CHAPTER IX.

A RIVER OF DEVON.

THE EXE AS A SALMON RIVER—WONDERFUL CAPTURE OF A MONSTER PIKE—TWO HOURS WITH A SALMON—MY SALMON ROD—A SHORT CAST—MAJOR TREHERNE'S CAST—TROUT-FISHING—A NICE BASKET—A LUCKY RECAPTURE—POETRY OF FISHING—OTTERS—HERONS—MOORHENS—WATER-OUSELS—KING-FISHERS.

A RIVER in Devon, though a moorland one, can hardly be classed as coming within the nomenclature of this little book. But, as that notable warrior, Captain Fluellen, observed, 'There is a river in Macedon, and there is, also, moreover, a river at Monmouth. . . . and there are salmons in both,' I may, perhaps, be pardoned, therefore, while on the subject of fishing, if I narrate some experiences among 'salmons' and other fish in the river I have referred to. Captain Fluellen says 'it was out of his prains' what name the river of Macedon bore, and no wonder; but I may say that my reference is to the river Exe, on which my home is situated.

Previous to 1879, the Exe was little accounted of as a salmon-river. Indeed, I am not aware that anyone fished systematically with the rod for salmon except, perhaps, in the immediate neighbourhood of Exeter above the tideway. An occasional fish may have been taken when spinning a minnow for trout, but they were not recognised as regular visitors to the river, nor were they often seen. As trout-fishing ceased in some of the association's waters as early as September the first, I am inclined to think that autumn-running fish may have been present in greater numbers than was suspected, but thus escaped observation. Parr were certainly sometimes troublesome in the spring.

However that may be, a total change came o'er the spirit of our river in 1879. The terribly wet spring and summer of that year, so disastrous to farmers, proved to be of incalculable benefit to the river, which developed all the honours of a salmon-stream.

A few fish were seen in the upper waters in May, and I think some were killed with minnow during that month. In June, I was away, and on my return found that salmon had ascended in large

numbers, were to be seen sporting in every pool, and had already afforded grand sport.

The river remained in ply throughout the season, and fish were able to surmount the weirs, numbers of which obstructions act as formidable barriers to the ascent of salmon between the sea and the upper waters.

Sixty or seventy fish to a rod in the waters with which I am connected—those of the Up Exe Association—were obtained by more than one angler. It was said that salmon, which should by rights have entered other rivers of South Devon, on this occasion, for some inscrutable reason, selected the Exe in preference. Up to the last they came in shoals. On the very last day of the season, I watched them trying to make their way over Thorverton weir. 'They came not in single spies, but in battalions.' Half-a-dozen would be wriggling and striving against the fall at one time. Great alterations have happily been executed at this and other weirs, and, though there is still much to be desired, fish can ascend in anything like a full water, and fair sport is often to be had in spring and autumn ever since that

memorable year, though it has never been approached as to numbers.

During summer the river is generally too low for sport, even though fish should be lying in the pools. But the smolts have to run the gauntlet of many enemies in their descent to the sea in spring. I fear they are not quite so unmolested by human agency as is desirable, but their great foe is the 'pike.' These voracious 'tyrants of the watery plain' exist in large numbers in the lower waters, but I have not known of any above Thorverton weir. They are caught occasionally just below it, but I have never heard of any above.

A young friend of mine,* a fine young fellow, and now pulling No. 3 oar in the Oxford eight, had a very notable piece of sport with a large pike at a part of the river below where the Culm joins the Exe. I think so excellent a tussle, and one so well and graphically described—for I give it in his own words—may well serve as the prelude to other descriptions of sport on our river. He entitles it 'My first pike.'

'I was at Rewe in September, 1885, and, there

* Mr. S. Williams. This was written in 1887, before the University race.

being no shooting just then, I thought of having a try for perch or whatever I could catch below Stoke Cannon, and so work on to Culm Foot, where the Culm runs into the Exe. With that end in view, I consulted an old "eel clatter" in Stoke as to whether there was a chance of getting a fish anywhere, and, if so, where were the best places.

'"Ees, vai," said he. "I knaws there be gurt fish thereabouts. Way, wan night, when I was down there catching eels, I yeared a 'menjous gurt flop in the water, and could see a fish drave (drive) like 'Billy eyed.' Aw, ees, do'ee go doun there, sur, you'm bound to catch wun."

'So down I went the next day, armed with my trout-rod (single-handed), reel, and fly-book. Not having a hook of any sort, and, not wishing to massacre a large trout or salmon fly, I hunted up an old perch-book of my father's—Heaven knows how old it was, I cannot remember my father fishing.

