the pleasure of it?"

Somehow, there didn't seem to be anybody available in the bar, not counting the melodious cook, except David Campbell and myself.

"Now you," said the Irishman, measuring Campbell's six-foot proportions with an appreciative blue eye, "you can fight like the divvil. I can tell it at a glance by the appearance of you. Now in friendship, like, and neither of us doing the other the slightest hurt in the world, would you fight with me then?"

"Aw, I can't fight," drawled Campbell who, besides once having won a boxing Blue at Cambridge, suffered from a peculiar sense of humour. "Here's the fellow who can fight. He got a boxing Blue, at Victoria College, in New Zealand."

What a lie! It filled the Irishman to the brim with pure and ferocious friendship. He danced a little circle round the bar in his delight. "Then here's the boy for me," he said. "So you're the great fighter, you are! Then would you," he begged, "let me give you one little tap on the nose? Just for the simple pleasure of it?"

I forget how I talked myself out of it. But I found, later, that the cook's bush song was quite well known and had long been duly recorded, so there wasn't any need to have collected it at so much peril.

That, surely, was enough heroism, pusillanimity, etc., for one night. But more was to come. It seemed to us, as we drove on through the



black pouring rain to Tumut, that it would be prudent to spend the night in that town rather than face the drive on to Talbingo. The road between Tumut and Talbingo ran parallel to the river, and, in wet weather, was flooded. On the other hand it seemed prudent to the publican in Tumut, when we awakened him, not to have any accommodation available. I don't know if he was just inhospitable, or sleepy; or if he thought we were interstate criminals or, possibly, shearers. He said we could easily make Talbingo. So, on through the night and the floods. You could not tell in the blinding torrents of rain that dashed on the windscreen which was the river and which was the road, but it didn't make much difference anyhow, for by now they were both the same thing, except that the river, had we turned into it, would have been rather deeper. By God's grace, when we did run off the road, which we did three times, we skidded uphill and found ourselves perched, rather absurdly, among grass and blackberries on the bank. And so backed down into the flood again, and plunged on. The things that you suffer for fishing!

And the next day still more heroic adventure, or at any rate high, strange, and heroic country awaited us. We had intended that trip to stay the week-end at Talbingo, without going on to Prosser's, for we had a curiosity about the Tumut River there, partly because we had previously caught fish in it, higher up, partly because on sunny days it always looked so exceptionally attractive, tumbling down through its huge round granite boulders in the reach beside the hotel. But, in the morning light, it was a wild high torrent swirling across the paddock almost up to the hotel door; and the only possible thing to do, we thought, was to drive on up the mountain and try the Three-Mile Dam.

So we did. And, in clear sparkling sunshine after the rain, there lay that noble sheet of water, a white wilderness of ice! All around, on the banks where the wildflowers used to grow, the snow lay thick and soft; it clung to the branches of the grove of black sallies where the bees rejoiced in summer and where, casting, you snapped off so many flies. Fortunately the ice on the great white circle of the lake was mushy at the edges so that we were not able to walk across its thin crust; as, remembering a friend who had skied across it one winter, David Campbell was much tempted to do. Near the outlet, where the creek ran down to Kiandra, we found a clear black hole and fished in it hopefully, then hopelessly, like the Eskimos. And

when, without seeing a fish all day, we drove back along Bullock's Head Creek to Kiandra, and back through snowy banks and slopes of heath still crushed flat from the weight they had borne all winter, back past Prosser's and down the mountain to Talbingo, we found that one wise fisherman, instead of driving so many miles to fish a hole in the ice, had sneaked with a worm up the creek at the side of the hotel and, flood or no flood, caught himself a very respectable trout. Point to remember: when the main river is flooded, try the tributary creeks or, as on the Badja, the backwaters.

What a contrast to that expedition was the day when David Campbell, Professor Manning Clark and I drove down from Prosser's to fish the Yarrangobilly—that clear, sparkling little stream, all sunshine and gentleness. We found the nest of a white-throated honeyeater, with three pink eggs in it, hung among rosy-blossomed tea-tree over the water. It was a wonderful example of birds' care and cunning: set among such slender twigs, so perfectly concealed among the green foliage and grey twigs that matched the nest, and the blossoms that matched the eggs, that no robber of nests, hawk or fox or snake, could possibly have got at it. Only a big flood down the gorge of the Yarrangobilly might have reached it; but there weren't going to be any floods, for that was the summer when no rain fell anywhere around Kelly's Plains, and the temperatures were over the hundred, and, in the warm shallow pools of the Murrumbidgee, the trout lay too stupefied to eat. Which was why we went to fish the Yarrangobilly, for, hurrying down its gorge through the limestone caves, that water should have been comparatively cool. Comparatively cool it was, but not cool enough, for there were no fish to be caught there either.

Or, rather, there were two. One was a very small trout which rose downstream where David Campbell and I were fishing and to which, waist-deep on the slippery pebbles in that narrow water where the banks were too steep and too overgrown to let you get anywhere ashore, we cast fly after fly in vain, rocking with laughter at our imbecility in competing for so ridiculous a prize; and the other was a slightly larger rainbow which Manning Clark, who was then new to fishing, triumphantly took upstream with a Coachman. It was a thoroughly idle day, yet had its own heroic quality in the splendour of the scenery around us; for, miles down in the deep forest at the foot of its limestone crags, bubbling with the secret strange springs

that well out among its pebbles, the Yarrangobilly was truly a magnificent little stream. Its extreme slipperiness, moreover, and the fact that you could never climb out of it once you were in, made it very useful indeed if you wanted to wade neck-deep or fall over. Both of which, frequently, we did.

We did, at least, since we could not walk along its banks, *fish* the Yarrangobilly. At Kelly's Plains we usually did far more hiking than fishing.

We had one perfectly absurd day over there with an assortment of David's squatting friends, Gordons and Osbornes; three carloads of us. The minute his car stopped on the river-bank Forbes Gordon was off upstream like a kangaroo on his long lean legs, heading for the pool where he had caught the four-pounder by the stone under the overhanging wattle. Mollie Gordon, his wife, took off manfully after him. Sam Osborne was racing past Forbes to reach a long straight pool he knew about, further on. David and I, to circumvent the lot of them, were haring it across the paddocks. Nobody spoke a word to anybody. Everybody raced. The whole countryside was filled with fishermen streaking for the horizon. And there, right at our feet, upstream and downstream from the cars, lay perfectly fishable water.

