

JOHN BRIGHT AS AN ANGLER:

A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE.

BY W. A. SOMMERVILLE.



REMEMBER being asked to dine at Abbotsford, and a postscript to the letter said, "The boat will meet you at the ferry at seven o'clock." I was looking to-day at what was the site of the St. James's Hotel in Jermyn Street, where Sir Walter Scott spent his last night in London. The hotel has long since gone, but the Tweedside Ferry remains. This was the ferry used by Sir Walter; you can picture him on the banks of the river with Tom Purdie and his dogs, and at his call the boat gliding across to take him to Abbotsford.

There is only one book of biography in our language which I think can compare with Boswell's "Life of Johnson," and that book is Lockhart's "Life of Scott." Is there anything more pathetic in literature than Lockhart's description of Sir Walter's return to Abbotsford from Italy? "As we descended the Vale of the Gala he began to gaze about him. Presently he murmured a name or two—Gala water, surely, Buckholm Torwoodle. As we rounded the hill at Ladhope the outline of the Eildons burst upon him, and when, turning himself upon the couch, his eye caught at length his own towers at the distance of a mile, he sprang up with delight." A few weeks after, waking from unconsciousness, he sent for Lockhart and said to him, "Lockhart, I may have but a minute to speak to you. Be a good man—be virtuous—be religious—be a good man." And he who filled our childhood with romance a few days afterwards passed away.

The ferry at Abbotsford is characteristic of many on the Tweed, from Berwick to the Crook. The stage coach used to change horses at the Crook Inn. The stage coach has gone, some day the ferries may go, too, to be superseded by iron bridges—how sad it all is! John Ruskin has told us. A mile and a bit below Kelso there is a ferry that takes you over to the village of Sprouston, where lives John Wright, maker of salmon-flies. John will take three salmon for any other man's one out of the Rock Pool; personally, I never could take one.

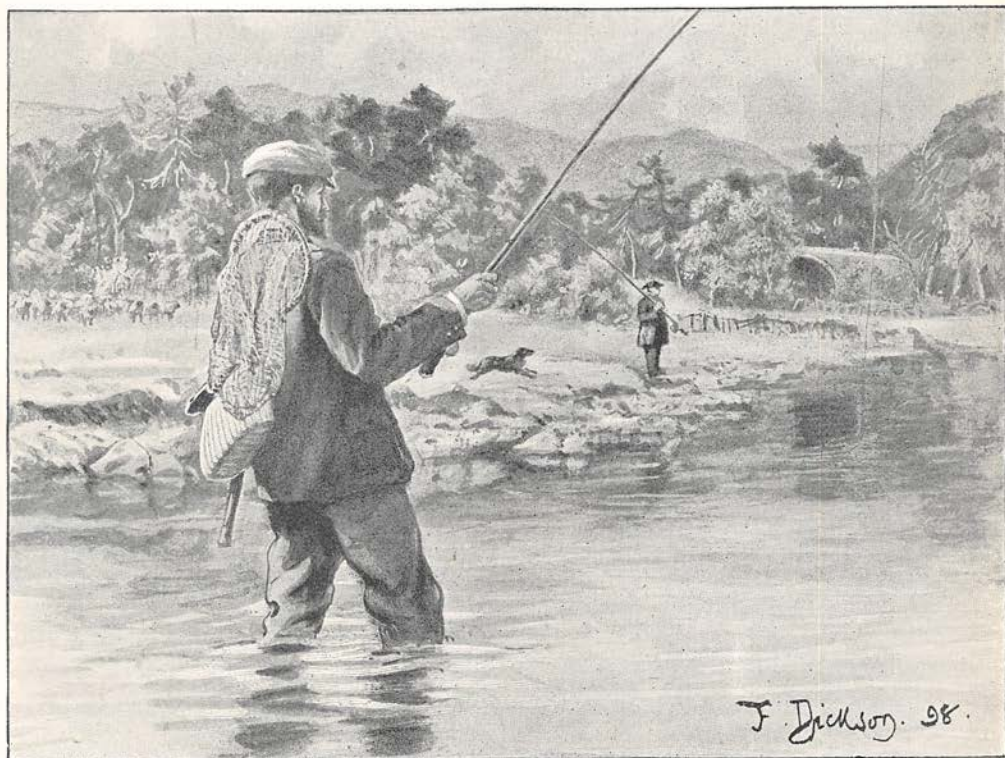
The ferry is rented by an old friend of mine, Charles Carse; Charles has a man called Donald, who rows the ferry boat for him. Donald seldom speaks, save when he gets a "challenge" from the other side of the river, of "Boat," from someone wishing to cross. I don't think he receives much pay, but all the money he gets he spends on books—not old books, but new ones, fresh from some Edinburgh or London publisher. The last time I was in his room there was more than a cartload of them—not on bookshelves, he has no space for that. He has them piled up in a heap, much as the crofters pile up their peats for the winter fire. His room is in Charles Carse's cottage, who gives him free lodging and what Donald calls "his meat." One day I was saying something to Charles in praise of Donald, with his silence and passion for books, and Charles did not differ from me very much. It was all true enough, he said; but it seemed that Donald consumed enormous quantities of porridge. "You have no idea of the quantity of porridge that man can put away." Here was the rift in the lute, the discord coming into the pastorale symphony of this Tweedside Ferry. It seemed that this porridge was the principle item in what Donald called "his meat." Well, I don't wonder the poor man was hungry, for he rowed the boat from daylight to dark, and had many a time a call of "Boat" coming across the river in the night from the Kelso road.

