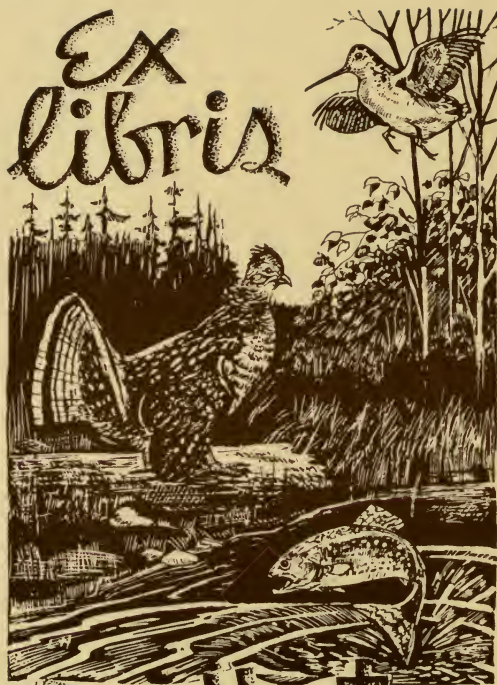




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AN ANGLER'S HOURS



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BY
H. T. SHERINGHAM
" ANGLING EDITOR OF 'THE FIELD'

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TO MY FRIEND

THE EDITOR

OF

“MACMILLAN'S MAGAZINE”

*Vir bonus et prudens versus reprehendet inanes,
Culpabit duros, incomptis adlinet atrum
Transverso calamo signum; ambitiosa recidet
Ornamenta; parum claris lucem dare coget;
Arguet ambigue dictum; mutanda notabit.*

HORACE, *Ars Poetica*.

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INTRODUCTORY

THERE are several reasons why this preface is not more apologetic than it is. Authors have for so many centuries been in such transports of glad apology, and have displayed so curious an ingenuity in expressing that diffident but hopeful emotion that, search as I will, I can happen on no set of phrases that looks original—even to myself. Yet I willingly concede the rightness of the apologetic mood in an author, and especially in this author, and I have large sympathy with those critics who will be unable to see the necessity for this volume. They will be unable to see it for a very proper reason — there is no necessity.

I cannot plead the urgency of friends for its production. One's friends, every man's friends, are nowadays too busy commencing author themselves to be solicitous in the preliminaries of alien publication. With the results it is different. There is much kindly and mutual reading; there is exchange of candid opinion; and quite a fortunate number of authors would be justified in stamping John Grolier's excellent motto, *et amicorum*, on the binding of their own works. This is all passing pleasant, but it robs me of a possible excuse.

Nor can I urge any high purpose which might at the first seeing lend dignity to the book and wrap it in some faint mist of necessity. There is practically no purpose and, I hope, no exhortation. Words of counsel may, I am afraid, be met with here and there. But, as a friend about to publish once said to me (and it is surely

a memorable saying), it is the hardest thing in the world for an angler to refrain from giving good advice. Angling, however, has an advantage over life in this respect: good advice has a definite place in its scheme of things, and is not always unwelcome. The man who can tell us where to fish and wherewith earns our thanks, and not, as would be the case if he suggested a change in habitation or deportment, our frown. Therefore I plead guilty to the words of counsel, and without claiming for them any value as counsel, I dare to hope that they are quite innocuous as words. So at the worst they should meet with indifference.

Even at the best they could not give any weight of necessity to the book—they are happily too few and unimportant for that—and I am confronted once more with the lack that will be plain to the critics. It might, perhaps, be possible to argue

that there is no necessity for any books beyond the greatest, that students of life should confine their reading to Shakespeare, that brothers of the angle should be well content with Walton. But argument is scarcely worth while, even if it had a chance of convincing. "I cannot argue, sir, but fish I must and will," is a sentiment not unworthy the consideration of most anglers, and it could well be adapted by those of them who are impelled to write of their pastime. In fact I hereby adapt it, and so an end to this matter of necessity.

Of late there has been great activity among the anglers who wield pens, and the *Bibliotheca Piscatoria* will soon need yet another supplement to keep pace with the growing shelves. But I have not heard or seen it suggested that anglers are yet weary of reading about their sport. If they are, one more volume, unpretentious

and unread, will not add very greatly to their weariness ; if they are not, I can only express the hope that it will not prove the last straw in a burden borne so far without complaint. Were I to formulate a wish as to the future of these sketches, it would be that my readers might find in them one tithe of the pleasure that I have had from so many books on angling. There are volumes which I read again and again with never-failing delight, and which are to me an intrinsic part of the contemplative man's recreation. The hours I have spent with them have been at least as enjoyable as the hours spent with the rod, which I have here endeavoured to describe. Should some other anglers catch here and there a memory or so, a murmur of streams, a gleam of sunshine, or a thrill of spring from my pages, I shall be well satisfied.

Six of these sketches appeared first in

The Field and five in *Macmillan's Magazine*, and all have been revised, and some, to a certain extent, rewritten. To the editors of these journals I beg to record my special thanks for allowing me to republish so considerable a portion of the book. For permission to reprint the two last papers I am indebted to the editors of *The Gentleman's Magazine* and *Temple Bar* respectively

H. T. S.

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I

AT DAWN OF DAY

DARK is the hour before the dawn, and surely never was dawn preceded by an hour darker than this. There is no sound of living thing within the silent rooms and long lonely passages, but one may hear the many strange voices with which an ancient house complains to itself in the silent hours. The beams groan and the panels creak, and ever and anon come the echoes of forgotten footsteps, that were perhaps trodden a century ago, and whose sound has been ever since wandering up and down the world unheard, until they have found their way back to their first home.

Of a truth never has an old house had better reason to complain. It has known the men of eight centuries, who have passed their little hurried lives in it, have uttered

their little hopes and aspirations, have wept their little tears, for a moment's space, and then have passed. It has known the strange cowled race who in the service of God spent their days and nights in fast and vigil, and whose solemn *Oremus* was the only sound that broke the stillness of the old grey walls. Others too it has known. Plumed and booted and spurred, the haughty noble has strutted his brief span through its courts and passages; the thrifty merchant has wakened the silence of night with the clink of gold, less perishable than himself in spite of all the philosophers. These and many more have added their little paragraphs to the history of the ancient house, and it groans anew as it considers the futility of man and his works. And now there are new inmates: little feet that dance and cause many an ache to its venerable timbers, little voices that shout and sing and bid unconscious defiance to destroying Time. And indeed for them Time seems to stand still, leaning on his scythe, as though he knew that before one thing he was powerless, the eternal spirit of youth. The old house has no love for youth. It groans and creaks

with renewed energy, and now and then summons the north wind to its aid and bangs its doors in loud discordant protest. But now the little feet and merry voices are still, for it is the hour before the dawn. Even the old house, as though it has protested enough, is sinking into slumber.

But lo, at the end of the passage appears a glimmer of light just sufficient to deepen the gloom. It approaches, and a dim figure seems to accompany it. What is it? Is it a Will-o'-the-Wisp imprisoned for its evil deeds by the monks of long ago? Is it that strange thing, a corpse-candle, that link with another world, whose appearance betokens that death has set his icy grip on one of them that are in the house? No, as it comes nearer it is evidently no more mystic thing than a bedroom-candle, and the figure that accompanies it is the figure of a man. A burglar, think you? It may be, for he moves most cautiously. But alas for his caution, a fearful clangour resounds through the house; the man, whatever he be, has dropped something which bids fair to have aroused all the sleepers. See, he stands motionless and hardly dares to breathe.

But no, all is quiet as before, and he regains courage, stooping to pick up his dropped property. What is it? It is nothing more romantic than a boot, of a large size truly, but still only a boot. And yet at this hour of the day a fallen boot resounds as loudly through the house as the beating of a drum; but the sleepers sleep on still. Slowly and carefully he picks his way down the broad staircase, crosses the hall, and opens a door under a low archway.

Let us follow him; if it be a burglar we must raise an alarm. Passing in through the doorway, we seem to be in a large room but faintly discovered by his little candle; but he has lighted the gas, and now we may observe him and his surroundings. If he be a burglar he is most quaintly attired, for as he stands in his stocking-feet he is evidently clad in shooting costume; a loose Norfolk jacket, under which we catch a glimpse of a woollen jersey, does not look like the raiment of a burglar. He seems to have been expected too, for on the table in the middle of the room is a fair white cloth, and on the cloth are the materials for a meal. There are the goodly proportions

of an uncut ham, a loaf of sweet white bread, a butter-dish, a teapot, cup and saucer, and other aids to breakfast. The man turns towards the fender, where stands a kettle on a small oil-stove. He lights the stove, and at this moment the clock on the mantelpiece strikes three. It still lacks nearly two hours to sunrise, and by the chinks of the shutters we can see that it is yet dark.

While the kettle is boiling let us glance round the room. It is not so large as we supposed, but it is very charming. The low ceiling displays two oak beams and a third which crosses them. The walls are panelled with dark oak, and on them hang a few pictures, mostly of sporting subjects; but not all, for over the broad fireplace hangs the Sistine Madonna, gazing as if with mild disapproval at the preparations for breakfast. There are many bookcases, too, with that friendly appearance which the soul loveth; but we may not linger among them, for the kettle has boiled and the man is already at his meal. Leaning against the loaf is a book, and he smiles as he reads, as if he loved it. Let us glance over his shoulder to see what it is that

charms him. The sentence on which his eye is fixed is this : " And in the morning about three or four of the clock, visit the water-side, but not too near, for they have a cunning watchman, and are watchful themselves too." A quaint old sentence out of a quaint old book, clad in a quaint old sheepskin jacket.

Now he has finished his breakfast, shut his book, and is already leaving the room. In the hall he unfastens the shutters of the glass door which opens on to the drive. Through the frosted panes comes in a faint grey light more ghostly than the former darkness ; but it is light, a twilight which gives promise of day. He sits him down on a chair, our friend, and puts on his boots and a stout pair of leathern gaiters. This done, he opens another door, passes through it, and returns laden with many things. On his back is a great creel, in one hand a bundle of fishing-rods, in the other a campstool and a basket, and a hat is on his head. And now, opening the glass door, he steps out into the drive, and we his companions step out with him unseen. A few instants he stands drinking in the pure morning air

in deep draughts, for by now morning it is, and we can see the outline of some of the nearer trees. Then he turns and walks down the drive to an ancient gateway, under which he passes and so out into the road. Following the road for some hundred yards, he turns to the right into a narrow lane which leads abruptly down hill. Here he has to pick his way carefully, for there are many loose stones underfoot, and the morning light is not yet strong enough to show him the dangers of his path. After he has gone about a quarter of a mile along the lane he comes to a gate on his left over which he climbs into a field, wherein are some sleepy bullocks who gaze at him with wondering eyes. A few yards farther and he is at the water-side.

A belt of white mist still hangs over the river, which flows beneath its level banks noiseless, deep, and strong. On this side grow rushes whose vivid green betokens that their roots abide in no black fetid mud, but in clean wholesome gravel. On the other side grow bulrushes, and where they are there is mud in plenty, cruel slimy mud that year by year claims its hecatomb of

victims from the flocks and herds that pasture among the river-meads. But our honest angler has nought to do with mud, and he knows right well that fishes love it not, when they may make their feeding-ground on good appetising gravel. He wastes no time, however, in inward contemplation, but strides along the bank until he comes to a little promontory of firm ground that juts out into the stream. Below this the water seems to repent of its unreasoning haste, and turns and creeps along the bank, as though it would retrace its course. This little bay or eddy is fringed with rushes, among which lies a tiny piece of paper, a casual waif borne hither by the breeze, a man would say. And yet 'tis not the work of nature but of art ; for last night there came one furtively with a dark lantern, who with unerring hand cast into the water at this self-same spot ten large balls compounded of rich bread, yielding bran, and easy clay, and finally placed the piece of paper where it is now plain to see. And he has come again in this twilight of the gods to reap the reward of his patient toils.

Let us see how he sets about it. First he places his camp-stool firmly some four feet from the water's edge. Then from the supplementary basket which he has brought he produces three balls like to those which he offered to the fishes on the previous night, only smaller. These he deftly drops into the stream, one close to the bank, the other two about eight feet out, just where the river hesitates in its course and then divides. Next, taking his rods and creel, he retires back into the meadow, to prepare for the attack. He unties the bundle of rods and takes out the handle of his landing-net, to which he fixes the net that lay in his creel. And this was wise in him ; we have known anglers so impatient to begin that they have forgotten to make ready their net, and so when that mighty fish came, whose advent they so eagerly awaited, they have seen him indeed and straightway lost him, which is the more bitter part.

Next he takes from its case a mighty rod whose joints are six and its length as many yards ; yet is it light, for it comes from a land where a generous sun makes the canes grow tall and straight and hollow withal.

To the butt of this he affixes a large wooden reel, on which is wound a line of fair white silk, which he swiftly passes through the rings; thereto he fastens a bottom-line of fine gut, on which is a large quill float (once reft from some lamenting swan), which he fixes ten feet from the hook. And now he arranges his lure. In his creel is a canvas bag full of rich moss, and in the moss are worms innumerable, both small and great. One of these he places on his hook, a large one, for it is a large hook, and then he takes the rod down to the water's edge. Very quietly he drops his line in at the outer edge of the eddy where just now he cast in his ground-bait. He knows that the water there is nine feet deep, and that the bullet which is on his line will be resting on the gravel while his bait is borne hither and thither by the ebb and flow. Resting this rod on the stalwart rushes, he takes another from the bundle and prepares it. Far other in kind is this—no more than twelve feet long, and so light that a midsummer fairy might use it with one hand, and so frail that it would not support the dead weight of even a little fish, and it has come from

far Japan. To it he fastens no reel, but a line of single hair on which is a tiny float with two small shots to balance it. Then he takes his seat on the camp-stool with his landing-net at his left hand and his creel beside him. On the hook of his second rod he moulds a piece of white paste, with no niggardly hand, for he is not minded to catch little fish, and drops it in not far from the bank. He rests this rod too on the rushes, and then he lights his pipe.

Meanwhile the light has been growing stronger and in the east a pale pink flush betokens that Phœbus has awakened out of sleep and has opened his eyes. Phœbus, like to erring mortals, cannot rise from his couch in a moment. First he opens one eye and then the other, and then he stretches himself, and lies for a while thinking that his course round the world is very weary, and that he would fain sleep a little longer; but even the gods must yield to the inexorable fates, and rise he must. To make him a bath he summons all the mists of earth and the morning dews; and see, even now the mist is quickly passing from off the river,—there is need of haste,

for it is a long journey to far Olympus. And then, when the god has bathed him and has quaffed his morning-cup of nectar, he puts on his raiment of gold with his golden bow and arrows, raises his head above the mountain-tops, and lo, it is full day.

Some men say one thing and some another, but we will always maintain that fishes seldom begin their breakfast before the sun has risen. Our friend has not yet had a bite ; but just as the sun's orb appears above the eastern hills his nearer float is slightly jerked. An instant, and it glides slowly beneath the surface. His hand is on the rod, and a gentle strike meets with a stubborn resistance. Then there is a glorious contest, not sudden nor dashing, but a battle of obstinacy and strength. The fish fights deep down and circles round and round, bending the little rod almost to the water. The angler can employ no force, for a single hair, even though it be the hair of beauty, can only draw to itself a resisting power by the subtlest of stratagem. Some two minutes the battle lasts, and then the circles grow shorter and shorter, the fish gradually comes to the surface, and we

catch a glimpse of a broad copper-coloured side. At last the fish is mastered, and the angler, changing his rod to the left hand, takes his net in the right. Now he rises and, stooping down over the rushes, dips the net under the fish and the battle is won. His pocket-scales tell us that the fish weighs two pounds and a half. Though it is a bream, which is not a very determined fighter, it is no small triumph to have landed so heavy a fish on a single hair. Our friend appears well pleased; but we do not grudge him his pleasure, for we know that ever in the track of joy follow sorrow and black care.

Our philosophy is proved, for scarce has he baited and re-set his line than his other float sinks into the depths. With hasty hand he strikes and another is hooked; but no, it is only a paltry little eel which has absorbed both worm and hook. Had its proportions been equal to its will, it would have swallowed line, rod, and angler too. It is evidently no welcome guest, and it is ten to one that the angler will be a hook the poorer. And so he is; but the eel's corpse is flung far away over the river, and

maledicatur resounds on the breeze. If we may adapt the words of the poet, "He had not fought him in vain, but in sorry plight was he"; for one eel, be it never so small, can make itself an intolerable burden to a man who holds that cleanliness is next to godliness. But he is not daunted; swiftly he repairs his damaged tackle and re-baits, not again with a worm, but with a piece of paste so large that one would think twelve fish in these degenerate days could scarcely swallow it.

It is not long before the little float again disappears, and the timely strike induces another battle. This time it is brisker, and the feeble rod is more than once in jeopardy. Cunning and patience, however, succeed, and the quarry is safely landed. This is no bream, but a fish whose ruddy fins, silver scales, and gold-flecked eyes bewray the roach. And truly he is a noble sight; a pound and a quarter is his weight, but his fighting power exceeds that of his cousin the bream who sought the death before him. Again the hook is baited and returned to the stream; and again, after no long interval, it darts under like lightning.

A strike, a rush, and then—alack, a shotless, hookless line is fluttering in the air! It is not every man, if indeed any, that can capture logger-headed chub on a single hair, because his rush is as the rush of a bull, and cannot be checked.

This line must be repaired; the other still lies untouched, for the bait is no meat for little fish, and great fish are slow and hard to entice. The hair-line is soon made whole again, but only to meet with fresh misfortune. The float disappears, and a fish is hooked. It moves deliberately about, much as though it were a log of wood suddenly instilled with life. Long the angler humours it and fondly hopes to have obtained the mastery, but presently the fish makes slowly but irresistibly for the middle of the river. Its opponent can only hold on, for he has no running line, and it avails him nothing. The line again parts, and he is desolate; for such are the ways of great bream. This is a sad misfortune, for, if we mistake not, he is now gone with bitter complainings to his kinsmen, and they will take warning and refrain from the deceitful feast. And indeed the angler catches

nothing for more than an hour, except it be one or two small roach, which are returned to the stream that they may attain greater weight and wisdom. Nevertheless he fishes on in patience, for the shoal of bream may come again, and it were pity to go home with but two fish to show for all his pains.

In the meantime there has been plenty to interest us. Far away down the river we saw a mighty bird that rose with much flapping of wings, and sailed away with its legs stretched out like a pennant behind it. That was a heron, who was breakfasting on the shallows below. Perchance some labourer going forth to his work disturbed him; perchance it was another angler, though anglers at this early hour are not common.

A little while ago there was a great commotion on the other side of the river. We saw many tiny fish leap out of the water in all directions, and in the midst of them was a turbulent wave caused by Master Perch, who was also breakfasting. Once, indeed, he came right across the river after some hapless bleak, and we saw him quite plainly. He even inspected our

angler's float, but concluded that it was not good to eat, and departed back to where the fish-fry live.

But see, what was it that came up to the surface some ten yards out, rolling mightily, and displaying the tip of a dark fin and a fragment of tail? That we believe to have been a great carp, for there are a few in the river; and our friend seems to think so too, for he takes up his big rod and proceeds to change the bait. He first takes off the hook, and selects another from his tackle-case, a small triangle with sharp bright points. From his creel he takes a little tin, and from the tin a little potato, of the sort that makes lamb and green peas a dish for a king. Then he threads the potato on to the hook with a small baiting-needle until the hook is quite hidden, which is the easier done because the potato has been boiled and is soft. With this new bait he casts forth his line, and it is not impossible that the carp may find it to his taste, for river-carp, though very cunning, may sometimes be deluded in the early morning.

And now his other float is gone again, and another bream comes to bank. After

this he is royally busy, and he catches seven, one after the other. That is the way of it, for bream stay not always in the same place, but rather wander up and down ; and when they come to where the angler is, then if he is adroit he may catch several ere the shoal has passed him. But of these seven none is so heavy as the first one, though two of them are a good two pounds apiece. And after the bream he catches some more roach, handsome fellows of nearly a pound.

All this while the potato has tranquilly offered its plump attractions in vain. But just now we thought we saw a slight movement of the float, such as a sudden gust of wind might cause. Yes, there it is again ; some fish is without doubt curiously examining the bait. And now the angler is placed on the horns of a dilemma. Suddenly his little float disappears : he strikes, and is fast in a good fish ; and at that moment his eye wanders off to the other float. Where is it ? He cannot see it anywhere. Without hesitating he moves the other rod to his left hand, and, seizing the big rod with his right, strikes hard. Now he is no longer in doubt as to where his float may

be, for, as he strikes, the rod is almost torn from his hand and the light check on the reel screams loudly as the line runs out. There is nothing for it ; he must abandon the other fish, whatever it be, and use all his energies for the big one. There is no doubt that it is a big one, for it has already got twenty yards of line out, and is making straight for the bulrushes on the other side.

The angler is up and along the bank in an instant, running down stream. Now he can get a cross strain on the fish, and only just in time, for two yards more and it would have reached its holt, and then, farewell to it. But he has turned it back into the middle of the river, and it fights doggedly in the deeps with now and then another dart for the bulrushes. The battle is long and fierce, but the fish is gradually weakening, and the angler is shortening his line. Then a dire misgiving seizes him : how is he to get it out ? The carp must be seven or eight pounds in weight, and his landing-net is not nearly big enough. But providence is on his side, for see, along the bank another angler is hastening to his aid. He has been pike fishing, and carries a great landing-net

which would hold a fellow of twenty pounds. At last the carp is brought close in to the bank, and the new-comer has it safe in the folds of his net. The spring-balance announces that it weighs seven pounds and three ounces. Its bronze armour gleams in the sun, and our friend thinks, as he surveys it, that he is a fortunate man. He is, indeed, for though the anglers in the river be many, yet they that capture the river-carp be very few. Some day that carp shall adorn his chamber, tricked out in a handsome case, and confessing by his superscription who killed him and how.

But time has meanwhile sped, and the angler bethinks him of a further breakfast, and packs up his tackle to go. The other fish, needless to say, has departed and taken with him most of the line. But that cannot disturb our friend's equanimity, for with fifteen fish, weighing nearly twenty-five pounds, he can go home with a quiet mind and be not ashamed to speak with his family in the gate. His shoulders will surely ache before he gets there, but that is as well, for unlimited prosperity is good for no man. And so let us leave him.

II

THE INVIOLEABLE SHADE

Still nursing the unconquerable hope,
Still clutching the inviolable shade . . .

I HAVE a dim memory of having read somewhere that Matthew Arnold was a fisherman in his lighter moments. Whether that be so or not, he could not have turned two lines more aptly to my purpose. For three full weeks have I been nursing the unconquerable hope ; for three full weeks have I been clutching the inviolable shade ; and now I hereby retract all that I have said upon the subject, and make solemn recantation of my heresies. Three short weeks ago I was to be numbered among the lumber's friends and apologists. I knew comparatively little of him, it is true, but that little was certainly to his advantage. The thought of him carried me back to the

rippling fords of Teme, where I first made his acquaintance with great pleasure and some profit, and I regarded him as one of the jewels in the angler's crown—not so bright, perhaps, as the trout, but by all means worthy of his setting. Now, however, I know him for the knave he is, and am become his enemy. And this is the manner of the conversion.

Over the wine-cup, or the modern drinking utensil which in these degenerate days has supplanted it, we were speaking of holidays. “There are far too many grayling there,” said the expert, insidiously, “and you'd get the tail-end of the trout fishing.”

I hesitated ; meditation had been busy with a certain unknown nook in Wessex, where the great roach are. But the expert went on persuasively : “There are some very big grayling there.”

He spoke of two-pound fish caught in the May-fly season and returned, that they might be taken again when in condition as three-pounders. He mentioned five brace as the kind of basket that ought to be the daily reward of painstaking effort, and finally he appealed to my sense of duty.

The trout were being shouldered out of the stream by their rivals, and it was incumbent on every honest man who had the good of the water at heart to do what in him lay to keep the stock of grayling within limits.

At last, after a little mental arithmetic (five brace a day for a week come to the considerable total of seventy fish, the weight being, of course, 140 lb.), I allowed myself to be convinced, and said that I would go and catch these fish. Could not the expert come too? But no, the expert was obliged to keep down the stock of grayling in another river, and therefore he feared he could not manage it.

It has since occurred to me that he did not reveal the whole of the matter. I have noticed that his fine catches of grayling always come from some other river, and I have a suspicion that he knows more of the inviolable shade than appeared from his conversation. But at the time I was quite satisfied with the results of the mental arithmetic, and after laying in a large stock of the numerous "fancies" and "terrors," whose varied brilliancy is warranted to kill grayling in any water or weather, I started for

the little Berkshire trout stream, to which I have so far rather vaguely alluded as "there," and in a few hours was standing by its side waving a particularly vivid "fancy" to and fro in the air, and nursing the unconquerable hope with great affection.

On the day of my arrival the trout rose, and I forgot all about keeping down the grayling, though I could see them in the water, and realised that the expert had not overstated their numbers or exaggerated their size more than is pardonable. In the evening, therefore, I found that I was short of the day's total of five brace by the total itself, though I had not done badly with the trout. I determined that this must not occur again; I had come down to catch grayling, and not trout, and grayling should be caught.

Yet, such is the value of good resolutions, the second day saw me again fishing assiduously for trout, which, by the way, seemed to like the gaudy fancies and terrors used as a kind of compromise with conscience; if I was not definitely fishing for grayling I was at least using grayling flies. And so the evening again came, bringing a deficit of five brace.

Plainly, I should have to have a really big day with the grayling to balance my accounts, and on the next morning I settled down to a shoal which was found rising on the edge of a long bank of weeds. They rose well for some hours, and I nursed my unconquerable hope, and cast diligently across a rather awkward breeze. But it presently began to dawn upon me that the undertaking was not quite so easy as I had imagined. Fancies and terrors were all tried in turn, and all discarded. The dark olive dun, which was on the water in fair quantities, failed to secure a rise. Black gnats, red quills, little Marryatts, sedges red and silver, the red tag itself, all seemed to be useless, and at last the unconquerable hope was, so to speak, put away into its cradle while I considered the problem.

Finally, a Wickham floated rather cynically over an obstinate fish and was taken. "At last!" I murmured, as I hurried down stream in obedience to the grayling's peremptory demand. A good fifty yards were covered, and I saw no more of him than his great back fin once. Evidently this was one of the two-pounders taken with the

May-fly and returned that he might be retaken as a three-pounder. But, alas! hardly had I decided on the inscription that should adorn his glass case when he stopped and shook himself, and the fly came away.

For a minute or two the cradle containing the unconquerable hope was in hazard of being kicked across the meadow, but calmer counsels prevailed, and I comforted myself with the thought that though I had lost a fish I had found the fly. The Wickham was to retrieve my fortunes, and to make up the fifteen brace which were now in arrears, for the grayling rise was over for the day. The Wickham would, however, have to work hard, I reflected, as I returned to my abode.

On the fourth day this inestimable fly did its best, and I actually caught a grayling of about a pound, and lost two others—a result not particularly gratifying, but lucky for the unconquerable hope, which was in some danger of being left in its cradle permanently.

It was on the fifth day that I saw a grayling a yard long—that, at least, is the length suggested by the unconquerable hope which

I was nursing, as it was early in the morning. The circumstance, however, prevented me from catching anything, for the fish in question kept me busily employed all day. I now lacked twenty-four and a half brace, and the Wickham refused to help me any more.

The sixth day saw another grayling in the basket. He was caught by accident, for he took the olive that was meant for a rising trout. The seventh day was somewhat notable. On that day the grayling a yard long rose at a black gnat which I offered him. I missed him, of course, and the week ended with a deficit of thirty-four brace.

In the evening of the seventh day I had an argument with the unconquerable hope. "If," it said, "you stay here long enough you will get another rise out of that yard-long grayling, and you may catch him." It added also, that grayling are well known to be uncertain fish. It was possible that any day might find them feeding madly. I should be sorry to have missed the carnival. I gave way, and decided to give them another week, and then the gales began.

