

BY H. HICKLING.

Illustrated by A. J. WALL.

“**A**NY sport, gennelmen?”
 Neither Tom nor I were sorry, I think, to hear old Cress’s voice. Weary of tyres and tubes, I had run down from busy “Brum” to see my old friend Tom Cliffe, and have with him a day’s quiet fishing in the Warwickshire Avon.

We were old schoolfellows, and had, when lads, tramped out into the country on many a day of sun and shower, so when we now met, had our past as well as the present to talk over. But if two men sit side by side for the greater part of the day without the excitement of sport, and with the monotony only broken by their own bite and sup, they are pretty sure to occupy a fair share of time in thoughtful smoking. We were such old friends that we enjoyed this silent companionship almost as much as we did our quiet talks. Still, for all this, both he and I, as I said before, were not sorry to hear Cress’s voice as his boat came in view round the bend.

Old Richard Cress was well known, being indeed as much a part of the river as its water-rats and willows. His occupation was what his father’s had been before him, and that of all his ancestors, as far back as could

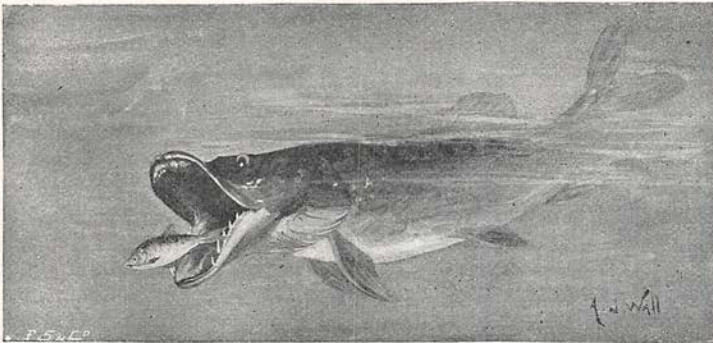
be traced, and that was over two hundred years. He kept a ferry and also rented a disused mill which gave him control over its flood-gates and thus enabled him to catch eels wholesale whenever a “flush” came. His favourite companion was an old spaniel, and he usually carried a gun, with which he killed rats and other vermin, and thus figured as waterkeeper over both fish and fowl.

His callings therefore made him spend his life on the river. He was as familiar with its sullen winter moods as the pleasant summer ripple known only to the fair-weather visitors; knew what was to be seen long before they were awake in the morning—something also of what went on in the night. No wonder that Dick Cress could tell more than his neighbours about river life and death. Tom having informed him of the small extent of our catch, invited him to come ashore and have a drink, saying aside to me, “His chat’s always interesting.” So, with a “Well, I don’t mind if I does,” the boat was soon made fast to the bank, far enough off not to spoil the sport, which no doubt we ought to have been having, but had not—a not unfrequent occurrence in the gentle art.

“’Ere’s my respects, gennelmen. I’m

surprised as they don't go better; wind's right, and water ain't a bad colour. Oh, aye, this is as good a spot as be on the river, for the other side be all 'candocks' in the summer, and is allis a cover for pike, and generally one or two good uns. They can't be got in the deep holes yet. I should a-thought you'd a-been sure of a run live-baitin'. But pike be like roach and the rest on 'em, there's no countin' on 'em at all for cert'in, not even when everythin' looks just right for a bit o' sport. And another day, when yer think it hardly worth while wettin' a line, you'll catch, and they'll seem to bite whether they're hungry or not.

"Talkin' o' that," continued the water bailiff, "I saw a funny thing last season. I was out with Master Jack, Squire's second, a-teachin' him trollin'. 'E caught a good un, and when I went to take the hook out I saw the greedy beggar had got another fish



THE PERCH THAT WAS A JONAH.

down his gullet. Master Jack says to me, 'I should like to see what's inside 'im,' so I took my knife and slit 'im open, when out 'opped a small perch. 'I'll put this joker in the can,' says I, 'for we're short o' baits, and if we run out we can use 'im with 'is back spines cut off.'"

