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ANGLING
SKETCHES

Andrew Lang
Angling Sketches

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Angling Sketches:

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Andrew Lang Angling Sketches

DEDICATION

TO MRS HERBERT HILLS

'NO FISHER

BUT A WELL-WISHER

TO THE GAME.'

IN MEMORY OF PLEASANT DAYS AT CORBY

PREFACE

Several of the sketches in this volume have appeared in periodicals. "The Bloody Doctor" was in *Macmillan's Magazine*, "The Confessions of a Duffer," "Loch Awe," and "The Lady or the Salmon?" were in the *Fishing Gazette*, but have been to some extent re-written. "The Double Alibi" was in *Longman's Magazine*. The author has to thank the Editors and Publishers for permission to reprint these papers.

The gem engraved on the cover is enlarged from a small intaglio in the collection of Mr. M. H. N. STORY-MASKELYNE, M.P. Such gems were recommended by Clemens of Alexandria to the early Christians. "The figure of a man fishing will put them in mind of the Apostle." Perhaps the Greek is using the red hackle described by Ælian in the only known Greek reference to fly-fishing.

NOTE TO NEW EDITION

The historical version of the Black Officer's career, very unlike the legend in "Loch Awe," may be read in Mr. Macpherson's *Social Life in the Highlands*.

THE CONFESSIONS OF A DUFFER

These papers do not boast of great sport. They are truthful, not like the tales some fishers tell. They should appeal to many sympathies. There is no false modesty in the confidence with which I esteem myself a duffer, at fishing. Some men are born duffers; others, unlike persons of genius, become so by an infinite capacity for not taking pains. Others, again, among whom I would rank myself, combine both these elements of incompetence. Nature, that made me enthusiastically fond of fishing, gave me thumbs for fingers, short-sighted eyes, indolence, carelessness, and a temper which (usually sweet and angelic) is goaded to madness by the laws of matter and of gravitation. For example: when another man is caught up in a branch he disengages his fly; I jerk at it till something breaks. As for carelessness, in boyhood I fished, by preference, with doubtful gut and knots ill-tied; it made the risk greater, and increased the excitement if one did hook a trout. I can't keep a fly-book. I stuff the flies into my pockets at random, or stick them into the leaves of a novel, or bestow them in the lining of my hat or the case of my rods. Never, till 1890, in all my days did I possess a landing-net. If I can drag a fish up a bank, or over the gravel, well; if not, he goes on his way rejoicing. On the Test I thought it seemly to carry a landing-net. It had a hinge, and doubled up. I put the handle through a button-hole of my

coat: I saw a big fish rising, I put a dry fly over him; the idiot took it. Up stream he ran, then down stream, then he yielded to the rod and came near me. I tried to unship my landing-net from my button-hole. Vain labour! I twisted and turned the handle, it would not budge. Finally, I stooped, and attempted to ladle the trout out with the short net; but he broke the gut, and went off. A landing-net is a tedious thing to carry, so is a creel, and a creel is, to me, a superfluity. There is never anything to put in it. If I do catch a trout, I lay him under a big stone, cover him with leaves, and never find him again. I often break my top joint; so, as I never carry string, I splice it with a bit of the line, which I bite off, for I really cannot be troubled with scissors and I always lose my knife. When a phantom minnow sticks in my clothes, I snap the gut off, and put on another, so that when I reach home I look as if a shoal of fierce minnows had attacked me and hung on like leeches. When a boy, I was – once or twice – a bait-fisher, but I never carried worms in box or bag. I found them under big stones, or in the fields, wherever I had the luck. I never tie nor otherwise fasten the joints of my rod; they often slip out of the sockets and splash into the water. Mr. Hardy, however, has invented a joint-fastening which never slips. On the other hand, by letting the joint rust, you may find it difficult to take down your rod. When I see a trout rising, I always cast so as to get hung up, and I frighten him as I disengage my hook. I invariably fall in and get half-drowned when I wade, there being an insufficiency of nails in the soles of my brogues. My waders let in water, too,

and when I go out to fish I usually leave either my reel, or my flies, or my rod, at home. Perhaps no other man's average of lost flies in proportion to taken trout was ever so great as mine. I lose plenty, by striking furiously, after a series of short rises, and breaking the gut, with which the fish swims away. As to dressing a fly, one would sooner think of dressing a dinner. The result of the fly-dressing would resemble a small blacking-brush, perhaps, but nothing entomological.

Then why, a persevering reader may ask, do I fish? Well, it is stronger than myself, the love of fishing; perhaps it is an inherited instinct, without the inherited power. I may have had a fishing ancestor who bequeathed to me the passion without the art. My vocation is fixed, and I have fished to little purpose all my days. Not for salmon, an almost fabulous and yet a stupid fish, which must be moved with a rod like a weaver's beam. The trout is more delicate and dainty – not the sea-trout, which any man, woman, or child can capture, but the yellow trout in clear water.