It wasn't just the fact that there was rather a crowd of us that caused this ridiculous relay-race; nor was it mere vulgar competition for the best bits of water. It was the belief which all fishermen hold, and none more ardently than did David Campbell and myself, that the fishing is always better Further On. In fact, Further On is the only possible place to fish. It was that belief that had sent us, at the Badja, miles across the mountains and down a waterfall to the Pockets, when we might have caught all the three-pounders we wanted at Jack Snow's front door. It was that, no doubt, as well as the sluggishness of the summer Murrumbidgee, that had sent us down the mountain to slip along the Yarrangobilly.

And further on, at Kelly's Plains, there was the Gorge. It was a long way further on. In those days before the Snowy Mountains Authority so rudely strumpeted the whole countryside it was all but inaccessible; not because of the difficulties of the country, which was all flat going till you actually reached the Gorge; but because of the distance. It could only be reached, really, for a day's fishing, by a long-distance Olympic runner. It was where the plains ended and

the mountains began and the river fell away in long unfished pools through the granite slopes to Yaouk (pronounced, for some unknown reason, Yi-ack). It haunted us.

There was, in fact, excellent fishing to be had miles before the Gorge began. There was fishing, for instance, in the bare tree-less country right where you came to the ford and parked your car. There where the stream ran sparkling through the tussocks, fishing one day with a man named Len, who impressed me by going fishing in a Rolls-Royce, I surprised him by catching a three-pounder in a back-water (which he thought an unlikely place) while he surprised me by catching another three-pounder in water not more than two feet deep beside a grassy bank, which I thought so unlikely a place that I walked right past it.

There was fishing, again, in all the country we had raced over with the Gordons and the Osbornes, where you turned off the main track at the stockyards, and met the Murrumbidgee in the hollow beneath the deserted farmhouse. There was, for instance, that immensely long pool, the very place where Forbes had caught his four-pounder, in which a most noble fish took my fly the very first time I cast into it, from the little marshy point midway along it; where one day, absurdly, I fished the whole length of it for my hat, which had blown into the water and proved, when at last I had hooked it, a fantastically heavy sort of fish to land on a 3X cast; where, more dramatically, my small daughter as she was then, standing on a marshy ledge and wholly absorbed in her fishing, also became absorbed in the bog, and sank slowly out of sight, or almost, and had to be rescued with considerably more urgency than my hat; and where, in the evening, big trout rose with exciting and maddening inaccessibility among the deep channels through the weeds and water-lilies at the tail.

There was fishing, or there should have been, in the deep hole where the river turned at right-angles against a high stony hillside; and, if I never could manage to pull a fish out of that most likely-looking place, deep and swirling and frothy, at least there was the pleasure of looking at that fine sunny hillside, crested with spider-gums floating like shadows against the blue sky and ribbed and knobbed with broken brown rock covered with a curious red lichen. There was fishing among the tussocks, where we saw the small yellow snake in the water; and very good fishing indeed in the pool further on where the casting, with your back against the cliff, used to be so

difficult and so rewarding and where one memorable day I thought that David Campbell, perched behind me in midstream on a flat rock stained with the droppings of the wild ducks who also roosted on it (when it was unoccupied), had caught the biggest trout of all time. There was the most almighty splash behind me, such as only a six-pounder could make. It was, however, only the poet himself; who, for no reason at all, unless from force of habit, had decided to fall headlong into the water.

Yes, there was fishing; I don't think we ever came to Prosser's from Kelly's Plains without trout. And, with snakes, bogs and flat rocks from which to fall in, there should have been adventure enough. But further on, so far further on! lay the Gorge. Where the waters ran down to Yaouk. Where the Murrumbidgee, that shy laughing dancing maiden that she was on Kelly's Plains, began to grow up, and think about becoming the really mature river she would be by the time she got to Cooma. Where the pools lay shining and solitary in the mountains.

So, full of hope, full of the spirit of exploration, full of the most unwarrantable energy, we set off from Prosser's and drove over the long red plains where the groundlarks flew up from the wheel-tracks before us and, whether leading us away from their nests in the kangaroo-grass or merely as athletic as fishermen, raced along ahead of us at thirty miles an hour; past the solitary grove of black sallies where the track crossed the soak, past the hillsides timbered with spider-gums, so light in leaf and limb that they were hardly there at all; down to the right at the stockyard and round beneath the deserted farmhouse and, crashing through bogs and bumping over tussocks, far across the long flat paddocks until in some final bog the car refused to go any further, and we left it; and on, two toiling midgets under the eye of the high circling eagle, miles across the flats in the hot sun until at last the mountains began to close in, the country shaped itself into a funnel, and there, bright among rocks or gathered into long green pools reflecting the white sallies on the ridges, lay the unfished waters of the Gorge.

And there was fishing indeed! I remember David Campbell's elated voice, floating far and faint round the bends from some still more distant place he had got himself to, "They're rising down here!"; I remember a sunny day of autumn when right at the entrance of the

Gorge the whole river was alive with rising trout and we caught seven of them, rainbows, in less than an hour.

But the bother with fishing the Gorge was that, after you had done the long hike, and after you had had these few moments of excitement and splendour, it was time, in almost no time, if you didn't want to be benighted quite so far from anywhere, to set off home again. The Gorge was a thing seen in flashes.

The deserted farmhouse, we were to find one night when we had extracted the car in the dark from whatever bog we had abandoned it in, wasn't so deserted as we had believed. There rose upon the night air from the shadowy, tumbledown old building among the trees on the hillside above us the most terrible, blood-curdling screaming. There are, of course, no such things as ghosts. It was not really likely that any mad station-hand or swaggie was murdering there either his mate or a pig. It was certainly, if that made it any better, that most fascinating creature known as the Murdering Woman Owl. As enthusiastic amateur naturalists we should have rushed up the dark hillside to investigate it. But somehow we found that we really couldn't keep Mrs Prosser waiting any longer to serve us our dinner that night; and so, into the car with more than usual celerity, and rapidly round the hill where the black cattle that always chose to sleep across the track made navigation somewhat difficult, and through the grove of sallies at the soak where one night we saw a wombat, and on across the great open plains where the groundlarks still got up and raced us in the glare of the headlights, and over the rickety bridge at last, and safe home to the Prossers.

