

Skues and the World's Best Rod

by

'LEONARDO DEL LAGO'

I WAS much interested in the article in the summer number of the *Journal* by R. D. Overfield and the later letter by R. B. Ullman on Leonard rods. I hope to be able to supply the missing link or links as to the existence of one or more of them.

When I first joined the *Flyfishers' Club* in 1938 it was, I think, due to the late Mr. Justice Henn Collins whose pupil I had been sometime before then. He was a member and apart from being a fine natural lawyer was an expert craftsman making his own violins and playing them when completed. He had a very large high class practice which left him little time for other things but he came into the club occasionally in the evenings and then left after tying some flies.

It was at Swallow Street that I first met Skues and perhaps as I was a young lawyer he may have taken some interest in me. However we became quite close friends and many of his letters to me have been included in C. F. Walker's book.

Before I joined the club I had been practising, somewhat unwisely perhaps, in Sheffield. It was not then an Assize town but before the coming of legal aid work at the Bar was so difficult to obtain even for the most gifted men one had to go where there seemed to be more opportunities. However I made plenty of friends including some fishermen and began fishing on the Derwent in the middle of beautiful country near Hathersage. When I came south in 1938 I was, in the words of the late and inimitable R. D. Peck 'Coming out of the duffer class' — except perhaps as regards casting, which I believe anyone who is first class — at any rate in one game, should be able to learn easily — that is of course unless it is a game played with one's feet.

I was then lucky enough to have enough money to afford some inexpensive fishing and Skues knew about this. He had recently taken a rod on the Nadder near Salisbury and asked me to join him which I was delighted to do. Skues had just given up his rod on the Abbots Barton water near Winchester where I imagine he spent most of his fishing life and where he obtained the knowledge to write his series of masterly books.

As he was then practising as a solicitor, mainly in family matters, in Essex Street off the Strand we used to travel down on the train from Waterloo to Salisbury or Wilton but I cannot remember which.

Skues never carried his rod or rods in a case but fastened the joints together with elastic bands and placed the rod upright on the seat next to him in the corner of the carriage. At that time I had what I thought to be a pleasant 9½ ft. Hardy rod but when Skues saw it he described it as being 'Something of a weaver's beam', a term he generally used for rods he did not particularly care for. In spite of his age Skues was quite equal to any form of chalk stream fishing as he never really entered the water nor ever fished for salmon, wading presented no problems.

I understand he gave up his rod on the Itchen for the following reason. Mr. Justice Gavin Simonds, who later became Lord Chancellor, had a beat on the same water and objected to what he thought was Skues' somewhat persistent nymph fishing. He com-

plained this disturbed the other fish in the river. When I mentioned this to Henn Collins he thought Simonds might be right as when fishing a nymph trout were often pricked and not hooked but I will leave the verdict on this to those who have left the duffer class more easily than myself. I do not think there was much love lost between Skues and the future Lord Chancellor even though they were both Old Wykehamists, lawyers and fishermen; but Skues who was not one 'to butter the biscuit when it was not needed' said 'Gavin Simonds is a very good fisherman'. The comparison between them was unusual. Both were very clever men: Skues until you knew him — taciturn and reserved and Gavin Simonds aggressive and self-confident.

Of course the Nadder in those days was not the same class of water as the Itchen but there were a few good trout and some grayling of good size as well. There was a small unlicensed hotel near the river at which we stayed and where Skues later spent most of the war years. It was hardly likely he would have let me handle his Leonard but it was fascinating watching him using it. He knelt with one knee on the bank behind the grass or reeds, gave his rod a few sharp flicks and then seemed to feed the line through the rings with his left hand, of course, so that the line shot along the surface of the water like a snake. He had very broad wrists and rather ugly thick hands and fingers.

When I joined the R.A.F. in May 1940, which was the last time I fished with him, we exchanged letters but unfortunately we lost touch due to my absences abroad. I believe he did come occasionally to the first premises the club occupied in the *Junior Carlton*. For a careful, clever and meticulous solicitor in a small firm of high repute he was a poor man. He told me that he lost heavily when the government of the day decided to nationalise the railways and pay off the stock holders. What he did not tell me — and I think Dr. Barton did — was that he helped to support one or more members of his family. He was a bachelor of simple tastes, a non-smoker and when I knew him drank only a little whiskey in the evenings. As far as I am aware he had no interests except fishing and his legal practice.

Now as to the one or more Leonards which may be unaccounted for. Dr. Barton, with whom I had been in correspondence when I was in North Africa (and before then when on leave in person) kindly invited me on my return in 1946 to help him edit the *Journal* which I was glad to do. Barton had a friend who owned some

water on the Anton, a tributary of the Test and she allowed him to bring a guest. I had a car in those days and when we went down together we stayed at the main hotel in Stockbridge. Now at that time I know Barton was using a Leonard rod which was fairly stiff and of a very light colour and which I understood he either bought from Skues or was given it by him. Before I was stupid enough to go out to Kenya where I lost much money Barton sold me a Leonard rod for about £9. It was certainly not the one he used when we fished together. My Leonard, when I got it, was in a metal case with a waterproof cover and an aluminium screw top.

