SWEET THAMES RUN SOFTLY

By the same Author

LOVELY IS THE LEE

COMING DOWN THE WYE

IORANA: A TAHITIAN JOURNAL

THE SEVENTH MAN

A TRUE TALE OF LOVE IN TONGA

COCONUT ISLAND

JOHN GRAHAM, CONVICT

BLUE ANGELS AND WHALES

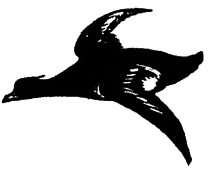
OVER THE REEFS

SWEET THAMES RUN SOFTLY

by

ROBERT GIBBINGS

with engravings by the author



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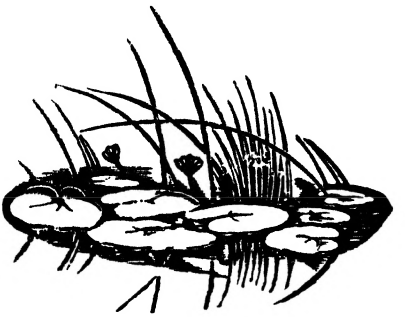


Sweete Themmes! runne softly, till I end my Song.

SPENSER, *Prothalamion*

PREFACE

HAVING TRAVELLED more than fifty thousand miles over salt water, and having visited the five continents of the world, it occurred to me that it might be fun to explore the river Thames, in whose valley I had lived for fifteen years. It seemed to me that it would be a neat and compact little journey within clearly defined limits. It would be restful, too, for I planned to float down-stream at the river's own pace, and to look for nothing but what I might see as I moved along, consigning all guide-books to the devil, and offering the same hospitality to insistent and obtuse advisers.

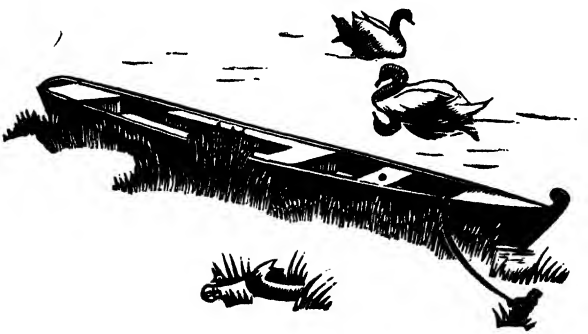
It seemed to me that for the trip I would need a boat in which I could fit lockers, for I hoped to take a microscope and other bits of apparatus which might make the voyage more interesting. I wanted, too, a boat in which there was plenty of room to sleep, and one which would not turn over when I turned over. She would have to be flat-bottomed in order to negotiate the shallower reaches of the river, and I hoped that she might be propelled by sculls, for I was brought up by the sea and have an instinctive scorn of 'prodding the mud.'

But wherever I inquired I was given one of two answers: either that such boats were not in demand

and were, therefore, not built, or that they were in such demand that they were impossible to procure. Both of these theories had the same meaning. The only thing to do was to get to work myself.

The Willow was therefore home-made, that is to say, she was built in the woodwork department of Reading University by Hubert Davis and Norman Howard, with my son and myself as unskilled assistants. None of us had done anything of the kind before, but H. J. Izaacs and Frank Pearce of Moss's boat-building firm, near Caversham Bridge, gave us freely of their many years' experience.

We launched her on the fourteenth day after beginning construction, and she did not take in as much as a bead of water.



CHAPTER ONE

I HAD LEFT *The Willow* at Lechlade, and it was about ten o'clock on the morning of the 1st of August when I found myself in Trewsbury Mead, which lies about three miles to the south-west of Cirencester. I know the hour and the date because, although I carried neither clock nor calendar, I saw the faces of those two tyrants side by side in a cottage where I made final inquiries for the head of the river.

'Follow along the edge of the meadow,' the old lady said, 'till you come to some straggly bushes, but pay no attention to them. Follow along then,' she said, 'till you come to a dead tree, but pay no attention to that either. Follow along again,' she continued, 'till you come to a big tree, I don't know if it isn't an ash, and on that you 'll see the letters T.H. There 's a well alongside of the tree, an old Roman well, they say, and that 's where the Thames rises. You can't miss it. T.H., that means Thames Head, and it 's cut in the bark.'

'I suppose I 'll see the water, anyway,' I queried, 'even if I miss the tree?'

'There 's no water in the well,' she said. 'It 's filled in with stones this long time past, nor 's there water in the meadows neither, not this time o' year. Plenty in the winter, though,' she added, 'geese and ducks come in, my husband feeds them, and my son, he says he never put hand in such cold water.'

The meadow was carpeted with vetches and clover, purple harebells and the yellow rock-rose, and I followed along as I was told, past the straggly bushes and the dead tree, to neither of which did I pay any attention, until I found the big ash, with the initials just decipherable in its bark. Immediately in front of this tree was the well, and on either side a thorn bush festooned with wild clematis, better known as old man's beard. It was the sort of thorn bush under which, in Ireland, if you had a mind to it, you might see the 'wee folk,' but in Trewsbury Mead I didn't see as much as a fairy ring, though I did find some giant puff-balls twelve and fourteen inches in diameter, and looking like lumps of dough. It is said that when these are young and still snowy white, they make good eating if cut into slices, smeared with egg and breadcrumbs, and fried in butter. But for me that is a risk not yet undertaken. Behind the ash the ground sloped up to the banks of the disused Thames–Severn Canal, whose dry bed, filled with thistles and the froth-like blossoms of meadow-sweet, makes a happy playground for young rabbits.

Early engravings of Thames Head show a fountain

of water, as powerful as a burst water-main, welling up into a lake whose banks are bordered by tall rushes and the reed-mace; but to-day the well is no more than a circle of loose stones, and there is no water in it. It was difficult to realize that over fifteen hundred years ago Roman legionaries had knelt there to drink, and Roman matrons and their children had carried jars of water from it to their camp on the adjacent hill.

A brown squirrel appeared while I was making a drawing, and hovered around with a proprietary air as if to inquire what I was doing. When I explained my purpose to him he departed, apparently satisfied.

So now I was at the head of the river, and my travelling was to be downhill all the way. I don't for a moment agree with Swinburne when he suggests that rivers grow weary on their journey to the sea. On the contrary, it seems to me that they have a very easy and joyous time wandering through flowery meadows, dancing over weirs, eddying round pools, and lazing for long hours in the sun.

But before I could take it easy like that I had to transport myself some twenty miles or more, on foot, to where my boat was waiting. Over the Fosse Way I went, that great Roman road stretching from Lincoln to Exeter, and down the dry bed of the stream, until I came to forget-me-nots and watercress. 'Water!' said I, as a moorhen scuttered out. And so it was, the first few pints of the fifteen hundred million gallons that fall over Teddington weir daily.

A little further on it was possible to see a gentle movement of the water against the rushes and, about

a mile from the source, tasselled weed carpeted a deep pool. Then my path lay over the low twin arches of a road bridge and under the high single arch of a railway bridge.

Here I met an old man who was sitting by the river with his feet in the water, and his boots on the bank beside him. He was rearranging a collection of post cards, collar studs, and pencils which he carried for sale.

'I suppose you wouldn't be wanting a bootlace now?' he said in a confiding brogue.

'And what part of Ireland do you come from?' I asked.

'I was born in the streets of Dublin,' he said.

'And how many streets were you born in?' I asked.

He looked at me for a moment with a twinkle in his eye. 'Four,' he said, 'me mother's house was at the cross-roads.'

That bootlace cost me a shilling.

Between Ewen and Somerford numerous ditches conspire with barbed wire and nettles to make the way of the pilgrim more difficult, but below Somerford a footpath leads through a wooded fairyland, following the course of the river to Ashton Keynes. Here the great water dock, the teasel, the willow-herb, and purple loosestrife struggle for supremacy on the banks, turquoise dragon-flies flit from lily leaf to lily leaf, and the pond skater and those small mercurial beetles, the whirligigs, gyrate and skim about the surface of the stream. I caught one of the latter for inspection, and found that its hind legs were spoon-shaped,

and each one jointed in such a way that its owner could 'feather' it, much as an oarsman feathers his blade, so offering more or less resistance to the water. No wonder, I thought, that it has such power and flexibility of movement. I have since been told that its eyes are divided horizontally, so that it can see above and below water at the same time.

Below Ashton Keynes the bulrush grows so thick that in places the water itself is hardly visible. Like some heraldic blazoning the dark blue lines of these rushes wander 'wavy-bendy' across the landscape. Here solitary mallard, in their summer dress, rose from the rushes, and an occasional heron lifted its unwieldy body into the air. I was watching one of these birds flapping its way across the meadows when my eye was caught by the figure of a man standing knee-deep in cut hay. He had on his head a woman's hat, with a heavy veil. On his hands he wore a pair of motoring gauntlets, and as he stood there, moving his knees up and down as if marking time, he made spasmodic slashes at the air with a broom which he carried in his right hand.

The course of the river led me by the edge of the field in which he stood, and as I pondered whether to approach this seeming lunatic or not he took off his hat and beckoned to me.

'Seen them bees?' he called, as he stepped out of the hay.

'Nothing but a bumble bee on a thistle,' I replied, hoping to reassure him.

'Danged if they bain't bitter little swines,' he said.

'My wife won't 'arf go on when she gits back. Not quarter mile up road she 'adn't gone on 'er bike when they started swarmin'. They come out of that 'ive like steam out of a boiler. Last time I touches 'em, I tells yer.'

Then he explained that the hive was a recent investment, that his wife had bought it very much against his wishes, that she had told him that if ever the bees swarmed in her absence all he had to do was to hold up a skep under them and shake the bough to which they were hanging. The bees would then drop into the skep and he could cover it with a sack till she returned. Unfortunately, in this case, they had swarmed *around* the branch of the tree.

''Uggin' it they war, like the collar on an 'orse.'

It was no good attempting to shake the tree, so he had tried to brush them off with a soft broom, for he 'd been told that if he got the queen the others would all follow. The obvious and inevitable result was that they had attacked him in thousands.

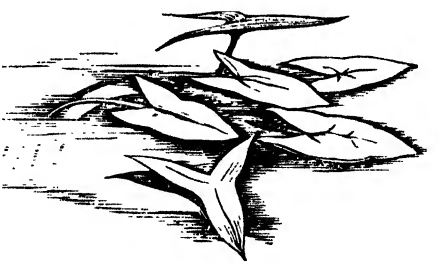
''Ail-stones and machine guns warn't in it,' he said. 'Never did see nothing like it. Stings on 'em like 'ay-forks. If I 'adn't 'ad 'er 'at I reckon I 'd 'ave a 'ead on me like a barsket a' apples.'

They had gone for his ankles, and stung him through his socks, and when he had bent down to knock them off they had gone for the seat of his trousers. All he could do was rush into the hayfield, kick up the hay about his shins, and stand there until the fury of his attackers had abated. He 'd been there for a quarter of an hour before I came along, and he was still ranting

about ''ow 'e 'ated 'em' when a woman's voice was heard calling from the farm:

'Bill! Bill!' she said, 'come quickly, them bees is swarmin'.

At Cricklade I learned that in the year A.D. 900 Alfred the Great, with his army, had forded the river there, and Canute too a century later. There is also a legend that the Danes sailed up the river in sixty ships of war. It seemed to me strange that ships of that size could have floated in this shallow stream where I could hardly paddle; but when I reached home and made inquiries I discovered that in the language of a thousand years ago the term 'ship' did not necessarily refer to a sea-going craft, but might equally well be applied to a body of men, rather less than a hundred in number: probably a ship's full complement. When therefore we hear that 'the Vikings brought sixty ships up the Thames to Cricklade' we shall be nearer the truth if we assume that an army of between five and six thousand men marched on the town than if we try to imagine a fleet of deep-draught vessels sailing where the average depth of water is measured in inches.



CHAPTER TWO

THERE WAS a heavy dew on the ground next morning when I continued my way towards Lechlade. Seeing a fisherman on the bank I was reminded of Izaak Walton who, speaking of the 'many flies, worms, and little living creatures, with which the sun and summer adorn and beautify the river banks and meadows,' goes on to quote Pliny that many of them 'have their birth or being from a dew that in the spring falls upon the leaves of trees; and that some kinds of them are from a dew left upon herbs or flowers; and others, from a dew left upon coleworts or cabbages: all which kinds of dews being thickened and condensed, are by the sun's generative heat most of them hatched, and in three days made living creatures.' Later he quotes again 'that as worms are made of glutinous dew-drops, which are condensed by

the sun's heat in those countries, so eels are bred of a particular dew, falling in the months of May or June on the banks of some particular ponds and rivers, apted by nature for that end; which in a few days are, by the sun's heat, turned into eels; and some of the ancients have called the eels that are thus bred the offspring of Jove.' Needless to say his authorities were entirely wrong on those subjects, though, to their credit, it must be added that the amazing nuptial journey of all eels to the Caribbean Sea, a fact now thoroughly established, seems hardly less fantastic than the imaginings of those early philosophers.

But it required neither Izaak Walton nor eels to recall the great Jove to my mind. Everywhere I looked there were spiders' webs glistening in the morning sun, and I thought of Arachne and her tapestry depicting the amours of that omnipotent deity. Poor Arachne, who gave her name to the whole race of spiders, *Arachnida*. It was no doubt a little presumptuous on her part to challenge a goddess to a weaving contest, but she certainly seems to have been a well-educated and broad-minded girl, if we are to believe Ovid's description of her finished work. Not a thread can have been idle in that vivid fabric. Not only did she faithfully portray Jupiter as a bull carrying away Europa, as a swan prevailing over Leda, as a golden shower embracing Danaë, in addition to many of the god's minor conquests, but she also included a representative selection of somewhat similar character acts from the life histories of Neptune, Bacchus, and Saturn. It must have been a rich canvas.

Against this, Athena had merely depicted 'the hill of Mars with twelve heavenly gods on lofty thrones in awful majesty,' and it is easy to suppose that subject-matter may have influenced aesthetic judgment when the prize was awarded to Arachne. Even so, the goddess should have accepted defeat with better manners. In my opinion it was sheer ill-breeding on her part to set about poor Arachne with a hard-wood shuttle. And, when the poor girl in desperation hanged herself, it was a venomous piece of work to turn her into a spider and compel her to live on for ever as one of those skulking creatures who get no respect or affection from man or beast, and live only to spread their treacherous spirals about the countryside.

My sympathies were all with Arachne as I wandered down-stream.

At Lechlade *The Willow* was waiting for me at Ford's boat yard, than which there is no more accommodating establishment on the whole river.

At Lechlade, too, I met the Viking. That, at any rate, was how he described himself, and his appearance bore witness to his words. He told me that he owned the river. When I first saw him he was tearing through the water under a huge lateen sail in a ship that he had built himself some thirty-nine years ago. She was the second of his making, and, as there is no reason to suppose that his first vessel was in any way less durable than his present craft, we may assume that their owner is as venerable as his features suggest.

He gave me seeds of the snake's head fritillary, a

plant that is rare in most parts of England, but plentiful around Cricklade, and he told me how the white and purple comfreys were used in old times by the country people as a cure for tuberculosis, and how dandelion tea was drunk to improve the complexion. He told me, too, how the wounded crusaders had been brought up the river in barges and lodged in hospitals dedicated to St John at Cricklade and Lechlade, and how it was from the latter that St John's, the first lock on the river, took its name. He also recited legends and ballads of the people, and while we talked he carved me a porridge spoon of withy wood. It has a curved handle so that the fingers need not be in the steam when stirring; it has a flat ladle so that fingers need not be burnt when removing the half-cooked oatmeal—one stroke on the side of the pot is sufficient—and it has a square end to make full contact with the bottom and corners of the pot. At my request he wrote down the words of *The Harnet and the Bittle* which he had recited:

An Harnet (Hornet) zet (sat) in an oller (hollow) tree,
An a proper spiteful twad (toad) were he,
An er merrily zung while er did zet,
Er sting were as sharp as a baganet (bayonet),
'Ow oo 's so bowld and vierce as I?
I vears (fears) nat bee, nar wopse, nar vly (fly).'

A Bittle (Beetle) up thuck (that) tree did clim (climb)
An scarnfully did luk at im,

Zays e, 'Zir Harnet, who give thee
A right to zet in thuck ther tree?
Although thee zings so nation vine (fine)
I tell e—it 's a ouse o' mine.'

The Harnet's conscience velt a twinge,
But growin bowld wi his long stinge (sting),
E said, 'it 's plain var all to zee
I 'm viner var than wopse or bee:
Be aff and lave the tree to me,
The mixen 's (dungheap) good enow var thee.'

Just then a Yoccle (green woodpecker, known as lawyer bird) passin by
Was axed by them their cause to try.
'Ha! Ha! it 's nation plain,' zays e,
'They 'll make a vamous munch for me.'
His bill was sharp, his stummuck lear (empty),
So up e snapped the caddlin (quarrelling) peer (pair).

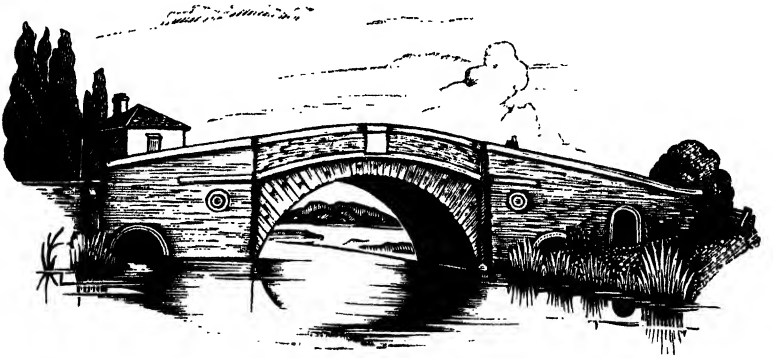
Moral

All you as be to law inclined,
This leetle story bear in mind,
Var if to law you ever gwa (go)
You 'll vind they allus zarve e zo.
You 'll meet the vate o' these yere two,
They 'll take yer cwoat and carcus too.

Halfpenny Bridge at Lechlade gets its name from the toll that was once levied there. An interesting

feature of its construction is that the keystone is not bevelled and depends entirely on friction to perform its duties.

Above and below this bridge dredging had been in progress for some time, and large heaps of gravel stood on either bank. Landing near one of these I ran my eye over it on the chance of finding some relic of a bygone age, and I was not disappointed. Quantities of hooked-nose shells lay about, and ancient bones.



'Them 's not shells,' said a rustic referring to the former, 'them 's devil's toe-nails.' But when I showed them to our Professor of Geology at Reading he didn't agree. On the contrary, he said that they were fossils of an oyster which had existed in the Thames valley when it was below sea-level, a matter of about two hundred million years ago. His remarks seemed to justify the old man on the Aran Islands who, pointing to a fossil in a rock, said with emphasis: 'That was there when God was born.'

But, discussing the terminology of these shells, the professor added that scientists had also noticed their

claw-like appearance, and had therefore given them the name Gryphaea, a term derived from the same root as the word gryphon, meaning talon. The bones, he said, were comparatively recent, not more than a few thousand years old, and once belonged to wild or semi-wild cattle, who roamed the valley when neolithic man was chipping his weapons of flint. By a curious coincidence, within a few hours of this conversation I picked up in a country lane near Bray a neolithic hammer-stone. How it got there I don't know, and why I saw it I don't know, but there it was before me on the ground, and its whole shape and character leave no doubt that it is an implement once used by those same primitive people for chipping their other tools and weapons.

Chance finds always recall a strange incident that befell me in my youth. It happened at my boarding-school when I was about twelve years of age. One Sunday, in church, the preacher was so eloquent that he wormed out of me not only my usual penny contribution to the collection, but also the only other three pennies that I had in the world. They meant a lot to me at the time, and after the first emotion of the appeal had died down, I couldn't help harbouring faint regrets at having been so easily moved—feelings which hopes of ultimate reward on the grand scale did not entirely allay. Next day there was a school cricket match, and my job, as a junior, was to sit about in the long grass adjoining the pitch and applaud the heroes of the hour. This I was doing to the best of my ability when I chanced to look on the ground, and there beside me,

one on top of the other, as neat as on a bank counter, were three pennies. The find was duly advertised in the school, but there were no claimants and, rightly or wrongly, I took the incident to be a direct message from heaven that, whether the Chinese starved or the Africans lacked loin-cloths, I was not expected to contribute more than my usual penny per week to their welfare.

And let me tell of one other happening. A few years ago I was travelling with a friend in Italy. We spent a week in Florence, and then moved on to Venice. Before our departure from Florence we paid the last of several visits to the church of San Michele to see Donatello's bronze figure of St Mark. Arriving in Venice next morning we went to the great square adjoining St Mark's Cathedral and sat down at a café. Hardly were we seated when my friend nudged me and said: 'Here 's St Mark.' Sure enough, down the piazza strode a huge figure in flowing robes, his high forehead and long beard a living replica of that statue we had visited so often. Then, to our utmost astonishment he stopped in front of us, and, holding out his hand to me, he said: 'Giovanni, Giovanni.'

'He thinks you 're St John,' said my friend, somewhat flippantly. But I could speak no Italian, and was dumb.

Again the figure said to me: 'Giovanni, Giovanni.' Then, when I did not reply, he passed on, and though we were a week in Venice, and visited the piazza every day, we never saw him again.

CHAPTER THREE

ITALY IS A long way from the Thames, though plenty of Roman relics have been found by our English river—plenty of mementoes too of other civilizations: Viking battle-axes, Saxon spear-heads, pre-Christian swords.

But my happiest times were not so much when I was thinking of these relics of past wars as in the hours before and after dark, when on secluded stretches of the river there was no sight or sound of fellow man. In the late evening there is scarcely a murmur save the munching-breathing of cattle, the churring note of a warbler in the reeds, or the splash of a pike rising to a surface-swimming bleak. In the early morning lapwings and pigeons fly low over the river, rabbits

perform a leisurely toilet, and herons rise sleepily and sail into space.

Sunsets and dawns were not spectacular, as I have seen them in the tropics, but I remember one particular morning. I had been moving with the current from the first glimmer of light. The water was like a mirror reflecting the grey of the sky. All I could see of the world was the rushes and their reflections on either side of the river. Nothing was visible beyond them, and the banks, following each bend of the river, cut off my view ahead so that I seemed to be floating on some enchanted lake, high up on the very rim of the world. Hardly a sound: only the call of a peewit, or the 'squark squark' of a wild duck flying overhead.

Rounding a bend some hills appeared dimly in the distance, but they seemed to belong to another planet far below my horizon. The banks glided back; no sound, no jar. I moved on the stream and with the stream, into the dark reflections and then out again into the silver light. As dawn crept in, colour began to show, and I could just make out the markings of some cattle on the bank. Only a few moments earlier these same creatures had been no more than silhouettes. It reminded me of polishing stone or timber—the way the grain of the landscape came up, willows and an occasional elm, grey against the sky, clumps of purple loosestrife and willow-herb standing out from the yellow ragwort and the pale comfrey that lined the banks.

Then the fish which had been silent began to rise, *ptchup, ptchop*, but there was none of the *splitch* sound

that one hears in the evening when the trout and chub are in more playful humour, and seem only anxious to drown the fly. Soon the clouds which had come over the starry sky at moonset began to fold back to the horizons, the sky turned to turquoise, and gold streamers stretched up from where the sun would shortly rise. When I looked at the river again I was moving down into that same valley from which an hour ago I had been so remote. It was dawn.

It is a curious thing, this night perspective. Many motorists believe that their cars run better after dark, and I remember, as a boy, wondering why it was that I seemed able to free-wheel uphill on my bicycle at night. The fact is that distances seem less in the dark whereas the height of objects remains the same, and therefore the angle of approach to any particular spot seems very much steeper than it really is.

Hours like those recalled to me a period of time when I lived alone. It was spring, and after a year of disintegration in worldly affairs I was once again among living things; apple-trees all around me, a maple-tree throwing out its golden inflorescences, everything budding into new life. In my seclusion clothes were unnecessary. My feet grew hard, my skin brown. Gradually my whole body became alive and perceptive, and I found a new and fuller consciousness. Instead of regarding the trees and the wild creatures of the woods as beings separate from each other and from myself, I came rather to consider that they and I were related as closely to one another as limbs of the same body or as branches of the same tree.

Though living alone I was rarely lonely. The grass was full of daffodils, and I planted cowslips, foxgloves, and the yellow mullein. A flower bed held nasturtiums for midday gaiety and night-scented stock for evening fragrance. Gradually the birds lost their shyness. Two turtle doves came daily to my door, a pair of grey flycatchers made their nest in the gutter above my window, swallows came and built inside my studio.

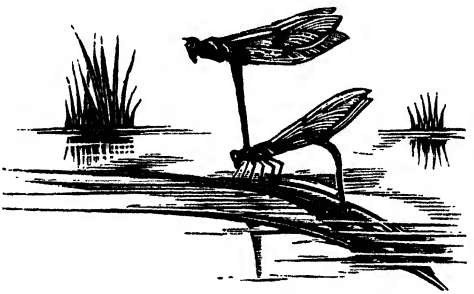
Then I went to stay with Llewelyn Powys, and we wandered together over the downs. One night in the great bed in which he himself had been begotten I dreamt that I walked in a country lane overshaded by tall oaks, and it seemed that the birds and the squirrels, the rats and the field-mice, and the small insects all came to me and led me to their nests, drawing aside the sheltering roots and leaves that I might see into their homes. Then, at the end of the lane, I was received by a gracious old lady, who took me into her house, and put on my head a golden turban, and, when I awoke, it seemed that it was Nature herself who had crowned me with riches.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN DRIFTING with the current there is a constant movement of insect life flying to and fro about the boat. Bees and white butterflies, smoky winged caddis-flies, white moths with forked tails, gnats and may-flies who, after a year and more of larval life beneath the water, live but a few hours in the sunshine. It is astonishing that all the intricacies of their small bodies should be formed for such a brief aerial existence. The moisture has hardly dried from their gossamer wings before they have fallen again to the water. There they float a moment, dead or dying, until the splash of a fish and an ever-widening ring on the surface tell of the completion of their life's cycle.

Numbers of dragon-flies flit about, some with black bodies and a spot of cerulean blue near the tail, others with cerulean bodies and a spot of black near the tail. Perhaps the handsomest of all the tribe is the Agrion, with its metallic blue-green body, and clear wings banded with dark brown or black. Others seem bronze, green, or purple, but these metallic colours change with every light, and even when their owner is captured the nervous contraction of the scales may alter the effect completely.

I watched a pair of these dragon-flies when, after mating, the female was about to lay her eggs. The male still held her firmly by the back of her neck with his tail, hovering over her, like some protecting aeroplane, when she alighted on a floating leaf. It is said that in certain species the female goes completely under water when depositing her eggs, and that the male then uses his grip to haul her back into the air; but the specimen that I was watching merely curved



her tail below the surface and laid her eggs in a submerged stalk of the water plant on which she was resting. Now, as I write some six weeks later, those eggs will probably have developed into 'nymphs,' and in this immature state they will remain for the next year or two, or even longer. But they will not be idle like a butterfly chrysalis; on the contrary, they will be leading a comparatively active life feeding on insects, small snails, and tadpoles, and growing so fast that they must shed their skin a dozen times. When eventually all the stages of their aquatic life have been completed these nymphs will climb out of the water, split their skin for the last time, and, within a couple

of hours, be transformed into mature dragon-flies. Henceforth they will fly as pirates of the air, devouring flies, mosquitoes, wasps, and even butterflies.

In spite of their name and reputation dragon-flies are harmless to horse and man, but I don't like to think of what might have happened if we humans had been on the earth in Palaeozoic times, when their ancestors, with wing spans of twenty-seven inches, zoomed up and down the valleys.

One Saturday afternoon, being tied up in a backwater, I took a sample of the sediment on the bottom and looked at it through the microscope. It was a mass of those unicellular organisms known as diatoms, the majority of which measure considerably less than the two-hundredth part of an inch in greatest length. Each of them was like a living jewel. Some were crystal-clear bordered with gold, some were sculptured like a cowrie shell, others recalled the cuttle-fish 'bone' that we find on our shores.

We are told that these diatoms are universally distributed in the sea and in fresh water, and that their body walls are impregnated with silica which remains after the organism itself is dead, and we are told, too, that not only are innumerable millions of these minute individuals now, at this very moment, forming oceanic deposits, but that deposits of a similar nature, in the form of earths, prove the existence of the same form of life in the earliest periods of the world's history. Diatomaceous deposits in Bohemia have been estimated to contain the remains of some forty million separate

existences in every cubic inch, but Miss Winifred Pennington, working at Reading University, has calculated that in the deposits in Lake Windermere the number is as high as six thousand million of these frustules in the same space. In certain places the deposits of this 'earth' are several hundred feet in thickness. Human beings use it to-day in the manufacture of dentifrices and dynamite.

My further consideration of such microscopic profusion was interrupted by a solitary old horse who came to the water's edge to drink. Plunging in, as if to make the greatest possible splash, he stood hock deep in the swirling mud while he drew up great draughts from the clear water beyond. Then, with dripping chops, he turned and heaved himself back on to firm ground.

'That 's a fine animal,' I remarked to a labourer who appeared with a halter.

'Best 'orse on the farm,' he said, 'an' that 's sayin' somethin'. Two year ago 'e wur bought t' feed the 'ounds.'

'He 'd follow hounds now,' I said.

'When I fetched 'im from 'Ammersmith 'e wus that scraggy 'is ribs was shinin' white through 'is skin and 'is off knee wus like the 'andle on a scythe. We put 'im out t' grass, an' we thought 'e 'd die afore mornin'. Danged if it warn't th' boss who near died afore mornin' with a 'eart attack. Never left 'is bed for a six weeks, 'e didn't. When 'e come out, 'e says to me: "Fred," 'e says—I wus cuttin' thistles over agin that gate—"Fred," 'e says, "that 's a fine

'orse. We 'll keep that 'orse, Fred,'' 'e says, and 'e bin with us ever since.'

When the water cleared I put my glass-bottomed box over the side of the boat, and watched the life that circulated among the roots of the water-lilies. The submerged leaves of these plants never come to the surface, and a casual glance may suggest that they are dull and worthy only of their menial office, but seen clearly they present a very different story, for no twirl of a ballerina's skirts could be more graceful than the folding and unfolding of those convoluted leaves. In rhythmic accompaniment tendrils of the Canadian pondweed, tufts of hornwort, and the threaded whorls of milfoil sway to the same ebb and flow, while sticklebacks dart here and there, and solemn perch pursue their dignified excursions. Beetles, too, some of them burrowing in the mud, others charging about with self-important urgency, and red water-mites paddling their busy way in search of small crustacea.

Turning up one of the floating leaves of a lily I found numbers of limpets attached to its under-surface. Aquatic caterpillars, too, had their homes there, as well as small trumpet shells, and semi-transparent snails whose cat-like faces extruded as they marched along, seeking what they might devour.

Seeing the fresh-water limpets I was reminded of one of their salt-water relatives, that I had seen on the coast in Devon. It is now generally known that, immobile as these lowly molluscs appear to be in daylight, they are quite adventurous at night. When

darkness falls, and, for all we know, when a high tide covers them, they set off on long grazing expeditions, feeding on the vegetable growth that covers the rocks. But dawn or ebb tide always finds them back at the spot from which they started. Each one has his own

particular patch. His shell has grown to fit the rock, and the rock has got worn to fit his shell.