Each day brought high wind and a sullen sky, and the whole week added two more small grayling to the catch. I did not get another rise from the grayling a yard long.

Of the infirmity of purpose which caused me to waste a third week in clutching the inviolable shade I do not care to speak. The gales continued, and I basketed a fish on each of the two worst days. The last three were ideal days for grayling, and the fish were rising all over the river at everything, apparently, except the artificial fly, which I used in all the ways known to me, both dry and wet, with less result than one would have thought possible—seven rises in all, including one short one from the grayling a yard long.

And so at the end of the three weeks I find myself 102 brace of grayling to the bad. Trout, indeed, I caught, but I did not seek for them. I wished to keep down the stock of grayling, and I have failed lamentably. Somehow the deficit must be made good. There has been some talk of a net, a stern proceeding which in the old days I deprecated. But now I shall be very happy to

lend a hand to the ropes, and the only thing that keeps my unconquerable hope alive is the possibility of being able to stamp on that grayling a yard long when he has been netted out onto the bank.

III

MAY-DAY ON THE EXE

“Six weeks every year among crag and heather,” is Charles Kingsley’s prescription for the Londoner’s holiday; and, all things considered, it is no bad one. If he is a comparatively free agent, he may apportion them more or less according to his pleasure. For my own part I incline to a fortnight in spring, the last week of April and the first of May, and the rest divided between August and September. This is, of course, only individual preference, and is inspired by the fact that I must have my spring trout-fishing even at the cost of suffocating in London during July.

There are many people who agree with me. About the middle of April you shall often see a contemplative person standing with his back to the busy throng and his

face to a fishing-tackle shop. If you are in a gloomy mood you may moralise at sight of him on the vanity of human wishes, and picture to yourself the horrid gnawing at the soul of the man, the regret for the holidays in past years never to be enjoyed again ; but if, on the other hand, you are cheerful and pleased with the world, you may look on him as a pretty picture of pleasant indecision, merely perplexed as to whether he will want two dozen large March browns or three dozen, and wondering whether the bushes are going to be as deadly to flies this year as they were last. I believe that this cheerful view is the right one to take, for if he cannot get his holiday your angler becomes morose and avoids tackle-shops and all that may remind him of what he is losing.

Yes, a man who gazes at the wares in a tackle-shop on a sunny day in April has certainly a fishing-expedition in prospect. It would be too terrible to imagine a poor wretch with the spring and the streams calling to him unable to obey the call. There is nothing more sacred, more inviolable, than this spring fishing ; it is one of the laws of Nature, and not the least important. Before

the angler would consent to give it up, he would turn highwayman and rob omnibuses in the Strand to procure funds, or blow up the Houses of Parliament and disorganise the kingdom to procure leisure. He must fish, in fact. If the shattered globe were falling to pieces about his ears he would be found hurrying off to his favourite stream, rod in hand, that he might perish there decently and in order—always provided, of course, that the lamentable event happened about the end of April. Against all reason, too, he must have his spring fishing. Tell him that the east wind blows constantly in April and May, that if he waits till the beginning of June he will be able to catch much finer and fatter trout with the May-fly in streams much nearer home ; it is all in vain ; he will shake his head, admit the force of your arguments, and say that he is going down to the West Country by the first train to-morrow.

Opinions differ as to which part of the country offers most attractions to the trout-fisher in spring. Many a tempting adviser would tell us to go north. By the negative process (than which is none more insidious),

Mr. Andrew Lang has almost made up my mind more than once to start for Clearburn Loch, for "there are trout in Clearburn." Here is his additional recommendation: "There are plenty in the loch, but you need not make the weary journey; they are not for you or me." The weary journey shall certainly be made one day, not of course that I want to prove Mr. Lang in the wrong, but because of the perversity of human nature, which insists on trying conclusions with fate, every man for himself. Moreover, there is always the chance that the trout of Clearburn may have changed their habits.

Then there is the great dry-fly school, which would inspire a man to cast the May-Day fly in southern Test or Itchen. There are patriotic Irishmen who have written witching words about their witching country, and whose descriptions of its trout-fishing are fully justified. The Principality also has its prophets; and there are good men and true who would go no farther than deep-bosomed Thames, for he holds out vague promises of monster trout to the man who seeks them with skill and patience. In short,

choice is manifold. But, after all, experience is the only safe guide.

I remember spending the whole of a spring day waiting for the rise by the side of Sprinkling Tarn, the most gloomy piece of water in Cumberland, that looks as if Nature had buried some monstrous crime beneath its dark water. Rumour ran that there were trout in it, many and good, and I waited patiently till dark, but never a fish rose, and to this day I know not if there are fish there. Therefore I cannot recommend it for trout, but if there be any man with an unduly good conceit of himself who is anxious to adjust his ideas, a few spring hours by Sprinkling Tarn would be just the thing for him. I know no piece of scenery so certain to make a man realise what a worm he is when taken out of his context. There are trout in the Sty Head Tarn on the pass a few hundred feet below, so after he has received his object-lesson and has humbled himself he can do some fishing there if he wishes.

But, though I love it well, I would not go to Cumberland for my May - Day. Rather do I hasten as fast as express train

can bear me to the ancient town of Taunton, and thence by a quaint simple-minded line (the forerunner of the switchback) to the other ancient town of Dulverton, and thence by road up the valley of the Exe to the prettiest village in Somersetshire. The wise man, when he gets to Dulverton, will send his luggage, indeed, by the dogcart that is waiting for him, but himself, for it is but three o'clock in the afternoon, will walk. He may, if he pleases, breast the opposite hill and plunge straight into the moor, so shall his journey be shorter in point of miles. But the man just escaped from London should acclimatise himself to Exmoor gradually; it is a little overpowering to step straight on to it from Paddington, and moreover, if it is his first visit, he may get lost.

Therefore let him take my advice and follow the road that runs by the Exe, not hurriedly as the earnest pedestrian, but leisurely as befits the man with a whole fortnight of spring before him. It is a friendly road, amiably winding, with just enough of undulation to make him glad that he goes, as he was meant to go, on his

two feet and not on two ridiculous wheels. Also there are soft mossy places for him to sit down upon with primroses and dog-violets for company, while he considers the wonderful young green which the bushes beside the road are timidly putting forth. And while he sits the yellow-hammers, and perhaps a squirrel, will come and look at him and give him friendly greeting, as do all things on Exmoor to him that comes in a right leisurely spirit. Above all, the Exe will talk to him from its bed below, and will explain that, though here near Dulverton it is a considerable river, nearly as big as its cousin Barle, and has its great weirs almost worthy of Severn, and in these weirs are the salmon, yet after he has gone a few miles up he will find it but a small stream, lively and clear as crystal, and ready to talk to him the whole of the rest of the way. Just here, however, it must leave him, because it has to go and attend to its weirs.

For about a mile the river and the road separate with the whole breadth of the valley between them. Afterwards, as the valley narrows they are never very far apart,

and sometimes they are so close that the bank of the road is also the bank of the river. Here our traveller can look down and see every pebble on the bottom of the stream, so clear is the water. But look as he may he cannot see what he is chiefly anxious to see—fish. The trout of a mountain stream to the eye accustomed to pavements are practically invisible, except in the deep still pools. On a chalk stream, with a little practice and with the sun at a proper angle, you can see every movement of the fish you are stalking; but in the mountain stream you have to fish in the hope that he is there. In the deep still pools, however, it is generally possible to see two or three elderly fish swimming about near the surface on the look-out for flies.

An elderly fish in the Exe is not a giant like his cousin of the Itchen. He attains his half-pound in weight and is proud of it, and the fisherman who catches him is proud too, for the Exe half-pounder compels respect both by reason of his scarcity and of his fighting powers. Never shall I forget the one that bolted down-stream with me as soon as he was hooked, forcing me

to splash after him for several minutes. I thought him a two-pound fish at the very least, and could hardly believe my eyes when he finally came to the net. If a brace of half-pounders is in one's basket at the end of a day's fishing it is matter for congratulation, and reason enough for displaying the catch to the passer-by. And yet there are big fish even in the Exe. There is, or was, one in a weir-pool which our friend passes, a fish that would not make an inconspicuous figure in the Thames. I have had a glimpse of him myself, and I thought he must be a salmon, but was assured that he was a trout. His dimensions and weight, if I gave them, would only be guesswork ; and as they might not be believed they shall not be given.

I can, however, testify to several fish in some of the big pools along the side of the road which must be well over two pounds, and that is, or ought to be, enough for the most greedy of fishermen—if he can catch them, for I believe them to be beyond the power of man's flies. I have spent many fruitless days trying for them, and have even been so unorthodox as to tempt them

with a dry fly, but have never yet induced one of them to rise. A local expert once told me that he had caught a trout of four pounds in one of these pools some years ago; but somehow his methods of narrative were not convincing.

Even the small fish of the Exe are not to be caught by throwing flies at them. Upstream must you fish, and hard must you work, to basket two dozen, and the finest tackle is none too fine. It is one of my theories that they are harder to catch than the trout of the Barle over in the next valley, and that the reason of it is as follows. A great deal of the bed of the Barle is composed of rocks covered with dark water-moss, and the result is that the water of the Barle is in general darker than that of the Exe, in which there is comparatively little of this moss, and so the trout are more readily taken in with artificial flies. But whenever you do come across a patch of this moss in the Exe, fish over it very carefully, and it is odds that your basket will be the better for it.

But while we have been gossiping our light-hearted traveller has walked a good

distance up the valley. He has refreshed himself with excellent ale (to the right-minded man on his holiday there is no such thing as beer) at a wayside hostelry; he has gulped in the spring in great draughts, and is fully conscious how good a thing it is to be alive and out of London. Now he is leaning over a little bridge contemplating Quarme Water. The Quarme is a lively little stream which runs into the Exe at the point where two valleys meet, for here the Exe turns a sharp corner and comes out of a valley to the left. The Quarme, too, is famous for the quality of its trout, but it is difficult to fish, being much overgrown. Both Exe and Quarme are preserved, but our fisherman has obtained leave to fish as much water as he can cover in a fortnight, for the hospitality of Exmoor will stand even that most searching of tests, the request for permission.

From this point it is but a short two miles to the prettiest village in Somersetshire, our friend's destination, where is the prettiest inn in the world and the warmest welcome. Here the wayfarer finds a solid tea ready for him, and he is quick to per-

ceive, and to take advantage of, the dish of cream which is one of its attractions. This cream would lead the most dyspeptic into error, but many things may be done and eaten in Exmoor air which in London would cause sorrow of heart and body. After his tea he goes out and strolls up the village street and lays out a small sum in procuring a licence to fish, for even when you have leave from the owners of the water you must further arm yourself with a licence, which is a thing worth knowing. Ignorance of this necessity has led well-known people into error and fines. The licence obtained, his steps turn naturally and unbidden in the direction of the principal bridge (the prettiest village in Somerset has several bridges), and there he meditates with his elbows on the parapet and his pipe going sweetly to his satisfaction.

The bridge-habit comes as easily to, and sits as gracefully upon, the angler as the oldest inhabitant. Indeed, unless he is at times given to meditating on bridges, I doubt if he is a true angler at all. In Somersetshire they know how to build bridges, with well-dispositioned parapets,

neither so high that one cannot lean on them in comfort and see into the pool below, nor so low that one is in danger of falling over on a dark night. One of the reasons why the angler almost always leans over a bridge, if there is one, is that the said bridge generally gives shelter to the largest trout in the neighbourhood. If he is a well-known trout and respected by the inhabitants he may be seen lying a foot or so below the bridge waiting for the worms which are thrown to him from time to time by his admirers. There is a bridge over another river, the midland Lambourn, below which are half a dozen trout constantly in waiting for pellets of bread, and I have there seen as many stalwart anglers, each with his slice of bread, solemnly making votive offerings.

And so our friend leans over the bridge and watches the patriarch, and speculates as to what will be the best way of putting a fly over him on some future occasion without arousing his suspicions. The patriarch also watches the man ; he knows quite well that the people of his village do not wear hats like that, and though he is not alarmed he is on the alert for anything that may

befall. A wax match is the first thing ; it falls into the river with a hiss, and the fish makes a dash at it. But he does not actually touch it, for it is only your very young trout that can be deluded in this way ; he will try to eat almost anything that falls into the water. After the wax match has been refused the man on the bridge is sufficiently interested to desire worms, and he gets a bit of stick and digs about in the grass at the side of the road, a tiresome process, which only results in one worm after much digging. This worm he duly throws in to the patriarch, and a surprising thing happens : as soon as the worm touches the water another patriarch, even bigger than the first (he looks a good pound) darts out from under the bridge and seizes the offering while the first looks respectfully, albeit hungrily, on. If the man on the bridge is a stranger to the neighbourhood, his first thought will be that the size of the Exe trout has been much underrated, and he will be pleased. Later on he will be disappointed. But if he has been here before he will know those patriarchs well and will not be misled.

After he has loitered on the bridge and strolled about the village for an hour or so, he makes his way back to the inn and unpacks his portmanteau. Then he has his supper, reads a few chapters of *Lorna Doone* before a comfortable fire, for on Exmoor it is chilly at night, even at the end of April, chats for half an hour with his landlord about Exmoor ponies, and other peaceful things, and so goes to bed, where he falls asleep, lulled by the murmur of the brook that runs under his window.

Eight o'clock is quite early enough for a Londoner to breakfast on May-Day down here, for it has been almost, if not quite, freezing in the night, and the trout will not begin to rise much before ten. A brace of five-ounce trout and a generous dish of eggs and bacon, followed by plenty of home-made bread and jam and cream, are none too much for the appetite of a man who has slept a whole night in Exmoor air and has splashed in a tub of Exmoor water after it. Moreover, he must go on the strength of that meat practically the whole day, because he is anxious to lighten his equipment as much as possible, and his packet of

sandwiches will be but small. There is nothing that increases a man's benevolence so much as the feeling that he has eaten a huge breakfast, and that every particle of it agrees with him ; and as our friend stands before the door of the inn clad in Norfolk jacket, knickerbockers, and shooting boots, waiting for his sandwiches, he is in case to exclaim with Tolstoy's pilgrim, "My blessing fall on this fair world." In a short time the sandwiches are ready and he puts on his armour, his light creel over his shoulder, his landing-net slung to his belt, and his sombrero hat on his head. His nine-foot split-cane rod is already fitted up, his cast has been soaking while he was at breakfast, and he is ready to begin to fish so soon as he reaches the water-side.

As this is his first day's fishing he proposes to go up-stream and fish from the bank, taking it more or less easily. Later on, when he is in better training, he will begin to fish some miles lower down, or will drive across the moor and fish the Barle, and then he will wade ; but to-day he does not want to get over-tired, and he can fish most of the best pools up-stream without

wading. If he is well advised he will not begin close to the village, but will take the lane leading uphill past the church, and drop down through the copse on to the river about half a mile higher up.

Here, in a slight bend, there is the most delightful pool possible. The stream turns a sudden corner round an old willow, and finds itself six feet deep before it has time to realise it; and thus for two-thirds of the pool there is that slight nebulosity of deep water running swiftly which really gives the honest angler a chance. As a rule, where Exe runs deep it delights to pretend that it is a sheet of glass, which is not good for fishing. At the tail of this pool Nature has providently put a convenient bush standing a little back from the water, and round this a man may very comfortably throw his flies without being seen. To this bush our friend goes, cautiously stooping, until he is kneeling behind it.

On his cast are three flies. He uses a large March brown with yellow twist as leader, a small hare's ear as first dropper and a blue upright as second dropper, this last in deference to public opinion in the

West Country, which considers no cast complete without it. One is loth to go against public opinion, but in the Exe I have caught four fish with the March brown and three with the hare's ear to every one with the local fly,—not that this is conclusive, far from it; it is merely related as an individual experience. It has seemed to me that the large March brown kills best when there is a good head of water, and the smallest pattern of hare's ear when the river is very fine, while the blue upright has served me well in a sudden evening rise.

To-day, however, the river is running a good height, for April has done its share of weeping, and though there may be a touch of east in the wind, its main characteristic is south. The sun is shining, but light clouds here and there give promise of intervals of shade; and altogether it is as good a day for fishing as a reasonable being could desire. Our friend makes the first cast of the season from behind the bush with a due sense of the gravity of the occasion. The first cast of the year is undoubtedly a solemn thing, and it has been the subject of

much previous meditation ; in his London chambers he has wasted many valuable minutes in considering exactly how he should make it and with what result. The result has seldom been much under a pound. But anticipation, as a rule, has no connection with fact. In this instance the first cast is not entirely successful. The leader reaches the water, it is true, but it is surrounded with what some angling authority calls "beautiful but useless" coils of gut, and, of course, no fish rises at so strange a phenomenon.

At the third cast, however, he is more fortunate, and there is a flash of yellow in the neighbourhood of the second dropper. He strikes and just pricks the fish, or so it seems. But as he makes his next cast he hears a sharp crack in the air behind him. "Struck too hard," he murmurs, and pulls his line in hand-over-hand to see the extent of the damage. As he suspected, the second dropper is gone, but he consoles himself with the thought that he is a little out of practice, and that he must expect to strike off a few flies on the first day. He opens his fly-book and takes out another blue upright, moistening the gut in his mouth

before he fastens it to his cast. Here let it be said that for the Exe and streams like it I prefer flies tied on gut to eyed flies, at any rate for droppers. On the whole they are easier to put on, and I fancy that for wet-fly fishing they make less disturbance in the water and have more hooking power, which is specially important in the Exe, where on nine days out of ten the trout are inclined to rise short.

His new dropper fastened, our friend begins to fish again. In a few casts he gets another rise, and this time he succeeds in hooking his fish fairly. It shows splendid sport, and its first rush might be that of a pound fish. However, there are no dangerous stumps in the pool, and it is not long before he lands it in his net, a lovely little trout of some six ounces. Where half-pounders are the limit of one's aspirations a fish of six ounces is a decidedly good beginning, and our angler is pleased with himself. As he unhooks his first capture he notices that the hook has fastened in the corner of its mouth, and wonders whether there is anything in the old Exmoor adage that all the fish caught in a day's fishing

will be hooked exactly in the same spot. Out of this pool he catches two more fish, one under three ounces (the limit of size which he sets himself), and therefore returned, the other about a quarter of a pound. Then he gets up from his knees and makes his way along the bank to the next pool, well content with his first quarter of an hour.

It is wiser on the whole in this part of the river to reserve one's energies for the best bits of water, and not to attempt to fish everywhere. Indiscriminate fishing pays, perhaps, if the trout are really on the feed, but if they are not it is sheer waste of labour to fish the long shallows. By keeping to the pools one catches more fish in the end, and their average size is bigger. Even in the pools, except after sunset, only the sharp water or ripple at the head and tail will yield much result; but, given favourable conditions, each pool should be good for five or six rises, out of which one may hook one or two fish according to one's skill and luck. Sometimes it happens that in one pool as many as four sizeable fish will be brought to basket; then for the next

mile there may not be a rise, and then one may come upon another pool where they are on the feed. At times the Exe trout appear to be curiously local in their habits; I have known them to be on the feed in every other half mile of water, while in the intermediate stretches they would not look at anything.

Our friend passes on from pool to pool, mostly getting fish too small to keep, but now and then one over the limit, until he reaches a bridge about a mile and a half from the village. Here he is on the same side as the road, which crosses the river at this point, and as the stream is shallow and not very promising he walks along the road until he shall come to some more pools. Presently he finds himself, as it were, in the middle of the moor, which rises straight up from the road.

Hitherto the hill behind him has been covered with fields and trees, but now all signs of cultivation cease for a while, and there stretches out before him a vast expanse of heather and fern with here and there a point of rock standing boldly out, and here and there a patch of vivid green which

shows that some spring is trickling down through the moss towards the river. If a man were to step unwarily into that little patch of green he would sink in above his knees, and possibly deeper. I know no more sudden contrast anywhere: one is in the midst of a scene of cultivation and the work of men's hands; one turns a corner, and is suddenly face to face with the moor rising hundreds of feet above. The moor! There is no word to describe it; its fascination, for all who have fallen under its spell, cannot be expressed by tongue or pen. A man can only gaze and marvel. As a cloud passes over the sun, and the purple slopes grow dark and threatening, he looks hurriedly over his shoulder, expecting to see a thunder-cloud coming up the valley, for when the moor frowns there is but one thing that can match it in awfulness, the great steel-grey cloud that comes up against the wind and rumbles in its path. But there is no thunder-cloud there, and as he turns round relieved the sun reappears and he finds the moor smiling once more. Of all colours purple is the most mysterious, and here it is in its every shade, from the

bright hue of monarchy to the darkest of all, that which is so near black that one can imagine Death wearing it on some high festival,—for he too is a monarch. And in the foreground close by, in vivid contrast to all those purples, to the green of the swamp and the grey of the rock, there dances up and down in the sunlight a little yellow butterfly.

The first sight of the moor to a man newly come out of London is a thing to linger over, a thing to think about, and so our fisherman decides to have his lunch here reclining at his ease on the mossy bank with his back against a comfortable rock, and to take his fill of gazing while he eats. First, though, for he is first a fisherman and afterwards a seer of sights, he empties his basket out on the grass and counts his catch. Ten fish are they, and they average a quarter of a pound, a very fair morning's work for an unambitious man, while for beauty of form and colour they can vie with the moor itself. A marvellous variety of colour too they can show—bright carmine, rich black, and clear brown and yellow,—while the main note is a fine gold, a colour

for which the Exe fish are notable beyond all of my experience. One of them, however, is very different from his fellows—a long, thin, black fish who had his abode in a patch of the dark water-moss, of which I have spoken as being found more in the Barle than in the bright Exe.

As he lies at his ease enjoying his well-earned lunch, thoughts of the beauteous Lorna and of the “girt Jan Ridd” come to him; he would give a king’s ransom to see the one and shake the other by the hand; for no one who has the least of poetry in him, lying here by the side of Exe with the moor all round, not ten miles away from the parish of Oare, could doubt for an instant of their reality, or could feel surprised to see the great yeoman appear suddenly over the brow of the hill riding back from Dulverton on his good but uncertain-tempered horse, Kickums, with his long Spanish gun slung behind him. A big Doone or two would also not come amiss, even though they should question the validity of the angler’s card of permission to fish, or, so little do they reckon of the law, of his licence itself. He is a man of peace, and he would not

attempt to argue the matter with the butt-end of his fishing-pole. Rather would he give them fair words, and asseverate how much he admired them from what he had heard of them. So might he escape, for even a Doone must be susceptible to flattery.

Thus he meditates for some half-hour, but no one comes to disturb his solitude, and at last he remembers that, though the children of the great novelist's fancy will never come to gladden his eyes, yet are there still trout in the Exe, and while there are trout life is worth living. So he rises and takes up his rod again. For the next mile or two the fishing is very good. The river winds like a serpent, and at every bend there is a pool of surpassing merit. But our friend finds that the trout are not rising so well as they were in the morning, and by five o'clock he has only added four to his basket. One of them, however, is a good half-pounder, and he fully sustained the reputation of his race. There is a chain of little pools, four in number, where the river turns twice in a few yards, and he took the March brown at the head of the top one.

It was evidently not his real home, for he rushed down-stream at once to the bottom pool until he came to the old stump in the middle of it. He was under it before the angler, in hot pursuit, could realise the danger. That is why his feet are wet ; he had to wade in up to his knees to grub about under the stump with the handle of his landing-net so that he might dislodge the fish. By a miracle he succeeded, and he is as proud of that half-pounder in his basket as he has ever been of a trout in his life. In a pool higher up another good fish which he hooked did the same thing, and though the angler waded in even deeper and poked even more vigorously it got off and he was left lamenting. That fish, he maintains, was fully three-quarters of a pound ; but it is the angler's privilege to estimate the weight of the fish he did not catch.

At the hour at which the feeble folk in cities are drinking nerve-destroying tea (not but that our friend would accept and even thank you for a cup at this moment, for he has worked hard), he is standing on another bridge about four miles from his starting-point, debating whether he shall work on

farther up-stream or turn back again and go over the same water, fishing the pools he has marked as the best. He decides to take the latter course, as he does not feel fresh enough to do justice to new water, but thinks he is still man enough to take some trout out of pools he knows during the evening-rise. Therefore he retraces his steps. He does not fish down-stream, it is contrary to all his theories, but he walks down to the bottom of each pool, keeping well away from the river, and fishes up it again.

And now he gets good proof of the sad fact that a man cannot go on fishing for ever, for though the trout appear to be rising well enough he misses fish after fish. This may be partly due to the deceptiveness of the evening-rise, but it is still more due to the fact that he is tired, and that his hand has in great measure lost its cunning. The uninitiated do not in the least realise what hard work fishing in a mountain stream is, even when one is not wading ; hence come their somewhat contemptuous opinions of fishermen, for they class them all together, whether they fish for trout or roach, as lazy

people who stand by a river and catch rheumatism. But, tired though he is, our angler perseveres, and between the bridges he manages to catch another half-dozen worth keeping; and thus, when he stands on the first bridge again, he has twenty trout to his credit, besides a good many small ones which he returned.

By this time it is nearly a quarter past seven, and now arises the question whether he shall go on fishing, for he has nearly another hour of daylight, or whether he shall stroll quietly home along the road. By fishing on he might make his basket up to two dozen, but then, again, he might not. No, on the whole he thinks he will not fish any more. For the sake of a fish or two it is not worth while tiring himself out and losing flies, and possibly temper. He has every reason to be satisfied with his catch, and besides his dinner will be ready for him at a quarter to eight, and he has forgotten the sandwiches as if they had never been. So he leaves the river and follows the road. Another day, when he finds himself with but five fish to show at the same hour, he will doubtless go on desperately so long as

he can see, but to-day he can afford the consolations of philosophy.

His May-Day has brought him the two great blessings of mankind, health and happiness, and a third, which partakes of the nature of both, the blissful consciousness that, no matter how large a dinner he eats (and he means to eat as large a dinner as he can), he deserves it and will not regret it. The old Greek poet has warned us to call no man happy until he is dead ; but as we watch this man walking gently back to the village with the shadows lengthening from the great hills on either side, his face as contented as a man's can be, we feel that the poet was wrong, and that here is one at least to whom a long May-Day has been pure gold without alloy.

IV

A BRACE OF TENCH

THE cooing of doves, the hum of bees, and all the pageantry of high summer seem somehow to be recalled by the word "tench." Perhaps it is that this fish invites meditation. During the hours, or it may be days, that he has to wait for a bite, even the most unobservant angler can hardly fail to take note of his surroundings. And so the doves and the bees gradually compel a drowsy recognition ; the wonderful lights and shades of a July noon first catch and then arrest the eye ; a discovery is made that the sky glows with the blue of the south, and that the water is a marvellous and transparent brown ; moreover, the insect world moves to and fro, a constant procession of unending activity, and yonder emerald dragon-fly is hovering above the crimson

cork that marks the whereabouts of the angler's neglected worm.

A cork float with crimson tip is very necessary to proper angling for tench ; it supplies the one touch of colour that is wanting in the landscape, and it is a satisfying thing to look upon. A severely practical mind might argue that it is as visible to the fish as to the fisherman, and might suggest a fragment of porcupine quill as being less ostentatious. But, however one regards it, tench fishing is a lengthy occupation, and must be approached with leisurely mind. The sordid yearning for bites should not be put in the balance against artistic effect. Besides, it may be said of tench more emphatically than of most other fish : if they are going to feed they are, and if they are not they most certainly are not. As a rule they are not, and their feelings are therefore not so important as the angler's.

In this canal, at any rate, their feelings receive but the scantest consideration. Evening by evening the villagers come forth, each armed with a bean-pole, to which are attached a stout window cord, the bung of a beer-cask, and a huge hook on the stoutest

gimp. A lobworm is affixed to the hook and flung with much force and splashing into some little opening among the weeds, where it remains until night draws down her veil. The villagers sit in a contemplative row under this ancient grey wall, which once enclosed a grange fortified against unquiet times. But now all is peace, and the cooing of doves in the garden trees has replaced the clash of arms. About once a week the villagers have a bite; a bean-pole is lifted by stalwart arms, and a two-pound tench is summarily brought to bank; but for the most part evening's solemn stillness is undisturbed by rude conflict. This is not surprising. Apart from the uncompromising nature of the tackle, there are other reasons against success. The canal is here one solid mass of weed. No barge has passed this way for years, and so there is no object in keeping the channel clear in the summer. If the angler wishes to fish, he must make a clear space for himself with the end of his bean-pole. Hence it comes that the villagers angle in two feet of water not more than six feet away from the bank, while the tench live secure out of reach.