'Arrived at Culm Foot, the next thing was to get a live bait. Luckily some dace were rising not far off, so I caught one with a fly and transferred him to my bait-can, which was made out of

an old tin. Having looked out the thickest trout-cast I could find (it was not at all thick, as I had only been using very fine casts all through the summer), I attached the old hook, soaked both hook and cast well, put on my float in the shape of a cork with a slit in it, baited my hook, and threw it into the deep swirl made by the meeting of the waters of Culm and Exe. The hole must have been fairly deep, but I had no opportunity of judging on account of the blackness of the Culm water, which is caused by five paper-mills between Cullompton and Stoke pouring their filth into the river, and thereby killing most of the fish.

'Having seen my float slowly circling round the pool, I laid my rod down in the reeds, and went backwards a little bit, to get out of the reeds and mud close to the water's edge. I then lit a pipe and had hardly got it into good working order before I saw my float disappear, and the rod preparing to follow it. I hastily got hold of it and was immediately aware that I had a large fish on.

'Away he went across the pool, taking out about thirty yards of line at a rush (luckily it was a newly-put-on line of forty yards, and was without

a hitch or kink of any sort). Slowly I reeled him up to me, and again away he went. This sort of thing went on for perhaps eight times till the fish grew tired, and went into the weeds about fifteen yards from me. Of course I had been very gentle with him all this time, and now I had to employ some force to get him out of the weeds.

'After some resistance, he slowly came back to me, tail first, with weeds hanging about him like the allegorical Old Father Thames, and then for the first time I saw him. My bat! what a tremendous fellow he seemed. I was quite aghast at his size, and wondered how he had not broken me. Of course, I thought, I shall never land him, and I know I shall never be believed if I tell them I lost a fish of quite eighteen pounds (which was the size I assessed him at).

'After a few fainter and fainter rushes, I had him under my feet dead-beat. The next thing was to get him out. I had no net or gaff of any description, and was afraid to try to stab him with my knife, as I might only wound him, and then he would probably break me. However, I slowly towed him from the pool where he had

taken me, up a back stream where the bank was higher and firmer—he following me like some great log, and my rod bent to the delightful angle that tells of a heavy fish. Having got him close under my feet in fairly shallow water, I put my rod down—with plenty of slack line on it, in case he took it into his head to move off—and ran to some railings of tough ash, a little way off.

'After a deal of hauling, I managed to wrench off a long piece of ash "like a weaver's beam," sharpened the end of it, where it had split, into a sharp point about the size of an ordinary lead-pencil, and stood over my fish, ready to give him the *coup-de-grâce*. With my rod in my left hand, I stooped down, and drove the instrument (I can call it by no other name) into him, just where his head joins his body. He never moved, and turned on his side immediately, and he was mine.

'I had to get into the water to lift him out, and then I had a good look at him (or her as it turned out, for it was a hen-fish in fine condition). I was a mile from Stoke, and had to get the fish there. I dragged him all the way across the fields till I reached the blacksmith's shop. There I weighed him, and he turned the scale at twenty-

three-and-a-half pounds. Every scale was taken off one side of his body, so that ought to bring his weight at least up to twenty-four pounds.

'That was my first pike. I might add that I repaired the next day to the same place, armed with a huge pike rod, and a trace and hook big enough to land a whale apparently. I hooked another very large fish, which broke me in the first rush, the trace going at the swivel.

'Pike, it is generally said, swim in pairs, and this may possibly have been the cock-fish.'

This noble fish now reposes in a glass case in the paternal home at Rewe.

Before such a capture as that above recorded, and with such inadequate means, most other ordinary fish-fights must pale, and I feel great hesitation in narrating one of several prolonged tussles I have had with salmon in the Exe since it developed into a recognised salmon-river. It will, however, serve to illustrate, what happened to my young friend, the varied chances which attend the fisherman. Luck certainly comes to him when least expected, and also ill-luck, against which all reasonable provision has been made.

Between the weirs of Up Exe and Thorverton

there exists a stretch of about half-a-mile of calm, deep water, and to this I often send down my boat, from its little haven by my house, just above Up Exe weir. At the foot of the last-named weir, and on to the next bend, is a capital 'stickle,' very good for trout, and at the tail of this, where it enters the deep water, I have often raised salmon, when the river is full enough to produce a bit of current there. The water, however, is usually very slack for salmon-fishing, and it is quite protected from westerly winds by high ground.

All along the stretch of deep water below, fine trout lie under the bushes, and a nice creel-full I sometimes pick up there when the water is suitable, but it is quite out of reach of favourable winds, as a rule, and in consequence very still.

