# PASSING OF A RIVER

## An Obituary

By G. K .M.

The river ran at the bottom of the garden where a plank bridge spanned it with railings on either side. All of us at the age of four had to give a promise that we would not go further down the garden than the first grass path. At the age of six we were promoted to the second grass path. At eight most of us had learned to swim and were allowed right down to the river, and no one bothered about us any more.

There was good reason for these precautions. In those days the river flowed under the bridge deep and smooth, brim full in the longest droughts of summer. Men had drowned in it—to this day the fate of two men has left the names Wheeler's Pool and Pocock's Hole. And there was the occasion when a man ran the whole length of the garden to tell Cox, the coachman, that a child was struggling in the water. Cox, a little wizened man, agile as a scrum-half, raced down the garden, saw the child lying on the bottom under the bridge, dived in and brought it out. But it could never be made to breathe again.

A small boy, thirteen years of age, won the Royal Humane Society's medal for rescuing the Rector's fifteen-year-old daughter a few hundred yards above the bridge. He and a younger brother were walking up the river when they saw the girl floating with the current, fully clad, but stern uppermost. The elder boy took off his coat, removed a bag of sweets from his trouser pocket, and handed both to the younger. He dived in, and, raising the girl's head, swam with her to the opposite bank. He held her there until the gardener appeared and pulled her ashore. The gardener had not been trained in first aid, but, holding her up by the ankles, he shook her until the water ran out of her lungs and she regained consciousness.

As children we spent most of our leisure hours on the river bank. It had so much of interest to offer. It was always worth while looking up and down stream as you crossed the bridge at the bottom of the garden to watch the trout lazing about. Turning down-stream you soon came to the Town Mill where you could see Dell, the Miller, with half a dozen helpers, their clothes while with flour, heaving sacks, climbing up and down ladders, while the produce of the Mill poured down chutes and the Mill itself rocked and shuddered. The harnessed river flowed deep and quiet above, but, freeing itself by turning the great wheel, it roared white and foaming below, gradually smoothing itself out in a black stream broken here and there by eddies.

Farther down, but needing a detour because of the tan-yard, you came to the Gas Works Bridge, and from there, by looking upstream through the railings, you could see more great trout lying in the shadows. Many of these, for some reason, were very pale in colour, almost white. We delighted in watching them stand on their heads

with tails out of the water, taking food from the gravel bed ; and no passer-by but stopped to watch them too.

More often we were led up-stream away from the town, past Duck's Bridge, so called after Duck, the jobber, one of whose lame horses could always be seen tethered knee-deep below the farthest arch, where the river rippled over the flinty shallows and was lashed to foam by the pawing horse. Above the bridge was a withy-bed, too rank and swampy to travel on foot. We used to explore that reach in a canoe on summer evenings and watch the wild duck, moor-hens, and dabchicks, which were very tame in that seclusion. On foot one had to skirt the withy bed along a muddy path called Treacle Bolly, which ended at the sheep-wash. At the time of the sheep washing, part of the river was diverted along a steep narrow chute on to which the sheep were flung one by one and swept by the water into the pool below. When they came to the surface, a shepherd caught them by the hind-leg with his crook and dragged them shivering ashore.

Past the sheep-wash lay the Horse Close and the Island Meadow, where eels could sometimes be seen in the side stream ; from there the foot-bridge led us to the churchyard, and so to the farm bridge, where we used to catch house-flies basking on the warm brick balustrade and thrown them to the trout below, which took them greedily.

Next came a short stretch with many bends, the banks beautifully built of cut sarsen stones to withstand the swirl of winter water, impatient of its tortuous course. What care, skill, labour, money, and art men of bygone days lavished on the welfare of our rivers! At the top of this stretch was the Hatch Pool, also banked by sarsen stones. Beside the hatches there was an archery hut, still retaining its circular target of red, white and blue rings, now used as a store for odds and ends, hatches, crow-bars, fishing rods. A little above was Pocock's Hole, the home of giant fish, and there-after the long stretch to Manton Bridge, above which, for a hundred yards, the river was artificially divided into four streams for running a Mill and irrigating the water-meadows.

