

Lives of English Animals

The Otter

By HENRY WILLIAMSON

ONE morning a stranger called at my cottage and said that there was a dead otter hung up outside a farmhouse door in his village. The otter had been shot the evening before. A farmer had seen it crossing his pasture, near a stream, while rabbiting just before twilight. 'Why had he shot it?' I cried hotly. 'Well,' replied the stranger, 'when I asked the farmer the same question, he merely replied, "What good be it, anyway?"' He told me that the otter had been an object of much interest in the Ebrington Arms the previous night, and also of considerable argument about its being able, or unable, to breathe under water. It was, of course, added my visitor, a land beast that got its living in the water, chiefly at night.

'But here's the point', he said. 'The otter was a bitch otter, and there's a litter of cubs somewhere by the riverside'. He believed he knew where they were: in a drain running down from a marsh. He himself was a croke, he said, having been badly hit in the War, and couldn't dig; but would I care to lend a hand, in the hope of saving the cubs? Rather, I left my writing-table gleefully, and with my spaniel pup leaping and frisking around me, went outside to where a pony and jingle were waiting. There weren't many motor-cars in Devon in those days, and our journey along the sunken lanes to the valley where my new friend lived took the best part of an hour. It was early spring, and the stony surface of the lane was running everywhere with water. The shaggy little moor pony went down the last steep descent very slowly, leaning back against the shafts, while the spaniel, forbidden to go into the fields because of rabbit traps, ran backwards and forwards, lifting his nose and then stopping to stare reproachfully at me. I was as eager for quicker progress as he was, although neither of us knew what a difference that journey beside the jingle was going to make to our household. Our household, I must tell you, at this period consisted of the dog and myself, a small black-and-white cat with one kitten, and a pair of white owls. Various other birds had lodged with us for short periods—magpies, a carrion crow, and a diving bird called a razorbill, which I found on the shore one day with its feathers clogged by oil-fuel. It was a wild little community, one commonly said in the village to be 'mazed', chiefly because the cottage windows were open night and day; but we went our own way quite happily.

About two hours later, my spaniel was wagging his tail-stump, and whining anxiously, to know what it was I was holding in my hands. The dog had never seen nor smelled such a creature. When it was put on the ground, he didn't know what to do about it. He gurgled, he yowled, he barked with puzzled excitement, he licked it, he pushed it with his nose, he licked it again. It was about the size of a rat, and yet it had not bitten him, as a rat recently had, in his nose. It was like a small rabbit, yet it did not run away. Indeed, it could scarcely crawl. And it made slight, snuffling, mewling noises as it sought around it blindly with its wide, flat head and minute, blunt nose. 'Good boy, Biell!' I said to the spaniel, as I put it in my pocket. We had opened the earthenware drain—which was choked higher up the marshy field—with careful blows of a pick, where we had heard the mewling cries, and found within two cubs, one of them lukewarm, just dead. It had died of starvation.

The immediate thing was how to feed this small, soft animal, pushing so languidly against my hands. We took it to my friend's house, and gave it cow's milk diluted with warm water, in a fountain-pen filler, through a hole nipped in the rubber squeezer. The cub sucked several fills and then fell asleep in some cotton wool. My friend was pleased with his new pet.

I returned home in the evening, to be greeted by the little black-and-white cat mewling as she ran along the wall of the garden, her tail fluffed up. She always waited on the wall for us, and showed her affection for the spaniel by arching herself against him and purring loudly, although always the dog ignored her. I lit a fire and prepared and sat down to supper. I