A few rises are almost all I ask for: to catch more than half a dozen fish does not fall to my lot twice a year. Of course, in a Sutherland loch one man is as good as another, the expert no better than the duffer. The fish will take, or they won't. If they won't, nobody can catch them; if they will, nobody can miss them. It is as simple as trolling a minnow from a boat in Loch Leven, probably the lowest possible form of angling. My ambition is as great as my skill is feeble; to capture big trout with the dry fly in the Test, that would content me, and nothing under

that. But I can't see the natural fly on the water; I cannot see my own fly,

Let it sink or let it swim.

I often don't see the trout rise to me, if he is such a fool as to rise; and I can't strike in time when I do see him. Besides, I am unteachable to tie any of the orthodox knots in the gut; it takes me half an hour to get the gut through one of these newfangled iron eyes, and, when it is through, I knot it any way. The "jam" knot is a name to me, and no more. That, perhaps, is why the hooks crack off so merrily. Then, if I do spot a rising trout, and if he does not spot me as I crawl like the serpent towards him, my fly always fixes in a nettle, a haycock, a rose-bush, or whatnot, behind me. I undo it, or break it, and put up another, make a cast, and, "plop," all the line falls in with a splash that would frighten a crocodile. The fish's big black fin goes cutting the stream above, and there is a *sauve qui peut* of trout in all directions.

I once did manage to make a cast correctly: the fly went over the fish's nose; he rose; I hooked him, and he was a great silly brute of a grayling. The grayling is the deadest-hearted and the foolish-headed fish that swims. I would as lief catch a perch or an eel as a grayling. This is the worst of it – this ambition of the duffer's, this desire for perfection, as if the golfing imbecile should match himself against Mr. Horace Hutchinson, or as the sow of the Greek proverb challenged Athene to sing. I know it all, I deplore it, I regret the evils of ambition; but *c'est plus fort que moi*. If there is a trout rising well under the pendant boughs

that trail in the water, if there is a brake of briars behind me, a strong wind down stream, for that trout, in that impregnable situation, I am impelled to fish. If I raise him I strike, miss him, catch up in his tree, swish the cast off into the briars, break my top, break my heart, but – that is the humour of it. The passion, or instinct, being in all senses blind, must no doubt be hereditary. It is full of sorrow and bitterness and hope deferred, and entails the mockery of friends, especially of the fair. But I would as soon lay down a love of books as a love of fishing.

Success with pen or rod may be beyond one, but there is the pleasure of the pursuit, the rapture of endeavour, the delight of an impossible chase, the joys of nature – sky, trees, brooks, and birds. Happiness in these things is the legacy to us of the barbarian. Man in the future will enjoy bricks, asphalt, fog, machinery, “society,” even picture galleries, as many men and most women do already. We are fortunate who inherit the older, not “the new spirit” – we who, skilled or unskilled, follow in the steps of our father, Izaak, by streams less clear, indeed, and in meadows less fragrant, than his. Still, they are meadows and streams, not wholly dispeopled yet of birds and trout; nor can any defect of art, nor certainty of laborious disappointment, keep us from the waterside when April comes.

Next to being an expert, it is well to be a contented duffer: a man who would fish if he could, and who will pleasure himself by flicking off his flies, and dreaming of impossible trout, and smoking among the sedges Hope’s enchanted cigarettes. Next

time we shall be more skilled, more fortunate. Next time! “To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow.” Grey hairs come, and stiff limbs, and shortened sight; but the spring is green and hope is fresh for all the changes in the world and in ourselves. We can tell a hawk from a hand-saw, a March Brown from a Blue Dun; and if our success be as poor as ever, our fancy can dream as well as ever of better things and more fortunate chances. For fishing is like life; and in the art of living, too, there are duffers, though they seldom give us their confessions. Yet even they are kept alive, like the incompetent angler, by this undying hope: they will be more careful, more skilful, more lucky next time. The gleaming untravelled future, the bright untried waters, allure us from day to day, from pool to pool, till, like the veteran on Coquet side, we “try a farewell throw,” or, like Stoddart, look our last on Tweed.

A BORDER BOYHOOD

A fisher, says our father Izaak, is like a poet: he “must be born so.” The majority of dwellers on the Border are born to be fishers, thanks to the endless number of rivers and burns in the region between the Tweed and the Coquet – a realm where almost all trout-fishing is open, and where, since population and love of the sport have increased, there is now but little water that merits the trouble of putting up a rod.