The Mill Pool below the hatches, which dammed up the water for turning the mill wheel, had special attractions. Willow trees of great age, height and girth grew on the banks at the tail of the pool, so that it was always shady. Standing on the hatches you could see trout of all sizes trying to force their way up the swift torrent on the concrete slide where it boiled under the weir. They would swim against the current in rapid spurts with all their strength, only to be rolled back again before they could get through. Now and then, one made its effort and did not return.

The Mill Pool, too, was of all places the best for seeing kingfishers. Every year they nested both above it and below, and every year they brought their young for their first fishing lessons to the brick walls flanking the hatches. Once in later life, when I was wading in the tail of the pool, wondering how to put a fly over an awkward fish, a kingfisher came and settled on my rod. It sat there preening itself and ruffling its feathers for fully a minute before it flew away up-stream. And always a grey wag-tail flitted to and fro with seemingly no object but to display the grace of balance through a bobbing tail.

The next half-mile took you past Wheeler's Pool, where once a willow, falling in a gale, missed a fisherman by inches. he was so engrossed in playing a fish that he took no notice till he landed it! And so past Plough Cottage, where a very pretty girl lived, to the top Hatch Pool and Clatford Bridge, which ended our favourite walk. At every bridge there were passers-by who stopped for a little and gazed at the river and often pointed at a trout : " B'ain't he a beauty ? ".

In those days the hatches were kept in repair and the irrigation ditches clean and open. Early in the new year the hatches were lowered enough to send the water along the carrier ditches to flood the meadows. It was chalky spring water, of even temperature, and it brought on early grass for the sheep. On sunny days in February, from the uplands, still in their winter drab, bordering the valley both above and below the town, could be seen mile upon mile of bright green pasture, intersected by countless rivulets of water reflecting the blue of the sky. On very young minds, whose eyes saw it for the first time, the contrast, the beauty, and the wonder of it left an everlasting impression.

Those meadows were reckoned the most valuable part of the farms, for they gave three crops : first, grazing for the sheep ; next, after a second flooding and drying off, a hay crop; and in late summer, when the upland pastures were bare, there was lush grass in plenty for the cattle. They let, even in those days, for £3 an acre.

I suppose that the river attracted men in every walk of life, in part because it was the life-blood of the valley. It fed and clothed us. The Mills ground the whole-meal flour ; the butcher bringing the joint of beef could tell you from whose water-meadows it had come. The sheep were grazed and sheared on its banks and washed in it after shearing.

Such thoughts were not much in the minds of boys. We thought more of the barn rats, which in summer dwelt in the reeds and sedges and up the pollard willows, and provided us and our terriers with otter hunts in miniature. And there were always trout to be caught.

We must have been a backward people in those upper reaches in the nineties, for fly-fishing had not yet penetrated there. We had heard of it, of course, but to us it appeared a silly, almost effeminate form of sport. Once a man brought two sons and fished with a fly, and with amusement we watched them whip the water and catch nothing. We ourselves knew well enough how to catch fish in more ways than one, and were experts at it in early childhood.

One way was with a minnow. First of all, minnows were caught on a bent pin baited with a worm, and a stock of them kept in a perforated tin anchored in the river. To catch a trout a minnow was killed by a flick on the head with a finger-nail, and weighted with lead threaded into its belly. A hook was fixed in the angle of its mouth, and finally it was attached to rod and line, then gently dropped through a hole in the weeds, or, better still, through the scum held up by the hatches. Usually, almost at once, it was snatched by a trout and taken away a few yards. Line was played out and the fish given a minute or so to get the minnow well down. Then you just wound up and landed your fish well hooked far down its throat. It was simple, but only

exciting when a very large one was hooked.

