Tying Wet Flies for Trout and Grayling

H. G. McClelland, 1919

Selected pages from The Trout Fly Dresser?s Cabinet of Devices.

Follow two illustrated methods for tying a wet fly, from securing the tying silk to shaping the body, wings and hackle.

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CHAPTER VII.

HOW TO DRESS A WET FLY.

At the outset of the present chapter it may be pardonable to reiterate the truism, that it is impossible to dress a fly true to nature without either a present model from which to work, or an accurate recollection of an absent one. The former alternative is, of course, the better; and before the latter can be employed the fly must have been studied, both as a whole and as a structure of parts—studied, in fact, with a view to imitation.

In "The Story of Ung" a short ballad by Mr. Rudyard Kipling, an old "maker of pictures," sings of the aurochs that:—

> "Men have not time at the houghing to count his curls aright."

And it is likely that, due to a similar cause, there may be much unsuspected "haziness" among fly fishers, as to what a natural fly is really like.

The fly dresser is, then, advised to avail himself of every opportunity of studying the form and colouring of flies, and to have always living models when they are obtainable. Meanwhile, the figures below may suffice to give a rough, general idea of some of the principal forms of insect life with which we shall have to deal.

In the following descriptions of the various methods of trout fly manufacture, I shall assume that the beginner (to whom I address myself) is right-handed. If the case be otherwise, it will not

be difficult to make the necessary modifications in my directions.

The vice should be screwed to the bench or table in such a position as to receive plenty of light. If possible, table and vice should be so arranged that strong light, as from a window, should come from behind the operator; while plenty of diffused light—*i.e.*. that coming from

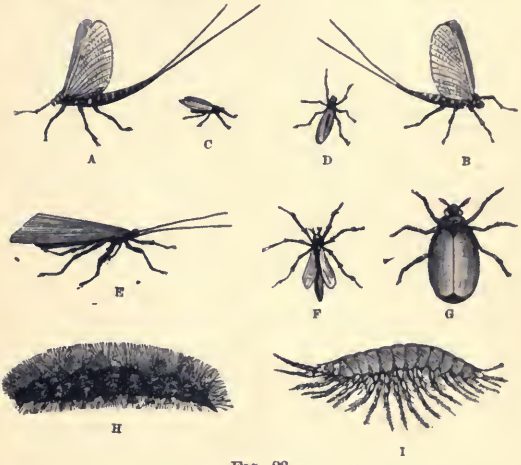


Fig. 23.

white or light coloured objects—should fall on his work in other directions. If a white carpenter's apron be worn, it will be found a great convenience in many ways, and will be of assistance in the matter at present under consideration.

I suppose that most persons understand the difference between what is known as "right-handed" and what as "left-handed" winding;

also what is meant by winding "towards the right," and what by winding "towards the left." As, however, these terms are likely to be of great use to us in the near future, I have thought it well to explain them by means of the illustrations below.

Let us now begin the dressing of our wet fly, which some may think has been too long deferred.

METHOD No. 1.

Our first exercise will be to dress an upwing dun or spinner. Fix the hook (No. 2 will be a

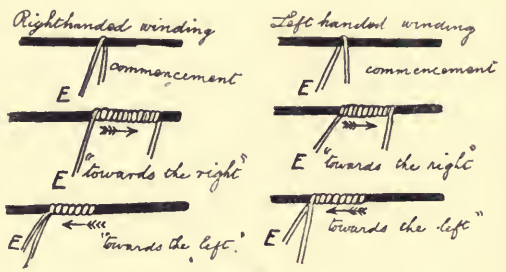


FIG. 24.

The shorter end of the tying silk is marked *E*. The arrows indicate the directions in which the winding progresses.

good size to commence with) in the vice, in the position shown in Fig. 25, and, if such a further aid to the eyesight be felt desirable, lay a piece of white paper on the table, so that the hook may be outlined against it.

