The Miller

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Abstract

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THE varnished fly-rod hissed through the air as Vern sent his first cast of the morning rolling out across the pool, dropping a large white fly near the fringe of bushes overhanging the far shore. Vern always fished a white pattern when he was after the Miller. His Dad had used a White Miller the first time they hooked the huge brown trout, and to them he was always the Miller.

Each year after the spring floods they had journeyed back to see if the Miller still rose in Stoney, fishing for two weeks in the secluded waters, using every wile in an attempt to outsmart the Miller. For five seasons they had camped on the same ground, back where Charlie was still in bed asleep. With his father, Vern had fished Stoney from the headwaters where it gushed from a few alder-choked springs, down to the lowlands where it grew into a wide stream of long pools and lazy eddies, but Stoney's special lure was in this short stretch—the home of the Miller.

Their most casual conversations usually ended in a discussion of the Miller. Even when Vern was called from his college classes to his father's bedside, they had talked about the trout. The last time Vern could remember a smile on his Dad's face, the man was saying, "It's all up to you now. I've taught you all I know and you've picked up a lot more. Even though I won't make Stoney this year, you can catch him. Yes, you're the one who'll have to beat the Miller."

A shower of spray erupted under the bushes and the tiny bit of white fluff was gone. Instantly the rod arched skyward, setting the hook in a fighting native trout. Vern felt a familiar warmth fill his body and he laughed to himself as he played the fish. He talked to the fish and to himself, and
Sketch

to the hills around them. Hundreds of times on Stoney he had tensed as his fly went under, hoping for the Miller; yet somehow, somewhere inside, always afraid the fish he hooked might be the Miller.

Vern quickly maneuvered out of the current and into shallow water. The frightened trout surged against the throb of the line, sizzling it through the clear water, jumping, diving and boring into the pool; finally floating on its side into the waiting net. He played the trout as mechanically as he would a hand of bridge, but in each encounter he sensed the ageless struggle of man against nature, intelligence against instinct.

After cleaning the trout and placing it in the moss lined creel, he waded into the current again. "It doesn't seem as if Charlie and I have been here two weeks," he thought. "If I can't find the Miller today it'll be another year before I can look for him again." He sloshed on downstream, his thoughts as turbulent and confused as the water that tugged at his boots.

Stoney had seemed different before Dad died. It really meant something to fish with someone who understood, about you, and Stoney and the Miller, and everything. The Miller was old, very old for a trout. To be that big he must have lived in Stoney before Vern ever fished it. The Miller could be dead now, too, from a flood, or a big coon, or a bear—but never from another fisherman.

He waded ashore and sat on the trunk of a dead tree, unable to go on fishing. Without Dad, and maybe even the Miller, now, Stoney lost all its individuality, its personality—it was just another trout stream. As he sat brooding, studying the polished stones scattered on the shore, Stoney's song began to rouse him from his despondency. He heard the high whisper as the water raced out of the pool above, a whisper that became a bass roar as the water spilled over a limestone shelf and began a bubbling symphony in the rapids below. Each day he had listened for a variation in the melody, a little more vibrant and compelling than usual, with lyrics telling of a special fish waiting in the next hole. While he watched shafts of sunlight cutting through the mist rising from the cool water, Vern leaned forward
and frowned slightly, listening to Stoney's chatter, then grabbed his rod and plunged downstream.

There was no need to question Stoney—the Miller was waiting in the pool around the bend. Of course, of course. He would be farther downstream than last time. Dad had explained that floods moved fish down when they were too big to get under rocks or behind roots. The Miller had just moved down a little, but he was there, he was still a part of Stoney.

Vern moved quickly down the rapids, letting the force of the current carry him along. He fell once, catching himself on one hand, but recovered and hurried on. When he reached the bend he slowed and moved quietly down to the head of the pool, scanning the translucent surface, absorbing every detail.