I had always imagined that the peregrinations of these limpets were limited to the extent I have described, but on this particular day, it was about noon, when I happened to be looking into a rock pool and noticed that one of them was moving. This individual was slowly gliding over the rock with little apparent hesitation as to the way in which he wanted to go. Once when he reached a shallow ledge he stopped, as if to gain breath, before attempting the climb, but it was only a minute or two before he had pulled himself on to the higher level, and proceeded on his way. By this time, in a space of seven or eight minutes, he had progressed nearly as many inches. As he swung slightly to his left to avoid a small cone of orange-coloured sponge he seemed to be heading for an oval patch on the rock which was bare of any of the usual pink encrustations. This naked spot seemed to me to have almost but not quite the same outline as the edge of the limpet's shell, and I wondered if it was really his home, and if he would settle there. Sure enough he came to a full stop on it, and he then proceeded to nestle, much as a broody hen nestles over her eggs, attempting to fit each protrusion of his shell into a corresponding depression in the rock. But it was obvious that something was wrong, for, try as he would, he could not make himself comfortable. He moved from side to side without advantage. He moved backwards and forwards. You 're on the wrong spot after all, I thought to myself. Suddenly, as if a

bright idea had struck him, he raised himself on his 'foot,' and turned completely round. Then, snuggling down, his shell fitted the rock at all points, and he remained as motionless as the Sphinx.

It seems an odd thing that the translators of King James's Bible should have confused the English bulrush with the paper reed of Egypt, for contemporary scholars tell us that the ark in which Moses was found was most certainly built of the latter. Yet further complications have arisen from the popular misconception that the great reed-mace, with its handsome spike of black velvet, is the bulrush. This is wrong. The true bulrush, pool rush, or blue rush is the tall slender wand, round and smooth, with a little feathery tuft near its tip and, as one of its alternative names suggests, of a dark bluish colour. Moorhens bend down its pithy stems, and weave them into their nests, thereby combining buoyancy with anchorage. Human beings cut them and plait them into baskets and seats for their chairs.

The river banks are lined with a profusion of flowers. There is rest-harrow or ground furze, whose 'root is long and runneth far abroad, very tough, and hard to be torne in pieces with the plough insomuch that the oxen can hardly passe forward.' There is comfrey, 'which joyeth in watery ditches, in far and fruitfull meadowes,' and figwort or water-betony, which, quoting once again from Gerarde, 'hath great square hollow and brown stalks, whereon are set very broad leaves notched about the edges like unto those of nettles. . . .

The floures grow at the top of the branches, of a darke purple colour, in shape like to little helmets. . . . It groweth by brookes and running waters, by ditch sides, and by the brinks of rivers, and is seldome found in dry places. It floureth in July and August, and from that time the seed waxeth ripe. . . . The leaves are of a scouring or cleansing qualitie, and is very good to mundifie [purify] foule and stinking ulcers, especially the juyce boyled with honey. It is reported, if the face be washed with the juyce thereof, it taketh away the redness and deformitie of it.'

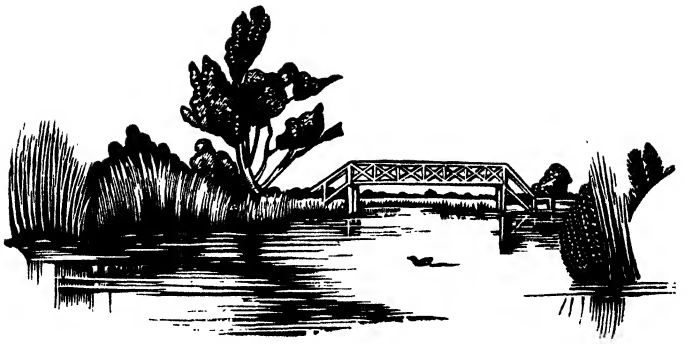
In Wiltshire to-day the older inhabitants prepare an ointment by boiling the leaves of the water-betony with bacon fat, and I am indebted to Mr C. T. Cuss of Swindon for a jar of this unguent, which is said to be a good remedy for rheumatism and excellent for the cleansing of flesh wounds. Even fresh leaves of the plant bound on wounds have beneficial effects.

Many volumes have been written on the flowers which border the river. I am only telling of those leaves and blossoms whose essentially decorative qualities arrested my attention. Of these there can be none more striking than the teasel, with its bristly flower-heads and that sinister cup of dew, at the axils of the leaves, wherein small insects are drowned before their juices are absorbed into the tissues of the plant. The common water-lily, both yellow and white, is known to all, but the delicate fringed water-lily, or round-leaved buck-bean, is seen less often, flourishing as it does in the more secret places of the river. It has the modest habit of retaining its buds under water

until their turn comes to bloom, and later, when pollination is completed, withdrawing the flower-head so that the seed-pods ripen under water. Its floating

leaves, though not attaining the same size as the common varieties, have the same leathery texture, a quality which enables them to withstand the battering of heavy rains or the strain of currents and floods. In the Far

East the water-archer or arrowhead grows in abundance, and is even cultivated for the food value of its tuberous roots. Here, too, in the Thames, it throws up its three-edged stalks, its three-pointed leaves, and its three-petalled white blossoms unmolested, and must ever remain one of the princesses of the river.



CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS A Sunday evening, and I was tying up to the bank for the night, just below a footbridge. I was thinking to myself of a drake I 'd seen earlier in the day among a flock of ducks, and how only one of those ducks had seemed to suit him. In and out through the flock he had chased her, on to the bank and back into the water again, then round a clump of rushes, and once more through the flock, before ever she consented to his wishes.

Just as I was wondering why he had been so particular when there were a dozen other fine birds from which he could have chosen, I looked up, and across on the opposite bank of the river I saw a girl walking downstream. Her back was towards me, but she was neatly dressed, and had a pleasing figure. I judged her to be in her early twenties. Pity, thought I, that 'twasn't on the other side I was throwing my anchor. But, before there was time for any romantic notions to

enter my head, another look at the retreating figure told me plainly enough that its owner was in no mind for any chat of mine. Every step the girl took showed that her mind was preoccupied. Never a glance to the right or to the left, only an occasional little petulant toss to her head, as much as to say: 'I *am* right.'

I wouldn't mind betting there 's a man in the case, I thought; some fellow who has been setting his pace a little too fast or, maybe, casting his net a little too wide. I watched her swing sadly round a bend of the river before I turned again to my preparations for the night.

As I glanced up-stream I saw, on my side of the river, just below the bridge, a man hunched up on the bank for all the world like a movie star about to drown himself in front of a camera.

Oho! I thought, so you 're the cause of the trouble, and what have you been saying to the poor girl? As he sat there, hugging his knees and staring into space, I supposed he was counting the hours till the half-day on Wednesday when they 'd see each other again. He 'll be lucky if she meets him, I reckoned, for there had been great determination in her step.

But suddenly he sprang to his feet, and crossed the bridge with a tread that resounded through the valley. Away down the towpath he went, with his jaw stuck out before him, and, like the girl herself, looking neither to his right or left. As I watched him stalk along, a bend of the river brought the heroine once more into view, and though she was some distance away, I could see that she was still pursuing her defiant course,

though I wondered if her pace hadn't grown just a little slower.

And now I thought it no great sin to watch the next act of this drama through my field-glasses.

Gradually he gained on her, stepping it out more firmly than ever. Yet not once did she look back. On and on they went. Even when he was within a few yards of her she still appeared oblivious of his presence. Only when he made a quick step forward and faced her on the path was she compelled to take notice, but then she merely pushed him aside and continued on her way. As they rounded another bend of the river and faded out of sight he was still following her, close at heel like a spaniel.

It was twenty minutes later when I looked up, and there, across the river, were those same two figures walking back up-stream. This time they were side by side. Over the bridge they came, and under the willow-tree where I had first seen him they sat down; and then, long after the sun had set and long after I had stretched myself out to sleep, faint murmurings were carried down to me on the evening breeze. And I thought to myself, 'tis queer how the drakes get their way.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WATERS of the great brook run cold and clear, filtered by the dense weeds which fill its course. This rivulet, emerging suddenly from under its covering of green vegetation, is an exciting contrast to the quiet muddy waters of the Thames. Here is an ideal place to bathe, clean gravel of the tributary to step on, and a deep pool of the main river in which to swim.

One day as I swam in mid-stream a snail floated past. He was a fine old specimen of the water-whelk, with a thick coat of weed attached to his shell, and when I put him in a shallow basin of water he seemed much less disturbed than our land snails are when handled. After a few moments he moved upwards, towards the edge of the basin, and when one of his tentacles told him that he was near the surface of the water he heeled over, and from under the right side of his shell he pushed up a tube into the air. Once out of the water this tube opened with an audible click, and then for about thirty-five seconds its owner remained quietly breathing, after which he closed the siphon and went below again. This operation he repeated every few minutes until eventually I put him back in the river to continue his journey down-stream. I have since discovered that there are two kinds of river

snail, those that have lungs, like my captive, and must come to the surface every time they want to breathe, and those that have gills, and can get all the oxygen they require from the water, like fish.

Another day I noticed that when stray fragments of weed floated into the main stream from the brook they were seized by fish, and worried, much as a dog worries a rat. This seemed to me strange. Although I knew

that certain fish in tropical seas are vegetarians, I had no idea that any of our own fresh-water inhabitants are inclined that way. I therefore 'got in first' with the next piece of floating weed. Tipping it into an aquarium I pulled it to pieces. It didn't take long to discover the cause of the excitement. From that one small fragment, that would have fitted into a teacup, there fell more than twenty of those fresh-water shrimps known as Gammarus, close relations of the sandhoppers which are so common under the stones and dry seaweed on our coasts. One loving couple held together in spite of all vicissitudes, and had it not been for my intervention they would doubtless have died romantically in each other's arms, deep in the stomach of some dace or chub. There were also, in the weed, quantities of midge larvae and water-mites, as well as diatoms which I have already mentioned, and small crustacea, known as ostracods, of which I will write later.

Hereabouts were fish in plenty. The dace, described by Walton as 'a merry little fellow, reckless and gamesome,' and the roach, 'accounted the water-sheep for his simplicity.' Bleak, described by the same authority as 'ever in motion, and therefore called by some the river-swallow; for just as you shall observe the swallow to be most evenings in summer ever in motion, making short and quick turns when he flies to catch flies in the air, by which he lives, so does the bleak at the top of the water.' Unfortunately for their owners the scales of this small fish are used in the manufacture of artificial pearls, and there is a special

fishery on the Continent, dating from the seventeenth century, whereby millions of the species are sacrificed annually in order that the silvery product from their scales may line the inside of glass beads.

But man isn't their only enemy. Morning and evening, pike take toll of their numbers, and more than once I have been splashed with water when one of these river pirates rushed on a victim who was close beside my boat. Many writers comment on the fact that the pike always takes his prey broadside on; but I am inclined to think that it is the rule rather than the exception for fish of all kinds to feed in this way. I have watched fish being fed in the aquariums at Bermuda and in London, and always the smaller fish were seized across the middle instead of by the head or tail. The same applies to reptiles. Not long ago I heard piercing screams in my garden, and rushing out I saw a grass-snake with a frog horizontally across its mouth. The frog was crying piteously, until the snake, seeing me approach, set it free unharmed.

While at this same anchorage I found in my larder a hard-boiled egg, whose shell had been broken. It only needed the evidence of my nose to tell me that it had seen its best days, so I broke it into a few pieces and held these under water. Keeping my hand absolutely still it was soon surrounded by hundreds of small fish, first the little ones, then larger and larger. Minnows, dace, gudgeon, they came and ate the egg out of my hand. While the larger ones of six or eight inches were feeding from my fingers the little ones went inside my half-closed palm to see what they

could find there. Of course I had to remain very still and to show as little as possible of myself over the side of the boat, but this was an occasion where I found my glass-bottomed box of use, for through it I could see everything as clearly as if it was all happening in the open air. At the same time it was difficult for the fish to see me.

Keeping still is almost a lost art among so-called civilized people, but a fisherman whom I met told me a pretty story about a moorhen. He said that one day as he was sitting on the bank, waiting for a bite, he heard a constant cluck, cluck, from a moorhen, which suggested to him that she was in some mild distress. He didn't take much notice of it, for there was no sign of the bird herself, but the note went on regularly for something like half an hour. Having no luck with his fishing he then decided that he would try about fifty yards further down-stream. He accordingly moved, and no sooner was he seated again than the note of the moorhen changed. Immediately it did so half a dozen little black chicks popped up from under the water-lilies just in front of his former pitch, and swam about quite happily. It is, of course, a well-known fact that these birds have the power of submerging themselves, all except their beaks, and so remaining hidden until danger has passed away. Obviously these chicks were well drilled to obey orders.

In the shallow water at the side of the brook I saw a loach sputtering in the mud, and had no trouble in picking it up in my hand. This extraordinary fish has the power of using its intestine as an auxiliary

breathing organ, a faculty of the greatest value when the ponds and muddy streams which it inhabits dry up. It is reported to be a good weather prophet, becoming very uneasy before a thunderstorm. This, however, is a susceptibility not confined to fish, for most people can feel 'thunder in the air,' and not a few are seriously upset during such electrical disturbances. Many of the lower animals give clear indication of their sensibility of approaching weather change, and Theophrastus, living in Greece in the third century B.C., compiled a long list of weather changes which might be deduced from animal behaviour. Many of these have been quoted again and again by subsequent writers, and many of them have now become everyday axioms. We are all aware that swallows flying low indicate bad weather, and most of us have heard that when sparrows are clamorous or when bees fly not far from their hives a change for the worse may be expected. But the old philosopher's remark on the hedgehog may not be such common knowledge: 'This animal,' he writes, 'makes two holes wherever he lives, one towards the north, the other towards the south: now whichever hole he blocks up it indicates wind from that quarter, and if he closes both it indicates violent wind.' I like, too, his statement that 'the rising of bubbles in large numbers on the surface of rivers is a sign of abundant rain,' an observation easily explained by the fact that when atmospheric pressure is low the gases imprisoned in the river mud are more easily released.

Other writers have told us that if the owl is heard

to scream during bad weather it announces a change for the better; that peacocks which cry during the night have a presentiment of rain; that if frogs croak more than usual, if earthworms come forth from the earth, if ants remove their eggs from their small hills, and if moles cast up an excess of soil, there will be rain.

Mr Joseph Taylor, writing in the year 1813, suggests that we should 'put a leech into a large phial three parts full of clear rain-water, regularly change the same thrice a week, and let it stand on a window-frame fronting the north. In fair and frosty weather it will be motionless, and rolled up in a spiral form, at the bottom of the glass; but prior to rain or snow, it will creep to the top, where, if the rain will be heavy, and of some continuance, it will remain a considerable time; if trifling, it will descend. Should the rain or snow be accompanied with wind, it will dart about its habitation with an amazing celerity, and seldom ceases until it begins to blow hard. If a storm of thunder or lightning be approaching, it will be exceedingly agitated, and express its feelings in violent convulsive starts at the top of the glass. It is remarkable, that, however fine and serene the weather may be, and not the least indication of a change, either from the sky, the barometer, or any other cause whatever, yet if the animal ever shifts its position, or moves in a desultory manner, the coincident results will certainly occur within thirty-six hours; frequently within twenty-four, and sometimes in twelve; though its motions chiefly depend on the fall and duration of the wet, and the strength of the wind.'

This belief was also current in Spain, as we know from an old Spanish drawing found in Seville depicting nine different positions of a leech in a carafe, each one indicative of a different change in the weather. No doubt it was through working on these hypotheses that the ingenious Dr Merryweather of Whitby invented his Tempest Prognosticator, an apparatus by which one at least of twelve leeches confined in separate bottles rang a bell when a tempest was expected. His device, looking like a giant cruet with the bell concealed in the handle, was exhibited at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851; but, for reasons not difficult to understand, it never became popular.

Speaking from personal experience, I can only say that a few months ago I collected some leeches from the Pang and kept them in my study. They certainly gave me notice of bad weather on one occasion, a day when the glass was high and the sky was fair, and I would have made a bet on fine weather for days to come. Not so my leeches, for they began to do jigs and reels about their tank. Sure enough, early next morning and all the following day it rained as if to flood the parish. But a horse-leech that I collected from the Kennet slept through a thunderstorm.

During some casual reading about these blood-thirsty parasites I came on an interesting fact, noted by Dr Kerter of Berlin. Having collected a number of leeches of several different species, he put them into a glass tube about four feet long and an inch in diameter, held vertically, and filled with water. After a time he noticed that many of them had congregated near the

surface, many of them had settled on the bottom, while others had taken up their position about midway up the tube. When he examined each group in turn he found that all those near the surface belonged to a species which normally attached themselves to the legs of swimming birds, those at a middle depth were the ones who under ordinary conditions favoured fish as their hosts, while the remainder who clung to the lowest depths were those who usually harassed the water-snail and other bottom-living creatures. All of which goes to prove that even the leech is as much a creature of habit as we are ourselves.

It is said that 'persons of a plethoric habit of body' are frequently oppressed with drowsiness before rain falls, and that aches, pains, wounds, and corns are more troublesome either towards rain or towards frost. Personally, I don't believe that it is necessary to be in ill-health in order to be a weather prophet. Living in the open, and giving close attention to the horizon and to the clouds, a healthy man can predict atmospheric changes with far more accuracy than a splenetic invalid confined to his room. In proof of this we have only to think of 'The Shepherd of Banbury,' who lived at the end of the eighteenth century, and whose contemplation of the heavens produced a set of rules for foretelling the weather of which the truth, in several cases, has only recently been proved by science.

During my travels on the river I did not bother much about the time of day. When it was light I woke up, and when it was dark I went to sleep, and when I was hungry I prepared myself some food. And thus I lived

as peacefully as any old badger in his earth. I could, of course, have consulted the flowers—the dandelion which opens at five o'clock a.m. and closes at eight o'clock p.m., the white water-lily which spreads its petals at seven in the morning and folds them together again at five in the evening, or the marigold whose short day lasts but from nine till three; but I soon learned to 'feel' the hour, and when occasionally, out of idle curiosity, I did inquire the time I rarely found that I was more than half an hour out in my surmise. Fog, of course, makes the calculation more difficult, but even main-line trains do not run to schedule in a fog.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HITHERTO I have said little about birds on the river, because not only are those last weeks of July and the whole of August a period of little song, but they are also the season of heaviest foliage on the trees. Our attention is not caught by sound, and our eyes do not easily pick up even the brightest feathers when hidden in deep shadows.

There can be few birds in England with more brilliant plumage than the kingfisher, yet few that are more difficult to see when at rest. People refer to it as a shy bird, but I do not think this is a fair description. On the contrary, I am inclined to think that if treated with the same respect as a robin it might prove equally audacious. In my own experience on the river I was surprised at how often the birds came close to me, and Mr Peter Ford, of Lechlade, has told me that when he was painting one of his boats a kingfisher came and sat beside him, cocking its head this way and that, watching him at work, and showing no sign of fear. Many fishermen have told me of similar instances when these birds have come and perched on their rods—I have heard of a swallow who did the same thing—and Mr Robin Rose has described how a kingfisher so appropriated one of the spare rooms of his home in Suffolk

that they were afraid to shut the windows lest the bird should hurt itself battering against the glass in its efforts to gain an entrance.

There is no doubt that kingfishers are difficult to see among the willows, for the light green edges of the

wings closely resemble the long pointed leaves of those trees. Furthermore, if the bird chooses a more exposed position, such as a dead branch, one of its favourite positions, it will take good care to face the spectator in such a way that the russet band on its breast merges into the withered bark of its perch.

I am more and more astonished at this phenomenon of camouflage throughout the whole animal kingdom. In a quiet pool of the Windrush I saw a young pike, whose mottled back exactly resembled a dead stick in the water. In another place I watched one of those bright butterflies known as painted ladies, flittering across the stream to settle on a lichen-covered stone. If I had not seen it in flight I should never have noticed it sitting there with its wings wide open to the sun, its yellow and black markings merging completely into the background. And we are told that these butterflies are regular migrants from Africa.

In my little book, *Blue Angels and Whales*, I gave a whole chapter to this subject. Hardly a day goes by without some new instance appearing. The little owl carries such a perfect bark pattern on its feathers that it is almost impossible to detect it as it sits in a hole in a willow-tree. The green woodpecker picking ants out of the grass, with the red on its head like a dead leaf, is completely lost to view. Chrysalids on a wall, on a tree trunk, or on painted timber will all be a perfect match for their background, although the caterpillars from which they developed were coloured alike. Recently I watched the ducks in Regent's Park. No bird could be more conspicuous on the water than

the red-crested pochard, but when it goes ashore on the island, and stands in the light and shade of the undergrowth, it becomes almost impossible to recognize even as a duck, so completely is the silhouette obliterated. But Sir Edward Poulton in his *Colours of Animals*, and Abbot H. Thayer in *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*, have dealt with this subject magnificently.

After the kingfisher, the heron must rank high in popular favour. Gliding round a bend of the river one day I saw a pair of these great birds rise. The first, with the usual ponderous strokes of its wings, flapped its way over the adjoining copse, but the second seemed scarcely able to lift itself into the air. Watching it, I soon saw the cause of the trouble, for across the bird's beak was a large fish. The broad wings beat the air, the long legs of the bird trailed in the rushes, but the weight in its beak prevented it from raising its head. What misgivings there must have been in the poor creature's mind as it tried to rise, and what disappointment when it was compelled to drop its burden! In the momentary glance I had of the fish as it fell, I estimated it to be about two pounds in weight, but pike, trout, or chub I failed to mark it, and I could only leave it for some other prowling creature of prey.

There is a fine heronry near Henley, said to be the seventh largest in England, and it is recalled that ringed birds from those nests have been found in the Isle of Man, and in Ireland. This adds credence to that charming legend of St Columba which Miss Helen Waddell has translated from the Irish, and which

Messrs Constable, the publishers, have kindly allowed me to print in full from her book *Beasts and Saints*, which I had the honour to illustrate.

St Columba and the Crane

And another time it befell, while the saint was living on Iona, that he called one of the brethren to him, to speak to him.

'Go thou three days from now to the west of this island at dawn, and sit above the shore and wait: for when the third hour before sunset is past, there shall come flying from the northern coasts of Ireland a stranger guest, a crane, wind tossed and driven far from her course in the high air: tired out and weary she will fall on the beach at thy feet and lie there, her strength nigh gone: tenderly lift her and carry her to the steading near by: make her welcome there and cherish her with all care for three days and nights; and when the three days are ended, refreshed and loath to tarry longer with us in our exile, she shall take flight again towards that old sweet land of Ireland whence she came, in pride of strength once more: and if I commend her so earnestly to thy charge, it is that in that countryside where thou and I were reared, she too was nested.'

The brother obeyed: and on the third day, when the third hour before sunset was past, stood as he was bidden, in wait for the coming of the promised guest: and when she had come and lay fallen on the beach, he lifted her and carried her ailing to the steading, and

fed her, famished as she was. And on his return that evening to the monastery the saint spoke to him, not as one questioning but as one speaks of a thing past. 'May God bless thee, my son,' said he, 'for thy kind tending of this pilgrim guest: that shall make no long stay in her exile, but when three suns have set shall turn back to her own land.'

And the thing fell out even as the saint had foretold. For when her three days' housing was ended, and as her host stood by, she rose in first flight from the earth into high heaven, and after a while at gaze to spy out her aerial way, took her straight flight above the quiet sea, and so to Ireland through the tranquil weather.

A great deal of study has been and is being made of bird migration, but I am only writing from my own experience. A few years ago I travelled from Sunderland to Barcelona on a small coaling tramp. We were hardly clear of the Channel when birds began to come on board. They stayed with us until we reached the Mediterranean. Turtle-doves, yellow wagtails, spotted flycatchers, chiff-chaffs, all on their way to Africa, and all taking personal safety for granted. From the moment when these birds alighted on the decks they assumed a right of way. Into the galley they would go, and sit on the teapot lid. When they had had sufficient crumbs they would divert themselves in the passages, where cockroaches and other non-vegetarian morsels might be found. Then on the deck, the bridge, the fo'c'sle head, or wherever their fancy led them.

One day Bill, the fireman, emerged from the entrails

of the ship stripped to the belt. On his head was a knitted cap; his trousers, once khaki, shone blue with grease. Bill was fond of birds, and he had found a fly-catcher which during the night had flown against the rigging and hurt itself. He had held it in his great clammy paw for over an hour, hoping to resuscitate it, and when he went to his dinner he had wrapped it in his cap. But when he came back it was dead, and now Bill leaned over the rail and silently watched its little golden body float away on the blue water. Then he wiped his chest and face with his oily 'sweat-rag,' blew his nose with no mean gusto, and went below.

Golden birds and death remind me of Christmas Day, 1914. I was a subaltern in the Munster Fusiliers, and my duty that day was to ride out over some lonely country to inspect an outpost. There was a howling gale from the south-west, and as I rode over a desolate moor I saw a flock of golden plover come tearing down wind. As they crossed the road some thirty yards ahead of me I saw three of them drop, but I heard no shot. The wind was too strong for me to hear; it would carry the sound, I thought. I waited to congratulate the man with the gun, but when, after a time, he didn't appear I dismounted, and leaving my horse with the orderly, I climbed the hedge to investigate. Instead of finding three birds I found seven, in a line parallel to the road. Four of them were cold and stiff. All but one had had their heads taken clean off by the telegraph wires which bordered the road.

That was in Ireland, on the east side of Cork harbour, not a great many miles from where I was born, though

It was on the west side of the county that I spent most of my youth. Up in the hills of Ballyshoneen and out in the Muskerry bogs; those were the places where I learnt anything that has been of value to me ever since.

I had a friend called Rafferty, Tom Rafferty. When I knew him first he was a middle-aged man, and a teacher in the village school, but my father, who had been at Trinity College, Dublin, with him, used to tell of the man's brilliance as a student. Apparently Greek and Latin came as naturally to him as his mother's milk, but there was one other thing that came easier still, and it wasn't in a milk bottle. Instead of becoming a bishop, and signing himself Thomas Killaloe, Thomas Raphoe or Thomas Cork, as his parents had intended, he dropped farther and farther from grace until he had been glad to earn a few shillings grinding the Latin into unwilling heads. But sometimes he would come shooting with me, though he never brought a gun and always insisted on carrying the bag. On these occasions it was his great delight as we went along to recite stories from the classics. Any excuse would set him off. A few moments' shelter in a cottage and I would hear about Baucis and Philemon. The sight of an old man walking along the road with a young girl would bring forth Acis and Galatea. The echo of a shot and he would tell of Narcissus.

One night, as we were sitting by the edge of a bog waiting for the duck to flight in, I remarked to him that if his classical knowledge was worth anything at all he 'd cut a few reeds and play a tune on the pipes while we were waiting. 'Ah, but where 's Syrinx?'

he said. 'Where 's who?' I asked. Then he told me the story of Pan and Syrinx. Somehow, though I could see no more than the top of his cropped head in the moonlight, the words, told in his lilting brogue, stuck in my memory, and I 'm setting them down now just as they came out of the shadow of the thorn bush.

''Twas away up on the hills of Arcady,' he said, 'and cold they were too, that there lived a nymph. Syrinx her friends called her, and more lovely she was than them all. Oho, but many the time she had to run far and fast with the little horny-footed satyrs following after her. And who do you think would be the worst of them all but Pan himself? Well, it seems that one day as she skeltered across the valley, with the little goat legs hot on her trail, she met with a river, and she unable to swim. What 'll I do now? said she to herself, 'tis destroyed I am. But if she couldn't swim she could do better, for, quick as a wink, she turned herself into a bunch of reeds.

'So there was Pan, and he thinking himself to be hugging a fine young girl when 'twas no more than the reeds of the stream that he held in his arms. Out of his mouth he let a great sigh, and the wind of it went from him into the reeds in his fist, and down through the valley the sound of it echoed, mournful and slow. Never mind, says he to himself at last, never mind. This is a new and a fine contrivance, and if it isn't one way I have her it 'll be the other, and so, with the skill I 'll soon be learning, it 's united we 'll be for ever.

'Now,' said Tom Rafferty, 'what do you think of that?' But I had no time to reply, for looking into

the sky I saw a duck high up, miles away it seemed, with its long neck stretched out, and it going like mad across a wisp of white cloud. I let it have the choke barrel, and I fired yards ahead of it, and to my surprise it began to fall. Down, down, it came, and Rafferty was there to meet it. 'My God!' he said, ''twas from under the stars you brought it.'

In the ordinary course of events I have a bad memory, so it always surprises me when I hear any one reciting at length; never more so than on one occasion, it must have been early in 1927, when I happened to be lunching with the late Lord Grey at his house in Smith Square. I had gone along to discuss the illustrations for his book, *The Charm of Birds*, and with me I had taken a copy of Lucian's *True History*, in the seventeenth-century translation by Francis Hickes, of which I had just completed a fine edition at the Golden Cockerel Press. While I was talking to Lady Grey I noticed that her husband was looking closely at the Lucian, holding the pages within a few inches of his face, and moving them from side to side in front of the one eye which at that time was of any service to him. After lunch he offered me a lift in his car, and as we went along he remarked on the beauty of the translation, and he then proceeded to recite long passages of the text.

'Disankering on a time from the Pillars of Hercules, the winde fitting mee well for my purpose, I thrust into the West Ocean: the occasion that moved mee to take such a voyage in hand, was onely a curiositie of minde, a desire of novelties, and a longing to learne

out the bounds of the Ocean, and what people inhabit the farther shoare. . . .'

'Thus sailed wee forward a day and a night with a prosperous winde, and as long as wee had any sight of land, made no great hast on our way: but the next morrow about sunne rising, the wind blew high, and the waves began to swell, and a darknesse fell upon us, so that wee could not see to strike our sailes, but gave our ship over to the winde and weather.'

He thought nothing of being able to quote it in that way, although his sight was so bad that when I visited him at Wilsford a few months later he was quite unable to see if there were eggs in the many nest boxes which were dotted about his garden.

It was in *The Charm of Birds* that he discussed the multiple nest-building of moorhens, giving an instance from his own observation of the way in which second nests are often used for brooding only. He writes: 'I have seén one used regularly for the young birds. This nest had never had eggs in it; it was near to and in full view of the place where I sat to feed water-fowl after sunset. Every evening for several days a parent moorhen conducted her young family swimming to the nest; assembled them on it, and brooded them there.'

Other observers tell of similar instances, all of which go to explain the number of apparently unused nests which are to be seen among the reeds.

But, of nests in general, I am strongly in agreement with this same great lover of birds when he suggests that, however kindly our interest or however benevolent our intention when we search for nests, by doing

so we expose the birds to dangers of which we do not dream and from which we cannot save them. 'When a human being finds and examines a nest he leaves some track or trace that betrays the treasure. A bent twig or a displaced leaf may catch the keen eye of a hungry jackdaw looking down from above.' And he goes on to tell how a fox once raided his water-fowl. 'There were about a dozen birds sitting at the time: many of their nests escaped destruction, for the birds appeared in due course with young ones; but the only nests that we had known of and visited, about five in number, were, every one of them, found and robbed by the fox.' This and many other instances so discouraged him that in later years he was 'content to be assured by ear that the birds were there: to know all had gone well by seeing young birds being fed, and thus have no knowledge of catastrophes and no share in them.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

JUST ABOUT the time that I was offered my present position as lecturer at Reading University it was also suggested to me by a London publisher that I should return to Tahiti and send him, from time to time, romantic manuscripts of the life down there. If it had not been for the cares of a family I should certainly have gone, but much against my inclinations I decided that it was my duty to stay at home and attempt respectability. I soon learned, however, that tropic islands are not the only places with wide horizons, and that even university cloisters can be avenues of romance. Faculties, Departments, or Schools of Agriculture, Zoology, Botany, Geology, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Philosophy, all within a few steps of my door, and their professors and lecturers ready to hand out information with oriental lavishness.