For excitement, for adventure, for the feeling of being far away from home among trout by day and horrible noises by night, there was nothing to match the Gorge. But by far the best of our fishing anywhere around Prosser's, as distinct from hiking-fishing, was in the Three-Mile Dam. Sometimes, as we bounced and bashed over the pot-holes on the way up to Kiandra to fish it, we used to think that the Eucumbene, which wriggled like a crystal snake through its bed of green tussocks in the gully beside the road, would repay further investigation. In fact, we knew that it would. There was the fabulous story of how Forbes Gordon and Sam Osborne were fishing one evening in that strange, enticing round billabong you could see from the road; and how while one of them was playing a seven-pounder the other hooked in the same pool a trout of eleven and a half pounds—

and both brought their fish home to prove it. Yes, indeed. Moreover it was from the Eucumbene, even while we were staying at Prosser's, that Mr Smart, the jeweller from Tumut, brought home one night the most glorious eight-pounder. But what a nasty mess of tussocks, crawling with snakes, the Eucumbene was! It was far from attractive water; and moreover it was visible from the road. It was neither athletic nor adventurous, even if you had snakes crawling down your neck the whole time, to fish a river that could be seen from the road.

Far and high lay the Three-Mile Dam; far and high and solitary. No fishable water lay higher; none, in those days, was more remote. The old gold-seekers had made it, by damming Bullock's Head Creek, and there in its basin right on top of the mountains it lay, the great broad circle of it in the rolling landscape, blue and silver to the sky, shivering in the slightest breeze, rimmed with low banks where alpine daisies glittered like snowflakes among the flowering heath, and guineaflowers and bulbine lilies, with minute white orchids among them, shone gold and yellow like the sun. Sky and water and flowers! The most enormous trout rose all day in it, leaping clean out of the water for dragonflies.

They rose, it must be confessed, quite out of reach. Wicked, ingenious men, I have been told, fished for them with balloons. You tied a child's balloon about six inches above your fly, and let it float out with the wind, a most reprehensible device. We didn't try that (perhaps because at that time we hadn't heard about it) but we did try everything else we could think of. We trudged round and round that lake, waist-deep in the very cold mountain water, casting as fishermen never casted before. We sneaked up on them where they rose a little closer in, under the grove of sally-gums, and got ourselves hooked up in the branches. We waded out up to our necks to perch on an islet of rocks. David Campbell found a queer unstable kind of raft, like a rocking-horse, and rode out after the monsters. But the maddening thing about those trout was that no matter how far out you waded or rode after them, they still rose just out of reach. They retreated before your advance. I suppose you would have needed a dragonfly, or a fly as large as a dragonfly, to tempt them anyhow. But they were fascinating trout to fish for; they kept you eager, and wading, and wet, all day. And sometimes, under the sally-gums, where they came in for falling beetles, or among the islets of logs and



tussocks where the creek flowed in, and best of all at the rocky point where a low ridge thrust far out into the lake and, so to speak, did most of your wading for you, you could catch a trout which, if not the equal of the mighty dragonfly-jumpers, was still a fish worth catching.

And then, at dusk, the big fish started to come in. They came in to the shallows to rise for moths and flies. And when it got quite dark, and sometimes even before then, you could catch them. We fished with two people who knew the tricks of the trade around Prosser's far better than we did: John and Peggy Dutton, two more squatting friends of David Campbell's; and John and Peggy Dutton showed us exactly how you caught fish in the Three-Mile Dam at night.

There was a fly called the Styx Special. It was the most enormous dry fly I have ever seen. It was as black as its name would indicate. It was a mass of very stiff black bristles; and it would float superbly. You lit a great bonfire on the banks to attract the moths and maybe also to attract the trout; you turned your car headlights on to the water for the same purpose; you tied on a Styx Special and cast it as far out as you could into the black water, and you left it there floating, and waited. . . . And *splash* went those mighty trout as they took your fly in the night!

I have seen a night at the Three-Mile Dam when John and Peggy Dutton, David Campbell and myself were each and all of us simultaneously wrestling with a fish in the darkness, and as soon as we had landed one trout, and cast out the invaluable Styx Special again, we would hook another, and another; a two-pounder, a three-pounder, a four-pounder; with the white moths dancing in the beam of the headlights, and the smoke and the sweet smell of burning snowgum wood billowing down from the bonfire, and stars overhead, and,

black, mysterious and enchanting all around you, the top of the world and the water. And when something out in the blackness took your fly with a splash like a whale leaping, and streaked out to the horizon and broke you off round a rock or just wasn't there any more, that, no doubt, was one of the monsters that leapt by day for the dragonflies . . . never really to be caught and landed, for such things are hardly possible, but always, immense out of the blue water by daylight or invisible by night, to leap in the mind's eye when you think about the fishing at Prosser's.

5



The Snowy

THE first time I fished the Snowy I did it more or less by accident. Once in November we were going from Cooma up to Kosciusko to see the snow; and, at the foot of the long hill into Jindabyne, suddenly the great river flashed into view, broad and blue and glittering as it twisted from the mountains through the green valley. It was the most famous of all Australian trout streams, and I must fish it, that was certain; and on the way back from Kosciusko I did.

And I saw that day the biggest trout that I ever saw in the Snowy. It was just upstream from Jindabyne, at the point where Wollondibby Creek came in. And there, right where that rather muddy water entered the deep swift current of the river, rising again and again as he gulped down flies in a sheltered pocket, swam that most regal trout. He showed himself each time as he rose, big and dark in the evening water, and he was a four-pounder if ever there was a four-pounder; and it seemed to be likely enough five or even six pounds, a monster. How to land him if you hooked him seemed quite an insoluble problem. There were snags in the pool, and it was much too deep to wade. The tangled mass of blackberries, seven or eight feet high, growing right to the water's edge on both banks of the creek made it impossible to get to the main river and cope with him from there. The Snowy's bank, anyhow, was equally lost in blackberries. The likeliest thing was that he would simply dash out into the river and disappear round the bend and down the current. But then the unlikeliest things do happen once you have hooked your fish. It might have been possible to plunge down the pool, more or less

submerged, or roll yourself over the blackberries. The first step was to hook him.

And, rising as regularly as he was, carelessly and greedily feeding as he patrolled round and round his pocket at the brink of the river, that seemed distinctly possible. It was a most difficult cast. High blackberries everywhere behind you, blackberries all round the trout's parade ground. If you cast too far, out into the main stream, it would be useless; if you cast short or made any kind of disturbance you would frighten the fish in his quiet pocket. Flung high behind you over the tops of the blackberries, whipped forward with immaculate precision, the fly must land, with one long delicate cast, exactly where the monster was rising. There are times when one can be inspired. The fly did everything it should have and floated down, light as the feathers it was made of, right on his nose. And the mighty fish . . . ignored it.