He stood immobile in the current as he studied the pool. The rapids died abruptly, indicating a steep drop-off. Thirty yards of smooth water turned slowly before breaking into white water again. Vern's attention focused on the two banks. One shore had a small beach and a gradual slope, but the other was a steep bank, topped by a narrow shelf overgrown with rhododendron and evergreens, too dense to walk through. Morning shadows from the surrounding hills still covered the pool, making it seem inky and bottomless to Vern as he surveyed it.

While he waited, deciding how to work the pool, a large fish swirled under the steep bank. Slowly, concentric rings chased each other across the water, dying on shore. Vern's heart beat uncontrollably and he felt his hands tremble. It must be the Miller. He backed up carefully, trying not to alarm the feeding fish. You just didn't make a wrong move near the Miller.

Without hesitation he climbed onto the brushy bank and began the stalk. Cautiously pushing his rod ahead through the maze of trees and bushes, he worked down toward the feeding trout. A small bird scolded him, twittering from tree to tree, outraged at the intrusion on his privacy. Vern pulled himself on his stomach for the last few yards, keeping below the rim of the bank. He paused at the base of a large conifer, listening for the trout. The heavy slurp he
heard drew the breath out of his chest; he lay trembling on
the ground and felt his body lift with each beat of his rac-
ing heart.

Finally he dropped his rod and dug his fingers into the
duff. Inch by inch he pulled himself over to the edge until
he had a view of the whole pool. For a moment he peered
down into the murky water and saw nothing, but as he
looked directly below he gasped sharply. There, longer
than the blade of a canoe paddle and as broad as his leg,
lay the Miller. He was even larger than last year, and in
a new pool, but there was only one trout that size in Stoney.
“If Dad could only be here,” Vern thought. “If he could
only see the Miller again.”

The huge trout finned leisurely in the slow current, tipp-
ing his massive snout occasionally to suck in an insect as
it drifted over him. Vern stopped breathing as he watched.
The Miller continued to feed, gliding effortlessly around the
pool, filling his mighty bulk with the minute insects. A
kingfisher came winging down low over the water. As he
swooped by, the trout disappeared beneath the undercut
bank with a single flip of his broad tail.

While the fish was out of sight Vern reached back for
his rod and checked the fly, leader and all knots. Nothing
must be allowed to go wrong—with the Miller on his line.
Four times they had had the Miller hooked, and four times
he had escaped. Twice he beat Dad by fouling the leader and
once he broke away by brute force. Vern had lost him when
his tiny hook straightened under the strain. Last time they
lost him, the trip before Dad died, he had said, “The man
who lands that fish will be a real woodsman. That damn
fish is already as smart as we are. A fool might hook him,
but that’s only the start. We know, don’t we, boy.”

Vern pondered his father’s words as he planned the cam-
paign. Lucky he was on this shore. Drag would ruin any
cast from the other shore, even if you could creep up close
enough. One mistake and the Miller would go down and
stay down. The first cast had to be perfect. He stripped line
off his reel and laid the coils on the ground, then pulled
just enough through the guides to let his fly float naturally
until it was past the fish. The bushes prevented a real cast;
he could only flip it out and pray.
He lay there, poised, waiting, for almost fifteen minutes. A cricket chirped near the base of the tree, hopping clumsily through the dry brown needles. A pair of kingbirds settled in the branches of a dead birch across the stream, now and then darting into the air to snatch a fly, then perching to wait for more breakfast. Vern was momentarily absorbed in the aerial dogfights, and when he glanced down the Miller had materialized beneath him. He waited until the trout was busy feeding, then catapulted the fly outward.

"Nuts!" he hissed as the leader wrapped around a twig, holding the fly dangling impotently in the air. He jiggled the rod tip gently, but the fly just danced in the air, refusing to drop to the water. He dug his fingers deeply into the soft soil and moaned, "Nuts, nuts, nuts!" He had lost his chance for the morning. He glared at the fly hanging in mid-air and silently cursed every tree and bush along Stoney.

