

FISHING IN TROUBLED WATERS

In Which "IRIDEUS," Still Incarcerated For Assaulting A Colleague, Discourses Further On The Perils Of Angling

"Quod scripsi, scripsi in quod"—Pilate

"STONE walls," as I remarked to my good friend, Col. Gaffem (Ret'd.), as we stood at our cell window this evening, "Do Not a Prison Make, Nor Iron Bars a Cage." And, indeed, considering that our stay here has yet two weeks to run, we were both in fairly good humour, for the prospect upon which we were then gazing was such as might have warmed the most despondent heart. Twenty-four hours of steady rain, in itself sufficient to render unfishable every stream in the province, had culminated in an intense and prolonged thunderstorm. In the half-light of the advancing evening, I could see Gaffem's countenance, normally rather congested and suffused, light up with an almost spiritual joy at each succeeding flash, and he confessed that if he but knew that Batecan was out in the thick of it, with a steel rod and a rent in his waders, his cup of happiness would be overflowing like the rivers.

For my part, when I contemplated the scene out-of-doors, though completely unmoved by the possible predicament of our treacherous acquaintance, I was forcibly reminded that angling can be not merely a nerve-wracking, but also a dangerous pastime. Not only must the angler face the unwelcome attentions of his own kind, he must be prepared to gird himself against threats from the forces of both animate and inanimate nature, and against the Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune.

Thunder And Lightning

The attacks of the elements are not the least of these. Certainly, as someone has remarked, thunder is rather like Signor Mussolini, being all bark and no bite, but lightning, on the other hand, is all bite and no bark. Nor can one (least of all one who is, like me, old and somewhat unathletic) remove oneself from the target area with anything like effective celerity once the attack begins. Yet it would be a denial of that freedom of will and action which we hold so dear were one merely to adopt an attitude of defeatist fatalism whenever a storm breaks. The situation of the angler demands action. It has been suggested that the best course is for the angler to immerse himself completely in the river, leaving only the nostrils above water, and then duck swiftly whenever a flash is seen. Against this, however, I would point out that since water is known to be a conductor, other tactics might be preferable, unless the angler first has himself degaussed. For myself, I have had frequent opportunities of studying this

problem during the past 30 years and so far I have only one sure safeguard to recommend. There is only one thing of which we can be certain regarding lightning, and that is that it never strikes more than once in the same place. It follows, therefore, that the angler should mark where the bolt falls, then hurry up and curl himself into the hole. If any of my readers consider that they know of a better hole, let them go to it.

Two Seasons Ago

For a contemplative man's recreation, angling is surprisingly full of alarms and excursions. I recall, for example, an outing which I had with Gaffem two seasons ago. It was a pleasantly warm summer afternoon and the air was filled with a drowsy hum, which we subsequently found emanated from the carcass of a half-submerged and long-drowned cow in a nearby backwater. We accordingly proceeded as rapidly as possible some distance upstream before starting in. I fished up first, Gaffem, being anxious to try out a new spinning rod and some fearfully barbed artificial minnows, having magnanimously agreed to fish over the heavier water behind me.

I must admit that I met with little success to start with, but about half a mile further up, I decided to spend a little extra time on a particularly fine pool which I knew to contain some trouts of the first magnitude. As I carefully approached down the grassy bank, I could see a good fish rising almost within range, and taking my stand right on the brink (which here drops rapidly into deep and fairly swift water) I began to cast methodically. The fish went down. I stopped and waited and he began again, and again I cast over him. This pantomime was repeated several times, then I heard Gaffem lumbering up in the rear and called out to him to move more quietly. No doubt seeing that I was concentrating on some worthwhile fish, he came up carefully behind me, grunting and blowing with his recent exertions and stood breathing heavily down my neck. Just then the fish rose to me and by good fortune I struck in time and hooked him. Turning in triumph to Gaffem, I was somewhat nonplussed, not to mention taken aback, to find that it was not Gaffem at all but Hermann Goring of Hognorton (Imp.), C.B.B., Farmer Josiah Bogwallop's pedigree red shorthorn bull which had, by some mischance, strayed from the home paddock. I was in a somewhat difficult position. Though I am by no means lacking in avoirdupois, Hermann's 2000lb. of bellicosity had me at an initial disadvantage and by reason of my own bulk, and the proximity of Hermann on the one hand and deep water on the other, the scope for a flank manoeuvre was somewhat restricted. Moreover, I had a sizeable fish to contend with.

Attack in the Rear

I still think that had I been left alone, I might have escaped undamaged through the power of the human eye,



"... He came up carefully behind me, grunting and blowing with his recent exertions and stood breathing heavily down my neck"

but at the psychological moment Gaffem appeared on the other bank and began to dance about and bellow instructions and advice. This Hermann apparently regarded as a direct challenge and without loss of further time he lowered his head and, striking me squarely on the pelvic area, catapulted me into the middle of the stream.

I was now in desperate straits indeed. Game to the last (though I say it who perhaps in modesty should not), I retained hold of the rod, but the desperate struggles of the now thoroughly frightened fish, assisted by the drag of the current and the dead-weight of my waders, which had immediately filled with water, speedily dragged me beneath the surface.

The ensuing few minutes are like to remain in my memory till my dying day. As might have been expected, the fish chose that moment to lunge desperately downstream, between my legs, and I had the utmost difficulty in retrieving the slack line. I was nearly at my last gasp. My face was purple as Gaffem's, my lungs burned within me for lack of air, and I realised that any moment might be my next. Episodes from the past drifted hazily before my smarting eyes. I saw the bar-parlour of the Extended Arms where I had celebrated my greatest triumphs, the pool on the Tongariro where I had lost probably the heaviest fish which has ever been lost by a New Zealand angler (in the summer of '09), I saw, as in serried ranks, the mighty trouts which I had not lost. . . .

Gaffem to the Rescue

I was contemplating this phenomenon with a curious detachment, considering the circumstances under which it became manifest, when I felt an excruciating pain in that section of my person with which Hermann had so recently come in violent contact. Convinced that some great eel, determined to profit speedily by the deep damnation of my taking off, had seized hold on me, I struggled with renewed vigour.

In vain. With each fresh convulsion I was but bitten the more deeply and inexorably pulled backward. My last lucid thought was that I was being slowly dragged into the deep, slack water below the willows on the other bank, there to be digested at the monster's leisure. Then oblivion mercifully descended.

No doubt I would have imagined myself in a Happier Land when at last I opened my eyes, had it not been that the first object which swam into my ken was the familiar face of my old friend, Gaffem—a trifle more puce than usual, perhaps, but still recognisable.

"Gad Sir," he cried, when he saw that I had come to, "Gad, Sir, you put up a magnificent fight, but I landed you! Ten minutes by my watch. I must write and congratulate the makers of that rod, it will hold anything."

The Fish Got Away

He had realised, he explained, that his only hope of saving me once I had fallen in was to hook me by means of his new spinning-rod. Fortunately, he was using a heavy line and a large artificial minnow armed with fearsome triangular hooks and at the fourth cast (the first three were more or less ranging shots), he had connected with the seat of my trousers. He apologised for any discomfort caused and explained that he had thought it better to cut the hooks out while I was still unconscious. I had been "out" a little longer than I might have been, he added, because after landing me he had bashed me over the head with a large stone in a fit of sheer absence of mind.

"But the fish?" I cried, memory flooding back.

The Colonel bowed his head. "Gone, my dear fella," he replied huskily, "and sixteen yards of the best silk line, as well as the cast, with it."

And those of my readers who are also anglers will understand that I would have sat down by the water's edge and wept if I had been in the physical condition to do so.