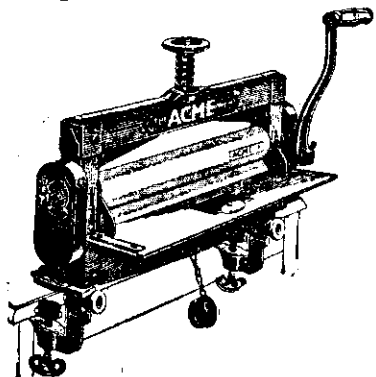


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THE joyful clang of the dinner-bell floated across the playground. The look of studied interest dropped from Mr. Sutcliffe's face and a dead geography class found its voice again, remembered it was hungry and bored, and surged shrilly up the aisles. Lennie came out on to the asphalt with a paper bag in one hand and a ball of newspaper in the other. Futz was ahead of him and running towards the river-bank. Together they swished through the tall grass under the willow trees and went down the slope beside the water. When the old poplar stump showed up through the grass they flopped down beside it and looked into each other's faces. A cold awareness of their dual purpose made them regret the remoteness of the recreation ground and its comforting herd noises. They had been to this place often during the year to eat their lunches, but it had never been more than an impulsive coming together. To-day, consciousness of a definite end to be achieved united them in a special way. To-day in the hour between morning and afternoon classes there would be no aimless eating of sandwiches and throwing away of crusts. The scraps they dropped into the stream now would be carefully placed so that none but the Old Man who lived in the hole under the bank could reach them.

"Got the bait?" Futz's voice crackled with eagerness as he pulled the fishing line from his school bag. Lennie unwrapped the screw of newspaper and held out the hunk of liver he had taken from his mother's meat-safe. Futz mauled it critically and cut off a thick bloody wedge with his pocket-knife. They opened their lunch parcels and chewed determinedly, spitting wet mouthfuls of bread into their hands and tossing them into the ripple. If you tossed it, too far out the ducks would come with a rushing whistle and their feet stuck forward, shovelling it up before it sank. Or the trout and smaller eels would gobble it and it would still be wasted.

Lennie remembered how they had first seen the Old Man who lived under the bank. It had been a day at the end of summer when the water was still low and clear. He and Futz had run away from a crowd of bigger boys and hidden in the grass by the old stump. No one had found their hiding place and after a while they had grown tired of whispering to each other and had stretched out on the river-bank. It was then that he had glided out of the

DOWN BY THE RIVER

Written for "The Listener" by
O. E. MIDDLETON

shadows, his flexible brown body cunningly trimmed to the down-rush of the stream. The biggest eel they had ever seen.

Futz had grown excited and thrown in whole sandwiches, but these had floated away and the ducks had got them. Later they had learned to moisten the scraps with saliva or to soak them in the water first. Then the Old Man had reached forward through the ripple, slowly mouthing their offering.

Lennie could not recall how many times they had watched him since. Even in winter when the river was deep and muddy they had felt he was there. He would never splash and break water as the smaller eels did further out, but they had continued to give him his share of food knowing that somewhere under the bank he would be waiting. In those months he had seemed like a friend, a secret thing they could come and marvel over in the dull hours away from home.

For a long time neither of them had wanted to tell anyone else. They had even made a promise about it here on the river-bank. Then yesterday Futz had come to school with a plan for setting a line and catching him. Futz's father was a ranger. According to him eels were dirty and vicious. They lived on ducklings and trout and when they grew big they were a real menace to swimmers. Futz's crusading fire had even been fanned by a little breath of covetousness.

"They say eelskin makes corker boot-laces if you dry it in the sun. And we could sell the meat to the Maoris."

"There he is!" Lennie pointed down into the amber shadows. Half-ashamed

and half-eager at what they were going to do, he watched Futz unravel the line and drop it in softly so that there was no splash. The red blob of liver sank quickly with the weight of the hook and drifted toward the shady part.

They could see the Old Man very clearly to-day. He lay sleekly near the bottom, his head thrust forward and his threadlike tail undulating gently. They saw for the first time the little white horns jutting from his head as he slid nearer the bait. Futz danced with excitement. He wrapped the line round his fingers and crooned to the eel, imploring him to bite hard.

The Old Man mumbled the bait in his eel-way with his flat mouth. Lennie began to feel sick. He was such a satisfying brown shape down there in the water. If they hooked him he would come writhing on to the grass in a tangle of line. Their hands would be thick with his slime by the time they got the hook out. And they would have to beat him on the tail to kill him. They would need a very heavy stick because he was such a big eel. Lennie started looking half-heartedly for a strong enough piece of wood.

Just then Futz yelled "Got him!" and started hauling on the line. Lennie turned to see the water swirling and turning muddy where the Old Man had been. Suddenly a shiny snake-like head shot above the bubbles. Two bright fish-eyes looked through the sunlight at them, then the surface smoothed over and he was gone.

Futz was swearing bitterly and holding up a frayed end of fishing line. "He got away and took my hook with him."

By the time the bell went for afternoon school Lennie's stomach had stopped churning. They hadn't caught the Old Man after all. By now he would be away down-stream somewhere, rubbing his nose on a stone to get the hook out.

As they headed back towards the classrooms Futz was still thinking about bootlaces. He said, "I bet some of the smaller ones would do just as well. How about having another go at dinner-time to-morrow?"

Lennie was thinking that he wouldn't have to take so much lunch in future. There would be no fun sharing it with the ducks, and anyway he wouldn't go down to the river-bank any more.

To Futz he said, "Think I'll start playing footy to-morrow."

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 8, 1949.