At last he gathered a handful of the small cones that littered the ground. He flipped one upstream so that it would float down over the Miller. When the floating blob passed into the trout's range of vision, he finned over and sucked it in, mouthed it, and spat it out with a quick shake of his head. Vern flipped a second cone. Again the Miller rose, but refused the cone and took a fly floating near it. He ignored the third cone completely. Vern nodded his head and mumbled, "You're a smart old brute, but you're not too smart. Your day will come." As he spoke he could not suppress a feeling of admiration for the Miller and his domination of the environment. The fish was the master of Stoney.

The cricket chirped again and Vern moved his hand stealthily toward the black insect. He slapped his hand down and felt the cricket jumping frantically against his closed fingers. He picked up the small bug and tossed it onto the quiet water, but the Miller made no move toward it. The circles died, but the trout still ignored the cricket. It kicked its legs in an effort to swim and the Miller darted up. The force of his lunge carried him partly out of the water, creating a splash that shattered the morning stillness.

A whoop from upstream announced that Charlie was awake and on the stream. Vern lay still, waiting to see what Charlie would do, how he would fish the pool. "Son-of-a-bitch, he's a good one," Charlie babbled, racing down the
rapids and into the head of the pool. He stopped abruptly in the deep water, sending waves skittering across the pool in front of him. Before the first ripple reached him the Miller shot under the bank.

Charlie sent his line swishing into the air and deftly placed his fly above the spot where the fish had broken water. It floated trimly for a split second, then moved sideways across the current, caught by drag. Charlie lifted his line and cast again. Again the fly zipped off unnaturally.

"What're you tryin' to do, snag him?" Vern shouted.


"Who do you think, Isaac Walton."

"Vern! What in hell are you doing lying over there on your belly? Have you gone nuts!"

"My fly got hung up and I came around to get it. Wait till I rip it loose and we'll head back for breakfast."

Vern snapped open his knife before reaching for the fly. He slashed a wide hole in the branches over the water, hacking out a hole big enough to cast through. Then he reached out and untangled his fly and leader, lost in thought. Nothing must go wrong the next time. The Miller was still a part of Stoney, and he was glad, but as long as he remained there he was a challenge. Vern weighed the two thoughts as he walked out to Charlie.

"How many did you get?" Charlie asked as they waded back toward their camp.

"Just one, for breakfast. How'd you do?"

"I caught six. Biggest one'll go over two pounds."

Vern didn't bother to ask Charlie how many he had kept. After each meal he had to bury four or five fish that Charlie caught and cleaned, but was never quite hungry enough to eat. Vern's dad had pounded the rule into him, "Take only what you can eat—leave the rest for seed. There's no excuse for keeping game you're not going to eat."

After breakfast they climbed into the canoe and headed upstream. "Maybe that big trout of yours, the Miller, is up in one of the spring holes," Charlie said as Vern paddled. "I sure would like to catch that fish. I could mount him beside that tarpon I got in Florida. Hell, one that big would
even win a prize in that magazine contest. How big do you think he is, Vern?"

Vern pondered a moment and said, "Well, he's bigger than that twelve-pounder in the hardware store window, and that was last year." As they approached a set of rapids Vern commanded, "Reel in your line. We'll have to tow the canoe up these."

When the boat was in quiet water again Charlie asked, half-heartedly, "You wanna fish awhile and let me paddle?"

"That's okay," Vern said, "I don't mind paddling. You keep fishing a little longer." He handled the boat so that Charlie could fish, but his mind was reviewing his failure that morning and planning his strategy for the evening. He had to think out every detail in advance.

"Maybe the Miller has died or been carried down on a flood," Charlie ventured.

"Could be," Vern lied. "I don't see how he ever lived to be as big as he is, or was, in a small river like Stoney."

"Well, that tarpon I hooked last summer wasn't in such a big river, for Florida. He really put on a show. My guide counted over thirty jumps. You should have been there. Say, since you brought me along in place of—since you brought me here, maybe I can talk my Dad into taking you deep-sea fishing with us. That's where you get the big ones."

