

THE DOOM OF THE OTTER

(After Mr Henry Williamson)

Showing how, in spite of its glorious scenery, Exmoor is a terribly difficult place to understand.

E.V. Knox

CHAPTER 1

LARKA lay on the glidders, looking out over the saltings of the gleat.

The quickets of water in the gussets of the stream looked now like the tails of stoats and now like the talons of an owl.

He was not deceived by this resemblance. No otters are.

Ic-yang!

Thousands and thousands of years ago, before the wild hog-mammoths ragrowstered on Exmoor, Larka had been a simple land-marten without interviewers. Now he was a water-marten with literary acquaintances everywhere. But he was not conscious of the change.

He picked the starbright salmon-scales from his glued whiskers with a webbed paw and waited for Sideslip to come. A gemmeous dragonet clittered over the marram grasses near the fish-pass and blaked above the old lean pill-mouth channered by worms. A taint of dog-fitch drifted down the uvver, mingled with garlic, mullein and honeysuckle. Scarcely a commonplace word, if Larka could only have known it, existed anywhere. There was a rue of wind in the maz-zards.

Ic-yang!

A he-rat yipped.

Waywise in all the runs and rilletts of the Two Waters, Larka had few desires. He loved, played, and ate. Especially ate! He knew no history or biology. If anyone had placed a copy of the Concise Oxford Dictionary in his bolt

of twisted claw-roots hollowed out where the goyal widens under the pobbles of the wall, he would not have tried to use it. He would merely have tised through his teeth. He tised now. There was nothing much else to do.

Kak, kak, kak, kak, said the young herons standing in the pool. Old Nog snicked sideways, beating long vanes as he pried the sill of the weir.

Krok, krok, krok, cried the raven. His croak was dry and brittle. He had eight or nine young bull-frogs in his craw.

It was dimmity, and the incult morasses of the Great Kneeset were occluded by ragged scarves of gloom. Nothing could be done to avert this tragedy. What had happened to them had happened. A vuzpeg whined in the ferny clutter. He had eaten a bad ruddock's egg. Go-beck, go-beck, go-beck, called the billy-grouse on the moor. A dog-fox began hunting stag-beetles on the dry shillet close to the gromwell-bed, whose scattered pods drifted loosely down the stickle and swirled in the dry scum of the ooze.

Hu-ee-ic!

A ram-cat came out of the twisted alders and rasped. An old boar-porpoise flung himself out of a trough and yickered. He would have yarred if he had known how to do it, but it was years since he had left his school. He had come up from the sea to hunt the polliwiggles in the water-warp.

Larka pressed his seals on the mud and listened for the low, flute-like whistles of his mate. Sideslip sat on a jut of scour eating salmon out of a tin. She smelt an otter-scent that she knew, and crept round the pilings into the race.

Hu-ee-ic!

The noise was like wet fingers drawn across a pane of glass. Larka had never heard wet fingers drawn over a pane of glass, but he knew instantly that she was there.

He remembered nothing now of the old hen-otter who had taught him to play bumblepuppy with October puffballs on the warm slope of Baggy Head, and bite at the blurred

gleam of loach in the shadowy pill. He was over a yard long. He weighed twenty pounds. His rudder was large and muscular. It was nearly as large as a glossary.

Hu-ee-ic!

His water-sleek coat glistened in the brimming light as he slid over the algae-smearred rocks. He let himself slowly into the splash. A V-shaped insertion of bubbles was sewn across the unpleated body of the pool. It was his ream.

The couple played hide-and-seek together amongst the ruddy strings of the sap-stealing dodder - though they did not use this phrase, for no otters swear. They dived, swam, bit, and tossed dry rabbit skulls and bleached dace bones above their heads. When they were tired, Sideslip went back to sleep in the old holt under the willow where she had been born in a nest of scurvy grass and fallen moss. Larka let himself into his own holt under the sycamore-tree, driving out two voles and a vair.

CHAPTER II

Tally Ho!

Leu-in! Leu-in, b'hoys! Ov-ov-ov-ov-over!

Tally-Ho! Tally-Ho! Yaa-aa-ee on to'm!

Evidently an otter hunt was afoot.

A dead stick floated down the stream with a live fly on it. Motor-cars with men and women appeared on the bank. A dark shadow caligured the funnicle of Larka's lair. It was Bugloss, the great belving stallion-hound of the Two-Waters Pack. Larka knew him well. He had been belved at before.

Plomp, plomp, plomp. That was Scratchem the terrier trying to get in.

Wough! Wough! Wough!

That was the terrier barking. He never spelt it with a final "w".

Lieu-in there! Lieu-in! Lieu-in!

24.

That was the Master speaking. He was a big, red-faced man rather like the Rev. CHARLES KINGSLEY but less upright. He had a great ash-pole, notched with the records of a hundred kills.

Larka was swimming in the leat. They had tried to gouge him out with an iron crowbar poked through the top of the hold. The hounds had thrown their tongues at him in vain. Then the men had thrown gas at him. Larka experienced no rage as he swam. It did not occur to him that it was unsportsmanlike to throw gas-pellets at a dog-otter under a sycamore-tree. He felt no personal animosity towards the therms.

When he had swum the clear leat between the borage and comfrey he took a land loop round by the rough hawk-weed and ragwort, and came back to the clear leat again, and then land looped once more and then returned to the leat. It went on hour after hour.

Pull 'im out, old fellers! Lieu-in there! Lieu-in!

Bugloss was always on this trail, not ceasing to belve.

Larka took to the main stream. He was betrayed as usual by the line of bubbles-a-vent. Stag-men and doe-women with sticks stood across the stream and stuck their sticks into the stickle to stick him.

He came ashore and ran to a farm-yard, where a great boar-sow was nursing a farrow of eleven cubs. There he quatted, trying to hide, but the boar-sow ran berserk at him and droye him away. He came to a badger's bury, but the badger was eating a pheasant and yinned. Larka mewed miserably. A butcher-bird yickered at him from its larder of bumble-bees. He returned to the river, but was viewed immediately. He caught a trout and went into a wood to eat it and rest.

Tally-Ho! Tally-Ho! Yaa-aa-ee on tō'm!

He could scarcely run now nor swim. He had been caught twice, and pieces were bitten out of him all over. He dived through the chain of jack-men and jill-women.

across the stickle, but the great teeth of Bugloss met in his rudder and stayed there, giving him a heavy list to port.

Locked together they went down to the sea. Where the young tide-rip met the old slack and Larka had eaten his first lobster, he broke loose and, turning, bit Bugloss fiercely in the flues. They were choked immediately, and the huge stallion-hound belved once and died.

Ic-yang!

Far out in the gathering gloom there came to the frothed surface of the glide

a bubble

O

and then another bubble

O

and then another bubble

O

and then

no more.

This piece is taken from E.V. Knox's book of burlesques Here's Misery!, published in 1928, and thanks are due to Methuen and Co. Ltd., for permission to reprint it here.