One day Ian Crichton, from Zoology, called me into his laboratory. 'Here you are,' he said, 'here 's some mud I brought back from South Africa two years ago. Put it in water and see what happens.' Then he gave me a cigarette tin filled with a hard yellow mud, from a lake which had dried up completely during the heat of the summer. It was as dry as the Sahara, and labelled 'Rondevlei, Cape Province, S. Africa, 6th March 1937.' That was on the 19th of June 1939, two years and three months after it had been collected, and at 7.45 p.m. the next day I dropped it into a glass jar containing distilled water, and covered it in such a way that dust was unable to enter.

On the morning of the 25th of June, hardly more than four days later, I took a sample of the water and examined it under the microscope. It was 'alive.' Flagellates, hundreds of them, like miniature tadpoles, crossing and recrossing the field of vision. There were numbers of other unicellular creatures, oval in shape, rushing about, with a rolling action, and there were minute transparent objects, each one wheeling on its own axis.

Next day I took further samples of the water, but practically all these forms of life had disappeared, while on the 27th and 28th of the month I could find no trace of them at all. Then for two days I was unable to make any observations, but on the morning of the 1st of July I noticed that at a height of about an inch from the bottom of the glass, the total depth of the water being slightly over four inches, there had appeared a delicate grey film, almost like a fine cobweb, spread

horizontally in the water from side to side of the container. As the day wore on the film grew more dense, and by the afternoon it was sufficiently coherent to sway when the water was disturbed, much as floating weed might do on the surface of the sea. On examination this film proved to be a mass of microscopic life. Where there had been hundreds of flagellates on the 25th, there were now thousands, larger and more vigorous, hurling themselves backwards and forwards, twisting, turning, and rushing about with the same intensity of purpose that bees show when swarming.

That was at five o'clock in the afternoon. At 8 p.m. the same evening I prepared a number of new slides, but could find no trace whatever of these same flagellates, which had been so numerous earlier in the day. I therefore examined the slide previously prepared, and to my surprise I found that all those minute creatures had congregated to form an irregular ring, about and around whose circumference they swam incessantly. Next morning they had all formed themselves into two close and compact groups, but, by two o'clock the same day, they had dispersed and were no longer visible.

So ended one cycle of life. But on the 7th of July I noticed what appeared to be patches of yellow fungus on the sides of the glass, spots of green here and there, too, and bubbles of gas were forming on the mud at the bottom, and were collecting in large globules on the somewhat shiny surface of the water. Rotifers made their appearance also. They take their name from the two rings of fine hair, or cilia, near their

mouth which, being in constant movement, have the appearance of rotating wheels. Not only do these cilia create a current by which food particles get drawn into the body, but they also act as propellers, giving to their owners a power of constant locomotion. Though not more than half a millimetre in length, these little creatures have a most complicated structure, with jaws, gut, ovary, and other organs, all clearly visible. Indeed, it is even possible to see the eggs within the ovary and to watch the jaws grinding up the food before it passes to the stomach.

Under the microscope the 'fungus' resolved itself into rod-shaped diatoms, and it was possible to see them being caught in the current created by the cilia and wafted straight down the rotifer's throat. Compared to the bustle and rush of their aggressors these diatoms moved calmly and with dignity, but it seems that in their world, as in our own, there is small place for such qualities, and the race is to the pushers and the go-getters.

When I set out on my river expedition a few days after this, the surface of the water in the jar had become thick with scum, and I hardly liked to think how noisome a tank I might find when I reached home again. I was therefore astonished when, on my return, all traces of these forms of life had disappeared, and in their place was a fairy pool of crystal-clear water with a forest of delicate green weed growing from the bottom. In the axils of the whorled leaves were clusters of orange fruits, and in and out through this labyrinth swam innumerable individuals of yet another

form of life, small bivalve crustacea known as ostracods, hardly larger than a pin's head, yet nearly as complicated in structure as their larger relatives, the shrimps and lobsters, with which we are more familiar.

As I write, in January, their empty shells cover the bottom of the pool in thousands, the green weed, known as Chara, maintains its growth in spite of frost, and I watch daily to see what new surprise is in store for me from this handful of earth which for twenty-seven months lay bone-dry in a tin.

Mud, to the human animal, is unattractive, but that opinion would not be shared by a large proportion of other living creatures. Apart from the hippopotamus and a few of the other larger mammals, whose views are so obviously different from our own, and apart from the vast multitude of birds whose existence depends on those acres of dark slobland left exposed by the receding tide, there are still an incredible number of creatures who enjoy life on or in that thick deposit. Of these the fresh-water mussel is perhaps the most obvious in the Thames.

It was often a source of wonder to me how these mussels, and the cockles also, could have found their ways to isolated pools and patches of water which lie above flood level, and which we know to be of artificial and recent origin. I was completely mystified on the subject until I came across a book, *The Dispersal of Shells*, by H. W. Kew, in the International Science Series. As the author says, it is certainly a surprising fact, though a matter of common observation, 'that almost every isolated cattle pond which a farmer digs,

perhaps near the middle of an upland pasture, should come to possess a mulluscan fauna within a few years of its formation.' He then goes on to explain that one reason for this strange phenomenon is that birds like sandpipers and snipe when feeding in shallow water often put a toe inside the half-open shells, whereupon the mollusc closes on them, and remains closed for some time. Meanwhile the frightened bird has sought fresh pastures. Of course, it is not suggested that there is any deliberation on the part of the shellfish; it just happens to be the animal's normal reaction to stimulus. The little orb or pea-shell cockle in the Thames has no more sinister intention towards the bird than the giant clam on the Great Barrier Reef of Australia has to the diver who unwittingly puts his hand or his foot into the vice. What happens after is all 'according to nature.' Sometimes events are as tragic for the bird as for the diver, for cases have been reported of dunlin, terns, and peewits who have been found dead or dying, with shells clinging to their beaks. One of the most extraordinary accounts of these occurrences came from America, where on one part of the Pamunkey river in Virginia it was impossible to raise ducks because at low water the ducklings got caught by the mussels and, being held, were drowned by the rising tide.

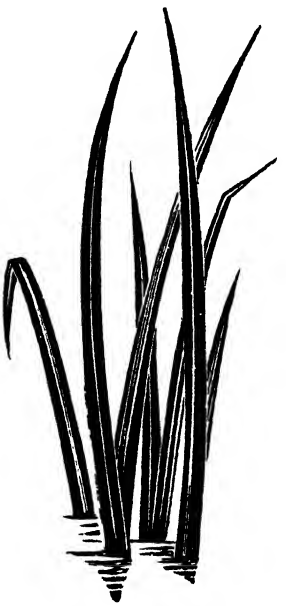
But birds are not the only means of transport. Newts, frogs, and even water-beetles, who are strong fliers, have all been found with shells attached to them, many of which are on exhibition in the Manchester Museum.

If we are surprised to find that newly dug cattle ponds have, in such a short time, been populated with these inert shellfish, it is equally astonishing to hear that there are still to be found, on this earth of ours, vast expanses of water which have never known a fish. Somehow, to an unthinking mind, it seems impossible that at this stage in the world's history there should be lakes and rivers capable of supporting fish, yet unpopulated.

So it is in Canada. My friend, Charles O'Donoghue, till recently Professor of Zoology in the University of Manitoba, and now occupying a similar position at Reading, has told me how, after the many thousands of years since one great watershed in the Rocky Mountains was formed, it fell to his lot to introduce fish there. Till then the water had never seen a scale.

In the ordinary course of nature lakes have an outlet to the sea, and through this channel fish of one sort or another find their way inland. The river flowing from these Canadian lakes fell over a high waterfall, which presented an insuperable barrier, even to the most athletic of the natural order Pisces. Every lowly form of aquatic life had found its way into the lakes, but never a fish. People said that the water was obviously unable to support fish life, that it must be lacking in the minute animals and plants which float in the water, and which scientists call plankton. But O'Donoghue was more observant. He could see how the geography of the land had been affected during the great ice age, and he noticed the height of the waterfall. He therefore set to work, and took samples of the water content, at

different depths. His calculations seemed to show that fish *could* live in that water if only they were given a chance to get there. To cut a story, of several years duration, short, he gave them this chance by introducing trout ova and fry in the year 1927. Four years later, when the first fisherman was let loose on the lake, he caught one hundred pounds' weight of trout in three and a half hours, of which the average fish weighed four pounds.



CHAPTER NINE

ONE CALM AFTERNOON I was tied up in a quiet backwater of the river. The water was like a mirror, and I was admiring the fringe of horse-tails which spread along the further edge of the pool. The old Greek herbalist, Dioscorides, described them very charmingly as 'a little shrub with one stalk, tender, like a reed, having continued joints lying one upon another . . . and round about the joints small leaves like those of the pine.' In the north of England, and in certain parts of Scotland, they are known as paddock-pipes or paddie-pipes—paddock being the Scots name for frog—the country people attributing the croaking heard in the marshes to the playing, by frogs, of these hollow pipes as instruments.

But that afternoon I was thinking more of their ancestors the giant trees, from which our coal seams have been formed—towering masts, fifty and sixty feet high. Now, the largest British representative of the family is no taller than a man, and the average height is but ten to thirty inches. I was thinking, too, of what the river must have been like in those far days when England had a tropical climate, when turtles and alligators splashed about in the mud, and a hippopotamus might at any moment have put his nose out

of the river. It was just then that a squall hit the river, circled round under the overhanging bank and, in less time than it has taken me to write about it, had drawn up the water into a miniature water-spout, rising nearly a foot above the ordinary river level. The wind only lasted a few seconds, and immediately it had passed the vortex subsided, but it seemed a very good indication of how water-spouts get formed, and of the immense force and speed with which a whirlwind sucks up the water and carries it along with whatever it may contain.

'Rains of fishes' have occurred in many parts of the world, but the accounts of them are nearly always disbelieved. Nevertheless the records go back to the second century, and in modern times instances have been reported in such authoritative periodicals as the journals of the Royal Society and the Linnean Society.

A recent fall of fish from the sky occurred about eleven years ago near Belfast, when, after heavy rain, dozens of tiny red fish were found on the roof of a farmhouse, and on the ground about it. Earlier, a storm had occurred at Aberdare, when, according to an eye-witness, 'it was not blowing very hard, but uncommon wet, and the fish came down with the rain in a body like.' They covered the ground in a strip about eighty yards long and twelve yards wide, and some of those fish that fell measured as much as five inches in length. Several of them were preserved alive, and were exhibited to the public for some time afterwards.

Other fish-falls are reported from New York, where the fish fell in the streets, and from India, where they

came down on a barrack square. It is interesting to note that, in almost every narrative, we are told of these events being accompanied by exceptionally heavy rains, and furthermore, that the fish have not been strewn indiscriminately over a wide area, but have fallen in a long and narrow line, suggesting the track of a cyclone. These descriptions must not be confused with the stories of people who have travelled abroad and who tell of fish that can remain alive, though motionless, in the bottom of a dried-up pool, and only spring into active life when the rain converts the mud into a pool again. That is quite a different thing, and is well known to scientists as aestivation.

But enough of mud, molluscs, and fish. The rain came down on me one morning so that I shouldn't have been surprised if whales had dropped out of the sky. The river was whipped with such fury that the splash of each splash splashed back again. The surface was like boiling mercury. The rain ran off the sides of my canvas cover like the fountain which played around the Sultan of Cheribon's couch to keep the poor

fellow cool in the hot weather, and I was hard put to it to prevent the deluge finding an entry into the boat.

I happened to be tied up at the mouth of a backwater, and I suppose my craft was inconspicuous. Anyway, just as I lifted a corner of the canopy to glimpse if there was a break in the sky, what should I see on the opposite bank but a girl, running fast up-stream, and she with nothing on. It was still raining so hard that I could not see clearly, but instead of the delicate pink which I am led to believe is the usual colour of naked damsels, this naiad was shining all over with the rain, so that she might have been clothed in silver sequins.

Now, said I to myself, is this nature, or am I a gentleman? But before I had reached a conclusion my head touched one of the main supports of the canopy, and a sluice of water into the stern of the boat abruptly changed the subject of my thoughts.

The shower passed as quickly as it had come on. A few minutes later the sun was shining, and I was rolling up the canvas hood in readiness for breakfast. Suddenly in mid-stream I saw the head of my sprite, her black hair encrusted with pearls of rain. She was swimming down-stream, and she looked in my direction just as I caught sight of her.

'Hallo,' she said, 'where did you come from?'

'Been here all night,' I replied. 'Have you come far yourself?'

'From below the bend,' she said.

I had a sort of idea that I knew her face, and she seemed to know who I was.

'Got much drawing done?' she asked.

'Come aboard and I 'll show you,' I said, looking as innocent as a lamb.

'I couldn't do that,' she replied.

'Why not?' said I.

'I 'm not dressed for the occasion.'

'That won't embarrass me,' I ventured.

'It might *me*, though.'

'Look here,' said I, 'I 've been watching birds, fish, frogs, cows, horses, and rabbits for the past month, and not one of them has worn as much as a pair of pants or a brassière.' The poor girl was obviously getting cold, and I was sorry for her. 'Come on,' I said, 'the kettle is boiling over, and I 'll make you a fine cup of tea.'

'With a drop of that rum for the moths?' she inquired, with a twinkle in her eye. Then I knew where we had seen each other before: in the bar at the 'Barley Mow.' We hadn't spoken, but her party had joined in the general laughter when I said I wanted rum for catching moths.

'Are you sure it isn't pheasants you are after?' one of the locals had asked from his corner.

'Have you got your raisins?' asked another.

It seems that twenty-four raisins soaked in rum will make any pheasant so doped that you can put him in your pocket without as much as a flutter. But that 's another story, and I 'm forgetting my girl. She was still in the water.

'I 'll tell you what,' she said. 'I 've left my wrap in that shed at the bend: get it for me and I 'll come aboard.'

It didn't take me long to hop ashore and run to the old tumble-down shelter. But there was no sign of the garment when I got there. High and low I looked, and I was just giving up in despair when I heard her voice. 'It 's all right,' she said, 'I 've found it.'

When I got back to the boat she was sitting in the stern, wrapped in one of my rugs, and pouring out the tea. Whether she had seen me in that rug before I don't know, but she was quick enough to see the advantage of the round hole that I had cut in the centre of it, for she had slipped her head through and was wearing it poncho-wise in the correct style.

So we had tea, without rum, and we talked about moths and butterflies, and that kind of thing, and she confided to me that very heavy rain always made her want to throw off her clothes and dash out into it; that she 'd never had a chance before; that she had left her cloak in a hollow tree, and—'had I seen her running on the bank?'

'Which bank?' I asked tactfully.

'Never mind,' she said. Then her eyes went to an old oak-tree in a coppice near by. 'Tell me,' she said, 'is that little bird a tree-creeper or a nuthatch? Just there above the double fork,' she added as I followed her glance.

'What colour is it?' I asked.

'I can't see, it 's just behind the branch; there it is, no, it 's gone again.'

'If it 's mottled brown on the back with a white tummy it 's a tree-creeper,' I said, 'but if it is slaty grey on the back with a reddish chest it 's a——'

Before I had time to say 'nuthatch' the boat gave a lurch, and when I looked behind me my lady had slipped out of the rug and into the water, and was splashing her way swiftly towards mid-stream.

'Good-bye, Robert Gibbings,' she called. 'You see, I know who you are.'

'And won't you tell me who *you* are?' I asked.

'Next time we meet,' she called, as she disappeared round the point.

But there never was a next time.

CHAPTER TEN

IT IS A COMMONPLACE that in whatever part of the world we may travel there will always be found someone who knows someone that we know. Then we hear the remark: 'Queer how small the world is.' If that kind of thing can happen in the more remote places of the earth, how much more likely it is to occur nearer home.

When I went on the river I thought, foolishly enough, that I was going into retreat, that I could hide myself, recognizing no one and remaining unrecognized by any. But I was soon disillusioned. Hardly a day passed on which I did not meet old friends or on which I was not drawn into a conversation which disclosed mutual friends.

One of these unexpected meetings was with a man whose Christian name is Martin. His surname I will leave unspoken. 'Loose Martin,' we used to call him, for not only did his clothes always hang about him in folds, but his long lean straggling limbs gave the impression that at any moment they might fall apart at the joints.

I met him for the first time in London. He had just returned from France, and he had brought with him three bottles of brandy, which he had smuggled

across the Channel by hanging them inside the front of his trousers. 'The customs officials will never hit you in the stomach,' he said. 'They may tap your side-pockets, but a man's belly is sacred, even in an excise shed.'

Martin is a writer. He doesn't have to bother very much about it for he has a small income of his own from other sources, but he likes to think out ideas for quaint books, or to get hold of some out-of-the-way subject and pursue it as far as he is able. It was he who suggested the book *Consequences*, which I published at the Golden Cockerel Press, in which each part in the old parlour game was written by a different author. John van Druten described 'the man,' G. B. Stern described 'the woman.' A. E. Coppard told 'Where they met.' Sean O' Faolain told what 'He said to her,' and so on via Norah Hoult, Hamish Maclaren, Elizabeth Bowen, and Ronald Fraser to Malachi Whitaker, who recounted what 'The world said.' The book, edited by A. E. Coppard, was a great success.

Another of his propositions was that someone should go to a clairvoyant and have his fortune told. The prophecy was to be written down and sent to half a dozen different authors, each of whom was to fulfil it as he or she thought best. His theory was that predictions are usually of such a general nature that many solutions are possible. 'Supposing,' he said, 'that she tells me I am going across deep water to do creative work, that may mean that I am going to France to paint pictures, to Ireland to write a book, or to Africa to build a railway bridge.' Unfortunately this idea of his

fell through because, at my suggestion, it was Martin himself who went to see the crystal-gazer, and she told him so many truths about his past and offered him such complications in the future that he no longer felt the subject was one to be treated lightly.

The last time I had seen him was about seven years ago, just before he sailed for America. He was taking

with him several packing-cases filled with old leather-bound books, which he hoped to sell for their bindings (the contents were rubbish), but I 'm inclined to think he missed the market. Now I met him again on the Thames at about seven o'clock in the morning, as I was letting *The Willow* drift down-stream with no more help than an occasional stroke with the paddle to keep her from the bank.

'Can you clear the line for me?' called a voice, and I looked across to see a fisherman almost hidden in the rushes.

'Try and separate those lilies,' he said. 'There 's a fish on. He 's tangled in the roots.'

I did as I was told, and immediately a pike of about seven pounds came into view. A few minutes later it was on the bank.

'Very unusual thing, second fish with the same bait,' he said. 'Hardly ever happens with pike. Got that little one there on the grass a few moments ago, threw the bait back without thinking, and this big one was on to it, and into the weeds before you could say—— Why, damn it, it 's you, Robert.'

'It is, indeed,' I said, 'and I only recognized yourself this minute.'

So I tied up the boat and went home with him for breakfast.

'What 's the great work you 're on now?' I asked as we sat down.

'Sheela-na-gigs,' he said. 'Did you ever hear of them?'

'Never.'

'And you a son of the Church! The Sheela-na-gig is what would, to-day, be termed an improper piece of sculpture, and of all places in the world they used to be put over the west door of the churches in Ireland, to keep the devil away.'

'Never heard of them,' I said.

'You wouldn't,' he replied. 'Most of them are taken down, and those that remain are unrecognizable. Here 's a drawing of one that was found at Rochestown in County Tipperary. Here 's another from Droghеda. That immodest lady on your left was on a church in County Cavan, which has since been demolished, but the carving is preserved in the Irish Academy. They were put over castle doors too, to avert the evil eye. There 's one from Ballinahinch, and that other is from Lemanaghan in King's County. What interests me,' he said, 'is that you find the same symbol all over the world. India, the Pacific, Mexico. Wherever you get a primitive people there you get the belief in the salutary power of these images.'

'And are you writing a book about them?' I asked.

'No,' he said. 'I 'd rather keep out of jail, but I 'm making the records for a more intelligent generation.'

The cottage in which he was living had but one room. It was built of wood except for a gable end of brick, which was badly blackened, as if by recent fire. The roof was of corrugated iron, with patches of new red paint on it.

'You should hear the starlings under that tin,' he said. 'That 's why I 'm early on the river. Can't

sleep after dawn with the row they make stampeding on the wooden ceiling.'

'You 've had a bit of a fire,' I remarked.

'Damn near burnt out last week. Had an awful time. Woke up about two in the morning to hear footsteps, as I thought, on that bit of gravel path. I 'd been suspecting prowlers for some time. So I waited till I reckoned they were outside the window. Then I jumped up, and pulled the curtain, intending to flash my torch in their face. Man! The place was an inferno. Timber and trees crackling: sparks flying. It didn't take me long to nip out of the house, but the ground was covered with burning chips and splinters, so I had to run back for my shoes. At the same time I picked up my trousers, but I couldn't find my belt. The next two hours I spent chucking buckets of water against those corners to stop the fire spreading, and every time I heaved a bucket my trousers fell down. I 'm tattooed all over with burns.'

I attempted to tell him about the fire-walking in the South Seas, and how, after certain incantations by the priest, the natives can walk about unhurt on white-hot stones, but he wasn't in any humour for the subject.

No, he didn't want to hear any more about fire. He knew just how powerful it was. 'How big is the pit, anyway?' he asked.

'About fifteen or twenty feet across, and five or six feet deep.'

'And how is it heated?'

'Layers of logs and small timber kept burning all night.'

'And the stones are mixed with those?'

'They are.'

'And the priest waves a few leaves and then walks about on the stones with bare feet?'

'He does, but he spends the night in prayer and incantation first. It is a very solemn ritual,' I told him.

'Do you believe all that?' he asked, incredulously.

'I do,' I said. 'I know several people who have seen the ceremony performed, and, what 's more, one of them saw a man go into the pit who had been forbidden to do so by the priest, and he was badly burned. He 'd broken some tabu.'

From the subject of fire we got back to his starlings, who, during the past season, had nested in the little box on his outer gate. 'I wouldn't have minded,' he said, 'if they 'd allowed me to use it as well, but they didn't. If I wasn't there when the postman called they would take the letters out of the box and scatter them down the lane. Time and again I tore out the nest: sticks, straws, dead grass, thistles, bits of string, ivy leaves, cow-parsley. The climax came when I left home for a couple of weeks. When I got back there was the nest and six eggs. I admitted defeat, and put up another letter-box. The youngsters flew a fortnight ago.'

I told him then of some tits that I knew who hadn't been content with throwing the letters out of the box, but had actually torn many of them into bits and used the fragments of paper for nest-building.

Then we got on to the subject of mother love. I told him of a bitch I 'd heard of who on meeting a litter

of her puppies, from which she had been weaned for some time, recognized only one of them, and that the one which had been delicate at birth. He capped this with the story of a cow which was so distressed by the death of her calf that a kind-hearted onlooker had the skin stuffed and given back to the mother. The cow licked it over and over with true maternal tenderness, until finding some of the hay stuffing protruding she forgot her grief and ate the hay. I then quoted to him a story by M. M. Enteman, who, writing on 'The Behaviour of Social Wasps,' tells of 'a worker wasp which, lacking other food to present to a larva, bit off a portion of one end of the larva's body and offered it to the other end to be eaten': a case of instinct triumphing over reason. He told me of chub in Nebraska who jump out of the water and snatch the flies off the sides of cattle that come to the river for watering. I told him of natives living in the tropical forests of South America who, when they become infested with a minute form of burrowing tick, lie down in the streams and are picked clean by the fish.

Then he took me to see a badger's earth in the wood behind his cottage. The trail to it was well trodden, and it was easy to see the mark of the broad pads and their five toes in the soft earth. Close to the 'bury' was an oak-tree, whose bark was filled to a height of eighteen inches with earth which the animals had rubbed from their coats after they had finished digging.

'They 're dirty feeders,' said Martin. 'When a fox kills a lamb or a rabbit he bites off what he wants, and leaves the rest unmutilated, but a badger leaves bits of

flesh and scraps of fur all over the place. Another thing,' he added, 'which you probably know'—but which, incidentally, I didn't—'is that when a badger robs a nest he does not get the bird, but scrapes all the eggs out and eats them outside the nest. On the other hand, when the fox is marauding he nips the bird in the back of the neck, puts it outside the nest, and then eats the eggs in the nest, taking the bird away with him afterwards.'

We prowled about the wood for a time, but found nothing of particular interest except the beetle-ridden corpse of a mole. No doubt the little owl who owned the larder was watching us, but we failed to see him. As is well known, the owls pounce on the moles when they are working near the surface, but instead of eating the body they leave it near their lair and feed on the beetles which congregate about the corpse.

And so we found our way back to the boat, and said good-bye. The sun had dispersed every vestige of cloud, and I was glad to exchange my trousers for my Tahitian *pareu*.[1] I gave old Martin three blasts on my conch shell[2] as I passed out of view. I wouldn't like to print what the farmer said whose horse bolted at the sound.

[1] The *pareu* is a brightly coloured length of cotton worn in a similar manner to the Malay sarong.

[2] The conch shell is grown by one of the larger molluscs of the coral reefs. It was, formerly, the war trumpet of the Pacific Islanders. When the tip has been filed off, the empty shell can be blown in much the same way that we sound a hunting horn. Nowadays it is used by natives for signalling to each other when fishing at night. Heard against the boom of the surf on the reef it is music not easily forgotten. The nearest sound to it that I know in this country is that from the blowing stone on White Horse Hill.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON ONE SHORT STRETCH of the river, during a period of five weeks, a thousand fishermen took out licences to fish. No fish except pike are allowed to be killed. All others that are taken are put into 'keep-nets,' weighed up at the end of the day, and then set free. It is a strange habit.

I do not think that there is, for the most part, any great cruelty involved in the catching, for most fish seem fairly insensitive about the jaws, and I imagine that most of these victims of human amusement soon recover from the nervous strain of being pent up with others in a confined area for a whole day. There is, however, an amazing amount of thoughtless suffering inflicted in this useless form of sport. I have often seen men walking up the bank with fish dangling in mid-air from the end of their rods, just to display the prize to their wives or children. Time and again I have seen fish *chucked* back into the water in such a way that they fall a dozen feet or more before they hit the surface. No wonder that so many dead fish are to be seen. The swim-bladder of a fish, which controls its balance in the water, is an extremely sensitive organ, and such rough treatment would easily upset its mechanism.

One fish that I saw, a chub, had obviously been affected in this way, for it was quite unable to submerge. As it swam its dorsal fin was out of the water, and when it attempted to dive its tail flapped helplessly above the surface.

Children too, in their unthinking way, cause unnecessary pain. Many a roach, bleak, or dace is

handled by one youngster after another in none too delicate attempts to extricate the hook.

Sitting on the bank for hours on end watching a quill does not seem to me to be a very exciting form of entertainment. Perhaps it is not meant to be. It may be classed under the heading of soporifics. I asked one man if he did not find it monotonous. He said no, that when he got tired of fishing for roach he fished for perch. I suppose that if one has waded in mountain

streams and played brown trout in swirling pools the camp-stool siesta must seem dull. Yet it is all relative. The man who has battled for hours with giant tuna and swordfish will spurn the half-pounder in the brook.

For my part I don't hold with big game fishing. It serves no useful purpose and inflicts hours of agony on creatures who do no harm to man. By all means let us kill for food, whether it be bird, beast, or fish. I am even in favour of a mild form of cannibalism *when necessary*. But that civilized human beings should take pleasure in the long-drawn death struggles of inoffensive creatures seems to me to be utterly revolting.

In the bar parlour of the Trout Inn at Tadpole Bridge there is hung on the wall the stuffed head of a large trout. The landlord will explain that it is there to put a stop to the argument whether or not trout have teeth on their tongue. This it does most thoroughly, for one glance inside the open mouth will show four very neat rows of short but effective needles; one line on each jaw, another on the roof of the mouth, and one round the edge of the tongue to meet it.

The story of the capture of this fish is a strange one. It happened in 1938. In that year it was decided to drain a small pond on a neighbouring estate, and in order to get rid of the water it was necessary to clear a pipe leading from the pond to the river. The operation was carried out successfully in the course of an afternoon, and late that evening the water was flowing away freely. But when the owner visited the

scene next morning he found the pool almost as full of water as when he had left it. Whatever his surprise may have been at this, it was nothing to his astonishment when he discovered that a large trout had got wedged head first in the entrance of the pipe. Being unable to move, and its gill covers being pressed by the sides of the trap, it was already dead. When taken out of the water it weighed nine pounds eleven ounces, and to-day its head mounted on a wooden shield gives a fine suggestion of heraldry in this quiet resort of anglers.

It isn't the first time that a trout has appeared in heraldry, for the Cornish family of Penrose bears that fish as its crest, and in a Roll of the kings, bannerets, and knights of the time of Henry VI there is a representation of two knights, mounted on horses with caparisons bearing their arms, and engaged in bloody combat. On the shield and tabard of the one are blazoned trout; on those of the other are pike. Indeed, a whole book has been written on the heraldry of fish: haddock, herring, turbot, eels, sprats, none of them has escaped; even flying fish have been caught in the net, and, not content with such a haul, the herald has harpooned the whale and ensnared the triton and the mermaid.

But I have already written of mermaids, from personal experience, and, anyway, it 's a dangerous subject, so I will speak of dogs instead.

Two men and a mangy sheep-dog were sitting outside 'The Trout.' The men were discussing the dog.

'I reckon nothing will cure him,' said the owner. 'He 's been to the vet three times, he has, and I 've washed him in water that I 've boiled a rusty horseshoe in, and he don't grow no hair. The river 's the only place for him, danged if it ain't.'

'Will you give him to me if I cure him?' inquired the other.

'Nothin' 'll cure him,' said number one.

'I 'll cure him,' said number two.

'Nothin' 'll cure him,' said number one.

'What will you bet?'

'I 'll stand you a bottle of whisky if ever a hair grows on his back again.'

'Will you shake on that?'

They shook hands.

'Now,' said number two, 'next time you go into Faringdon you go and see th' chemist, and you say to him, you say, mix me up six drachms of creosote in a half-pint of sweet oil, just common oil of creosote; don't you go letting him work off no fancy stuff on you. And when you gets home you shake that up, and you put it on the dog. Not all of it, you know, just enough to moisten th' skin. It 'll work in all right, and he won't rub it off, not if he rolls in sand for a week.'

The owner seemed sceptical, but his adviser gave him no chance. 'Look here,' he said, 'you remember that spaniel I had, the black cocker. Didn't he have a fine coat? Too thick, it were. I 've heard that dog following me on a frosty night, and the icicles on his ears knockin' together and ringing like church bells

And once on a time his ears were red bleedin' raw. Yes, and his back from collar to tail red bleedin' raw too. And who do you think cured him? Tell me,' he said, 'did you know——?' His voice dropped to a whisper. I couldn't catch the man's name, but I gathered he 'd been in some trouble, something to do with poaching, and was apparently a great man with dogs. 'You see,' said the speaker raising his voice again, 'the creosote kills the bugs and the oil feeds the hair.'

I have since heard that that sheep-dog has now got a coat on him like a hundred-guinea sable.

At another inn, not many miles further down-stream, I overheard another conversation. I had dropped in for dinner, and the whole atmosphere was rather 'correct.' Waiters in tails, and menus, and all the usual paraphernalia of napkins, large and small knives and forks, and half-dead flowers in vases. At the next table to mine were a father, a mother, and their son, aged about fourteen.

'To-morrow we 'll reach Kelmscott,' said the father somewhat portentously.

'The what cott?' asked his son rather flippantly.

'Kelmscott Manor, where William Morris lived. He was a poet, you know, wrote a lot of books on Socialism, and that kind of thing. He did a lot of printing too.'

'But didn't we go there last year?' asked the son.

'Oh, no, that was The Silent Pool, where the girl drowned herself: held herself down to the weeds to—

er—get away from the—er—er—unwelcome attentions of——'

'What are unwelcome attentions, daddy?'