The angler from foreign parts (all parts beyond the market-town are foreign here) has realised these things, and has endeavoured to strike out a new line for himself. A punt and a long-handled rake were borrowed a day or two ago, and a round pool was cleared among the weeds some twelve yards from the bank, where the water was a good five feet in depth. Further, a narrow channel was cleared between this pool and the bank. Then ground-bait, in the shape of innumerable fragments of lobworm, was thrown in, and the tench were left to recover from their surprise, and to find out what a blessing it is to have plenty of good food with plenty of room to eat it in.

The clock on the old tower is just striking four in the grey dawn when he comes to prove the value of his theories. There is no row of villagers here now ; indeed the world is only just awake, and the earliest of them is hardly rubbing the sleep from his eyes. This is no cause for regret ; solitude and tench fishing should be synonymous. Though summer is at its hottest, it is now none too warm, and the dew hangs heavy on the long grass that fringes the

canal. But it is just in this cool morning hour, this period of refreshment, that the tench are apt to be on the feed. The angler is equipped with a rod of twenty feet made of East India cane; it is heavier than a roach pole, but it is also much stronger, and was primarily designed for bream fishing in a very deep river. A light but strong silk running-line and a cast of undrawn gut, with one small bullet to cock the float, and a No. 7 hook complete the outfit.

The little pool that was cleared yesterday stands out in marked contrast to the weedy surface round it, and it is plainly beyond the reach of any bean-pole. With this long rod, however, the bait can be swung out easily enough, and a small lobworm is soon lying on the bottom of the canal ready for the first fish. It is well in tench fishing to have eighteen inches of gut below the bullet, and to plumb the depth so that the bullet itself just touches the bottom. When the float is nicely cocked in the middle of the pool, the angler rests his rod on its pegs, throws a few fragments of worm in round the float, and then takes his seat on the camp-stool that he has brought, and com-

poses himself to wait. Tench are not quite so difficult to entice as carp, but where they run big they are not to be hurried. In this canal they run very big ; three-pounders are occasionally caught by the villagers, and much heavier ones are often seen, and it is these bigger ones that the angler desires ; so he is content to wait until breakfast-time if need be ; it will not be the first occasion.

Presently the sun begins to rise away behind the old wall and the grove of chestnut trees, and the morning grey gradually softens into a kind of luminous opal. Then the angler sees the first sign of fish ; a greenish shadow passes close under the bank almost at his feet. That is a tench of about two pounds, and it seems to have gone out by the artificial channel into the pool ; perhaps it will find and attack the worm waiting there. Anyhow, it is a good sign ; it shows that the fish are moving. From time to time a kind of " plop " may be heard in the middle of the weeds, which also indicates that the tench are breakfasting, but for a long time the bait remains untouched. At last, just when the angler

is deliberating whether it would not be wise to put on a fresh worm, the float moves a little uneasily. Then there is a pause, and it looks as if the fish had left the bait. But no, the float stirs again, once, twice, and then begins to sail slowly off.

The angler picks up his rod without hurry, for it is wise to give a tench plenty of time, and strikes gently. There is no mistake about the fish now, and the rod bends handsomely to the encounter. The tench fights very gamely, and does all it knows to bury itself in the weeds round the little pool ; but the tackle is strong, and a little extra strain stops it short of them at each rush. The fish plays deep and with great power, but there is no mad plunge such as a trout would give, and at length it is drawn through the channel within reach of the net, and safely landed. It looks very handsome in the morning light, with its armour of tiny scales gleaming in dusky gold, and it weighs a full two and a half pounds.

A nice fish, but not one of the big ones, and so the hook is re-baited and swung out again without loss of time. Then follows

another period of inaction, during which the sun gathers power and height, and gives promise of another piping-hot day. About half-past six the float stirs again, and presently glides off as it did before. The angler strikes and is fast in a second tench. But this time there is no holding the fish, which moves irresistibly across the pool into the weeds opposite. The line is kept tight in the hope of bringing it out again, but it soon becomes apparent either that the tench is curiously inactive or that, in some way understood by fish but never intelligible to men, it has transferred the hook from its mouth to the toughest piece of weed it can find. And so it proves. Much pulling in different directions has no result, and at last the hook-link breaks.

That fish, the angler reflects ruefully, as he puts on a new hook, was undoubtedly a four-pounder at the least. The strain he applied must have turned anything smaller, and it is doubtful whether another big one will bite, for the sun is now on the water. However, there is still an hour and a half before breakfast, so the float and a new hook are swung out once more. Oddly enough,

there is a bite at once, and a tench of about the same size as the first is soon in the net, and ultimately in the basket. But this is the end of the morning's sport, and for fully an hour the bait lies absolutely unheeded, and at last the angler winds in his line and departs. His bag of fish is not remarkable, and three bites in four hours and a half do not sound exciting ; but he has acquired a noble appetite, and is by no means dissatisfied. Other mornings there are, and plenty of them, when he will not get a fish at all. And again (for such is the glorious uncertainty of tench) there may come a day when he must get assistance to carry home his catch.

V

THE FLY-FISHER'S AFTERMATH

“THE May-fly goes out, summer comes in, and trout-fishing is over.” This was the strong statement made to me the other day by a friend who was somewhat disappointed at the poor results which had attended his efforts on a noted dry-fly water. I upbraided him for being a pessimist, and a not strictly truthful one, to boot ; but, though I would be the last to admit it to his face, I am by no means sure that there is not a good deal of justice in his observation. I am not myself so far gone in pessimism as to assert that trout-fishing is altogether over, but the hammer of adversity has impressed me with the fact that the glory of it is departed.

The progress of the trout-fisher's year is not unlike that of courtship. The trout is as capricious as any maid, now hot, now

cold, now kind, now disdainful, never to be depended on until its capture is an accomplished fact, and, as the convenient Irishman would say, not always then, for there are such things as unfastened creels, and rotten landing-nets, and even unretentive hands. One might pursue the illustration a little further. Let us say that the angler has had the privilege of an introduction to the trout on some West Country stream in March. If it leads to even so much as acquaintanceship, and recollection at the next meeting, he may consider himself fortunate, for there is a certain vile east wind which commonly blows in March, and is most biting to all young things, love among the rest. However, now and then towards the end of the month he will find that his intimacy is progressing, for even an east wind will not blow for ever, and when it is not blowing sport is always possible.

As he angles on into April he will meet with still more success, and by the end of the month he may almost dare to call it friendship. I am not speaking of the past most miserable April, when the wind blew steadily, mercilessly, and unceasingly from

the east.¹ All through May he may venture to use more and more the privileges of a friend, and on the first day of June he may seek for his opportunity. He will find it very soon afterwards, on a day when he reaches the river, and finds that the May-fly is really up, the river boiling with hungry trout, and the air alive with equally hungry swallows. The chances are that he will need no encouragement then, but if he should, let the settling of a May-fly on his nose be a signal for putting it to the issue. If after that he does not win his suit, write him down a blunderer and unworthy to succeed.

It is an open question which is the happier, the lover at the supreme moment of affirmative, or the fisherman when he sees his May-fly taken at the first cast by a fish that seems to disturb the whole river by its size and eagerness. To avoid controversy let it be said that they are equally happy. On this summit of the good things of life, however, I must pause, for the pursuance of

¹ This sentence was written some years ago, but it seems to have acquired some of the qualities of a permanent truth. April is a month sadly changed for the worse.

the illustration down the other side might prove distressing to love's young dream, and I would shatter no ideals. It has, in fact, sorrowfully to be confessed that in fishing at least "the great too much," as Shakespeare feelingly calls it, induces satiety in the fish if not in the man. And I have no hesitation in speaking of the May-fly as too much; viewed from any aspect it deserves the censure. The fish eat too much; they eat too quickly; and they are too full afterwards. Indeed, one might almost say that the angler catches too many. There is nothing in the least admirable about the pride which many men take in being able to say that on Friday last they took five dozen fish, weighing anything they care to put them at, or best omitting the weight, as Christopher North in the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*. "A hundred and thirty in one day in Loch Awe, James, as I hope to be saved—not one of them under——" And the candid Shepherd puts in the details for him: "A dizzen pun'—and two-thirds o' them aboon't. A'thegither a ton." With growing candour he elaborates a little story for himself wherein he figures as the captor of some

sixty-three dozen trout in one day, "a cartfu'—the kintra-folk thought it was a cartfu' o' herrins."

But this is digression. I admit that it is a pleasant thing to have a good basket of fish, but an inordinate basket does not materially add to the angler's satisfaction, and it does materially injure the stream on which he fishes. Many good fly-fishermen have a private limit of size, below which they never retain a fish, and this is an excellent method of being sure of not taking too many, though for different streams it is necessary to fix a different standard. It would naturally be absurd to return everything under a pound in the West Country, for instance, where a fish of that weight is a great rarity ; but in such rivers as the Kennet a pound and a half would not be too high a limit, at any rate in the May-fly season. And, as a matter of fact, on some waters it is possible to take as many fish as one can carry with the May-fly. I have known one rod on the Teme to catch over two dozen trout up to two pounds and a half, and none of them under a pound, in one day, but that is somewhat exceptional.

At any rate, the fact remains that, given a good rise of the May-fly, a moderately skilful angler is practically certain to take a good basket of fish on almost any water.

It is natural that after so large a banquet as is provided for them by the short-lived insect the trout should not feed so well as they did before it, and that the angler should consequently fare worse ; and it is also natural that he should grow somewhat weary of the ill luck which is usual in July and August. By *usual* I do not mean to say invariable, for, of course, fish may be caught on the most hopeless days ; but in these two months empty baskets are sure to be frequent, and the sport on the whole poor.

The general fisherman will not complain at the behaviour of the trout in the dog-days, for he has his bottom rod to keep him employed ; and there is really no reason for the fly-fisher to complain either, if he follows the example of his fellow-angler and directs his energies to the capture of other kinds of fish, which provide excellent sport to the fly, and are in their several ways just as interesting to fish for as trout.

I think that angling writers have never

yet done sufficient justice to the pleasure of fly-fishing for coarse fish. Many of them describe it in detail with full instructions, but they all seem to regard it as something inferior and subordinate to trout-fishing, whereas, in my opinion, it is an entirely separate branch of the art and entitled to quite as much respect. It has, moreover, the advantage of being at its best when trout-fishing is at its worst ; and it has yet another advantage over trout-fishing in that it is less practised and yet far more easily obtained. I have often wondered why so few fly-fishermen take it seriously. There must be many busy men who, able only to take their holiday in July and August, rush away to Wales or Devonshire for fly-fishing. They get little sport—as is to be expected in rivers which are probably low, and which have been fished hard and often in the spring months—and they are disappointed. Were they to apply their skill to the despised coarse fish, their sport would almost certainly be quite good enough to satisfy them.

The coarse fish that take a fly best are roach, rudd, dace, and chub, in an ascending

scale of merit. Of the two first I will say but little. Roach take a fly, as a rule, in very hot weather (oddly enough a friend of mine once caught several roach in the Hampshire Avon with a dry fly in *February*), and most of the remarks which I shall have to make on dace will apply to them.

Rudd are not very widely distributed over England, but where they are found (principally in the rivers and broads of the Eastern Counties, and in the tidal pools of the south coast) they give splendid sport to the fly, as they are bold risers and plucky fighters. They grow to a considerable size too ; fish of two pounds or more are not uncommon in some waters, while three-pounders are not unknown. A Norfolk rudd once smashed a fly-rod for me in a way suggestive of a five-pound trout. But the scales were not wanted.

Dace and chub will best repay the trouble of the fly-fisher. One or other of them is found in nearly every river in England, and in most they are both common. However, they require to be fished for in somewhat different ways, for though a chub may take

a dace-fly and *vice versa*, it is best to aim specially at one or the other and to use different sorts of tackle.

Dace do not grow to a great size ; a fish of a pound is an uncommonly large one, and though I have heard of dace of a pound and a half, I suspend judgment until I have actually seen them. My own aspirations (at present unrealised) do not go beyond the pound. Fish up to three-quarters of a pound, however, are fairly common in some rivers, notably the Colne, the Kennet, the Dorsetshire Stour, and some of the tributaries of the Great Ouse. The Cam is famous among anglers, first for the size and beauty of its dace, and next because of the town to which it gives its name, though the great unthinking world would possibly reverse the order.

I have also seen very large dace in the Test, the Wylye, and one or two other famous trout streams. The small size of the dace is no adequate criterion of its fighting power. In my opinion a dace of half a pound will fight as well as a grayling of the same size, and that is as much as to say as well as need be. Some one will no

doubt hurl Cotton at me here : “ a grayling, who is one of the deadest-hearted fishes in the world, and the bigger he is, the more easily taken.” This looks as if Cotton had only fished for the grayling in the trout season, when it is in poor condition, though he certainly does say later that it is a winter fish. However this may be, I mean that the dace fights uncommonly well, and on fine tackle takes a good deal of landing.

There is one point in connection with this fish on which most of the writers on angling seem to me to speak without duly weighing their words. They advise the young angler to practise fly-fishing for dace as an excellent initiation into the more difficult art of trout-fishing. Here I confess myself at variance with them, for it is my experience that, whether with wet or dry fly, dace are far more difficult to catch than trout. This is due to the lightning rapidity with which they rise, seize the fly, and let it go again, and also to their too frequent habit of rising short. If a man fishes much for short-rising dace, he will find that when he turns to trout his tendency will be to strike much too quickly. One *can* strike

too quickly for trout, but for dace one can hardly strike quickly enough. Hence I do not consider dace-fishing as very useful practice for trout, except, of course, in so far as any sort of fly-fishing teaches a man how to throw a good line.

One ought perhaps to say a few words with regard to tackle. The rod which I like as well as any for dace-fishing is a cheap American split-cane. It throws a good enough line, is very light, and is pliant enough to obviate the natural tendency to strike too hard, which accompanies one's frantic efforts to strike instantaneously. But this is only private prejudice. As a matter of fact any fly-rod does well enough for dace, so it be very light and not too stiff. The reel-line should be tapered, and not too heavy for the rod ; with the American cane one can use a very light line even more or less across the wind. But the essential thing in dace-fishing is that the gut cast should be tapered as fine as possible ; by *possible* I mean as fine as the lightness of the angler's hand will permit. A man who cannot get out of the habit of striking hard loses both time and trouble in fishing too fine, as

the chances are that he will find himself continuously putting on new flies in place of those which he has whipped or struck off. But those who can use the finest tackle will catch most fish. With regard to flies, they must be small, but it does not very much matter what pattern one uses if the fish are rising. It is a mistake to carry too many varieties, as it leads to the difficulty of making up one's mind. If I were restricted to half a dozen patterns, I should choose the Coachman, black gnat, Wickham, red tag, Brunton's fancy, and soldier palmer. But this again is only private prejudice; there are many other flies equally good.

We next come to the question of where and how to fish. Dace are usually on shallows in summer, and it is there that most will be caught, but in some rivers there are few shallows and the fish are in deep water. In the latter case it is no use fishing for them unless they can be seen rising, and even then they will only take a dry fly as a rule. On the shallows a wet fly is often as good as a dry one, sometimes better; if there is much wind it is decidedly better. Taking dace-fishing all in all, however, my

experience is that the dry fly proves killing to the largest fish, and is moreover easier to fish with, as a dace rises at it more visibly, and the angler stands a better chance of striking in time. Sometimes dace may be caught with fly even in mid-winter. A warm, sunny day seems to tempt them to rise. But I have only tried with dry fly then.

How to use the dry fly, and the various recipes for anointing both fly and reel-line to make them float, are amply set forth in many handbooks which will give the ignorant and curious full instructions as to how to succeed both with wet and dry fly. For the former method let the novice take note of the advice that he will there find about adding a fragment of kid glove to the tip of his fly. He will find it invaluable. There are such things as gentles, too, but they are unpleasant to handle and they whip off. Finally, in recommending the dace to the notice of fly-fishers, I cannot praise him more highly than by saying that I would as lief fish for him in rivers where he is large and abundant as for the trout of any mountain stream.

Before beginning to speak of the chub, I will own to a further private prejudice, strongly in his favour. Therefore it is pain and grief to me to read the undeserved reproaches that are cast at him by all manner of fishermen. Even that most charming writer, "The Amateur Angler," whose nature it is to speak well of all men, fish, and things, confesses that he has never caught a chub, and if I read aright I do not detect in him any desire to do so. But he regards him from the point of view of the dinner-table, and that explains his attitude.¹ Yet I maintain that a fish is not to be proved, basely like a mere pudding, from the eating; and even if it must be so I would not dismiss the chub without some attempt at vindication.

I remember once catching a most lovely trout, lovely that is in point of condition and colour. It was cooked; it cut a seductive pink; but its savour was of foul mud, and I had to breakfast on something else. Yet this trout lived on a shallow of the fairest gravel, and the water that rippled over it was pure crystal. On the other

¹ Since this was written "The Amateur Angler" has made the chub honourable and delightful amends.

hand, I can remember eating some chub caught in a deep muddy river, which, in comparison with this deceptive trout, were delicious. To be strictly honest, I will admit that this happened on a camping-out expedition when provisions were running low, and thus it was practically a case of chub or nothing. Even that, however, does not detract from the fact that those chub were eatable. The matter must be left there; many a case has been ruined by over-elaboration.

It is surprising what a number of angling-writers appear to have one eye consistently fixed on the larder, and how few of them see anything worthy of admiration in the chub with the other eye. Some, however, have spoken well of him, Dame Juliana Berners for one. "The chevyn," says that learned, if somewhat apocryphal, lady, "is a stately fish, and his head is a dainty morsel. There is no fish so strongly enamored with scales on the body." A stately fish is the very name for him; when he comes out of the water in August with his red fins, and great silver scales deepening into golden brown on the back, he looks truly a broad,

strong, stately fish. His shape is not so graceful as that of a trout, but it is suggestive of enormous strength. The difference between them is as the difference between a cart-horse and a hunter. The hunter is much more active and much quicker, but the cart-horse has more pulling-power. The chub may not be quite as strong as a cart-horse, but he can pull hard enough when hooked to make his capture a matter of grievous uncertainty. He grows to a considerable size. One may justly expect to catch chub of three pounds in most rivers which contain them, and one can *see* much bigger ones.

I know of several rivers where on any sunny day in August chub of four and five pounds may be seen basking on the top of the water. The Great Ouse is full of big chub, and in the neighbourhood of St. Ives, where much of the river is free, many really large ones are caught every summer. The Thames, too, is a splendid river for them; it seems to be much better than it was, for Robert Blakey ("Palmer Hackle, Esq."), who wrote in the middle of the last century, chronicled the capture of a four-pound chub

in the Thames in 1844 as a remarkable occurrence. Even more remarkable, however, seems the conduct of the fish : " He was a very strong, active fish, shot across the river like an arrow on feeling himself hooked, and fought well for a full hour before he could be got out of the water. He was caught with a common gut line ; and therefore required considerable indulgence before he could be overcome." Considerable indulgence indeed ! An hour ! Chub may be larger nowadays, but they appear to have sacrificed quality to size. But this is again digression, and by an odious comparison I run the risk of belittling a favourite fish, who is still really an excellent fighter, especially if hooked near a bed of weeds or the roots of a tree.

To turn now to the tackle which is required for chub-fishing with a fly. By far the best sport may be obtained with a very light rod and very fine tackle, but it is only possible to use them under certain conditions. I remember a spot on the Severn near the small town of Tewkesbury which I used to fish for many years. There is a stretch of about four hundred yards of shallow water

just below the junction of a branch of the Avon with the Severn. It could not technically be described as a shallow, as it is from three to five feet deep, but it is considerably shallower than the rest of the river in that neighbourhood. In this piece of water there always used to be, and no doubt still are, great numbers of chub which were generally on the rise. It could be fished either from the bank or from a boat, and it was possible to use very light tackle, as there were neither trees nor weeds, and playing a fish was perfectly straightforward. The chub did not run very large, but, averaging from three-quarters of a pound to two pounds and a half, they gave magnificent sport on finest drawn gut and a five-ounce rod. This would apply to any similar piece of water, but unfortunately such spots are rare except on the Severn. Most rivers abound in natural obstacles, and it is necessary to use strong tackle for that reason.

For general use against the chub I should recommend the dry-fly fisher's outfit, a powerful split-cane rod of from ten to eleven feet with a heavy tapered reel-line

forty yards in length. With this combination it is possible to cast a long line with wonderful accuracy, and also to hold a heavy fish which is trying to make for weeds or roots. The gut-cast should also be tapered, but not too much, as the fly which is to be attached to it is heavy and liable to whip off. Chub do not seem to mind how thick the tackle is if the gut and fly are all that they see. With regard to flies, different rivers have their own patterns, but I know of one fly which will kill on any river, and that is Charles Kingsley's favourite, the alder. It should be dressed lake-trout size and should have a kid tail. It may be classed as another of my prejudices if I say that a man really needs to use no other pattern ; but of course there are other excellent flies. Big black, red, and soldier palmers, bluebottle, Zulu, Francis, Coachman, all kill, and kill well. It is also worth noting that on a very rough and stormy day chub will sometimes take a large white moth when they will not look at anything else, and this is also the case in the rough water below a weir. All chub-flies are improved by the addition of a kid tail.

The tackle ready, the next point is to consider where and how to fish for chub. On a strange river the experienced fisherman will first look for a mill-pool or weir-pool, next for the mouths of tributary streams, ditches, and backwaters, and lastly for rows of trees along the bank. These places are the natural homes of chub because they all ensure an abundant supply of food. I myself always make for the nearest backwater in the daytime, if it is possible and permissible to fish it, and for the weir-pool or mill-pool in the evening. In the ordinary river it is to be presumed that the biggest fish of all will be in the mill-pool because of the grain and flour which come from the mill. Some mills stop working about six in the evening, and then is the time to see what a rise of chub really means. It is almost as exciting as a rise of trout at the May-fly, but, as Sir Edward Grey says in his delightful book, the look of the evening rise is, alas, the best part of it. I do not know why it is, but the mill-pool chub has always been to me harder to catch than any other; perhaps he is too well fed. However, one is sure to get a

few fish in any mill-pool when the rise is on.

Evening fishing is quite straightforward. One puts on one or two flies and simply casts at the spot where one imagines the fish to be. If one is casting on the shallows below a weir the flies may be worked salmon-fashion, that is to say, cast straight across the river and allowed to work down and across stream. If one is fishing in the open river, they should be cast under the opposite bank and drawn slowly away from it. Very often a river must be fished from a boat, but the principle is the same: the fly has to move slowly across the spot where the fish are.

The principal difficulty in this sort of fishing is striking at the right moment. It is a great mistake to strike in a hurry. I know some first-rate trout-fishermen who, when they first fished for chub, failed sadly because they struck much too quickly. The stately fish requires to be treated in a stately manner, and one must strike with pomp and circumstance. Sometimes a sort of wave may be seen following the fly; this means that the chub has spied it from a

distance and is coming after it ; it does not mean that the fish has already risen. The trout-fisher, whose experience has taught him to strike at any movement of the water, does so when he sees this wave, but the chub-fisher draws his fly steadily on in front of the wave until he feels or sees his line tighten. Then he knows that the chub has really taken the fly, and that he may strike. Of course it sometimes happens that the fly falls just above the chub's nose, and then he will rise as quickly as a trout and may be struck at once ; but more often he will follow it for some distance before he takes it. In rough water one often sees neither wave nor rise, but a little practice makes it possible to tell with certainty from the tightening of the line when a fish has taken the fly. A chub will often hold an artificial fly in his mouth for a long time before he discovers his mistake.

So much for the straightforward method of chub-fishing in the evening. We now come to fishing for them in the daytime, which is to my mind far more fascinating as well as more difficult. The hotter and finer the day the more I am pleased, and herein

lies much of the fascination. A real summer's day is the most perfect thing conceivable, but I know of no other branch of the sport of fishing to which it is suitable. On a day when the cows are standing in the stream, middle-deep, when the air is heavy with the scent of river-thyme and vibrating with heat and the hum of bees, let the angler clothe himself in grey flannel and a cricket-shirt and cover his head with the broadest-brimmed, saddest-hued hat he possesses, and then make his way down to the river about ten of the clock. Let him take no boat,—a boat on such a day is worse than useless,—but let him go afoot along the river-bank. Now he must display what powers of scouting he possesses, for he must take advantage of every inch of cover that is to be found, and must be ready to kneel and crawl and even to go like the serpent of Scripture.

In small rivers there is usually plenty of cover in the shape of bushes, and in large ones there are often fringes of rushes and reeds behind which a man may stand seeing and yet unseen. Let us suppose that the angler has found his bit of cover, and is standing

behind a clump of reeds which come about up to his chin. His first action is to peer very carefully over them ; he sees that there is a sort of still pool just at his feet, formed by a surrounding belt of weeds. If the chub in the river are at all right-minded, there will be a fish of size and importance basking on the surface of that little pool just as surely as I am writing these words.

Having seen his chub it becomes somewhat a matter of chance. If the chub has not seen his head, if he can flick his fly just in front of its nose, if it does not see his rod as he does so, if he hooks it when it rises, as granting the other contingencies it certainly will, and if when he has hooked it he can keep it out of the weeds and land it through the reeds, that chub is his. But it sounds easier than it is. As a rule the chub will see his head, or his rod, and will disappear at once. Very often the angler will strike too quickly and jerk the fly out of its mouth ; for it is a thing to test the strongest nerves to watch a big fish taking a fly, and to make sure of not missing it through excitement. Then again, beds of reeds or rushes are excellent cover, but they are bad

landing-stages. I have often had to put my whole trust in Providence, grasp the line, and pull. It is worth remembering that a line will in an emergency stand an immense strain; if it will not, it is a bad line and not to be fished with.

Of course the chub will not always be lying under the angler's own bank. Very often he will see a dark shape lying in the middle of the river, or under the opposite bank. The farther away the fish is, the easier it is to approach it. Sometimes it is lying very far off indeed, in fact out of reach of the ordinary cast. It can then be sometimes reached by what is called shooting the line, that is to say, by getting out as much as one can in the ordinary way, and then keeping an extra yard or two of slack line in the left hand which is released when the line is nearly extended. It is possible to cast several yards more in this manner.

The angler will thus work his way along the bank, stalking every fish he sees, and catching one here and there. By being subtle as the serpent and working very hard, there is no reason why he should not get several brace of big fish, and that on a hot

August day ought to satisfy any one. I remember once filling a big creel as full as it would hold on such a day in a little backwater about a mile long. In size it was no more than a brook, but every hole displayed two or three chub lying on the surface. The backwater possessed an invaluable series of bushes along its banks, and by creeping from bush to bush I could catch a chub in every few yards. The fish fought as well as trout, and I got broken up several times by their getting round stumps and under roots. I have never enjoyed a day more. Oddly enough, though I have fished that backwater several times since I have hardly caught anything there, which is probably due to the fact that I have never again been fortunate enough to go there on a really hot day. This, among other reasons, has brought me to the conclusion that the hotter the weather the better it is for stalking chub.

This mode of fishing naturally recalls the methods of dry-fly fishing for trout. It is not necessary to fish so fine, and it does not much matter whether the fly be dry or wet (sometimes the dry fly works wonders with

chub, but as a rule they will take the wet fly equally well), but it is even more difficult to stalk a chub than a trout, and the fish caught are on the whole larger. Add to this that chub may be taken readily on a day when trout will not look at anything, and here is a branch of sport ready to one's hand which it is impossible to despise. The ordinary evening fishing for chub from a boat, when all one has to do is to hook and play the fish, is easy enough; but to catch them in the way described, in clear water under a broiling sun, requires quite as much skill as any form of fishing, and the man who catches his five brace may justifiably take pride in his achievement. I commend the sport to any brother anglers who have not yet tried it; and if their success be proportionate to my good wishes they will not complain.