Here old Cress paused, and then gave a quiet chuckle. I saw there was some sequel to his story, so asked, "Did you use him, after all?"

"No. Next day I met Master Jack on the river with his mother. It seems 'e'd been tellin' her about this, and nothin' 'ud do for my lady but I must up with the bait tin from where I kep' it sunk and show her that perch. 'Poor thing!' says she, and then she quietly tips the whole lot of 'em out into the water, sayin', 'You've been in the whale's belly once, and you shan't be treated worse nor Jonah.'

"What's the biggest pike I've seen taken from the Avon? Well, I've known several over twenty pound, but don't think I've seen one over twenty-three; but I 'ad one once what ought to 'ave been the 'eaviest of all by rights. It was like this 'ere: there was a bit of a flood comin' down, and I and my man 'ad a net across to catch eels. It was late in the evenin' when we took it in, and when clearin' the 'mullock' out I saw what I took to be an old log 'ad got in. I went to pick it up, when it moved. I said to my man, 'What-never 'ave we got 'ere; blown if it ain't a graert pike!'"

Dick Cress suddenly pulled himself up to his fullest perpendicular. "Now, gennelmen, how tall do you think I be?"

We were both rather surprised at this apparently irrelevant question, and Tom, thinking that the man, like most of us, was not averse to a little personal flattery, made a show of taking critical mental measurement, and said, "Five feet ten."

"No, sir, I ain't, I'm five foot six inches. I took that fish and 'ung it from my garden gatepost for any of the villagers as liked to see it, and though it's a good many years back, I dare-say if you ask 'em, some of 'em will remember it now. It's tail just touched the ground, and when I

stood beside it its snout was just the same height as the top o' my 'ead. 'E 'ad a long thin body and a graert hugly 'ead, and looked like a hidjus big sort of a tadpole. 'E'd gone blind, which accounted for 'is starved condition. The bank 'ad burst of a big pool near Warwick, which 'adn't been emptied for years, and I reckon 'e came from there. I chucked 'im back into the river when 'e began to smell, but I sent 'is measure to Mr. Frank Buckland, and 'e sent me back a letter sayin' that if the fish 'ad been in good condition, accordin' to 'is length and size of 'is 'ead, 'e should 'ave weighed over sixty pounds."

"Should like to see that letter," I heard Cliffe remark *sotto voce*.

But I thought to myself that a biography might be written on that fish and be worth reading. First, his greater craftiness, making him avoid the angler's wiles and helping him

to catch more food than his fellows, with the result that he ultimately exceeds them all in size and strength, and has become to all the younger fry the bogie man of their world. He now, to have a good square meal, has to turn cannibal, and the older and larger members of the pool soon regard him much the same as in days of yore our ancestors looked on the all-devouring dragon. Inevitable old age at last overtakes the giant; his sight begins to go, and he at length becomes another blind Samson, but is doomed to a much more lingering death, which he awaits midst the taunts and jeers of those that were wont to fear him. Anglers coming to the pool, if told of his existence, would have thought the monster fabulous, but hoped to be able to prove the truth of the report by having him on and out. What a pity he was not caught in his prime, for with his skin varnished and extended by all the stuffing a taxidermist could cram in, he no doubt would have made for life the reputation, as an angler, of everyone who ever possessed him.

I saw a big bird with a large spread of curved wings and long legs stuck straight out behind, rise above the trees, about two hundred yards down the river. With impressive sweeps it was soon carried out of sight.

Cress had turned to see what had attracted my attention, and watched it keenly,

unconsciously bending his body down as the bird lowered itself in the distance, remarking when thus lost to view, "An old jack-'erne."

"No, I don't know as they does do so very much damage; they ain't plentiful enough. Not but what they're here oftener than most folks would think. You see, there's a bit of an 'eronry in Warwick Park, and that's where they come from, I reckon. One's often down 'ere in the early mornin', and off back again before most folks are about—it don't take 'em long to cover some distance with them long wings of theirs.