That exasperating trout! Nothing would induce him to take any fly I offered. He rose all round each one, eating whatever it was that he was so fond of; and then, full fed or annoyed with all those artificial flies dropping on his parade-ground, worked his way out into the Snowy and vanished.

Well, you can't expect to catch the biggest fish in the Snowy just like that, dropping in like a tourist and flicking a fly about for half an hour. You must earn your fish; you must get to know your waters. And the proper way to fish the Snowy, and all the beautiful streams round about it, was to stay at the famous old fishing lodge, the Creel.

The Creel had begun its life as a hotel and, though it was built of timber instead of the more appropriate stone or pisé, still kept its ancient form: long and low, with rooms looking out onto a wide veranda and beyond it to the grove of imported pines and elms, and beyond them to a glimpse of the Thredbo whose rippling waters murmured into your sleep when it was calm or, in its frequent floods, rushed and roared through the night as the wind rushed through the pine-trees. As more and more guests came over the years the house had expanded in all directions; and all about the grounds, under elms or old red gum-trees, stood a strange collection of out-houses called "cottages" and "chalets" where hardy fishermen braved the ancient bedsteads and the thudding of the motor that made the electric power.

There were Black Orpingtons leading their cream and sooty

chickens about the yards; and turkey hens sunk in the inveterate misery of their kind, and their melancholy young darting their beaks like snakes to snap up flies from the sunny walls of the implement shed, and resplendent cock birds puffing out their feathers and fans like Chinese emperors. There were cows and a red calf. There was a pretty white she-goat who was usually tethered under the lichen-covered old plum-trees in the orchard and spent her days yearning for fruit and green leaves beyond her reach. How eloquent are a goat's pale yellow eyes when she pleads for food; how daintily, when she is given a plum, she munches it round in her mouth and politely ejects the stone! She was always getting herself so tangled in her chain, that goat, that she had usually more or less hanged herself when you called on her; but often, too, she broke free and instantly made for the garden in front of the veranda where, amidst great commotion from people trying to drive her away, she snatched mouthfuls of gerberas and honeysuckle. There were wild birds, too, among all these domestic creatures. All day long the thrushes called with their sweet voices in the high trees; magpies warbled; the lowries and the rosellas rang their small dainty bells to each other or flew in shrieking flocks, with flashes of green and blue and crimson, to feed on the plums and apples—you would see them, solemn and wicked, a red bird in a thicket of red fruit, taking a bite here and a bite there, always ruining, as is their mischievous way, more fruit than they ate.

Some distance from the house, along the track to the gorge where the Thredbo rushed down in a white cataract, there were three or four ginger Tamworth pigs in a yard of rough-hewn saplings. They too were very partial to plums, but not as polite with them as the goat. It was here, at the pig-yard, so we were told by Billy Stanton, that quiet, slow-speaking, smiling man who managed the Creel, that there had occurred the most horrifying episode with a snake. Billy had had somebody helping him build the yard, a guest or a labourer, who had two dogs with him. One of the dogs put up a big brown snake in a pile of loose rocks near the yard. The snake instantly bit it. The other dog rushed in to join the fight and the snake bit that one, too, and hung on to it. And in the midst of all the yelping and barking and snarling and commotion and confusion, with the dogs trying to kill the snake, and the man trying to drive the dogs away and get at it with a stick—in the midst of all this savagery the snake, mad with rage, struck the man too: twice, on the legs. By good luck he was

wearing leggings; so the man recovered of the bite, the dog it was who died. It did, too, poor creature. Both the dogs, when the snake at last had been killed, ran away and lay down in the river. One, after an hour or two, got up and staggered away and was sick for three days before it recovered. The other died in the river. It was a story that considerably increased my respect for snakes; it added a slightly uneasy flavour to the pleasant, pastoral occupation of feeding the pigs.

But it had happened some years before; and if there were probably still a few snakes around the property, particularly near the Garden Pool where the jungle of blackberries seemed to be crawling with them when you fished it after dinner in the dark, nobody was ever eaten by them. It was a pleasant place, the Creel: and, with the notice-board in the old dark dining-room recording all the fish over three pounds which had been taken for years and years past, and occasionally a new name and a new fish being added to the list, with the fishermen coming home at night with their catches to be cooked for breakfast next morning, and with all the talk about fishing, there was certainly a flavour, a feeling, an atmosphere—what is the word?—a *slither* of trout about it. It was haunted by the shades of mighty fishermen of the past, who rode in with pack-horses and camped by far pools of the Snowy when fishing was really fishing; and it was patrolled still by a few survivors of the heroic days and by their direct heirs and descendants, tall, silent, formidable men who trod the veranda in big boots and disappeared early in the morning.

There was one reach of the Snowy not far from the Creel where I had some lovely fishing one year. That was the water just downstream from where the Thredbo flowed into the bigger river, and it was a year when the grasshoppers were swarming. They stripped the farmers' fruit-trees; they ate the paddocks on the hills down to little more than granite sand, with only a few red fronds of sorrel left to nourish the hungry sheep. They clapped their yellow wings and whirled like flocks of fighter planes as you walked through the tall yellow weeds, called snake-flowers, to the river. All day long, taking off on their senseless flights, with no notion of where they would land, they flopped into the river and paddled with an air of surprise to the shore again; and all day long in the shallow run at the meeting of the two rivers, in the rapid downstream and in the long straight pool below it, the trout rose and feasted on them.

I don't know why, when the whole length of the Snowy from Island Bend to Jindabyne was pleasant to fish, as were all the other rivers near by, this particular reach should have seemed so supremely delightful. It was not an adventurous place to get to; it was not famous; it was not conspicuously beautiful; and I never caught any big fish in it. Many small strands of pleasure made the rope that holds it in my memory.

One of them was solitude; for it so happened that year that I always fished there alone, and it is good to be alone in the sun. Then there were the skylarks. There would be half a dozen of them in the air at once, dark specks poised high in the blue on their fluttering wings, and the whole immensity of sky and mountain and river-valley would be ringing with their music. What a torrent of shining melody that tiny bird can pour out! At the base of a dry thistle on the flat between the Thredbo crossing and the Snowy I found a nest with three brown speckled eggs in it, and every day on my way to the river I used to stop and look into the little grassy cup to see how they were getting on.