Like the rest of us in that country, I was born an angler, though under an evil star, for, indeed, my labours have not been blessed, and are devoted to fishing rather than to the catching of fish. Remembrance can scarcely recover, “nor time bring back to time,” the days when I was not busy at the waterside; yet the feat is not quite beyond the power of Mnemosyne. My first recollection of the sport must date from about the age of four. I recall, in a dim brightness, driving along a road that ran between banks of bracken and mica-veined rocks, and the sunlight on a shining bend of a highland stream, and my father, standing in the shallow water, showing me a huge yellow fish, that gave its last fling or two on the grassy bank. The fish seemed as terrible and dangerous to me as to Tobit, in the Apocrypha, did that ferocious half-pounder which he carries on a string in the early Italian pictures. How oddly Botticelli and his brethren misconceived the man-devouring fish, which must have been a crocodile strayed

from the Nile into the waters of the Euphrates! A half-pounder! To have been terrified by a trout seems a bad beginning; and, thereafter, the mist gather's over the past, only to lift again when I see myself, with a crowd of other little children, sent to fish, with crooked pins, for minnows, or "baggies" as we called them, in the Etrick. If our parents hoped that we would bring home minnows for bait, they were disappointed. The party was under the command of a nursery governess, and probably she was no descendant of the mother of us all, Dame Juliana Berners. We did not catch any minnows, and I remember sitting to watch a bigger boy, who was angling in a shoal of them when a parr came into the shoal, and we had bright visions of alluring that monarch of the deep. But the parr disdained our baits, and for months I dreamed of what it would have been to capture him, and often thought of him in church. In a moment of profane confidence my younger brother once asked me: "What do *you* do in sermon time? I," said he in a whisper – "mind you don't tell —*I* tell stories to myself about catching trout." To which I added similar confession, for even so I drove the sermon by, and I have not "told" – till now.

By this time we must have been introduced to trout. Who forgets his first trout? Mine, thanks to that unlucky star, was a double deception, or rather there were two kinds of deception. A village carpenter very kindly made rods for us. They were of unpainted wood, these first rods; they were in two pieces, with a real brass joint, and there was a ring at the end of the top

joint, to which the line was knotted. We were still in the age of Walton, who clearly knew nothing, except by hearsay, of a reel; he abandons the attempt to describe that machine as used by the salmon-fishers. He thinks it must be seen to be understood. With these innocent weapons, and with the gardener to bait our hooks, we were taken to the Yarrow, far up the stream, near Ladhope. How well one remembers deserting the gardener, and already appreciating the joys of having no gillie nor attendant, of being “alone with ourselves and the goddess of fishing”! I cast away as well as I could, and presently jerked a trout, a tiny one, high up in the air out of the water. But he fell off the hook again, he dropped in with a little splash, and I rushed up to consult my tutor on his unsportsmanlike behaviour, and the disappointing, nay, heart-breaking, occurrence. Was the trout not morally caught, was there no way of getting him to see this and behave accordingly? The gardener feared there was none. Meanwhile he sat on the bank and angled in a pool. “Try my rod,” he said, and, as soon as I had taken hold of it, “pull up,” he cried, “pull up.” I did “pull up,” and hauled my first troutling on shore. But in my inmost heart I feared that he was not my trout at all, that the gardener had hooked him before he handed the rod to me. Then we met my younger brother coming to us with quite a great fish, half a pound perhaps, which he had caught in a burn. Then, for the first time, my soul knew the fierce passion of jealousy, the envy of the angler. Almost for the last time, too; for, I know not why it is, and it proves me no true fisherman, I am not discontented by

the successes of others. If one cannot catch fish oneself, surely the next best thing is to see other people catch them.

My own progress was now checked for long by a constitutional and insuperable aversion to angling with worm. If the gardener, or a pretty girl-cousin of the mature age of fourteen, would put the worm on, I did not “much mind” fishing with it. Dost thou remember, fair lady of the ringlets? Still, I never liked bait-fishing, and these mine allies were not always at hand. We used, indeed, to have great days with perch at Faldonside, on the land which Sir Walter Scott was always so anxious to buy from Mr. Nichol Milne. Almost the last entry in his diary, at Naples, breathes this unutterable hope. He had deluded himself into believing that his debts were paid, and that he could soon “speak a word to young Nichol Milne.” The word, of course, was never spoken, and the un-supplanted laird used to let us fish for his perch to our hearts’ desire. Never was there such slaughter. The corks which we used as floats were perpetually tipping, bobbing, and disappearing, and then the red-finned perch would fly out on to dry land. Here I once saw two corks go down, two anglers haul up, and one perch, attached to both hooks, descend on the grassy bank. My brother and I filled two baskets once, and strung dozens of other perch on a stick.