VI

A FEBRUARY PIKE

So terrible was he, said one, that when he left his lair the river retreated before him, fleeing impetuously over its banks and taking refuge in the water-meadows ; so ravenous was he, said another, that moor-hens and ducks shunned the spot, herons dared venture no nearer than half a mile, and even an otter had been seen in the grey of dawn hastening away with every sign of consternation in its countenance. The great pike of the previous year, said a third with conspicuous candour, weighed the better part of nineteen pounds ; but even that creditable magnitude had not secured for it untroubled repose, for the unhappy fish had lived in a state of constant panic, ever dreading the time when it should be its turn to be devoured.

Only death indeed, intimated the candid

one, had resolved its doubts, and that barely, for its nineteen-pound struggles had been misinterpreted as the seductions of a wee timorous bait. The monster had come forth from the depths to take advantage of the situation, and had only been driven off by the heroism of angler and keeper, who would not submit tamely to the insolence that regarded nineteen pounds of hard-earned pike as no better than four ounces of dace. Therefore they repelled the giant with shoutings and splashings, landed their nineteen-pounder, and took it away to the taxidermist; in fact, if evidence of the story were needed, the fish might now be seen in a glass case with gold letters on it.

These Gargantuan fables were, even to an intelligence enfeebled by recent influenza, obviously but the persiflage of the club, the imaginative flights that every honest angler takes from time to time into the unknown. Nevertheless, they chimed in wonderfully with the convalescent mood that suggested a holiday and a pike or so to end the season, and next day I put myself with my tackle into a cab, and then into an express train, little dreaming that I was about to enjoy

the only week of spring weather that graced the year 1903, insinuated by a stroke of pleasing humour into the middle of February, where none but I could find it. When, an hour and a half afterwards, I got out at the station for which I was bound, the sun shone and the air was like wine, the wine of the South with the chill taken off. And when, yet an hour later, I reached the river bank, I sat on a stile, reflected that the world is indeed good, and looked round for May-flies.

But, be the sun never so warm and an overcoat never so embarrassing, it is not given to mortal angler to see May-flies on the Kennet in February ; if it were they would be vain, and a salted dace was more appropriate to the season. There was no wind, but the river was of good height and colour, so the chance of a fish or two was not so bad. It remained a chance, however, for neither by spinning nor trolling with snap-tackle was a run gained in the whole length of water at my disposal, though it must be confessed that I did not overwork myself. I was a convalescent, after all, conscience admitted, and had a perfect right

to enjoy this miraculous gift of spring as I would. The keeper, who appeared with the frugal mid-day repast, was politely of the same opinion, but there was a small pike in the adjacent brook, and he would esteem it a favour if it could be removed, as it harried his trout and vexed his soul. To be brief, it was removed, and it weighed three pounds and a half. This was the only fish that greeted the spring on the first day.

The second day was like unto the first, and every whit as perfect—more perfect in fact, for the keeper had procured some live baits, and the salted dace could be discarded. His mind was not, however, quite free from care, for it appeared that there was another small pike in the adjacent brook, which harried his trout and vexed his soul hardly less than the first. This also was removed with the help of a gudgeon on a paternoster, and it weighed two pounds and a quarter; but the Kennet yielded nothing, though the keeper, cheered by slaughter, talked in somewhat Gargantuan strain of a big pike seen occasionally by himself and others. Asked if this fish had been known to cause floods,

eat ducks, moor-hens, and herons, alarm otters, and wrestle with anglers for a live bait weighing nineteen pounds, he confessed that these accounts bore the impress of exaggeration; the fish he meant would be somewhere about sixteen, and it lay just opposite the second hatch-hole in the middle field. This exactitude of detail made the fish seem a possibility, but neither spinning nor live-baiting induced him to move, and the second day ended with little done, but much enjoyed.

On the third day there was a soft vernal air after a crisp, frosty night, and I awoke to the joyful consciousness that I was fully restored to health. Sunshine had been too much even for the notorious after-effects of influenza, and there was now no reason why I should not fish as though I meant to catch something. The masters of the gentle art inform us that good intentions are not enough of themselves to bring about success; in these days of over-fishing one must also use science and fine tackle. I pondered over the matter during breakfast, and afterwards looked through my tackle-box for a trace that should satisfy the requirements of science

and the remarkable weather. Eventually I picked out a rather fine Thames trout trace of single gut, soaked it, and tested it up to a dead weight of five pounds. To match it there was a flight of live-bait hooks tied on similar gut, and I observed to myself that any moderately skilful angler ought to be able to land anything with such excellent material.

Then in a state of considerable scientific elation I went off to the river, to find it the least bit ruffled by the breeze, and very suitable for the testing of my theories. I began with a live dace on float tackle, casting it out almost to the other side of the river and allowing it to swim down-stream, while I kept pace with it along the bank. And, sure enough, as it reached the spot pointed out by the keeper there was a check, the float went under, and a vigorous strike just revealed the fact that the fish was a heavy one before the trace parted at an upper knot.

Then was it borne in upon me that the sun was too hot, the breeze too mild, the season out of joint, and science a wicked delusion. Had there been a snoring breeze,

had the white waves been heaving high, as even a convalescent has a right to expect when fishing for pike in February, had the still small voice of science been drowned by a conflict of the elements, I should never have thought of using a ridiculous gut trace (on which Izaak Walton himself could scarce have landed a minnow), and that sixteen-pounder would have been mine. Besides, I was no longer convalescent, and boisterous weather was what I needed—was no less than my due. In a word, my meditations were supremely ungrateful, and I was justly punished when the wind dropped altogether, February became more like May than ever, and not another fish moved for the rest of the day.

On the morrow, however, there was a real south-westerly wind and a fine ripple on the water. Pike, I reflected, as I mounted an eight-inch dace on a Pennell spinning-flight, have been known to run at a bait twice in a day, twice even in an hour, almost, even, twice in a minute. It was therefore logical to expect the sixteen-pounder that morning. Yet, by the time a third of the water had been carefully spun

over without a touch, the edge of enthusiasm was to some extent blunted, and the keeper, who appeared about mid-day, was asked somewhat petulantly to explain the wrong-headedness of the fish under his charge. This, of course, he could not do, but, willing enough to tell of past triumphs, he furbished up the tale of the nineteen-pounder anew, and dwelt on the labour of carrying it home, accompanied as it was by two others of fourteen pounds and thirteen pounds respectively, both caught by the lucky fisherman on the same day.

Having done his duty by the triumphs of history he departed, and somewhat cheered I returned to my spinning, determined to give the sixteen-pounder another chance. Opposite the hatch-hole of which mention has been made, the river was deep and some thirty yards wide, but a few yards above was a shelving shallow. Spinning across and up-stream I thoroughly searched the deep water and worked up towards the shallow, making casts of about thirty-five yards. At last, in some four feet of water, I had that blessed sensation only obtained in spinning for pike, the sensation that some-

thing which suggests a stout post has come into collision with the bait, but something that sends a thrill up the line and obviously is not a post. In a second or two it became obvious that the fish was a heavy one, and I cast a hurried glance over my shoulder to see if the keeper was still in sight. He was—a microscopic figure in the distance—and I whistled with all my breath to recall him. Fortunately the sound carried, the retreating figure stopped, recognised the signal of distress, and returned at a run.

Meanwhile it was as much as I could do to play the fish and attract assistance at the same time. At first the pike moved steadily up-stream for fifty yards or so ; then he came back again at a great pace, and I had to run with him, winching in line for all I was worth—a vain proceeding, as the fish immediately took it all out again. After a while, however, it became evident that the main battle was to be in the deep water, and by the time the keeper arrived proceedings had become more dignified and sedate.

“That’s him,” gasped the keeper, as a thick olive-green back showed for a moment close to the bank.

“Twelve pounds,” I commented. “He’s making a good fight for his size.”

The sight of the fish suggested that it was nearly time for the net—a big grilse net—and it was not long before the gradual application of the butt told. The pike was brought in and the net was slipped under it. “He’s a big twelve-pounder!” I exclaimed, when it became obvious that the net was too small, a point emphasised by the fish, which rolled out of it and hurried away to the other side of the river, fortunately still hooked. Thrice this happened, but the fourth time the quarry, utterly beaten, allowed himself to be packed inartistically into the inadequate receptacle and dragged ashore in triumph. As net and fish were carried safely out into the meadow I enlarged my estimate of him to sixteen pounds.

“More,” said the keeper, and it became apparent that he was right when, each holding one end of a sack, we were traversing the mile that lay between the river and a weighing-machine. By the end of the mile the more moderate estimate (the keeper’s) was forty pounds.

As a matter of fact, the fish weighed

twenty-three pounds and a few ounces, though, as I still fondly imagine, in the glass case it looks more. The triumph was not Gargantuan, perhaps, but in such marvellous spring weather it seemed so. It is seldom that one has everything that one could desire, and that holiday was perfection. It made the influenza quite worth while.

VII

FISHERMAN BILLY

“As long as my boat,” says Old Billy firmly, looking with pride upon the great pool at our feet. We have been speaking of certain legendary carp that lend romance to the place. Old Billy, it appears, has from time to time seen a colossal tail threshing the surface, and he will not permit himself to estimate the weight of the body to which it belongs. Old Billy is one of those grandly untruthful persons who will not occupy themselves with the smaller statistics at all. The carp are undoubtedly there; they are numerous; and they are as long as Old Billy’s boat: that is the thread of his discourse unravelled from the tangle of metaphor and illustration. “*You* can’t catch ’em,” is his impolite conclusion; “nor can nobody,” is his afterthought, dictated

probably from interested motives, for have I not on sundry occasions given the old villain the wherewithal to buy beer? Even Old Billy recognises the unwisdom of particular charges of inefficiency against the person who, for the time being, represents a day's wage of unknown quantity.

However, I am not prepared to quarrel with his assertion, partly because I have never been able of set purpose to catch carp anywhere, and partly because I am not quite convinced that these particular carp have existence other than theoretical. Twice have I been within measurable distance of belief—once when fishing for bream with a bunch of the larvæ of bluebottles (politely known as gentles, impolitely known as maggots), and I hooked something irresistible which ran out all the line and destroyed it at leisure in the depths; once again, when a stout new salmon-cast parted like cotton on the strike. But these events are of the now distant past, and time has induced wiser incredulity; probably in both cases I hooked a pike, a circumstance that often precedes angling misfortune.

On this sharp winter morning it is some-

what out of place to speak of carp, and, but for Old Billy, I should not have done so, for we are intent on pike, and pike only. Old Billy, however, must always ease his mind on that subject; in some obscure way he seems to think his own credit and reputation greatly increased by the presence in the pool of fish which are enormous and uncatchable; possibly, too, he has some unrecognised vein of poetry in him which finds vent in frequent allusion to the wonders of the deep. Having dismissed the carp, however, he brings the punt round to the landing-stage without further delay, and points with pride to the live-bait in the bucket; finer live-bait, he says, you could not see anywhere; money, in fact, could not buy them. Conceding the point as one which hardly demands emphasis (for Old Billy caught the live-bait himself, and I have fished with him before), I get into the punt and instruct him to push off.

The pool is some eighty yards in width and some hundred and twenty in length, and it is in parts very deep,—bottomless, according to Old Billy. The great river which forms it here plunges over weir-

beams for the last time before it joins a river still greater a mile lower down, and it celebrates its last victory over the obstacles opposed to it by man in a fine turmoil of foam. Then the main current sweeps grandly across the pool to its channel below, leaving behind it two enormous eddies, one on each side. A finer pool for pike-fishing it would be impossible to conceive; the bottom is all of gravel, and the supply of fish seems inexhaustible. No matter how many may be caught one day, the next finds the pool re-stocked, for it is the Mecca of all the pike in many miles of the parent river. Of this fact Old Billy is well aware, and he regards the fish from a base, matter-of-fact point of view; his avowed object is always to kill as many as he can. That is why he desired me to fish with trimmers to-day, a suggestion which I sternly put away. Trimmers are, in the first place, an abomination. In the second place, they are large discs of cork painted on the one side white and on the other red; a stick runs through them, and a line is wound round them, and they are sent out with a live-bait to fish by themselves with

the white side uppermost. When a pike takes the bait the trimmer turns over and turns red—blushes for shame, in fact ; then you go and chase it in a boat. The use of these things is reprehensible, but,—no, on second thoughts I will not speak of the fascination of the game ; I will merely denounce them and so leave them.

In his heart Old Billy despises me for sticking to the rod as good sportsmen ought ; but fish, he admits, we shall probably catch, for the water is right and the weather. There were a few degrees of frost last night and it is still cold. The amiable red sun that is now well up will make it a little less cold presently, but not much ; this December day he is more for ornament than use. The air, however, is dry, and there is no wind ; this is the cold that makes one vigorous and does not induce shivering fits. It is, in short, as fair a day for winter fishing as could be wished. Old Billy paddles the punt out to the marks, if I may borrow a term from those that go down to the sea in ships, and sticks in his rypecks just at the head of the farther eddy. For some unexplained reason most of the pike inhabit

this part of the pool ; it may be that the other eddy has less movement, and consequently has accumulated a little mud. At any rate nine-tenths of the pike taken in the pool are hooked in this eddy, and here we accordingly fish.

I have a somewhat childish liking for a beautiful float, and the one I mean to use is large and fat, its upper part a rich crimson, and its lower a deep green. I am well aware that it is conspicuous, and that the complete angler would be ashamed to attach a thing so monstrous to his line. Yet it is not so large as a trimmer, and its ruddy and cheerful countenance always seems emblematic of hope, even when the fish are least in the humour. Equally ruddy and cheerful are the three little pilot floats which are fastened above the other at intervals of eighteen inches. They are used ostensibly to keep the line from sinking, but really for æsthetic effect ; the line will not sink because it has been well greased in the manner known to dry-fly fishermen, but the floats look pretty as they follow the big one in an obedient row. If the rod were long enough I should use more. Old Billy would not

understand my refined pleasure in these minute things, so I do not trouble to explain them to him; instead I dangle the snap-tackle before him, that he may put on a dace from the bucket.

While the floats are travelling down the eddy I have leisure to consider his appearance with more care. He is a very small man and extremely ancient, clean-shaven, and with a face wrinkled like a winter apple; yet, small, ancient, and wrinkled though he be, he can paddle a heavy boat against a strong stream, can lend a hand with the seines when the salmon are running up from sea, can pull up his eel-traps (no mean test of strength), and can carry a bucket full of water or fish as well as many a younger man. He is an astonishing example of what an open-air life will do for a sound constitution. He will never see seventy again, though his age is a matter of speculation merely; he himself is not informed on the point. So far as I can ascertain, his principal article of nutrition is beer, and, though he does not stint himself therein, one would hardly think it a wholesome form of diet. Yet here he sits, this

cold day, clad only in his blue jersey, patched trousers, and rubber boots, as hale and hearty as can be.

Only once have I known him to be ill. I met him outside his favourite house of call looking thoughtful and somewhat troubled. Questioned as to the reason of his dejection, he complained somewhat bitterly that the doctor had knocked him off his beer. I inquired why, and Old Billy said that the doctor had called it pneumonia; had prescribed bed and simple fare, and generally trampled heedlessly on all the patient's convictions. He had even said that Old Billy would die if he did not obey orders. I strongly advised him to fall in with the doctor's views if he could see his way to do so, and to soften the unpleasing counsel gave him something for luxuries. He said he would think about it, and so soon as I was out of sight proceeded to do so,—in the public-house. He consumed a regal quantity of his favourite beverage, and apparently drove out the pneumonia. Since then he has had the poorest opinion of the medical profession.

“He's under, master,” says Old Billy

suddenly, recalling me from my scrutiny of himself. Sure enough the big float has disappeared, and the pilots are also vanishing one by one. I wind in the slack line and tighten on the fish, which I can tell at once is only a small one. He fights gamely enough for his size, but a two-pound jack is quickly mastered, and very soon he is over Old Billy's great landing-net and lifted into the punt. The hooks are taken out without trouble, and I examine them to see that they have taken no hurt from the jack's sharp teeth; suddenly I hear a sound of thumping, and looking up find that Old Billy is beating the unhappy little fish on the head with a bottle, the instrument he commonly employs for dispatching pike. This is annoying; I fully intended to put the little fellow back, for he is two pounds short of the size which I consider adequate. This I explain with vigour, and command the miscreant to release his prey and return it to the water. Old Billy gives a final decisive blow, and then, regarding the inanimate corpse with satisfaction, observes that it is too late.

He has a theory that it is fatal to success

to return the first fish of the day, however small ; this he explains at length, giving instances of the lamentable results of such weakness that have come under his notice. His practice, I regret to say, is to kill the small fish that come later in the day also. I have seen him in the proud possession of dead pike that could not have weighed a single pound. Mindful of this I give him very solemn warning of what will happen if he does it again, and then turn to the fishing.

Presently there is another run which results in the capture of a second pike of small dimensions ; this is rescued from the bottle with difficulty. Then for a full hour the float works round and round the eddy, down the main stream, and even round the other eddy, without a touch. Old Billy snorts, and reminds me that he prophesied as much when I returned the second fish of the day ; it is peculiarly unlucky to return the second fish of the day. It certainly does look as though something was wrong ; it is now near mid-day, and two runs from little fish are all I can boast of. Moreover, there is no time to waste. It will be dark by four, and

if I am to show anything like a decent basket I must work for it. Requesting Old Billy to modify his croaking, I reel in and take off the floats and snap-tackle, replacing them by a spinning-trace weighted with a heavy lead.

My companion pours scorn on the idea of spinning ; I shall catch nothing thus ; I might possibly have caught something worth having with live-bait if that fish had not been returned ; as it is I shall catch nothing anyhow. The idea seems to fill Old Billy with melancholy pleasure in spite of the fact that there is a price on the head of every pike over five pounds killed by me this day. The old man is often like this : if the mood seizes him he will not prophesy good concerning his clients, but evil. I ascribe this to his having once found a dead human body in the river, a proud occurrence, which is one of the landmarks of his life. Whenever he thinks of it he becomes solemn and prophesies evil in a tone of befitting seriousness. Afterwards he will, if allowed, relate the incident, dwelling with unction on the more gruesome details. I do not encourage the charnel-house talk,

however, but request him to put a bait on the spinning-flight for me. This he does extremely well, in spite of his contempt for my policy; many decades of wicked life have taught him all there is to know about catching fish, and he is unrivalled at getting the perfect curve on a spinning-bait, an art that many fishermen never acquire at all. Practice will not do it alone; an unerring hand is needed as one of Nature's gifts, and you must arrange the hooks right instinctively at the first attempt or your trouble will be vain; there can be no revision of your work, or you will destroy both bait and temper, and in the end produce nothing better than an unseemly wobble.

Old Billy's bait spins beautifully, as can be seen by trying it close to the boat with a short line. Now I pull about thirty yards of line off the reel and coil it on the floor of the punt with some care, so that there shall be no kinking. Kinking is one of the curses of the pike-fisher's lot, but with reasonable precaution it can be avoided; when one is in a boat one ought never to be troubled with it. The principal things to ensure are a clear space for the coils of

line, well away from rowlocks, oars, and other hindrances, a sufficiency of swivels on the trace, and, last and most important, some power of self-restraint; the bait must be swung and not hurled. Swing it quite gently and it will travel an immense distance by its own weight, picking the line up cleanly and gradually as it goes. My thirty yards of line run out without let or hindrance, and then, after giving the bait a second or two to sink nearly to the bottom, I begin to draw it in, working it slowly with the rod between each draw of the left hand. In deep water one can hardly spin too slowly. Old Billy watches with a cynical eye. Mr. Jones, he observes, can throw his bait fifty or sixty yards. Evidently the dead body is still in his mind, and the tribute to Mr. Jones is not so important as it might seem. If the positions were reversed, and I was in the counting-house while Mr. Jones was in the punt, I doubt not that the fifty or sixty yards would be placed to my credit.

Thirty yards are sufficient for the day at any rate. Before the bait has travelled ten it is checked, and I have that supreme

sensation which makes spinning for pike so fascinating, the sensation of being in contact with some mysterious power in the depths. It is not in the least like the sudden plunge of a large trout; the feeling for the first second or two is as though the river-bed had suddenly become animate and had grasped the bait in firm hands. A kind of electric thrill is communicated from the fish to the fisherman, and informs him at once that he is not fast in stump or weed; occasionally, it is true, he may for an instant think that a weed is a fish, but the real thing is never to be mistaken.

After the first few seconds of resistance the pike begins to realise his predicament, and he fights in sullen wrath. For quite a long time I cannot recover any line, and even have to concede some yards as he bores steadily out into the strong current. The firm strain tells, however, at last, and I get him after several rushes nearly up to the boat, till his olive back is visible about three feet below the surface. The sight of the punt, however, rouses him to new efforts; down he goes again with tremendous power, and is under us before I can realise it. In

a second he will be round one of the rypecks and free as water. In these circumstances there is but one thing to do : I plunge the point of the rod right down into the water and hold him as hard as I possibly can. Now he must either break or yield, and fortunately he chooses, or cannot but choose, to yield. He is brought back to the right side, the net is under him in a instant, and he is in the boat, as pretty a seven-pounder as could be seen in a year's fishing. He is short and thick, his olive sides touched with a hint of yellow, a typical winter pike ; he will eat, I give my word for it, as well as any spring salmon. He has taken a minute for each of his seven pounds to land, which gives some idea of his fighting qualities. It has been my experience that pike of between seven and ten pounds often give more sport than far heavier fish. They play with more dash, as a rule. A big pike seems to make the error, not unknown among big nations, of underrating the forces opposed to him ; but he has not the advantage possessed by them of being able to learn from his mistakes. Old Billy has by now used his bottle with effect, and is

looking at me without guile. "Didn't I say as you'd catch something, master?" he demands. The incident of the dead body has faded from his memory, and he is sanguine once more.

The next thought is luncheon, which we must consume in haste, for only another hour or two of daylight remain, and I hope to catch at least another brace of fish. Old Billy declines to trifle with sandwiches; he has obeyed my instructions to provide himself with what he needs, and he indicates the half-gallon jar which is his constant companion on fishing excursions. I am glad to see, however, that he has also brought some bread and cheese.

While we eat he relates various marvels that he has seen and known. His favourite story is of the enthusiastic fisherman and the great pike which was supposed to have its home in the river above the weir. The usual way of fishing the river is to trail a spinning-bait forty or fifty yards behind a boat, and in the course of a day five or six miles of water will be covered twice. The great pike in question was said to live in a deep reed-lined reach about four miles

away, and was estimated at twenty pounds. Well, one day Old Billy was rowing the boat with two fishermen in it who had made up their minds to catch the big one. The weather was just right ; the baits were all that could be wished ; all things were favourable. As the boat approached the monster's haunt all hearts beat more quickly, and when, just in the right place, one of the rods bent to a heavy weight the excitement was intense.

Backwards and forwards across the river surged the fish, fighting with great power, though not with the dash of a salmon, and all three were convinced that they had got him at last. Old Billy is of opinion that it was some hours before they got the enemy up to the boat, but that is probably an exaggeration. Up to the boat they got it eventually, however, and even then it could not be seen, nor could the angler force it to the surface. Old Billy fortunately had his biggest landing-net, a monstrous thing four feet in diameter, with a long pole as handle, and he determined to try and scoop the fish out. To his joy he succeeded in netting it, and then the united efforts of the

three were brought to bear, and they lifted out—an enormous fish-kettle. The utensil had been caught in the handle by one of the triangles, and had naturally offered great resistance to the rod, swinging from side to side in the current in the most lifelike way. If the angler had not been using the strongest of tackle he would never have landed it. Even Old Billy was deceived, he admits; and he even went so far as to look for the fish inside the kettle, but it was not there.

By this time we have made an end of eating, and I begin to fish again. But curiously enough the spinning dace attracts no more pike to the net, though I get one half-hearted run from a small fish which just touches the bait and leaves it. A precious hour is spent in vain, and I can see that Old Billy's mind, for lack of occupation, is travelling back to the dead body once more. Soon he will begin to croak. This must be averted somehow, and I try a new device which has often served me well in this pool before. Taking off the gimp trace I replace it by another of stout gut, and attach thereto a Devon minnow of a non-

descript yellow colouring and two and a half inches long. Old Billy of course protests, assuring me that "them things is no good," but perseverance is at once justified, for I get a nice five-pound fish at the second cast.

Thereupon Old Billy asks me again to remember that he said I should catch fish to-day. Before very long I am fast in another, which is also safely landed, but which has unfortunately played havoc with the bait. The sharp teeth have practically destroyed the dressing of the hooks, and it would not be safe to trust the chances of a third encounter. I have not another Devon of the right size and colour in my box, so a spoon-bait is put on for the last half-hour, greatly to the dissatisfaction of Old Billy, who has no sort of belief in spoon-baits. This time he may be right, for I only catch one three-pound fish, which I return hastily before he can get at it with the bottle. By now it is freezing again and the sun has set, so I decide that we have had enough. Old Billy pulls up his rypecks and we return to the landing-stage.

We have a brace and a half of decent fish to show, so we have not done so badly. Old

Billy disregards the forms of thanksgiving as I hand him his day's wage and something over, but again begs me to remember that he said I should catch fish. I should, he adds, have caught more if I had not returned the small ones. With that he packs the four pike for me into the long rush-basket, and hastens away to the Black Swan, while I walk off in the opposite direction. This evening he will describe to an admiring and credulous audience the complete failure that attended my efforts until he himself grasped the rod and showed me how it should be done. By closing time he will have caught all the six fish that entered the landing-net this day. But I forgive Old Billy his little weaknesses. The only complaint I would make about him is that his company has made a short winter day seem still shorter.

VIII

A MINIATURE TROUT STREAM

PEBBLEVILLE-ON-SEA (as the prospectus putting it before the notice of all who like a really quiet seaside resort had said) was certainly neither Brighton nor Margate. No bathing-machines broke the continuity of coast ; no gentlemen of temporary colour mocked the moaning ocean with comic songs ; no Paris confections were ridiculously outlined against the infinite. Pebbleville was small and scattered ; its houses were but land-marks, so to speak, dotted about as though each represented the corner of a street that should have being when Pebbleville had become a Brighton or a Margate. Pebbleville was inexpensive, and its few visitors were elderly and given to meditation ; they neither romped nor paddled, but strolled gently along the cliff or sat gently

on the three seats that showed where the esplanade should be in time to come. In a word, Pebbleville was the very place.

And yet the angler was dissatisfied, unreasonably dissatisfied, for had he not been at some pains to find a spot where his great literary undertaking should be inaugurated between the sea and the sky, a spot where no distractions could exist, a spot where thought should be trammelled by no worldly considerations whatsoever? And to this end had he not put rods and tackle firmly away and disregarded all advertisements that contained the word "fishing"? So now he was in the exact haven of his desire, and not at all pleased with it. Frowning at the fishless sea (if it were not fishless it was, at any rate, unfishable, for Pebbleville possessed no pier, no jetty, and no boats), he turned gloomily in the direction of the winter garden—that is to say, in the direction of what would some day be the winter garden; at present it was a large piece of gorse-clad common land, enclosed in a wire fence, and adorned with eleven small Christmas trees,—the first beginnings of a plantation. Passing round the Christmas trees he found his path

impeded by a ditch, a small matter, but one that had far-reaching results, as will appear.

The ditch was two feet in width, and contained water of a sombre quality. The angler, unwilling to step across to the dubious opposite bank, threw the end of his cigarette indignantly into the obstacle. Then a remarkable thing happened: there was a commotion in the murky water, and the missile disappeared, only to reappear a moment later. The angler whistled and rubbed his eyes; then he whistled again. Then he turned and sought for some means of testing what looked like a discovery. Grasshoppers were plentiful in the thin grass round him, and very soon one was captured and thrown after the cigarette-end. Again there was a commotion, and the grasshopper disappeared. But this time there was no reappearance, and this time the angler had been on the alert, and had distinctly seen the form of a small fish—a small fish, moreover, with spots. His countenance cleared. Pebbleville was, after all, not so dull a place as he had thought, and presently he made honourable amends, and acknowledged to himself that a man might

go farther and fare worse—this after a little exploration had revealed that the ditch was in reality a tiny sluggish brook, which here and there widened out into a pool, and was everywhere of some depth.