Then of course there was the river itself. If it was sedate enough there, nevertheless that was the point at which it came pouring out of the long wild gorge that ran unbroken and hardly touched by man miles and miles through the mountains from the steeps of Kosciusko; and there was a special, gentle charm in its sedateness. Green forest and distant blue walls of mountain upstream, green paddocks and willows below, it was a nice mid-way point between the wilderness and civilization. And, when finally you got to it, wading the Thredbo at its one crossable point and on through the snake-flowers and thistles and the last hot sandy hollow of its flood channel, aromatic with the fallen leaves of the sally-gums, it was a pretty bit of water with its own small intriguing difficulties. You could try to cast under the overhanging tea-tree on the far bank, or into the swirling back-water across the rapid, from which the current would always snatch your fly away just as you had landed it in that likely-looking spot. It was pleasant to fish up the run and notice how quietly the Thredbo waters came in, brown over the brown pebbles, rippling into the blue and crystalline Snowy; pleasant to wade out into the rapid and as far downstream as you could go into the long deepening pool, green under its white-flowered tea-trees.

Moreover, I made a discovery there; and it is always very satisfac-



tory to discover for yourself something about the art of fishing. It was the fact that, though they all seemed to be taking their grasshoppers from the surface, the trout preferred a wet fly to a dry fly; and moreover that they were particularly interested in a huge dark-red fly called the Claret and Teal. The one fly they certainly did not want was the official dry-fly imitation of a floating grasshopper. Maybe they eat most of their grasshoppers drowned, or maybe a grasshopper-imitation on the surface doesn't kick enough to look natural. Any large fly would do, for the grasshoppers were all sorts of colours. I even persuaded the fish to take notice of a colossal salmon-fly, spotted yellow and black, that had stayed in my fly-box from days at Taupo in New Zealand, years before. But the Claret and Teal was the one they really fancied. I had great luck with that fly until, with infinite grief, I lost it up a tea-tree bush somewhere below Island Bend.

So, with the aid of that discovery, I did catch fish, even if they weren't very big ones, in that delectable spot. And, not the least of its fascinations, there were always, as there always are, what seemed to

be enormous fish rising quite out of reach all the way down the long pool.

Once in that spot, one other year when I was fishing it with my daughter, I saw a most amazing sight. Out of nowhere, out of the green forest, down the long gorge from Kosciusko, came a small fat New Australian floating in a little yellow washtub. Heaven knows where he had come from! One moment there was just the empty river glittering in the sunshine, and the next moment there was this thing on the water, a little yellow raft with a man in it. He couldn't have been a more surprising apparition if he had been a Martian in a flying saucer. Naked to the waist and wearing green floral bathing trunks, he was fishing dry-fly as he sailed, and he might have solved the problem of how to catch the unreachable fish in the long pool if he had been able to manage his craft a little better. But while he was talking to me he dropped his paddle overboard and then went round and round the pool in circles, paddling with his hands. "I frighten all the fish!" he said to me with great good cheer. I might have agreed with that, but we had just discovered that the only trout that seemed to be rising that morning, which had been coming up with a mighty swirl under the tea-tree right at our feet, was a platypus. So we left him there, paddling in circles and frightening the platypus, and where he got to I never will know. Maybe he floated out to sea in the end in his little yellow raft, or turned up in some farmer's irrigation paddock a thousand miles away. . . .

A mile or so downstream from the long pool was a famous fishing place known as the Gutters. You could have walked down to it easily enough, but it always seemed too hot for that; and besides, there was a bull that used to sing all day to its cows in the first paddock downstream and seemed disposed to investigate any trespassing fisherman. So it seemed more attractive to drive down the Jindabyne road to the property known as Hiawatha, where sleek black mares and their foals whiled the summer hours away under the shade of the pepper-trees at the gate; and so across the paddocks where the little brown ground-larks, apparently hypnotized, flew along the wheeltracks in front of the car at twenty miles an hour and never seemed to be able to get off the track and go home. The Snowy at the Gutters, a big river by now, split itself into deep swift channels that ran between reefs of granite, and in that maze of waterways very big fish were said to lie. One of the mighty men from the Creel used to drive over at dawn, not fish-

ing, just for the pleasure of watching them. Somehow I never got around to exploring the Gutters properly myself, and all I ever caught there was a lean, disgraceful little brownie of less than a pound; but I was at the Creel when that same watcher of the dawn brought back a four-pound rainbow from those waters. On another occasion he caught something even more remarkable—a Judge of the Supreme Court. The Snowy had a very dangerous habit of silently, without warning, rising into flood when they let the water out of the Guthega Dam higher up; and the Judge was on the far side of the Gutters when this happened and got into trouble trying to come back. His friend waded out chest-deep into the torrent and pulled him across with a stick. The worst thing about those floods was that the river, which had long before swept itself clean, swelled up around you with no discoloration and none of the debris of leaves and twigs you would expect, rising so swiftly that you were in bother before you noticed it.

If I didn't myself ever really do the Gutters justice, I did in that same year of the grasshoppers catch myself a nice fish about a mile further downstream; a three-pound brown; and if this was an absurdly simple feat it was also quite a pretty bit of fishing. There was a most curious piece of water where, sneaking back from the head of a long straight pool and lying shallow, narrow and motionless between the hillside and a sandbank, a backwater baked in the sun; and, as I was walking along the bank above the tail of it, where it wasn't more than a foot in depth, half a dozen grasshoppers plopped away from me into the water; and the big brown trout, which had been waiting for just such an event, rose from behind a snag and took one of them. There he was, to be caught. The problems were: how, without disturbing him, to move into concealment from that high bank; how to approach from the flat bare sandbank, without being seen; and how to drop the fly lightly and accurately exactly where he lay beyond the snag. That clear shallow water allowed no blundering. I should have changed my big wet Claret and Teal for a dry fly, which would have been more manageable, but I felt I couldn't spare the time. I thought only one cast with the wet fly would be possible; to withdraw it and cast again would almost certainly disturb him, and he would be off into the depths. Neatly, very neatly, the Claret and Teal, from where I lay prone on the sandbank, floated through the air and landed, like a small aeroplane, precisely where it was meant to. The fish rose, inspected it, and sank again below the snag.

It was not, he decided, a grasshopper. Woe. Agony. I pulled it out and cast again without hope. Inexplicably, he took it. . . . I was just a little disconcerted when I bore back the three-pounder in triumph to the Creel, to learn that that very day the giant fisherman had chosen to bring home his four-pound rainbow from the Gutters; but a three-pounder is never to be sneezed at.