'Well, you know—er—when someone likes you awfully and—er—you can't bear them, how—er—er—what a nuisance it is.'

The boy agreed, doubtfully.

'They drained the pool afterwards because they thought the trout were dying,' continued the father, 'but it filled up again.'

'But I can't see why she drowned herself,' said the boy.

'Will you have fruit salad or lemon cream?' asked his mother.

But I wasn't always eavesdropping; indeed, I was much more concerned with avoiding people, and my best times were at night or in the hours soon after dawn when, except for a herdsman turning in the cattle, there would be no sign of human life. It is those quiet mornings in August that remain in my memory far more clearly than momentary conversations, those mornings when the sun rose through the mist like an ivory disk, seemingly without power to shed light or give heat, and those evenings too when darkness veiled the river, and time stood still, so that I seemed to be moving through events, past, present, and future, as if I was walking through a field of resting cattle. This one is an event of yesterday, that one is an event of to-morrow; the future as definite as the past. It was I who was moving through them.

Only a few years ago, in geologic time, elephants, rhinoceros, sabre-toothed lions, and grizzly bears inhabited this valley; wild boars lived in the thickets. Vast herds of reindeer and bison may have forded this same river where now there is a bungalow and a diving board. In still earlier times tropical vegetation flourished: palms and pandanus, cinnamon-trees, custard apples, and a species of gardenia which, if not the same, must at least be a relative of that little white flower the *tiare* which is worn with such significance in Tahiti. Behind the left ear it means 'I want a lover,' behind the right ear it says, 'I 've got one.' When I was on the island I saw very few people without a flower.

The one danger that I anticipated on the river was midges. I fully expected to be 'eaten alive,' and yet, for some curious reason, I never once felt the bite of any flying insect. Thousands of them came on board each evening, and camped under my canopy, but never once was I stung. But the more I saw of them and the more I watched them under a lens, the more I realized what living miracles they were. We wonder at the tomb of Tutankhamen, at the Parthenon, at the Panama Canal, but those have all been conceived by the human mind, whereas even the wings or the antennae of one of these pin-head flies are beyond the realization of the clearest-thinking brain.

Similarly with crystals: we have learned that the angles of any one kind of crystal are always the same, be it topaz, amethyst, or diamond, and we believe that this is so because the molecules which compose that

crystal are combined in such a way that they form the particular angles of that crystal. Thus, when built up together in large groups, they can only produce multiples of themselves. As with children's bricks, squares can never make triangles nor diamonds be arranged as squares.

But even if we are agreed on that we have still before us the question WHY?

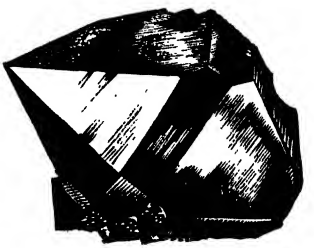
There is at No. 30 Old Church Street, Chelsea, an Aladdin's cave, known to few but mineralogists, wherein are to be found precious stones innumerable. Few of them cost more than dinner in a west-end restaurant. Many of them cost less than a hundred cigarettes.

I know a man who always carries one of these stones in his pocket, and delights to hold it in his hand. At last I have found something both exquisite and everlasting, he says. One day he has with him a cube of purple fluor-spar from Derbyshire or, perhaps, a pyramid of smoky quartz from Cumberland. The next it may be rock crystal from Madagascar. To him the sense of *tenancy* in life is stronger than in any one I know. 'We are passing through,' he says. 'Passing through. Flowers fade, timber crumbles, metal corrodes, but these stones will remain.' He has no relatives in the world, but he feels kinship with those who have owned these stones in the past and those who will care for them in the future.

On my own table is a section of agate, cut and polished, its concentric rings of rose, ivory, and carmine enclosing a turbulent mass of amethyst. I

bought it some years ago for a few shillings, and no expenditure has ever brought greater reward. Its depths are always there, clear and refreshing, a petrified pool never to be disturbed by wind or tide.

Few people realize the beauty of even the commonest of stones; yet the insect who makes his home in a pile of gravel on the roadside lives in a palace.



CHAPTER TWELVE

OF ALL THE PLANTS that grow in water, none has more exquisite leaves than the sweet sedge. Like finely chiselled scimitars their curved blades sway in the wind. In former days, owing to their fragrance, they were used for strewing on the floors of houses and churches. Concerning this practice at Norwich Cathedral, Mackenzie Walcott, in his *Traditions and Customs of Cathedrals*, published in 1872, speaks of a procession of the corporation on horseback and in carriages to the cathedral, 'preceded by the dragon, whifflers, swordsmen, musicians, the standards of blue and silver, and crimson and gold, the councillors in gowns, mace-bearer, the city-waits, the marshalmen, and the civic authorities, with the sword carried erect. The gates of the close were opened at their approach, and the corporation proceeding through the nave, strewn with sweet-scented rushes, was received at the choir door by the Dean and Chapter.' He tells also that rushes were used in the choir of Canterbury in 1635, and that at the time of his writing the custom of strewing the choir of Bristol with sweet-smelling herbs was still observed when the mayor visited the cathedral in state. Another writer mentions that when the sedge was trodden on at Norwich its fragrance became stronger, so that the whole cathedral seemed filled with incense.

In many of the backwaters of the Thames the surface

is covered with pondweed, known as potamogeton, greatly beloved by the larvae of the china mark moth. Many of the leaves will be seen to be perforated, and if these are examined the caterpillar will be found on their underside, comfortably ensconced between two fragments of the leaf, each about an inch and a half long, and rather more than half an inch broad. These, a perfect pair, it has nibbled out, and so arranged that, their concave surfaces being face to face, there is ample space between them for residence. Thus the larva does not live naked, but is even more completely enclosed in leaves than our first parents.

'Our first parents'—the longer I live the more I am amazed at the fantastic legend concerning that unfortunate couple, with which the world has been regaled for over two thousand years. Nature is cruel—we all know that—but not so cruel as the Book of Genesis. From the moment when Adam and Eve behaved as any two normal people should have behaved under similar circumstances, the narrative goes on in an ever-increasing crescendo of inconsistency. No sooner have we left these unhappy 'first parents' than we are confronted with the story that 'the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.' Well, that may be all right, but two verses later we are led to infer that they dispensed with the marriage ceremony. Who were these sons of God? Surely their home influence should have been good. And yet they behaved in a way which would be frowned on even in twentieth-century England.

And then God saw that the wickedness of *man* was great in the earth, and it repented Him that He had made man on the earth, and, there and then, because His own sons had slipped across the frontier, He decided to destroy 'both man and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air'; for it repented Him that He had made them. What harm had a wren or a blue tit ever done that they should all have been destroyed? I mentioned this to a man who once engaged me in religious conversation. His reply was that probably God was human like the rest of us, that after all it was the first world He had made, and that it was only natural that there should have been a few mistakes. Anyway, He *had* sent His son to put things right, and one should not expect more than that. This seemed to me to be on a level with a question I once heard: 'If there isn't a heaven or a hell, where are we to go to?'

I don't like the sound of Noah, either. I believe he was mealy-mouthed. Why should some beasts be labelled clean and others unclean? It is the beginning of class distinction. Incidentally, nothing is said about the fish. I wonder what happened to them. I 'm afraid a lot of the corals must have died from the effects of fresh water, as they still do in the Red Sea after heavy rain.

Of course my father believed in the Book of Genesis. He also believed in a personal devil, and I 've heard him say that the devil was always waiting, like a black cat, ready to jump on people's backs. Perhaps that is why I am not fond of cats.

I don't want to dwell on Biblical subjects, but I can't help recalling Jacob and his ringstraked cattle (Genesis xxx. 31–42):

'And Jacob said, Thou shalt not give me any thing: if thou wilt do this thing for me, I will again feed and keep thy flock. I will pass through all thy flock to day, removing from thence all the speckled and spotted cattle, and all the brown cattle among the sheep, and the spotted and speckled among the goats: and of such shall be my hire. So shall my righteousness answer for me in time to come, when it shall come for my hire before thy face: every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats, and brown among the sheep, that shall be counted stolen with me. And Laban said, Behold, I would it might be according to thy word. And he removed that day the he goats that were ringstraked and spotted, and all the she goats that were speckled and spotted, and every one that had some white in it, and all the brown among the sheep, and gave them into the hand of his sons. And he set three days' journey betwixt himself and Jacob: and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks. And Jacob took him rods of green poplar, and of the hazel and chesnut tree; and pilled white strakes in them, and made the white appear which was in the rods. And he set the rods which he had pilled before the flocks in the gutters in the watering troughs when the flocks came to drink, that they should conceive when they came to drink. And the flocks conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle ringstraked, speckled, and spotted. And Jacob did separate the lambs, and set the faces of the

flocks toward the ringstraked, and all the brown in the flock of Laban; and he put his own flocks by themselves, and put them not unto Laban's cattle. And it came to pass, whensoever the stronger cattle did conceive, that Jacob laid the rods before the eyes of the cattle in the gutters, that they might conceive among the rods. But when the cattle were feeble, he put them not in: so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's.'

For my own part I am inclined to think that the dream which Jacob recounted to Rachel and Leah, in explanation of his success, may have been associated in some way with sleep-walking, and that a gate may, perchance, have been left open. Alternatively, he may have been a very skilful cattle breeder, and have known some principle such as we now understand about the blue Andalusian fowl.[1] At the same time he was probably clever enough to keep his knowledge to himself, and allow his neighbours to retain the almost universal superstition concerning the effects of pre-natal influences. On this I could write a full chapter, but I will refrain, and quote but a few instances, for every reader must know of many cases within his or her own experience.

About the year A.D. 400 Heliodorus, Bishop of Tricca in Thessaly, when writing certain love stories

[1] When any two blue Andalusian fowl are bred together twenty-five per cent of the offspring are clear black, twenty-five per cent are white splashed with black, and fifty per cent take after their parents and are blue. If these blues are interbred the results will be exactly the same—twenty-five per cent black, twenty-five per cent white, and fifty per cent blue, and so *ad infinitum*. But if two of the blacks are mated together the results will be entirely black, and if two of the splashed whites are bred together the results will be entirely splashed whites. What happens when a black is crossed with a splashed white? The astonishing answer is that they are one hundred per cent blue.

—for which, incidentally, he was afterwards unfrocked —ascribes to Persina, Queen of Aethiopia, the following parting lament to her daughter: 'In the tenth year after our marriage when as yet we had no child, I retired to repose myself during the scorching heat of noon, and here your father Hydaspes visited me, being warned to do so in a dream. In consequence of this visit I became pregnant. . . . But when at last I brought you forth, a white infant, so different from the Aethiopian hue, I was at no loss to explain the cause, since, in the embraces of your father, I had kept my eyes fixed on the picture of Andromeda.'

That is, of course, fiction within fiction, but it shows that the belief was current at the time.

To-day, on the atoll of Pukapuka, in the South Pacific, it is believed that if a pregnant woman eats fish with a small mouth her child will have a small mouth. If she eats the head of a fish with a large mouth her child will be endowed with a large mouth.

In a Norwegian paper devoted to agriculture a correspondent writes: 'One of my neighbours a couple of years ago mated his mare with his stallion at noon and in bright sunshine. He realized immediately that there was danger of the foal being too light, and he was right in his forebodings, for the following spring the mare produced a light dun foal. Last year he again paired the mare and the stallion, but late in the evening, and in order to be on the safe side, he covered the mare's head with an old black coat. What happened? Well, this year the mare produced a dark dun foal.'

Then there is the recent case of a farmer in

Connemara who owned a splendid mare from which he hoped to breed a Derby winner. To achieve his ambition he paid a very high fee at stud. But, to his great consternation, when the foal was born it was nothing better than a piebald circus pony. He has not yet recovered from his grief, but he explains that the fault was entirely his own, giving, as his reason, the fact that he grazed the mare in a field which adjoined one in which there were spotted cattle.

I myself have a friend, highly educated, who believes that a birthmark which he bears on his anatomy is due to the fact that his father, when on honeymoon, was bitten by a dog in the same spot. So the belief goes on.

Talking of birthmarks reminds me of a curious incident in my own family. When my eldest son was born he had on the index finger of his right hand a circular black patch. Our friends said, he is going to be a black and white artist. The nurse scrubbed and his mother scraped, but nothing would move it, and he seemed destined to carry the blemish through life. One Sunday afternoon, however, when the boy was about a fortnight old, I lay down, and falling asleep I dreamt that the mark had gone. In due course I got up, and going to my wife's room, I told her what had happened. 'Nonsense,' said she, pulling the small hand from under its bedclothes, 'it will be there all his life.' But when she looked for the mark it was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IF EVER THERE WAS a saint on earth before myself it was my father. I was reminded of this when someone dropped a bottle outside 'The Rose Revived' at Newbridge. My father was a parson, a canon at that, and he could have been a dean, the Dean of Ross, no less. But he was a large man, and when he went to inspect the deanery he found that there wasn't a room in the house in which he could sleep with his legs straight unless he put his feet through a window, and so he was compelled to remain a canon.

But he was a great teetotaller. There wasn't a temperance platform in the country on which he hadn't spoken. Not that he was bigoted; on the contrary, he generally had a drop in the house in case of illness, and if he knew that any old gentleman was coming to the house who might be used to having something with his lunch, then the laws of hospitality triumphed over moral principles.

On one such occasion, when my grandfather, on the mother's side, was coming to see us, my father decided that he must buy a bottle of whisky. Well, if any place that sold such things could be respectable, the most respectable, in his eyes, was a large general grocer's situated at the junction of the two most important streets in Cork. In he went, and he bought his bottle, and he inquired how they were all keeping, and how their relations were keeping, and how the children that he 'd baptized were keeping, for he knew every one in the city, and they all knew him. Then in their turn the manager and his assistants inquired of him how he was getting along in the country, and how was his eldest son in the Navy, and if he 'd sold the Kerry cow yet, and was his second son still wanting to be an artist. Anyway, this conversation being concluded, and having shaken hands with every one in the shop, for he was a very genial man, he issued forth into that great junction where St Patrick's Street meets the Grand Parade. He was no sooner outside the door, with a sense of a difficult task accomplished successfully, than he proceeded to push the bottle into the pocket of his voluminous mackintosh cape. But, whether from subconscious nervousness or not I don't know, he forgot that the pocket had an opening on the inside as well as on the outside, and in a moment the bottle had dropped to the pavement.

A broken bottle of whisky is at any time a tragedy, but usually an affair for private grief. In Cork it is an occasion for public mourning. A crowd soon collected; and there was my innocent teetotal father in

the midst of them all, looking down at his broken four-and-sixpence worth, and saying to himself: 'Oh, my, my! Oh, my, my!'

I referred to my grandfather, who was the cause of this trouble. He was a remarkable man if ever there was one. I don't suppose there are many antiquarians alive who haven't heard of Robert Day of Cork—not important ones, anyway. Wherever you go you 'll find traces of his collection: Roman beads in the museum at Cirencester: Fijian flesh-eating forks in New Zealand: medals wherever medals are to be found. Didn't the late Lord Wolseley take a medal off his own chest and ask the old man to add it to his collection? The trouble with some grandparents is that they die too soon. There he was, with his hall filled with Polynesian clubs, and his study packed with everything from old gold ornaments downwards, and now they are all dispersed, and all that I remember of him is a fine hearty handsome man with great knowledge.

All this digression began with a broken bottle at Newbridge. My first sight of Oxford, 'City of Spires,' was the gas-works, and I cannot say that the view improved a great deal before I reached Folly Bridge. There I left the boat and walked up St Aldate's Street, spending a few moments in Christ Church quadrangle to refresh my eyes after the dreary approach to the town. After that I went on into 'The High,' to visit my friend, Mr Sanders, at 'Salutation House.' This is as cosy a bookshop as one could desire, retaining that atmosphere of geniality and ease which no doubt existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

when the house was known as the Salutation Inn. Davenant and Shakespeare almost certainly visited this resort, and it is on record in the registers of St Mary's parish that Anthony Wood and Sir Kenelm Digby were carried home from it in a condition which would to-day be described as 'tight.' At one time there was a bear-pit behind the house.

From there I proceeded past the Bodleian and, as I went, I wondered to myself if anybody had ever asked to see a single one of the hundred books which I have printed, the fifty that I have illustrated, or the five that I have written. They are not there through any virtue of their own, but by all-embracing Act of Parliament. A shilling a copy, I 'm told, it costs to store the thousands upon thousands of volumes which arrive there every year from all sources. I thought of the painted timber ceiling within, dating from the first decade of the seventeenth century, and the cubicles lined with leather-bound books, many of them occupying the same position on the shelves as they did when the first catalogue was compiled, and a few still chained to the shelves, as they all used to be. I envied the men who could sit and study with that store of knowledge all about them, with no sound to disturb their thoughts beyond the rustle of turning pages; a rustle like the incoming tide as it creeps over shingle.

And so across Broad Street to visit Basil Blackwell. We have it on the authority of Sir Max Beerbohm that soon after Zuleika Dobson arrived in Oxford a certain old don emerging from Blackwell's saw, to his amazement, great beads of perspiration glistening on the brows

of those emperors whose pedestals are interspersed along the railing of the Sheldonian. I can assure the reader that their condition was nothing to mine when I saw a whole window of Mr Blackwell's devoted to books on the Thames. There was I, knowing absolutely nothing about the river except what I could glean from its own waters, and about to write a book on the subject. There was I, I say, confronted by a whole library on the subject. Histories of the Thames. Histories of the villages beside the Thames, and of the bridges which span it. Histories of its tributaries. Picturesque tours of the river. A naturalist on the river. Lure and lore of the river. Maps, charts, and guide-books galore.

'The last time I saw you you were stripped to the waist, bronzed, wearing a sarong, and looking like a river god,' said Blackwell himself, emerging from his door.

'And now I 'm pale, in a puce sweat, and feeling like a water-rat,' I said. But, as ever, he was kindly and encouraging. He seemed positively anxious to see whatever I might write, and he even suggested that these very pages might some day appear in his window.

Revived by this conversation I staggered, metaphorically, across the street again and studied Messrs Parker's windows. There, in the centre, was a life of Gauguin. For a moment I forgot the placid river and the colleges of crumbling stone, and thought only of the red sands, the indigo sea, and the brown girls that he loved to paint. When I was in Tahiti I saw the last letters that he ever wrote. They were found beside his dead body

in his hut in the Marquesas Islands, but I do not think they have yet been published, for they do not reflect very favourably on many people who may still be alive. They were, for the most part, arguments in favour of justice for other people.

But it was time for lunch. So I stepped along to 'The Mitre.' The day was hot, a broiling day. Two large women and a scrawny red-faced man were sitting at the next table to mine, all of them conspicuously suffering from the heat. 'Two boiled and one roast' was the order I heard passed on by the waiter. I did not hear his rendering of my own demands.

After lunch I bought a dozen eggs. A dozen out of the seven thousand million eggs (I 've checked the figure) that are consumed in England each year. A dozen of them, any one of which, if put under a hen, would within twenty-four hours have begun to develop a heart, within another twenty-four would show the beginnings of eye and ear, and within as many days would be a fully hatched chicken capable of feeding itself.

What would happen if instead of eating those seven thousand million eggs they were all hatched and allowed to run about Great Britain? How many generations would it take for my dozen eggs to produce seven thousand million chicks? Such were the great thoughts in my head when I was accosted by two men in the Turl.

'Excuse me,' said the elder, 'didn't we see you on the television a little while ago?'

'That 's quite possible,' I replied. 'I 've done several performances.'

'Under the sea, making drawings on celluloid?'

'Xylonite,' I corrected.

'May I shake your hand?'

'You may, indeed,' I said, giving it to him.

'May my son shake your hand?'

'He 's welcome,' I said.

With that they passed on, and I proceeded to cross the street. Being unduly flattered I did not look where I was going, and next minute I had bumped into a man on a bicycle, whereupon I lost half my store of eggs. Straightening myself out from this encounter, and taking a careful look to see where I was going next, I was surprised to see that a number of people were looking in my direction, and all of them had their hats off.

'Damn it!' said I to myself. 'I can't be as famous as all that.'

Then I looked up the street, towards Carfax, and what did I see coming along but a hearse, and it covered with wreaths?

Before passing the dilapidated college barges and the mouth of the shady Cherwell, and continuing my way down-stream, I must not forget the Trout Inn at Godstow, dating from the twelfth century, and on the opposite bank of the river the ruins of the nunnery, 'built by Editha ye Prioreſs in the year 1138 and dedicated in honour of ye Virgin Mary and St. John ye Baptist; by Alexander Bp. of Lincoln in the presence of K. Stephen and his Queen; with abundance of Bps., Earls, Barons, and others of prime quality.'

Here the fair Rosamund Clifford lived before King Henry won her love. The sad story is too well known to need repetition, but it is comforting to reflect that the fruits of their shocking behaviour were one earl and one bishop.

It was now towards the end of August and war seemed imminent. My travelling was, therefore, accelerated, and I had little time for contemplating the many mansions whose lawns fringe the waterway. Weeping willows, warning notices, and diving-boards are my chief recollection of the river until I came to Nuneham Park. There I met Clarissa. She was in a boat which could not have been more than six feet in length and I took her to be about ten years of age. She was working her way up-stream and, as we passed, she remarked on the beauty of the evening. To this I readily assented. She said she thought it was 'quite exquisite.' She added that she and her sister and her parents were camping near by; indeed, there was Lucilla on the landing-stage, making a sketch of the trees on the opposite bank.

Lucilla was an artist. I guessed her age to be about fourteen. Having been introduced, and having admitted that I also had aspirations to being an artist, she showed me some of her drawings, on the express condition that I would show mine. Then they told me of a cottage and a bridge which I really *must* draw, so I tied up my boat, and they took me along, and pointed out what in their opinion was the best view. I made the drawing, but the cottage and the bridge are really much nicer than they appear in my engraving.

At Abingdon I ought to have visited the abbey, whose history is, for the most part, the history of the town for over eight centuries before the year 1538. I ought to have admired its fifteenth-century gatehouse, and seen the thirteenth-century fireplace with a chimney which is said to be the only perfect example of its period in this country. I ought perhaps to have visited St Helen's, 'the finest Perpendicular parish church in Berkshire,' and the almshouses 'of various dates and various foundations.' Instead, however, I found my way into a side street, and bought a waste-paper basket.

The purchase of such a utensil may seem a trivial matter, but this is no ordinary basket. It has a capacity of about two bushels, and this enables it to be used for at least a month without being emptied, a mighty advantage in a studio tabooed to housemaids. Furthermore, rubbish thrown from any corner of the room usually finds its mark, so that bureau, writing-table,

and easel are all served by the same receptacle. Last, and not the least, it is well and truly made of osiers for *service* on the farm. Therefore it is pleasing to the eye and a happy contrast to the 'fancy decorated' monstrosities which 'adorn' most houses.

Sutton's Pool by Sutton Courtenay is a fairy world of falling waters. By moonlight—and the moon was full when I was there—it is a setting for the rarer moments in life. But though time and place were perfect, the third component of beatitude was lacking, so I moved on, leaving the last golden hours of evening to the boys fishing on the weirs, and the silver hours of night to the grebes, the moorhens, and the old dog-otter who must surely hold lordship in those gently swirling waters.

But next day I had time to stop and make a drawing of the little church at Appleford, and, when that was finished, there was a dryness in my throat which sent me in search of the village pump. In the course of my exploration I found 'The Black Horse,' and there I

learned of Mr John Faulkner, a jockey, who but lately had taken 'his last hurdle.' He had lived to the age of a hundred and four, had ridden his first winner at the age of eight, and was still in the saddle when over seventy. He married twice, and had thirty-two children, all of whom are still living, save one who died from an accident. The eldest is now eighty-five and the youngest thirty-nine.

'An' didn' 'e 'ave a wunnerful funeral. Four black 'orses drawed the wagon to the church.'

'Wasn't one of them 'orses painted, Bill?'

'Well, 'e warn't the same colour a week afore.'

Everybody knew 'Old John.' He had his own corner in 'The Black Horse,' and nobody ever sat in it after he had entered the bar. He had his own pitch on the river, too, 'Faulkner's Island' they call it. Nobody else was allowed to fish there. 'Barbel, that 's wat 'e was arter. Never fished for nothin' else.'

He broke his thigh at the age of ninety, something to do with a mule. 'You 'll never walk again,' said the doctor. 'We 'll see,' said Faulkner. Seven weeks afterwards he walked to Abingdon and back, a distance of eight miles.

He rode many races for an owner called Palmer, who afterwards achieved an unenviable notoriety.

'Ever 'eard of Palmer, sir? 'Ung for murderin' 'is wives. One arter another 'e married an' then 'e poisoned 'em. Kep' a lot o' 'orses.'

Faulkner had horses of his own too—'Biscuit,' which he is said to have ridden second in the Grand

National, and 'Rip Van Winkle,' which, though bought for five shillings, won several small races.

His last words were to ask for a glass of beer. When he was unable to drink it his family knew that 'the old man was finished.'

At Clifton Hampden I visited the 'Barley Mow,' and would fain have enjoyed its hospitality for some days, but the threat of war had become too acute. Therefore, having counted the hundred and twenty-eight nests of the house-martins glued under the arches of the toll-bridge, I pushed on towards Reading, allowing myself but an hour in Dorchester, a town so rich in relics of the past that an old lady couldn't dig a hole for a wireless mast without disturbing a human skeleton, and a garage proprietor couldn't fit a petrol tank without finding arrow-heads, Roman pottery, and coins.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ABOVE SHILLINGFORD I anchored in mid-stream to make a drawing of the bridge, and then continued my way towards Wallingford. Below this town the river flows through a wide plain, but near Cleeve the Berkshire Downs come into view, and soon we are confronted with some of the grandest scenery on the river, the Goring Gap. On either side, behind a fringe of luxuriant chestnuts, maple-trees, and acacias, the hills rise steeply, dotted with chalk pits, and crested with beech woods.

From the top of those downs one can see a mighty long way on a clear day. There is, however, nothing

that is really spectacular, though much that is homely and lovable, in the gently undulating country, where farm succeeds farm, and fields of newly turned earth alternate with those whose crops are ripening to harvest. The White Horse Hills stretch quietly to the west; the Chilterns, a little more turbulent, tumble towards the east. Between them the river winds its way from the Cotswolds.

But the chalk under one's feet is dappled with wild flowers. Swaths of purple marjoram and yellow bedstraw fill the air with their fragrance. There is the deep blue clustered bell-flower, whose colour loses its intensity if the plant be transferred to richer soil. There is the pale yellow spike of the agrimony, smelling of apricots; the St John's wort, famed for salves and lotions; the common centaury; the wild mignonette; and the self-heal. Scarlet-spotted burnet moths hang on the scabious and knapweed, and feign death when touched. Black and orange caterpillars of the cinnabar moth swarm on the ragwort.

When I first visited those woods they held a holy silence, broken only by the murmur of wood-pigeons or the tapping of a woodpecker. To-day, as I write, trees crash to the ground, three and four to the hour, and, on all sides, there is a wilderness of brown leaves, dead before their time.

Two men can fell between twenty and thirty trees in a day. Two other men can strip them of their branches and cut them into lengths, in the same time. So they are made ready for the spike-wheeled tractors which drag them, ignominiously, to the mills set up

within the wood itself. There they are seized in clamps, and levers press them relentlessly against the saws. What was yesterday a beech, in all its glory, is to-day but a pile of rough-hewn planks. To-morrow these will be transported to the factories. Nothing but a few saplings is allowed to remain. Soon the hillside will be as naked as a trimmed poodle.

Many of the vistas that one sees between Streatley and Mapledurham might have dropped from gold frames in the Royal Academy. Titles such as 'Where Stately Trees caress the Stream,' 'Dappled Meadows,' or 'Smooth Hills and Quiet Waters,' would be appropriate in their catalogue. Not that I want to disparage the landscape. On the contrary: I have already said that it is among the grandest on the river. It *is* 'lovely' country, the hills *are* 'splendid,' the trees *are* 'gorgeous,' the houses 'charming,' the cottages 'sweet'; but like a Victorian drawing-room it is too rich and comfortable to engender thought.

Mapledurham Mill is said to be the oldest on the Thames. It is certainly the most picturesque, and it is probable that more drawings have been made of it than of any other building in the upper reaches of the river. It has about it all the romance which attracts amateur artists, and all the variety and interplay of forms which interest the more cold-blooded professionals. The church, too, fits most opportunely into 'the picture,' for the tower, appearing in the background, forms the apex of a triangle which has the mill for its base. This mathematical figure, however disguised, is, as Sir Charles Holmes has said, 'the secret of almost all stable

and compact pictorial designs.' Incidentally, the inside of the church is worth a visit if only for the fact that the nave and chancel belong to the established Church of England, while the south aisle is the private property of a Roman Catholic family who use it for their rites and ceremonies of burial.

I would have made a drawing myself of this whole group of buildings, but for my innate laziness, which concocted the excuse that the sun was in the wrong position. Nothing is simpler to an artist than to invent pretexts of this kind, and there is a great temptation to do so because drawing at any time needs an effort. There is, in particular, a kind of initial inertia which has to be overcome before excitement spins the fly-wheel of one's thoughts. It is so *much* easier to go on looking for 'something better' round the next corner. Many's the day I 've started out full of hope, and returned home with nothing but self-delusion.

After Mapledurham the face of the country is blemished by the marks of man, and if one cannot navigate that stretch of river by night the best alternative is a mild inebriation. I was unable to manage either, but I had the good fortune to synchronize my arrival in Reading with a river-steamer, and to watch the final acrobatics of four boys who had run a parallel course for several miles along the tow-path.

Their exhibition was the nearest that I have come across, in England, to that of the diving boys and other stray performers that one sees in foreign parts. The four youngsters trotted along the tow-path as lightly as 'terriers on their private excursions.' Suddenly one of

them would let out a war-whoop. The next moment he would be executing a hand-stand on the shoulders of an accomplice, or balancing on his own head upon a gate post. After this, quite unconcernedly, he would break back into that easy trot which seemed to be his normal form of locomotion. A few minutes later one of the others would display. Then they would all combine in a knock-about turn. In between these diversions their pace on the tow-path never slackened. Breath seemed unnecessary to them.

When they reached the sanctified ground of the riverside park, their exhilaration and abandon increased, and they behaved with all the effrontery of merry andrews at a carnival, turning cartwheels among the astonished visitors, somersaulting over partly occupied seats, dancing on their hands, and performing other buffooneries. It was all as fresh and irresponsible as a ballet, and it happened in Reading. They collected no more than they deserved.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE WAR BROKE OUT, but I was over age. Besides, I had met a bullet in the last war. I tried for camouflage. I offered to make drawings from submarines, having already worked under water in a diving helmet; but my duty seemed to be at the University. Not that I minded a great deal, though I couldn't help feeling restless. On the other hand, I was near the river, and I could watch its varying moods. Even if I only gave an occasional broadcast on the subject it might help people to remember that, if it was human folly which had brought about the catastrophe, it was, for the most part, only human beings who were paying the price. The world of nature was unaffected; flowers still bloomed, birds still sang, even butterflies continued their migrations, and rivers flowed towards the sea.

Early in October I visited the river Colne, following it up from where it joins the Thames above Lechlade. It was very quiet up there, and as I walked along everything seemed to be packing up for the winter's sleep. The rushes were withering, the reeds were turning yellow, the willows were dripping their leaves one by one into the stream. Hardly a sound of a bird except

an occasional chirp from a robin or a wren. Then I chanced to look closely at one of the hedges and I realized that it was autumn, the season of fruits. At least ten different kinds of berries hung on the branches within a yard of where I stood. There was the blackberry, and the common red hawthorn. There was the elderberry which makes such good wine, and alongside it the scarlet seed-cases of the wild rose. There were the black clusters of the privet and the buckthorn, and the juicy crimson of the guelder rose. Crab-apples grew near by, and the spindle-tree hung out its pink fruit. Over them all twined the black and the white bryony, each with its crimson berries. It was a wonderful sight, that patch of hedge, with everything on it glistening in the sun after a morning shower.