At the bottom of the garden the fish were less easy to catch because the water was deeper and less weedy. That part was left to old Cox, the coachman, who, on many summer evenings, could be seen walking down the garden rod in hand, his black pipe stuffed with shag and gripped hard by his solitary eye-tooth. He used a variety of baits about which he was very secret, and rightly so ; for he seldom came back empty-handed, and he once returned with a seven-pounder.

What we considered far better sport than fishing with rod and line—and indeed it required greater skill—was tickling trout when we 'dragged' or netted the river, an annual event, carried out in September. Every riparian owner netted the river, and their netting rights were jealously guarded. Dell, the Miller, had the rights at the bottom of our garden ; we could only fish there with rod and line.

We ourselves had some three-quarters of a mile of netting rights above and below the Hatch Pool. 'Dragging' the river was the great event of the year, and the smell of bruised water-celery still brings back memories of it. A few days before the netting the weeds had to be scythed, leaving here and there, jutting out from either bank, hides under which frightened fish could shelter. On the appointed day, early in the forenoon, the net, weighted with leads below and buoyant with corks above, was stretched across the top boundary. The upper hatches were shut, the lower opened to keep the water shallow. Just below the boundary were two or three old pollarded willows, whose roots, spreading from the bank into the water, gave shelter for fish. The younger ones among us began the day by feeling eagerly behind those roots. Too eagerly; for in our haste for first blood, hands moved too fast and touched a fish too suddenly. Then there was a thump and out fled the fish, usually up-stream into the net, where a bobbing cork marked the place.

To bungle so was to lose prestige, and with this reproach upon us we took more care and fingers touched the next fish gently. It was easy by feel to find the fish's belly, and if it were tickled lightly there it would remain still. The other hand was used to discover the lie and size of the fish. A real giant brought an ecstasy of excitement. Perhaps the fish would move up-stream a few inches and must be tickled well forward under the chin to steady it, or it would drop back a few inches and must be tickled nearer the tail. When it lay quite still, thumbs were brought over its back at the thickest part. Then suddenly you squeezed, driving the tips of the fingers into the fish's chest. (Unless the finger-tips were used—they seemed to have a paralysing effect—the fish just shot out of one's grasp like a piece of slippery soap in a bath.) In triumph it was raised from the water, and if small enough, thrown on to the bank, where spectators knocked it on the head. If it were very large, you carried it out, making rather heavy weather of it, to draw attention to your prowess. Old Cox was the greatest expert of all. Pipe in mouth throughout the day, he showed by his expression when he was touching a big one. He had a grip like a vice and sometimes allowed himself a smile when he stood erect with a trout

in each hand. Toby Besant, too, was so clever at it that we used to speculate on how many trout had gone surreptitiously into his cooking pot in the space of his eighty years. We didn't begrudge them ; there were always plenty.

Throughout the day the net was dragged down-stream and pulled round the hides in the weeds, to catch the fish that escaped the hands of the ticklers. At the end of the day there would be fifty or a hundred brace on the bank, any fish not well over a pound having been returned to the water.

Some readers will be horrified at this massacre of trout, but, as I have explained, fly-fishing was not practised in those days in the upper reaches of our valley. And the river was so robust and its condition so perfect for the breeding and quick growth of trout, that if we had not taken many out each year it would have become overstocked, with disease or loss in size as the result. In spite of our efforts, more fish escaped than were caught, and, even after the netting, the river was teeming with trout.

The last event of the say would be such an outrage in these times that I have been told that it should never appear in print. Yet it was the custom of the locality and practised openly and I see no reason for silence.

This was the way of it. The water-meadows were dried after flooding by drainage ditches, which discharged their water into the river through brick culverts below water level. There was a particularly long one that opened into a stone-faced back-water at one side of the Hatch Pool. Very large and usually dark-coloured fish used this culvert as a place of refuge. The net was placed across the mouth of the back-water, and quick lime was pushed with a mop from the far end of the culvert. As soon as the chalky water became visible in the back-water, trout began nosing the surface and were ladled out in landing-nets or were caught in the drag-nets. We always got about half a dozen large ones that way.