And I myself, in another year, caught a four-pounder just a couple of hundred yards further downstream; or at least I thought I did. It was in a fascinating big round pool among the hills, and the fish lay in a runnel between the shore and a granite reef. Racing over to Hiawatha after dinner to catch the last of the fishing in the dusk, I had hooked and lost him two or three times. I knew exactly where to go and how to fish for him. I knew how big he was; I had felt his weight on the line. And this night, dashing over to the river with David Campbell, I was determined to get him. And, while David perched himself on a slippery rock in midstream somewhere and hooked a nice little fish himself, I fished again for the monster, and I got him. He was fully six inches long and must have weighed about as many ounces. Small fish, hooked in the darkness, should really be lost in the darkness if they are to keep their weight up.

That was the pool where Percy Mathers, when I fished it with him in the year of the grasshoppers, gave me the worst fright he ever gave me. The track down to it, over the smooth granite rocks and the slides of rubble, was steep. The current, sinister in the dusk, ran deep and swift under a ledge at the end of it. Percy was never very good at balancing himself. His method of proceeding down a mountain was to walk straight into the air, head erect, boldly striding forward as if the slope wasn't there. And, if you walked it that way, it wasn't. Down came Percy, slithering erect, right to the brink of the torrent; and there, mercifully, paused swaying for an instant before taking the final plunge into limbo. "This scramble fishing," he said with a rare touch of testiness, "is no good to me."

Percy was a remarkable character. He was a naturalist of great renown in England, expert in the peculiarities of the chaffinch. He carried in his pocket, for light holiday reading, the odes of Pindar in Greek. He had been something at Oxford; he had been editor of a famous English quarterly. He had been something to do with elephants in Burma; and in Hitler's war, engaged in highly confiden-

tial diplomacy, he had spent a great deal of time dashing about under the oceans in a submarine. Heaven knows how he got to the Creel, in the wilderness of the Snowy Mountains, so many thousands of miles from his native haunts. He came there, he told me, because he loved mountains and fishing. There were plenty of both at the Creel; but they were both a little more rugged than he had anticipated.

He was a slight, rather frail-looking man, was Percy, with a peculiar kind of glitter about him. I think this was partly because of his horn-rimmed glasses, partly because of his enthusiasm, partly because of his wit. One way or another there was always a kind of twinkle coming from him, like sunlight on a small, eager rapid. His wit, naturally enough, was chiefly for after dinner. A hot shower and two dry sherries, and Percy came to the dinner table prepared to glitter. It was a tradition; it was a ritual; it was what one did while the red wine passed. Percy's wit was small and impish and punning—"God have mercy upon them, miserable spinners!" was his great triumph, one night when we were talking about the spinner-fishermen then beginning to invade the sacred waters of the Snowy.

He was the absent-minded professor to perfection. Every morning as he stood on the steps of the fishing lodge ready for the day's excursion, his eager, bird-like face twinkling under his very small solar topee, he would, so to speak, count himself up to make sure nothing would be left behind. He had a most useful mnemonic which, patting his pockets and peering in his creel, he would carefully recite:

*My rod, my reel,
My flies, my creel.*

Very good; nothing could be forgotten. I use it now myself. But what about his tobacco? What about the wine? What about the scissors which, as a true dry-fly man, he regarded as essential for changing a fly in a hurry or poking into knots in his cast? What about a change of boots and trousers? What about lunch? What about getting all his precious belongings home again? Percy was not to be trusted. He left his fishing bag somewhere in the Thredbo and cleverly found a small wicker creel, left by some other absent-minded professor, on the banks of Spencer's Creek. He left his scissors on a rock at the Gutters. He left his entire stock of flies in their transparent box on that rather cow-trodden part of the Mooabah called the Banks

and we used to call in regularly to look for it. If he put a cast down beside him in the grass it instantly vanished—as indeed does everybody's cast. If he put a fly down beside him while he was changing it, the fairies took it. Wisely he kept his spare pair of spectacles tied onto him with string; which, when he had bought some new ones in the store in Jindabyne—very special ones, “made in *Germany*”—he also did with his scissors.

Beaming like a leprechaun under his sun-helmet, tied up and trussed with odd articles, soldierly in a windjacket and khaki trousers, complete with “my rod, my reel, my flies, my creel”, Percy, as he trudged that high country, was the most indomitable fisherman I ever saw. Once, I think, he had been a very good fisherman. But he cast his line now, for some reason of his own, with an unorthodox sideways motion that sent the fly swinging behind him in a half-circle. When, as was usually the case, there was a serried mass of tea-tree behind him, he hooked the tea-tree. When there was a clear space behind, he hooked himself. When he was not hooked up in the tea-tree or himself, he was usually to be found prostrate in the tussocks or the streams. He had a remarkable propensity for falling over, and could do it with equal ease on land or water. His way of marching straight forward, shoulders back, head erect, eyes front, in perfect military style, not only brought him slithering down slopes but got him into bother with any obstacles that might be on the most level ground. I see him now in my mind's eye striding across the high plain by Spencer's Creek in a thunderstorm, crashing over the holes and boulders in the heath, or, indelibly and immortally, falling headlong in the Snowy at Island Bend and rising up dripping and bleeding to go on fishing.

How he loved it all, in spite of his disabilities and his disasters! And how glad we were to see him rewarded in the end with a very nice fish from the Moonbah. “But I *enjoy* it!” he used to say, whatever fate befell him; “but I *enjoy* it!” His enthusiasm began at breakfast and continued all day. “Spencer's Creek—*lovely*!” he would say if that was where we had decided to go for the day. “Island Bend—*lovely*!” and above all, for it was the most manageable of the streams, “Moonbah—*lovely*!”

And that was, indeed, the great advantage of fishing at the Creel: not merely that the Thredbo was just off the veranda and the Snowy

only about half a mile away, but that there were so many fishable streams all within easy reach if you had a car. East, west, north and south, everywhere there were trout-streams.

If you followed the Thredbo up for a full day's fishing, through the gorge where it tumbled through the walls of granite and on past the rocky bends and the Sandy Pool where one day I thought I had lost my sister when she wandered off looking at the wildflowers, you came to the deep still waters of Paddy's Corner where Charlie Collins, an old-timer of the mountains, lived alone with his horses and an old blind bitch that used to make nasty little runs at your legs; and where, if I never caught any of the enormous fish that were reputed to lurk there, I used to enjoy the company of two large and very slithery lizards, speckled like the granite, who lived in a chink in the rocks and made a sinister rasping noise as they slid into it. They were Cunningham's Skinks, I think.