Wax a length of about 10in. of tying silk by taking a little liquid wax on the tip of the forefinger and drawing the silk slowly several times between forefinger and thumb. Cleanse the finger and thumb with turpentine and wipe them on a

cloth, which should be kept for the purpose, or on the apron referred to above.

Now, commencing from a point about ⅛in. from the end of the shank, wind right-handed,* about six turns towards the left, then back over the same six turns towards the right. Fasten silk in clip, and cut away end (E).

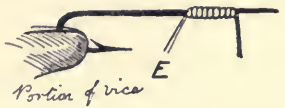


FIG. 25.

If dressing flies to gut, take a length of the latter, being careful that it is perfectly round and otherwise of good quality, and flatten one end between the teeth, so that the length of the flattened end may be about one-half that of the shank of the hook.

Lay the flattened end horizontally beneath the



FIG. 26.

shank (Fig. 26). Remove silk from clip, and wind towards the left, till the straight part of the shank is entirely covered (Fig. 27). Fasten silk in clip.

Take the two fibres to imitate the whisks of the fly between the finger and thumb of the right

* I say right-handed only to fix the ideas. Of course, the left-handed method of winding may be adopted if it be preferred.

hand, the tips of the fibres pointing in the same direction as the forefinger. Lay them with the roots touching the left-hand portion of the upper side of the shank, and the points projecting to the left (Fig. 27).

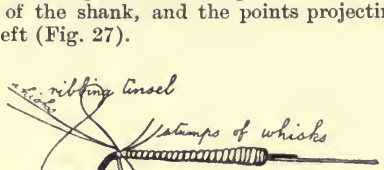


FIG. 27.
Whisks tied in, and ribbing tinsel about to be tied in.

Carefully adjust the length of the part to be allowed to project, according as the fly to be imitated is a Dun or a Spinner (*Vide* Fig. 23, A. and B., also note, page 79). Now press the shank

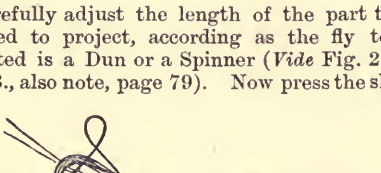


FIG. 28.
Whisks and ribbing tinsel tied in, and floss about to be tied in.

of the hook, together with the fibres, placed in position as above, between the forefinger and thumb of the left hand. Remove the silk from clip with right hand, and take two more turns towards the left,

bringing the silk up and down between the tips of the left thumb and forefinger. Now remove the left hand from the hook, and take another turn of the silk towards the left, this time bringing it not over, but behind the fibres (Fig. 27). Then fasten silk in clip, and trim root ends of fibres.

Next tie in the ribbing tinsel (if any) by another turn towards the right, and then (Fig. 28) the floss, or other body material, by a few more turns in the same direction. During these operations the tinsel, or body material, if soft, should be held close to the shank of the hook, between the

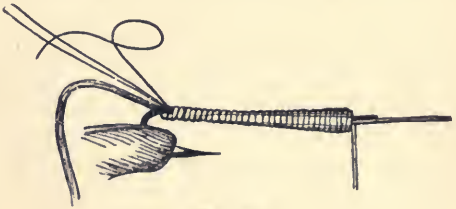


Fig. 29.

left forefinger and thumb, just as were the whisks at the preceding stage of our present piece of work.

Fasten silk in clip, and cut away slantwise the exposed end (K) of the body material. Then continue winding towards the right, till the original starting point is reached. Fasten silk in clip.

Now, with the right hand, wind the strip of body material over the foundation of tying silk, changing for the moment to the left hand, to pass the strip between the pillar of the vice and the length of tying silk, held taut by the rubber clip.

During the winding, the second, third, and fourth fingers of the left hand should hold the vice lightly, a few inches beneath the jaws, so as to allow the left finger and thumb to rest a little below the shank of the hook, one on either side

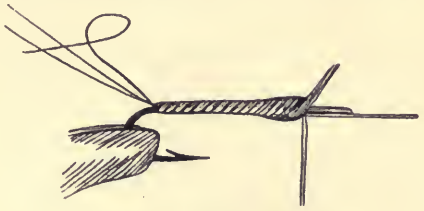


FIG. 30.

of the vice, in readiness to receive the body material from the right hand once in every turn.