Pebbleville, as has been intimated, is not the rose, but it lives near one. The fashionable watering-place of Pierhaven is but a short journey away. Pierhaven boasts, of course, shops, and the same afternoon the angler expended some twenty shillings on such a fly-fisher's outfit as a place where no fly-fishing is could afford.

The next morning saw him putting up a nine-foot greenheart rod on the bank of the brook and smiling, partly with pleasure, partly with amusement; it really seemed rather ridiculous to fish for trout in so microscopic a stream. Fate appeared to agree with him, for not a cast had been made when an interruption occurred in the shape of a gamekeeper in leggings, who politely asked if the angler had permission to fish. Needless to say, the angler had not permission; the inhabitants of Pebbleville had assured him that the brook was as free and as troutless as air. But the keeper was

better informed. The water, he admitted, contained fish, but he feared so wanton an innovation as angling for them could not be thought of. He was polite, but firm ; so the angler tendered his card, took down his rod, and departed disconsolate. Pebbleville was, after all, a poor place to inaugurate a great literary undertaking in, and the rest of the day proved it conclusively.

On the morrow, however, the sun rose at his accustomed time, and with more than his accustomed brightness, for on the breakfast-table lay a letter, which, in a few courteous phrases, acknowledged the receipt of his card, and gave the angler the privilege of fishing in the brook as long and as much as he pleased. Pebbleville was itself again. Breakfast was eaten with appetite, a note thanking the owner of the land for an exceptionally graceful act of courtesy was written and posted, and in a very short time the winter garden was being crossed with hasty steps.

The Christmas trees seemed to have grown in the night, and the brook was certainly larger than it had appeared ; the Pierhaven fly-rod was a miracle of cheapness at half a

guinea, and the March brown was by no means so ill tied. In short, Fortune wore a smiling face as the first cast was made from behind a blackberry bush onto a pool at the lowest end of the garden. The moment the fly touched the water a tiny fish was upon it, and was immediately twitched out, so as not to disturb the pool more than was necessary. The captive was an undoubted trout, though it measured scarce five inches, and was rather dark in colour, a natural result of living in so opaque a stream.

It did not take long to make these observations and return the fish to the water, and then the fly was again despatched round the bush. The second cast produced a second troutlet even smaller than the first, and within five minutes the angler had twitched out three others from the same place, and he began to wonder whether he had stumbled on a hatchery and was angling among the fry. Presently, however, he found that there were better fish in the brook. The March brown fell just at the edge of a film that had collected in one corner, there was a flash of a golden side, and a strong

fish was soon testing the five-ounce rod to the full value of its half-guinea, dashing madly about the pool, and twice jumping out of the water. Fortunately there were few weeds, and the trout did not attempt to bolt up-stream, and before long he was being lifted triumphantly out in the Pierhaven landing-net, a simple affair of cost proportionate to the rod. Spring-balance the angler had none, so he could only estimate his capture's weight at half a pound or thereabouts, reflecting that though half a pound is no great matter in itself, it means a good deal coming out of a pool barely three yards in length and two in width. This fish, too, was dark on the back, but was beautifully golden on the sides, well spotted, and very plump.

After the trout had been killed and placed amid some dock-leaves in Pierhaven's canvas bag, the fisherman left the pool well satisfied, and began to fish up-stream. It was not easy fishing. In places the brook's two feet of width were reduced to one by overhanging brambles, which stretched out interfering tentacles, and grasped the fly before ever it could reach the water. That,

at least, was how it seemed to the man ; the brambles might conceivably have retorted with comments on his inaccurate casting. But this insufficient stream held a marvellous stock of little trout, and almost every time the fly touched the water an impudent fish of, approximately, half an ounce would hastily appropriate it. But no more big ones were seen or felt until the next pool was reached.

This pool was surrounded completely by briars, and only about a yard of water was visible at all. However, the angler flicked the fly over the wall of leaves, and stood on tiptoe to observe the result. There was a rise immediately, and a good fish took the fly firmly away under the thickest bush before its owner could interfere. Justly annoyed, the angler applied pressure, and then the Pierhaven rod lost heart about the business, and said so with ominous crackings ; no half-guinea fly-rod yet built could be expected to pull a half-pound trout out of a bush. The angler anathematised Pierhaven, and desisted. An attempt to pull the fish out by grasping the line failed, and the fly was lost. Then the rod was

examined. Fortunately it had not snapped off clean, but had only begun to split in the middle of the second joint, and after being bound for a few inches with a piece of fine string it seemed fairly sound.

It was soon tested again. Close above the scene of the accident was another little pool below a miniature stickle. The water was clearer as there was more life in it, and it ran deep under the angler's own bank. There was no cover here, so he knelt down away from the water, and cast the new March brown up-stream close to the edge, trusting to his hand to tell him of a rise, which it did almost at once, as another half-pounder impetuously hooked himself. He was handled with great tenderness, for the rod was obviously not to be trusted, and it was quite a long time before he joined his brother in the canvas bag.

Join him he did, however, and the rod was still whole, as, marvellous to relate, it remained during the whole of the fortnight that its purchaser stayed in Pebbleville, and in spite of being used on this part of the brook or another daily, and in spite of subsequently being much harder worked. On

this its first day, the brace recorded completed the bag, for no more big ones rose, though the midgets were insatiable; but as the angler grew better acquainted with the peculiarities of the stream his catches improved, until one evening he returned proudly home with five brace of fish, of which the smallest was half a pound and the largest was not far off a pound, a truly remarkable basket for so microscopic a stream. Pebbleville-on-Sea stands in a niche by itself in the gallery of happy memories, and the great literary undertaking has not yet been inaugurated.

IX

THE FESTIVAL OF THE GREEN DRAKE

To the angler who is modest in his desires the May-fly must ever be somewhat of a fearful joy. There is something uncanny about finding the trout in a well-fished stream, commonly epicurean of taste and cautious of habit, converted in the twinkling of an eye into omnivorous maniacs ; and it is small wonder that the insect whose advent causes this remarkable change has sometimes been the object of invective as well as of panegyric, for there are many men who prefer a season of moderate (perhaps slight) sport to the "crowded hour of glorious life," which makes all after hours so dull and spiritless. And I am by no means sure that they are not right ; the passing of the May-fly from such a river as the Test is

not an unalloyed misfortune. When small fly is plentiful enough to satisfy both angler and fish, a stream is sufficiently blessed and artificial excitements are not required.

But there is one aspect of the drake in which his value can hardly be over-estimated. Many trout-streams in their lower reaches hold a quantity of coarse fish, whose influence on the trout is to make them large and few, and (for evil associations corrupt good manners) to render them indifferent to surface food. These waters in consequence become quite useless for legitimate fly-fishing except during the brief carnival of the May-fly. Then, and then only, has the angler a chance, for no trout, however large or addicted to minnows, can refrain from joining in the prevalent enthusiasm. And so you shall find a fish of five pounds feeding as eagerly as any troutling—ay, and catch him too if luck is with you, and then your happiness should be complete. Is not a great fish like that taken fairly with the fly worth a basket filled never so full with pounders? And are there not on the records of most streams inscribed the tales of trout taken with the May-fly of five, six, and even

more, incredibly more, pounds? I know one small stream where on the same evening a fisherman caught a brace of trout weighing seven and a quarter and nine and a half pounds respectively. To this day I cannot think of that brace without awe. Nor, since the tale was told to me, can I bring myself to fish for pounders with the May-fly. Even though it prove, as it too often does, that I have dropped the substance to grasp the shadow, I do not regret the choice. The substance could not at most have exceeded three pounds. Of the possibilities of the shadow I have spoken.

And so I must ask the reader to turn his back firmly upon this pretty stream that invites him to linger. It is indeed full of trout. As we look down on the bridge we can see one or two lying motionless among the green ribbons of weed, and a few yards away under that alder-bush another is rising quietly from time to time, feeding probably on the fly that takes its name from the bush; for in early June Nature is lavish of her insect life, and the alder and the May-fly often vie with each other for the notice of the fish, and it may chance that the angler

will kill even more with the modest brown fly than with the drake itself. It is hard to leave a rising trout without giving him "something to rise for," as the pugnacious urban idiom hath it ; but let the reader only be patient for another half-mile of this dusty high-road, and I warrant him he shall see something better worth the seeing. The trout in this little tributary are but midgets, attaining only to some paltry two pounds or so ; no bad size, of course, taking all in all, and very fitting for small dry-fly work, but in the fleeting carnival of the drake not worthy of our steel. No, we will leave them behind us and on after the shadow.

The London road stretches out white and straight. It is past mid-day, and the sun is coming to his hottest ; you can see that this is the most blinding half-mile of weariness and dust in the world. A low hedge is on either side, and not a tree casts a morsel of shade. To walk for ever and ever on just such a path as this would be a very fitting judgement for the wicked ; add to the picture yon turbulent machine that comes roaring by clad in a nimbus of dust-cloud, and imagine the wicked being compelled to

jump out of its way for ever and ever, and you begin to doubt whether there be any wicked enough for so excessive an arrangement. We certainly are not wicked enough, and we may regard the glare and the dust and the motor-car merely as a kind of purgatory intended to fit us for the paradise to come. *Ecce janua caeli.* We turn to the right, go round a corner, and are at once in the deep cool shadows of a perfect English lane. High banks, fern-clad and mossy, crowned with still higher hedges of hazel, alder, and thorn which almost meet overhead, make of the sun but a luminous atmosphere; an oak here and there spreads out massive limbs protectingly casting a deep shade. The wild rose is in full bloom, and stands out against the darker green, shyly conscious of its beauty. Surely it is the most tantalising of blossoms, so fragile and so exquisite, the "dainty rogue in porcelain" of the hedgerow.

A quarter of a mile of this easiest of travelling and we are at a gate on the right hand by two haystacks. It has been newly tarred, and one may neither climb nor touch. What is to be done? A short field away

we can see the small stream that skirts the water-meadows, and beyond the vivid green, which shows the richness of grass intersected by countless rills of clearest crystal, we can see the river itself gleaming in the sunlight. Who cares for a little tar? But soft, let instinct work. Are we not descended from the ape, and has not the ape four hands? Tar will not hurt our heavy boots, and the gate may be so lifted, bracing the muscles of the thigh, until it is fairly open and no harm done, and it may be shut after the same fashion. Then we wade knee-deep through the long grass towards the little black bridge that crosses the brook into the water-meadow.

No, there is no reason why we should not pause a while here, and the elm just shades the bridge nicely. The brook *is* rather weedy, but observe the purity of the water, the gold of the gravel, and the silver of the sand in that little channel between the streamers; it is the ideal water for a few fat trout. There is food in abundance, and there are quiet corners under willows separated by little merry stickles, in which an honest fish may lie and capture every

floating morsel without undue exertion, adding to his weight like some dignified alderman whose active days are long past. These pampered fish are not, it is true, numerous, and they are, like the alderman, epicurean of taste, but they cannot resist the May-fly any more than the others, and I calculate on a brace out of this little stream before the evening. But at present we should do little good by disturbing it, as the fly has not begun to hatch out.

So we will cross the meadow and get to the river. From here it looks easy enough to do so, but in reality the path is devious and difficult to find amid the long grass. These water-meadows are in truth a collection of little islands cut off from each other and the world by innumerable tiny streams, feeders of the brook we have just left. Some of them are but a foot wide, but they are all at least two feet deep, and the man who, eager to be at his fishing, hastens heedless after his nose will get very wet. I know, because I suffered the like on my first visit. But there is a dry and safe path, and across the more considerable drains there are little bridges, and so with tortuous steps we reach

the river with dry feet. Sometimes though, when the river runs higher than its wont, even this serpentine path is delusive; the rills gain in size from their parent's overflow, and in turn spread out over the meadows until there are two or three inches of water through which one must splash. Hence some of our fishermen wear long rubber boots, though they are not comfortable, and hardly necessary; stout shooting-boots kept carefully greased are enough to defy the damp.

And now let us sit down on the famous Black Fence and mop our brows, for it has been no small walk from the station. Moreover, it will be as well to investigate the luncheon that has been packed for us in the creel; breakfast is a thing of the ancient past, and there are fifty good miles between us and the great city in which we ate it. If a man who has come all that distance does not deserve his luncheon nobody does. And while we eat we can observe. I have said that this fence on which we sit is famous. It has seen the capture of many a fine fish; the river here turns a corner after a rapid shallow, and forms a deep pool with

a good eddy under either bank. It is at the tail of the shallow that the big trout are almost always caught. In the pool itself there are generally some heavy pike in the winter—fish of from twelve pounds upwards, to say nothing of enormous chub and barbel. For this tributary of the Thames is undutiful enough to surpass its parent in the general size and quality of its fish. It is probably the most prolific water in England. But of course with all the coarse fish you must not expect the trout to be very numerous; if we get one at all I shall be satisfied.

Just as we have made an end of eating and are filling our pipes we see the first fly. There he sails down-stream, drifting at first with motionless wings upright; now he begins to flutter, and we watch curiously to see if he will escape to the ampler air or become food for fishes. It is the unexpected that happens, and a swallow skims over the surface and picks him daintily off, just as a belated dace dashes at him from below. The swallows, in truth, probably devour more flies than do the fish. Two or three more flies struggle up to the surface at intervals;

one of them is taken by a fish under the opposite bank, probably a dace, for it rose with much fuss and splash. It is time to put up the rod.

We use no cobweb and gossamer tackle here ; we have to be able to throw a long line, and must be ready for big fish. And so the split-cane rod is a powerful weapon, the reel-line is heavy, and the cast tapers only to the "finest undrawn," as the catalogues have it, to the uninitiated rather mysteriously perhaps. "Drawn" gut is gut which has been passed through steel plates, filed down, as it were, until it has lost its original stoutness. It can be made extremely fine by the process, but naturally it loses most of its strength. Undrawn gut is three times as strong as drawn gut of the same thickness. The reel-line has been carefully rubbed with a preparation to make it float, and the cast has been in the damping-box all the morning, so all we have to do is to put on a fly and we are ready. The fly-box is filled with marvellous patterns of the drake, with wings of all sizes and colours. The collection has accumulated for years, but we do not really need more

than about four varieties, and of the four this one with the rather small grey wings and brown body with gold twist is my favourite. If I cannot succeed with this I sometimes put on that little buttercup yellow ; it is not in the least like any drake that ever left the mud, but the trout sometimes take it well. Then there is the spent gnat, a curious lop-sided thing that floats with its wings flat on the water : I usually put that on in the evening when the fish are feeding quietly close under the banks on the myriads of dead flies that come floating down. The fourth pattern is the "straddle-bug," really, I believe, supposed to be an imitation of the sub-imago as it is in the act of emerging from its case. In effect it makes a very good hackle May-fly, and is at times killing.

Now we are ready, and we must keep our eyes wide and seriously open for a rising fish. What is that right opposite, a long shadow lying close under the clay bank in the little bay ? It is a fish, sure enough, but at this distance of nearly twenty yards I cannot determine its kind. Yes, see, it has just lifted up a lazy head and taken some

small fly. It is a long cast, but easily within the reach of this rod, and so the line sweeps backwards and forwards until the length is judged to have been attained. A very happy chance makes the grey wings alight on the bank a couple of feet above the fish ; the slightest of hints from the wrist coaxes the fly onto the water, and it floats down exactly as one could wish. As one could wish, too, is it taken, and another hint, from the elbow this time (for it is ill striking from the wrist with a split-cane rod, as what the learned call its resiliency makes it a case of "one step forward and two back," and so it pays better simply to tighten on the fish), drives the hook home, and the rod bends in answer to a rush for the deep water.

But, whatever it be that we have hooked, it is certainly not a trout ; there is no dash about the contest, and after a very short resistance a dead weight allows itself to be drawn towards us. As I thought, it is only a chub, and not a very large one ; two pounds and a half may be his weight, but he is not worth the weighing, so he may go in again. Had it been a month later he would not have submitted so tamely, but

now he is hardly recovered from the spawning season. The coming ten days will make a new fish of him, and when he is heartened up with good cheer he will be worth fishing for, or anyhow his heavier brethren will. You see that row of piles sticking out of the river under our own bank? It is round them that you will find the biggest chub. Last season a man took one of full five pounds there with the May-fly, and lost another even heavier.

The flies are coming down faster now, and the dace are beginning to rise freely. There, we have hooked one; mark how he fights. He has the cunning of the grayling combined with the dash of the trout, but on this tackle we have him safe. We will weigh him. Three-quarters of a pound by the balance—a very creditable weight for his species. He shall be kept, for dace come into season here on this day, and a few of these big ones look very well lying on the long grass in the creel. I could wish they rose as well to small flies as they do to the drake. Very seldom can you get such dace as this with the black gnat, though it does come about now and then, generally rather

late in the season. Last September, on this same stream, rather higher up, a man caught some beautiful dace while grayling-fishing. Three of them were over a pound. But such good fortune has never attended me here.

Just as we are fastening the lid of the creel a great "plop" causes us to start, and we turn our eyes to the river just in time to see the great swirl where some monster rose at the extreme corner of the eddy. That fish is an old—I cannot say friend, for I have never actually seen him—but at any rate an old acquaintance. He was here last year in the same spot, and rising in the same tumultuous fashion. Oddly enough he only rose about once in every two hours, always with the same heavy plunge. No efforts of mine (and I spent the greater part of a day over him) could persuade him to come up to an artificial fly. I was convinced at the time that he was a colossal trout, but the interval of a year has given time for calm deliberation, and now I think he is probably a pike. That would explain his desultory behaviour; for a pike, though he will rise now and then at a May-fly (possibly out of

the feeling for good-fellowship that makes so many men drink whisky), will not turn to and make a meal of it after he has reached any considerable size. So we will not waste any more good exertion on him.

But there is the rise of an indubitable trout, out in the middle of the rapid above the pool. It is difficult to cover the spot, because there is a thick bank of weeds between us and it, and the line catching thereon will make the fly drag at once. There are two ways of getting over the problem. One is to go up above the fish and float the fly down to him, a method to which there are the objections that you must stake your all on the one cast, as in lifting the line off the water you are bound to frighten him, and that if you should get a rise you are very likely to miss him. The other method is to make what I may call a false cast from below. That is to say, you get out considerably more line than you require to reach the spot, and check it in its outward flight, so that some yards fall in clumsy coils outside the weeds. It is not pretty to see, but it at least allows the fly to float down for a yard or two

unchecked, and you can repeat the cast several times. The first effort sends the fly rather too far, and it is a good yard on the wrong side of the trout. In calm water the gut floating over his head would most certainly put him down, but in this swift glide perhaps it will not affect him. No, it is all right ; he has just risen again. Now the fly has fallen just where it should, about a foot above him, and as it reaches him he comes at it with a splash. But he has not taken it. He was suspicious, and merely tried to drown it. This is a common trick of these large trout. Probably they are animated by the zeal of the witch-finder : if your witch swims she is a very monstrous black witch ; if she sinks she is no witch, it is true, but none the more is she any wife for Cæsar, now that suspicion has rested on her. And so it is no doubt with the fish and the May-fly.

We shall not tempt him again for a while, so let us stroll down-stream, picking up a dace or two, and looking for another trout. It is not yet really time for them with this afternoon sun still so fierce. When it has dropped a little, say after six o'clock,

we will go to work seriously. At the next fence there is a row of willows which spread a cool belt of shade right across the meadow from the river to the brook which we first crossed, and under the willows runs one of the main ditches that connect the two. This ditch gives in miniature the whole history of its parent river. At our feet it is but the tiniest rill, a foot wide and an inch or two deep, babbling softly over its miniature bed of gravel. A few yards lower another rill even smaller joins it joyously, adding its atom of importance. Another and yet another flow in, swelling the original rill and increasing its responsibilities until it measures a full yard from bank to bank. Then we find another stream of equal volume joining strength, sweeping in with all the dignity that one full-grown river displays when it merges its identity with another, eddying round its bank and marking the conflict of two currents with a little whirlpool. Henceforth our ditch is to be taken respectfully. It flows with the strong even glide of the chalk stream, and is spanned with two plank bridges.

It is not wholly that I might point out

these facts that we have followed the ditch, or wholly that we might enjoy the shade. The May-fly is here too, and, I doubt not, a good trout or so with him. Yes, there, under the third willow from where we are standing, is a rise. A feeding fish, sure enough ; there were but three May-flies near him, and he has taken them all. Now we will endeavour to take him. We can safely advance fairly close, as he lies under our own bank, and kneeling in the shade of the tree above him we peep cautiously round the willow trunk. Another determined rise shows us exactly where he is, not six yards away. With an underhand cast the fly is made to drop onto the water a little above him, and he comes at it nobly. In a second he is dashing away down-stream and the angler is holding on like grim death. We cannot follow because of the trees, and we must test the efficacy of trustworthy tackle and passive resistance. Twenty yards below is one of the plank bridges, and if he gets to that he is a free trout, for there are piles under it. But no, he is turned just in time, and now we can compel him slowly to come back. The greatest danger is over, and,

though he is by no means beaten, he will never reach the bridge now. And so, after a minute and a half of sudden leaping and short rushes, he is at last in the net, a pleasant and substantial weight for the willing hand.

Two pounds is what the balance makes of him, and we are pleased, for we had scarcely thought him so much. He does credit to the ditch, and excellently supports the theory that in a country where trout are at all no piece of running water should be despised, for the fish loves a small stream and grows fat in it. When the May-fly is out on these water-meadows you may find a trout feeding in the tiniest rill, almost on the grass in fact, and no small fry, mind you, but just such another as this is.

Our capture has disturbed the ditch too much at this point, so we will go on down to the bridge that so nearly was our undoing. There is a rise some yards below, and we proceed very much as before, except that we have now no friendly tree to cover us, and must kneel afar off. The fish takes the fly as well as could be, but somehow he is missed. Odd, there he is rising again the

moment after at a real fly. We try again, and he takes the artificial fearlessly, and yet is missed the second time. But the third time we strike quickly, and hook something of no great size. It proves to be a dace of half a pound—rather a disappointment; we were sure it must be a trout. There are not many dace in these ditches, but a few come up from the brook after the May-fly, and a small pike or two come up after them. The brook joins the river some three miles lower down, and, though it mostly contains trout, a few coarse fish inevitably make their way into its deeper holes.

The ditch runs into the brook at a point where several trees make it impossible to throw a fly from this side, and there is generally a good trout lying there, quite conscious, no doubt, of being unassailable. Below the trees is the little brick bridge leading across the brook to the farmyard, and below the bridge is what is known as "the pool." It deserves its name, for it is an ideal trout-stream pool. The current flows rather swiftly through the single arch of the bridge, and loses itself in the still

depths. There are eight good feet of water here in the deepest part, and though the pool is but fifteen yards or so in length and eight in breadth there seems to be an inexhaustible supply of fish in it. It is not long since a pike of eight pounds was caught here, and there is always a shoal of fine roach, a few perch, and one or two big grayling—all these besides the trout. Last year I was watching an angler fishing here, casting his May-fly right under the bridge from below, more in hope than in expectation of a rise. He had just turned round to say something of no importance, when I saw an enormous trout rise up steadily and absorb his fly. I informed him of the circumstance, but it was too late, and the five-pounder is, I hope, still there, unless the otter has slain him.

There is a legendary otter who has his home somewhere under the bridge, but he moves in secrecy, and does his fell deeds under fitting cover of darkness. The keeper claims to have seen him once—out of range—but the only trustworthy evidence of his existence is the occasional discovery of one of our best trout on the bank with the pound

of flesh taken duly from his spotted back, and it is probable that he does not live here. Distance is nothing to an otter; a few miles of travelling give him an appetite and improve his taste for the finer trout. Let it be said here that I do not agree with the theory held by the animal's apologists that he would as lief dine off chub or pike as trout. It is not in the least true, for the otter knows the value and flavour of trout as well as we do, and if he can get one he passes all coarse fish by in contempt. In so small a stream as this he can do a deal of mischief, and does. I would not see him wantonly butchered on big rivers, where there is room for him and the angler too, but his depredations here recall the story of the ewe-lamb, for the trout are none too numerous.

Our efforts to get a rise out of the big one have not been a success, though we have made a very good pretence of not looking at our fly as it floats out from under the bridge. So we will move on. About fifty yards down-stream there is a drinking-place for the cattle, and the hurdles enclosing it make a nice ripple, in which there is always

a trout. We will fetch a compass out into the meadow, coming back to the bank some distance below the rough water. Yes, there is a rise right at the head of it, close to the hurdle. We advance stooping to within casting distance, and the attempt is made on one knee. The fly is taken fearlessly, and in a second we are running down-stream, winding in line as we go, for the fish is hurrying in the same direction, and we must keep below him. But he does not run very far, nor does he fight very long, and soon we have him in the net, a long lean fish of a pound and three-quarters, not in bad condition exactly, but a trout of the Cassio type, which no feeding would ever make plump. One meets with such fish in all rivers at all seasons ; probably they are dyspeptics who eat the things they like rather than the things they should.

But, lean or no, he makes a brace of trout in the basket, and is welcome. The exertion of his capture has made us realise the heat again, for in London we are not used to running. Tea would be no bad celebration of our good fortune, and it will not really be waste of time. A man fishes twice

as well on a hot day when he has had his tea, and after all we can spare half an hour from one pleasure if we devote it to another. And without doubt it is a keen pleasure to sit in the little parlour at the farm looking out of the open window into the little garden, and enjoying the scent of the wall-flowers, remembering not too obtrusively the while how odious the great city must be at this moment with its airless roads, glaring pavements, and its disconsolate rows of black skeletons, that are set up by way of adornment and humourously called plane-trees. And the hot tea is itself a blessed thing, the best of the homœopathic cures, and far more cooling in the long-run than ice.

And so let us return to the river refreshed and strengthened. Now you can see what a May-fly rise really means. The insect is floating down-stream literally in thousands ; he is fluttering over it, he is dancing up and down the bank, he is clinging to every twig and blade of grass ; he has settled, several of him, on our hats, and one is on the middle joint of the rod. The whole river-side is an astonishing carnival of life. The swallows are flying low in short circles

and eating their fill (I always think the fly is wasted on them, for it does not make them grow very fat and heavy like trout); and the water itself is simply boiling with fish of all shapes and sizes; and there is so much fly that close under the bank the surface of the water is covered with spent gnats, which float down unregarded and uneaten.

And now our difficulty is to persuade a fish to rise at the artificial fly when the real insect is at each cast to be seen within a few inches of it. However, we get one or two good dace, and return a brace of chub within a few yards of each other, though we cannot persuade a trout to rise. We will now work up-stream again with the Black Fence as our objective, for there, if anywhere, we shall meet with that monster of our desires. All the way along the meadow between us and it heavy fish are rising—chub for the most part, with a trout or two under the opposite bank. But at our fly they will not look, though we cast it never so cunningly. Why should they, when the deception must be so patent? The real insect floats down with its wings close together like one wing

or the mainsail of a cutter, while the clumsy artificial spreads its wings apart. I believe there is a theory that the artificial is intended to represent the real fly at the moment when it begins to flutter, which is (so it is said) the moment when the fish seizes it. But so far as my observation has gone, it seems to me that a trout rises when he sees the fly, flutter or no flutter. One season I had some flies tied with a single upright wing, but they would not float. The straddle-bug, however, sometimes answers this purpose, and is always worth a trial.

And now we are at the fence again. The low western sun is right in our faces here, but our hats have broad brims, which save us from being dazzled into inaction. Now we can see a trout, almost in the same spot where we caught the first chub ; he is within two inches of the surface, just raising his head lazily from time to time, and taking a fly as it floats over him. But he won't raise his head for ours, though we try several patterns, including a large Wickham (a fly which sometimes succeeds with May-flies all round it), and a full half-hour is vainly

spent in tempting him. Evidently he is not for us, and we must try another.