sat in the tall-backed Windsor chair, cat on one side of me and dog on the other, both looking up and awaiting tit-bits. Afterwards I browsed before the teak-wood fire, while the spaniel slept against my feet and the little cat curled up against the dog. The next morning I was sitting at the table and writing *Dandelion Days*, while the cat nursed her kitten and our tame chaffinch hopped about the floor for crumbs. The chaffinch came every morning, but the cat knew the bird and never tried to catch it. Suddenly as I was writing the dog sprang up and rushed barking into the drang or passage-way outside: the chaffinch flew away: the cat, all fluffed up, fled to the dog's help. 'Biell!' I shouted to him, 'will you shut up!' He slunk back, following my friend of the day before, carrying the otter cub. 'I'm afraid it's going to die', he said. 'The cow's milk is obviously no good. Forgive my butting in like this, but I thought you might know what to do'. We looked at the cub feebly moving on the table. The spaniel stood on his hind legs and whined, glancing at it and then at our faces. Then the cat leapt lightly on the table. She arched her back, and growled. We watched. She swore undecidedly at it. Its mouth opened, but no sound came. She moved slowly towards it, and after much hesitation got near enough to sniff it. She drew back, and made as if to stroke it with her paw. But altered her mind just before touching it, and merely tapped it, and held her head on one side when its mouth opened and uttered an inaudible mew. It was inaudible to me; but the cat must have heard it, for she put her head on one side, and quizzed it with a new interest. I noticed that the pupils of her eyes were round and very black. Then she glanced furtively about her, as though thinking of escape; then she cocked her head sideways again; and suddenly swore at it, and jumped off the table and padded up the wooden stairs to the bedroom above, where her kitten was lying in the dog's basket. I followed her up, and she mewled pathetically at me. Her eyes were still very dark and round. She was less than a year old, little more than a kitten herself. I took the kitten downstairs and put it on the table beside the otter cub. I rubbed their noses together, and then their tummies. I put them on the stone floor, side by side, and immediately the kitten began to cry out, feeling the cold. Chirruping anxiously, the cat came pattering down the stairs, and giving a cry of reassurance, went straight to it. She made several attempts to pick it up by the scruff, but she was too small, and, looking up at my face, asked me, with the faintest mew, to carry it for her. I picked up cub and kitten together and sat on the edge of the table, and she sprang up lightly beside me, rubbed her ear on my hand, and then lay down on my lap and purred happily while both snuggled into her. And thereafter the otter cub was fed and washed and enjoyed equally with her own kitten, until it was strong and well enough to go back to its owner. For there was no question that my friend wanted the cub for himself: and he had made me swear to secrecy while it was in my care.

He brought it up on a bottle, and by midsummer it had grown bigger than the little cat which had undoubtedly saved its life. Let me describe its appearance. It had short, thick fur, brown as a bulrush; a long, low body which seemed to glide over the ground, so short were its legs. It had a long tail, thick and strong, tapering to the end. Its head was wide and flatter than a cat's head, with small ears almost hidden in its fur, and a wide mouth set with whiskers. Its feet were like a dog's feet, but sturdier, more splayed, and there was a web of skin between each of its toes. How it loved a watering-can! Or better, a hose-pipe turned into a zinc washing bath on the lawn under the apple trees! It would roll on its back in the water, and try to clutch and bite the jet. The water smoothed its hair, and gave it resemblance to a small seal. Of myself and its master it knew no fear, indeed it would run to either one of us when it saw us in the garden, but of strangers it was suspicious, gliding away on its almost invisible legs and returning and stopping again, perhaps to open its mouth and utter a sort of growling hiss. It had two call sounds to its master—one like fingers drawn down a wet pane of glass,

and the other a greeting cry of *tuchatuck*. It was fed on milk, on fish, on part-cooked rabbit flesh mixed with dog-biscuit and vegetables. All that summer it ran in the garden or followed its master on his slow hobbling walks by the river and down the sunken lanes. It came to know my spaniel, and the two would play together. And during the following autumn, while its master was away in hospital, it came to live in my cottage, a secret and hidden guest during the day, and a rover with us at night. Usually at twilight we went for a walk down the valley, hunting in the little runner or stream for eels and trout. And one night, when it had gone farther from me than usual, I heard a sudden hissing and chattering coming from a distant dark hedge with the excited and dismayed yelping of the spaniel. I ran over to the noises. The otter was in a rabbit gin. It rolled and twisted as it bit the iron, and then its paw, rolling and blowing in fear, and snapping at the spaniel, whose sudden agonised howling told that the sharp, incurved teeth had met in its body somewhere. I took off my coat and threw it over the otter, whose frenzy of strength was amazing. It was some time before I managed to hold it between my knees and then, with my hands, depress the steel spring of the trap. Feeling the wounded paw, it seemed to me that three of the toes were almost severed. I was bracing myself to hold it firmly in the coat, when suddenly the coat was empty.