When the tying silk is covered, hold the body material above the shank with the right hand (Fig. 30), and with the left remove silk from clip.



FIG. 31.

and take a turn over the body material and towards the right. Change tying silk into right hand, and take another turn towards the right and over the body material. Fasten the silk in clip, and cut away hanging strip of body material.

Wind ribbing tinsel carefully in open spiral turns, fasten with tying silk and cut away end, by same procedure as was used in fastening and cutting away end of body material. Fasten silk in clip.

Now select a wing or tail feather from which



Fig. 32.

to prepare wings. Cut away a piece of the feather web, about three-eighths of an inch broad, *i.e.*, of twice the breadth of which the wings are to be. Hold the severed web in both hands in the position shown (Fig. 32), and move either hand very slightly in the direction indicated by the arrow placed next it. The pressure of the

fingers on the web should be very light during the movement, and at the end of the movement one hand should be removed. Then take hold again with this hand and repeat the process. this time removing the other hand. Continue in like fashion, occasionally pausing to stroke the fibres out straight, until from the form A (Fig. 32) the web assumes the form B.

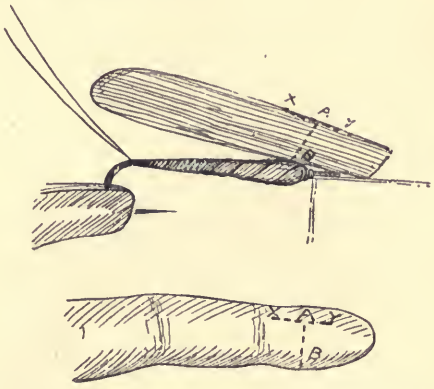


FIG. 33. The lower half of the figure illustrates the position of the lines A B and X Y on the left forefinger. It will be understood that the portion of the forefinger is not shown in its proper position nor, of course, in its proper relative size.

The fibres should be carefully stroked together, where they threaten to separate.

Now double the web as shown in the figure, leaving the light or dark side outermost, according to choice.

The wings are now ready to be tied in. They should be taken by the roots between the finger

and thumb of the right hand, and laid on edge along the upper side of the shank of hook, so that their length may be correctly apportioned.

Then place the tips of the left finger and thumb on either side of the hook-shank and wings, so as to hold the latter in position.

Remove silk from clip with the right hand. Then, opening the left thumb and forefinger a little at the tips, by concentrating the pressure on the line A B (Fig. 33), pass the silk up between the tip of the thumb and near wing, and hold it taut for a moment perpendicularly above the

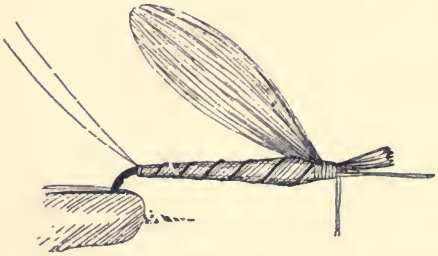


FIG. 34.

shank. Now concentrate the pressure of the left thumb and forefinger on the line X Y (Fig. 33), and pass the tying silk down between the off wing and the tip of the left forefinger. Now, pressing, with the left thumb and forefinger, on both tying silk and wings, draw down the tying silk slowly and firmly with the right hand, thus contracting the stumps of the wings, and binding them on the upper surface of the shank. Pass the silk two or three more times around the stumps of the wings, to secure the latter more completely, before removing the pressure of the left forefinger and thumb. Fasten silk in clip

and trim away the exposed stumps of the wings with the scissors.