But this was not legitimate business. Not till we came to fly-fishing were we really entered at the sport, and this initiation took place, as it chanced, beside the very stream where I was first shown a trout. It is a charming piece of water, amber-coloured

and clear, flowing from the Morvern hills under the limes of an ancient avenue – trees that have long survived the house to which, of old, the road must have led. Our gillie put on for us big bright sea-trout flies – nobody fishes there for yellow trout; but, in our inexperience, small “brownies” were all we caught. Probably we were only taken to streams and shallows where we could not interfere with mature sportsmen. At all events, it was demonstrated to us that we could actually catch fish with fly, and since then I have scarcely touched a worm, except as a boy, in burns. In these early days we had no notion of playing a trout. If there was a bite, we put our strength into an answering tug, and, if nothing gave way, the trout flew over our heads, perhaps up into a tree, perhaps over into a branch of the stream behind us. Quite a large trout will yield to this artless method, if the rod be sturdy – none of your glued-up cane-affairs. I remember hooking a trout which, not answering to the first haul, ran right across the stream and made for a hole in the opposite bank. But the second lift proved successful and he landed on my side of the water. He had a great minnow in his throat, and must have been a particularly greedy animal. Of course, on this system there were many breakages, and the method was abandoned as we lived into our teens, and began to wade and to understand something about fly-fishing.

It was worth while to be a boy then in the south of Scotland, and to fish the waters haunted by old legends, musical with old songs, and renowned in the sporting essays of Christopher North

and Stoddart. Even then, thirty long years ago, the old stagers used to tell us that “the waiter was owr sair fished,” and they grumbled about the system of draining the land, which makes a river a roaring torrent in floods, and a bed of grey stones with a few clear pools and shallows, during the rest of the year. In times before the hills were drained, before the manufacturing towns were so populous, before pollution, netting, dynamiting, poisoning, sniggling, and the enormous increase of fair and unfair fishing, the border must have been the angler’s paradise. Still, it was not bad when we were boys. We had Ettrick within a mile of us, and a finer natural trout-stream there is not in Scotland, though now the water only holds a sadly persecuted remnant. There was one long pool behind Lindean, flowing beneath a high wooded bank, where the trout literally seemed never to cease rising at the flies that dropped from the pendant boughs. Unluckily the water flowed out of the pool in a thin broad stream, directly it right angles to the pool itself. Thus the angler had, so to speak, the whole of lower Ettrick at his back when he waded: it was a long way up stream to the bank, and, as we never used landing-nets then, we naturally lost a great many trout in trying to unhook them in mid water. They only averaged as a rule from three to two to the pound, but they were strong and lively. In this pool there was a large tawny, table-shaped stone, over which the current broke. Out of the eddy behind this stone, one of my brothers one day caught three trout weighing over seven pounds, a feat which nowadays sounds quite incredible. As soon as the

desirable eddy was empty, another trout, a trifle smaller than the former, seems to have occupied it. The next mile and a half, from Lindean to the junction with Tweed, was remarkable for excellent sport. In the last pool of Etrick, the water flowed by a steep bank, and, if you cast almost on to the further side, you were perfectly safe to get fish, even when the river was very low. The flies used, three on a cast, were small and dusky, hare's ear and woodcock wing, black palmers, or, as Stoddart sings,

Wee dour looking huiks are the thing,
Mouse body and laverock wing.

Next to Etrick came Tweed: the former river joins the latter at the bend of a long stretch of water, half stream, half pool, in which angling was always good. In late September there were sea-trout, which, for some reason, rose to the fly much more freely than sea-trout do now in the upper Tweed. I particularly remember hooking one just under the railway bridge. He was a two-pounder, and practised the usual sea-trout tactics of springing into the air like a rocket. There was a knot on my line, of course, and I was obliged to hold him hard. When he had been dragged up on the shingle, the line parted, broken in twain at the knot; but it had lasted just long enough, during three exciting minutes. This accident of a knot on the line has only once befallen me since, with the strongest loch-trout I ever encountered. It was on Branxholme Loch, where the trout run to a great size, but

usually refuse the fly. I was alone in a boat on a windy day; the trout soon ran out the line to the knot, and then there was nothing for it but to lower the top almost to the water's edge, and hold on in hope. Presently the boat drifted ashore, and I landed him – better luck than I deserved. People who only know the trout of the Test and other chalk streams, cannot imagine how much stronger are the fish of the swift Scottish streams and dark Scottish lochs. They're worse fed, but they are infinitely more powerful and active; it is all the difference between an alderman and a clansman.

