

A FISHING CATECHISM

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A Fishing Catechism by R. F. Meysey-Thompson

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R. F. MEYSEY-THOMPSON

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I	
FISHING ETIQUETTE	9
CHAPTER II	
SALMON FISHING	21
CHAPTER III	
TROUT FISHING	53
CHAPTER IV	
DRY-FLY TROUT FISHING	108
CHAPTER V	
WET-FLY TROUT FISHING	121

	PAGE
CHAPTER VI	
BAIT FISHING FOR TROUT	130
CHAPTER VII	
DAPPING	152
CHAPTER VIII	
GRAYLING FISHING	186
CHAPTER IX	
LOCH FISHING	192
CHAPTER X	
FISHING LAWS	206
INDEX	223

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INTRODUCTION

FISHING, now the most popular of sports, has only taken its high position in the affection of the multitude within the recollection of men who are not yet past middle age.

Forty years or so ago but very few persons were to be met with on any river ; but now they may be counted by scores, where formerly there would only have been perhaps a single rod. In the large towns are innumerable fishing-clubs, some of which count their members even by thousands, who, though very likely compelled to confine their attention to coarse fish by force of circumstances, are yet thoroughly imbued with the instinct of a true disciple of Isaac Walton.

One of the causes of the growth of these clubs is, no doubt, the facility with which waters can now be reached ; but there is also a yearning on the part of the town dweller to get into the country,

and from the very essence of his pursuit it is absolutely necessary that the fisherman should be a close observer of nature, if he is to attain any considerable measure of success.

Fishing has been eagerly followed from the very earliest period in the history of the world, as far as we have knowledge. Amongst recent discoveries a tomb in Egypt has disclosed the figure of a man, walking in a procession, and carrying a very modern-looking rod and line, with a barbed hook at the end. It may be remembered, too, that among the amusements provided by Cleopatra for Antony was that of fishing from a boat; and how she even provided divers to hook live fish on to Antony's line, when his attention was diverted, and the fish were slack in biting, thereby proving herself far in advance even of our own age, and setting an example that no doubt many at the present time would copy if they only knew how to do so.

So absorbing is the pursuit, so entranced are its votaries, that from the wealthy salmon-fisher, who may possibly pay hundreds of pounds in rent and wages, down to the ragged lad fishing for minnows and stickle-backs with a crooked pin and bit of string, one and all experience the same intense longing to be at work again when once the season has come round. It by no means follows that great expense provides the most pleasure, and some of the keenest sportsmen

may be found amongst the humblest of those who fish for fishing's sake.

Let no one turn up his nose and decry the means whereby another derives his pleasure and his sport. It is too much the fashion for enthusiasts of one branch, that may possibly suit their local water, to sneer at other methods, of which they themselves have very possibly no experience, and to brand as "poaching" any way of angling not favoured by themselves. Many of these despised methods demand the very highest skill and knowledge of woodcraft; and a good rough-and-ready mode of estimating what is fair, or the reverse, is whether the fish has voluntarily come and taken the lure, as compared with its compulsory capture by tickling, netting, or the like.

Purists of the dry-fly—as they love to term themselves—are apt to imagine that their art requires more skill than any other. This is not borne out by an experience of nearly forty years in this special branch of the art, commencing when I joined a small private club on the Itchen in eighteen hundred and sixty-seven. That it is a most fascinating form of fishing for trout is at once readily granted, but in a comparison of skill it is another matter. Take, for instance, one of the numerous becks or burns in the North on a hot summer's day. The water will be gin-clear, every pebble distinctly marked, and every trout

so plainly visible that each of its spots may be counted. The stream is, in all probability, not more than twelve feet wide or so, and no deeper than the calf of the fisherman's leg. To be successful under these conditions with either a worm, wet-fly (a dry-fly would at once be drowned by the rapidity of the current), dape, or minnow, needs an artist indeed! And yet many a native will manage to make a respectable bag on any day under such adverse conditions. It must not be forgotten that the dry-fly fisherman has probably not less than ten or twelve yards of line in use, and is able to keep that distance below the fish that he has marked down; yet the minnow or worm fisherman will not have more line out than the length of his rod—perhaps eleven feet—and he is therefore very much closer to his prey than the other. The shade-fisher, moreover, who uses the dape has even less, and seldom has more line than half the length of his rod! He therefore must remain almost absolutely still, keeping the closest watch on the trout, and timing his measures accordingly. The rod can only be pushed forward inch by inch, and when the fish is but some eight feet away it seems almost possible to gauge his secret thoughts, so that it is necessary to be very careful. It may be five minutes of intense tension of nerve before you are ready to let the fly lightly touch the

water, and if the trout responds readily your triumph is complete, especially if the capture has been effected with an artificial fly.

Stalking fish under such conditions surely requires as much skill in avoiding the keen eyesight of burn-trout as can ever be called for when fishing with a dry-fly on the banks of a chalk-stream, however clear.

Those who have been brought up from their youth to fish only with the "dry-fly," most frequently know nothing of the method of using the wet-fly to the best advantage, and decry it accordingly. They may, perhaps, on occasion, condescend to try it, but if they do it is in an unbelieving, half-hearted sort of way, and so imbued are they with the principles of their usual style of fishing, that they fish with the wet-fly in the same old way, as if it was a "dry" fly sunk for the occasion. It is, perhaps, needless to say that they do not add greatly to the contents of their baskets, and then they cling closer than ever to their belief that wet-fly fishing is merely a school of "chuck it and chance it." That they ought to have so manipulated their rod that a semblance of life is given to the flies they do not understand, nor would they know how to effect this. It is here that the "personal equation" comes in, and it is by the difference of their skill in this respect that one fisherman not only induces the fish to rise at, but also to