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 uneaten 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 crowed 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") pot-hat, why the Taw was called the Gentleman's River.

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

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 shillets, 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 muddied 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 shillet 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

THE RIVER TAW AT UMBERLEIGH, WITH UMBERLEIGH BRIDGE IN THE BACKGROUND

put a grill over both inlet and outfall. I delayed too long. There was a night when I heard a flute-like whistling as I lay in bed fifty yards away, a soft curlew-like piping; through the warm darkness I smelt a violet-scent. The otters had come up the runner from the main river, hunting eels, and so had found my little nursery.

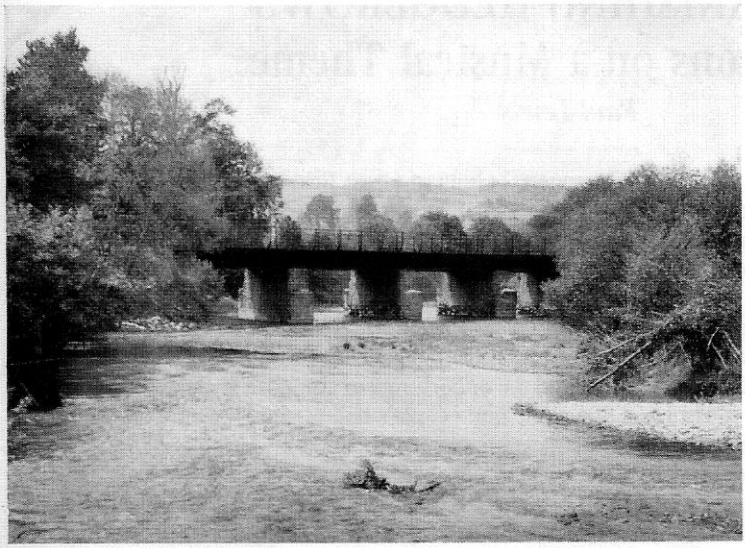
In the morning a dozen fish, the size of sardines, remained in the clouded water. Five-toed spoors were everywhere on the wet yellow-clay bank. I had put the fish into the pit and fed them to protect them from enemies in the river: for they had come from a hatchery, and my idea was to turn them into the Bray (which by way of the Mole eventually joined the Gentleman's River) when they were bigger. As my son remarked, "Your Tarka has scoffed the lot."

Only the ignorant and sedentary townsman could believe that those who hunt beasts do so from a sadistic strain. A sadist is a repressed man, one usually inhibited from childhood by some deep psychical wound; and a man using his body naturally in arduous exercise, whether on horseback or his own "flat feet," tends to become easy and amiable, anything but repressed. Again I speak as an observer, also as one who in my younger days often rode to hounds and enjoyed the excitement and the danger of crashing through tall thorn hedges and over stone and earth banks, with little or no thought of peril for the fox. To say that the fox or the otter enjoys being hunted is likewise nonsense; but I doubt if a hunted predatory animal feels fear after the first great shock of being roused and knowing that its enemies are upon it. During dangerous action one does not feel fear; the bad moments are before action, and sometimes afterwards, upon reflection. Animals may not be able to reflect (scientists say they cannot, yet I am not so sure), but they do dream.

It is a paradox that many beasts of venery owe their existence to those who hunt them in an organised manner. Certainly the otters in the salmon rivers of the West Country owed their immunity from being trapped and shot to the fact that riparian owners relied on otter-hunters to keep their numbers down. It is easy to trap an otter. A stake is driven into the river bed, its top several inches underwater; a touching place for a swimming otter. A trap placed on the stake is scentless under water; the trapped beast is held by the steel gin and chain, until, tired of swimming, it drowns.

The otter, like its cousin the seal, was once a land animal. Its young are afraid of water until they have been pushed in by their mothers. Then they love it. I used to see a tame female cub in a garden at Knowle, in North Devon, whose joy in living was intense; and she loved nothing more than having a garden hose turned on her. She lay on her back, trying to clutch and bite the jet of water, while mewing with happiness. Then she would spring out of the tub and race around the orchard. Her mother had been shot by a farmer; and a friend of mine had dug out the litter of cubs in a drain leading into the river. All but one were dead; and the survivor was nursed by a cat, whose kittens had

AN INCIDENT DURING A MEET OF THE CHERITON, NOW DISBANDED, AND THE WYE VALLEY PACKS OF OTTERHOUNDS NEAR BARNSTAPLE



"THE RAILWAY FROM WATERLOO CROSSED THE RIVER": THE RAILWAY BRIDGE OVER THE TAW NORTH OF CHAPELTON

been drowned, in the Foxhunter Inn, which stands on the main road between Barnstaple and Ilfracombe. Later, my friend reared the cub with milk in a fountain-pen filler: that little detail tells the date.

In the decade following the first World War there was a Joint Week every August, when other packs came down to Devon and hunted the Gentleman's River, and its sister the Torridge. The two rivers find the Atlantic together in the estuary by Appledore. Many uniforms added colour to the field of the Joint Week. One saw the red jackets and grey breeches of the Culmstock from Somerset; the navy blue, cloth caps and all, of the Dartmoor; the blue and red of the Eastern Counties; the cream and blue of the Crowhurst, from Sussex. The various masters took the combined packs, or hounds selected from them, in turn. It was a grand gathering of old friends. There were jolly cream teas in the inns after the days' sport. Motor-cars with acetylene brass lamps raised clouds of dust afterwards in the narrow lanes. There was a dance in the Assembly Rooms at Barnstaple, or in one or another of the local country houses famous for centuries. It was the end of an age; the observer could see the signs all about him, and must hide his thoughts under an amiable exterior. One should not talk of death. Is not this life most jolly?

So the otters found life, I am sure. Not all the brown water-weasels found and hunted were killed. The Master of our home pack, the Cheriton, told me that on an average two out of every three hunted otters got away. He never hunted a gravid bitch, but whipped off hounds (that is, called them off by horn and whip-cracks in the air) when a bitch was seen to be in whelp; or when she returned again and again to the holt out of which she had been bolted, thus telling plainly to watching human eyes that cubs were laid up within. After one long and pleasantly tiring walk up a valley near Dartmoor, I returned home on my motor-cycle and in moonlight stood awhile by a bridge built by the Romans over the Torridge at Taddiport, and watched several otters hunting salmon in the pool below. Was one of them the beast who had escaped downstream that day in a sudden spate? I liked to think so. The Torridge spates rise and run away very quickly. The otters at Taddiport were having terrific fun, whistling and jumping about in the water.

The otters of the West Country are not often hunted nowadays. There are traps in the rivers; a pelt is worth five pounds. Many of the small boys I used to watch eating plum cake and drinking lemonade, while their parents munched sandwiches and drank good English ale among farm labourers on the benches outside the inns, have grown up and fallen in another war. Perhaps their spirits return sometimes to the banks of the Gentleman's River, where ghostly otters hunt salmon, invisible to mortal eyes, returning with their living brethren from the deep Atlantic main.

THE ESTUARY OF THE RIVER TAW AT BARNSTAPLE