THE CUT THROAT OF THE BITTER ROOT

By Percy M Cushing

Illustrated with Photographs

A FLASH of white silver in foam white water, a lightning dash for safety below the riffle, a quick strike with the split bamboo, and the shriek of the click. And then you get him or you don't get him, according to your skill and the stoutness of your tackle. For the cut throats run big on the Bitter Root—and fight hard.

Rushing northward a hundred miles and more, hurrying over pebbled beds, dropping down rock-strewn rapids, occasionally dallying a moment in dark pools and darker shadows, the river, with its legions of trout, twines along the Bitter Root Valley, and you get the trout—if you can.

All you need is time—time to burn, days and days of it. The other necessities, the rod and flies and seventy feet of enamel line, you can pick up somewhere if you didn't pack them along as I did mine.

The river, fed at brief intervals by rushing mountain streams, reaches like a silver finger along the western side of the valley which extends southward a hundred miles from the city of Missoula in western Montana. It is hemmed in by the snow capped peaks of the Bitter Root range on the west and by the less abrupt Hellgate Mountains on the east. The narrow mountain streams, pitching abruptly from the canyons, roll down the range of the Bitter Root like tear furrows down the cheeks of a granite giant.

With the exception of the Blackfoot River, far to the north, the Bitter Root offers the best trout fishing on the western slope of the main range of the Rockies in Montana. The trout are mainly of one variety, the cut throat, Salmo Clarkii; though the natives of the region term them variously, as the size of the fish varies with the depth of the water which they inhabit. Occasionally the rainbow is hooked and the steel head trout is not unknown, but in the main the trout of the Bitter Root and the streams that feed it are cut throats.

They are savage fighters, too, in certain seasons voracious, and from May to September they furnish splendid sport. Those caught in the narrow and swift mountain torrents that plunge like silver threads through the canyons seldom exceed ten inches in length, and because of their small size are called locally mountain trout. They are the ordinary cut throats, but never grow any larger on account of the limitations of the streams which they inhabit. Down in the river itself they grow much larger, reaching a weight of three and four pounds and there the local fishermen call them "river trout" or "red bellies," because of the rosy hues under the gills and on the belly just behind the head.

There is art in taking these big fellows, too, as I found out. It requires no skill to drop a fly into the boilers of one of the small subsidiary streams and yank out seven to ten inch fish, but to lure a three pounder from the black depths of a river pool takes a deft hand, and once the fish is hooked, a skillful one to keep him there.

The train that took me southward along the valley from Missoula was loaded with fishermen. It was Sunday, and on Sunday everyone turns out to fish. They go up the river as far as Florence, a distance of twenty miles, but seldom farther. Consequently, the farther up stream you go from

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Florence the better the fishing gets. My first stop was midway between Florence and Stevensville, fifteen miles farther on, and the men at Three Mile where the big irrigation company that is cultivating the valley has one of its camps told me that there was only ordinary sport to be had there.

"Better go on up to Medicine Springs," they said. "That's where to get 'em, thirty, forty a day, all you want."

Oh, yes, I was going all right, but not now. I had plenty of time, and if I loafed I'd see more of the country. Then, too, pretty fair sport where there were really trout might mean untold revelations to Easterners who were obliged to fish mostly where trout were not.

I went to Stevensville. I went with the avowed intention of finding a fisherman—one who knew the river and who was willing to show it—a sort of guide. I asked a small boy, the first person I met.

"Traout?" he said. "Yu bet. There's a few. Do I know anybody hereabouts who goes fishin'? I shore do. There's Gene Cottrill—he can pour out a stream of water from a bucket an' ketch fish in it—he shore can."

Mr. Cottrill was the barber. He was shaving a customer when I came in, and invited me to sit down. When he had finished wiping his razor he turned to me.

"We catch 'em all right," he said. "Anybody can if they know how. It's just as easy as anything else if you can do it. Ever caught any trout?"

I admitted that I had—a few.

"Well," said he, "so have I. I caught a few yesterday—just twelve. That's two meals for my family—two meals even. I never catch any more

ON THE WAY.

HARD AT WORK.