A fortnight later I was in the woods near Henley, marvelling at the lemon and gold of the beech leaves suspended over the dark evergreen undergrowth of box-trees and red-berried yews. In the clearings the rose-bay willow-herb had withered to a silver carpet. By the river the poplars still held the green in their lower branches, though their upper edges were tinged with yellow. The crimson leaves of the chestnuts had already fallen from their outermost twigs. How peaceful it all was, with scarcely enough breeze to carry a spider in its flight. And what homes there were for spiders in the rotting tree stumps, deep dark dungeons covered with dew-spangled nets.

I feel that in an earlier chapter I was unkind to these exquisite little creatures, narrow-mindedly giving

priority of importance to my own species. It is true that the spider is stealthy, laying its snares and then lurking furtively, prepared to pounce at any moment. But that is not *very* different from the human being who constructs his shelters on the moors and then gets his victims driven over him, not of necessity, but for sheer amusement. We are too prone to judge.

A spider's web is little short of a miracle: each thread composed of a number of finer filaments: cords which, within the knowledge of man, are the strongest in existence in proportion to their weight. Seen under the microscope each one of them, other than the inner threads of the spiral and the radial supporting lines, is loaded with globules of a viscid secretion, so that it resembles a necklace of widely spaced pearls.

The construction of the web is well described by T. H. Savory in his book, *The Spiders and Allied Orders of the British Isles*. He writes: 'The foundation lines are laid down first, in a quadrilateral or large triangle. Then the radii are added, placed on opposite sides of the centre alternately and so wonderfully spaced that they form almost exactly equal angles all round. They are then connected by four or five turns of a wide spiral, which is only a temporary structure. Now the character of the spider's movements changes from rapid to slow, deliberate actions. Working from the outside inwards, the spider applies to the radii a thread of viscous silk. As each attachment of this spiral to a radius is made, it is rapidly stretched by one of the

hind-legs. This causes the sticky secretion with which it is covered to break up into a number of equally spaced drops. The temporary spiral is rolled up as the spider works, and finally eaten. The centre platform is added last, and consists of a few turns of silk, not perfectly spiral in arrangement.' He adds: 'These spiders live either in the middle of their webs or remain in hiding under a leaf or other near-by object, one leg always touching a thread which runs to the hub.'

Spiders are said to have a liking for music, and have often been observed to let themselves down from the ceiling and hover over a musician, but, from experiments which have been made with the help of a tuning fork, it seems likely that the vibrations of the music are akin to those set up in the web by the buzzing of an ensnared fly. We must therefore attribute this appearance of aesthetic appreciation to a more primitive urge. The same probably applies to lizards, who also like a diet of flies, though I knew one that had a *penchant* for chocolate cream. My friend, William Murdoch, tells me that when he was living in Switzerland the lizards used regularly to come out on to the window-sill and the rail of the balcony and stay there quite still while he played the piano.

Although spiders may be lacking in aesthetic perception, they are by no means unintelligent, for, to quote but one example, in windy weather they have been observed to fasten small stones to their webs to act as ballast in the storm. Much as we dislike their activities in our dwelling-houses we are not above using

their silk on the sights of our scientific instruments, where, as cross lines, they give greater accuracy than can be obtained by any other means. The silk is finer, lighter, and stronger than that produced by the silk-worm. There was at one time a spider spinning industry in Madagascar, and gloves and stockings have actually been woven from the product, but excessive spinning is exhausting to the spinner and the venture was not commercially profitable. In country districts of England the web is often applied to wounds to staunch the bleeding.

Of this multitudinous family of Arachnida it has been said that 'there is no other case in the animal kingdom where courtship is attended with any approach to such danger,' and many people are full of sympathy for the males, who, having fulfilled their function in life, are, in most cases, promptly eaten by their mates. I am not so sure, however, that it isn't a good and a timely death, for they die in a moment of ecstasy, and are spared a long while of domestic worry.

In mid-November the oak-trees are still in russet dress, while their neighbours, the beeches, stand almost naked to the winds. Flitting among the branches are mixed companies of tits, tree-creepers, and gold-crests. In the hazel undergrowth robins, wrens, and perhaps a pair of wintering blackcaps hop among the immature catkins and the few remaining leaves resplendent in their black and yellow motley. Under the hazel: crimson brambles. Under the brambles: fungi, sulphur tufts with their greenish gills clustering

round the tree stumps, blue caps with their lavender stems, excellent for eating, pushing through the fallen leaves. Under the leaves: worms.

Of all created life we are inclined to show least respect for the worm, yet no less a man than Darwin wrote a book of over three hundred pages dealing entirely with its habits. In his concluding chapter he states that 'in many parts of England a weight of more than ten tons of dry earth annually passes through their bodies, and is brought to the surface on each acre of land,' and that it is by this means that many ancient remains of great archaeological value have been buried and preserved. It is by this means, too, that the ground is prepared 'in an excellent manner for the growth of fibrous-rooted plants and for seedlings of all kinds.' After discussing the value of the leaves which are dragged into the burrows as food and which, 'after being torn into the finest shreds, partially digested, and saturated with the intestinal and urinary secretions, are commingled with much earth,' he finishes by saying: 'The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of man's inventions; but long before he existed the land was, in fact, regularly ploughed, and still continues to be thus ploughed by earthworms. It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organized creatures.'

In the clearings the red bracken shelters the pheasant, and the green moss is a cushion for the rabbits. In the

hedgerow the parasol mushroom shows its ruffled cap, and dead twigs are bejewelled with 'coral spot.'

Each season of the year, as it comes round, is the best. Each day, each hour that we are alive is the richest. For what is yesterday but a memory, and what is to-morrow—which may never come?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT WAS TOWARDS the end of the year when I went to renew my acquaintance with the 'Barley Mow' at Clifton Hampden. This house dates from between the years 1320 and 1350, and is a fine example of 'cruck' or 'crutch' building, a form of architecture which can be traced back over two thousand years, and is referred to by both Ovid and Vitruvius. In principle it consists of pairs of crooked trees set up to form arches which are connected at their summits by a ridge-pole. Around this skeleton the house is built. In the earliest times there were no vertical side walls to buildings of this kind, the construction following the bend of the timber; but at a later date horizontal tie-beams were added to the arches, and these projecting on either side were fitted into upright walls built to receive them. As the engraving shows, this feature is clearly seen in the gable end of the inn.

Jerome K. Jerome wrote that this house is 'the

quaintest, most old-world inn on the river,' and I think he is right. But more to me than the low-pitched gables, the thatched roof, and the oak panelling was the atmosphere of quiet comfort. It was like living at home without any of the troubles of home life.

During my visit there was a light fall of snow, and as I walked along the banks beside the dark running water, snipe and wild duck rose up in all directions. It seemed strange that all the sandpipers who had flickered up and down those banks through the summer months should now be enjoying the warmth of Africa, while the snipe who are so like them in appearance had come across the North Sea from Norway to spend the winter with us on those same recently vacated feeding grounds.

In the snow were the tracks of birds and animals. I could see where, through a hole in a hedge, a covey of partridges had followed their leader, before spreading out to leave a fan-like tracery from their feet. They had been frightened soon afterwards, for the tracks ended abruptly, showing just where they had taken to flight. Then there were the heron's steps, heel of one foot to toe of the other, a single stately line of imprints carried on into the water, and still visible in the soft mud below the surface. And the moorhen's, whose spur does not point directly astern, but carries on the line of the outer toe of each foot. And the pheasant's, who for all his proud bearing doesn't lift his feet very high, but leaves thinly scratched lines between each footprint.

I followed the track of a stoat. At first he had gone at a gallop, his pad-marks two and two at long intervals,

as he hurried to his hunting ground. Then, quick feverish paces, all close together, when he had picked up a scent. After that he had run a couple of yards in one direction, hesitated, gone back, re-crossed his old path, found the scent again, and so after his victim.

Another day I trailed a fox. No hurrying on his part: just a steady walk along the river bank to where the ducks might be resting under the alder-trees. The only sign of hesitation that he showed was when he crossed the track of a pheasant, and then he had halted, side-stepped, and noozled the ground. Deciding that 'it wasn't worth it,' he had resumed his march.

Although it was still December the rooks had begun to show interest in each other and in their nests. Sitting about in pairs, on or near their old nests, they had great talks together, of an apparently confidential nature. Mr Robert Didcock, who was working on the road, told me that if these birds build their nests high up in the trees it forecasts a fine summer. He also said that if they forsake a tree in which they have nested for some years it means that that tree is going to die, and he pointed out to me a tall elm in which rooks had always nested till a few years ago. Then they had suddenly left it, and now the tree is dead.

As the crisp snow crackled under my feet I couldn't help a quickening of the pulses when the wildfowl rose in flights, for, though I haven't pulled a trigger for many years, I suppose that even the most repentant sinner sometimes gets a surreptitious thrill at the recollection of past sins. There is a story, I hope not too well known, of an old lady who confessed to the

priest that she had broken a certain commandment. one that occurs towards the end of the decalogue.

'How many times?' asked the priest.

'Only once, Father.'

'How long ago?' asked the holy man.

''Twould be about thirty years now, Father.'

'Have you never confessed it before?'

'Oh, yes, Father.'

'Don't you know that after absolution there is no need to confess the same sin again?'

The old lady paused, then in a confiding tone she whispered: 'Ah, but I like to talk about it, Father.'

So it is with me and my memories of the old days of sport, though I now get far greater pleasure walking the country, armed only with a pair of field-glasses, then ever I did when carrying a double-barrelled gun.

Sinodun Hill, better known as one of the Wittenham Clumps, is not far from Clifton Hampden. It is rich in history, as its tremendous earthworks must testify even to the most casual visitor. Ancient Britons, Romans, Danes have all been there. But I am happier with the present times than with the past, and what gave me the greatest thrill among those wind-swept beeches was the number of woodpeckers' nests in the dead timber. In one tree, whose trunk had snapped off some thirty feet from the ground, I counted five holes pecked deep into the wood, as well as many others which were comparatively shallow. Three of the completed holes were facing north; one looked towards the east, and the other to the west; but none

opened to the south. Like many other birds, the woodpeckers do not care for the sun in their eyes when nesting. Many trees, in both clumps, had one or more sites prepared, but whether or not they had all held eggs I do not know, for they were high above the ground, and the trunks of the trees were branchless and smooth.

On that particular day there was an east wind sweeping up the valley that whistled between my shirt and my skin. The rest of the world was wide open to it, but no other channel seemed to do. It was the precursor of that amazing phenomenon, the silver rain, when the world was sprayed with crystal, when every resting bud became a jewel and every twig a diadem.

Only once before have I seen anything approaching such conditions, and that was in Dublin in 1917. I was stationed at the Royal Barracks under orders for Salonica. Meanwhile a draft of two hundred men were to leave for France.

''Tis mighty slippery outside, sir,' said my batman, when he called me in the morning: a Sunday it was.

'How long were you in the canteen last night?' I asked.

'Begod, sir, it 's like wearing roller skates on a greasy pole,' said he, disregarding my question.

When I attempted to reach the mess for breakfast I discovered that his report was in no way exaggerated. It might have been possible to get along if the ice had been flat, but the slippery, uneven surface of the barrack square made it almost impossible to move. I was compelled to stagger around that quadrangle, in full

daylight, in a way that no officer had ever manœuvred it before, even after midnight.

The draft was leaving for France that day, and at ten o'clock they paraded on the square. The colonel tried to uphold his dignity as he slithered here and there, clutching at the adjutant who, in turn, was supported by the regimental sergeant-major, who wore socks over his boots.

The men were called to attention, and they did their best to obey. The same difficulty arose when they were put 'at ease.' Then the colonel addressed the parade, and in a few moving words told them the traditions of the regiment. He concluded by saying that he knew that they would stand firm when duty called.

On the order to 'quick march' the whole draft fell flat on the ground. The first man that moved had sent all the others down like so many rows of ninepins.

''Tis stretched we are before we start,' said one.

''Tis my flank is turned,' said another, rubbing his backside.

They were told to move off as best they could. And so they marched away, straggling from tree to tree along the edge of the canal and clinging to the railings in the streets until they reached the boat.

No sooner were the frost and snow gone than the flood rose in the valley. Paddles were out of the weirs and the foam-flecked water came sluicing through. Thousands of acres were covered with water. Cattle were huddled on little hillocks. Moles could be seen on the open ground running for higher levels; rabbits

who hadn't left their burrows in time to get far away were compelled to climb into the willows, and there they lived for days feeding on the bark of the trees. The valley became a lake of silver. Where once the water had seemed inky black, flowing between snow-clad fields, now it was shining bright, reflecting trees

and sky, with nothing but a moorhen or a swan to break its surface.

Winter is a hard time for rabbits, what with floods and ferrets, for that is the season when those stealthy little creatures are sent down the burrows to drive out the rightful owners. I don't like ferrets myself, but I have a friend called Jim who likes them very much. He tells me that it is a great mistake to carry ferrets in a box, that they are never comfortable there, and that they will always eat their way out if they can. He says it is much better to put them inside your shirt against your skin, that they like the warmth of your body, and that half a dozen of them will lie around your middle as cosy as a basket of kittens before the fire.

But, as I said, I don't like ferrets; I much prefer ducks, and if there 's one thing that makes me envy people living in London it is that there are so many wildfowl in the parks, and they quite tame. Instead of having to disguise oneself as a bulrush or a twig of willow, and creep along on hands and knees in soft mud in order to see them, it is only necessary to stroll along the nicely kept paths beside the ponds and the birds will come and feed out of your hand.

Of all living creatures few seem so happy and gay as some of those ducks. In particular the tufted ones, those little chaps with the crest on the back of their black heads, and a white patch on the side of their bodies. They always seem to be quite hilarious, splashing the water over themselves, and apparently sharing some continuous joke. On one occasion I remarked on this to another visitor, but he said he didn't know the difference between one kind and another. 'Ducks is just ducks to me,' he said.

Though I know a little more than that I can't help telling of my surprise when I first began to look at birds and found that every individual of any species is as different from any other of the same species as any two people you may meet in the street are different from each other.

Up till then I had thought that all fully fledged male chaffinches were exactly alike, that every robin had just the same amount of red on its breast, that every sparrow had precisely the same markings on each corresponding feather. But I soon found that I was as wrong as the man who supposes that all sheep are alike,

and wonders how the shepherd can tell them apart. Every bird is as much an individual as every human being. I was reminded of this very forcibly when the weather was cold and hard, and there were more birds than usual on the window ledge of my study, where I put food for them. One morning a party of four greenfinches arrived: I would say they were a parent and three of last year's brood. The parent was bigger, more filled out, so to speak, than the others: his plumage was brighter and his beak stronger. He was very insistent on the rights of seniority and never allowed his juniors to approach where he was feeding. Of the three children, as often happens in other families, the biggest was a bully while the smallest was the most cheeky. The smallest was also much browner in colour than the others. Number two had a more delicately shaped beak, and was rather quieter in behaviour than the others. All of them had entirely different yellow markings on their wings.

But one sad quality they all possessed: they were *most* aggressive. By early in the afternoon they had driven off nearly all the other birds, blue tits, great tits, chaffinches, robins: all had been chased away to another table in the garden. The only warrior who faced up to those finches was a sparrow without a tail. That little chap stood no nonsense. When the bigger birds lunged at him with open beak he accepted the challenge and went for them hot and strong. I needn't say that, as often happens in human affairs, that little fellow with the stout heart was soon left undisturbed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT 'S FINE to wake up on a winter's morning when the frost on the window is like bracken leaves engraved in the glass. It 's fine to be walking the fields at midday when the snow is crisp and crackling like the sound of toast between your teeth. But on winter nights there are few things better than good fires, good wine, and good company. It was on an occasion combining these three aids to serenity that I met Maurice Healy, K.C., for the first time. Born in the same city of Cork, with but a few months between us, we had to travel for forty years and more before our two roads converged at the 'Hind's Head' at Bray-on-Thames.

That was a night, the night we met. Forty strong men sat down to dine at eight o'clock and did not rise again till a quarter past one next morning. There was every sort of guest, from a member of the royal family downwards, including soldiers, sailors, a member of Parliament, a second-hand bookseller, writers, and other artists; and over them all brooded our host, Barry Neame, shedding a genial warmth among the company. Wines flowed like the water over Marlow weir: the sort of wines that a Frenchman would cross the Channel to drink. Lafite 1924, Haut-Brion 1924, Margaux 1920; imperials, magnums, jeroboams of

them. I asked Maurice if it was true that the name Haut-Brion was derived from the French pronunciation of O'Brien, a branch of that family having settled near Bordeaux in the sixteenth century, and become great exporters of wine.

'Of course the story is true,' he said; 'didn't I invent it?' Then he went on to explain how in his researches on wine he had been forced to that conclusion, for there is neither family nor château of Haut-Brion in the whole of France; but there was this most important family of wine merchants, who, incidentally, had also come from County Cork.

Such a party as I have described may seem unduly long to those of puritan disposition, but I remember a feast in Tahiti which lasted for four days. It wasn't all eating, of course. There was singing and dancing and swimming in the lagoon. People even dropped asleep for an hour or two; but I can state most emphatically that whenever they awoke it was to find the entertainment in full swing. I wish I were gallivanting under those palm-trees now, instead of sitting with a fire, an electric heater, and a rug round my feet to keep out twenty-seven degrees of frost.

In sickness or in health 'wine is a good familiar creature, if it be well used.' So said Iago. Once upon a time I called in a doctor to cure me of tonsillitis.

'Do you like port?' he asked.

'I do,' I answered.

'Have you got any?' he said.

'I have not,' said I, 'but I can soon remedy that.'

'Get some,' he said, 'and drink it. Not a glass after

lunch or a glass after dinner, but several glasses of it after lunch and several glasses of it after dinner, *and* a glass in between meals as well.'

The only trouble was that I got well too quickly. But didn't I pay his bill with pleasure!

I never see a hen sitting on a nest of eggs that I don't recall another fellow countryman of mine, a lover of solitude like myself, and not without affection for birds. His story is told by Captain David Porter, of the United States Navy, whose journal was published in New York in 1822. In that he writes:

'On the east side of Charles Island, in the Galapagos, there is a bay known as Pat's Landing; and this place will probably immortalize an Irishman named Patrick Watkins, who some years since left an English ship, and took up his abode on this island, and built himself a miserable hut, about a mile from the landing called after him, in a valley containing about two acres of ground capable of cultivation, and perhaps the only spot on the island which affords sufficient moisture for the purpose. Here he succeeded in raising potatoes and pumpkins in considerable quantities, which he generally exchanged for rum, or sold for cash. The appearance of this man, from the accounts I have received of him, was the most dreadful that can be imagined; ragged clothes, scarce sufficient to cover his nakedness, and covered with vermin; his red hair and beard matted, his skin much burnt, from constant exposure to the sun, and so wild and savage in his manner and appearance that he struck every one with horror.

For several years this wretched being lived by himself on this desolate spot, without any apparent desire than that of procuring rum in sufficient quantities to keep himself intoxicated, and, at such times, after an absence from his hut of several days, he would be found in a state of perfect insensibility, rolling among the rocks of the mountains. He appeared to be reduced to the lowest grade of which human nature is capable, and seemed to have no desire beyond those of the tortoises and other animals of the island, except that of getting drunk. But this man, wretched and miserable as he may have appeared, was neither destitute of ambition nor incapable of undertaking an enterprise that would have appalled the heart of any other man; nor was he devoid of the talent of rousing others to second his hardihood.

'He by some means became possessed of an old musket, and a few charges of powder and ball; and the possession of this weapon probably first stimulated his ambition. He felt himself strong as the sovereign of the island, and was desirous of proving his strength on the first human being that fell in his way, which happened to be a negro, who was left in charge of a boat belonging to an American ship that had touched there for refreshments. Patrick came down to the beach where the boat lay, armed with his musket, now become his constant companion, directed the negro, in an authoritative manner, to follow him, and, on his refusal, snapped his musket at him twice, which luckily missed fire. The negro, however, became intimidated, and followed him. Patrick now shouldered his musket, marched off before, and on his way up the

mountains exultingly informed the negro he was henceforth to work for him and become his slave, and that his good or bad treatment would depend on his future conduct. On arriving at a narrow defile, and perceiving Patrick off his guard, the negro seized the moment, grasped him in his arms, threw him down, tied his hands behind, shouldered him, and carried him to his boat, and when the crew had arrived he was taken on board the ship. An English smuggler was lying in the harbour at the same time, the captain of which sentenced Patrick to be severely whipped on board both vessels, which was put in execution; and he was afterwards taken on shore handcuffed by the Englishmen, who compelled him to make known where he had concealed the few dollars he had been enabled to accumulate from the sale of his potatoes and pumpkins, which they took from him. But while they were busy in destroying his hut and garden, the wretched being made his escape, and concealed himself among the rocks in the interior of the island until the ship had sailed, when he ventured from his hiding-place, and by means of an old file, which he drove into a tree, freed himself from the handcuffs. He now meditated a severe revenge, but concealed his intentions. Vessels continued to touch there, and Patrick, as usual, to furnish them with vegetables; but from time to time he was enabled, by administering potent draughts of his darling liquor to some of the men of their crews, and getting them so drunk that they were rendered insensible, to conceal them until the ship had sailed; when, finding themselves entirely dependent on him,

they willingly enlisted under his banner, became his slaves, and he the most absolute of tyrants. By this means he had augmented the number to five, including himself, and every means was used by him to endeavour to procure arms for them, but without effect. It is supposed that his object was to have surprised some vessel, massacred her crew, and taken her off. While Patrick was meditating his plans, two ships, an American and an English vessel, touched there, and applied to Patrick for vegetables. He promised them the greatest abundance, provided they would send their boats to his landing, and their people to bring them from his garden, informing them that his rascals had become so indolent of late that he could not get them to work. This arrangement was agreed to; two boats were sent from each vessel, and hauled on the beach. Their crews all went to Patrick's habitation, but neither he nor any of his people were to be found; and, after waiting until their patience was exhausted, they returned to the beach, where they found only the wreck of three of their boats, which were broken to pieces, and the fourth one missing. They succeeded, however, after much difficulty, in getting around to the bay opposite to their ships, where other boats were sent to their relief; and the commanders of the ships, apprehensive of some other trick, saw no security except in a flight from the island, leaving Patrick and his gang in quiet possession of the boat. But before they sailed they put a letter in a keg, giving intelligence of the affair, and moored it in the bay, where it was found by Captain Randall, but not until he had sent his

boat to Patrick's landing, for the purpose of procuring refreshments; and, as may be easily supposed, he felt no little inquietude until her return, when she brought him a letter from Patrick to the following purport, which was found in his hut.

"'SIR,

"'I have made repeated applications to captains of vessels to sell me a boat, or to take me from this place, but in every instance met with a refusal. An opportunity presented itself to possess myself of one, and I took advantage of it. I have been a long time endeavouring, by hard labour and suffering, to accumulate wherewith to make myself comfortable; but at different times have been robbed and maltreated, and in a late instance by Captain Paddock, whose conduct in punishing me, and robbing me of about five hundred dollars, in cash and other articles, neither agrees with the principles he professes, nor is it such as his sleek coat would lead one to expect.

"'On the 29th of May, 1809, I sail from the enchanted island in the *Black Prince*, bound to the Marquesas.

"'Do not kill the old hen; she is now sitting, and will soon have chickens.

"'(signed) FATHERLESS OBERLUS.'"

The author of the journal goes on to say: 'Patrick arrived alone at Guyaquil in his open boat, the rest who sailed with him having perished for want of water, or, as is generally supposed, were put to death by him on

his finding the water to grow scarce. From thence he proceeded to Payta, where he wound himself into the affection of a tawny damsel, and prevailed on her to consent to accompany him back to his enchanted island, the beauties of which he no doubt painted in glowing colours; but, from his savage appearance, he was there considered by the police as a suspicious person, and being found under the keel of a small vessel then ready to be launched, and suspected of some improper intentions, he was confined in Payta jail, where he now remains; and probably owing to this circumstance Charles Island, as well as the rest of the Gallipagos, may remain unpopulated for many ages to come.'

I am inclined to believe that the man who could write such a letter as that signed 'Fatherless Oberlus' was probably grossly maligned by Captain Porter, who was not above breaking his own parole when taken prisoner by the English in 1814. It is interesting to note that his frigate, the *Essex*, eventually became a convict hulk in Dublin Bay.

I do not live in any great bondage myself, but, like many a less fortunate brother, I share my cell with a mouse. I have the use of the room in daylight and he has it during the hours of darkness. In return for this hospitality he does me the service of keeping my india-rubber trimmed. Anybody who is in the habit of using soft rubber as an eraser knows how quickly it grows a skin, and knows too what a mess this skin can make of a delicate drawing. Some people rub it off

on a piece of rough paper before applying it to anything more valuable; other people, as I used to do, take a thin sliver of it off with a penknife; but, since my tenant came along, all that worry is over, for now every night he climbs on to my table and with his teeth rasps off small fragments. He does not appear to eat them, and I take the action entirely as an expression of goodwill. It certainly leaves the rubber in perfect condition for my work.

This mouse has another queer habit. He likes to collect the peanuts which I keep for the birds, and to store them in my footgear. One night recently he carried some twenty of them across the room, and secreted them in the toes of the shoes that I was to wear next day. A few nights later he treated my boots in the same way. Now I have given him a pair of old slippers, and in these he has not only stored his treasure, but hidden it behind a barricade of cinders, sticks, and leaves.

It is a pity that mice and men must always quarrel

over property, for mice are charming creatures, and, with a little forbearance on either side we might all be good friends. Burns thought so too.

'I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen-icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request:
I 'll get a blessin' wi' the lave
And never miss 't.'

One of the saddest sights I ever saw in my orchard was at a place where a mown path divides two patches of longer grass. Across this track a field-mouse was wont to lead her young, but, one morning, as she did so, a hawk swooped down. It lurched through the trees, fanning out its tail and wings for an instant as it dropped over one of the little ones, and, without interrupting its flight, seized it in its claws and carried it away. I watched to see if the mother would return, but she never appeared again.

If I seem to sentimentalize over what must be inevitable it is only because I am so conscious of the wealth of beauty destroyed by every stroke of fate. A fly, exquisite, and in every detail formed beyond the imagination of man, is but a mouthful for a frog. A frog, whose system is so complicated that it can be considered as a prototype of our own construction, is swallowed whole by a duck. A duck is but one meal for a fox, or a human being.

It is the same with the fish in the river. Once, as a boy, I shot a cormorant, and, as I carried it along by

the legs, a trout dropped out of its mouth. A good shake of the bird and a dozen more fell out. The first one was hardly more than dead, but each one that followed showed increasing signs of digestion. That morning they had all been swimming gaily, head up to the current. Each of them had taken several years to reach perfection.

Of trout and trout fishing I had a letter from Ireland the other day. The writer is a boatman on Lough Mask, and this is what he told me:

'I 'd better describe to you,' he writes, 'what I saw one day in this wild natural woodland, sandwiched, as I might say, into the lake. It was part of the lake less than a hundred years ago and there are a number of creeks running into it from both sides, very deep water and a great place to fish for Gillaroo trout. Well, I was fishing in one of these creeks one afternoon in the month of March, and I was looking across to the opposite bank, which sloped down to the edge of the water, when what did I see but a wee little woman about the size of a six or a seven year old child and she holding something like a small wooden dish between her hands. Then, while I was watching her, she stooped down and lifted water, and after that she returned into the stunted alders. I knew that there was nobody near that place who resembled her in any way so I made up my mind, at once, to go and investigate. It took me about five or seven minutes to get round to the other side, but I had a clear view inside this strip of the peninsula, for there was an open space that extended to the water on the far side, and during

the five or seven minutes that I was getting there I kept my eyes on it. Well, I searched the whole place from top to bottom but could get no trace of any person or boat, nor could I find any way that a person could leave it. After my searching was over I decided to go to the only house in the place, which belonged to the man that owned this part of the land. So I went and just told what I seen and did. He listened to me, and I asked him what he thought about it. He smiled, and this is what he said. He said, Ah, there was several queer things seen about there. Then he told me that he and his brother had an occasion one day to be going the pathway that they had cut through the scrub, mentioning just the way I was after coming by. His brother was first, he said, as the two of them could not walk together, the path was too narrow, when a little man suddenly crossed before them. When they had passed the spot his brother said to him, Could it be a goat it was? Well, said he, if it was he was wearing a tall hat.'

I have never seen a fairy myself, but there are plenty of people in Ireland more fortunate than I. It is they who will tell you of 'The Gentry,' 'aisy angered and aisy pleased'; it is they who will tell you of the trooping fairies who wear green jackets, and the solitary ones who are always dressed in red. Strange stories, too, you will hear, of dancing near the raths and of great battles between rival armies, and how, on midsummer eve, the wee folk may be seen mounted on white horses, and riding through the bonfires which stud the hills.

Midsummer Eve! Many's the bonfire I jumped through when I was young, in company with pious Protestants and holy Roman Catholics, all united in celebrating, unconsciously, the old heathen festival of fire worship. But I never saw a fairy yet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

'Cuckoo, jug, jug, pu we, to witta woo.
Spring, the sweet spring!'

NOW THE CELANDINES are sparkling in the marshes, and pools in the still flooded fields shine blue. The redshanks are whistling, the peewits are tumbling, and yellow wagtails trip along the muddy borders of the stream, their breasts as brilliant as the kingcups. The sand-martins, too, whirling like leaves in a gale, advertise their return, while high up among the purple blossoms of the elm-trees the young rooks have already broken their shells. Nearer to earth the poplars wave their catkins, and the willows and sallows regale the year's first broods of insect life.

The sap is rising. Each day our world turns further towards the sun. All the energy held in bondage during the winter is being released. To quote an anonymous writer: 'Week by week the crops swallow up the wild life of the open countryside, while the woods and hedges draw veil after veil over the doings of the small things which they shelter, and wherever we go a hundred eyes peep and a hundred ears listen, of creatures that we cannot see or hear at all.'

If we would glimpse behind that veil we must forget

those fanatics who think that walking at less than four miles an hour is a sign of laziness or physical decay. Those are the people who, after an excursion into the country, spend their evening at a cinema because they have seen nothing during the day with which to occupy their thoughts. We must learn to walk slowly, so that we have time to see; we must learn to tread quietly, so that we do not cause alarm; above all, we must *think* peace. A certain visitor to the London Zoological Gardens was seen to be on terms of close friendship with the wolves. When asked how he dared to trust them he replied: 'Perfect love casteth out fear.' I believe that it is this gentleness of thought which brought about the understanding between so many of the medieval saints and the wild creatures amongst whom they lived. There was St Columban, at whose call the squirrels and other animals of the woods would come and 'leap and frisk about him for sheer happiness, jumping up on him as young dogs jump on their masters,' and St Godric who was visited regularly by a stag that he had sheltered from the huntsmen, and St Ciaran whose only companions were a fox, a badger, a wolf, and a deer, all of whom obeyed his word in all things, 'as if they had been his monks.' The records are full of such stories of these 'mutual charities,' as Miss Waddell has called them, and I am convinced that in many cases these stories are far more than mere legend.

In early spring the close-cropped meadows fold over the bare flood-washed earth of the river banks, and

there is little sign at the water's edge of the wealth of gold and purple blossom that will presently appear. No wonder the reed- and the sedge-warblers delay their arrival from abroad, for the rushes and reeds which are to be their home have hardly yet pushed their way through the matted tangle of last season's growth.