By this time we boys were shaking with cold ; for we had been up to our middles in water and often deeper the day long. Neither old nor young had waders or any form of protection against the water. It was customary for us younger ones, in spite of feeling cold, to finish by swimming about the Hatch Pool in our clothes. The first time I did it, my large borrowed boots and sodden garments weighed me down and I went to the bottom. The spectators on the bank thought that I was giving a display of swimming under water, till an elder brother remarked unsympathetically, as is the way in large families : "Look at the ass ; he's drowning." He was told to rescue me, and did so. It was an unhappy experience getting air back into my lungs, and I was thoroughly ashamed for some hours.

Last of all, the fish on the bank were counted and we boys deputed to distribute them. A brace to So-and-so; a nice one to old Mrs This ; a brace and a half to Mrs That because of her large family, and so on. Mostly they went to poor people, often to pauper women, because my father was the local doctor and knew where trout would be most welcome. The pony, Sir Bevis, was harnessed up, the trap loaded with fish, and, wherever we

handed them in, we were overwhelmed with thanks, and there was always the comment : "What beauties!" And indeed they were.

The netting of the river became a less regular event as the elder ones of the family grew up and went into the world. Old Cox got rheumatism and Toby died of old age. I myself lost the taste for it after a memorable occasion at the age of thirteen. On that day I saw a trout caught on a fly in the River Dart. It was a tiny fish by our standards. I asked if I might try, and caught one the size of a sardine. When so little a fish could give that thrill, what must it be like to have one of our two-, three-, or even four-pounders on a frail fly-rod with thin gut and small fly!

It took me three years to catch one of our trout. In that smooth water the fish could only be approached from below and a dry fly must be dropped lightly just in front of their noses. The first year my bad casting merely frightened them ; the second year I rose and hooked a few, but, in my excitement, usually struck so violently that I broke the cast, or else I broke it in the first mad rush of the hooked fish. The third year I caught them. Some of my brothers had taken to fly-fishing too, and drag-net and minnow became obsolete.

But for some time fly-fishing remained in its infancy in those upper reaches, and we were able for quite a trivial sum to rent a mile of water above our own, which included the Mill Pool and the Top Pool. With me the sport became a passion. Every spare moment in the fishing season was spent on the river. While still at school—my school was on the river—I once volunteered to attend the O.T.C. camp at the beginning of the summer holidays. The train to the camp did not leave till about noon, after nearly all the other boys had gone to their homes. Dressed in uniform I went to the river, bitter that I must be away from it for a whole week. A hatch of fly began. Holding a branch, I leaned out over the river to try to catch one of the flies as they floated down. Satan tempted me. The train was due to start in half an hour. Why should I go to camp? War was out of fashion. I let go the branch. Having swum out and run to the school, I reached my housemaster breathless ; I had fallen in trying to catch some blue-winged olives ; my uniform was drenched ; how could I go to camp in this plight ?

A boy of about my build who, because he lived in some outlandish part of the United Kingdom, was catching a later train to his home, was saying good-bye to the housemaster. Hearing my troubles, he said : " You can borrow mine." There was just time to change, and I went to camp sorrowful but chastened in spirit.

A few years later the lure of the river kept me from my books when I should have been reading for an examination, and one sultry August evening found me on the Mill hatches tying on a small salmon fly. The day had been blank, but a salmon fly thrown into the foaming torrent of the Mill Pool was bound to succeed, and I was still at the stage where I must catch fish. I was about to cast the fly into the pool when an old friend of the family turned up and said he had advice to tender. I told him to go ahead. He said : "Spare the rod and pass the exam." I have always since been grateful for that advice.

In justice to that little river I must tell of a few of it red-letter days before passing to tragedy.