In 1874 my father rented the Lower Sprouston water on the Tweed, the cottage stream and the mill stream, and the right to fish down for about a mile to a cast called Red Nanny. We used to fish alternately for about two hours. When it was not my turn I would take my trout rod and go up the river to Sprouston Dub and have a try for a trout. One day I was fishing, when I became conscious of someone coming down the river towards me; it was John Bright. He came slowly, pausing now and again to watch the salmon as they broke the surface of the water. In those days I had a collie dog called "Yarrow," and away went Yarrow, glad to find someone to sympathise with him. This was the first time I ever met Mr. Bright,

though I often used to meet him afterwards when he was fishing at Sprouston, and I used occasionally to travel with him between Edinburgh and Kelso.

I would sometimes go up to the rising ground above the Dub and watch him fishing. That he was a very good angler I would not say; it takes long years, beginning in boyhood, to be that, and a development of muscle that is not gained by walking into the division lobby of the House of Commons or ascending the steps of the Reform Club. He could play a fish as well

Mr. Cobden." If he had been visiting at Hawarden he would speak of it with a pleasure, almost as though it were a privilege for him to go there. Side by side with Cobden he had fought for the repeal of the Corn Laws, but he always left the impression with you that Cobden was greater than he. I never heard him speak in public, but in talking to me on the river there was the same earnestness that characterised his public utterances. He never attained what Tennyson calls "the wise indifference of the wise." With him there was no indifference;



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as most of us, and cast not too long a line as well as need be.

That he loved the river it is needless to say; his angling brought him into touch with its streams and pools, the riverside flowers, the birds, and the birch trees with their silver stems. And then there were the kindly Tweedside folk with whom to talk, and the silent evenings, when the river seems to speak, "deepening thy voice with the deepening of the night."

He would often talk to me about Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Cobden, "My friend

he had still the deep-beating heart of his boyhood and the perpetual youthfulness that is a distinctive mark of genius.

Once, in travelling with him from Edinburgh, I lost my railway ticket. I was sure I had placed it in one of my waistcoat pockets, and I remember that Mr. Bright insisted on examining each pocket himself. One day we were going to Kelso, and Yarrow, my collie dog, was with me. Now Yarrow was, like all collie dogs, a great diplomatist; and whenever the ticket examiner made his appearance at the door of the carriage

would disappear mysteriously under the seat. Mr. Bright remarked to me that it was perfectly evident that Yarrow must have at one time belonged to a gentleman who was in the habit of travelling without a dog ticket.