"Of course they do live on fish, and take some pretty big uns down too. Once I were cleanin' the nettles out of an osier-bed, and I 'eard a big bustle goin' on in a clump o' sedges, so I crep' into 'em and found a jack-'erne 'ad got a rat. 'E took it in 'is beak and shook it same as a terrier, and 'e killed it and ate it. An 'erne's a rum customer, too, when 'e's wounded; you've got to be careful 'ow you go near 'im, for 'e'll use that long bill of 'is like a bayonet.

"Now what does most 'arm to the fishin' is eels and swans. I dare say you've noticed in the close season that strings of perch spawn float in the stream, fastened to the small willow roots; well, the eels then pretty well live on these. At the same time you'll see the swans always on the 'shallers'



"I FOUND A JACK-'ERNE 'AD GOT A RAT."

a-goblin' up spawn. I catch all the eels I can to sell 'em, but I often wishes somethin' would 'appen to a few of them swans. Dang me! but when I've seen 'em that busy at it, and my gun so 'andy too, I've felt as though an accident *must* 'appen to 'em. One did once, anyway, though if I tell you, most likely you'll not believe me, but it's the truth all the same.

"I was but a lad, so it must a-been well nigh fifty year ago. I was up the river in the punt with my dad, when 'e pointed to a swan up a backwater. 'We'll go and 'ave a look at that bird,' says 'e; 'e's dead, I'll be bound, for 'e 'as 'is 'ead down under, and 'e 'ad it so yesterday when I come by.'

"He poled the boat to it for me to take 'old of the bird.

"'Why don't you lift it in?' says 'e.

"'I can't,' I called out, 'it's got somethin' 'angin' to it.' And so it 'ad—a great pike of twenty-three pounds 'ad taken down the swan's 'ead and as much of 'is neck as 'e could. The only way I can account for it is, the fish was very 'ungry, and maybe in the dusk mistook the swan's 'ead movin' about feedin' under water for a big eel and went for it. There must a-been a fine old struggle on before both were drowned.

"'Take this fish straight up to the 'All,' says my dad, 'and show it to the Squire, and tell 'im 'ow I got it.'

"'What!' says the Squire, 'don't tell me such rubbish!'

"'Please, sir, it's the truth,' I answered; and when they came to look down the mouth there were some bits of feather still caught in 'is 'tushes.' My father took 'ome the swan, and my mother made 'erself a cushion with the feathers."

The appearance of the ubiquitous rat gave a turn to the conversation.

"I shoots 'em because they gnaws the bark off my osiers, but it don't seem to make much difference to the numbers. In the summer the banks fairly swarm with land as well as water-rats, but I don't think as either on 'em catch fish, though they'll eat dead uns fast enough.

"Now, I've noticed when an otter comes and takes up 'is quarters anywhere there's a lot of rats come and live round his holt. For, as maybe you know, the beggar catches a lot more fish than 'e eats; as often as not 'e only takes a bite out of the back, behind the 'ead, and if an eel—which they're very fond on—'e leaves the tail part. After that, you see, gennelmen, the rats begin to dine."

"By-the-by, Cress," struck in Tom, "a

few weeks back I met a man with a pike of about three pounds. He said he found it when going to work in the morning, on the turf where the path runs between the cliff and the river. He told me it looked quite fresh out of the water, and I saw what I thought were teeth marks on it."

"Ah, the man 'ad frightened Mr. Otter off just when 'e'd brought out 'is breakfast to eat. I know there's at least one about, for I've seen 'is pad, but I've been too busy among the osiers to set a trap for 'im. 'Twas only yesterday I noticed a bit below 'ere where 'e'd fouled—my old dog drew my attention to it by rollin', as 'e always does."