There was that leave from the first world war in the last week of May. The peace of the river after the turmoil of the trenches was all that man needed for contentment. It seemed to think it had a duty towards a soldier back on leave from France ; for the fish rose all day and always took my fly, partly perhaps because there had been none to fish for them for two years past.

Sunday of that week of leave was the most memorable day. I strolled up the river with a brother, and lunch-time found us at the Mill Pool. A fallen willow lay on the bank just above the hatches, and on this we sat to eat our sandwiches. From this spot we saw a lone of rising fish under the far bank. We took it in turns to fish. In half an hour, one of us always sitting on the fallen willow watching, we had caught 3½ brace, averaging just under the two pounds, one of them a three-pounder. The total for the day was 6½ brace ; and this on a stretch of river that has never known the May-fly.

Then there was the day when a friend brought his twin sons to fish to celebrate their coming of age. By tea-time the twins had caught a few fish, and one of them confided to me that his father, who had so far caught nothing (chiefly because he and I had so much to talk about), was not the clever fisherman he used to be. A little later, as 'father' and I were returning to the house for an early dinner to fit the evening rise, I saw a good fish lying under an overhanging willow, just where my brother had hooked the three-pounder that Sunday. 'Father' rose and hooked it, and the two went up an down the bank as though a salmon were being played. It weighted 4 lb. 5 oz., so 'father' was reinstated as a fisherman.

And there was that Sunday, 1st October, the autumn of a lovely summer of fierce drought, when three of us strolled up the river after lunch. We were without rods, for the season had ended the day before. At the Top Pool the light was right for seeing fish and there was semicircle of great trout lying near the surface where the rough water gave way to smooth, one of them a giant among trout. But perhaps I had better withhold that story, although the sin is now thirty-four years old.

The day most spoken of now was one in late September when my friend Philip, who loves a really big fish, came to stay because I had seen a monster in the Mill Pool always lying in the same place, and sometimes breaking the surface with its nose. Day after day and all day it occupied that lie, and I left it unmolested. Philip tried many flies, but it would not take. I suggested a sedge, and he said; " You try " ; and it took. A fearful battle followed. I was weeded once , but got clear again ; and all the time Philip, glancing at my rod point, kept saying: " Don't be too hard on him. " At last he got the net under it. The fish weighed 6 lb., short, thick, and deep. It is in a glass case above me as I write.

I missed seeing that great fish in its familiar spot, but that evening another very large one had taken over the same place. I fetched Philip, but it scorned everything he offered. He left it awhile and caught a fish in the tail of the pool, which looked so small after my six-pounder that he wanted to put it back, although it weighed 2¼ lb. Just as it

was getting dark a last try at the big fish was successful, and that one weighed exactly 5 lb.

The river gave more than fish. It gave the lazy flight of the heron, its eerie cry and sudden swerve when it saw you ; the swish of flighting wild duck ; the white owl quartering the meadows by Wheeler's Pool ; and the thousand sights and sounds and smells that any chalk stream gives and which have been written of by many more competent to do so than I.

After many years in distant lands I achieved my ambition and acquired the fishing rights of the stretch we used to rent whose centre was the Mill Pool. Bit by bit I added the adjoining meadows and the house that overlooked the pool. At first all was well, or nearly well ; for already I could see that the river was ailing. Some years before, men had come and sunk a deep bore into the great chalk range which, like a huge sponge, absorbed the winter rains and discharged them all summer to the springs of the river. The men found water in abundance and pumped it over the watershed to an industrial town in another river basin. Thus the river began to shrink. And the town grew and the industries grew and the individual consumption of water grew. More bores were sunk, more pumps put in, and adits were made in the chalk till a thousand million gallons were being taken. Year by year the river wilted more till it began to go dry in summer far down from its source.

To meet this shrinkage I tried narrowing the bed by throwing up ramps and planting rushes in the silt that formed below. It helped for a time, but only for a time.