Wandering along the banks it is easy to see what havoc among the willows has been wrought by the hard winter. There is scarcely a tree that has not lost a branch, and many of them are split from crown to foot. Even so, those that have weathered the storms are now throwing out shoots whose feathery tips shine silver in the sunlight. In the crevices of the gnarled timber the seeds of many wild flowers find congenial soil, and berries of the whitethorn, alder, wild rose, and blackberry, dropped by birds, soon germinate and flourish. Sometimes the winged fruit of an ash takes root, and, thrusting downward through the core of the willow, eventually becomes a lusty young tree, supporting the mere shell of its foster-parent.

And plants are not the only form of life that finds hospitality in the crannies. The wild duck often nests in the hollow bole; other birds, too, including the moorhen and the tawny owl. I found an owl's nest below Sonning. As I stopped to look more closely into the hole where she was nesting the old owl flustered out through a second opening, in the back of the tree, leaving behind her two downy youngsters who blinked at me with supercilious gaze. After a few moments they turned their backs and refused further audience. There was also an egg, which bears out

other people's observation that owls lay at intervals and begin incubation with the first egg, with the result that young birds of different ages, and eggs in different stages of development, are often found in the same nest.

When disturbed the parent had flown to the top of another tree, and while I was inspecting the nest she

was being mobbed by a number of small birds. Worried by this, she set off towards a neighbouring copse. But a rook saw her, and as she flapped away he gave chase, striking at her again and again as she flew. Before she reached shelter he had almost driven her to the ground. When she was at last able to find cover from her assailant he took up a point of vantage on a near-by elm, and was obviously prepared to attack again, if given an opportunity. That was the last I saw of the battle that day, but next morning when I passed she

was again on her nest, and I was relieved to think that I had not been, unwittingly, the cause of a tragedy.

Besides the seeds which find soil and the nesting birds that find shelter, there are forms of life innumerable which inhabit not only the crevices of the living bark, but the spaces between the dead bark and the old timber. Beetles, wood-lice, spiders, and many others are there; all of them creepy-crawly things to our way of thinking, but each exquisitely adapted to its own particular mode of life.

I am more and more surprised at man's presumption in allocating to his own body the prize for beauty. Regarded dispassionately, this ungainly frame of ours must be far down in the aesthetic scale. Why, even our zenith of feminine beauty, the Venus de Milo, is the better for having no arms. And the artist was compelled to drape her legs so that the torso might have a semblance of architectural design. We are, of course, interested in our own construction, and more particularly in that of the opposite sex, but only because our strongest instinct colours every aspect of our existence. If, however, we can for a moment forget that urge and compare ourselves with other forms of life which we see about us we may get a true perspective on the subject. When, for instance, we compare our naked skins with the feathers of the chaffinch or the yellow-hammer, ours must seem a poor covering. When we think of the graceful movements of any of the cat tribe, of the speed of even a rabbit or a hare, or of the muscles of the horse or ox, we must realize how inferior we are in agility and

strength. Only in brain power are we superior. And to what miserable ends has that superiority been directed!

Talking of hares and rabbits, I recently learned that the heart of a hare is three times the size of that of a rabbit of the same weight, because the hare, being an 'athletic' animal, needs a very much greater supply of oxygen to the blood when running from danger at high speed than the rabbit, who merely dodges down a burrow to escape its pursuer. On the other hand, when the animals are at rest and the oxygen consumption is about the same, the pulse rate of the hare is only one-third that of the rabbit, thereby compensating for the larger pumping mechanism.

Most birds have hearts which are nearly twice as large as those of mammals of the same size, since the strenuous action of flight requires considerable oxygenation of the blood. The pulse rate, too, of birds is enormously high compared to that of man. Whereas we can pursue our daily avocations with a heart-beat of about seventy-two to the minute, the average rate for small birds like the tits and finches is about eight hundred to the minute, while the canary rises to one thousand, and the minute humming-bird registers the amazing figure of one thousand four hundred. All through life we get this adaptation of structure to circumstances.

Generally speaking, I don't like swans. I think they are self-opinionated and cantankerous, with natures spoiled by the flattery of human beings. Wherever

they go they are pampered or treated with respect and indulgence. They have been glorified in the mythology of many countries. According to Indian fables, for example, the white cirrus clouds were swans bathing in the blue lake of heaven—a very pretty thought, no doubt, especially when it was added that they were really the Apsaras or Swan-maidens, the houris of the Vedic heaven, who were to receive the souls of the heroes slain in battle. The story-tellers, however, didn't say anything about the subsequent disillusionment of the heroes when they found themselves enveloped in a cold mist, instead of the warmer embrace they had expected.

From other countries, too, come legends of these swan-maidens who visit the earth and temporarily lay aside their feathered attire. They conjure up some pretty pictures of the damsels swimming in rivers and lakes, with their finery neatly folded on the bank. (I myself have never found more than one feather at a time.)

It is generally understood that if, on such an occasion, a man can steal one of the dresses, the owner of it must be his. Taking things by and large, this does not seem to work out as an entirely satisfactory form of marriage. Sooner or later, even if nothing worse happens, the lady is sure to find her wings. Then she just puts them on and flies away.

But, whatever may be said for or against the birds, there is no doubt that a swan on her nest has a truly regal appearance; and in the spring there are plenty of them to be seen on the islands in the Thames. There

they sit, under canopies of budding willows, proud as queens upon their thrones, while their ever vigilant consorts sail majestically up and down the stream. I watched one pair who were putting the final touches to their nest. The female sat on the great pile of sticks and the male sat on the ground, about a yard away, with his back to her. Stretching out his neck he picked up twig after twig, and passed them behind him to his mate. Then she, stretching out her neck, in turn, picked them up and placed them on the nest beside her. In this way the structure was moulded, exactly to the shape of her body.

Compared to the edifice of the swans the nest of the moorhen is a modest affair. Many of them are conspicuous, but others are easily passed by. I came on such a one above the old eleven-arched bridge at Sonning. If I hadn't seen the dark head of the bird slipping away through the clusters of Loddon lilies on the bank I should never have noticed the untidy mass of dead reeds which, along with other debris from the recent flood, was suspended in a wild rose bush that overhung the river. It was difficult to realize, even at close quarters, that this was a nest, so carelessly thrown together did it seem. But under the few dead rushes with which the bird had partly covered the contents I could see at least seven eggs. Again, perfect camouflage, the deep ochre of the eggs blending with the colour of the nesting material: their dark spots and the matt surface of the shell helping in the illusion. Another nest that I saw, also in a brier rose, had been first built of dead material; but after the eggs were laid,

and as the green leaves of the rose-bush appeared, the bird had added fresh rushes to the structure, thereby suiting her architecture to the changing season. She also used the new rushes to shield the eggs when she left the nest.

This covering of the eggs by the moorhen has been doubted by some observers, but that may be because the nests they saw were in full incubation. It is well known that the pheasant and the partridge, who conceal their eggs most carefully while still laying, cease to do so when they 'go down' on the eggs. In my own experience this applies to the moorhen too.

Of all the water-birds who act in this way none is more thorough than the dabchick, whose soggy pile of rotting weed is far removed from all that the word nest conjures up in our minds. The speed with which the eggs are hidden on the least alarm is amazing, and contrasts strongly with the deliberation shown by the bird when she comes back and replaces the weed around the edge of the nest.

The Loddon lilies, of which I have spoken, and which resemble giant multiple snowdrops, are said by residents of Wargrave and Henley to be peculiar to that stretch of the river, just as the fritillary is reputed by local residents to thrive only in the meadows around Cricklade; but in neither case is the claim justified. The lily, or summer snowflake, is to be found in marshy ground in Suffolk, Kent, and Dorset, as well as in other parts of the south of England, and the fritillary occurs in many districts in the southern counties as far east as Norfolk and as far west as Somer-

set. One of the grandest displays of fritillaries is at Burghfield on the Kennet. There, close to the little bridge which spans the canal with one arch of stone and the parent stream with one arch of brick, and hard by that cheerful inn, the 'White Swan,' the meadows are ablaze in spring with the purple and the rarer white 'turkey caps.'

There, too, in the adjoining marshes, the snipe build their nests. Morning and evening, the air resounds with their drumming. Now from one side, now from the other, comes this uncanny bleating. When we look to the right we hear it on our left, when we look to the left the sound comes from our right. At last our eye catches a flickering speck in the sky. Higher and higher it circles. Then, swooping down, the bird spreads its tail. A moment later we hear the sound. It seems almost impossible that such a noise could be made by the vibration of a few tail-feathers. Yet it is easy to produce sound. The cricket sends out its penetrating note by merely rubbing one limb against the other, and most of us know the shrill noise that results from blowing on a blade of grass held between the fingers. I have even heard it said by an eminent scientist that if all the energy expended in the cheering at a cup-tie football match could be collected and transformed it would not be sufficient to light one twenty-watt electric lamp.

The Kennet is one of the few tributaries of the Thames which are navigable, and that only because it forms part of the Kennet and Avon canal. It is possible to-day to travel by water the whole eighty-six miles

from Reading to Avonmouth, but there are a hundred and six locks, the lock-keepers are few and far between, and the charges for even floating on the water are high. It would be a strenuous trip.

It was at Burghfield that I was shown a peewit's nest, and told that every spring for the past five years, and possibly longer, a nest had been built in exactly the same place in that field. Sixty paces from a gap in the hedge, in line with a certain tree—there they came

every year, and never once had they been seen by any one, save my informant. On the day he showed me the 'scrape' the four eggs were chipping, and next day when I walked near the spot the mother bird was full of her new responsibility, running here and there with head close to the ground and crest erect, calling to the youngsters to lie low until danger was past.

Not far from here a lapwing which had been ringed was found eleven and a half years later within a few miles of where it had first been taken.

It is, of course, well known that swallows, starlings, rooks, and many other birds return to their former nesting sites—a wren and a flycatcher build in the

creepers on the same corner of my house year after year—but I was surprised to learn that in a field which had gone to hay, been ploughed, grazed, and then been ploughed again the peewits should remember the exact spot of such a casual structure as their nest appears to be. Perhaps, as with human beings, it is not the home, but the associations connected with it that matter. I remember one occasion when the train in which I was travelling was slowing down at a smoke-smothered town in the north of England, and I remarked on the dreariness of the outlook to a fellow passenger. 'Ah, it 's very homely,' she said, as she got up to collect her belongings before alighting.

Another time I travelled from Newhaven to Victoria with two old ladies who had been visiting Normandy. Looking out of the carriage window on to those terrible roofs of south London, one of them asked the other: 'How do you think this compares with Rouen?' Her companion paused for a moment. 'Well,' she said, 'it 's home, you know.'

Near Burghfield, and, as often happens, not far from each other, I found two of last year's reed-warblers' nests, the one suspended between three osiers like a cobweb, the other attached to a single stalk. Both were in such perfect preservation that to a mere human eye nothing more than a new lining would have been necessary to put them in habitable order for another season.

Under a few branches in the hedge on the side of the road to Mortimer I found a pheasant's nest, with all but one of the eggs covered with oak leaves. 'They

like the ditch side of a fence,' said Mr Fred Cook, the local gamekeeper, to whom I mentioned it. Then he took me to a clearing in a wood and showed me where every year a pair of partridges nest, and where every year their brood gets drowned in a dike which separates the woodland from the open country. He said that as soon as the clutch is hatched the parents make for the fields, calling to their young to follow them. But, though the water is no obstacle to the old birds, it is too big a jump for the fledgelings. And thus the annual disaster takes place.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT WAS 'a rainy wretched scurvy day,' as Swift wrote to Stella, when I stood on Clifton Hampden bridge and made a note of the first item on the schedule of tolls: 'For every horse, or other beast drawing any Coach, Stage Coach, Omnibus, Van, Caravan, Sociable, Berlin, Landau, Chariot, Vis-a-Vis, Barouche, Phaeton, Waggonet, Chaise, Marina, Caleche, Curricle, Chair, Gig, Dog-Cart, Irish-Car, Whiskey-Hearse, Litter, Chaise, or any like Carriage, Sixpence; . . .' If it hadn't seemed, to quote Swift again, 'the rainiest day that ever dripped,' I would have taken more particulars, but as it was I could only hurry on to Long Wittenham church, which, according to *Kelly's Directory*, is 'an edifice of stone in the Norman, Early English, Decorated, Late Perpendicular, and Elizabethan styles.' I must admit that after that description I found the building disappointing. But while I was there the sun came out, and I noticed on several of the tombstones a rich growth of yellow lichen. Of this I collected sufficient to dye myself a fine purple tie. I hope my behaviour will not seem sacrilegious, and I trust that the beloved wife of someone whose name was illegible will forgive me. I can only say that if after a hundred and fifty years my own

remains can be of that much service to humanity I shall be more than pleased.

Home dyes have, for me, the same charm as mushrooms. They are luxuries freely presented by heaven, with none of the usual toil and moil that is imposed on us in the task of obtaining the bare necessities of life. In the case of my purple tie the process was simple. Here is the recipe:

Grind the dry yellow lichen to a fine powder and put it into water, in the proportion of a handful of lichen to a pint of water. Heat the mixture gently. Soak the material to be dyed in warm water and then immerse it in weak ammonia—about the strength of smelling salts—for a few minutes. Then drain off the ammonia, and transfer the fabric to the lichen bath. Bring the whole to the boil and let it simmer. After half an hour of this treatment remove the prospective tie, which will by then have attained the colour of mud, and put it into ammonia as before. It will then turn a delicate rosy purple. The main part of the operation being thus completed, rinse the garment thoroughly in cold water. Dry it and iron it. Have it stitched to the correct shape. Wear with a grey or blue shirt, and accept the subsequent admiration with humility.

I like to think of the many plants that distil, in secret, colours other than those they show to the passer-by. The roots of lady's bedstraw yield a red equal to that of the true madder, and the leaves will impart the same colour to the bones of any animals that may feed on

them. Agrimony and centaury both give a good yellow dye. The devil's-bit scabious holds a blue within its leaves. By the river there is the yellow iris that secretes a blue, the water-lily a brown, the teasel a yellow, and the meadow-sweet a black. No casual spectator would suspect it of any of them. They remind me of the chambered nautilus which is *said* to hold a black pearl in its innermost recess. It doesn't. I 've tried. But what I 've said of the plants is true.

Talking of black pearls, however, reminds me of one that I did find, and, of all places in the world, I discovered it in a match-box.

It happened like this. When I was in the South Seas I did a good turn for an old sea captain. It cost me nothing, and I forgot about it. Next time I met him he had returned from the Paumotu Islands, that group of lovely sun-blasted coral islands known as the Dangerous Archipelago. Over a café table he pushed a match-box into my hand and told me not to open it till I got home. The customs officials out there were inclined to be interfering. When I opened the box in the privacy of my palm-thatched hut there was a black pearl there and a dozen others as well.

Palm-thatched hut. It has since been roofed with pandanus, but it is still called by the natives 'The House that waits for Robert.' . . . But this is a long way from Long Wittenham and its church. I seem to have wandered from the church in more ways than one. People like to perpetuate irreverent legends about churches, and of the building at Little Wittenham it is said that the tower was built by a repentant

gambler who left as his mark a small window in shape like to the ace of spades. After careful examination I am inclined to agree with the alternate theory that the contour of the window is due to the accidental breakage of the stone. I am not so clear, however, about the story connected with the church at Fairford, whose glass must be amongst the finest in England. In the old county histories we read that 'John Tame, Esquire, Merchant, was ye first founder of this Church. He being a merchant, took a ship that attaqued, in which was excellent paynted glass,' and having in this way become possessed of the windows, the worthy merchant is said to have built a church to fit them. The Reverend Thomas Rudge, B.D., writing in 1802, says: 'About 1492, soon after the siege of Boloigne, a vessel laden with painted glass, bound to Rome from the Low Countries, is said to have been taken by John Tame, who immediately determined to build a church for its reception.'

But the ecclesiastical authorities of to-day do not like the suggestion that the church was built by a man who, though pious, was not above a little private buccaneering. It is pointed out that 'the glass was designed' (or, should it be said, *appears* to have been designed) 'for Perpendicular lights, a style of architecture peculiar to English Churches,' and therefore it is unlikely that it would have been on its way to Rome. Furthermore, attention is drawn to such 'Royal Cognizances' as the Prince of Wales's feathers, the badge of Edward IV, and Tudor roses, all of which appear in the designs. It is not for me to hold an opinion one way or the

other, neither do I think that the truth or falsity of the story matters a great deal. What worries me far more is that this and many others of our grandest churches should be disfigured by the tawdriest of modern furnishings, as they most certainly are.

Fairford is on the Coln, which flows into the Thames just above Lechlade, but there is another tributary of the same name which joins the main river at Staines, and of this the Coln Brook is a branch. Concerning this stream, and the village of the same name through which it passes, there is lurid history. The story is first told by Thomas Deloney, an Elizabethan novelist, and it is thought that he obtained his material from the tradition then, and now, extant in Colnbrook. In that village there is an ancient inn named the 'Ostrich,' though formerly it was known as the 'Crane.' There it was the pleasant custom of the host and hostess, 'when any man came thither alone without others in his company, and they saw he had great store of money,' that he should be 'laid in the chamber right ouer the kitchin, which was a faire chamber, and better set out then any other in the house: the best bedstead therein, though it were little and low, yet was it most cunningly carued, and faire, to the eye, the feet whereof were fast nailed to the chamber floore, in such sort, that it could not in any wise fall, the bed that lay therein was fast sowed to the sides of the bedstead: moreover, that part of the chamber whereupon this bed and bedsteed stood, was made in such sort, that by pulling out of two yron pinnes below in the kitchin, it was to be let downe and taken vp by a draw bridge, or

in manner of a trap doore: moreouer in the kitchin, directly under the place where this should fall, was a mighty great caldron, wherein they vsed to seethe their liquor when they went to brewing. Now, the men appointed for the slaughter, were laid into this bed, and in the dead time of the night, when they were sound a sleepe, by plucking out the foresaid yron pinnes, down would the man fall out of his bed into the boyling caldron, and all the cloaths that were vpon him: where being suddenly scalded and drowned, he was neuer able to cry or speake one word.

'Then had they a little ladder euer standing ready in the kitchin, by the which they presently mounted into the said chamber, and there closely take away the mans apparell, as also his money, in his male or capcase: and then lifting vp the said falling floore which hung by hinges, they made it fast as before. The dead body would they take presently out of the caldron and throw it downe the riuer, which ran neere unto their house, whereby they escaped all danger.'

Thus it happened to Olde Cole, a wealthy clothier also known as Thomas of Reading, but, unfortunately for the innkeeper and his wife, there was some confusion in disposing of the old man's horse, and the wife, being apprehended and examined, confessed the truth. Both she and her husband were hanged 'after they had laid open al these things before expressed. Also he confessed, that he being a Carpenter made that false falling floore, and how his wife deuised it. And how they had murdered by that means lx persons. And yet notwithstanding all the money which they had

gotten thereby, they prospered not, but at their death were found in debt.

'Coles substance at his death was exceeding great. . . . And some say, that the riuer whereinto Cole was cast, did euer since carry the name of Cole, being called The riuer of Cole, and the Towne of Colebrooke.'

Perhaps the chief interest of this legend, as was first pointed out, I believe, by Sir Walter Raleigh, is that in the details of the murder as described by Deloney there are many phrases which bear a close resemblance to passages in *Macbeth*, and as Deloney's work was written before 1600, and *Macbeth* did not appear before 1605, it may be assumed that Shakespeare was not unacquainted with the earlier work and consciously or unconsciously may have drawn upon it. Apart from the fact that in each case the hosts murder their guest we have the innkeeper's wife, like Lady Macbeth, urging on her husband who, at the last moment, seems reluctant to commit the deed. 'What man (quoth she) faint you now? haue you done so many and doe you shrinke at this?' Then, although the hallucination has got shifted, there seems more than a chance similarity between the words of Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene and those of Olde Cole who, 'beholding his host and hostesse earnestly, began to start backe, saying, what aile you to looke so like pale death? good Lord, what haue you done, that your hands are thus bloody?'

Other passages in Deloney will suggest their own parallels in the greater work: 'With that the scritch owle cried piteously, and anone after the night rauen

sate croking hard by his window. . . . Methinks these instruments sound like the ring of S. Mary Overies belles, but the base drownes all the rest: and in my eare it goes like a bell that rings a forenoones knell.'

This is gruesome talk; let us get back to the main river. 'Tis fine to work one's way up-stream with the whole course of the river as one's home, and all the ritual of the brick-walled house forgotten. Food when one is hungry, sleep when one is tired, and every night a different wall-paper to one's bedroom. Sometimes the design is of willow leaves in moonlight, sometimes it is of tall tasselled reeds tapering towards a purple ceiling. Always there is the faint music of lapping water or light winds stirring the rushes, of birds flying overhead or calling as they feed in the meadows.

Day and night the stream glides by. There seems no limit to the water that passes, carrying with it fallen leaves, catkins like woolly caterpillars, drowned and drowning flies, or flecks of foam from the weir up-stream. Below the surface long strands of the water buttercup swirl and sway, ribbons of pondweed too, and thick clumps of water dropwort with their feathery fronds sparkling with bubbles of oxygen, all of them offering shelter to the trout and chub whose bodies swing to the same rhythm.

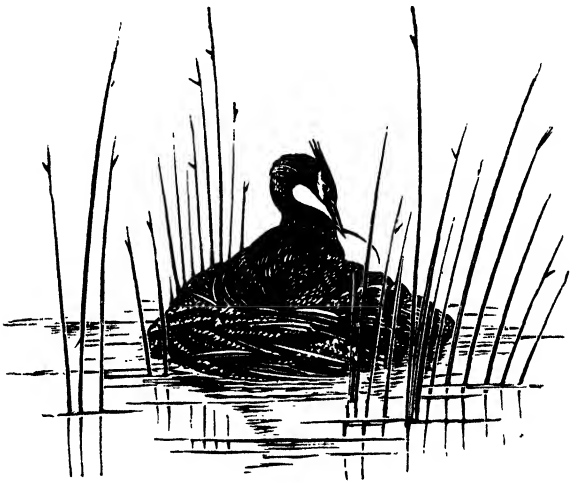
Overhead the air is filled with mating gnats. Black alder flies and pale green may-flies flutter uncomfortably in their brief aerial existence. A kestrel lights in the top of an oak-tree, its back in the evening sun as red as copper, its blue head more blue than the sky behind it. A pair of mallard flying up-stream are attacked by

another drake who seizes the female by the back of the head and pulls her upright in the air with legs flapping before her mate can drive him off.

The evening closes in slowly, as if the day were loath to go. It is the ninth day of May, nineteen hundred and forty years since Christ; but how many million ninth days of May have passed since the evening and the morning were the first day, since mist first hung in the valleys at dawn, since dew first fell at dusk?

It was early in May when I moored my boat near Shiplake in hope of seeing the great crested grebes which nest there. Little grebes, tufted duck, shelducks, mallard, mergansers; I saw them all, but no crested grebe. Professor Julian Huxley has given a good description of the courtship of these birds in the *Zoological Society's Journal*, from which he has kindly allowed me to quote. He tells, in great detail, how a pair of birds suddenly approached each other on the water, raising their necks and ruffs until they were face to face. Then they began shaking their heads at each other, waggling them violently from side to side. After that a slow motion set in, in which the beak and head of each bird was swung slowly from side to side 'as if the bird were searching the horizon for it knew not what.' Then the violent shaking began again, only to give place once more to the slow side-to-side movement. After six or seven repetitions of this performance a preening action took place, after which each bird gave about a dozen or fifteen violent shakes and then returned to normal both in appearance and behaviour.

Of another pair he tells how they both dived and brought to the surface beakfuls of dark ribbony weed, after which, having swum towards each other, they lifted themselves so high out of the water that only the tips of their tail ends remained below the surface. In this position they rocked gently from side to side 'as if swaying to the music of a dance.'



Finally Professor Huxley describes the actual act of mating. 'Sitting on the bank one day, looking out over a broad belt of low flags and rushes, I saw a grebe come swimming steadily along parallel to the bank, bending its head forward a little with each stroke, as is the bird's way in all but very leisurely swimming. I happened to look further on in the direction in which it was going, and there, twenty or thirty yards ahead of it, I saw what I took to be a dead grebe floating on the water. The body was rather humped up; the neck

was extended perfectly straight in the line of the body, flat upon the surface of the water; the ruff and ears were depressed. So convinced was I that this was a dead bird that I at once began revolving plans for wading in and fetching it out directly the other bird should have passed it by. Meanwhile, I wanted to see whether the living would show any interest in the dead, and was therefore much interested to see the swimming bird swim up to the tail end of the corpse and then a little way alongside of it, bending its head down a bit as if to examine the body. Then it came back to the tail end, and then, to my extreme bewilderment, proceeded to scramble out of the water on to the said tail end; there it stood for some seconds, in the customary and very ungraceful out-of-water attitude—the body nearly upright, leaning slightly forward, the neck arched back and down, with a snaky cormorant look about it, the ruff and ears depressed. Then it proceeded to waddle awkwardly along the body to the head end, slipping off thence into the water and gracefulness once more. Hardly had it done this when the supposed corpse lifted its head and neck, gave a sort of jump, and it, too, was swimming in the water by the other's side. It was now seen that the 'corpse' had been resting its body on a half-made nest, whose top was scarcely above the water, and it was this which had given it the curious hunched-up look. The two swam about together for a bit, but soon parted company without evincing any further particular interest in each other.'

So much for the crested grebe. Courtship with

many of the other water-birds may not be so spectacular; nevertheless it is well worthy of observation. Writing of the mallard the late J. G. Millais says that the courtship 'appears to be carried on by both sexes, though generally three or four drakes are seen showing themselves off to attract the attention of a single duck. Swimming round her, in a coy and semi-selfconscious manner, they now and again all stop quite still, nod, bow, and throw their necks out in token of their admiration and their desire of a favourable response. But the most interesting and amusing display is when all the drakes simultaneously stand up in the water and rapidly pass their bills down their breasts, uttering at the same time a low single note. . . . At other times the love-making of the drake seems to be rather passive than active. While graciously allowing himself to be courted, he holds his head high with conscious pride, and accepts as a matter of course any attention that may be paid to him.'

The same writer says of the teal that 'in the springtime it is a common sight to witness amongst the teal flock a number of males all paying attention to one particular female. Other females swim about, yet the males take no notice of them, all their homage being paid simultaneously to the reigning beauty. It is a pretty sight. . . . As if by mutual consent, several drakes raise their bodies from the water, erect the tail, arch the neck, and pass their bills down the chest, at the same time they give voice to the low double whistle. During this movement the female sometimes permits one or even two drakes to approach her

closely, whilst all the others are disposed in a circle or semicircle near at hand; but if any male that has not found favour in her eyes seeks to approach she will drive him off at once—an ignominious position which he seems to accept without question. It is only after some days of this volatile flirtation that the female eventually goes off with one male and remains strictly monogamous for the rest of the season.'

Unfortunately the ordinary traveller on the Thames is not likely to see many teal, still less to witness such displays, but in the spring meadows the redshank may be seen 'marking time' with his scarlet legs while he flutters his wings before the female, showing off to her the delicate silver of their under-surface. On quiet backwaters the moorhen, too, pirouettes before its mate; and among the reeds and osiers the modest little warblers flirt their tails and puff themselves out to twice their size.

And as with birds, so with human beings. Wandering arm in arm along the bank, or floating in punt or skiff, young men and maidens display before each other their finest plumes. Writing on this subject Professor J. C. Flugel says: 'It has been manifest to all serious students of dress that of all the motives for the wearing of clothes, those connected with the sexual life have an altogether predominant position. . . . Among civilized peoples the overtly sexual role of many clothes is too obvious and familiar to need more than a mere mention. This is particularly the case as regards women's fashions in the last few hundred years. The designer who places them, the dressmaker who sells

them, the divine or the moralist who denounces them, the historian of dress who reviews them as they successively occupy the stage for such brief years or months as may be allotted to them—all are alike agreed that their ultimate purpose, often indeed their overt and conscious purpose, is to add to the sexual attractiveness of their wearers and to stimulate the sexual interest of admirers of the opposite sex, and the envy of rivals of the same sex.'

For myself I will only say, 'tis grand to be young in May.

CHAPTER TWENTY

'Sumer is icumen in,
Loud sing, cuckoo!
Groweth seed, and bloweth mead,
And spring'th the wood now,
Sing cuckoo.
Ewe bleateth after lamb,
Loweth after calf the cow;
Bullock starteth, buck verteth,
Merry sing, cuckoo,
Cuckoo, cuckoo!
Well sing'st thou, cuckoo,
Nor cease thou never now.'

HILAIRE BELLOC, writing of an imaginary traveller coming down the Thames at the close of the Middle Ages, says: 'Nothing that he had seen in this journey would more have sunk into his mind than Reading Abbey,' even though it stood but on 'a small and irregular hill which hardly showed above the flat plains of the river meadows.' He goes on to say; 'In massiveness of structure and in type of architecture Reading seems to have resembled Durham more nearly than any other of our great monuments,' and he adds: 'In the destruction of Reading the people of this

country lost something which not even their aptitude for foreign travel can replace.'

It may be hard to believe that to-day; nevertheless people who are inclined to disparage the modern town of Reading should at least remember that it is to its ancient abbey that we owe the preservation of the *Cuckoo Song*, described in the *Oxford History of Music* as probably the sole example of its species, exhibiting 'ingenuity and beauty in a degree still difficult to realize as possible to a thirteenth-century composer.'

There can be few districts in England where the bird is more in evidence than by the banks of the Kennet, within a few miles of those abbey ruins. All day and every day from earliest dawn we hear the call from tree or shrub or even sedge. Singly, or in pairs, the birds cross and recross the river. Sometimes two males fight as they fly, while the accompanying female awaits the victor. According to the Reverend C. A. Johns, 'the cuckoo does not pair or keep to one mate,' being, therefore, as irregular in its loves as it is promiscuous in its pirating of nests.

It was by the Kennet canal, about seven o'clock one morning in May, just after I had come out of the water, that I heard a voice behind me.

''Spose you couldn't spare us a cup of tea, guvnor?'

I turned to see a tall and cadaverous man, shabbily dressed, on the towpath. He had a sack over his left shoulder, and a mole trap in his right hand, and it struck me then that his own toothless jaws were a good imitation of the trap that he carried. I looked at the wizened eyes, the stringy neck, and the high cheek-

bones prominent under their taut yellow skin, and I judged him to be close on seventy years of age.

'Mole-ketchin' ain't wot it was,' he said, 'not worth ketchin' 'em now.'

He sat down on one of the timber baulks which flank the canal.

'Might as well throw 'em in the canal as try to sell skins. Given it up. Goin' in spike again.'

'Going where?' I queried, as I got an extra cup out of the locker.

'Spike,' he said. 'Wot you 'd call the institooshun.'

'What 's it like inside?' I asked.

'I 'm not a reg'lar,' he said. 'No, an' I 'm not a cuckoo-waller neither, one of them fellers wot spends all winter in one house and takes th' roads when the weather gets fine. No, I 'm a mole-ketcher, but mole-ketchin' ain't wot it was.'

'I 'm told the food is good,' I said.

'Food 's good,' he said, 'and lay-downs is good, though the old 'ands 'd sooner sleep on th' floor. They don't like the showers neither; they likes t' git in th' bath one arter t' other till water 's thick as soup. I don't 'old with that, but some spikes is different nor others. Got ter take wot yer finds. Makin' skitches?' he queried, pointing to a drawing book that was lying open on the bottom of the boat.