Tweed, at this time, was full of trout, but even then they were not easy to catch. One difficulty lay in the nature of the wading. There is a pool near Ashiesteil and Gleddis Weil which illustrated this. Here Scott and Hogg were once upset from a boat while “burning the water” – spearing salmon by torchlight. Herein, too, as Scott mentions in his Diary, he once caught two trout at one cast. The pool is long, is paved with small gravel, and allures you to wade on and on. But the water gradually deepens as you go forward, and the pool ends in a deep pot under each bank. Then to recover your ground becomes by no means easy, especially if the water is heavy. You get half-drowned, or drowned altogether, before you discover your danger. Many of the pools have this peculiarity, and in many, one step made rashly lets you into a very uncomfortable and perilous place. Therefore expeditions to Tweedside were apt to end in a ducking. It was often hard to reach the water where trout were rising, and the rise was always

capricious. There might not be a stir on the water for hours, and suddenly it would be all boiling with heads and tails for twenty minutes, after which nothing was to be done. To miss “the take” was to waste the day, at least in fly-fishing. From a high wooded bank I have seen the trout feeding, and they have almost ceased to feed before I reached the waterside. Still worse was it to be allured into water over the tops of your waders, early in the day, and then to find that the rise was over, and there was nothing for it but a weary walk home, the basket laden only with damp boots. Still, the trout were undeniably *there*, and that was a great encouragement. They are there still, but infinitely more cunning than of old. Then, if they were feeding, they took the artificial fly freely; now it must be exactly of the right size and shade or they will have none of it. They come provokingly short, too; just plucking at the hook, and running out a foot of line or so, then taking their departure. For some reason the Tweed is more difficult to fish with the dry fly than – the Test, for example. The water is swifter and very dark, it drowns the fly soon, and on the surface the fly is less easily distinguished than at Whitchurch, in the pellucid streams. The Leader a tributary, may be fished with dry fly; on the Tweed one can hardly manage it. There is a plan by which rising trout may be taken – namely, by baiting with a small red worm and casting as in fly-fishing. But that is so hard on the worm! Probably he who can catch trout with fly on the Tweed between Melrose and Holy Lee can catch them anywhere. On a good day in April great baskets are still made in preserved

parts of the Tweed, but, if they are made in open water, it must be, I fancy, with worm, or with the “screw,” the lava of the May-fly. The screw is a hideous and venomous-looking animal, which is fixed on a particular kind of tackle, and cast up stream with a short line. The heaviest trout are fond of it, but it can only be used at a season when either school or Oxford keeps one far from what old Franck, Walton’s contemporary, a Cromwellian trooper, calls “the glittering and resolute streams of Tweed.”

Difficult as it is, that river is so beautiful and alluring that it scarcely needs the attractions of sport. The step banks, beautifully wooded, and in spring one mass of primroses, are crowned here and there with ruined Border towers – like Elibank, the houses of Muckle Mou’ed Meg; or with fair baronial houses like Fernilea. Meg made a bad exchange when she left Elibank with the salmon pool at its foot for bleak Harden, frowning over the narrow “den” where Harden kept the plundered cattle. There is no fishing in the tiny Harden burn, that joins the brawling Borthwick Water.

The burns of the Lowlands are now almost barren of trout. The spawning fish, flabby and useless, are killed in winter. All through the rest of the year, in the remotest places, tourists are hard at them with worm. In a small burn a skilled wormer may almost depopulate the pools, and, on the Border, all is fish that comes to the hook; men keep the very fingerlings, on the pretext that they are “so sweet” in the frying-pan. The crowd of anglers in glens which seem not easily accessible is provoking enough.

Into the Meggat, a stream which feeds St. Mary's Loch, there flows the Glengaber, or Glencaber burn: the burn of the pine-tree stump. The water runs in deep pools and streams over a blue slaty rock, which contains gold under the sand, in the worn holes and crevices. My friend, Mr. McAllister, the schoolmaster at St. Mary's, tells me that one day, when fish were not rising, he scooped out the gravel of one of these holes with his knife, and found a tiny nugget, after which the gold-hunting fever came on him for a while. But little is got nowadays, though in some earlier period the burn has been diverted from its bed, and the people used solemnly to wash the sand, as in California or Australia. Well, whether in consequence of the gold, as the alchemical philosophers would have held, or not, the trout of the Glengaber burn were good. They were far shorter, thicker and stronger than those of the many neighbouring brooks. I have fished up the burn with fly, when it was very low, hiding carefully behind the boulders, and have been surprised at the size and gameness of the fish. As soon as the fly had touched the brown water, it was sucked down, and there was quite a fierce little fight before the fish came to hand.

“This, all this, was in the olden time, long ago.”

