

It's peaceful under the willows

Written for "The Listener".
By "ETAOIN"



I HAD just climbed out of the river-bed on the edge of a hay-field when I first saw the old woman approaching and I fully expected that she was going to give me a lecture on the institution of private property, with special reference to riparian rights. Anglers get used to that kind of thing, but being quiet and peaceable individuals and diplomatic withal, they can generally placate the landowner or even win him over if there happens to be a spare fish or two in the bag.

But apparently I misjudged her, for when she came up to me she gave me good day with a sweet smile and inquired what luck I had had. I hadn't had any, but as I pointed out to her, it was such a fine day and the river was so beautiful just to look at, that the catching of fish didn't seem of such prime importance as it had when I set out, and no doubt I would do better in the evening, anyway.

"I was just going to ask you," she said, "if you had seen my little boy Jim on the river anywhere? He is lost somewhere, and I thought he might be down there. He has always liked the water and loves just watching it moving and seeing the trout swimming round under the willows."

"So far," I replied, "I haven't seen a soul, but I haven't covered much water yet, and maybe I'll catch up with him farther upstream. How was he dressed?"

"Well," she said, "He is wearing his sailor-suit. He always likes to wear it at the week-ends; but you couldn't mistake him. He's such a fine little man, almost as big now as his Mother, and he has fair, fair hair. He will probably be lying on a rock somewhere just looking into the water. He has always liked the water and he loves just watching it moving and seeing the trout swimming in the pools. You'll know Jim at once."

"But there is no need at all for you to go out of your way to look for him. He will be all right, I know. He has got lost so often before. Little boys are thoughtless sometimes; they don't know how much their mothers worry about them and time passes so quickly when one is young. . . ." She smiled. "You will be telling me that time always passes quickly by the river."

I SMILED back. "That's true enough, in all conscience. I'm hardly on the river of a morning before, it seems, it is time for me to reel up and get off home again. It's the water that bewitches us, it washes the minutes and the hours away and time only comes back to us in the evening—unless the emptiness of our stomachs brings us back to reality."

"That's just the way it is with Jim," she said. "Many a time he forgets all about his dinner and I always try to see that he has an apple in his pocket before he goes out. There's so much nourishment in an apple, and it gives his stomach something to work on. Of course, I'm not really worrying about him, though he has been away a little longer this time than he usually is. He is a very careful boy, and knows how to look after himself."

"He has often got lost like this before. Once, when I missed him after sending him into the township to get some messages, I went in myself later on to see if anything was keeping him, and there was a fine to-do. Mr. Matthews at the store said he had seen him going back by the river and he got properly worried and insisted on going out to look for him and took some

other men with him. I told him that there was really nothing to worry about, but he said that it was better to be on the safe side. Of course they found him, as I knew they would, lying on a rock and looking down into the water. He liked watching the water moving and seeing the trout swimming in the pools, and he was quite upset, thinking that he had worried me by forgetting to come straight home. But it was all right; he had come back to me just as he always does. Even if I did worry, I wouldn't have the heart to let him see it because he does so like being down by the river. It's the water and the trout swimming round in the green under the willow-trees.

"Many a time he has pestered me to go down to the river with him and watch the fish, but a Mother has so many things to do about the house that I haven't been down with him yet. But I'll go down some day when I have more time to spare. It might do me good. I have had such pains in my head lately and Jim says that when you look down into the green water it seems to wash all your aches away, and your eyes feel cool if the sun has been in them. Often he has said how he wishes he could get down under the water like the fish. They seem so peaceful down there and they never get tired of swimming round and round in the green under the willow trees, where the sun doesn't bother them. He can swim, too, can Jim, but he says he gets annoyed because he can't stay down long enough to enjoy it the way the fish do. I often laugh at him and tell him he should have been born a fish and that makes him laugh too, and I tell him that the fish haven't such a peaceful life after all because if the anglers aren't after them with their hooks and lines, other fish may catch them or the gulls may swoop down and kill them; but when I say that Jim laughs again and says that if he were a fish he would be a big one and a wise one too, and he would catch the others instead of them catching him. That's just like a boy, isn't it?"

I CHUCKLED. "He sounds as if he were an angler at heart. I'll probably find that Jim is a kindred spirit and if he is later than usual in getting home it'll probably be because we are trying to catch some of the big fish he watches."

"Well, if you do meet up with him, you won't keep him out too long, will you?" she asked anxiously. "He really has been away longer this time than he has been before and he hasn't had any dinner. I know it is silly of me to worry, because he always takes such good care of himself, but I can't help worrying just a little. And it seems to be a bit different this time." She fumbled in the pocket of her pinafore.

"Before, when he came down to the river like this, I would just wait until he remembered to come back or perhaps I would come part of the way to meet him, like to-day. I used to meet him sometimes just about here and he would take my hand and walk back to the house with me telling me about all the lovely fish he had seen in the green water under the willows. Other times the neighbours might give me a call when they were passing and tell me that Jim was down at the river again, but this time it was a telegraph boy from the township. He came in just a little while ago with this. Do you think it's different this time?"

MY hand went out mechanically for the telegraph form. I felt I could not read it, any more than I could face the worried inquiry of her eyes. I half turned away and it seemed that in the afternoon sun the words swam on the paper. . . . "The Admiralty regrets . . . H.M. Submarine . . . overdue, and must be presumed lost . . . your son James. . ."

She must have seen my face go white because I felt her hand on mine.

"Do you think," she said, "it's. . ."

"Yes," I answered, "I think it is different this time."

I felt very sick, and afterwards, when I had done what I could for her, I went back to the river and lay down on a rock under the willows, and watched the trout swimming round and round. They look so peaceful and the green is easy on your eyes if the sun has hurt them.

They Hankered After Hangings

A very curious circumstance took place in the kingdom of Denmark, relative to the infliction of capital punishment upon malefactors. They were attended from the prison to the place of execution by priests, accompanied by a very numerous procession, singing psalms, etc., etc.: which ended, a long discourse was addressed by the priest to the culprit, who was hanged as soon as he had heard it. This spectacle, and all the pious cares bestowed upon the criminals, so far seduced the imaginations of the common people, that many of them committed murder purposely to enjoy such inestimable advantages, and the government was positively obliged to make hanging dull as well as deadly, before it ceased to be an object of popular ambition.

—SYDNEY SMITH.