Bare hook nymph-fishing on the Kennet

BY OLIVER KITE

ESSEX is a term meaning various things to different individuals. It was, once, the kingdom of the West Saxons, those valley dwellers who pushed up the rivers flowing into the English Channel, and settled on their banks; whose villages are to be found to this day, along the Itchen, Test, Bourne, Anton, Avon, Wyley, Stour, Allen, Frome, and the like. In literary terms, it is the country of Thomas Hardy's novels. To the fly-fisher, it embraces all those classic chalkstreams of the counties of Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset and Berkshire.

In the course of a season, as you know, I get round most of them, once or twice, or more so, and it is possible, down the years, to arrive at some sort of comparison between them all. Rivers, like women, have a personality all their own, and on the whole they run true to form. Of course, it takes time and intimacy to weigh this up, and the process is both interesting and instructive.

I am writing from a personal standpoint, and the fact is that I do not necessarily find rivers quite as some writers have described them in the past. There could be many explanations for this: conditions may have changed; the nature of the fish may have altered radically, and so on. But I must describe what I find, not what I have been told to expect.

If there is one river where I have scarcely ever known what it is to fail, that river is the Kennet, home of the strong and sturdy red-fleshed trout, unsurpassed anywhere, and probably equalled only by the best fish of the Bourne and upper Itchen. I described my last day there in our issue of July 15, when I made a nice basket on the Imperial. Since then one or two self-appointed sages have assured me that I would have a very lean time at Hungerford on a really sun-bright, flyless day in the dog days of high summer. I therefore welcomed the opportunity recently to go back and put these pessimistic views in perspective, thanks to a further kind invitation from one of the Hungerford commoners, Mr. Jerry Golding.

Dressing-room preliminaries

Golding is an architect by profession, and before we set off for the river he showed me an outbuilding he has adapted as a fly-dressing room. He also produced some fine cocks' necks, including a scarce honey dun, as I had earlier promised to show him the simple tying of the Imperial, so successful on my last visit. I came to Hungerford on this occasion with 99 trout to my season's tally. I suppose about a dozen were caught on the Hawthorn-fly, six on a Mayfly, two on a Sedge, and five or six on a bare hook. The rest fell to the Imperial, mostly in circumstances chronicled in detail in this diary. It is not often that I reach the century mark with upwards of 90 per cent of my fish taken on the dry fly, and I could scarcely expect to be on peak nymph-fishing form this day.

Anyway, I wired up a few O hooks, as Golding wanted to see me nymph-fishing. Then I followed him down to the water. There were very few other rods about. The sun blazed in the sky and we were clearly in for a day of intense heat.

First Look at the Dunn

Golding took me to begin on the little River Dunn, a tributary which joins the Kennet at the lower end of the Hungerford fishery. There was a really big rainbow lying sullenly in this stream, which would have no truck with me and my bare hooks and Imperials. Higher up, three goodish grayling were lying fairly deep, in rough arrowhead formation, the largest out in front. I knelt quietly behind the screen of fringing comfrey, willow-herb and meadowsweet, interspersed with tall figwort, and I cast my bare hook about nine feet upstream of their lie. I watched the floating leader as it drifted towards them, then, when I judged the hook to be just ahead of the good one, and about at his level, I lifted it smoothly. He was on to it like a tiger, and he was mine, some minutes later, a cock fish of 1 lb. 6 oz.

Hundred up

At the top of the Dunn water, another nice grayling was lying in mid-stream, questing about on the clean gravel in relatively shallow water. Not as big as the one in my creel, but worth trying for. When I cast to him, a good trout came shooting across from beneath some ranunculus, and intercepted the bare hook before it reached the grayling. He was a strong and lusty fish, deep with few spots, and he took me quite a way downstream before I got the net under him, and his 11 lb.

When W.C. got his hundredth hundred, at Lord's, he celebrated with a magnum of champagne at the wicket. You can do these things in such a hallowed place, but you scarcely expect to drink champagne after netting your hundredth trout of the season. I did, though. Unknown to me, Golding had the delectable fluid cooling in the river only a stone's throw from where I landed my fish, and we sat down on the adjoining seat and broached it. The cork flew high and far and came down almost on top of a trout rising under the far bank! If I were given to flights of fancy I reckon I could make quite a fisherman's story of that incident.

We put away the champagne and a cold fowl, with lettuce fresh from my friend's garden, and then he produced a prime melon, which he halved. Into each half he packed strawberries he'd picked that morning, all duly refreshed, as the French would say, with Cointreau. You should try this, as my pen cannot possibly do it justice.

Testing time

The late morning had passed most agreeably, and by the time luncheon was over, we were well into the afternoon. Golding showed me those parts of the Kennet I had not seen before, then we walked slowly up the whole length of the water. It was deserted, the few rods out having gone home until evening, so we had it to ourselves. Presently we separated and I made up stream for the bridge that carries the London to Bath road. There was a trout above this bridge but he was not on the fin, as we say, and I left him in peace.

I decided to have a look at the upper water, but I got to the top of it before I found a warrantable trout, lying out over some weed on the shallows before a large pool. I cast the bare hook reasonably accurately a foot or so ahead of him, and he gave me some indication of lift immediately, to which I responded sharply. It was 4.50 p.m. When he went into my creel to give me a brace, and with this I felt quite happy.

Back at the bridge I rejoined my friend, and together we set off to walk back down along the opposite bank this time. Just below the bridge we spotted three good grayling, well down, and on our side of the very wide river thereabouts. He insisted that I have a go at them, so I lengthened my line. I was about to cast when I spotted an even better trout lying rather farther out than the grayling, and showing every indication of being up on the fin.

As I would expect, the bare hook was ignored until I induced, then he rushed at it and took firmly. After a lively struggle, Golding-netted the fish for me... We were both delighted to find he was the best of the day, going exactly 2 lb. For me, he turned an already good summer day into an excellent one, with four fine fish in the creel, the smallest 1 lb. 5 oz. Another consequence of this most enjoyable outing was that I had almost doubled my bare-hook score for the season, and, of course, passed my trout century.