READY TO GO HOME.

than that—it's wasteful. There's plenty'll catch all they can—catch 'em on hoppers, angle worms, and beefsteak, and say they used flies. They did, too, because they put the bait on a fly hook. But they ain't exactly respected about here."

"You use flies of course—what kind at this season?" I said.

Mr. Cottrill's eyes were even and gray. They looked as if somebody had run a plumb line across his face, and set them in by it. He looked me squarely in the face with them. I never wasted time asking myself whether anything Mr. Cottrill said was precisely exact after that. I knew it was.

"I use flies," he said quietly, ignoring the second part of my question. "I begin using 'em as soon as the snow's off the ground. I start right in on the road there in front of the shop, and I use 'em every day until the fish begin to rise. Then I use 'em on the river. To catch fish regular and catch big ones a man needs plenty of practice. I begin on forty foot of line in the road, and by the time I'm ready to fish I can handle sixty as well as I did at the end of the last season."

Mr. Cottrill motioned toward his partner who was honing a razor.

"This is Wes Walls," he said. "We fish together mostly. I'm sorry I can't go with you to-morrow. I went yesterday. It's Wes's turn. He'll be glad to take you."

"You go, Gene," said the other barber.

"Yu bet I won't—it's your turn."

And the upshot of it was that I agreed to meet Wes at the shop at five the next morning.

Cottrill was there before either of us, going over his own fly book.

"Thought I'd come down and see you get off all right," he said. "Let's see your book—got any bait hooks in it?" he continued suspiciously.

I assured him I hadn't. I had taken them out before starting, for I remembered the chat I had had with him the day before. People who used bait weren't "exactly respected about here."

"Now," went on the barber with an expression of relief in his gray eyes,

Wes had seen the rise. "Red belly —and a good one," he commented. "They always shine like that when they come up. Try him again."

I massacred my next cast in my excitement, and then Wes, standing in midstream forty feet distant, dropped a coachman plump in the center of the eddy and struck in time. The fish was a good one weighing that night when dried out a pound and a half, and it took ten minutes to land it. Then we proceeded.

From Hamilton on to Missoula the river widens gradually and as gradually loses its rapidity. Where we were fishing it was perhaps twenty yards across. Occasionally it branched off to either side of a small wooded island, and always where the two branches came together there were swift water and deep pools.

Mostly the small trout lay in the riffles—the big ones in the eddies below them or in the deep, quiet pools close under the banks on the edge of the current. It takes a deft fisherman to bring one of the big fellows to hook in the quiet water where the fly is more plainly seen and its ruse discovered. In such holes the feathered bait must not lose motion for an instant. The second it meets the water, the set of the wrist must start it moving, or the pause will reveal the deception, and all manner of future casts will be unvailing after that.

It is far easier to handle a fly in swift water where the current takes the line out readily, but the fish are smaller. However, I was satisfied to whip the riffles, and the fish I caught averaged half a pound or a trifle more.

Wes was after the big ones. An impatient cast was all he gave the boilers and the white sand holes at their bottom. It was in the deep, black, eddying holes close to shore or under the shade of fallen trees lying half across the stream that he plied his master hand.

And always those sturdy legs of his kept driving him along, and I, puffing hard, followed laboriously down river. The smooth, round stones of the bottom were slippery and afforded little footing. The rush of the water snatched at my knees whenever I paused, and more than once as I tried to wade across stream I felt the bottom slipping away from me and regained my balance only by desperate struggles.

Wes, used to it, seemed to encounter none of my difficulties. He waded waist deep with the water boiling about him as easily as I struggled in the rapids to my knees. And he didn't wait for me, either. Always he clung along the west bank, dropping his cast, which after a time appeared to be possessed of human understanding of his wishes, into the dark pools, and a steady stream of silver fish with red-gold bellies and the red ring along the gill that marks the cut throat slipped into his creel. Occasionally he lifted the cover and peered in at them.

Once or twice he changed his flies—a cowdung for the royal coachman when the river grew swifter; a plain coachman for the cowdung a little later. With my own creel filling far less rapidly, I followed his example, changing my royal for a queen of the waters. And a moment later I had a chance and lost it.