In the shallow ripple under our own bank some twenty yards above us there is a quiet rise which is probably due to a trout, for in the evening they leave the deep water for the shallow feeding-grounds. This ripple has a character of its own ; it is within the belt of weeds, and is formed by a little mound of gravel just below a drain that leaves the river on the right. The fly alights on the water just opposite the drain, hesitates for a moment at the parting of the streams, and then, yielding to the main current, hurries down on the dancing wavelets. But not far, for a fish rises just where the gravel begins to shelve towards the deeper water. There is no mistake about it this time, and almost before we can realise that we have hooked a fish he has bolted down-stream and we are clambering over the fence. Fortunately he seems well hooked, but he is very strong and looks like running for a mile. This, however, cannot be ; at any rate we cannot run with him, for twenty yards below the fence is a drain, and the bridge is well back

in the meadow. When we reach this we must hold on and hope for the best. There are a few seconds of desperate opposition when this policy is put into effect, but all holds and he changes his mind. And now he is running up-stream again, and line must be gathered in hand-over-hand. We hope he will now choose to fight it out in the deep water above the fence. And so it proves; he bores sulkily about in the pool, occasionally making another desperate rush, and once jumping full two feet out of the water. But his efforts get less and less violent, until at last we can draw him over the landing-net fairly beaten. And a very excellent capture he is, all four pounds I warrant you. No? Three pounds and seven ounces only? Oh, well, he fought as well as if he had been four. Yes, perhaps I am a little excited, but you will grant it was such a battle, and is such a fish as you shall not meet every day.

We will sit down on the fence again to steady our nerves. The most seasoned hand trembles a little after catching a big trout, and the stoutest heart must flutter in the moment of triumph. We have done very

well, three nice trout and seven fine dace are a good enough basket for any reasonable person, and we shall envy no man's sport this day—unless, of course, he happens to have caught a trout weighing more than three pounds seven ounces. Now our pipes are lighted, if you will come with me I will show you a thing. We must go to the top of the meadow to yon clump of willows. Here you see a floodgate through which a narrow stream flows out of the river into the meadows, making music in the deepening twilight. We cross over the gate and follow the little stream for a few yards until it divides, one branch continuing on its course, the other turning sharp to the left and running through an underground channel into a little round pool hardly more than two yards in diameter and eighteen inches deep; hence the stream flows softly along under the hedge until it joins the brook we have visited already. Tiny as this pool is, I know there is a large trout in it. It was thought better to await the dark before attacking him, because the water is crystal clear and there is no cover. A spent gnat was put on while we were sitting on the

fence, and now all we have to do is to flick it onto the water. Instantly there is a heavy plunge, and the rod is bent almost double. We have him! No, by Heaven, he has us; he has bolted straight down the little stream and is safe under some roots, and we are a fly the poorer. Ah, well, it is useless to repine. Perhaps two three-pounders in a day would have been greater fortune than we deserve. And so let us go and seek our country supper with appetites sharpened by success, and after lay our heads on country pillows with fair hopes for the morrow.

X

THREE WILD DAYS IN WESSEX

IT was hard to understand at the time why, at the natural and innocent inquiry as to his favourite bait, the local authority should suddenly shut up like some sensitive plant. He had been nobly and generously expansive, measuring his catches of fish as if they were coals, by the sack, but now he was reticent and cautious. "Sometimes I use one thing, sometimes another," he said.

The reason for the change of attitude became clear later (when he was one day discovered in close proximity to a net), but for the present it mattered not. It was enough that he had revealed where fishing was to be had which involved the substitution of a sack for the more ordinary and modest creel, and there was no unnecessary delay in putting this important discovery to the

proof. A sack, two sacks—for there were two anglers—were put into the waggonette with the tackle and lunch, and the river was reached before 10 A.M. had struck by the church clock on the hill.

It was not a promising day ; summer, after two months of hopeless severity, appeared to be endeavouring to surpass itself, and leaden masses of cloud swept across the sky at the bidding of a rushing, mighty wind. But the river, seen from the high stone bridge on which we were standing, looked as attractive as the keenest seeker after free fishing could desire.

Above the bridge was a broad gravel shallow on which were doubtless the dace of which the local authority had spoken, and, it might be, a trout or so as well. In the distance the mill could be seen through some trees, and a point above the shallow where two streams met suggested a back-water as well as the mill-stream, and presumably a weir-pool. Below the bridge the river curved away among trees in a tempting succession of stream and pool. The problem, inevitable on a new and unknown water, arose, what was to be

fished for, and where? The fly seemed hopeless in such a wind, the shallows were no better than a storm-swept sea, and indeed, so far as could be seen, the water above the bridge was shelterless.

Below, a clump of trees a meadow's distance away offered more hope, and thither the indomitable companion strode firmly, without wasting words. His instinct proved to have been right; the river turned a sharp corner under the shadow of the trees, forming as perfect a pool for perch as could be met with. The rods were quickly put together, and soon two red worms were offering wriggling attractions to the fish in two convenient eddies, and the anglers sat somewhat sheltered from the icy blast.

Almost immediately the indomitable companion's float disappeared, and a fish was hooked, which turned out to be a nice perch of nearly a pound; it fought gamely, but the pool was too deep for weeds, and the net soon claimed its own, while the wind shrieked with renewed vigour, as though to celebrate the success. Incidentally it tore from its parent limb a piece of wood that was almost big enough to be called a branch,

and hurled it to the ground in dangerous proximity to the head of the indomitable companion. He, however, paid no attention, but calmly re-baited his hook, and was soon fast in another perch, which was also safely landed.

I had so far not had a bite, and I stirred uneasily as the wind hurled down another piece of wood that was quite a branch, this time near to my own head. The indomitable one continued to catch perch, and the landing of each fish seemed to be a signal for a shower of missiles from above, which were steadily increasing in size. At last, as a great log came down with a resounding thud about a yard from me, I arose, seized my tackle, and, announcing that I thought I would go on and explore up-stream, departed without unnecessary delay, leaving the indomitable one in the course of extracting the hook from his sixth perch with an extremely cheerful countenance. It was long, he said, since he had had such sport.

Some hundreds of yards were covered before it was deemed safe to look back, and then, amid what Horace calls a world

tottering to destruction, a bending rod showed that a seventh or, it might be, even an eighth fish was being added to the basket. A pious wish was uttered that the ruins might miss that heroic being, and then the hasty flight was resumed. Such a gale surely there was never yet on sea or land; the poplars below the bridge were bending like fly-rods and creaking like a rusty winch; other more stubborn trees were being destroyed piecemeal; but in the bridge itself and its high embankment there was hope—*they* could hardly be blown down. And behind there was a welcome calm, in which a perturbed angler might collect his faculties, and presently, for sheer shame, I put a fly-rod together. It would be possible to cast within a few yards of the embankment, and the dace might, like the perch, be on the feed, out of a spirit of pure contradiction.

And, oddly enough, this proved to be the case. A pluck at one of the three flies was felt at the first cast—it was impossible to *see* a rise. At the second a fish fastened, and was landed without much ceremony. In such weather the finest tackle would

have been a mockery, and undrawn gut disposed of the dace, for all he was the half of a pound, with promptitude and despatch. Then began such an hour of sport as may never come again. The fish seemed literally mad for the fly, and black gnat, soldier palmer, and Coachman were all taken with instant impartiality ; and it seemed that the dace were all big ones, running between half and three-quarters of a pound. Several times two were on the cast together, and once even three, of which one got off. Many were lost ; in such a wind it could not be otherwise, for it was impossible to attempt to humour a lightly hooked fish ; but the fifteen pounds of dace that had been amassed by the time the rise was over seemed to justify the sack, which they half filled.

The indomitable one, whom a merciful Providence had spared, appeared in time to assist in the counting. He had, he complained, been prevented from making a phenomenal bag of perch by the trivial circumstance of a tree being blown down into the very pool which he was fishing. As it was, he had only caught eleven, with

three roach of a pound each, and, the tree having disturbed the river somewhat, he had also set out to explore. Exploration was, however, interrupted by the coming of the rain, which had so far held off, and the day's fishing ended prematurely. Nevertheless, as we went homewards we agreed that the local authority was a very estimable person, and that we were singularly fortunate in having stumbled on a piece of free fishing which even the English climate could not render bad. When the weather improved, we assured each other, we should do something remarkable in the history of angling ; all that was necessary was a little patience until the gales should have blown themselves out. Summer cannot *always* disguise itself as winter, and after two months we were entitled to hope for better things.

So we waited our chance and studied a depressed and unsympathetic barometer. At last one morning the wind dropped and the indomitable one greeted me at breakfast with the words, "It's going up." I hastened to verify this glad intelligence. Sure enough the needle had moved ; it no longer presaged seismic convulsions and dis-

heartening phenomena of that kind, as it had been doing for some weeks, but was content to indicate "rain." This, my companion pointed out, clearly meant a fine day, since no barometer could be expected to recover itself all in a moment from such upheavals as we had been having, and any upward movement at all was a sign of complete change; now therefore was our expected opportunity. The greyness of the sky, he explained, was a sure sign of mid-day heat.

We started accordingly. During the drive I surveyed the heavens with suspicion, and when we reached the bridge I called his attention to a certain rumbling noise that was going on in the distance. I am always diffident about rumbling noises when I am out fishing; one has read horrible stories about fire falling from heaven upon the angler, by way of his rod, and consuming him. But the indomitable one knows no panics of this kind; he said it was "guns on Salisbury plain." Those weapons also, in some obscure way, seemed to account for the oppressiveness of the air and the indubitable masses of heavy cloud that hung

low at all points of the compass. Having explained these things, he led the way upstream to the weir-pool, which we had decided to fish that day. It was a deep, still hole, with very little current coming over the sill, and to me had a dark and dismal appearance; I never can take a cheerful view of any water when there is a rumbling noise in the distance. However, the rods were fitted together, some ground-bait was thrown into the pool, and we began to fish for roach.

There were no bites, and apparently no fish in the pool to cause them. Presently, too, I felt called upon to observe that the guns on Salisbury plain must be getting nearer, since the sound was steadily increasing in volume. The indomitable one suggested that a breeze was getting up and was assisting the noise to travel. But there was no breeze, and, so far as I could see, no excuse for his equanimity. Before long I was compelled to ask ironically if he thought there were guns all round us, because the rumbling was now plainly coming from several directions at once, and to the meanest intelligence was obvious and alarm-

ing thunder. He admitted rather regretfully that there did seem to be "thunder about," and after an awe-inspiring clap remarked that there must be a good storm somewhere; when it broke the fish would wake up. He had long been curious to find out whether fish really did feed well in a thunder-storm. With this he threw in another handful of ground-bait.

I, however, had risen when the last peal began. My interest in the scientific effect of electricity was languid. I said: "There are *three* good storms, and in about three minutes they will be *here*. I don't believe the most perverted fish would bite in three thunder-storms, and I shan't wait to see." The indomitable one laughed, and I fled, taking refuge in the sitting-room of a little farm hard by the mill. We neither of us know to this day whether fish will bite in three thunder-storms better than in one or none, because even the indomitable one was compelled to retreat before the torrential downpour that began in a few minutes and lasted until after five. The mill formed a convenient centre for three separate storms, each one more violent than the other, and

we spent an unprofitable day looking out of the window and watching the lightning as it played about and destroyed the surrounding country. When the rain did stop eventually the river was the colour of pea-soup, and roach-fishing being out of the question, we went home disconsolate.

After this the barometer needle went back to its prognostication of earthquakes, and the indomitable one refused to fish any more. It was not that his heart quailed before our English summer, but that it was filled with righteous indignation. A refusal to fish seemed to him the only way in which he could mark his disapproval of the weather. I acknowledged that he was right, but still I badly wanted to try the stream again, for I was certain that its possibilities were untold. So one morning I bethought me of the old adage which promises sunshine before eleven if it has been raining before seven. It was raining nicely at half-past six, and a brisk wind got up about nine. There was just a chance when I started that this would dissipate the clouds and give the sun its opportunity. I took a fly-rod and set out in my waders and

a short mackintosh coat, determined to give the dace on the shallow another trial. The water was reached about half-past ten, just when the clearing-up ought to have begun, if there was any truth in adages, which there is not. As a matter of fact the rain chose that time to begin in real earnest, and continued vigorously for the rest of the day.

I endured many things, including sodden sandwiches for lunch, and persevered in spite of them all. But the fish did not seem to appreciate my efforts. It may be that Wessex dace demand more violent weather than was vouchsafed to them that day. The wind, it is true, was creditable, and the rain did its best, but there was no mad rise such as there had been before. The fish came short, and it was not until I retired to the shelter of the bridge and added to each fly on the cast a tiny tail of white kid that I could manage to catch any at all. With that extraneous aid three dozen nice little fish, averaging perhaps three ounces, were creeled. The big ones seemed to have vanished, and there was not a half-pounder in the whole catch. I

proved, however, to my complete dissatisfaction, that mackintosh does not make a man weather-proof. Between a short wading coat and the back of one's waders there is a small, unprotected gap ; the rain finds it out immediately, and one is more miserable than if one were wet all over.

There was only one bright spot among those grey, damp hours. About six in the evening a March brown, that had been put on as tail-fly for a change, rose a fish which at once leaped into the air, and unmistakably proclaimed his quality and species. He ran out line in grand fashion, and it was some minutes before he could be coaxed down to the net—a trout of well over a pound and a half, which in shape and condition was perfection itself. His capture formed a curious conclusion to a curious experience of weather and fishing.

XI

LADY MAUD'S WALK

(AN ESSAY IN INCONSEQUENCE)

I AM full of problems. Last Sunday afternoon there were most certainly eight of them in that wooden box under the yew hedge, and now there are but two ; and yet no human hand has touched bowl or jack in the interval. Six days have passed since then, and with each day, or anyhow for each, has disappeared one round plaything. It is just so restful and sufficient an inquiry as is suited to the afternoon of a Sunday in July and to Lady Maud's Walk. Let me smoke a cigarette while I think it out. The one great objection to perfect comfort is that one has to move when one wants to do anything, and a man recumbent on many cushions has much difficulty in finding his matches. Ah, here they are, and now to thinking again.

What was I thinking about? How odd it is that I never can remember anything in the country. Oh yes, it was the bowls. They have certainly disappeared, and as certainly I have not moved them, nor has any one else. It seems almost as though they have been spirited away. Can Lady Maud have taken them, and if so, what can she have wanted with them? It must be five centuries since her fair brow was wrinkled over the problem, still unsolved by her sex, as to what bias is and how you obtain the benefit of it. I don't know either, but then I am a dweller in cities, and cannot be expected to know about rural pastimes. If I lived permanently in the neighbourhood of a bowling-green I think I would try to find out. I daresay I am perpetrating a historical crime in mentioning Lady Maud and bowls in the same breath. Were they invented in her day? How helpless a creature is man without his books! But they must have been, for what is it the King of Hungary says when he is devising schemes for his daughter's amusement?—

An hundred knightes, truly tolde,
Shall play with bowles in alayes colde.

But it does not follow that Lady Maud knows a bowl when she sees it ; she may not have had actual experience of one. Perhaps, poor unquiet lady, she took them to be skulls, relics of the rude forefathers of the hamlet, a mistake natural enough for a lady long dead and probably unlearned in anatomy, and, if it were not Sunday, I would almost say permissible when I consider the descendants of the rude forefathers and the seeming texture of their heads. If that was her thought it was but becoming in her to grieve over their unburied state and to carry them over to the churchyard without the garden, there to repose decently in some hollow tomb.

Truly comfort is a great stimulus to unprejudiced thought ; I am able to look at a question from all sides to-day, and on further consideration I see that I am doing Lady Maud a great injustice in imputing to her ignorance of skulls. No doubt she saw plenty of them ; she lived in the good old times when skeletons and even horrid corpses dabbled in gore were to be met at every turn. Horrors and yet more horrors made up the life of man ; one wonders that he

had the spirit even to invent bowls. In any case, I think I may exonerate Lady Maud ; for five centuries she has been too full of her own sorrows to think of trivialities, be they bowls or skulls.

How difficult it is to get at the truth of things. This is not meant to be a wise reflection—one cannot be very wise on a hot afternoon in July,—but in some sort to excuse myself to myself for not having made sure of Lady Maud and her legend. A little research would probably have revealed to me the whole story, with names, reasons, and dates. Some relation was she to John of Gaunt, daughter possibly, or it may have been daughter-in-law ; but I do not greatly care. Historical accuracy is for pale people in the British Museum, not for me on the grass with my mind full of bowls. So far as I have heard it, thus runs the tale : Back from the wars came the squire, Lady Maud's stripling son, who had gone forth to win his spurs, and it was here, on this terrace walk, that they first met in the dusk of a late autumn afternoon. Mother and son fell on each other's necks, and in this close embrace her jealous husband found them.

A man of his age, he saw in the situation something that called for vengeance first and explanation after, and springing upon the pair he seized the youth in his mighty arms, and without more ado tossed him over the parapet into the river. This done, I suppose he questioned Lady Maud as to the identity of the man drowning below, or it may be that he heard his son's last cry and recognised the voice. At all events, horror-struck by what he had done, he rushed from the terrace, sprang upon his horse, and rode madly out into the night. And as he rode his horse cast a shoe, which now hangs on the church door in confirmation of the tale. Should further proof be needed the sceptic has only to repair to the terrace at midnight, and if he is properly constituted he can see Lady Maud herself pacing to and fro wringing her hands.

I am not sure that I tell the legend aright. Some say that it was Lady Maud herself who was hurled over the wall, and that her angry lord had some justification, inasmuch as the gallant was not even distantly related to her. But it does not matter which story is the true one. The important

thing is that the lady still walks, and that I am told is indubitable. It is not given to everybody to see ghosts. I was recently here at midnight myself, and saw nothing, though I am not altogether surprised, for it was not in the hope of seeing her that I came, and indeed if I had expected to see her I might not have come.

There is a huge agile worm, known to anglers as the lobworm, who takes his walks abroad only under the stars. Him must you pursue with guile and a bedroom candlestick to light your path. On a shining night, when the dew lies thick, you shall see him spread at ease inches long on the smooth lawn. He has both head and tail, and, while his head wanders abroad, for safety's sake he always keeps the tip of his tail in his hole, so that when he is alarmed he can retreat backward quicker than thought can fly. It is your business to grasp him with finger and thumb before he is frightened, and very sure and rapid must you be. And you must know which end of him is head, so that you may grasp the other, or he will slip through your hand like an eel. Even when you have him firmly you will find

that his tail clings marvellously to earth, and if you pull too hard he breaks in twain; but if you work him gently as one works a loose nail out of wood he will yield, and gradually all his great length is your own. When you have him you have an excellent bait to your angle-rod, but, as I have shown, in the catching he needs to be handled with as much love and tenderness as Master Walton's frog itself. I am not ashamed of having hunted him here, but I am glad Lady Maud did not happen upon me while I was doing so. The disembodied spirit and the maker of earth are too incongruous, and she might conceivably have resented my preference for the worm; even the ghost of a woman, I suppose, does not like being scorned.

But I could not exist within a few yards of Thames unless I had lobworms in store. For the river below is the Thames in infancy, innocent as yet of locks and weirs, almost ignorant of boats, but not too young to be full of fish. Immediately under the old ivy-mantled wall Thames is a standing lesson to those who forget that they have ever been young. He is no more than six

inches of crystal spread over six yards of gold, and looking on him flowing thus softly I have wondered how it came about that the victim of the tragedy could possibly have been drowned. But I am told that the winter rains make a different river of him, a foaming, swirling torrent which would bear the strongest swimmer away. Indeed a mile higher up I was shown grassy dykes in a meadow, where the river turns a sharp corner, which I wrongly took to be relics of some Roman camp. I was informed that they were nothing of the sort, but merely the river's winter channel. It appears that when he is swollen and proud he disdains his banks at this point, and rushes headlong across the fields, taking a short-cut to his proper channel lower down. He may be very grand in winter ; in fact in places he is said to be a mile wide ; but I prefer him as he is now, a bright little trout-stream.

A trout-stream, I take it, is a stream that ought to hold trout, otherwise I could not give him the honourable title, for you shall not meet with a trout in a mile of him. For all his importance in winter he is not

yet old enough or wise enough to have thought out his latest and greatest triumph, the spotted monster which has made his name famous wherever angler fastens reel to rod. What trout he has to show are small ones borrowed from his tributaries. But though he fails in that respect, in the matter of chub it would be hard to find his equal. I know of a quiet corner a few hundred yards away, where in a clear spot between the rushes and the water-lily leaves lie some half-dozen chub of astonishing magnitude. Two of these are certainly the better part of a yard long. And there they will lie for ever, I suppose, for no lure avails against them. In the deep weedy holes here and there are great pike and perch, and everywhere are roach and dace. But July is still too early for bottom fishing. It is a month for meditation in the shade until the evening, when you may put on waders and fish this delightful shallow for dace with a dry fly.

One of the few books that I carry with me on a holiday is the *Counsels Civil and Moral* of Francis Bacon. It gives me a comfortable sensation of the possession of

wisdom without the trouble of acquiring it. As a matter of fact the only thing I have read in the volume since I have been here is the essay on gardens. It now lies open on the grass beside me at this passage: "The Green hath two pleasures. The one because nothing is more pleasant to the eye than green grass kept finely shorn; the other, because it will give you a fair alley in the midst, by which you may go in front upon a stately hedge, which is to enclose the garden."

Bacon had a fine feeling for grass, and I think he would have commended Lady Maud's Walk, which is some thirty-five yards of green velvet, separated from the river by the ancient wall, and from the world by a stately hedge of yew. It is really wonderful grass, close set with scarce a base weed in it. It reminds me of the Oxford gardener and the five-pound note. An American gentleman who was much struck with the lawns of one of the colleges drew the head-gardener aside and promised him a five-pound note if he would divulge the secret of lawn-making. The gardener agreed to the bargain, took the five-pound

note, and divulged the secret. "Well, sir, it's principally rolling and mowing. You roll the lawn and you mow the lawn, and when it's very dry you water it of an evening. And when you've done that carefully for five hundred years you'll have a lawn something like this." I wish I knew what the American said, or did.

There are two places where the wall has lost a few stones, and is thus low enough for a man to lean on his elbows and look over into the river twenty feet below, or across the stream to the great grass meadow opposite. There is something strange about that meadow, or plain, as from its size it deserves to be called. A man standing in it fishing in the river shall ever and anon hear sounds behind him as of men brushing hurriedly through the long dry grass, but when he looks round he shall only see the distant trees with the cows under them, and perhaps a plover or two wheeling across the cloud-flecked blue. Nevertheless there are men hurrying to and fro under the noonday sun, men whose footsteps can be heard but whose feet cannot be seen. There was a great battle fought here ages ago, before ever the

Norman had set his seal on the land, and doubtless the slaughter was immense. But why they should still hurry across the meadow in the sunlight I know not. Perhaps the persistent foot of the angler annoys them, and they follow him as who should say—

There let the wind sweep, and the plover cry,
But thou, go by.

I begin to think that this place, in spite of its beauty and ancient peace, is just a trifle too much in touch with the other world. I have never before lighted on a spot so be-haunted. Of Lady Maud and the phantom army across the river I have spoken. There are others as well. The old rectory house is full of them. It is the most delightful house in the world. You enter it, turn a corner, go up ten steps, turn another corner, go along a passage, turn another corner and go down three steps, and you are lost. I am lost two or three times a day. When this happens I sit down on a step and wait for a guide, and if no one comes within the next half-hour or so I cry aloud for aid. Little inconveniences of this kind do not matter here, where all is leisure ; but in a

house which is capable of losing half a dozen people all at once in different directions, you may confidently expect now and then to meet persons in strange garb who do not really exist.

There is somebody who walks past some of the ground-floor windows just about tea-time. You hear a rustling through the open window, and you glance hurriedly out just in time to see a misty figure go by. There is somebody who sits in the entrance hall in the morning, a boy of about fifteen, some say. There is a restless lady who patrols the stairs and passages. These are harmless enough, but there is another whom I would not meet for worlds. A delightful sitting-room looks away over the lawns and river to the west. This was once a bedroom, but one night, or rather one early morning, the sleeper was awakened by a clutch on his throat, and to his alarm saw in the half light a dark figure stooping over him. As he became wider awake it drew itself up, passed through bed and wall and disappeared. Since I heard this tale I do not sleep so well, more especially as I am informed that neither this sitting-room nor the rest of the house

is considered to be haunted much. *The* haunted room is the one which I have the honour to occupy. It looks harmless enough in the daytime too, a little long room with cheerful wall-paper and a tiny window, a real casement, half covered with a creeper. But at night the open half of the casement looks like an empty frame, and I lie awake waiting in some apprehension for a white face to come and fill it, and by way of passing the time of expectation my too active memory brings up every horrible old story that ever I heard.

What slaves we are to our nerves! In theory I do not believe in ghosts, but in practice I am only too ready to be convinced. I sincerely hope that the homicidal ghost will not be the agent chosen for my conversion. If his identity is guessed correctly he is not a person to be encouraged, for he is supposed to be the last of the mad monks of Medmenham. I don't suppose he cares greatly whether he is encouraged or not. *Oderint dum metuant* probably serves him for a motto, if he still retains any of his Latinity. Talking of Latinity, I wonder whether the Roman has any idea how important his

grim utterance has become as an instance of the consecutive use of *dum*. Why is it that in books people preparing for an interview with a ghost always fortify themselves with a revolver? Surely the only spirits to which that useful implement could do any hurt would be the household gods, and that would please a malevolent ghost of this kind rather than alarm him.

I suppose the idea is that the weapon makes a cheerful noise when fired, and so impresses the spirit of the departed with the great increase in man's moral magnificence that has come about since his day. But in spite of progress and moral magnificence, man, with his poor three dimensions, is at a great disadvantage in dealing with a being that comprehends four at will. Passive resistance seems his only chance of coming well out of the encounter; to say grandly with Teufelsdröckh, "Hast thou not a heart; canst thou not suffer whatsoever it be; and, as a child of freedom, though out-cast, trample Tophet itself under thy feet while it consumes thee? Let it come then; I will meet it and defy it"; or more humanly with that fine churchman

of the old school, when hard pressed by his obstinate parishioners, "My attitude, gentlemen, is to lie on my back and kick." Either way of meeting the enemy commands my admiration, and I wish they may occur to me when the moment of trial comes.

Latet anguis in herba. This garden seems to be alive with snakes. There goes the fourth I have seen to-day. Two of them swam across the river. A swimming snake is a graceful but uncanny sight; he goes through the water like a corkscrew with his horrid head upraised as though seeking whom he may devour. Fortunately these are only grass-snakes, but as a cautious Londoner I suspect that there are adders about too. A pretty moral tale of my childhood comes into my mind, which relates how two children clad in shining white robes were put into a garden with instructions to play about as good children should. They were allowed to do anything except dirty their garments and approach a certain old wall. Naturally the bad child not only dirtied its robe hopelessly but also went and climbed about the wall, whereupon it was bitten by an adder. How it all ended I

do not remember, but this is just such a wall, and I see in myself a certain likeness to that bad child. It is much too hot to climb the wall, but I am reposing in its shadow, while in the distance I can hear the good child singing a hymn. In the hot weather the Sunday school is held in the rectory garden close to the old sun-dial, and the opening hymn sounds very pleasant and soothing from afar.

A whimsical idea of an open-air cure for English music comes across me ; distance and the summer breezes have a most refining effect on the raw effort. But I fear it would not achieve its object. After all, it is not English music that is at fault, but that glorious and barbaric power, the British public, which insists on having what it wants, even if it has to pay for it. They that pay the piper must call the tune, and if the tune they call is a poor one it is not the piper's fault ; he has to live, poor man, in spite of the Voltaires, his critics. I do not know why I should have been betrayed into airing an urban grievance, unless it is that I have not yet got over my indignation at hearing, on the first evening of my stay

here, the bray of a concertina, which, after a few preliminary and unpremeditated rural effects, plunged recklessly into the latest atrocity, a hideous ode written by some cosmopolitan Pindar in commemoration of a victory gained in the lists of love by some commercial Hieron from the United States, a vile piece of romance by gaslight that had actually driven me out of London for rest and change. But these thoughts are out of keeping with Sunday school, or anyhow the expression of them may become so, and as I am not a great poet I must be careful. I wish I were a poet, a Wordsworth for instance. Then instead of talking nonsense I should be extracting immortality out of my surroundings by, shall I say, four quatrains descriptive of the startling effect produced on a dandelion by the singing of a children's hymn, as witnessed by the recumbent but accurate poet.