For an hour, two hours, three hours, I searched down the valley, calling and listening, while the idiot spaniel thought we were after rabbits. I never saw it again. But wait, did I ever see it again? I can never be certain. Two years later I found the imprint of an otter's feet by the lonely bog of Cranmere, forty miles south of my village, where five rivers have their beginnings; and one seal, or impression, appeared to be marred. Could it be? On that vast silence of peat and water and heather only the startled chirrup of a solitary pipit answered my thought.

The otter is a wanderer, a gypsy of the waters. Sometimes it crosses from one watershed to another in its roving, travelling and feeding by night and usually lying up by day in a holt under the roots of riverside trees, on rocky ledges, in tussocks of rushes, or on the mossy boughs of great old oaks overhanging streams, basking in sunlight or in rainy weather sleeping curled within their hollow trunks. The otter hunters, with their hounds, know these places, which are used again and again, season after season, and maybe century after century, by wandering otters. I saw many otters killed after long hunts during the summer days, when the rivers were low and at last the hunted beasts could swim no more, but in their last desperate fatigue turned to face their enemies, and were crushed and pulled and broken in the deep-growling worry. I saw many killed thus—but never one with a maimed paw.

Once a friend told me of an otter found drowned in a crab-pot on the coast of the Severn Sea, and thither I went, and sought and found the fisherman: but it was not my otter.

And one winter night I heard a cry as of plover whistles, soft and oft repeated, in the darkness outside the cottage, and the cat heard it too, and her fur fluffed out before the fire and her eyes were suddenly large and dark, and the spaniel sprang up and ran whining to the small round cat-hole near the bottom of the door. Outside the churchyard elms were seething, the Atlantic rain lashing down, the streamlet was thick and noisy—and in the feeble rays of the electric torch I saw a twin glint, and then—nothing. Had the otter chanced this way,

following the stream down from the hill, and coming to the waterfall where so often it and its human friend had played in the darkness—remembered—and been anguished with memory? Only the rain from the Atlantic, beating down on tree and thatch and gravestone, knew the answer.

Two days later an otter was caught in a rabbit trap on the high ground overlooking the sandhills and the estuary of the Two Rivers, and when I heard of it I went down to the village near the sea, and spoke to the trapper who had beaten it to death with a stick. But the 'girt-mousey-coloured fitch', he said, had no scar on either of its forepaws: it was a 'girt broad-headed dog-fitch' whose skin was worth ten shillings. A bit of luck, they agreed with him in the inn.

The stationmaster of one of the little West Country stations which still have oil lamps and rambler roses was trouting one evening when he noticed he was being followed by an otter. For more than ten minutes as he

went slowly upstream, casting his line, the otter followed him. It 'snorted at him like a seal' he declared afterwards, saying that it must have been after the fish in his creel. Had the otter cubs 'laid-up' in some drain or holt by the river? Could it have been my otter—once so faithful and affectionate—disturbed again by a feeling within itself which it did not understand?

And the otter I saw once near the cave of seals below the headland—where the peregrine falcons have had their eyrie for perhaps a thousand centuries, perhaps even before the large weasels took to hunting fish in the rivers, and thus became webbed and streamlined and deep-chested for underwater hunting—the otter which ran towards me over the big grey boulders at the edge of the sea, and hesitated, and stared, and was so perturbed by apparent curiosity, even as I was?

And I recall suddenly coming upon a happy family playing under the waterfall of the stream near my cottage by the tall beech trees—the white surge of water and the dark heads moving there—was my otter among them, sliding over the falls again and again, a merry party of water-weasels whistling



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and fluting and clutching one another in play, while the trout in the pool below were hidden in terror in their holes and hovers of the rock?

And was it, perhaps, the otter which came upon a thousand yearling trout, so carefully reared and tended in the little hatchery at the bottom of the garden, and finding this sudden wealth, spent it royally, according to its nature, so that only seven were left uncaten the next day?