My salmon-rod is only a light grilsing weapon of about fourteen feet long, little more indeed than a double-handed trout-rod. I have had it in use for many years, and am accustomed to it, a matter of some importance to me. I am quite content if I can place my salmon-fly neatly on the water with only two or three rod-lengths of line

out. I have no power to do more; and when I read of such casts as that made by Major Treherne, even though by means of a powerful rod, I feel amazed that over forty-five yards of line can be sent whirling through the air, and so distant a point reached by the agency of any rod. All honour to him who can accomplish such a feat!

I was out one evening in the end of May, two years ago, on the water in question. Unfortunately my lad had broken his right collar-bone; but, as he thought he could gaff with his left if the opportunity offered, he accompanied me. My indoor servant took the oars, but he was more willing than experienced. Our course down-stream to the junction of stream and pool was certainly erratic, and we passed the usual 'lie' without my getting a rise. We, however, worked the boat up again, assisted in our tortuous course by a boat-hook in the one available hand of the lad in the bow.

Again I essayed my luck with a small Jock Scott, or black and teal, I forget which. This time I was more successful. A little higher up than usual, a fish came—a silver streak a boil, and then the rush. And such a rush

Directly he was hooked, he turned, and went down-stream harder than any fish I ever handled.

'Back water!' I exclaimed. 'Follow the fish!' as the line was being taken out at a furious rate. 'Backing water' was an accomplishment in which my willing oarsman was not a proficient, but with what he could do, and the current, and the towing of the salmon, we were moving slowly down, though the salmon was still going his hardest. I never saw such a rapid rush.

I looked at my reel. Oh! horror! there were only a few turns left, for I had only some seventy or eighty yards of line on. I felt wretched, expecting the inevitable crash, when suddenly the violent strain ceased, and I was able to gather in line. I breathed more freely and felt like a man reprieved. The fish had turned in the very nick of time without jumping. One yard more, and something must have gone, and that certainly would have included the fish.

We were now in deeper and slacker water, and the salmon was boring into the bank on the further side at the wide bend of the river. As we dropped down almost level with him, I gathered line in fast, and was soon on fair terms in that respect,

and ready for any further move. He made several dashes about the pool, but knocked about at his own sweet will, for I had not the slightest power over him. There were rotten weeds on the opposite side, and these he again bored into, and, holding to that bank apparently with the object of entangling the line in some overhanging bough or projecting root, now made his way up-stream with a bunch of weeds clinging to the line. We had to follow, and it was no easy matter to manage him, as he got higher up than the boat, and I could not turn to face him. I find some difficulty occasionally when a fish suddenly rushes up, as I have to play him over my shoulder.

After some considerable exhibition of his strength and independence, for I had little or no influence over his movements, he took it into his head that he would return to the place whence he came, and settled down into a quiet steady pull up-stream. We pulled away up on one side, and he on the other, the oarsman being assisted as before by the bowman, now that we were in shallower water.

At last the vicissitudes of the chase brought us

clear of bushes, and opposite the low open meadow bank, and, as it was quite shallow above, we brought up here with the bow of the boat inshore.

He, too, evidently came to the conclusion that it was too shallow above, and hung about deeper water on the other side a good way above the place where I hooked him. Here he doggedly fought. His initial energy had abated, but he was still somewhat master of the situation, and I could do little at first to control him. He ought to have been a very heavy fish by the way he fought, but what size he was I could only conjecture, for he had not shown. Still I did not think, somehow, that he was above the average of the river, about ten pounds. It was now dusk and he had been hooked over an hour, before I began to have a little my own way. I would coax him half-way across, then he would dash back, but not attempt to go far down-stream, and I was able to play him from our position by the bank. This happened many times with less and less vigour as time went on, and at last I managed to bring him over to our side. He shied once at the lad on the bank who, gaff in left hand, was waiting for a chance, and I made

him stand lower down. Again I got him pretty close to the bank, and my lad made a stroke, held for a moment, and then away went the fish once more to the opposite side, apparently with as much vigour as he had displayed any time during the last half-hour.

He attempted his old tactics, but his strength was failing him. The moon, little past the full, had risen in great glory behind the trees of Up Exe mill, and the gaffer got a good view as I once more towed the fish under the bank. He struck, and this time with success, and in another moment had a beautiful clean fish of just eleven pounds lying on the moonlit sward, and I, very tired, lowered the point of my rod.

He was hooked outside in the fleshy part of the cheek, and this of course accounted for his great staying powers. From first to last the struggle occupied nearly two hours. An evening or two afterwards I killed another fish of almost exactly the same size above Up Exe weir. I heard a splash in a run of water not more than four feet deep—for the river was getting very low—above where I was casting, and, rowing up there, rose him at once. He missed, but I gave him a little

rest, put on a small Durham Ranger, and hooked and killed him in about twenty minutes in a place I had never killed one in before. Such are the varied chances of fishing.