The Glengaber burn is about twenty miles from any railway station, but, on the last occasion when I visited it, three louts were worming their way up it, within twenty yards of each other, each lout, with his huge rod, showing himself wholly to any trout that might be left in the water. Thirty years ago the burns that feed

St. Mary's Loch were almost unfished, and rare sport we had in them, as boys, staying at Tibbie Sheil's famous cottage, and sleeping in her box-beds, where so often the Ettrick Shepherd and Christopher North have lain, after copious toddy. "'Tis gone, 'tis gone:" not in our time will any man, like the Ettrick Shepherd, need a cart to carry the trout he has slain in Meggat Water. That stream, flowing through a valley furnished with a grass-grown track for a road, flows, as I said, into St. Mary's Loch. There are two or three large pools at the foot of the loch, in which, as a small boy hardly promoted to fly, I have seen many monsters rising greedily. Men got into the way of fishing these pools after a flood with minnow, and thereby made huge baskets, the big fish running up to feed, out of the loch. But, when last I rowed past Meggat foot, the delta of that historic stream was simply crowded with anglers, stepping in in front of each other. I asked if this mob was a political "demonstration," but they stuck to business, as if they had been on the Regent's Canal. And this, remember, was twenty miles from any town! Yet there is a burn on the Border still undiscovered, still full of greedy trout. I shall give the angler such a hint of its whereabouts as Tiresias, in Hades, gave to Odysseus concerning the end of his second wanderings.

When, O stranger, thou hast reached a burn where the shepherd asks thee for the newspaper wrapped round thy sandwiches, that he may read the news, then erect an altar to Priapus, god of fishermen, and begin to angle boldly.

Probably the troops who fish our Border-burns still manage

to toss out some dozens of tiny fishes, some six or eight to the pound. Are not these triumphs chronicled in the "Scotsman?" But they cannot imagine what angling was in the dead years, nor what great trout dwelt below the linns of the Crosscleugh burn, beneath the red clusters of the rowan trees, or in the waters of the "Little Yarrow" above the Loch of the Lowes. As to the lochs themselves, now that anyone may put a boat on them, now that there is perpetual trolling, as well as fly-fishing, so that every fish knows the lures, the fun is mainly over. In April, no doubt, something may still be done, and in the silver twilights of June, when as you drift on the still surface you hear the constant sweet splash of the rising trout, a few, and these good, may be taken. But the water wants re-stocking, and the burns in winter need watching, in the interests of spawning fish. It is nobody's interest, that I know of, to take trouble and incur expense; and free fishing, by the constitution of the universe, must end in bad fishing or in none at all. The best we can say for it is that vast numbers of persons may, by the still waters of these meres, enjoy the pleasures of hope. Even solitude is no longer to be found in the scene which Scott, in "Marmion," chooses as of all places the most solitary.

Here, have I thought, 'twere sweet to dwell,
And rear again the chaplain's cell.

But no longer does

“Your horse’s hoof tread sound too rude,
So stilly is the solitude.”

Stilly! with the horns and songs from omnibusses that carry tourists, and with yells from nymphs and swains disporting themselves in the boats. Yarrow is only the old Yarrow in winter. Ages and revolutions must pass before the ancient peace returns; and only if the golden age is born again, and if we revive in it, shall we find St. Mary’s what St. Mary’s was lang syne —

Ah, Buddha, if thy tale be true,
Of still returning life,
A monk may I be born anew,
In valleys free from strife, —
A monk where Meggat winds and laves
The lone St. Mary’s of the Waves.

Yarrow, which flows out of St. Mary’s Loch was never a great favourite of mine, as far as fishing goes. It had, and probably deserved, a great reputation, and some good trout are still taken in the upper waters, and there must be monsters in the deep black pools, the “dowie dens” above Bowhill. But I never had any luck there. The choicest stream of all was then, probably, the Aill, described by Sir Walter in “William of Deloraine’s Midnight Ride” —

Where Aill, from mountains freed,

Down from the lakes did raving come;
Each wave was crested with tawny foam,
Like the mane of a chestnut steed.

As not uncommonly happens, Scott uses rather large language here. The steepy, grassy hillsides, the great green tablelands in a recess of which the Aill is born, can hardly be called "mountains." The "lakes," too, through which it passes, are much more like tarns, or rather, considering the flatness of their banks, like well-meaning ponds. But the Aill, near Sinton and Ashkirk, was a delightful trout-stream, between its willow-fringed banks, a brook about the size of the Lambourne. Nowhere on the Border were trout more numerous, better fed, and more easily beguiled. A week on Test would I gladly give for one day of boyhood beside the Aill, where the casting was not scientific, but where the fish rose gamely at almost any fly. Nobody seemed to go there then, and, I fancy, nobody need go there now. The nets and other dismal devices of the poachers from the towns have ruined that pleasant brook, where one has passed so many a happy hour, walking the long way home wet and weary, but well content. Into Aill flows a burn, the Headshaw burn, where there used to be good fish, because it runs out of Headshaw Loch, a weed-fringed lonely tarn on the bleak level of the tableland. Bleak as it may seem, Headshaw Loch has the great charm of absolute solitude: there are no tourists nor anglers here, and the life of the birds is especially free and charming. The trout, too, are large, pink of

flesh, and game of character; but the world of mankind need not rush thither. They are not to be captured by the wiles of men, or so rarely that the most enthusiastic anglers have given them up. They are as safe in their tarn as those enchanted fish of the "Arabian Nights." Perhaps a silver sedge in a warm twilight may somewhat avail, but the adventure is rarely achieved.