The rapids suddenly ceased. The wooded shore drew in closer along the darker water, and a half mile stretch of slow running river opened around a bend before us.

'Big ones here, if you can get 'em," said Wes across stream.

I nodded. A dozen yards ahead an old stump reared black from the dark water that curled leisurely about it. On shore was thick brush that crowded close over the banks. The shade of a large tree fell across the river for a few yards on either side of the stump. I knew there was a trout hole there, and a trout hole such as big fish love.

The river was too deep to wade, and I took to the shore. The brush clutched my leader and clogged my rod, but working cautiously, I edged up under the tall tree that shaded the pool. There was not room behind me for a cast, and overhead the branches were too low to lift my rod upright, so I skidded my queen of the waters out into the black current sidewise. And the next minute I was in the midst of a mad struggle.

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Up he came straight and quick as lightning—like a white corpse from the deep. I felt him rising out of the blackness before he struck, felt him coming up, up in that fraction of a second before my wrist told me that what my eye had seen was a reality. And then my fly vanished from off the water like magic, and I felt the tip of the split bamboo come down toward the butt certainly, surely, irresistibly, and I threw the butt out to meet it, threw it hard and fierce.

What happened then always afterwards seemed a sort of blur. An hour later when I tried to analyze it in detail I could not. I had only the impression of a doubled rod, a big black stump with black water hissing around it, a crowding wall of brush, and the frenzied fear of a snagged leader.

I remember faintly a mighty sidewise flopping in the water, a series of mad rushes, and then a quick whip of the rod and an awful sense of disaster. The bamboo suddenly straightened backward, the line and leader snapped up and hung tangled in the brush above me, and Wes's voice droned across stream.

"Guess you lost him—a big 'un, three pound anyhow and mebbe more."

Dolefully I untangled the line and looked over the leader. It was intact, but the barb of my hook was broken short.

A hundred yards down stream Wes stopped and sat down on the bank, motioning me to do the same. I asked him what was up.

"Watching flies," he answered.

And then I noticed fish breaking along both sides of the stream below us —breaking constantly and in many places. Wes studied the air, suddenly turning to watch swiftly from one point to another. To me across the river it looked as though he was "seeing things,"

as he was, I learned, when he drawled across, a moment later:

"Salmon flies mostly, I think. We'll try one anyway."

He got out his fly book, and then, working cautiously along the bank to a clear space, shot a cast out over the quiet water. Almost instantly there was a rise, and he landed a good sized cut throat.

"Now we'll be sure," he said, and sat down on the bank again. Taking out a knife he opened the fish and examined its contents.

"Salmon flies all right," he commented; "put one on."

I did so and at the first cast hooked a fine fish. There was no denying the scientific methods of Wes after that. We landed a dozen beauties in that quiet reach of water, all of them more than a pound and one a two pounder that Wes slid out after a hard struggle.

Then we reached the fast water and Wes cut open another fish and changed back to the coachman. It was just below this spot that I got a taste of real excitement.

Two mountain streams fed into the river close together. Just off the mouth of one of them a slender birch tree had fallen, its top lying across a pile of drift thirty feet from shore. Between the bank and the drift, the water gouged sharply down five feet into clear white sand and swept out a boiling rapid on the other side. It was a likely looking place.

I had caught my last coachman on a snag, and was using a king of the waters. I could not reach the center of the cut beneath the birch from the shore, and I was convinced that there were fish in it. There was nothing left but to go out on the tree.

It was a ticklish job. The bushy end of the birch rested lightly on the drift pile, and the trunk gave and wabbled painfully as I advanced. Then, too, I was anxious to go as cautiously as possible so as not to create any disturbance in the water.

At last I was within a few feet of the drift. Steadying myself I shot my king of the waters up stream, a short cast, and let it sweep down on the current. I think it almost reached the trunk of the tree on which I stood. Then it went out of sight and a gleaming dash of light came and went before my eyes. I almost [illegible], too. Why I didn't, I don't know. As the big fish struck so close to me I clutched the grip of my pole frenziedly to shoot the hook into him, and my fingers closing over the rod held the line tight against the grip and kept it there.