When my wife took the rod out of its case some time ago to hang it up the case got lost : I would be glad of another. It is 9ft. long with two tops. There was first class trout fishing in Kenya but I think prudently I left it at home and I did not realise I was the owner of such a rarity until recently. This came about thus. After three years in Hongkong without a holiday and because my daughter was producing 'As You Like It' at Stratford-on-Avon, I decided to come home and had been offered an evening on the Leckford water by a friend who had a rod there. Before going down to the Test my wife and I had arranged to go to Gmunden in Austria where Henn Collins before the war had caught a trout of 5½ lb. on a dry fly. It had been recommended to me by the Austrian travel agent in Hongkong who had been recently told it was the best place in Austria. On arrival — after a little conversation with a farmer — he told me that the river was 'ausgefischt'. The local authority who issued the licences were asking a minimum price of between £25 and £30 for three days grayling fishing. There were some pleasant Swiss fishermen staying in the same private hotel and I considered the most sensible thing would be to watch them. They did very well fishing the upper reaches of the wide, wooded river using mostly sedges and casting down stream — but there was no sign of any trout. The Swiss told me grayling are rarely, if ever, found in Switzerland so that it was a change to catch them. However, like Schubert who had been on a long visit exactly 148 years before, 'We enjoyed the heavenly scenery and the friendly people' as he wrote to his brother. This may not have anything to do with Leonard rods but may be a warning to those seeking fishing abroad.

After I had been down to the Test as the guest of my young friend where we had a blank evening at Leckford, I called in at the Rod Box in Winchester which is owned by two very knowledgeable

fishermen whom I was glad to meet. They had not seen a Leonard before and were much interested in it.

My next step was to bring it back with me to Hongkong and I would not have done so if I had known what trouble lay ahead. Now the Personnel and Public Relations Officer for Shell in Hongkong is Geoffrey Fox, who is a member of the club and who has recently done great execution fishing in New Zealand. He is a far better fisherman than I shall ever be and he asked me to take the Leonard round to his office for inspection. What he said about it was this: 'You have a superb wet fly rod with a very soft action and with which you could kill a fish very quickly. You should not have brought it here at all for the very hot and damp summer will affect it. If you were to lose it three things would be needed to get another. First you would have to persuade our kind hearted secretary (my description) to write to the *Flyfishers' Club* in New York and ask them if they could get the makers to supply another which might not be easy. Secondly you might have to wait three years and at the end pay perhaps £150 for a new rod. My advice is that you should send it home as soon as you can.' He also added that you could fish with a dry fly with it if you bought a No. 3 Kingfisher line. I think the one I have at present which I used on the Test was too heavy.

On receiving this excellent advice I promptly insured it for £250 and started looking about for someone who would take it by air to England. This was not too difficult as my regular golfing companion, who is Japanese, is on the staff of one of the leading international air lines. He said he was going for a short visit to England on business and that would include a weekend's golf at St. Andrews. The Hongkong Club carpenters made me a small box without any charge (or over time) and which service I doubt if you would get in England these days. I then handed it over to my friend who said he would post it by registered post on arrival. Six weeks later there was no sign of the rod at my wife's house in Canonbury and, as she is a person who is good at dealing with unpleasant situations, she telephoned Heathrow asking what had happened and was told that due to a strike in Germany my friend's plane had been delayed and that in consequence he had missed his connection to Scotland and had to stay the night with a colleague: that they had got 'involved in a party', (which did not in the least surprise me) and that when taking the luggage from one car to another the rod had been lost. Before I had claimed on the insurance company

and had time to start actions for negligence against all concerned, a letter came from my wife saying the rod had been found in the lost property office at Heathrow notwithstanding it had three fully addressed labels pasted on the box and had been there for a month and might be there still for all I know.

If any members would care to see the Leonard I am sure that my wife would be only too pleased to show it to them. Our secretary has the address in Canonbury and 38 bus stops exactly at the house. There is a garden, but no lawn at the back where the rod could be waved about. Should members be sufficiently interested to arrive in force I think a bottle of 'Dry-Fly' sherry would be much appreciated.

Readers interested in records may like to hear the following. My young friend, with whom I had a blank evening at Leckford, then went up to West Ross where he has fishing and caught nothing. In September he joined some friends at Stanley for three days fishing on the Redgorton beat on the Tay, when six of them caught in three days 124 salmon. My friend caught 15 of them — 13 on fly. On one of the three days 46 salmon were caught altogether.