But who am I that I should be irreverent? I do not forget that of the two voices "one is of the deep." Let me think of something else. Somebody, I think it was Sydney Smith, said that the further he went West the more convinced he became

of the abiding truth that the wise men came from the East. I wonder if the evidence is sound. How else should it have come about that I was invited to play for the village team yesterday when the captain found that the eleventh hour had come without its man? I acquired no glory, and I helped my side not a whit; one catch indeed came in my direction, and I stretched out unwilling hands,—to miss it. However, the ball smote my thumb with great violence, so I must have conquered my natural timidity to some extent. In days of old, when I was a constant cricketer, I used to be rather skilful at missing the ball by a few inches only after an obvious effort to reach it, so that to all appearances I was a well-intentioned, if unsuccessful, field; but now I am sadly out of practice and my thumb is still painful.

I am told that the bowling of the other side was nought. In fine cricketing phrase, "the trundlers rolled up tosh." That may have been so in fact, but to me the uttermost "tosh" has a habit of being very fast and alarming. I did make one run by accident, but it was not accounted to me for

merit ; at least it did not appear in my score, and I have no doubt that ethically they were right in calling it a bye, and so do not complain. We were beaten, which I regret, though as a mere substitute I do not feel that the responsibility is mine. One of our umpires was accused of umpiring for his side, which produced a lengthy and heated discussion in the field. Much testimony was borne and great irony brought to bear on the situation,—and the heart of the opposing captain was moved within him that he spake, “Well, if you want the game, we’ll give it you now.” Thereafter he retired to the deep field and took no further interest in the proceedings for fully half an hour. Nevertheless he returned in time to bowl me out, which was inconsistent of him, as his side was winning all along. When a man acts the part of Achilles he ought to do it thoroughly.

I wonder why it is that one’s temper is so much more uncertain when one is engaged in amusement than when one is occupied with the affairs of life. I once knew a man who was universally beloved and respected until in an evil hour he was persuaded to

make trial of what is known as scientific croquet, an absurd game with boundaries and all kinds of needless difficulties. He rapidly became an enthusiast and less rapidly something of an expert ; and in exact proportion as his reputation as a player increased so did his value as a social unit decline, and at last all the ladies in the neighbourhood refused to play with him because his language was so unnerving. But when he was not engaged in playing croquet, a thing which became somewhat rare, those who were intimate with him said he was still the well-mannered man he had ever been. I suppose he belonged to that large class of Englishmen who cannot endure to be beaten, a virtue no doubt in great matters, but in small ones something of a nuisance.

Cricket is exhausting ; at least I suppose it is the cricket that makes me feel so commonplace. I am dropping into that condition in which a man might easily compose moral maxims and glory in so doing. That I will never permit while I can help it, therefore for a while I will think and say no more.

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Tea-time, did you say? No, I have not been asleep, only lost in profound meditation. Has the Sunday school gone? Good! What, you have found three of the bowls on the tennis-lawn? And they have been gnawed? All right, I'm coming. Well, I was right in exonerating Lady Maud, but I wonder I didn't think of the dogs. And now for my well-earned tea.

XII

THE MYSTERY OF A THAMES SALMON

“AMARYLLIS,” said William with studied carelessness, “is thinking of taking up fishing.”

I did not encourage him, merely saying “Oh!” in as non-committal a tone as I could manage.

He went on rather dubiously, “She wants to catch salmon, because they make such good presents.” I nodded politely, but did not comment on his statement. William has been married to Amaryllis for three months, and is the most dutiful of husbands.

He seemed a little dashed by my lack of sympathy, and relighted his pipe, which had gone out. Then he returned gallantly to the charge. “And so, you know, we

thought I'd better come and see you, because you know about fishing, and could tell us what to do and where to go. It'll be awfully good of you. Amaryllis suggested that you might go out with us next Saturday and put us in the way of it. Where shall we go?"

Having got thoroughly into his subject, William acquired confidence, and his concluding question took, I thought, a good deal for granted. He has not yet got over his delighted wonder that so unworthy a person as himself should have been chosen to render domestic obedience to Amaryllis, and he is still inclined to exact for her extra-mural obedience on the part of his friends, which, to do us justice, we are in general very willing to accord, for she is the most charming little autocrat in the world.

Nevertheless there are occasions on which one must obey with judgement, and when William pointed out that, even though I was going to fish the Itchen on Saturday, and even though there were no salmon there, still Amaryllis might be willing to content herself with trout—large ones—I

hastened to exercise the judgement aforesaid.

Itchen trout, I assured him, were not to be caught in a day, even by Amaryllis. Was he aware, I asked, that one of the most noted experts living had only killed one small fish during the whole of his first season? Did he think that his wife would be willing to persevere at least as long? I put the case somewhat strongly, because I had a vision of keeper Jobson's face when he should come upon the wedded pair seated side by side and dangling lobworms in a hatch-hole.

Fortunately William saw the point, and was convinced that Amaryllis would require more speedy success, and besides it was salmon she wanted, not trout. He invited other suggestions. I gave him some. I told him what were the chances of a young and uninfluential married couple in the matter of salmon-angling. I forget now what the figures were, but they roughly represented a cost of from ten to a hundred guineas per pound of fish, according to the locality of the fishing, and they considerably lengthened William's face.

He said he had no idea that it would be so costly a business. They could of course, as his wife had intimated, lessen the outlay somewhat by borrowing the necessary implements from me, but even so it required consideration. He would go home and talk it over with Amaryllis in the light of the information that I had so kindly given him. He went, and for some days I heard no more of the matter, which seemed just as well. It would be absurd if these two young people were really to add the angling fever to the other woes of married life.

Then came a note to me from Amaryllis. "Please come to tea," it ran. "We have found out where we can catch salmon for nothing"—she underlined the word—"and I want to show you how wrong you were."

One rather likes to be shown how wrong one was by Amaryllis, so I went and found her triumphant. "There," she said, giving me a little slip of newspaper as I took my teacup, "what do you think of that? Willy said that what you didn't know about fishing wasn't worth knowing. Is that worth knowing, please?"

Amaryllis's eyelashes curl upwards at the

end, and can look very mischievous, but it was not my fault if William had misrepresented me as an oracle on the subject of my particular hobby. That he should apologise for me then by saying that "Everybody is liable to make mistakes" I regarded as my misfortune, and I proceeded in self-defence to read the newspaper cutting.

It was headed "Salmon for the Thames," and stated in a few words that "a further consignment of young salmon had been liberated" by the association which undertakes that laudable work. In fact, the paragraph closely resembled others that I had seen before, and I did not feel that it required any particular comment or that it possessed any particular significance. I looked to Amaryllis for enlightenment, and was told without delay that if some people put salmon into the Thames other people could take them out again, and, moreover, could make presentation thereof to Aunt Elizabeth and other objects of deserved esteem.

"Certainly," agreed William weightily; it seemed that he did not object to being a little oracular himself—when it could

be done in the safe form of conjugal agreement.

It may be that subsequent events found me too ready to take the broad downward path, that I lost for a moment—for a good many moments—the frank-faced candour that should be an angler's proudest quality. But I would plead that I conscientiously endeavoured to explain to the pair what the paragraph signified, and that they steadily refused to be convinced. Also, as I have mentioned, Amaryllis's eyelashes are not to be disregarded in a discussion.

"It says salmon," she asserted, with a little toss of her head. "If it meant parrs, or whatever you call them, it would say so."

"Undoubtedly," William threw in.

"I don't believe you know anything at all about it," she continued with dignity, "you weren't there. I believe they put in quite big salmon, so that they might begin to fish for them at once. I call it very wise of them, and very stupid of you to be so obstinate." Amaryllis's eyelashes almost touched her cheek, and betokened that their mistress was quite hurt about it. I gave way.

"You may be right," I admitted. The

eyelashes left the cheek, and Amaryllis looked up brightly.

"I believe you were only teasing me," she said, "and to make up, now you admit I am right, you must come and help us catch them."

"You must, old man," William added ; "can't do less."

So it came about that not long afterwards three persons were seated on three Windsor chairs in a punt anchored in a certain back-water of the Thames. Two of them were prepared to give battle to any salmon that might be in the vicinity ; the third (myself) was resignedly acting as philosopher and guide. It had seemed inadvisable to enlist the services of a professional fisherman, for it is not every fisherman who can enter into the spirit of a delicate situation. Amaryllis was confident that she was going to catch a salmon, and she expected a show of confidence in those around her. Anything like laughter or even doubt she would never have forgiven. William also would dutifully have shown resentment.

So I put lobworms on barbel hooks for them, explained (in answer to certain initial

complaints) that they had not been provided with eighteen-foot fly-rods because the water was the wrong colour for the fly, and generally endeavoured to seek peace at the expense of veracity. After all, I can bait a hook, and I know as much of the haunts of Thames salmon as the next man. I hoped, too, that a long day spent in vain would cool Amaryllis's enthusiasm, and that after it the incident would be regarded as closed, even at the expense of Father Thames's reputation as a salmon river. It was possible, of course, that she might ascribe failure to my inefficiency, but in that event she would not be unappeasable. If she were ever to learn that she had caught no salmon because there were none to catch, I should never be forgiven for letting her fish in error.

The day wore on. We sought several fresh beats (save the mark!), but never a touch indicated that salmon or anything else fancied lobworms on leger tackle. We lunched, and I held forth at some length on the uncertainty of salmon-fishing. I amended the ancient Thames story (of the man who caught a brace of ten-pound trout

the first day he fished the river, five years ago, took a house on the banks on the strength of it, and has been there ever since fishing early and late without touching another) and gave it them. In my version he caught two twenty-pound salmon early in the sixties, but the other details were the same.

Amaryllis was plainly impressed, and began to eye the river doubtfully. Then there was a momentary excitement over a small perch which attached itself to William's lobworm. It excited her contempt as being a mere "common" fish, and was returned. A little later we boiled the kettle and had tea, and I told the story of the ardent but unfortunate angler who, since early boyhood, had been wandering from river to river throughout the United Kingdom, fishing day after day, but had never yet caught a salmon, though he once hooked and lost what his gillie said might have been a sea-trout. It was an almost probable story, and very convincing. Amaryllis looked at her rod with distaste, and feared she would never *really* have patience enough for fishing. In fact, all was going well. It was

nearly time to go ashore for the train; she had had her day's salmon-fishing, and was in a fair way to be persuaded that the fault of failure was not mine but fate's. And all would doubtless have been well if she had not soon afterwards had a bite, and, after a severe tussle, succeeded in landing the fish.

It was a three-pound chub, plump, silvery, and, as such a fish is apt to be, imposing. I was about to disclose its identity to Amaryllis, who was still palpitating with excitement, when William, looking at it judicially, said suddenly, "It *is* a salmon, by Jove!" That did the mischief. Amaryllis's secret suspicions were confirmed, and she at once agreed with him enthusiastically. She had seen salmon in shops, and they were just such big bright fish as this. Its head was, perhaps, a trifle big, and some of its fins were red, but in all other respects it was just what it should have been.

I shrugged my shoulders; their minds were made up, and it was no good saying anything, for they would not now have believed me. I merely observed ironically

that its head and fins might be accounted for by their owner's having been a long time in fresh water. They took me seriously, and said that it doubtless was so. After that we had to pack up in a hurry and catch our train. Amaryllis was all smiles and enthusiasm during the journey back to town (luckily we had the carriage to ourselves), and when we parted at Waterloo she thanked me prettily for my trouble, and announced that she was going to send the lovely salmon to Aunt Elizabeth that very night.

I went home wondering what the recipient would think of the gift when it came to table, and hoping that I, at least, might not hear of the matter again. I did not for some days, but about a week afterwards it was recalled to my memory rather violently by One in Authority, who met me and waved a journal at me. "Have you seen this?" he asked.

I had not seen that, and was promptly shown. The journal was the *Hourly Alarm*, and in it was an article entitled, "Salmon return to the Thames: Lady's Remarkable Capture." With many sub-headings, such

as "Netted after the ninth leap," the article gave a grotesque but recognisable version of Amaryllis's exploit, and, after a paragraph of superlatives, wandered into a remarkable life-history of the "king of fish," stating how it always works up rivers to feed and down them to spawn, and attributing the return of salmon to the Thames to a food-supply increased by the winter floods.

"This is important," said the One in Authority, "not the gas, of course, but the fact." I gasped, and begged him not to take too much on trust, but somehow I could not tell him why I was so warm about it. He seemed surprised, but thanked me. But he had, he said, the best of reasons for believing that the fish was a real grilse; he had ascertained the lady's name and address (William must have been talking in the city), and he proposed to call upon her without delay. With that we parted.

Events have moved rapidly since then. I met the One in Authority yesterday morning, and he was a very angry man. "It had a big head and red fins," he explained shortly. "It is disgraceful that

these rumours should be published as facts in this way."

The lady, he explained, had been herself misled, and apparently by some experienced angler who was with her. The name of that angler he intended to ascertain, and his tone implied dire consequences to the person in question. The One in Authority does not like having his time wasted over trifles.

When I got home I found a note from Amaryllis saying that doubts had been cast on the authenticity of her fish, and commanding me instantly to write letters to *all* the papers giving my word as an angler that it was a salmon. Even Aunt Elizabeth was doubtful about it.

Lastly, this morning I find a paragraph in the *Hourly Alarm* headed, "Thames Salmon: Cruel Hoax on a Lady," and filled with caustic observations about a certain gentleman who is responsible for the whole mistake, and who is in plain words invited to explain his conduct. So I am just throwing a few clothes into a portmanteau, and am leaving town for an indefinite period. Letters will not be forwarded.

XIII

THE MIDLAND BROOK

ONE knows quite well what a brook is, but I am rather puzzled as to how to define it. In scientific language, I suppose, it would be classed as a feeder or a tributary, but neither of these definitions can be regarded as satisfactory; the first is too utilitarian, and the second is too suggestive of Cæsar and other forms of exact knowledge. Nor do we find it more happily placed in the popular idiom. A brook is not a river, nor is it a ditch; the one name is inexact, the other insulting. A brook is——, but I am still puzzled, and must go to the task more subtly. When you find a stream that is neither so great but that a reasonably active man encumbered with rod, landing-net, and creel can without rashness attempt to jump across it at least three times in every mile,

nor so small but that it is capable of maintaining a few trout, then you may conclude that what you have found may be a brook—*may*, because there are also burns and becks which would fulfil the conditions laid down. As a rule, it is easy to distinguish a burn or beck (except for the Hampshire beck they are practically the same) from a brook. The main point of difference is mud. Your right-minded brook is rich in mud, while your burn has little or none, and seeks to make up for the deficiency by rocks and shingle. The Hampshire beck, so far as I know it, is a thing by itself, a sort of miniature chalk stream readily to be distinguished from a brook by the clearness of its water and the consistency of its bed, which is hardly more muddy than a northern burn. If there is mud, it is not a beck at all, whatever the natives may call it, but a brook.

I have been at some pains to draw these distinctions, because I do not wish it to be thought that I am singing the praises of the small stream in general. The burn has received more than its share of adulation from angling writers, and I cannot but

think that it has deteriorated in consequence. It has begun to realise its own importance and is puffed up with pride, and it now takes as good care of its trout as the Itchen itself, which, when you consider that the said trout average some six to the pound, is clearly monstrous. There may perhaps be yet a burn or two in those very remote parts of the kingdom to which the invention of printing has hardly penetrated which are still unspoiled by education. Mr. Andrew Lang knows one, and guides us to it after this fashion : "When, O stranger, thou hast reached a burn where the shepherd asks thee for the newspaper wrapped round thy sandwiches that he may read the news, then erect an altar to Priapus, god of fishermen, and begin to angle boldly." This does not help us much to the discovery of the burn, but it induces the reflection that sandwiches wrapped in newspaper are not at all nice, and unless the angler has reason to believe himself in the neighbourhood of the precious stream I think he would do well to wrap his sandwiches in something else. But perhaps Mr. Lang has calculated on his doing so, and thus renders his burn doubly

secure. For my part, I know the burn not. Of those which are known to me, most are under the delusion that they are salmon-rivers at the least, and worth about a guinea a foot in good golden currency. Nor would it now do any good if one endeavoured to undeceive them ; the mischief has gone too far, and so they had better be left to their wrong-headed pride.

With the brook, the honest, solemn, Midland brook, it is different. No one sings its praises ; few people even realise its possibilities. It receives, perhaps, a certain amount of unthinking acknowledgement from the neighbourhood as presenting some difficult jumps to a young horse ; but only to one or two is it given to understand that in this sluggish obstacle to the field are such trout as those who fish in burns can only dream of. I grant that the appearance of the brook is against it : the water is thick, not muddy exactly, but of a dark complexion which makes it impossible to see to the bottom where it is over eighteen inches in depth ; the bottom is principally mud or muddy clay, and the round sullen pools are full of old stumps and branches : the

whole is lamentably suggestive of eels. And yet it contains trout, real trout, short, thick fish seldom weighing less than a pound, and sometimes as much as three pounds.

Young Farmer John knows all about them, and in answer to discreet questions admits that he generally gets a brace of fish, and often two brace, of which one at least is a two-pounder. Once he got as many as five brace on a single afternoon early in April. But then John only goes out when there has been a heavy storm and the water is muddy, and he fishes always with a big worm. He does not seem to think much of the brook and the trout. They are only fish to him, not the chiefest jewels in his crown and worth more than their weight in gold ; it might be wagered that he thinks much more highly of his rabbits. I feel that in asking his permission to fish in the mile and a half that runs through his land I am taking advantage of his ignorance of the proper balance of things ; but, as usual, conscience is grasped by the throat and squeezed into acquiescence. "Why, yes," he says cheerily, "fish as

much as you like, but I'm afraid you won't catch much with the water so low."

The fact that the brook has not been found out has its advantages. Permission to fish in a recognised trout-stream is not granted thus easily and ungrudgingly. In the event, the stock of fish in the water is not materially diminished. The brook is visited perhaps four times; the first day the catch is nothing at all, the next two days yield a brace of fish each, and the last day (there has been some rain in the interval), under favour of Providence, results in four nice trout. But, as John observes, there are plenty left, and I take his word for it willingly, though it is only about once in a season that you can form any sort of estimate of how many trout a Midland brook really does hold. On some warm July evening, perhaps, they may suddenly take it into their heads to rise all together, and then in pools which you have fished over and over again, and in which you are ready to swear there is not a single trout, you shall see five or six good fish feeding steadily. But on other days and evenings you shall not see a sign of fish; the brook seems absolutely lifeless except

for the water-skaters and the occasional bubbles caused by an eel, and you fish on without the least encouragement, until you begin to doubt whether there is a trout in the stream at all. But if you are lucky enough to be at hand on the one evening, and to happen upon the right fly, you may make up for a good many blank days.

To be successful in brook-fishing needs a long and patient apprenticeship. It takes years to understand even one brook; but there is this much of consolation in the matter, that when you thoroughly know one you are much better able to cope with others, for they all have many characteristics in common. They all have much the same variations of stream and pool, of mill-head and mill-tail; they all abound in old stumps and willow-roots; and they all have an occasional waterfall or weir, with a floodgate in the pool above it. So it comes about that the best places for trout in one brook have their counterparts in another, and the practised eye can detect them at once. It does not follow, of course, that the fish are to be caught; but it is something to know where one has the best chance of catching them,

and to feel that one is not through ignorance fishing in spots where no trout can possibly be.

Now for brook-fishing a man must have an open mind ; he must not be wrapped up in theories, or too submissive to public opinion. If one method of fishing seems to him more likely to succeed than another, he must be prepared to adopt it, and must to a certain extent disregard what is considered dignified in a sportsman. He should be ready to—— But it occurs to me that all this preamble may have prepared the reader for the worst, so I hasten to say that I do not mean the setting of night-lines or the use of a net. I only intended delicately to introduce the question of the worm. The matter is simple enough in reality. Some parts of a brook cannot be fished with a fly, by reason of the bushes and trees on the banks, and in other parts (except on that one evening) the angler might throw flies for ever without getting a rise. Therefore, if these parts are to be fished at all, there is only one thing for it—a worm. Even in the parts of the stream where a fly can be used with

effect, I do not stand out for strict and invariable orthodoxy. An Alexandra—the pot-hunter's pet — will sometimes kill a brook trout which would not look at an ordinary fly, and in that case I think its use perfectly legitimate. In fact, it comes to this: brook trout are so hard to catch by any means short of actual violence that the angler need have no scruples about trying anything up to the said limit. He will have been fortunate if at the end of a day's fishing, during which he has tried every known lure, his basket contains two brace of fish, and may justly look for applause even though he took them all with a worm.

I am not sure, though, that the worm is altogether the best bait, except when the water is very thick. A rather large March brown has served me excellently at times, and as a general rule I should say that the fly quite holds its own. Whether it should be used wet or dry depends entirely on local conditions. As a rule, one is only too thankful to be able to get a fly onto the water anyhow; but here and there one always finds a certain amount of open water, and if in it a fish or two may be seen rising,

a dry fly may be put over them with advantage. Dry or wet, only one fly should be used, and it should be rather larger than those employed on a river. There is also another method, which I have not mentioned, well worth trying on summer evenings, and that is dibbling with a real moth or some other large insect. I incline to think that the man who fishes in this way is the truest disciple of Izaak Walton, who loved it beyond all other kinds. But how you shall get your fish out when you have hooked him is entirely a matter for yourself to arrange with Providence.

Prepared, then, to fish as seemeth him best, the angler will proceed to investigate the stream. Let us take Farmer John's water as the scene of his operations, for it is typical of the brook in general. It includes two disused and dilapidated mills, about a mile apart, with their mill-pounds and mill-tails, backwaters and weirs, if that name can be given to little falls about five feet wide. As the mills have not been working for years, there is only a trickle of water running under their wheels, and the tails below are shallow and weedy and not worth fishing. The

pounds above are in consequence stagnant and also weedy in parts, but they are fairly deep, in places as much as five feet, and they hold the largest trout in the brook. The lower one widens out to about thirty feet close to the mill, and is some forty yards long. The other is longer, narrower, and deeper. It is not of much use to fish them in the daytime, but in the evening a fish or two may be found rising round the hatch-hole above the weir, or at the top end where the water is shallower. Then a fly at the end of a long line may tempt a heavy fish. In the daytime the best places to fish will be the little weir-pools and the backwaters below them, because the main current of the brook runs by this channel now that the mills are not working. The weirs are the choicest spots of all, so we will make our way to the lower one first.

At first sight it does not look promising for fishing. From the mill-pound it is a drop of about six feet to the pool below, and the angler finds that the wall above is the only point from which he can possibly fish, for the weir-pool is a sort of harbour framed in bushes, through which no human ingenuity could insinuate a rod unless an axe

were employed for half an hour first, while across the middle of the pool, just where it is deepest, lies the trunk of a recumbent willow with projecting branches. This leaves about three square yards for fishing, and that leaves no room for sentiment. A worm is essential to the fishing of this place, and with a worm shall it be fished. The angler has brought a stiff little fly-rod, nine feet in length, which is sturdy enough for worm-fishing and at the same time able to throw a fly a long distance when a heavy tapered reel-line is used with it ; it is just the thing for brook-fishing, in which power is required, combined with shortness. He fits it up and attaches a strong worm-trace weighted with a small bullet to the running line ; he uses a large hook, on which he puts a small lobworm, hooking it in the middle and once only, for this gives it more freedom to wriggle, and so attract the fish. Then he drops his baited hook into the rush of the fall, and waits. Thames trout-fishers know well that the trout in a weir lie just where the water seems roughest, right under the foam. The fact is, that immediately under the fall the commotion is merely superficial ; deeper

down the water is quite calm, and the fish may rest there in comfort, and if any tempting morsel comes over their heads they can seize it in an instant.

The worm has not been in the water a minute before there is a slight twitch at the line, and the angler knows that he has a bite. There is no violent rush ; the fish is at home, and need not move more than an inch or two. An unpractised hand would hardly realise that the tremor meant anything, but the angler understands it, and after giving the fish a few seconds to get the worm well into its mouth, he strikes. Then is proved the wisdom of his strong tackle. It is no joke at any time to play a trout of a pound and a half in three square yards of water with certain breakage all round ; add to this the fact that the man with the rod is standing six feet above the fish, and you get as delicate a combination of difficulties as could well be imagined. He can do nothing but hold on and trust in Providence. Providence does not desert him, and the trout's repeated efforts to reach the old tree and the bushes are checked by the uncompromising policy forced upon the man, and at last the victory

is won, or rather the fish is beaten. Then arises another problem: how is it to be landed? The victor casts himself on the ground and tries to reach down over the wall with his landing-net, but finds that he cannot come within six inches of the water. He must hazard all. Still lying down he lays the rod on the grass and takes the line in his left hand, and then with his heart in his mouth lifts the fish out of the water until he can put the net under it. It is a risky manœuvre, but good tackle will always stand more strain than one expects, and one can afford to take an occasional liberty with it. The principal danger is that the fish, finding itself in the air, may begin to kick, or the hook may lose its hold. But our angler succeeds this time, and secures his first fish, and is mightily pleased about it. There is nothing more important to success in brook-fishing than to catch one's first fish early in the day; it prevents the despair and incredulity which are only too likely to fill the soul when one has angled for hours without seeing a trace of a fish.

He puts his trout in his basket on a bed of long grass, and considers his next move.

He must give the weir-pool a rest ; though, if he returns to it presently, it is quite likely that it may yield him another fish. The little backwater, which winds for some hundred yards of ripple and pool before it joins the main brook, seems to him the most likely place, so he determines to fish it next. It is a tiny stream, not more than a yard wide in most parts, though the pools at the bends are all of a fair depth. It is overhung with trees and bushes, and is altogether most difficult to approach. Moreover, the water is much clearer than that of the main brook, so clear in fact that it would be worse than useless to fish it with a worm. He must try and throw a fly on such bits of it as he can get at. Accordingly he takes off his worm-trace and replaces it by a short fly-cast on which is a large March brown. Then he takes a circuitous route through the meadow to the point where the two streams meet. There is generally a trout here, so as he approaches the bank he finds it expedient to go on three legs, as Charles Kingsley phrases it, until he is within about two yards of the water. Then, crouching as low as he can, he endeavours to flick his fly between two

willows about four feet apart onto the pool. As happens three times out of four in this sort of fishing, the March brown refuses to have anything to do with water or trout, and clings tenaciously to one of the willow twigs. The angler jerks at it, hoping to free it without moving, but the wretched thing only clings the tighter. What happens then depends on the nature of the man. He may pull till the cast breaks, put on another fly and endeavour to reach the water again, or he may rise patiently and release the willow. In the one case the odds are that the second fly will join its fellow on the twig, for in brook-fishing accidents have a habit of repeating themselves ; in the other, any trout that may be lying abroad in the pool will of course see him and depart hurriedly.

After this occurrence he goes cautiously along the bank, lurking behind trees, crouching behind bushes and losing flies. I would draw a more cheering picture if I could, but truth is precious, and in fact he does lose many flies. It requires a deal of skill and more of luck to flick a fly with any accuracy, and flick he must, for there is not a spot in the whole backwater to which it is

possible to make a legitimate cast. Flicking a fly is an indescribable process by which you make it pass round or through a tree, under a branch and over a bush, until it falls safely upon a square foot of water. If it gets round, under, and over the initial obstacles, the chances are largely in favour of its alighting on the bush which always waits for it on the opposite bank, and which is generally inaccessible. Therefore it stands to reason that flies must be lost.