'I 'm doing a book on the river,' I said; 'writing and illustrating it.'

'I knowed a man, once, was an artist. 'E drawed corsets for lydies' papers, but corsets ain't wot they was neither. 'E took to griddling, wot you calls

singing. Lovely voice 'e 'ad. We did a round togither. Slough, Watford, St Albans, Bedford, Rugby, Warwick, on to Oxford. Sixteen of 'em altogether. Take just over the month. Look 'ere,' he said, as he bit into a slice of bread and butter, 'if ever you wants t' earn money on th' street corner, sing 'yms. No good singing love ter-day. Folks larf at you. Wot you want is 'yms. *Safe in the Arms*, that 's a good 'ym, an' *Lead, Kindly Light*, an' *I 've found a Friend*, that 's another 'll fetch a tanner. You wants ter give th' idea you 've gorn a bit wrong and 'ad a downfall, but now you 're tryin' to go strite again. Tryin', mind you. Mustn't be too easy. Kind of keeping yer nose to the white line goin' round corners. Then they 'll 'elp you. If you wus to sing "I 'se allus bin pure and 'oly" you wouldn't get nothink 'cos wot old ladies likes is sin. If they thinks you bin bad and come over good they hands it out to yer. "Yus, lidy, it 's 'ard to go strite when you 're 'ungry," that 's wot you got ter say. Then they arsks if you 's married. "Ah, lidy, I married the wrong gel." Then they feels responsible for their own sex wot caused the trouble. "I wouldn't be 'ere now, lidy, but for 'er." Don't you tell 'em no more, don't you tell 'em what you gorn and done, not even if you 'asn't done it. Don't you tell 'em nothink. They likes to think of all the sins you might 'a done; keeps 'em busy all day, enjoying theyselves.'

This conversation might have been prolonged indefinitely if I hadn't had to dress and make my way to London.

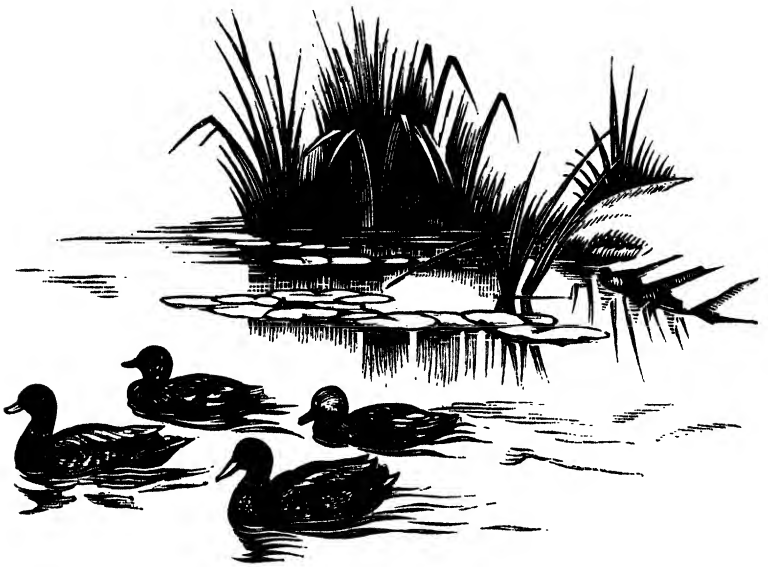
Having an hour to spare, in the course of the day, I visited St James's Park, where I saw the strange sight of a female mallard with eleven ducklings being accompanied everywhere, both on land and water, by a bar-headed gander. I was told by the keeper that the friendship had been going on ever since the youngsters were hatched, and the only explanation seemed to be that the older birds had perhaps lost their mates, and being lonely had 'palled up' in this way. The keeper told me of two other curious friendships among the birds on the lake, in one instance between a Carolina duck and a pair of mallard, and in the other between a tufted duck and a pair of mallard. In neither case was there any sign of irregular mating or any suggestion of jealousy. Each trio went about together for years, both pairs of mallard reared their young, and the third parties were no doubt as proud of the successive broods as maiden aunts who watch the increasing total of their nephews and nieces.

I was told another interesting story by the same keeper. It seems that a pair of mallard made a nest in a deep hole which was set rather high in a tree overhanging the lake. One morning the duck was seen rushing about in the water, flying in the air near to the tree, and all the time squawking loudly, as if calling to the youngsters to descend. As there was no response on their part a keeper brought along a ladder, and climbing up he reached into the hole where, at full arm's length, he found eight ducklings. Putting these into his cap he brought them down, and gave them to the mother. But, to his surprise, she was by

no means satisfied, and continued her manifestations of anxiety. He therefore ascended the ladder again, and shining a torch into the cavity he discovered yet another duckling hidden away in a crevice. When he had added this one to the brood already on the water the old duck was entirely content, and, calling her family about her, she swam happily away.

While on the subject of semi-domesticated wild-fowl I must quote once again from J. G. Millais who, having told how merciless parent ducks can be to any of their offspring that may be ailing, goes on to describe an amazing instance of tender-heartedness which he witnessed on the Serpentine. After telling how a sick youngster had been killed by its parent he says: 'Instantly there was a violent commotion amongst the group of ducks who were resting on the lawn about ten yards away. They quacked loudly in astonishment, and one of them, flying to the rescue, seized and bit the murderous mother with evident fury. So sudden and determined was her gallant attack that the criminal almost immediately retired discomfited, and rejoined her brood, with which she swam clean away. Now ensued a scene of the most touching and pathetic character. The rescuer, betraying unmistakably her deep concern for the little one now nearly dead, turned it over with her bill, and did everything she could think of to restore it to life. But in vain; its little feet could only helplessly paddle in the air, and so, as a last resource she tenderly picked it up in her bill, swam ashore, and gently placed it on the grass. Though by this time the duckling was quite dead, the kind-

hearted rescuer continued to push it gently, and occasionally lift it with her bill, while quacking loudly, and exhibiting all the tenderness and solicitude of a mother for her lost child. At last, finding her efforts at restoration were of no avail, she walked sorrowfully round and round the dead body, expressing by piteous flapping of her wings the depth of her despair.'



There is another story which shows not only a degree of sexual emotion, such as we are inclined to reserve for ourselves, but also a communication of idea far beyond that usually allowed to the lower animals. Speaking of a pair of mandarin ducks which had been kept in captivity the late Mr Couch writes: 'The drake being one night purloined by some thieves, the unfortunate duck displayed the strongest marks of despair

at her bereavement, retiring into a corner, and altogether neglecting food and drink, as well as the care of her person. In this condition she was courted by a drake who had lost his mate, but who met with no encouragement from the widow. On the stolen drake being subsequently recovered and restored to the aviary, the most extravagant demonstrations of joy were displayed by the fond couple; but this was not all, for, as if informed by his spouse of the gallant proposals made to her shortly before his arrival, the drake attacked the luckless bird who would have supplanted him, beat out his eyes, and inflicted so many injuries as to cause his death.' Even ducks have got to be careful.

At this time of year the wild impetuous thrust of nature is so great that steady growth seems to give way to a series of transformations. Within a few days the close-cropped fields become knee-deep in buttercups, and the ripened down of the dandelions blows high above our heads. The thorn-trees and the chestnuts grow white with blossom before we are conscious that they are fully green with leaf; the fruit blossom fades before we realize its colour.

The pages in the book of life are turned too fast; we can only glance at the pictures, with scarcely a moment to read the text. This was impressed upon me as I returned to my boat after that same day in London, for water-buttercups, sedges, grey poplars, wild currants, all seemed to have put on a week's growth in the few hours when I was absent.

'You can't show anything like that down in the country,' a Londoner had said to me with pride as we viewed the pageant of tulips in St James's Park.

'Man alive,' I said, 'for every pampered blossom in those beds I can show you a hundred that have grown of their own accord, that have come up year after year, needing no attention, surviving all vicissitudes of weather.'

'Not such fine blooms,' he said.

'Not so blatant,' I replied.

Then I went on to point out the variety, the wealth of bloom, and the exuberant growth of wild flowers by the river. No slug-eaten seedlings, no bare patches of soil. If one plant goes down in the struggle there is another to take its place.

The trouble is that most of us like orderliness: the close-trimmed verges of the flower-beds, the regimented plants, give us a sense of security. We like to feel that everything is under *our* control. Even an old tree-cutter once told me that he liked 'to trim the elms to a decent shape instead of letting them straggle wild all over the place.'

I also pointed out to my companion in the park that in nature there is no anxiety about succession. Before the spring flowers have burst their seed pods the buds of summer blossom have appeared: wild geums, ragged robin, comfrey, valerians, and orchids, following on the fritillaries, the cuckoo flowers, and kingcups. Water-lilies, irises, teasel, willow-herb, and many others will be there in their turn. And there is no waiting between courses, none of those constantly re-

curring periods when flower-beds consist chiefly of bare earth, and we are waiting for the bulbs, waiting for the wallflowers, waiting for the antirrhinums, or the dahlias, and then waiting again for the spring.

Apart from the question of the quality in cultivated blooms my friend's chief objection to my remarks was that without a garden one couldn't have cut flowers. As he rightly observed, few wild flowers survive for long after they are picked. To this I replied that cut flowers at any time are a barbarism, and that if any one *really* appreciates a growing flower he cannot get any but the crudest form of satisfaction from seeing a bunch of drooping heads in a vase. No flowers, however carefully or even lovingly they may be arranged, can look as well when cut as they do when growing. If we have a garden there is less need than ever to decapitate the plants in order to enjoy them. The memory of a bed of lupins in full sunlight is far better than the sight of a dozen of them sagging from a glass jug in the glare of an electric lamp. Tulips, which started this discussion, are some of the worst sufferers. God knows, in spite of what I have said, they are my favourite garden flower, but it gives me little pleasure to see them drooping over the edge of a piece of oriental pottery planted on a grand piano, or hanging from a vase on a photo-laden mantelshelf.

Though the weather was oppressive the sky was clear, and as I returned to my boat that evening I could see big white-lipped chub gliding in and out of the trailing weeds, watching for the half-drowned may-flies

that floated with the current. But towards sunset banks of white vapour gathered in the east, and in the west tall nimbus clouds reared their heads towards the mackerel flecks in the upper air. Sudden sharp squalls of wind hit the river, now from the west, now from the east. As the sun sank behind wine-red clouds large drops of rain fell one by one on the canvas cover. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The birds became silent. After a pause the rain came again, spattering the water with silver rings, and giving many young leaves their first wetting. In an ever-increasing *crescendo* it rained and continued to rain, and with the rain I fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I SUPPOSE THAT in the whole pageant of river scenery there can be no item more recurrent to human eyes than grass, yet, in proportion to its constant reappearance, there can be no form of life which receives less attention from the passer-by. Just as to the great Dr Johnson one green field was like another green field, so to most people grass is just grass, something that cattle eat or something that man can turn into lawns. They do not realize the infinite variety of growth in every yard of turf or the infinite beauty of the individual flowers: the crowded spike-like inflorescences of the foxtail, the trembling florets of the quake-grass, the wild proud panicle of the oats.

There is no greater competition for existence anywhere than in a meadow. Even human footsteps

will encourage those grasses which prefer a firm tilth, to the detriment of those who like a looser soil. Hence the clearly marked line of a footpath, where the grasses which thrive happen to be of a dark colour.

Until recently I was as ignorant on this subject as any one else. I knew that hay from newly sown meadows was best for thoroughbred horses, and that hay from old pasture land was 'good enough' for cattle, but I had no idea that cocksfoot, sweet vernal, timothy, and other such pretty titles were anything more than names in children's posies. But a colleague of mine, John Waldie, B.Sc., devotes his whole life to grass. No quadruped could be a greater connoisseur. He knows the flavour of every blade, the amount of proteins, minerals, carbohydrates, and fats possessed by each. He knows at what week in the year they start and finish growing, and which of them need protection from their more thrusting neighbours. From him I have learned that the science of grazing is as important a matter for the farmer as rotation of crops.

It seems that some of the most nutritive species of grasses begin their period of growth early in the year, and continue it late into the autumn. Heavy grazing in early spring may therefore do permanent harm to the pastures, for, by long-continued cropping, these early-growing species will be deprived of strength, and will be unable to compete in the struggle for existence when activity sets in among the coarser and less desirable varieties later in the year. Moreover, cattle and sheep are selective feeders, and their grazing needs careful

supervision lest they exterminate the more palatable components of a meadow.

Apart from this utilitarian side of the subject, there is an irresistible appeal, even to the most casual passer-by, in the rich growth of a grass-field in spring and early summer. There seems no breathing space left in the thick felt which covers the soil, and yet the fields are powdered with the gold of buttercups and trefoils, the purple of clovers and vetches, the red of sorrel and the white of the ox-eye daisies, all of them holding their own in the struggle. And as the days lengthen, the grasses continue their growth, until in June we have all the wealth and fragrance of the hayfield. Then is the time when labour becomes a pleasure, when old-time stories pass, and legends are handed down from generation to generation. In the heat of the noonday sun the clank of the mowing machine, the 'wheetly-harp-harp' of the sharpening stone on the scythe, and the cheery shout of the driver to his horses are sounds to gladden the heart of any man. In the evening, when the corncrake is heard calling to its straying youngsters, and when the white ghost-moth hovers over the few grasses still standing by the hedge, there is no sweeter site for lovers' dalliance than among the haycocks in the close-mown field.

Raising the rick is an event of the year, and proud the young labourer when first allowed to shape the corners. Nowadays most of the hay is conveyed on to the rick by elevators, but when I was a boy we forked it up from the horse-drawn cart, and each man emulated the other in throwing the largest forkfuls.

'Wanderful forks. Wanderful forks,' said old Boss

Galvin, who was directing operations on the rick. 'Is it sweating ye are?'

'The river isn't flowing faster,' said Taedy Cronin, who was on the cart beside me.

'A provision of nature,' said Galvin.

'A what?' asked Taedy.

'It 's my belief,' said the old man, 'that the rain that you soaks in the winter you sweats in the summer.'

Talking of hay reminds me of a man I once knew, named Macrae. He was from the south of Scotland, and one of his jobs was to buy hay for the firm that employed him in the north of Ireland. He was a very particular kind of man about details, especially such little matters as the exact weight of a hayrick. It was no good the farmer saying it was *about* five ton or *about* eight ton or *about* ten ton, for in the mind of this honest Presbyterian there was always a doubt.

Now doubt is no harm in itself, but when buying hay it should be tactfully expressed, and the man from over the water had just a shadow of bluntness in his speech. Mr Murphy from near Ballyclare did not like that.

'I tell you there 's sixteen ton if there 's a pound,' he said on one occasion.

'I 'd like to see it weighed,' said Macrae.

'I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't eighteen ton,' said Murphy, 'and sweeter hay doesn't grow in Ulster.'

'It has got to be weighed,' said Macrae.

'And where will I weigh it?' asked Murphy.

'At the public weighbridge in the town,' said Macrae.

'He 'd skin a flea for the fat,' thought Murphy to himself. But he didn't say that; instead, he just asked: 'And how will you have it delivered?'

'Send me a load a week.'

So the bargain was made.

It was a wet year, and, when the days were fine, Murphy had much to do on his farm besides carting hay. For this reason he always chose wet weather for delivery of the goods. But, lest it should be said that the drop of rain might add weight to the hay, he took care always to cover the load with a large tarpaulin. So scrupulous indeed was he that he took along a spare tarpaulin of the same size to be weighed separately, so that the weight could be deducted from that registered on the scales. In this way the whole sixteen tons was delivered, one ton at a time.

Macrae was well pleased with the transaction, but he didn't know till many years afterwards that he had paid for an extra ton. The fact of the matter was that every time the cart went on the scales Mickey, the farmer's son, who weighed ten stone himself, was snuggled away under the waterproof covering, only to slip out later when a convenient moment arrived.

But, while such considerations may occupy our minds in the upper reaches of the river, where, on all sides, we see rich meadows, it will be the close-trimmed lawns which attract our attention as we get nearer to London. Nowhere in the world is there such perfect turf as in England, and nowhere is it regarded with greater pride. Even a map-maker thinks it of importance to mention that the lawns

of the Manor House at Shepperton are the finest on the river.

Once upon a time in the courtly days of Queen Elizabeth lawns were sown with sweet-smelling herbs; the paths too, and even the turf-covered seats, so that, as one walked or rested, there arose a fragrance from the bruised leaves. William Lawson, a contemporary of Shakespeare, says in his manual, *The Countrie Housewife's Garden*, that in 'Gardens and Orchards bankes and seats of Camomile, Penny-royall, Daisies and Violets are seemely and comfortable.' Shakespeare makes Falstaff say of camomile that 'the more it is trodden the faster it grows.' John Evelyn refers to carpet walks of camomile, and Francis Bacon advises us that those herbs 'which Perfume the Aire most delightfully not passed by as the rest, but being Troden upon and Crushed, are Three: That is Burnet, Wilde-Time, and Water-Mints. Therefore, you are to set whole Allies [paths] of them, to have the Pleasure when you walke or tread.'

Although a few herb lawns still exist, including one at Buckingham Palace, ambition to-day is for the most part focused on grass. The extent of the interest centred thereon may be gauged from the fact that Messrs Suttons of Reading can supply several hundred different mixtures of grass seeds, each one suited to a different soil and climate.

This passion for a velvety turf seems to be inherent in an Englishman's blood. Just as ladies of high degree think it not beneath them to attend to their linen cupboards, so retired admirals of the fleet and generals

whose battles on a wider front are over think it no menial duty to creep about the ground on hands and knees, attacking the smallest weed that may have forced a landing on their territory.

The zeal manifests itself not only in England but abroad. I met a retired colonel in Tahiti who had spent years, with roller and mowing machine, coaxing the coarse herbage of that island into the semblance of a lawn, and he would have achieved a reasonable amount of success but for the activities of the land crabs who burrowed in from the shore and disfigured his sward with large holes. When I visited his house he was preparing an elaborate device by means of which kettles of water, kept constantly on the boil, emptied themselves down any hole through which a crab might attempt to invade his property. Unfortunately, before the efficacy of the contrivance could be put to the test a tidal wave wrought such havoc in his garden that the old man left the island with a broken heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NEAR HAMBLEDEN LOCK I decided to leave my boat for a few hours and wander up into the beech woods behind the village of Fawley. The day was warm, and, as I climbed the hill towards Skirmett, my pace slackened. Not so that of a fine-looking girl, accompanied by a fierce-faced duenna, both of them stepping it out with that air of righteousness that always affects people when they turn pleasure into duty.

'A fine day,' I said brightly, raising my cap as they passed, for the sun was shining, and surely to goodness there was no harm in a pleasant remark—they with a bull terrier and a black spaniel to protect them.

The old lady glowered at me from under her hard hat.

''Tis,' said the girl; just ''tis,' and no more.

'You 're mighty fearful the two of you,' I thought, as I watched their flat heels hitting the gritty road. With that I let them go over the brow of the hill and out of my mind.

Soon after this I turned up a track into the woods leading to a gamekeeper's hut, where A. E. Coppard used to live. That was where Hal Taylor, my predecessor at the Golden Cockerel Press, found him, some twenty years ago, with 'a chest of drawers full of short

stories.' It was a selection of these which, under the title *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me*, brought fame to author and publisher alike.

The track through the wood followed the edge of a clearing, and as I wandered along I was noticing how different varieties of mosses were zoned according to the intensity of the light. Some grew most freely in the full sunlight: others preferred a half light for their greatest effort. A few throve best in comparative shade.

Suddenly the stillness of the wood was shattered by the screeches of a dog. I couldn't be sure if the cries were from terror or from pain, but they echoed through the trees like the howling of a pack of wolves. It was obviously trouble of a serious kind, for the noise continued, so, brushing aside the willow-herb and the foxgloves which occupied the open space, I ran towards a plantation of young larches from which the cries came. Through this plantation a grass path swung up the side of the hill, and as I panted round a bend I found myself confronted by the elder of the two women who had passed me on the road.

She was waving her stick at me, and gesticulating, as if I was responsible for whatever was happening. But, guided by the noise, I pushed by her and round the corner. There, on her knees, in a clearing by the path, I found the girl tearing at the jaws of a trap which held the spaniel by the leg. Of course she and the old lady, and a couple more of them as well, might have pulled at that trap for a week without getting its jaws open. There 's only one way to do it, and that 's easy.

'Hold the dog's head,' I said, for I didn't want *its*

teeth in *my* shins, and with that I put my foot on the spring and pressed it down.

Next minute the dog was careering about, barking its head off with delight, and the girl was trying to catch it to see if it was hurt. When she did get hold of it there wasn't as much as a scratch to be seen. She was just beginning to thank me when her aunt appeared. 'Come on, Eleanor,' she said, and without another word the two of them went off.

I couldn't help feeling that they were a bit brusque in their departure, but off they went with that don't-follow-me look in their eyes, and I was left to find my way to the nearest pub and console myself for the ingratitude of women.

That didn't take long. The 'house' was near the wood, and it was being well patronized.

'Ever see'd a snake swim, George?' The speaker was a big cheery-faced carter.

'No, nor a helephant neither,' said George, whom I took to be a small farmer.

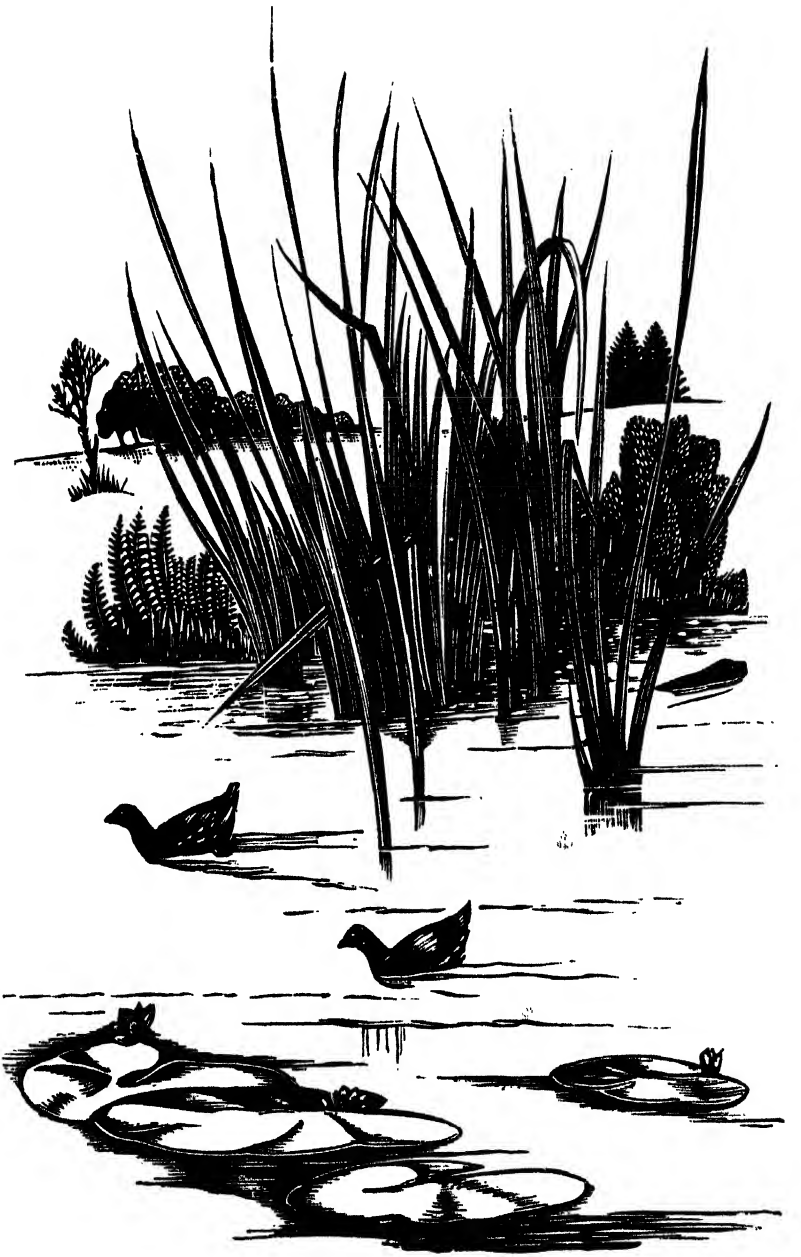
'I see'd one Thursday.'

'A wot? A snake swimmin'?'

'Yus. A snake swimmin'.'

'Wot time o' day was that, Bill? I reckon soon arter closin' time.'

'It warn't arter closin' time. It wur just afore openin' time. Thursday evenin'. On the Cherwell it was. 'E swims across with 'is 'ead stuck up out of the water like the perryscope on a submarine. 'Is body was straight as that stick in your 'and, but 'is tail was flappin' like a fish.'



'You should see the sea-snakes in Australia,' said the landlord, a retired sailor. 'Black as a crow on the back and yellow as a lemon on the belly, and venemous, Gawd bless my soul! Compared with one of them, a boa constrictor is a garden pet.'

''E allus goes one better nor we, don't 'e,' said George.

'I 've seen one of the yellow ones,' I said. 'He was stranded on an island in the Pacific, after a storm.'

'Did he have a spotted tail?' asked the landlord.

'He did,' I agreed.

'Now who 's tellin' lies?' asked the old sailor proudly.

'I 'll tell you somethin' queerer nor that,' said an old chap from a corner. 'Ever know'd a rabbit eat birds?'

'Go it, Joe,' said the landlord.

'It 's true, mind you,' said Joe. 'Them as don't believe me can ask Miss Betty up at the Grange.'

'What sort o' birds do 'e eat, hostriches?' asked Bill.

'No, swallows. Catches 'em flying,' laughed Ted, the local postman.

'Yer wrong,' said Joe. 'It 's sparrers, 'e catches 'em in 'is run. Birds come in t' pick a bit o' food, an' rabbit 'e 'its at 'em with 'is paw. Then 'e eats 'em.'

'Wouldn't believe it,' said the landlord.

'Wouldn't believe it meself till I seen it. Thought 'twere rats when I see bird wi' legs off. Next day I

catches 'im at it. Miss Betty, she says it 's as 'ow 'e was starved afore she got 'im. Got in the 'abit o' eatin' anythink. 'E certain wus a bit poor when she brought 'im along.'

The weather was showery next morning, so I spent an easy day tidying up my lockers, binding the ends of a few ropes, and making adjustments to my canvas cover. Towards evening I was contenting myself with a book, when a woman's voice on the bank said: 'Are you *very* busy?'

I looked up to see the black spaniel of yesterday and its owner on the bank.

'I came to thank you for your help yesterday,' she said.

'But you did thank me,' I replied.

'Not really.'

'Won't you come aboard?' I asked.

'No, I mustn't do that. My aunt has gone to church, and I just slipped down from the village on the chance of finding you.'

At this moment the dog jumped into the boat, leaving a wet trail from his paws over seats and cushions.

'Oh,' she said, 'what an awful mess!'

'I think you ought to come and clean it up,' I suggested.

'I really only came to thank you,' she said.

'But you can't do that from the bank.'

She hesitated. 'Well, just for a moment,' she said, as she stepped on board.

'Did you think it awful of me to go off like that yesterday?' she asked.

'I didn't fall in love with your aunt,' I said.

'People don't nowadays. But they did once. She was very lovely when she was young.'

'It 's in the family,' I murmured.

She pretended not to hear me.

'Why was that trap there?' she asked, as she sat down. 'So close to the path?'

'For foxes,' I answered. 'There was an old hen tied up near by.'

'Did you see all those dead birds and animals hung on the wire fence?' she asked. 'On the other side of the wood: magpies, jackdaws, owls, and some little animals with long tails?'

'Stoats or weasels,' I said.

'And some birds with blue on their wings.'

'Jays,' I told her. It was obvious that she was not a country girl.

'That 's a gamekeeper's gibbet,' I said.

'But is it *really* necessary to destroy them?' she asked.

'It certainly isn't necessary to leave them rotting like that. They could at least be buried,' I said. 'They have no deterrent value to other vermin, and a head or a tail should be sufficient to earn the capitation grant from the owner of the shoot.'

'It 's like sticking human heads over gates in medieval times.'

'It 's just as barbaric.'

We agreed on this, and she rose to go.

'You haven't told me about your aunt,' I said.

'I didn't come here to do that. You tell me what you were reading.'

'Aunt first: reading afterwards!' I replied.

'Well,' she said, 'she married a very handsome young man who took her to live in his castle.'

'Just like they do in the story books?'

'Just like they do in the story books.'

'What happened then?'

'She was so beautiful that he went mad with jealousy and locked her up.'

'In the castle?'

'In the castle.'

'Go on,' I said, 'this is a good story.'

'It 's true, perfectly true. He kept her locked up for twenty years, and only allowed her out once a year, when he drove her to the nearest town in a closed carriage to buy clothes.'

'And how did she escape?'

'She didn't. He died. Now she lives most of the year in London, and spends all her days looking in the shop windows. She hates the sight of men.'

'Did this happen in England?' I asked.

'It happened in the British Isles. Now tell me what you were reading?'

'Well,' I said, 'just as you came along I was frightfully excited to find in a Celtic anthology a poem by a very great friend of mine, one Hamish Maclaren. What 's more,' I said, 'that same Ham used to live up in that windmill near Skirmett, not far from where we met yesterday. Sit down and I 'll read it to you.'

This time I sat at the same end of the boat, and I read to her *September Heresy*:

'If God made little apples—
'Tis so good men do tell—
If God made little apples
And made them red as well:
If He put mists in hollows,
Soft winds upon the leas,
Hearts for the south in swallows,
September hues in the trees:
If God could match His roses
Down in the miry lane
With hips and haws for posies
(And rain, and sweet rain),
Oh, if God made September,
Gold of the standing stooks,
Silver dews in the garden,
The high wild flocking rooks—
Aye, if God made September,
Then preach you ne'er so well,
Parson, I 'm not believing
That God could make a hell.'

'My aunt has gone to church.'

'To hell with your aunt,' I said. 'Do you like the poem?'

Yes, she liked it very much, and took the book to read it for herself.

'There 's another one there that I like,' I told her, 'a few pages earlier:

What is the greatest bliss
That the tongue o' man can name?
'Tis to woo a bonnie lassie
When the kye comes hame.'

'It 's time for me to be going hame,' she said.

'I 'm sorry about that,' I replied, looking 'wistful.'

'So am I,' she answered. Then she got up.

'Now say good-bye and thank you,' she said to the dog as she picked him up and held out his paw. In doing so she dropped his lead, and, as I stooped to pick it up, the animal licked my face.

That 's a kiss,' she said laughing, as I got out my handkerchief.

'A pity 'twas from the dog,' I replied.

She looked up at me. There was silence for a moment. Then she asked: 'Are we all square now?'

'We are,' I said, 'but to-morrow I 'm putting a dozen traps in every wood.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

'FAY CE QUE VOUDRAS' was, once upon a time, inscribed over the door of Medmenham Abbey. I don't know what the motto is to-day, but, judging by the number of notices that I saw disfiguring both sides of the river, it might well be 'No Landing.'

I expect the Hell Fire Club held some wild parties there, wild even for the eighteenth century, but not *much* wilder than many that still occur in London and elsewhere. Human nature will burst through the thin veneer that hides it. The stories that have been handed down to us of those annual meetings are very shocking, but shock often goes hand in hand with envy, and both lead to exaggeration.

They must certainly have been a distinguished gathering, with a Chancellor of the Exchequer as their head, and a First Lord of the Admiralty, a Governor of Bengal, a Regius Professor at Oxford, a member of Parliament, a poet, and no less an artist than Hogarth in their ranks. John Wilkes, 'Friend to Liberty,' was also of their number. He had married, at the age of twenty-three, an ugly heiress ten years older than himself, because, at the time, he was sufficiently inexperienced in life to believe that his parents knew better than he did on such a matter. He even consented to set up house with his mother-in-law, a cranky old lady, who indulged in speculations on theology.