Charlie turned to face Vern and a large fish rose to his fly. "Whoops!" Vern shouted, pointing to Charlie's fly with a dripping paddle. Charlie jerked his rod and the fish was hooked.

"I've got him! I've got the Miller on," Charlie screamed. Vern cringed, but rememberd that the Miller was safe and grinned at Charlie's back.

The fish bored deep into the pool and the rod bowed dangerously. "Better not horse him," Vern warned, chuckling. "He's big enough to break your rod."

Charlie's face was pale and his teeth were clenched. "It's the Miller, I know it is," he panted out. The battle was fierce, but one-sided as Charlie towed the fish toward the boat. Suddenly it turned, jerking the line from Charlie's hand, and swam into the rapids below the pool. Line
screamed off Charlie's reel and he clutched madly for the disappearing line.

"Let him go. You can't stop him," Vern yelled, pushing the boat off to follow the fish through the rapids.

Charlie managed to grab the line as the trout roared down the swift water. The tip of the rod dipped into the water, snapped, and the line fell slack, floating in coils on the water. Charlie's face turned crimson and he screamed oaths after the victorious fish.

"We'll beach in the next pool and see what the trouble was," Vern said. Charlie glumly wound the broken leader through the guides and sat fingerling the ruined rod. Silent chuckles rocked Vern, but he managed to control outward signs of his amusement.

"My other rod is back at camp. We could go back and rest until evening," Charlie suggested.

"Yeah, it's tough to have that happen on the last day," Vern said. "Oh, well, the morning's about shot anyway. We might as well loaf a while."

* * *

When Vern awoke from his afternoon nap the bottom of the sun was already hidden below the hills. He rolled over and looked at Charlie sleeping in his hammock, but decided against waking him. Silently he rose, gathered his equipment, and headed for the Miller.

Trout were rising in every pool, feeding on large, gauze-winged mayflies. The hatch almost covered the water with the insects and some of the smaller trout were leaping clear of the water in their eagerness to capture such a delicacy. Vern hurried down to the rapids above the Miller's pool. When he climbed out onto the bank he had passed the insects, but could still hear the fish slapping the water in higher pools. "I suppose I'll have to wait until they come and go before I can try him tonight," Vern muttered, as he began the crawl to his fishing position.

He had almost reached the hole he had prepared when he heard the Miller begin to feed. Looking across the water he could see the mayflies rising and falling over the stream, flecks of gold in the reddish sunlight. "If I try him now and
he takes a real fly instead, I'm shot," Vern thought. "Yeah, if I have to drag my line back over him he'll go down for good. I'll have to make sure mine is the last mayfly he sees tonight."

Vern squirmed and fidgeted as he heard the trout filling himself on the swarm of mayflies drifting by. He was torturing himself, waiting, but that was the only way to be sure. He had to be sure. He pawed through the artificials in his fly-box, finally selecting one that seemed to be just the right size and the right shade of yellow. He attached it to his leader and turned his attention back to the Miller.

The Miller kept feeding, taking in flies with huge gulps. "He's the only fish in the pool," Vern said to himself, "but it's no wonder!" He eased himself forward until he could watch the trout feed. In the water he looked almost like a sunken log, a log darting back and forth sucking bugs from the surface of the pool. For an instant Vern wondered if he wanted to catch the Miller, but—why shouldn't he? Quickly he began plotting the fight.

"My gosh! If he goes down the rapids I'll have to wade after him." He eased back and removed his heavy boots, realizing that if he jumped into the pool wearing them he might drown, and surely loose his fish. After he pulled the boots off he emptied his pockets; no use soaking everything.

The fish was rising less frequently when Vern finished unburdening himself. He peeked upstream and saw that only a few mayflies were still fluttering over the water. In about two or three more minutes—

Check the fly, knots, leader, everything. Strip out a few coils to take care of his first run. He hesitated a second, deliberating, then flipped the rod tip and watched the fly sink out of sight below the edge of the bank.

A slight splash and his line was taut. He struck, sinking the barb. Nothing happened, and he struck again, making sure the hook was buried in flesh.