These are the waters with which our boyhood was mainly engaged; it is a pleasure to name and number them. Memory, that has lost so much and would gladly lose so much more, brings vividly back the golden summer evenings by Tweedside, when the trout began to plash in the stillness – brings back the long, lounging, solitary days beneath the woods of Ashiesteil – days so lonely that they sometimes, in the end, begat a superstitious eeriness. One seemed forsaken in an enchanted world; one might see the two white fairy deer flit by, bringing to us, as to Thomas Rhymer, the tidings that we must back to Fairyland. Other waters we knew well, and loved: the little salmon-stream in the west that doubles through the loch, and runs a mile or twain beneath its alders, past its old Celtic battle-field, beneath the ruined shell of its feudal tower, to the sea. Many a happy day we had there, on loch or stream, with the big sea-trout which have somehow changed their tastes, and to-day take quite different flies from the green body and the red body that led them to the landing-net long ago. Dear are the twin Alines, but dearer is Tweed, and Ettrick, where our ancestor was drowned in a flood, and his white horse was found, next day, feeding near his dead body, on a little

grassy island. There is a great pleasure in trying new methods, in labouring after the delicate art of the dry fly-fisher in the clear Hampshire streams, where the glassy tide flows over the waving tresses of crow's-foot below the poplar shade. But nothing can be so good as what is old, and, as far as angling goes, is practically ruined, the alternate pool and stream of the Border waters, where

The triple pride
Of Eildon looks over Strathclyde,

and the salmon cast murmurs hard by the Wizard's grave. They are all gone now, the old allies and tutors in the angler's art – the kind gardener who baited our hooks; the good Scotch judge who gave us our first collection of flies; the friend who took us with him on his salmon-fishing expedition, and made men of us with real rods, and "pirns" of ancient make. The companions of those times are scattered, and live under strange stars and in converse seasons, by troutless waters. It is no longer the height of pleasure to be half-drowned in Tweed, or lost on the hills with no luncheon in the basket. But, except for scarcity of fish, the scene is very little altered, and one is a boy again, in heart, beneath the elms of Yair, or by the Gulleets at Ashiesteil. However bad the sport, it keeps you young, or makes you young again, and you need not follow Ponce de Léon to the western wilderness, when, in any river you knew of yore, you can find the Fountain of Youth.

LOCH AWE

THE BOATMAN'S YARNS

Good trout-fishing in Scotland, south of the Pentland Firth, is almost impossible to procure. There are better fish, and more of them, in the Wandle, within twenty minutes of Victoria Station, than in any equal stretch of any Scotch river with which I am acquainted. But the pleasure of angling, luckily, does not consist merely of the catching of fish. The Wandle is rather too suburban for some tastes, which prefer smaller trout, better air, and wilder scenery. To such spirits, Loch Awe may, with certain distinct cautions, be recommended. There is more chance for anglers, now, in Scotch lochs than in most Scotch rivers. The lochs cannot so easily be netted, lined, polluted, and otherwise made empty and ugly, like the Border streams. They are farther off from towns and tourists, though distance is scarcely a complete protection. The best lochs for yellow trout are decidedly those of Sutherland. There are no railways, and there are two hundred lochs and more in the Parish of Assynt. There, in June, the angler who is a good pedestrian may actually enjoy solitude, sometimes. There is a loch near Strathnaver, and far from human habitations, where a friend of my own recently caught sixty-five trout weighing

about thirty-eight pounds. They are numerous and plucky, but not large, though a casual big loch-trout may be taken by trolling. But it is truly a far way to this anonymous lake and all round the regular fishing inns, like Inchnadampf and Forsinard there is usually quite a little crowd of anglers. The sport is advertised in the newspapers; more and more of our eager fellow-creatures are attracted, more and more the shooting tenants are preserving waters that used to be open. The distance to Sutherland makes that county almost beyond the range of a brief holiday. Loch Leven is nearer, and at Loch Leven the scenery is better than its reputation, while the trout are excellent, though shy. But Loch Leven is too much cockneyfied by angling competitions; moreover, its pleasures are expensive. Loch Awe remains, a loch at once large, lovely, not too distant, and not destitute of sport.