Is it any wonder that he was glad to 'break out' for a couple of weeks each year? Maybe the others had their troubles too. It is a well-known principle of dynamics that the greater the compression the greater the explosion.

Anyway, it is a pleasing stretch of the river, and I like to think of the shades of those roisterers playing hide and seek among the yew hedges on moonlight nights, or chasing each other round the stumps of the old elm-trees on the lawn.

It may have been my imagination, but when I was there, just before dawn, I thought I saw a gleam in the water like the white shoulders of a girl. During the night there had been glints of silver moving among the trees on the island, and I thought I heard faint laughter, but that may have been the ripple of the current against my boat. In the morning I found a piece of material, like 'nun's veiling,' tangled in my anchor rope, but, when I attempted to take it out of the water, it dissolved in my hand. It was probably very old.

A mile or more below Medmenham is the 'Bell' at Hurley, claimed, like many others, to be the oldest inn in England. 'Built in 1135, it began life as a Guest House to the Benedictine Monastery close by. To this day there remains an underground passage from the Inn to this ruined monastery.' I never can understand why they had to have so many underground passages in those days. Quoting again from the handbook: 'River, woodland, green meadows, all the attractions of a beautiful countryside, unsurpassed in Britain, are here in profusion. For the sporting enthusiast, golf,

tennis, shooting, rowing, swimming, riding, fishing, and many other present-day diversions are provided in every attractive form. In the centre of this most beautiful spot lies the age-old village of Hurley, and set in this perfect background is Ye Olde Bell Hotel.'

For twenty-five shillings a day you can enjoy it all.

I had an excellent dinner there, during which I pondered on the ruined monastery now known as Ladye Place. I can't say that I gave much thought to its foundation, about the time of the Norman conquest, or to its change of ownership, four and a half centuries later, when it passed into the possession of the Lovelace family. What did twist about in my mind was the fact that here was the spot where all the trouble in Ireland began, for, in the very vault in which I had just knocked my head, occurred the private meetings and consultations of those personages who called the Prince of Orange to England.

Now, if those meetings hadn't taken place there would have been no Orangemen in Ulster, there might never have been the troubles, and we *might* have had Lord Craigavon and Mr de Valera as friendly and loving towards each other as Lord Halifax and Mr Chamberlain. It is a solemn thought.

Of course no one in this country will ever understand those inhabitants of Ireland who live south of the Boyne. Let me tell one story.

During 'the bad times,' just after the Irish Free State came into being, my people were living in the south of Ireland. My father, as I 've said before, was a parson, and one of the things he believed was that 'a parson

had no business to be mixing himself up in politics.' Whatever he might think, it was better for him to mind his own business. And so, beyond voting occasionally for William O'Brien, he never uttered a political opinion, but ministered to all with the kindliness which filled his soul.

To give you an idea of the man I ought to tell you that he prayed in season and out of season. He could hardly put on his boots without muttering a prayer, and the queer thing was that, when he prayed, he groaned aloud as if in the travail of his soul. I 've heard him groaning in the larder, I 've heard him groaning in the stable, and at all queer times of the day he would retire to his bedroom and drop on his knees for a few moments.

I remember one occasion, just after we had got a new housemaid. Soon after her arrival, in the middle of a morning, she came running to my mother.

'Come quickly, mam, the master is above in his bedroom, and he 's dying of pain.'

'That 's nothing, Mary,' said my mother, ''tis only praying he is.'

'Lor, mam, but isn't he the holy man!'

Although I have mentioned my father more than once, I have not spoken of my mother, nor do I intend to say much now. She died before I was twenty, and I loved her dearly. 'Leave the boy alone.' That 's what she used to say when uncles, aunts, and other loving relatives ballyragged me for wanting to be an artist. I still remember the scorn with which one of them, an aunt by marriage, said to me: 'You don't

suppose *you* could be an artist.' 'Leave the boy alone,' was what my mother said.

But to get back to the bad times and Irish temperament. My father and one of my sisters were living about five miles from Blarney. (I 've never kissed anything smoother than that stone in the old castle.) Though fighting was going on all around them, and shootings and house-burnings by both sides, no one ever said as much as an unkind word to either of them. They were, however, expected to provide occasional meals for the combatants. Sometimes it would be the Free Staters, sometimes the Republicans, who came in and demanded food; parties of them, six or eight at a time. In particular there was a self-appointed general in the Republican army, whom we will call Moloney. He had an army of about a dozen men who were constantly harassing the Free State soldiers. He harassed us too by his constant visits. The only thing about these visits that you could be quite sure of was that he wouldn't appear while the opposing forces were in the house. After a time his claims became unreasonable, and two and three nights a week he might appear with his party. My sister became desperate, so one night, after she had given the Free Staters a good meal, she said to them: 'I wish to goodness you 'd catch that fellow Moloney. He 's eating us out of house and home. If it goes on much longer there won't be enough for the mice in the pantry.'

The guests marched off through the stable yard. They always came in at the back door and fed in the kitchen.

A couple of days later they appeared again.

'Oh, Miss Aimée,' said the captain, 'we 've caught Moloney. He 's in prison, in Cork jail, and you won't be bothered with him any more at all.'

My sister ransacked the larder to show her gratitude to them. 'Isn't that grand?' she said to my father, who was in his study preparing his sermon, 'Moloney is in jail, and we 'll be bothered no more by him.' My father agreed.

Off went the Free Staters down the drive, and the household began to think they could look forward to a rest. But hardly had the old gate swung on its hinges behind the departing troops than the back door opened, and in walked Moloney with his band of irregulars.

'Wisha, Moloney,' said my sister, 'where did you come from?'

'Arrah, miss,' said he, 'sure I escaped.'

'And do you know,' said she to me, when she was telling me the story, 'we were quite glad to see the poor fellow again.'

And now back to Marlow. The spire of the church seems very prim after all that talk, and the suspension bridge would be fragile in a fight; but the two together make a dainty little picture. The church was built in 1832 to replace the old Norman building which had been pulled down on account of its dampness. It is bright, airy, and cheerful within, and God Himself knows that that can be said of few buildings dedicated to His honour. There are plenty of achievements of

arms and other memorials for those who like to contemplate the past, one of them bearing the name of Permanus Perryman, and another to a lady called Cassandra. For some obscure reason I grew romantic by that grave.

It is said that, when the old octagonal wooden spire was being repainted in 1790, a workman fell from a scaffold, seventy-five feet from the ground, and escaped with no more than a severe concussion. I do not think, however, that this can be taken as any criterion of immunity for those who work in sacred buildings, for I knew a female sexton who slipped on the aisle which she had just polished, and split her skull from nape to crown.

A bridge has existed on the present site since early times, and among the patent rolls in the Tower of London are grants dating from the reigns of Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV, allowing tolls to be levied for the repair of the said bridge. A new wooden one was built about 1790, and that was replaced by the present structure in 1829.

Although the beech woods of 'Bochinghamscire' ('boc,' the Anglo-Saxon for 'beech-tree') are reputed to be the finest in England, the Quarry Woods, on the Berkshire side of the river, give them a close run for their title. In spring and in autumn that mighty fleece along those hills is a sight not easily forgotten. I don't know who the tutelary deity of beech-trees may be, but I am fairly confident that it is a female. Whereas the oaks growing in heavy soil are tough and knotted, with rough skins, galled and warty branches, and

seared leaves, the beeches, loving the milk-white chalk, are graceful and smooth, with feminine curves, their leaves bearing a delicate downy growth comparable only to what is sometimes found in the small of the back of the 'fairer sex.' I speak, of course, as an artist.

It is not for nothing that the beech has been called the 'Mother of the Woods,' for planted appropriately it helps other forest trees to flourish. The widely branching roots assist in the aeration of the soil; the leaves, when on the branches, give a gracious shade, and when fallen to the ground yield a richer humus than those of any other species; and the drip from the branches kills those weeds which would otherwise rob the soil.

The trees at Cliveden stretch up a hundred and fifty feet, and more, from the river level, as if anxious to compete with the oaks that thrive in the clay cap of the hill. There is a pleasing uncaredforness in these woods. Creepers hang in festoons from the higher branches, and ivy composes its mosaic of leaves about the lower boughs. Nature is given her last chance beside the river for many miles and she makes the most of it.

At Maidenhead, where I went ashore to replenish my water jars, I mentioned to the proprietor of a boat-yard that I was writing a book on the river.

'Oh, I 'm not doin' any advertisin',' he answered quickly.

'But I 'm not looking for advertisements,' I explained.

'Oh, a real book! Say Bill, this gent is writin' a book all on his own.'

'Wot, like *Three Men in a Boat?*'

'Only one man in my boat,' I said.

'Ain't yer got any one to keep yer company, cook yer tea, and that kind o' thing?' asked the first speaker.

I sighed, and replied in the negative.

'You 're better orf,' he said. 'Where did you come across that punt?'

'Built her myself,' I told him.

'Oo,' he said, 'you 're a proper water-man, you are. You come inside and see the picture my uncle Fred made on 'is way back from China.' He led me into his office. 'A proper old East Indiaman that ship was. All done with wool. Every stitch done with 'is own 'and. 'E made the frame 'isself too.'

A mile and a half further down-stream I reached Bray, once famous for its vicar, now famous for the 'Hind's Head.' I couldn't pass there. Why should I, anyway? Lunch was probably being served on the lawn. It was.

By the time I got back to my boat it was late in the evening, and the river seemed to have taken on a warmer tint.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WINDSOR CASTLE from the river *is* grand. There 's no mistake about that. I don't care what people say about alterations and reconstructions by 'egregious architects'; the fact remains that it is a glorious silhouette, dwarfing everything else on the river.

It needs a sight of Windsor Castle to realize a little of what Malory meant in all that long history that culminates with the death of King Arthur. What a death that was! 'And thus they fought all the day long, and never stinted, till the noble knights were laid to the cold ground, and ever they fought still, till it was near night, and by that time was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the down. . . . Then was King Arthur ware where Sir Mordred leaned upon his sword among a great heap of dead men. Now give me my spear, said Arthur unto Sir Lucan, for yonder I have espied the traitor that all this woe hath wrought. . . . Then the king gat his spear in both his hands, and ran towards Sir Mordred, crying, Traitor, now is thy death day come. And when Sir Mordred heard King Arthur, he ran until him with his sword drawn in his hand. And then King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield, with a foin of his spear throughout

the body more than a fathom. And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound, he thrust himself, with the might that he had, up to the bur of King Arthur's spear. And right so he smote his father Arthur with his sword holden in both his hands, on the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the brain-pan, and therewithal Sir Mordred fell stark dead to the earth. And the noble Arthur fell in a swoon to the earth, and there he swooned oft-times.'

After such splendid writing I hope it will not be considered sacrilegious to whisper that I sometimes get a naughty delight in the thought that Sir Galahad, the purest knight that ever lived, should have been born out of wedlock. I wonder what Malory was 'getting at' when he wrote that.

I am reminded of a dear old spinster, in a village where I once lived, who was called upon to judge the babies at the parish fête. Without knowing it she awarded the prize to a love-child. Next morning there was a deputation of angry mothers, metaphorically waving their wedding rings, to ask her if she realized what she had done.

She answered them very sweetly: 'But I wasn't judging morals, I was judging babies.'

I would like to talk of Leonardo da Vinci, of Erasmus, of William the Conqueror, and many others whose parents had more fire in their blood than cold calculation in their brains; but, indeed, it is no fit subject to be discussing under the shadow of Windsor Castle. I 'm surprised at myself, already.

By the time I reached the royal town I had decided that I needed a quicker mode of conveyance to help me past the increasing number of architectural disfigurements on either bank. If those mansions are the result of men growing wealthy it would have been far better for their owners to have remained poor and to live in converted railway carriages.

I know the scorn, and the by-laws too, that are heaped on the man who can afford no more than a shelter from the elements. Shacks and huts are said to deface the countryside, but they are no worse than battlemented villas and portcullised boat-houses.

So, at Windsor, I anchored *The Willow*, and boarded one of Salter's river steamers. I found myself sitting next to a cheery middle-aged man, whose wife and daughter were on the seat in front of us.

'That 's Magna Charta Island,' he said to his wife, as we passed Runnymede.

'Little bit of a place, isn't it?' she replied.

'Big enough for the barons to put it across him all right,' said her husband.

'When he went home he rolled on the floor and bit the rushes,' chirped the daughter.

'Poor man, it must have been a worry to him,' sighed the good mother with genuine kindliness.

My thoughts on this tactless king, who had been born into such an awkward position, were interrupted by the sight of young men and maidens bathing. I wonder why it is that girls in the water seem so much more attractive than they do when on the land. They do to me anyway. It may just be novelty. If I lived

in the water I might find the same allurement in those who trip along the bank. On the other hand, it may be some strange harking back to the primitive. Have not our ancestors all emerged from the sea?

When I was a boy women bathed in voluminous folds of heavy drapery. To-day, with brightly coloured fragments, they draw attention to those parts of their anatomy which theoretically they wish to conceal.

I trust that I have by now established sufficiently with the reader the natural innocence and uprightness of my soul to confess that I once visited a nudist colony. Indeed, I lived there for a fortnight. It was by a lake, among pine woods, and there were only two rules of conduct:

> Thou shalt not carry a camera.
> Thou shalt not wear clothes.

First thing in the morning we tumbled into the lake. Then, with a towel wrapped about us, we drank hot coffee and ate rolls and butter. After that we laid aside the towels and played games: good hard games that stretched every muscle. Into the lake again before lunch. After lunch, a siesta in the sun, and then more games. In the evening, songs around a camp fire. In that camp there was no consciousness of age, or class, or sex. The essential spirit of the community was one of honesty. Coyness could not exist. All the ordinary complications of life faded away. It was the nearest thing to Eden that I expect to find this side of the Styx.

How I do seem to wander from the Thames.

'That 's a pretty house, with the pergola,' said my neighbour.

'Sweet, isn't it?' said his wife.

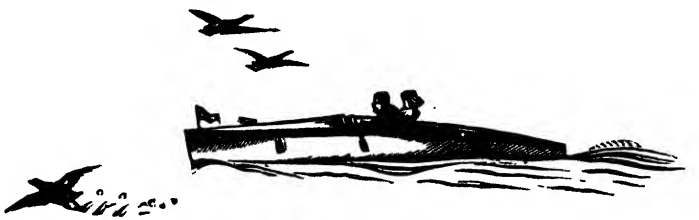
'I 'd like one of them launches,' said the daughter, whose name was Olive.

'What, the *Lotus*?'

'No, the *White Knight*.'

'Some day we 'll get one,' said her father.

'I 'd like one we can sleep in,' said Olive. 'Cruise up and down the river and do our own cooking.'



'Mother do the cooking?' queried mother, gently.

'Some day, ma,' said the father, 'when that young hussy is off our hands, you and me will go a cruise where we don't smell cookin' till it 's brought to us on a hot plate.'

'Look at them turkeys in the water,' said Olive.

'Those aren't turkeys,' said her father. 'They 're ducks. You can tell by the bill. India-runner ducks, that 's what they are.'

They weren't. They were Canada geese.

Oh, Lord! I do hope I don't seem unkind. We all make such fatheaded mistakes that we can ill afford to smile at others.

The aesthetic note of the bungalows between

Datchet and Sunbury wails up and down like an air-raid warning. Sometimes it is griping and disquieting, sometimes it is just melancholy, at others it is wearisome and almost insupportable.

But would it be wise to attempt anything different? Would Cotswold houses or mansion flats look any

better? Do not these 'musical comedy properties' represent the attitude of mind of the people who want to relax, who want release from living up to something when at home? (There are mighty few people in England who, in their heart of hearts, do not wish that their parents had been just one degree higher in the social scale.) Don't these trivial perforated gable timbers and cheap-jack mass-production garden ornaments signify irresponsibility? The knowledge that,

if the whole place was burnt in a night, another could be erected in a day, must surely contribute to that freedom of spirit for which sufferers from our economic system yearn. Those people don't come to the country to worry themselves about aesthetic problems any more than artists wandering in Threadneedle Street concern themselves with theories of banking.

I am convinced that if it was all in a foreign country, where there was no sense of personal responsibility, it would be delightful to paint. Great domes of weeping willows alternating with comic patterns of lattice fence, with garish barrels of geraniums, hammocks, toy dogs, cabin cruisers, and, of course, men and women in grotesque outfits. It would need the realism of a French painter to do it all justice. We, on this side of the Channel, mix highfalutin notions with our pigments, and the result suffers thereby.

I always wanted to be a painter. That may have been from snobbish motives. They rank so much higher in popular esteem than engravers. But though it is colour which usually attracts me first in a subject, I have, for the most part, kept to the austerity of black and white. I happen to be one of those people who need a strict discipline from their medium. Etching, with all its possibilities of false bitings and special printings, is a quagmire for me. With water-colour, whatever little art I possess dissolves into mist. Modelling in clay lands me knee-deep in a bog of imitation.

Engraving needs a cold formalization of thought. The technique is austere. There are no happy accidents. The same applies to stone-carving. There can

be no attempt at naturalism: all expression must be subservient to the medium.

Hampton Court Palace is a welcome sight after fifteen miles of bungalows. There are some splendid paintings there, clear and incisive both in insight and execution. But there are some woolly visions in paint as well. It is some time since I was inside the building, but I seem to remember Queen Anne on a ceiling, surrounded by an amazing number of half-dressed men and women, all performing the miracle of keeping light draperies in place in a high wind. There was more of that kind of thing, but without the queen, in William the Third's bedroom, and an inordinate number of *amorini* in his dressing-room.

From the river one is more conscious of the ranks of decorated chimneys than of any other feature of the castle. There is a splendid wall, too, that bounds the Home Park, but the steamer moves too quickly, and Metropolitan waterworks soon blot out the memory of Tudor display.

This is a short chapter but, as I 've said, the steamer moved quickly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AFTER KINGSTON I was compelled to come ashore and become terrestrial in my habits. If it hadn't been for the war I should have kept to the water, by tug, launch, or steamer, until I had reached Tilbury, and seen the great liners setting out for the other side of the world.

I 've sailed from Tilbury twice. It is a wonderful moment when you realize that you are moving, that you are actually under way. You look back through the haze, and there is scarcely anything visible of all the bustle that you are leaving behind. The ship goes on and on, so quietly, and with no apparent effort; and then the bugle sounds for lunch. When you come on deck again less than ever is to be seen through the mist. Every hour takes you further from responsibilities at home; every hour takes you nearer to blue seas.

It always seems to me a little uncanny that the ship should go on moving throughout the night, I suppose because, in a small boat, one always moors at the end of the day. Each morning, on the liners, we find ourselves further and further south. I think the feel of the decks under my feet and the timber of the rails

under my hand are what give me the greatest pleasure on a ship. The metal of the funnels and other structures is unsympathetic. I never trust the deck-chairs. Cabins always smell of paint, saloons of conditioned air. But the boat deck, smooth as a table, with gulls screaming overhead, with rigging singing in the wind, and a white wake of eddying foam stretching far astern, that is the memory that calls and calls again when others have long been silent. . . .

But if I couldn't get to Tilbury I could at least get as far as Kew. There, in the plant-houses, are the paw-paws and mangoes, the frangipani and hibiscus, and the hot sweet smell of tropical forests. Coco-nuts and bread-fruit too, and the pandanus or screw pine, with its roots projecting from the stem some six feet or more above the ground. Wonderfully ingenious the natives of Polynesia used to be, in fashioning their clubs from these trees. They cut through the trunk a few inches above and below the point where the root made its exit, shaped the severed lump of wood into the head of the club, and used the root as the handle.

When I was in the Pacific I saw none of the fights which, at one time, were almost a unit of currency. There used indeed to be a very strict ceremonial in these affairs, particularly in the islands to the west. If a man were to *break* the bones of his enemy's skull when dispatching him, his wife would be held to scorn when she took over the subsequent culinary operations. No, the main head of the club was to knock a man senseless, and that nice highly polished point which

you see in my illustration was merely to give the *coup de grâce* by a light tap between the bones of the cranium.

There 's nothing like that in Tahiti now. All is brotherly love and accord. The chief use of the tree is hat-making, and thatching, from its leaves.

Another device of these islanders, to overcome their shortage of implements, was the method of training the roots of the iron-wood tree to the curve deemed best for a shark-hook. After scratching away the soil on the side of a cliff where these trees grew, they bent the young root to the required shape, fastened it in that position, and then covered it again with soil. After a few years' further growth it would be strong enough to be cut from the tree, and then with the soft outer growth removed would only need a hard point. For this, I am told, a bit of a human shin was most efficacious.

I think my most vivid recollection of 'the islands' is of an evening in a banana grove not many miles from Tautira, where Robert Louis Stevenson lived. The girls of the district were practising dances for an annual celebration in the capital. There was no light

but that of the moon and a few torches. The music came from a big coconut-tree drum and a few sections of bamboos beaten with hammers. The dancers, wearing their grass skirts and wreaths of flowers, trod barefoot on the sand.

We, in this country, are inclined to think only of the rather obvious implications of the movements in those dances, but to the performers it is a different matter. There is a very definite rubric, and absolute precision is necessary. To acquire this there must be severe training. That night the same measure was repeated over and over again, as often as the most inexorable ballet master could have demanded. Not until something approaching perfection was reached did they call a halt.

Have you ever seen one of those big flat leaves of the banana-tree turn over in the moonlight, when there is no breath of air, and when every frond is still? There is no reason for the movement. It turns over and falls back again, like a sigh. The natives say that it happens when a spirit is passing.

Kew is, of course, watered by the Thames, and every strange plant that thrives there does so on Thames water. The exotic ducks too, Carolinas, mandarins, and Japanese teal; they all flourish on the same old stream in which the fat white Aylesburys swim at Clifton Hampden, and the plump home-grown geese leave their feathers by Radcot Bridge. I haven't mentioned that bridge before. It 's the loveliest and I believe the oldest on the river, but it is easy to miss it since the course of the river has been diverted by a 'cut.'

'Don't look at the funny gentleman, 'Orace; look at the funny birds,' said a visitor to Kew Gardens, whose young son displayed too keen an interest in my drawing.

From Kew Green, and 'there 's pleasant houses, if you like,' I walked along Strand-on-the-Green. The houses are charming, but the river is filthy. Talk

about the sacred Ganges. It is nothing to the Thames at Chiswick. And there were children bathing, swimming in water the colour of beer, with a sediment on its surface thick enough to be the beginning of a new continent.

It is tidal water here, and the craft that one sees are, for the most part, sea-going, sitting into the water, and becoming part of it, like a duck. The fresh-water skiffs and punts slide about on the surface like 'pond-skaters.'

I like these deep-bellied craft. They are built to get somewhere. After all, if one wants to reach any point on the river, it is much quicker to walk or go by car. Sea-going boats are meant to take you to places at which you can't arrive by any other means.

Here by Chiswick, too, the tugs charge up and down. Real bull-nosed tugs, whose job it is to haul heavily laden barges. And after Chiswick I visited Chelsea. Chelsea where 'the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us.'

It was Whistler who wrote those words. He also wrote, in the same *Ten o'clock Lecture*: 'Nature contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he bring forth from chaos glorious harmony. To say to the painter, that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano.'

The same artist established for ever the right of any expert to charge more than the standard rate of remuneration. When asked by the judge in a law court if he considered it reasonable to ask two hundred guineas for the labour of two days, he replied: 'No; I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime.'

There is an inviting sound in the word 'Chelsea.' It has the same quality as 'Montmartre' or 'Montparnasse.' That may, of course, be association of ideas. When I moved from Chelsea, fate took me to a village in the country, where tennis held sovereign rights. At one particular house I was expected to bind myself, with solemn vows, to be present on the lawn at a date which might be anything from four to six weeks ahead. Those vows could not be lightly broken. On arrival on the day, one was confronted with a diagram which showed all one's partners for the afternoon, at what time each set was expected to begin, and approximately at what time it should finish. It also showed the partner one was expected to take in to tea and at what hour, precisely, that act of gallantry should be performed. Somehow it lacked the spontaneity I crave in relaxation. I was glad to keep a *pied à terre* in Chelsea.

That was with my friend Charles Spencer and his wife Claude Prescott. A very nice couple indeed; and he with great precision of mind. At the time of the big flood in Chelsea, some ten years ago, Charles was awakened in the early hours of the morning by a policeman who was banging on the front door. He went to open the door, and as he did so a torrent of water gushed over his feet. The policeman was standing, knee deep, on the pavement outside. 'Oh, sir, the river!' he gasped.

'The Thames, I presume?' said Charles, blinking.

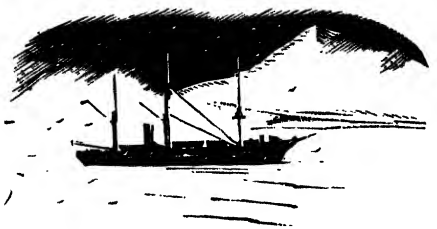
He is very honest too. When I suggested taking over one of his rooms we discussed every possible

advantage and disadvantage accruing to both of us from the deal, and the prospects seemed entirely desirable until I asked if there was much noise.

'My dear chap, it 's appalling,' he said.

But, in spite of that, I took the room, and lived there happily for long after.

From Chelsea it is scarcely more than a couple of miles to Blackfriars Bridge, and thereabouts is moored the *Discovery*. She is not very conspicuous, tied to the



embankment, and one might easily pass her black hull. But for threepence one can go aboard and walk those decks where Scott and Shackleton stood for many a long day, and many a long night, on their first journey to the Antarctic. This is the ship that for two winters was frozen in, immovable, in McMurdo Sound. These are the two-foot-thick sides and the eight-foot solid stem which resisted the crushing of the ice-floes. These are the very anchors that dropped fathom after fathom through icy sea and lay embedded in a sea floor never before stirred by human agency. Below deck one can see the cabins where the men lived and the bunks where they slept and dreamed, no doubt, of warm firesides at home.

Among that crew were two men whose names are not as well known as those of their leaders. They were William Lashly and Tom Crean. They both sailed on the first expedition in 1901, and they sailed again on the *Terra Nova* in 1910. Those two men and the present Admiral Sir E. R. G. R. Evans were the last to see Captain Scott and his party alive.

When Lashly sailed in the *Terra Nova* he was forty-three years of age. He had been a stoker in the navy, and of him Scott wrote: 'It is splendid to have people who refuse to recognize difficulties . . . hardworking to the limit, quiet, abstemious, and determined.'

He and the two others formed the last supporting party to those who reached the pole and perished.

Lashly kept a diary. He began it a few days before they parted from Scott, and he made his last entry when, eventually, they reached their base. It was first printed in Mr Cherry Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World.*

When I wrote to Lashly two years ago he replied: 'My Diary is as I dotted it down after doing a very hard days dragging. I could not bring myself to write more although many little incidents cropped up each day as we trudged along hour after hour, trusting in God to give us strength to fulfill the duty we were entrusted with and bring back to safety Lieut Evans. It was a hard task, but it was worth all we did for our comrade.'

In another letter he says: 'I have been looking through some of my rough notes and find there is very little to add to what has already been published in

Capt. Scott's narrative of the Southern journey while we were together. After we said good bye to the Polar party on the 4th of January 1912 we only know what we read, we were now faced with 750 mile to reach our base but my account commences from when we started north 3 of us Lieut Evans our leader and Navigator Crean and myself, Crean was to have led the way the first week but unfortunately he was stricken with a severe attack of snow blindness, it now fell on me to lead the whole of the way, not a very nice job as you see there is nothing in front of you only that whiteness the snow, I must thank God for keeping me clear of blindness. It is a pity the youth of to-day are not informed of the struggle for life these men put up with, I wonder will anyone ever try again. I don't think so. But should there ever be anything crop up that wants men to do something for the benefit of his fellow men we shall always find men to come forward even at the risk of their lives. And this is Britishers.'

In April of last year he wrote to me again: 'We are now dwindling down, I am really the only man that did both the Scott expeditions from beginning to the end.' By this he meant the only man then still alive who had sailed in the *Discovery* and the *Terra Nova*. Crean had died in August 1938. Finally, in a letter dated '29.11.39' he says: 'Perhaps you will wonder why the leader is the worst position in the team but you see there is nothing in front to help take away the awful glare, there are times when you cannot see any steps you are taking it is most trying to the eyes and nerves, you have also to remember you must look out

for every morsel of food, you have to make sure of your depots dont miss them or you are gone. I have not been too well of late. . . .'

He died a few months later.

His diary began on Christmas Day 1911: 'Christmas Day and a good one. We have done 15 miles over a very changing surface. . . . I had the misfortune to drop clean through, but was stopped with a jerk when at the end of my harness. It was not of course a very nice sensation especially on Christmas Day and my birthday as well. . . . Mr Evans, Bowers and Crean hauled me out and Crean wished me many happy returns of the day, and of course I thanked him politely.'

His last entry after they had struggled back three hundred and sixty miles to their base, hauling their sick leader on the sledge for close on ninety miles of the way, reads: 'Mr Evans is alright and asleep. We are looking for a mail now. How funny we should always be looking for something else, now we are safe.'

It is epic writing, and it makes my fiddling about on the Thames seem very small.

POSTSCRIPT

GENTLE READER, FORGIVE ME. I know that in my journey down-stream I have been narrow-minded and biased. I know that I have neglected or shut my eyes to many people, places, and events of great interest and importance; but I am not historically minded, nor do I appreciate to the full what is called civilization. As a boy I spent much of my spare time searching for places where there was no sign of human existence, no roads or cottages or even smoke from cottage fires, no cultivated fields, no hedges; but it was not until I reached middle age that I found the solitude I had sought, and then it was far from the Thames, on lonely atolls of the Pacific, and on uninhabited islets in the western Atlantic. I should have been wiser, perhaps, if I had stayed there.

The upper reaches of the Thames were entirely unknown to me until a year ago, and I took particular care to avoid guide-books and informative friends before I set out; nor, indeed, have I paid much attention to them since I came back. I had hoped to see at the source of the river a clear brook issuing from a rock or gravelly bed but, instead, I found only a dried-up well and a series of muddy land drains. Needless to

say I was disappointed; indeed, in a sense, I was disappointed all the way down by the persistent tameness of the river, the longest and most important in England. But, in spite of that, I came to love the quiet stream which plods its way obedient to every lock and weir. Perhaps there is sound sense in the advice to a young man: 'Find your ideal woman and marry her opposite.'

Even if there are no excitements of navigation and no grander scenery than the Goring Gap, there is no monotony. Every mile of water has its own character, every bridge too, every village, and every farm whose meadows are enriched by the silt of winter floods. I met the owner of such a farm and he took me to his house one Sunday evening. He told me that he was entirely happy, that he owned his farm, that he worked eighteen hours a day and liked it, that his wife enjoyed her garden and the poultry, that they had four healthy children. He asked nothing more of life. I met university dons who discoursed on sherry and Shelley, and were happy. I met labouring men who talked of beer and badgers, and were happy. I met anglers whose thoughts, at times, were centred on maggots, and they were happy too. Some people say that it is impossible for people with imagination to be truly happy, for realizing all the misery that is in the world they must be affected thereby. This seems to me a doctrine of defeat. Admittedly there is cruelty and illness and poverty, but there is also abundance of kindness, good health, and richness of spirit. For every child that cries by the roadway there are fifty

who are laughing in the fields: for every bird that is taken by a hawk there are a hundred still singing in the trees. Even in these days when hell bursts upon our world, like boiling lava from a volcano, let us remember that for every insult offered to humanity there are a hundred deeds of heroism.