The pool exploded. Spray flew above the edge of the bank. The rod arched, jerked up and down and settled into a steady bow. The Miller headed for the rapids and the reel screamed in protest. He changed his mind and churned back upstream, as Vern frantically stripped in line.

"Oooh. If he snags the line I'm lost," Vern moaned. "I've got to play him from the reel."
After charging around his home pool the Miller seemed to realize he was fighting a losing battle and headed downstream again. This time Vern squirmed over the bank and dropped into the icy water, rod held high above his head. As he went under he pushed against the bank with his legs and came up in chest-deep water. The Miller was racing down the rapids, taking precious line from the reel. Vern fought his way into shallow water and sloshed after his quarry. The trout elected to hold his ground in the next pool, and Vern reeled in line as he advanced. Just as the fish was wallowing around the pool, pitting his great weight against the frail, but limber bamboo rod, Charlie bustled downstream.

“We've got him, We've got him,” Charlie screamed gleefully. “I've got a gaff, Vern. Let me go in and stick him.”

“Stay back, way back,” Vern ordered.

The Miller tired of fighting an invisible opponent and swam for the next set of rapids. Both boys ran downstream, keeping as nearly abreast of the trout as possible. His bulk was clearly visible in the shallow water and Charlie chortled, “He's good for a first prize for us. He's the biggest Goddam trout in the world. Be careful, Vern. Do you want me to go in and gaff him?”

“Stay the hell back, will you!”

“Okay, okay, but when you need me just say so.”

The Miller swam to the surface and headed upstream, leaving a two-foot wake. “Holy smoke, he's going to fight the rapids,” Vern breathed. The Miller laboriously worked his way to the next pool, making slow progress against the current and the tension of the line. Vern followed him up the bank, waiting for the next tactic, his muscles tense and sore.

The fight was nearing a climax. The Miller was almost beaten, defeated by his unwieldy size and unknown age. As Charlie plunged up Vern resisted a temptation to snap his leader, but kept applying a steady tension instead. The fish circled the perimeter of the pool, fighting his persistent opponent—the small, sharp sting in his mouth.

Vern began leading him toward a sand bar, watching for a sudden surge of life. “If he shakes now he'll break your leader. Please let me gaff him,” Charlie pleaded.
“Stay back,” Vern snarled. “It’s my fight.”

Gradually the Miller neared the bar, coming in on his side, his gills spread wide and his mouth gasping for air. They could see every spot on his broad side as he floated nearer. Vern moved toward him, but he only slapped the water weakly with his tail. He held the rod high with his left hand as he applied the final pressure to beach the fish. He grabbed inside the gill with his right hand and instantly dropped the rod, clutching the trout with both hands.

“Je-esus Cheerist,” Charlie gasped as Vern knelt in the water, gazing at the beaten fish.

Vern felt a strange chill as he fumbled to dislodge the small hook. “In the tongue,” he murmured. “Not even the Miller could have shaken it.” Tears filled his eyes as the dying fish lay half out of water, pumping his gills for breath.

“Drag him out and we’ll measure him. What are you waiting for?” Charlie demanded.

Vern turned away from Charlie and shut his eyes hard, squeezing out the tears. Quickly he rose and began wading into deeper water, carrying the Miller. When the water was belt-deep he released the fish. It floated at an angle momentarily, then righted itself and disappeared into the dark water. Vern stood slumped, watching the eddy left by the mighty tail of the vanished Miller.

Charlie was almost sobbing. “What did you do that for?” he screamed hysterically.

Vern waded to shore, shaking his head slowly, almost whispering, “You wouldn’t understand, Charlie. You wouldn’t understand.” He sat weakly, taking great quivering breaths, as if expelling foul air from his lungs.

When he looked up he was smiling. He stared at the hills in the west, rimmed with a wide band of scarlet. He had proved himself as a woodsman by defeating the Miller, but he had done much more.

Things were still right. Stoney still sang and the Miller still swam—for Vern he would swim there forever.

—Tom English, Sci. Sr.