As we had given up expecting any sport, we left our lines in the water and strolled down the bank with Cress. What he showed us contained scales and fish bones, as circumstantial evidence of an otter having been about. Tom told me that Dick Cress was a famous trapper, probably holding the record for otters killed along the course of the Avon—in fact, that what he did not know of the ways of these bold, but, to us, unobtrusive raiders, was not worth knowing.

My interest was aroused, for I have ever had much sympathy with this animal. His forbears having been declared outlaws many centuries ago, certainly one of his keenest instincts is to avoid man and his artifices.

As a playful pup, he is only allowed by his wary parents to frisk in the sunshine in the very early morning. He is soon taught not only to fish with dexterity, but to be at the same time on the alert that he is not seen by his enemy, thus being early in life able to shift for himself should he lose his parents. No matter that every otter has been destroyed that has come to that part of the river, if the spot seems to offer them some protection, another will soon be found there, having travelled at great risk, probably from a long distance.

Another journey is often to be made to find a mate, which, like all rare animals, he, strange to say, generally succeeds in doing.

There is no close time for him, poor fellow. If the hounds scent him, the huntsman is not expected to consider whether the animal is out to get provision for his family. If on rivers like the Avon—impossible to hunt—a man with a gun sees him, whether he be interested in the preservation of fish or not, the man will probably fire at him with as little reflection.

Otters may almost be said to carry their lives in their hands from the time they can

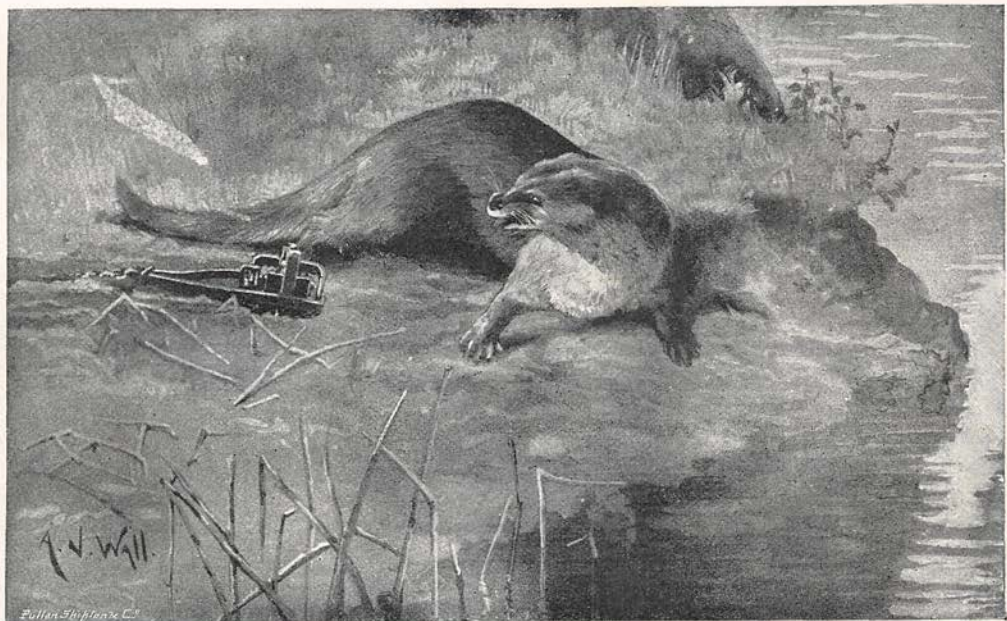
see—for they are born blind. Though many cannot die a natural death in old age, yet the plucky manner in which they fight when retreat is hopeless calls forth admiration, and suggests that life must be as dear to them as to other animals, and probably equally happy. Pride in, and the making use of their great craftiness, agility and strength must, one is inclined to think and hope, contribute to make existence pleasant as well as exciting.

“You want to know ’ow I catch ’em? Well, you see otters are fond of comin’ out on a bit of turf like this, or up on the top of an old pollard, often takin’ a fish to eat.

ground is very soft I put some moss or grass under the pan to keep the mud from gettin’ there and stoppin’ it workin’ well, but I don’t ’andle nothin’ more nor I can ’elp, their scent’s so keen.