The reader of Mr. Colquhoun's delightful old book, "The Moor and the Loch," must not expect Loch Awe to be what it once was. The railway, which has made the north side of the lake so ugly, has brought the district within easy reach of Glasgow and of Edinburgh. Villas are built on many a beautiful height; here couples come for their honeymoon, here whole argosies of boats are anchored off the coasts, here do steam launches ply. The hotels are extremely comfortable, the boatmen are excellent boatmen, good fishers, and capital company. All this is pleasant, but all this attracts multitudes of anglers, and it is not in nature that sport should be what it once was. Of the famous *salmo ferox* I cannot speak from experience. The huge courageous fish is still

at home in Loch Awe, but now he sees a hundred baits, natural and artificial, where he saw one in Mr. Colquhoun's time. The truly contemplative man may still sit in the stern of the boat, with two rods out, and possess his soul in patience, as if he were fishing for tarpon in Florida. I wish him luck, but the diversion is little to my mind. Except in playing the fish, if he comes, all the skill is in the boatmen, who know where to row, at what pace, and in what depth of water. As to the chances of salmon again, they are perhaps less rare, but they are not very frequent. The fish does not seem to take freely in the loch, and on his way from the Awe to the Orchy. As to the trout-fishing, it is very bad in the months when most men take their holidays, August and September. From the middle of April to the middle of June is apparently the best time. The loch is well provided with bays, of different merit, according to the feeding which they provide; some come earlier, some later into season. Doubtless the most beautiful part of the lake is around the islands, between the Loch Awe and the Port Sonachan hotels. The Green Island, with its strange Celtic burying-ground, where the daffodils bloom among the sepulchres with their rude carvings of battles and of armed men, has many trout around its shores. The favourite fishing-places, however, are between Port Sonachan and Ford. In the morning early, the steam-launch tows a fleet of boats down the loch, and they drift back again, fishing all the bays, and arriving at home in time for dinner. Too frequently the angler is vexed by finding a boat busy in his favourite bay. I am not sure that,

when the trout are really taking, the water near Port Sonachan is not as good as any other. Much depends on the weather. In the hard north-east winds of April we can scarcely expect trout to feed very freely anywhere. These of Loch Awe are very peculiar fish. I take it that there are two species – one short, thick, golden, and beautiful; but these, at least in April, are decidedly scarce. The common sort is long, lanky, of a dark green hue, and the reverse of lovely. Most of them, however, are excellent at breakfast, pink in the flesh, and better flavoured, I think, than the famous trout of Loch Leven. They are also extremely game for their size; a half-pound trout fights like a pounder. From thirty to forty fish in a day's incessant angling is reckoned no bad basket. In genial May weather, probably the trout average two to the pound, and a pounder or two may be in the dish. But three to the pound is decidedly nearer the average, at least in April. The flies commonly used are larger than what are employed in Loch Leven. A teal wing and red body, a grouse hackle, and the prismatic Heckham Peckham are among the favourites; but it is said that flies no bigger than Tweed flies are occasionally successful. In my own brief experience I have found the trout “dour,” occasionally they would rise freely for an hour at noon, or in the evening; but often one passed hours with scarcely a rising fish. This may have been due to the bitterness of the weather, or to my own lack of skill. Not that lochs generally require much artifice in the angler. To sink the flies deep, and move them with short jerks, appears, now and then, to be efficacious. There

has been some controversy about Loch Awe trouting; this is as favourable a view of the sport as I can honestly give. It is not excellent, but, thanks to the great beauty of the scenery, the many points of view on so large and indented a lake, the charm of the wood and wild flowers, Loch Awe is well worth a visit from persons who do not pitch their hopes too high.

Loch Awe would have contented me less had I been less fortunate in my boatman. It is often said that tradition has died out in the Highlands; it is living yet.

After three days of north wind and failure, it occurred to me that my boatman might know the local folklore – the fairy tales and traditions. As a rule, tradition is a purely professional part of a guide's stock-in-trade, but the angler who had my barque in his charge proved to be a fresh fountain of legend. His own county is not Argyleshire, but Inverness, and we did not deal much in local myth. True, he told me why Loch Awe ceased – like the site of Sodom and Gomorrah – to be a cultivated valley and became a lake, where the trout are small and, externally, green.

“Loch Awe was once a fertile valley, and it belonged to an old dame. She was called Dame Cruachan, the same as the hill, and she lived high up on the hillside. Now there was a well on the hillside, and she was always to cover up the well with a big stone before the sun set. But one day she had been working in the valley and she was weary, and she sat down by the path on her way home and fell asleep. And the sun had gone down before she reached the well, and in the night the water broke out and filled

all the plain, and what was land is now water.” This, then, was the origin of Loch Awe. It is a little like the Australian account of the Deluge. That calamity was produced by a man’s showing a woman the mystic turndun, a native sacred toy. Instantly water broke out of the earth and drowned everybody.

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