As the river grew more stagnant, blanket-weed, that foul growth which settles like a cancer on a dying river, replaced the lovely weeds of a healthy stream. Growing at great speed during every hour of sunlight, it throws of ragged masses that roll down-stream half submerged, catch any surviving water-buttercup, and drag and hold it under till it suffocates for lack of light.

One July morning I walked down to the Mill Pool before breakfast. Looking up the river from the spot where the fallen willow had been, I saw a sight that will remain with me for ever. The whole stretch seemed to have blossomed in the night with water-lilies. But they were not lilies; they were the white bellies of fish dead from lack of oxygen. No healthy river weed survived to give off oxygen during the hours of sunlight, and the rotting flannel-weed absorbed it day and night. A month later the river was dry, and I used to walk up the gravel bed because it was drier than the dewy grass. Rabbits took the place of fish, made holes in the banks, and ate the garden produce. I netted out five hundred fish that still survived in my water and put them back in the river eight miles lower down. And I counted 1800 dead.

That autumn I had the town rubbish tipped into the dry bed of the stretch above the Mill Pool and banked it in with willow logs and thereby narrowed the bed by half. With the winter rains the springs broke and the river flowed again. I restocked, and fish made their way up from below.

A few years later, again on a July morning, I looked up that reach once more and saw that fish were rising

freely. But I soon saw that they were not rising at flies, but at oxygen, swimming swiftly in the panic of suffocation and coming to the surface to gulp air. Fortunately they were fewer than formerly.

Today, anyone looking up that reach would see no line of rising trout or waving water-buttercup. Instead he would see a patch of water almost stagnant, devoid of all signs of life, except perhaps for a moor-hen. There are no fish in that reach today. And it would be no use throwing a salmon fly into the Mill Pool, for no foaming torrent goes through the hatches now. Instead there is a tiny trickle, not enough to cover the concrete slide. And at the Top Pool no semicircle of great trout would be seen. There is none there. The pool is stagnant ; a barbed-wire fence, sagging with blanket-weed, runs down the middle of it to keep the cattle of either bank watered for a few weeks longer after the rest of the river has gone dry.

Every summer now when the rainfall is below average the river dries almost to the garden where I played as a child and where the Rector's daughter nearly drowned. No Rector's daughter could drown there today, even if she wanted to.

This destruction has been gradual, taking more than a quarter of a century, so that the plight of the river is scarcely noticed by the younger generation. Soon there will be none left that knew it in its health and vigour. Nor is the river I have described an isolated instance of man's destructive tendencies in the name of progress. Half the rivers of southern England are in decay, and there is no trace left of many that were flourishing trout streams when I was a boy. Many know this and inquire the reason, and those responsible say 'drought.' It is fashionable now to attribute most of our ills to drought. But drought is not the answer. I have looked up the local rainfall figures for eighty years and the first fifty were drier than the last thirty. The true answer is that, although we have Conservators and Catchment Boards and Water Acts, there is no conservation, merely exploitation. "Taps must replace wells," they say. And, indeed, it is desirable that they should. But by taking thought we could have both rivers and water for domestic and industrial use, and if war forced the necessity upon us, a way of achieving it would be devised. We pat ourselves on the back and puff out our chests when we have a five year plan for anything, but no one will consider a fifty- or a hundred-year plan, which is what our rivers need.

Thus, man being feckless, and Governments solely bent on what will catch the vote of the many, the murmur of the rivers fades as they wilt and die, and the voices of the few men that cry out for the preservation of our rivers remain unheeded. So a generation will arise that has never seen a river, and children will be taken to see one as they are taken to see the sea. No doubt, here and there, at certain times of year, folk will stop for a while on the bridges, as they do here today, not to see the great trout feeding on the shallows, the blue flash of the kingfisher, the wagtail balanced on a stone, the moor-hens and the dabchicks and the water-buttercup in flower, but because the winter bourne has begun to flow again.