Up from Paddy's the river lost itself in the wilderness, only to be reached by intrepid souls who rode it on horseback with Charlie Collins, and did very well there, too; but, if you drove round through Jindabyne and up the Alpine Highway, you could meet it again at the Eel Hole. There were supposed not to be any fish worth talking about at the Eel Hole, but one beautiful maddening sunny afternoon they rose all round me and I caught none while some clever stranger who was fishing the same water landed five quite respectable rainbows. I don't know whether it was just that I was having an off day, or whether it was because he was fishing with the very fine 4X cast, while I was using a 3X. It was beautiful water, wide and green and deep.

On and up, a little trampled by Thredbo Village but memorable for a gang-gang that came and watched me one wet day, raising his red crest in astonishment while I fished hopelessly in the yellow floodwaters, the Thredbo at last lost itself in the rocks by Dead Horse Gap; but over the top and down the Victorian side, in that hot, lush valley of the tall timber, other rivers sprang up to replace it. The Indi and the Geehi ran clear and cold and shallow over their slippery round stones; and the Murray too, somewhere in a ferny glade, began to think about moving down the country. . . . You could, if you chose, have wandered on fishing for ever.

But then, not nearly so far to travel, branching off the Alpine Highway back near Jindabyne, was that lovely little stream, the Moonbah:

rough and rocky and snaky below the bridge; flat, tussocky and a little too domesticated, but with some really good fish in it, in the cow-paddocks around the Banks; offering a curious diversion in its tiny tributaries, Grassy Plains Creek and Rendezvous Creek, mere runnels through deep tussock, where the best fish of all were caught early in the season; exquisite in its upper reaches where, fringed with black sallies, it bubbled at the foot of the mountains or meandered across the wide swampy plain where the red and white Hereford cattle used to feed. "*Ah, the Moonbahl!*" said Percy. . . .

There was a gorge away up there where the fishing was said not to be worthwhile; but I never saw grey rocks so beautifully patterned with green lichens and moss as down in that fishless gorge; I never knew a piece of water more interesting and exasperating to fish as it twisted and turned and hid itself among its tangle of tea-tree and briers; and once, when I was fishing it with David Campbell, I saw a spiny ant-eater, the echidna, stumbling and rasping its way along a landslide of broken granite and, when I called out to David to come and see it, he told me that he had just seen "the biggest, reddest fox I ever saw in my life."

Once, too, surprisingly, I took a good fish out of it, a two-pounder which lay just where I thought it might lie, in a most impossible place under the tea-tree. And once, just where the gorge comes up



into the open again, I met with another large and interesting fish who rose just in front of a rock in midstream, so that one had to stand below him in the water and drop the fly just over the top of the rock, a difficult and intriguing feat to accomplish. That was the day when a fisherman who was camping under the sally-trees told me that the only fly that was any use up there that season was—either the Royal Coachman with the crimson belly or the ordinary plain white Coachman. . . . Only the right one was any good and I could never afterwards remember which of the two to use. But whichever it was, if the tip is of any use to anyone, that was the fly which caught the three-pounder that day in front of the rock.

Then, upstream among the roaring Herefords, was that nice flat manageable piece of water where Percy Mathers achieved his triumph; and beyond that, the narrow, ever dwindling but still remarkably fishable streamlet, sparkling in the sun and bubbling over weedy shallows. Every now and again it dropped into surprisingly deep pools where, wading pool and shallow alike to avoid the snakes in the tussocks, my daughter and I once had a great day's fishing and caught, between us, eleven takeable trout. And beyond that, still dwindling but still with its fishable pools, the high remote waters through the last green farmlands and the wild mountains . . . ah, the Moonbah, indeed!

Jacob's River, the Eucumbene, the MacLaughlin green with frog's blanket, the Gungahleen teeming with little fish as it tumbled through the gorge from the Snowy Plains to fall headlong into the Snowy—the Gungahleen where once I met a man who had caught a six-pounder three years before, and who had spent all his holidays on it ever afterwards, trying to catch another—everywhere, not to mention the Eucumbene Dam, there were fishable waters.

Far up on Kosciusko where the mountains rolled down in slow green waves from the granite-scarred ridges to the high plain golden with buttercups and billybuttons and rosy with trigger-flowers, you could try out Spencer's Creek. There were millions of fish in Spencer's. All day long, even in the first big pool by the bridge and on up into the winding reaches where it slid under granite boulders or banks of heath, they rose for the little green grasshoppers that leapt into the air from your boots and sprinkled the water in front of you. Perhaps they ate too—and we hoped so—the big sluggish March-flies that

settled on you every time you paused to rest and meditatively sucked your blood. At any given moment, anywhere along that clear shallow creek with its round granite boulders, its heathy channels and its sands glinting golden with pyrites, you could see a dozen fish rising.

But the size of them! If they grew eight inches long they were monsters. They were mostly about six inches, and often you hooked them smaller. It was not fishing; it was massacre. You could catch a dozen or twenty of them in a morning if you liked, but what was the use of that? We did sometimes eat a few of the larger specimens for lunch, wrapped in wet newspapers and grilled over the embers of the campfire in the orthodox manner, and very nice they were too, prised gently away from their bones when they were cooked and laid on slices of bread and butter; but they were not fish you could be seen with.

Years and years ago, so the old hands say, respectable fish lived in Spencer's; but there, and in all the Kosciusko waters, they seemed to have dwindled by the time I made their acquaintance. Once I tried out Spencer's neighbour, Betts' Creek. It looked very tempting, winding through bogs of wildflowers at the foot of the stony hillsides and opening into broad shallow pools quite deep enough in odd corners to hold a good fish. But the fish, though sometimes a six-incher took the fly with such a rush that you thought you had really got something at last, were as small as in Spencer's. Some looked young and some—the mighty seven-inchers—looked dark and old. Summer's brief showers of grasshoppers and March-flies couldn't have been enough to fatten a fish that had to live—how *did* they live?—through the long bleak winters up there, when the streams were buried in snow. Sensible fish, presumably, all migrated downstream when they grew up.

Once, too, I fished those enticing billabongs that, apparently unconnected with any stream, lay glittering in the heath above Spencer's; big, round, icy-clear pools, naked to the mountains' reflections and the winds. I saw nothing in them except the tiniest trout and, not exactly helping the fishing, a solitary wild duck that swam ahead of me as I walked.