When dressing flies to gut or on down-eyed hooks, this is quite an easy matter, but when dressing on up-eyed hooks, it is more difficult. In this latter case the simplest plan within my experience is as follows: Hold the scissors on the right forefinger and thumb, but with the blades pointing inwards towards the elbow. Now set the points astride the stumps of the wings and

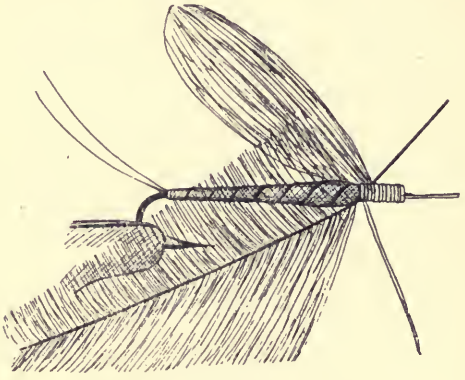


FIG. 35.

upper side of the shank, and, holding the wings between the left forefinger and thumb, draw the scissors upwards, at the same time compressing them, so as to cut away as much of the stumps as possible. Repeat the operation as often as may be necessary.

Remove silk from clip, and continue winding towards the right, till the end of the shank is completely covered.

Then wind back towards the left, as far as the roots of the wings. Change the silk into the left hand, and taking the tips of the wings between the right forefinger and thumb, raise them up

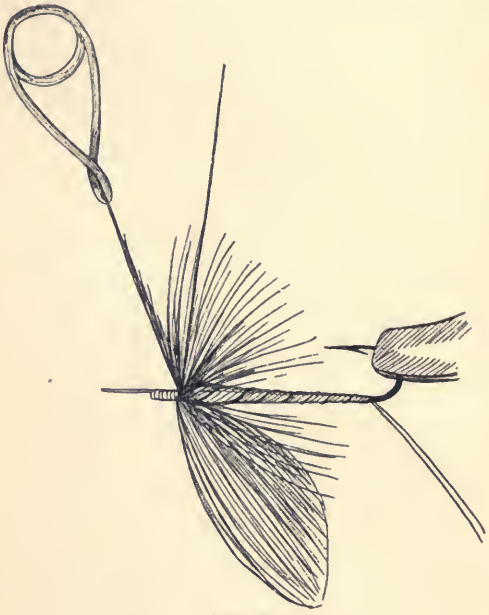


Fig. 36.

from the shank of the hook and pass the silk behind them. Fasten silk in clip.

Now prepare a hackle of suitable length of fibre, by stripping off the down on either side of the root end of the quill.

Then, holding the hackle by the tip, lay the bare stem obliquely across the under side of the shank, pointing "half-right," and the inner or less glossy side of the fibres facing inwards towards the shank.

Fasten in hackle, *i.e.*, bind stem to shank, with two turns of the tying silk towards the left. Fasten tying silk in clip, and cut away exposed end of hackle stem. Fasten hackle pliers on point of hackle.

Now wind hackle two or three turns towards the right, changing hands, as in winding body material, and keeping the stem of the hackle taut during the operation. Bring the turns alternately behind and in front of the strained length of tying silk, always, however, pulling the point of the hackle a little to the right when it is passing underneath the shank. Now, holding the unwound part of hackle taut, and pointing "half-right," fasten down the wound part with two turns of the tying silk, towards the right and in front of the wings. Fasten silk in clip. Cut away closely the unwound remnant of the hackle. Remove silk from clip.

The next step is to fasten in the tying silk by means of what is called the "whip finish."

All kinds of lapping, whether on rods, cricket bats, or any other such articles, are finished by this neat and secure fastening. The manner of making it is a little difficult to describe in words, but perhaps it will be understood from the figures below. These are intended simply to illustrate the whip finish, and have no other relation to the figures which have preceded them. Thus a portion of the shank of the hook is shown bare, though, in the method of fly dressing with which we are now dealing, the whole shank is covered with tying silk, before the time for making the whip finish is reached.

To make the whip finish :—

Raise a part of the silk above the shank, as in Fig. 37, and fix the end in the rubber clip.

Form the loop as in Fig. 38.