Thus for thirty yards or so he wrestles with circumstance without moving or seeing a fish, but presently he comes to a better spot, which is clear of bushes on his own side, though there is a tree. Kneeling behind it he can get his fly onto the water more or less easily. He peeps round the trunk, and finds that he overlooks a tiny rapid above a pool. And there, by all that is fortunate, is a trout lying in the channel between the weeds, a light-coloured fish of about a pound. He trembles a little as he prepares to flick, for it is nervous work fishing for a trout when you can see him, but it does not prevent him from flicking the fly just where it ought to go—a few inches above the trout's

nose. Much flicking and little water have dried the March brown, and it floats nicely down-stream. As, other things being equal, it was morally certain he would, the fish takes it in a business-like way as soon as it reaches him, and the angler strikes. For about a quarter of a minute there is a sharp tussle ; the trout dashes about in the shallow water, and the man in the foolishness of his heart thinks he has him ; but finding that the weeds are not strong enough to help him, the fish soon turns and bolts down-stream into his hole, and then the fly comes away.

It is disappointing, but natural. Pike tackle would hardly hold a trout in this water, where it is only a distance of a foot or two to the nearest root, and only by the merest luck could a light fly-cast be expected to do so. With human inconsistency the angler, who in his calmer moments would defend the beauty of brook-fishing against all comers, mutters a wrathful wish that he had had the Atlantic or some other open piece of water in which to play the fish. Rather humbled, he then continues his way up-stream. In a deep, dark pool at a bend he

sees another fish rise, and again he manages to flick his fly aright. The trout takes it almost before it touches the water, and retires under a root with promptitude. The angler vows that this time he will not be done out of his lawful prey, and without pausing to doff boots or stockings he climbs down the bank and commits himself to the deep. He sinks into the mud at once—sinks horribly; but nothing daunted he wades out into the pool until he can reach the root with his net. Then the fly comes away again, and he returns to shore wet, muddy, and furious, and, sad to say, sits down and abuses brooks and brook-fishing for many minutes. Eventually, however, he becomes calmer, reflects that after all he has one good fish in his basket, and decides to go back to the weir-pool and try for another with a worm. This he does, but not getting another bite he soon leaves it and turns to the main brook.

For about a hundred yards above the floodgate and the weir it is quite a considerable stream, deep, sluggish, and in parts twenty feet wide. To-day it wears its most lifeless aspect, and his fly falls absolutely

unheeded. Presently he finds himself by the side of a big pool below a brick bridge built for Farmer John's hay waggons. There is not a sign of a moving trout, but he fishes over it carefully, and at last, almost under the arch, he gets a rise and hooks his fish. It fights gamely, but in this open pool it is comparatively simple work to land it, and it duly goes into his basket, a nice little trout of nearly a pound. Then he goes on upstream feeling more cheerful. There is, it must be confessed, rather a monotony about the pools of a brook, especially if one is not sure whether they contain trout, and one never can be sure unless one has seen them on that July evening. They are solemn, I might almost say sulky, pieces of heavy water, and it seems of little use to fish them. Our friend catches nothing and sees nothing for the next half-mile, though he tries the worm as well as the fly. Then at a sharp corner he finds a pretty gravel shallow, at the head of which he gets another rise. He misses the fish, though, and consoles himself with the thought that it was only a small one. A quarter of a mile higher up the brook runs under a road, and on a shallow

above the bridge he sees another fish, a big fellow, which, unfortunately, also sees him, and darts back under the bridge.

Yet another quarter of a mile and he comes to the second mill. The backwater here is short and shallow, but the weir is very promising, forming quite a large pool at the back of the mill. It is not easy to fish, as it is surrounded by tall osiers, but by kneeling on the bank and flicking on rather a large scale he manages to get enough line out. There is very little water coming over the weir now, and the pool is clear and still. The bottom is covered with that dark-green mossy weed in which trout love to lie. At the very first cast a trout rises out of the weed and is hooked, but it is only a little thing of an ounce or two, and he puts it gently back. It is not till he puts his fly right under the fall that he gets another rise, but then it is a good one, and a heavy fish feels the steel. It shows fine sport, and rushes about all over the pool, running out his line in grand style; but there are no dangerous places except a tree in the farthest corner, from which he manages to turn it, and in a few minutes he has it in his net, a

dark, burly fish weighing two pounds all but an ounce.

The pool is too much disturbed now for further fishing, so he leaves it, climbs up a high bank, and finds himself on the edge of the mill-pound. Farmer John's water ends with the meadow in which the pound lies, so he only has about a hundred yards more water at his disposal. The pound is narrower and deeper than the one below, and here and there it is overgrown with bushes. He follows it to the end of the meadow, looking out for a rising fish, but though it is now six o'clock he cannot find one. So he goes back to the deepest part by the hatch-hole and sits down to wait till he does see a rise. To while away the time he puts up his worm tackle, and throws it in on the chance of getting an eel. For a long time it remains untouched, but at last the line quivers a little, and he picks up his rod so as to be in readiness to strike, for you must not give an eel too long, or he will swallow the hook and cause you great tribulation. Soon the line begins to move slowly off, and he strikes. For nearly a minute the eel, or whatever it is, moves slowly about

in a small circle, and the angler congratulates himself on an easy capture. Then, without the least warning, there is a tremendous rush, twenty yards of line are off the reel before he realises what is happening, a great fish leaps out of the water a long way off, and all is silence. The angler winds in his line, reflecting on the perversity of things. It is not often that one can meet with one of the very big fish that these brooks sometimes hold, and when one does it is a pity to mistake it for an eel. That trout may have been anything over five pounds.

After this everything else seems of small importance, and though our angler catches another trout of about a pound in the weir-pool, he has to a great extent lost interest in his fishing, and presently he takes his rod down and starts off on his four-mile walk home. As things go he has not done at all badly, and his two brace of trout are at any rate well earned. Moreover, the big one is still there, and he can come again.

XIV

A SUBURBAN FISHERY

“ I WOULD cultivate the devil himself if he had any trout-fishing within twenty miles of London,” said my friend, with a note of regret in his voice—whether for the fishing or for the impossibility of utilising his undoubted social talent I am not prepared to say. The speech was perhaps a little rash (it is recorded on good authority that men have been taken at their word by the personality in question, to their subsequent regret), but there are doubtless not a few bold anglers in London who would not hesitate to echo it, even if they were considerably less safe in so doing than they are.

But the supposition belongs to the realm of vain speculation, for the devil himself would have his own task in acquiring the

fishing in the first place, and in the second, supposing that he performed it, one may safely assert that he would firmly refuse to be cultivated even for the sake of also acquiring a valuable soul ; a soul *is* a valuable thing, and my friend's, for all his freedom of speech, is worth more than most, but it is not so valuable as all that. Trout-fishing within twenty miles of London belongs to the world of dreams, where are also the elixir of life, the philosopher's stone, the rainbow's end, and other unrealisable delights, and the common man whose dreams do not come true must awake out of sleep and travel into a far country before he can get his fishing.

Trout and trout-fishing are not necessarily the same thing, or I should not speak thus from the depths. There are trout within twenty miles of London ; there are trout *in* London. A noble lord captured one with a fly quite recently from the lake in Buckingham Palace grounds. He even rose others ; or, as one of our less highly priced newspapers naïvely put it, others "made several bites" at his fly. This was a rainbow trout, a fact which adds its small

weight of significance to the evidence of the Americanisation of London ; there are rainbow trout also in the Serpentine. But while we view with pleasure the presence of rainbow trout in our lakes, we do not fish for them, and if we did we could not call it trout-fishing. Trout-fishing is too idyllic a thing to be imaginable within sight or sound of the great city. When my friend spoke his brave words he meant it, of course, to be understood that the trout-fishing in question was to be situate in a lovely valley ; the meandering stream was to flow through lush pastures over a bed of golden gravel, with ancient willows shading its deeper pools from the noontide glare ; wide-spreading oaks were to stand sentinel over the peaceful scene (not so near to the water as to cause risk to flies) ; the brook — it was to be little more — was to contain nothing but trout and good trout food ; and lastly, there was to be no sight or sound of human industry or pleasure, save one thatched and timbered cottage set away in a bower of roses by the lane, where the keeper was to dwell and give the angler tea at four of the clock. It is only fair to mention these things, lest

the reader might think a soul was offered, so to speak, for a mess of pottage.

Then, again, there are trout in several streams quite close to London ; there are trout in our suburban fishery, quite a number of them. But even those of us who are fondest of our stretch of river do not call it trout-fishing. We merely admit, on being pressed, that there are trout in it. We even admit that they are sometimes to be caught, but we are reticent as to the manner of the catching.

And yet it is hard to see why we should be, for our trout are highly civilised and seen in all arts and cunning, as is but natural when you reflect that they live within fifteen miles of the Marble Arch, know what a London fog looks like, and have recently made the acquaintance of the electric tram-car. Fish living thus in the heart of things must not be placed in the same category as the spotted rustics of Devonshire or Wales, nor are they to be beguiled with rustic lures. Let our keeper, who is quite without shame, put the matter baldly and plainly for the reader's enlightenment. "You take my advice, sir," he says, "and give 'em some-

thing big, something that will fall in with a splash."

Nor is *big* with him a mere euphemism, implying moderately large ; rather is it a meiosis concealing *enormous*. A two-inch salmon fly is what he alludes to ; its pattern is indifferent to him, so it shines very brightly and falls into the water with Aristophanic vehemence. And though a few of us spend long and patient days in floating each approved inconsiderable gnat, delicately poised on its hackles, over the unappreciative nose of Black Henry or Spotted Charlie, for the most part we agree with the keeper. And so it is our constant endeavour to find the latest and largest thing in salmon flies in the hope that novelty may meet with appreciation. There was once a red-letter day on which one of our fraternity caught no less than five trout, and I came upon him as he was landing the fifth. I begged that I might be permitted to inspect his fly, and found myself face to face with the unknown in all its magnificence. It had no wings ; it had no hackle ; it was just a resplendent glorious body of dazzling beads and silver and gold. My Jock Scott

rivalled it about as much as a partridge rivals a golden pheasant, and I went on my course saddened and caught nothing. But that brother understood the nature of our trout.

The reader may have noted a little while ago that I mentioned two of them by name, but he must not be surprised. All our more considerable fish have their names, though we cannot exactly say that they answer to them. Black Henry, for example, is a kind of landmark (or should I say watermark?), and he lies always on a little patch of gravel between the weeds, at the tail of the principal shallow of our water. By Black Henry you can tell whether the river is high or low. If it is high he will be a mere dark shadow on the bottom; if it is low you can count his spots—though there are other ways of ascertaining the state of the river, of course. Black Henry also marks the lowest point of the shallow where you may expect to find a trout; just as Long William up by the bridge marks the highest—the end of our water, in fact. Black Henry is somewhere between four and five pounds in weight. Long William is much heavier,

and is indeed the largest trout we have in this part of the stream ; he may be eight pounds or even more.

Between the points marked by these two fish you shall see some energetic angling done on any Saturday afternoon in full season.

“ Bless me,” you may exclaim with Viator, “ what salmon-fishing is here ! Are we not in Wales ? ” But you will soon become used to it, and after a while you will even enter into the spirit of the game. Let me exemplify. On the opposite bank there is an old willow which leans across the stream farther than the others and forms an eddy. It is a long cast, twenty-two yards at least ; but we use here powerful rods and heavy lines, and it is no great effort to pitch the Silver Doctor into the eddy. It falls with as great a tumult as the keeper's soul could desire, and then works its erratic way back towards our own bank. If you look carefully, and if the water is clear and the sun shining, you can see a long shadow lying a yard or two below the eddy and rather nearer our bank. That is Spotted Charlie, a favourite of mine. My object is to rouse

his imagination, and to stimulate him to rapid action by the sight of the impossible fly's jerky attractions.

Spotted Charlie weighs three or four pounds, and is invariably polite (which is why I love him); there, you may observe how he follows the Silver Doctor just to show that he is not insensible of the compliment. A yard or two in attendance, and he conceives that duty has been accomplished; then he returns to his own place with dignity. He will go through the same formality with any other monstrous fly you like to throw at him, but at the end of it all his own place will not miss him. Yet it is *just* possible that on some warm evening, in that brief interval between dusk and dark, he might attempt to destroy the silver-bodied alien that has invaded his feeding-ground (for, I take it, a trout only seizes a salmon fly out of ferocity), and then—then his position would be vacant for a smaller brother.

A few yards higher up lies Didymus, another big fish. He, as his name implies, is of a deeply suspicious nature, and the advent of an artificial fly, great or small, is

enough to cause his hurried departure. For this I am myself probably to blame. Two years ago I actually hooked him with a dry fly, a Wickham, at which he rose with the readiness of any troutling. How he disposed of the fly, and the yards of line of which he robbed me, I know not, but the incident is probably fresh in his memory. About fifty yards above him, a narrow islet, running down-stream from the bridge, divides the river into two channels. There are usually several trout round the point of this islet, and sometimes one may be caught here.

A year or so since there was a nice fish named Robert who lay always on the strip of golden sand between the two streams. He was much sought after by the fraternity because he was so plain to be seen, but he never rose at anything. On a day a fisherman angled for him indignantly for two hours, and in his determination to succeed was perhaps over-energetic, for he lost several flies in the bush that grows at the islet's tip. Finally, as his fifth fly took fast hold of a twig, he lost patience; taking off shoes and stockings, he waded out to recover

his property. To his surprise, the fish did not resent his approach, in fact took no notice of him ; and I blush to record that the irate brother took mean advantage, and kicked Robert very hard. So Robert disappeared, it is thought for good ; but I suspect him of living in anonymous seclusion on a shallow lower down.

Not very long ago a considerable sensation was caused by the intelligence that one of the brethren had hooked Long William with some gaudy fly, and had even played him for several minutes. The fish of course got off, as a trout of that size generally does, but the event has stimulated the fraternity to fresh exertions ; and it is hoped that some day—not this year, perhaps, or even next, but still some day—he may be hooked again. However, we never really expect to catch one of these patriarchs ; a brace of trout of a pound and a half each is the limit of our hope, and even to that we attain but seldom. Under the arches of the bridge do we have the best chance. There the stream ripples nicely, and the trout sometimes rise as trout should.

Above the bridge lies Eldorado, the un-

attainable. It is in fact a large mill-pool, where is a splendid mill-race gushing out over bottomless depths, which gradually shelve up to a wide shallow. Upon this forbidden pool the brethren often cast a discerning eye, and speculate on the probable weight of the trout that must inhabit it. Nor do they hesitate to speak of ten and even twelve-pounders, and sometimes, as they lean upon the bridge and give rein to their fancy, you may hear darkling hints as to what they would catch could they only find themselves standing in their waders on the shelf of that great tumultuous hole with their trusty spinning-rod in hand, and of course the card of invitation in pocket. But prophecy is somewhat akin to faith, as explained for us by the Sunday scholar; it consists principally in asserting what will happen in case of certain contingencies that will not arise. In this instance the contingency is the card of invitation, for the mill-pool is very strictly and (let me add) properly preserved. This is perhaps as well, for it saves the brethren from the possible fate of the prophet convicted of falsity, and at the same time allows them the pleasures

of imagination without the cold restraint of hard fact.

Notwithstanding all this I firmly believe that there *are* ten and even twelve-pounders in the mill-pool, and—but we will leave this subject and go down-stream; I am but human myself. So far I have spoken only of the trout in our river, but the other fish claim attention quite as deservedly. The stream used to be noted for the size and number of its dace; fish of three-quarters of a pound were common, and pounders were not unknown. The numbers have not fallen off. On a fine warm evening you may see them rising all over the river; but the average size of those caught has curiously deteriorated. It is an exceptional thing now to catch a dace of half a pound.

I hear that this phenomenon has been observed in other parts of the river as well as ours, but what the reason of it may be it is difficult to surmise. Possibly it is due to the decreasing volume of the stream, which, like all streams near London, is gradually shrinking in obedience to the insatiable demands of the water companies. But this explanation is not wholly satisfactory. The

river is still considerable and affords abundance of fish-food, and the quality of its water, which at one time was very doubtful, has been steadily improving of recent years.

Another explanation, which seems more likely, is that the fish are too numerous. A laudable custom prevails amongst the brethren—in fact it is more than custom, it is down in black and white as law—of returning all fish under certain specified sizes, and with admirable observance of the rules of what is sportsman-like the brethren interpret this law generously, retaining but very few of the fish they catch, and restoring to their element many that weigh much more than the prescribed number of ounces. This may have resulted in over-stocking. It is well known that an over-stocked trout-stream is in worse case than an under-stocked one, and the signs of it are unmistakable; but with coarse fish it is more difficult to tell. Certainly the condition of our dace has not fallen off; they are as game for their size as trout, and when they are in the mood give very pretty sport to the fly-rod.

Immediately below the shallow begin the

roach swims, which vary from three to five feet in depth. The brethren who fish for roach sometimes have exciting experiences. One day I came upon a brother sitting on his stool with an air of patient expectation, the tip of his roach-pole quivering, and his line running slowly but steadily out. He had, he explained, hooked something ten minutes before which had so far defied his efforts, inasmuch as he was fishing with a cast of single hair and could not employ force. He supposed it to be a big bream ; it was about forty yards away now, but he was not without hopes of landing it. Even as he spoke a great turmoil in the water upstream confirmed his views as to the distance the fish had travelled, and then he managed to turn it and gradually to recover his line. Some time later I had the pleasure of landing the bream for him, a great fish of nearly five pounds. It was a real triumph to have taken it with a single-hair line.

On another occasion I found a brother lamenting a misfortune that had overtaken him. A large bream, it appeared, had departed with a large portion of his tackle, including the float. I condoled with him,

and went on my way up to the shallow where I intended to fly-fish for dace. Just before I reached it, about a hundred yards above the spot where the brother was sitting, I perceived something which looked like a float, in fact was a float. It was proceeding rapidly up-stream, and the fish was evidently still on. Without the least expectation of accomplishing a miracle, I cast the fly at the lost property, and the miracle happened!

The fly took hold of the other line somewhere, and I found myself vicariously fast in a fish, which immediately quickened its pace as it felt the added strain. It sped up-stream and I sped after it, fearing every moment that the fly would lose its hold. Presently the fish jumped, and so declared that it was no bream. However, it had doubtless been weakened by its previous encounter, and before long I got it into the net, a trout of about three pounds. The fly, I found, had fastened on the ring of the float. Then arose the question: Had the fish been caught with a fly or with the gentles that the brother had been using? In the one case it was legitimate to keep

it, in the other forbidden. I discussed the problem with the brother until it became obvious that the decision must be speedy or the trout would succumb, and then decided to spare him. So he probably lives and thrives to this day, though I am still doubtful whether he did not gain his freedom on false pretences.

Below the roach swims are willows which shelter some heavy chub. Under one of them which leans across the stream lives a great trout, and is *said* to live a phenomenal perch. The trout I have seen, but the perch, which fable puts at four or five pounds, I have not seen, nor am I very credulous with regard to him. His suggested size makes him improbable, and it is scarcely likely that he would live in amity under the same tree as the trout. Neither of them could eat the other, it is true, but they would certainly disagree on most matters, and one (probably the perch) would drive the other away.

Leaving the willows we come to a point where the river broadens out and then divides, one channel running down to the mill, and the other to the weir. In this

broad water, as it is styled, are the pike. We boast ourselves second to none in the number of our pike. They weigh six ounces apiece, and we often make quite a large basket of them ; for they will take anything that is presented to them, and are particularly fond of salmon flies. In the channel running to the mill, however, which is not much fished, as it is shallow and weedy, there are a few larger ones. Current report weighs a solitary veteran for us at sixteen or seventeen pounds, but that is probably an exaggeration. Following the other channel we soon find a deep narrow reach bordered by ancient stumps. This is the abode of the perch, and here rare baskets have occasionally been made in September and October, which are the best months for perch here. There is another huge trout somewhere in the neighbourhood of this hole. Very occasionally he is seen to feed. He ploughs the river like a torpedo-boat, and the small fry leap out in shoals before him ; but he is too ancient and cunning to take a fly, and he has never yet attacked a spinning-bait, though he probably would do so if you could catch him on the

feed. But he is provokingly irregular in his habits, and it is likely that he feeds at night. There is another monster about a hundred yards lower down among the willows, who once took a roach-bait and destroyed most of the angler's tackle. He, too, is very rarely seen to feed.

This clump of willows, where the river turns a corner, is a favourite place for chub, which grow to a large size and are proportionately cautious. The heaviest of them hardly ever rise to a fly, but occasionally they bite well in the winter at cheese or lobworms. Some distance below the willows is the other shallow. There are usually one or two good trout here, as well as a plentiful supply of dace. After this the river turns two abrupt corners and then keeps a straight course for the weir. The weir-pool and the two hundred yards of stream below it are really the most fascinating piece of the fishery. Seated on the wall by the rush of water, you could easily imagine yourself buried in the country miles from even a market-town. The mill-house is the only building within sight, and its somewhat bold squareness of outline

is veiled by fine old apple-trees that surround it.

Everywhere else is the scenery of rural England, as this generation knows it, mile on mile of grass-land, dotted with oak and elm rising to faint blue hills in the distance. Sometimes I have longed for a field of golden corn on the other side of the stream, but golden corn is rapidly losing its honoured place in the Englishman's scheme of things, and in many a district where the harvest-song once resounded it is heard no more ; and the nation's cheap bread is made of bone-dust or some such nourishing material. The progress of civilisation, which has modified so many of our great thoughts, has had its effect on the proverb, too. We knew of old the dubious character of much that glittered ; now we are learning that not all that is golden is gold, or even to be bartered for it. There are compensations, though : long grass is sufficient of a nuisance when one is fly-fishing ; corn, which is taller, would vex the brotherhood still more.

But to return to the weir-pool : it is not very large or very deep, but it contains a

few ancient trout as well as the perch and coarse fish, and these trout have, until quite recently, been a source of displeasure to the fraternity. They flatly refused to be caught, whether by fly, live-bait, or spinning, saving two only—and one of these, being captured in the winter by a pike-fisher, had to be returned. Therefore the matter was taken into earnest consideration, with the result that the general feeling found voice in what practically amounted to a vote of censure on the inhabitants of the pool without definitely calling for their destruction. “If,” so approximately ran the expression of opinion, “a trout shall be taken by a brother who is bait-fishing, it may be retained.” There was a proviso as to the size of the fish, but it was not so strict as to hold out any hope for the veterans of the pool, should they be unwise enough to take the bait intended for barbel or bream, for which fish the fraternity in general, and two brothers in particular, at once began to display an unsuspected yearning.

Before very long it became a recognised thing for these two brethren to sit one on each side of the weir, each holding his leger-rod

and regarding the troubled waters with a hopeful expression, and waiting for the barbel and bream to begin to bite. For barbel and bream the common earth-worm in its largest size is as good a bait as you shall find, and doubtless their patience would have been rewarded had barbel and bream existed in the pool in any quantity. But of barbel and bream there is no considerable store there ; indeed, only one of each kind has been taken, I believe, during several years.

Nevertheless, the patience of the two anglers was not exhausted, and one day one brother was aroused by a shout from the other. Raising his eyes, he plainly perceived that his friend was fast in something heavy and vigorous which was hurrying round the pool. Like a true sportsman he hastened across the bridge with the landing-net, and after some exciting minutes had the pleasure of lifting out, not barbel or bream, but one of the veterans themselves. The fish was a noble specimen, weighing some ounces more than that five pounds which every honest angler hopes some day to achieve, and you may imagine the joy of the successful brother, who shook hands

with himself, his friend and the keeper, and generally failed to conceal the pride that was in him. Then, the first glow of triumph over, he remembered that his luncheon awaited him at an adjacent hostelry, and went off in a condition of great benevolence to consume it.

The other brother returned to his rod and ate meditative sandwiches with renewed hope; if one veteran had taken the earthworm intended for barbel and bream, why not another? For some time he angled on confidently; it seemed certain that he would have a bite in a minute. But somehow the bite came not, and an insidious doubt began to creep into his mind. Were there any veterans in his corner of the pool? If there were no veterans he could not expect bites. He looked across at his friend's corner; the eddy there certainly had a better appearance than his own. What if all the veterans lived in it? To cut a long story of mental strife short, he decided that he would make a trial of the other corner while the absent brother feasted, and he accordingly removed himself, his rod and his sandwiches, and became confident once more.

Though confidence certainly aids success it does not ensure it, and even in the new corner bites came not. It seemed, indeed, as if distance had lent enchantment to the view, and the doubt returned in even more insidious fashion. What if there were no more veterans left anywhere in the pool? This possibility was very discouraging, and he began idly to look about him. By his side was the bag containing the absent brother's earth-worms. He took it up and inspected the contents; they were notable earth-worms, finer and more considerable than his own. Still idly, he abstracted one and considered it, and after a while it seemed to him that it would be as easy to place it on his hook as to return it to the bag. This he accordingly did, and then, having committed the earth-worm to the deep, he began to meditate on other matters.

He was aroused by two occurrences, one the return of the successful angler, the other an undoubted pull at his top-joint. To this he gave his attention first, and answering the pull he found that he too had hooked a large fish, which behaved in much the same manner as the first veteran. The positions

were now reversed, and the newly returned brother hurried to his assistance ; between them they eventually landed what was obviously another and even more important veteran. It weighed, in fact, over six pounds. Now it was the second brother who failed to conceal the pride that was in him, and there was more shaking of hands, and by the time I reached the spot the very atmosphere seemed to rejoice ; the sun beamed more brightly and the waters plashed more merrily. Yet I suspect (though I will no more than whisper it) that the first brother may have reflected somewhat ruefully on the insistence of human appetites ; had he not gone away for his luncheon it was probable that both the veterans had fallen to his steel. Indeed, he said so — not grudgingly, but as one who states a fact—and commented on the turn of fortune that had inspired his brother to fish in *his* corner and employ *his* earth-worm.

This fact disposed of, however, all was joy. Now I, as has been said, came up when the rejoicing was at its height, and rejoiced also for a space. But presently it

seemed (to my unsuccessful mind) that these brothers were somewhat too fortunate ; nor did they seem disposed, like Polycrates, to make sacrifice against the evil chance, but rather spoke of glass cases, methods of preservation, and other pinnacles of achievement. Therefore I was reluctantly compelled to remind them that these veterans had been taken with the earth-worm intended for barbel and bream—a circumstance which I for one should blush to record on a glass case.

But they were full of argument. In the matter of Polycrates they pointed out that the cases were not parallel. Polycrates caught his fish after he had made his sacrifice ; there was no precedent for making a sacrifice after catching the fish. Further, they explained that there would be no necessity for anything about earth-worms to appear on the glass cases ; in fact, such an idea had not entered their heads. Lastly, and most forcibly, they said that I was jealous, and that if I had not captured a veteran it had not been for lack of effort ; had they not seen me angling for barbel and bream in the self-same manner but a

day or two before? In short, they reduced me to silence and shame.

Below the weir-pool is the "hut"—which, by the way, should have the honoured legend *piscatoribus sacrum* above its portal. It stands on piles right in the middle of the river, has a balcony running round it, and is connected with land by a wooden bridge. In the hut a layman might soon learn all the intimacies of the craft—such talk would he hear concerning the habits of all fish that swim, and the ways of catching them; such variety of tackling, of rods, of flies, spinning-traces, floats, hooks, reels, and landing-nets would he see. And he might note, if of philosophic habit, the subtle difference betwixt morning and evening. In the morning the brotherhood is brisk and full of hope; it has a long day all its own; it snuffs the pure air; it fits together its rod with speed; care and worry are things unknown. But in the evening the brotherhood lingers and dallies with regret; it has spent its long day, perhaps with inadequate result; it no longer snuffs the pure air—it breathes it in with low sighs; it takes down its rod slowly, almost

sadly : the shadow of London seems to be upon it once more. And so, still slowly (unless it absolutely *has* to catch a train), it crosses the bridge, passes along the river-bank until it reaches the keeper's garden, bids him and his wife good-night at the cottage door, and proceeds thoughtfully on its way to the station in the gathering dusk.

In the case of a fortunate brother who is accompanied by a veteran on his return journey the melancholy subsequent on irrevocable delights is no doubt sensibly lessened if not altogether removed ; and even for the less successful there is always the consolation of knowing that next Saturday is but a week hence.

THE END

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