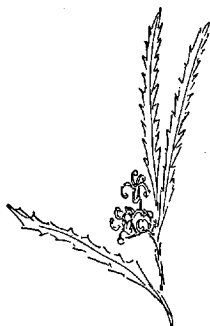
There were just two occasions in Spencer's when I saw good fish; and they were very good fish indeed; and both, I think, cannibals. One was enormous. I saw it chasing the small fish about in the pool above the bridge; they leapt into the air to escape from it, like small

fry from a killer in the sea. Its back jutted out of the water as if it was too big for the pool it swam in. It showed no interest whatever in the big salmon-fly I put on to engage its attention. The other big fish, downstream among the rocks in the gorge, struck, so far as I could make out, at a small fish which had just taken my fly. I really don't know what happened. There was a commotion in the water; the impression of a heavy weight on my line; then a very small fish on the end of it, and a fine two-pound rainbow darting away again to his fastness under the cliff. Maybe there would still have been good fish to be caught there, as there are said to have been in the old days, if one could have stayed for the evening rise; but Spencer's Creek always seemed very cold and a long way from home in the dusk, and long before then we had usually been chased out by a thunderstorm. They came pouring through a gap in the mountains, lilac and mauve with the burden of far-off dust-storms, and lashed us with hail and lightning. If we didn't particularly object to such weather—and Percy enjoyed it—the trouble was that in no time at all the river came up in flood and that was the end of the fishing.

There was one surprising thing you could do when the storms had driven you out from Spencer's, and that was to drop a fly in the lake that lay in the hollow by the old Kosciuszko Hotel. It seemed vaguely immoral, and possibly illegal, but it was very interesting to squelch through those snaky-looking reed-beds to the point where Betts' Creek ran in, and there drop a fly to a rising trout, and pull out, if not a large fish, a brownie at least worth taking home.

And so, back to the Snowy. One wet day when we had been stormed out from Spencer's and even the big river was coming up in flood, I fished the Snowy upstream from the junction with the Thredbo, and remember it for a small lean brown trout which was a triumph in the circumstances, and for a large kangaroo which hopped through the undergrowth towards me and stood up very tall and menacingly said "Oof!" It was a half-tame creature which had come down out of the snow one winter and had been befriended by someone living on the river-bank. Higher up was the big Horseshoe Pool where, between fishing in vain one sunny morning for a very small fish that rose over a rock-ledge in about six inches of water, we watched a great flock of gang-gangs—twenty-two of them there were—enjoying themselves in a huge old ribbony-gum over the river; and higher up still, to be reached by driving along a jeep-track through

the bush, then slithering down a mountainside, was a rough and noble stretch of water which I chiefly remember because, fishing it one day with Percy, I lost my car in the bush . . . at such times there always seems to be a great deal of bush in Australia. And then, higher still, was Island Bend, beginning then to be invaded by the Snowy Mountains Authority, but still with some beautiful water upstream from it. One lovely day there, when the sun shone on the broad stream and the thrushes called high and piercingly sweet in the tall timber, I hooked the most handsome three-pound rainbow. He was rising in a deep pool for small green beetles that I could see floating down the stream to him. So I sagaciously put on a fly that looked like a small green beetle; and lo, he took it! And lo, he dashed towards me at full speed; and dashing backwards over the slippery rocks to keep pace with him, I fell flat on my back in the water . . . and good-bye fish.

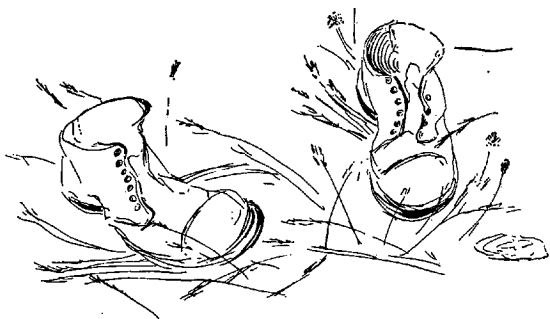


I thought once I would have a look away up under the summit of Kosciusko to see where all this water came from: I would seek out the source of the Snowy. But that was easier said than done.

The great problem was, first of all, to find the Snowy. There, under the concrete bridge on the road to the summit, it was unmistakeable: wide and shallow, and of that absolute pure clarity which only newborn rivers have, a surprisingly big stream for one that had only just gathered itself together out of the snow. Upstream, too, for a little way, round those first bends where it lay in its great blue pools under the snowbanks, it was still unmistakably itself. But then the trouble began. The river divided. There were two Snowys. The only thing

you could do was choose one of them, and call that the Snowy; so I took the stream to the right, which came down more directly from the ramparts of Kosciusko. But soon it too divided. It was not one stream, but a hundred. It was a patch of bog and buttercups. It was a hole in the heath, filled with clear water, beside which lay the claws of a long-dead yabbie, still purple and green despite the weathering by sun and snow. It was a wide watery shallow, unconnected so far as you could see with any direct movement of the stream, lying aimlessly among speckled boulders and the dark-green carpet of heath as if the country could not make up its mind whether to be land or water.

All you could do in this maze of water and flowers—the shiny yellow buttercups, the giant dandelions, the purple eyebright, the silver snow-daisies, the billybuttons, the creamy sprays and green fronds of the alpine parsley, the exquisite mauve-flowered dwarf mintbush—was to pick one trickle and follow it. On went the trickle through the heath, straight to the final wall; and there, in the little sunlit pool where the snow thrust over the boulders and turned into water before your eyes, surely lay the source of the Snowy. But no; five yards or so beyond it, lay another little pool; and another again beyond it. There was no saying which was the source. Far up the mountainside soaks of melted snow lay hidden among the moss; water gleamed on the granite. The whole mountain was the source. But in and out of the sunlight and the shadowy caverns of the snow in those final crystalline pools, climbing up the mountain as far as a fish could well climb, darted tiny rainbow trout. What a long way they had to go before they grew into four-pounders at the mouth of Wollondibby Creek!





This is not a fishing guidebook or a how-to-fish book, but a book written, in the words of the author, "for the pleasure of going fishing again in retrospect along my favourite rivers". Reprinted from *The Seven Rivers*, Douglas Stewart's reminiscences of fishing in Australia and New Zealand, this collection is an affectionate evocation of the wildlife, the scenery, the fishermen and the fish of some of the rivers accessible to Canberra anglers.

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