Pull the gut through this loop, and wind with the part of the silk marked A B C, one turn

Fig. 37.

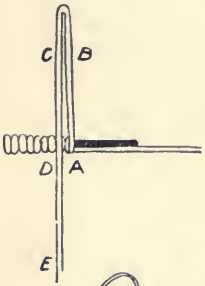
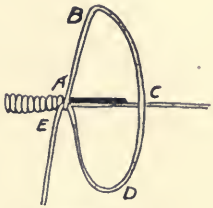


Fig. 38.



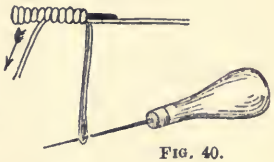


Fig. 40.

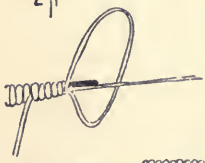


Fig. 39.



Fig. 41.

towards the right. Repeat this operation a few times. The work will now appear as in Fig. 39.

Insert the point of the dubbing needle in the loop, and hold it taut, as in Fig. 40.

Remove from clip and pull silk home, as in

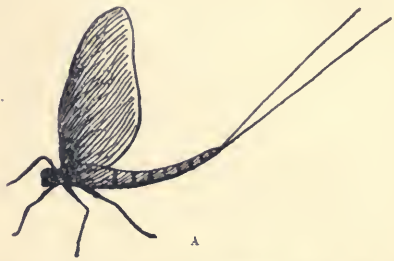
Fig. 41, and finally cut away as closely as possible the loose end of the tying silk. In fly dressing, four turns of the tying silk are sufficient to form the whip finish. When the fly is dressed to gut, the last turn of the whip finish should not reach the end of the shank. It will then be almost impossible for it to come undone, and, when the head of the fly is varnished, the abrupt ending of the outermost layer of silk lapping will not be noticeable.

Our fly is now complete, save for the varnishing of the head and the final adjustment of the fibres of the hackle and wings. Coachbuilders' copal varnish is the best kind to use, but it requires at least twenty-four hours to harden properly. Shellac varnish, made by dissolving orange shellac in rectified spirits of wine, dries almost instantaneously, and is excellent when the fly is wanted for immediate use. A tiny sable hair brush is perhaps the best thing with which to apply the varnish, but the dubbing needle or a wooden match pointed at the end will do very well as a makeshift.

In giving the fly its finishing touches, whether at the worktable or at the riverside, many amateurs are inclined to forget that it is intended to be a copy of a natural insect, rather than of a shop-made artificial. They should not endeavour to bring the hackle fibres into a compact bunch, in the same plane with the hook, but should rather spread them out, pointing fore and aft and on either side, as do the legs of the natural fly.

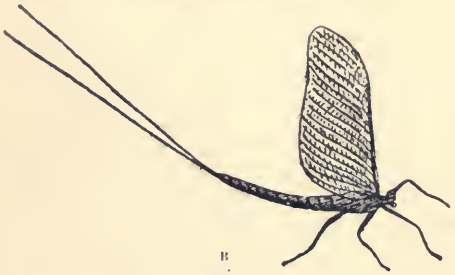
NOTE.—I append sketches of a dun (the last state but one of the upwing fly familiar to us all) and of a spinner (the complete and reproductive state of the same fly). The two sketches (A and B, Fig. 23) appearing on page 66 are unsatisfactory, as they do not illustrate the chief distinctive features, nor the correct proportions of duns and spinners.

The wings of a dun are more or less opaque, and are, for the most part, well imitated by the feathers usually employed. The wings of a spinner, on the contrary,



A

are, as a rule, like films of crystal, either *smooth* or *frosted* (as it were), to give an effect which might perhaps be described as "scaly sheeniness."



B

To the best of my judgment, the proportions important to fly dressers of these upwings appear somewhat as follows:

Of both dun and spinner, the length of the wings from base to tip is equal to the total length of head, thorax, and abdomen (body).

Of a dun, the length of the whisks is to the total length of head, thorax, and abdomen, as 7 to 6, approximately.