On the portion of the river where I used to watch Mr. Bright fish I once had a record day. The river was very low, weeks having passed without any rain; the fish had left the streams and shallows and gathered into the Dub, which is really a great lake formed by the dam or weir constructed to store the water for driving the corn mill below. I rented the water at this time with a Mr. Wood, whose brother was standing for Parliament. As he was assisting him with his election work, he had little time for fishing, but he had written that if the water was in order he would come North for a single day, travelling all night in the Midland sleeping carriage, and returning home to England at night. He left it to Charles Carse, from whom we rented the water and who rowed our boat, to decide whether he should come North or not. I had only landed one fish in nine days. The want of rain and bright sunshine had done their work.

Charles was in trouble. "Should he wire Mr. Wood?" (he always called him Mr. 'Ood) "to come or no?" Charles was very partial to Mr. Wood, but with him, as with all of us, he had a fault to find. If Mr. 'Ood would fish the Dub with two single gut traces, instead of two double, it would make his fly sink deeper, and he would kill two fish for one; but Mr. Wood had his way, preferring the stronger tackle. Charles drove down to Kelso with me to consult Mr. Patterson at Forrest's, who was a great authority on the weather; and in the evening, things promising to get no better, they wired Mr. Wood not to come—and Mr. Wood lost a great day on the Tweed.

When I reached the river, Charles was waiting for me at the Butterwash, and we rowed down to the Dub. Captain Griffiths (now Sir George Waldie Griffiths, of Henderside) was fishing the Henderside side, and as we passed I asked him if he had had any sport. He answered that he had been fishing for an hour, but had caught nothing. You fish down stream for salmon, but even fishing down stream has its exceptions. The waves on the Dub were a foot high and the wind blowing strongly. Charles decided to start fishing up stream.

There was no difficulty in casting, and I

sent my fly with ease to the other side. I had not long to wait; there was a heavy, determined pull at my line, my rod bent, and away went a salmon as merrily as a four-in-hand down Piccadilly. "Ye gave him a right stroke," said Charles; "haud on to him." Soon we knew that he was a very heavy fish. Would the slender hold give way? He took a lot of holding; away up stream for eighty yards I had to let him go again and again. Had I checked him, he would have broken my gut cast as easily as you broke your breakfast egg this morning. He sulked and started to tug at the line much after the fashion of a steam launch at her moorings in a storm. At last the steady pressure of rod and arm told; we gradually drew him nearer to the side, and Charles landed him safely in the net.

He weighed 33 lbs. I then killed two in succession—they weighed 27 lbs. each—and later one of 29 lbs. By evening I had twelve fish, averaging 19 lbs. each. Captain Griffiths, fishing on the other side, killed thirteen fish, so that we had twenty-five fish between us. Charles walked down to the gate at Henderside with me. We had previously had many a weary blank day together. Only anglers know how grateful one is to have such a change of luck. But Charles's pleasure was tempered with sadness. He bade me good-night, pathetically adding, "What will Mr. 'Ood say?" As I walked home that long last beautiful mile that leads into Kelso—I once counted seventy pheasants together in the Park at Henderside from it—I, also, could not help thinking of my friend Mr. Wood. "If Mr. 'Ood would fish the Dub with two single gut casts instead of two double, it would make his fly sink deeper, and he would kill two fish for one."

The last time I saw Mr. Bright we travelled from Kelso to Edinburgh together. There was a little crowd on the Kelso platform round a compartment in the window of which the stationmaster had placed a placard marked "engaged." I had gone into the next compartment, a smoking one, when John Bright came up and told the stationmaster laughingly that he would rather go into the smoking carriage with me. The stationmaster transferred his label, and we had the carriage to ourselves. He told me he feared it would be his last visit to Kelso, and spoke as pathetically of the parting as if he were saying good-bye to a friend for ever.