With no chance to let the reel run off, the full weight of the strike was thrown on the tip and from there to my arm, jerking it sharply out and down. A heavy trout in swift water can pull a lot harder than you believe and the yank cost me my balance. Swaying like a tight rope walker who loses his equilibrium, I see-sawed back and forth on that narrow tree trunk in astonishing fashion. The motion of my body started the tree rocking as a slack wire rocks, and then in a trice there was a rush of water in my mouth, a roaring in my ears, and I was going down the current, tumbling over and over like a bottle in a whirlpool.

It was a lucky thing for me that a hundred feet below the deep water fetched up in a broad sweep of shallow yellow rapids against a bank of pebbled sand; against this bank I bumped, half drowned. The strong arm of Wes fastened to my collar, and I was high and dry in an instant, hardly aware of what had happened.

The first thing I saw was my rod still clutched in my hand with a death grip. There was a mighty tugging at the end of the rod. Then I realized that I wasn't the only one that had held to that tackle during my bath. The trout that had caused the unexpected plunge had held on, too. He was a big "red belly" of two pounds, and there was something a trifle more than satisfaction as I plunged him into the creel.

"Better be careful," said Wes as we started again, and there was a shade of seriousness in his voice. "I saw a man drown before we could get to him that way last season."

On other days I tried the trout in the smaller streams, cut throats, too, but smaller because of the more limited size

of their haunts. A fellow could catch a string of a dozen little ones in as many minutes. But it could not compare with river sport, for all that was necessary was to drop a Gunnison Beauty or some other modest fly on a number nine hook into a foot deep pool and yank it out with a fish attached. After an hour of it and a full creel I understood why Wes and Gene could never be induced to visit the mountain streams.

"It spoils a man for fine casting," they said. "It's all right if you like it —and of course the little fish are sweeter—but, well, the big ones are harder to get. Guess that's why we like 'em."

A week later I tried Medicine Springs and the Burnt Fork, farther up the river. More fish—yes, there were, and they were easier to get, but somehow the gloom didn't rise in the canyons and the sun stream over the snow of the Bitter Roots the same way they did when Wes and I drove home that first day. If you ever happen to be out in that country, ask the first person you see in Stevensville for the man who can pour out a stream from a bucket and catch fish in it. It will be worth your while.

THE NEW FOOTBALL IN PRACTICE

WE have had a great deal of new football in theory for the past six months. We are now seeing it in practice. The three photographs which follow are of the Yale team in the preliminary work at Lakeville, Connecticut. The plays shown are an index of what may be expected in the way of open running and passing. There is every indication that as soon as players and officials get past the first stages of uncertainty as to the meaning and application of some of the rules the game will be more rapid and pleasing to watch than it has ever been. The first game played—by the Carlisle Indians—was fast and full of interest and there was surprisingly little penalizing for violation of the new rules.

A gratifying development on the part of some of the teams is in the direction of open-field passing by runners. We have been notoriously deficient in that respect in this country, partly because of the greater liability to fumble, but largely because of the limitations of the old rules. Princeton, with Herring the old Princetonian and later an English Rugby player available as adviser is expected to show some new tricks in this respect.

At a special meeting of the Rules Committee in New York City in mid-September some valuable tips were given on the interpretation of the rules. For example, a tackle may not stand sidewise on the scrimmage line for the purpose of getting into the interference quickly. The runner with the ball may put his hand on the interferer in front of him but may not take hold of him or be pulled along by him. In a fair catch a player who is onside may interfere with the man making the catch. In the case of a forward pass if the man catching it stands still or makes a single step in any direction and then stops, the ball is dead. If a backward pass is to be made in such a case it must be immediately on catching the ball. A forward pass cannot be made by a runner after he has crossed the line of scrimmage.

Section 6, Rule 20, was changed to permit a return kick which had been prohibited under the rule as it stood. Kicking or kicking at a ball on the ground or bounding is penalized by the loss of the ball at the point where the foul was committed. The rule prohibiting hurdling was amended to exclude jumping over a man who is on one knee.