In a spinner this same ratio is, approximately, as 7 to 4.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW TO DRESS A WET FLY.

Method No. 2.

The following method of dressing a wet fly is that commonly used by professionals. Male hands, as a rule, dispense with the vice, holding the hook at the bend tightly between the left forefinger and thumb; but whether a vice be

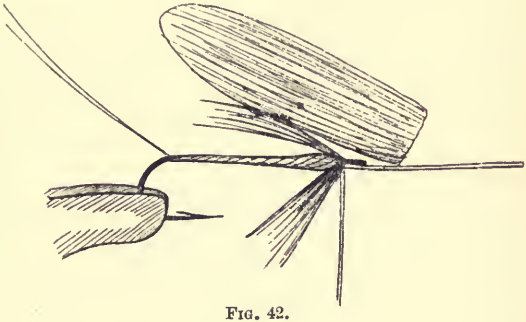


Fig. 42.

used or no, the method, in its essential details, is always the same.

I trust that I may safely use, from now on, a shorter and more technical style of description.

Commence as before, and continue till body is formed and secured. Tie in hackle as before by two turns towards the left, and clip away bare

stem. Wind two or three turns of hackle, the first in front of silk, the second behind, and the third (if there be any) in front. Fasten off hackle by two turns of silk towards the right. Clip away unwound tip. With dubbing needle



FIG. 43.

adjust hackle fibres, coaxing some of those which stand out above shank of hook to lie on either side. Press the fibres back. Prepare and tie in wings, and finish as before.

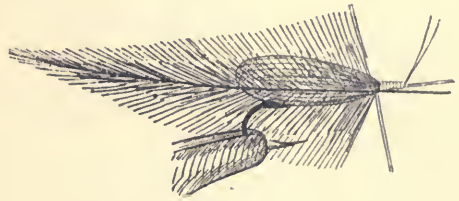


FIG. 44.

This same method is used in dressing down-wing flies, the hackle fibres left on the upper side of the shank after treatment with the dubbing needle should, in this case, be clipped away. The following methed, however, is to be preferred:

How to dress a Downwing.

Commence as before, but a little nearer the bend of hook, and, of course, omit whisks. Form body as before. Prepare and tie in wings. Clip

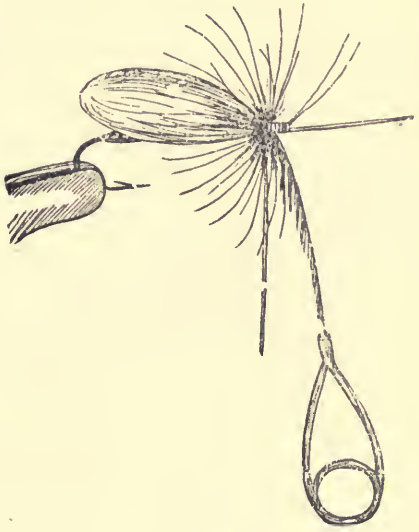


Fig. 45.

stumps and continue winding to end of shank, tying in feelers at head, as whisks were tied in, in preceding example. Wind back again to roots of wings as before. Split the two wings apart with the watchmaker's tweezers, and, taking the tip of either wing separately between the left forefinger

and thumb, draw it down a little on its own side of the shank. Now place the hackle in the position indicated in Fig. 43, and holding both wings, hackle, and the shank of the hook between left forefinger and thumb, fasten the wings in a

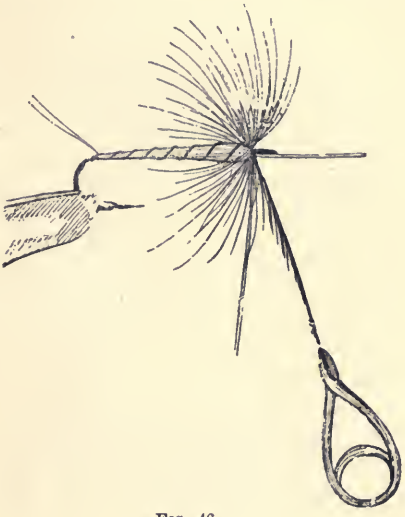


FIG. 46.

lie-down position, and tie in hackle by means of two turns of the tying silk towards the left.