And another morning, just before sunrise, as I was walking by the dawn-silvery stream, I heard a great splashing and furrowing in the gravel shallows above the Viaduct Pool, accompanied by growling and 'hurring' noises—and there was an otter dragging a salmon by one of the fish's pectoral fins. It had hunted the fish about the pool, and driven it upstream to the shallows where in its terror it had beached itself. I

watched the otter tearing at the flesh of the shoulder—and then the otter saw me. It seemed to flatten and spread itself into the water, like brown oil, and went down with the current. I waded across to the twitching fish, and was about to bang it on the head with a stone when the otter returned, pattering up the shallow. I also stood still, staring. Wasn't that brown, flat head, back-sloping, familiar . . . surely the off front paw was maimed . . . and those small eyes staring at me . . . 'Tuckatuck—tuckatuck' I called, 'tuckatuck—tuckatuck'. Was there an answering cry or was it the cry of the river, the eternal cry of water striking rock and stone and gravel-bed, all the way down from the moor to the sea, wherein its wandering life is forgotten? I can never know. And that lower half of a skull found on the sandy shore by the estuary—with most of the teeth fallen out . . . an otter's jaw. I wonder . . . I wonder.

THE GENTLEMAN'S RIVER

By HENRY WILLIAMSON

THE name given to the longest river in Devon, the Taw, by the otter-hunters who walked along its banks when I was a young man was the Gentleman's River. During the pleasant days of spring and summer I used to follow the hounds to see what I could see, for the purpose of writing a book on the otter. Why the Gentleman's River, I wondered. Was it because many of the followers were landed proprietors, each owning a few miles of river adjoining their properties? There were salmon and peal in the pools, and the shadowy brown trout. Pheasants crowded in the woods rising on the hillsides above the valley. The railway from Waterloo crossed the river, thundering over the iron bridges against whose stone cutwaters, or tarred round iron pillars,

trees uprooted in floods were lodged with big rafts of sticks—the hiding-places of otters.

There were other bridges, too, old pack-horse bridges; and at one or another of them we met in the morning, and hunted upstream, or rather cast upstream, until the scent of an otter was marked by excited tongueing and the massed waving of feathered sterns.

Usually by each bridge, or near it, was an inn. And the inns appeared to have been built for the convenience of the otter-hunters, for we arrived before them always about one o'clock. In my ignorance, one day I asked the Master, dressed in white breeches, blue coat, yellow waistcoat, blue woollen stockings and white (called by the unknowing "grey") top-hat, why the Taw was called the Gentleman's River.

Leaning on his ash-pole, with its many silver rings engraved with places and dates of otters killed, together with zodiacal sign denoting male or female, he stroked his long yellow moustache and smiled. "Well, the inns are so placed that we can refresh ourselves at luncheon." Just as a fox who showed good sport by running well and not going to earth was considered to be a gentleman, so the Taw, for the hospitality it offered along its banks, was the Gentleman's River.

That perhaps dates the time of which I am writing, nearly thirty years ago. Personally I did not care for otter-hunting; but as a writer I did want to get the facts, and without the distortion of personal feelings. I was distressed when I saw the otter swimming slower and slower, his way barred up or down river by the stickles of men and women standing leg to leg across the shallows, stirring their iron-shod poles against the shallets, the flat stones piled by spates below the pools. These stickles were to prevent the water-beast from going down or up the river.

The detached beholder of any sport or game cannot really enjoy it, unless he understands it, whether it be otter-hunting or football. Now my sympathies were always with the otter; and at times I had to restrain myself from mere bias against the hunters. To describe them as sadists would be as silly as to consider that cricketers were merely flannelled fools or footballers muddled oafs. I had learnt by 1923 that it was fatal to write with satire out of dislike.

Let us examine the facts, or some of them, about otter-hunting. The otter is a ferocious water-weasel, lithe and swift, very strong, to me exceedingly beautiful and graceful (perhaps the same things in nature) and with a dominant sense of fun. Otters, warm-blooded mammals who cannot breathe under water, will play for hours at a waterfall, tumbling, wrestling, hurtling over as though fighting one another, then climb out at the tail of the pool, and run to the river above the fall to plunge over again for more fun. They whistle with joy. When they are hunting salmon they are merciless: the terrified big fish will beach itself on a shallet bank to avoid them, if driven into shallow water. Then my sympathies are with the hunted. Otters hunt for food, as well as for sport. Once I had five hundred fingerling trout in a pond fed by a runner in my garden, and I knew I should fence it in with wire-netting and



BONDLEIGH BRIDGE, ON THE UPPER REACHES OF THE RIVER TAW. Otter-hunters call this North Devon river the Gentleman's River because of the number of inns offering hospitality on its banks