“I like ’e jaws of the trap made ’igh, as if you dor’t get a good holt on ’im ’e’s that strong ’e’ll get away, and ’e ain’t particular about leavin’ a claw or so behind.

“’E seems to make a big struggle when caught, and in the end generally falls into the water and is drowned. At ’ome I’ve got ’angin’ up the pelt of one I cured. ’E was fast by one of ’is front paws, and I could show you where ’e’d bitten off several of



CAUGHT AT LAST.

They generally leave the water at some spot near where the bank shelves down. ’Tis too ’ard ’ere to see the track where ’e did, but if ’e ’appens to come out when the water’s drawn low, his pad will show on the mud.

“Up at the mill, if they want to go from the lower to the upper pound, or the t’other way about, they seem to always use a bit of turf bank near the ‘fletcher’ to come out or go in at.

“When I sees as one’s about, if I want to make pretty sure of catchin’ him, when the water’s down I cuts out with a spade a few steps up, and I generally find as ’e takes to usin’ them. Then I lets a steel trap in there near the level of the water; if the

’is hind claws, ’e was that desprit at not being able to get loose.”

What an agonising struggle for life!

“The heaviest I ever killed was thirty-two pound, which is a great weight, though I’ve been told they’ve been known to reach thirty-six. One ’ad got out of a trap about three miles lower down, which I’ve no doubt was this brute, for I found one of ’is front legs ’urt and ’is shoulder badly swollen. I was goin’ up in my punt when I saw ’im lyin’ by some osiers that ’ad been cut and stacked a few yards from the bank—I think ’e was feelin’ very sick from his ’urt. I landed and crep’ up, and just managed to fetch ’im a good blow with my punt pole as ’e was gettin’ into the water.

"I've more than once on a still evenin' 'eard one callin' to 'is mate, I suppose. There was one at it one moonlight night last spring, and I answered 'im back." Cress then blew through his upper teeth, making a low but shrill whistle. "I crouched down, for I was among some nettles, and I brought 'im near me, for I could 'ear the rustle of the dry leaves 'e trod on. I looked 'ard, but couldn't make 'im out, and then 'e winded me and was back in the river in no time."

As a small contribution to the conversation, I related what my mother remembered happening at Budleigh Salterton, some forty years ago. One winter's morning the inhabitants were frightened by some mysterious footprints in the snow, seen on some of the lower roofs. As there was also evidence of the visitor dragging a tail after him, the superstitious Devonians were so convinced that their town had been visited by his satanic majesty that a report to that effect got into the newspapers. A keeper however dispelled their dread of some impending calamity by informing them the track was only that of an otter, no doubt very hard pressed for food.

Richard Cress seemed to receive my tale with some mental reservation. I thought

this ungrateful, as I had shown perfect credulity for all his stories.

"Well, no doubt they be very bold sometimes," says he. "Once I was at Scar Bank, some miles up stream, takin' up my 'putchens.' I was sittin' pretty still, baitin' one of 'em, when an otter came out from the bank and swam right round my punt and then dived off. I reckon 'e must 'ave come after the eels I 'ad, and 'e'd scented, but 'ad not noticed me at first. I don't think as their sight is anythin' like so good as their scent and 'earin'."

"Tell me some more of your experiences," I said.

"Well I dare say I could, sir, but the fact is my wife is the only one at 'ome to 'tend to the ferry. I've been away a pretty long time, and ought to get back there."

"Never mind," put in Tom Cliffe, nudging me but smiling at Cress, "you will see all Dick's stories when he has written his book."

"Now, Mr. Cliffe, you know I've told you afore I'm no schollard, 'avin' 'ad no schoolin' to speak of—not but what if I did write I could tell some few things of natural 'istory as 'as never been printel yet."

"I'm sure you could," we both assented, and I venture the reader will agree with us.