Wind hackle and finish as before.

HOW TO MAKE A BUZZ-FLY.

Commence as in method No. 2, but leave less of the end of the shank bare. Continue as in method No. 2 till hackle is wound and secured.

Clip unused tip of hackle, and wind silk towards the right to end of shank. Wind back towards the left till hackle is reached, and then form whip finish as before.

How to Dress a Palmer.

The term palmer, as Ronalds tells us, applies primarily to the caterpillars of certain moths, notably to that of the Arctia caja, or garden tiger moth. They are well known in most districts under the name of woolly bears, and are frequently

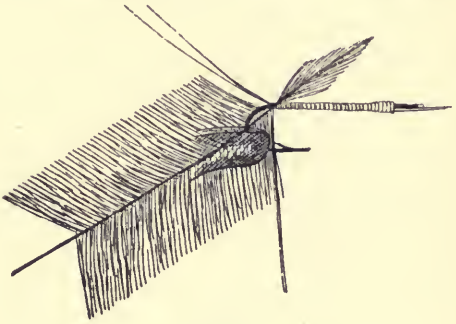


Fig. 47.

to be seen crawling on the footpath. They are said to make long wanderings, and hence their name, palmer being the term originally applied to pilgrims returned from the Holy Land in the days of the crusades. In fly dressing, however, the term palmer is used in a general way, to denote wingless artificials, hackled all down, or half-way down, the body. Mr. Francis Francis shows, I think, convincingly enough, that the natural palmer cannot be regarded as having a place among the staple foods of the trout, and that the

artificial imitation must therefore be relegated to the list of fancy patterns.

Ronalds and Foster seem to be of quite a different opinion, but we need not enter on the controversy here. The important fact for us is, that both the large woolly bears and the small palmers are often very killing lures.

The following is a good method of dressing a palmer: Lay on the silk and tie in gut as usual. Select a hackle, long in the quill and relatively

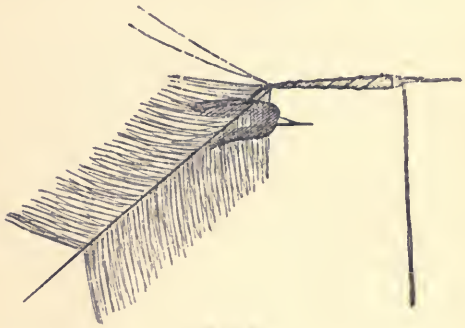


Fig. 48.

short in the fibre. Stroke back all its fibres except those at the point. Tie it in by the point, before tying in body material.

Tie in ribbing tinsel, if any, and body material. Wind tying silk to shoulder. Wind and fasten body material and ribbing tinsel.

Wind hackle, keeping it well on edge, in open spiral coils, close behind, and touching ribbing tinsel. Fasten down hackle with two turns of tying silk. Cut away stem of hackle.

If desired, another hackle may now be tied in,

and the fly finished as a buzz-fly, or both hackle and wings may be added as in No 2, thus making

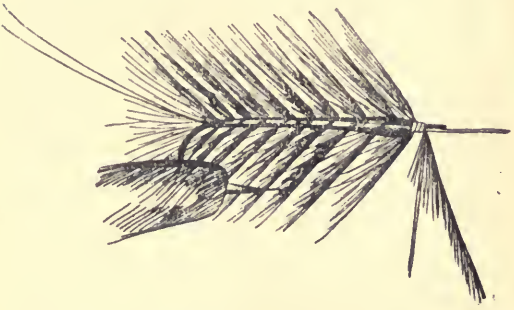


Fig. 49.

the fly what we may term a winged palmer. The third alternative, is, of course, to form the head and finish "right away."