I was told the other day of a gentleman who, fishing some few miles below, in the waters of another association, was placed in the same predicament (with a difference) in which I was so nearly placed with the fighting-fish whose capture I have recorded.

A strong fish ran out all his line. He had failed to secure it to the axle of the reel, and it was simply carried off bodily, and he was left lamenting. At least I know I should have been. Life has few charms left, for the time, when one is broken in playing a good fish. Every fisherman knows the feeling of blank hopelessness, of gloomy despondency which comes over him on such an occasion; but to see one's line glide rapidly from one, the rod straighten, and not even have one last tug and tussle. Dreadful! I do not know how that gentleman felt, but I, personally, would far rather have had a grand pull and struggle at the last, even though there ensued a universal smash, than be thus gently deserted.

Our fish do not run large. The largest I have heard of being killed in these parts was, I think, under twenty-three pounds, and he was killed in low, bright water, with, I have been given to understand, a worm.

Now worms in the right place are, as we know from the studies of experienced observers, most interesting and useful creatures. They offer themselves as food for moles, and moles, we are told, are also very useful, though, as a prejudiced individual, I prefer their absence in my meadow to their presence. 'Your worm is your only emperor for diet,' said Hamlet. But with all these attributes in their favour, worms are yet but grovelling creatures, and it seems a little out of the fitness of things to use him as diet or bait for so lordly a fish as the salmon. I do not think I should have the heart to do it; but then I am greatly prejudiced in favour of using the fly, and the fly only, in water so well flogged as the Exe, both for salmon and trout. Others, of course, think and act differently, and I do not blame them for so doing; the water is often, for a lengthened period, unsuitable for fly-fishing.

The chapter I intended devoting to fishing in

this section of the river Exe will be unduly prolonged if I linger over my chat, as I confess I am very much inclined to do, about salmon.

The river, to all appearances, containing, as it does, a succession of deep pools and 'stickles,' is one eminently adapted by nature for both salmon and trout, with good feeding. But modern drainage on Exmoor, and on the hills adjacent to the beautiful valley of the Exe, which supply the feeders to the river, has greatly destroyed its value as a fishing-stream. Heavy rainfalls produce floods, sometimes disastrous ones, but the river soon runs out, and only remains in good ply for a short time. The consequence also is that the springs are more quickly acted on by summer drought, and in a hot summer the river sometimes ceases to flow. I have seen salmon in the pools suffering much from this want of fresh water, for there does not appear to be much done to intercept the sewage of towns and villages on its banks.

The numerous obstacles to the ascent of salmon in the shape of weirs constructed to afford water-power to mills is another prolific impediment to their ascent, as they can only get over them in a full river. Great improvements have, it is true,

been carried out in this respect, under the direction of the conservators of the river since 1879, but it is believed a good deal yet remains to be done. This is a matter of funds, as the conservators are alive to the advantage which would probably ensue.

Our trout in this section of the Exe run about three to the pound, taking them all round. A pound fish is not to be had every day; indeed, the fisherman need not expect many of that size in the season. The Tiverton association, which lies next above us, has endeavoured to improve the breed of trout by introducing fry of the larger Loch Leven species. Our association, I regret to say, did not see their way to do this, but one or two private members have stocked two or three pools at their own expense. We have not yet had time to see the result of this experiment.

How often! how very often! it is that the biggest fish of the day—or what was esteemed so—through some piece of unnatural bad luck effects his escape. It is a constant subject of complaint.

As I have spoken of the viccissitudes and chances of sport, I will narrate a case where, for once, the reverse happened.

I had killed a nice basket of trout averaging nearly half-a-pound, and including one of close on a pound, in the stretch of sluggish water just where the two hours' struggle with the salmon took place.

The railway bridge of the Exe Valley Railway spans the river just above Thorverton weir, and there is a very pretty look-out down the river from this point, defaced, however, by the new and hideous erection of Thorverton mill.

There is a second low fall below the upper weir, and a fine stream, and good for salmon, issues from it. Indeed, most of the water between that and the imposing structure of Thorverton bridge holds fish in a good season. This last spans the channel of the river in one high arch with smaller ones in the meadows on either side. A weary trial to suffering horseflesh is that abrupt ascent and descent, and not innocent of accidents. It is said that so many mere temporary structures had been washed away that the designers determined to have one beyond reach of floods.

Beyond lies a scene essentially English. Park-like, 'wide-skirted meads,' interspersed with trees, with the glittering river winding amongst them, low hills bounding the distance.

A gentleman, on one occasion, hooked a good salmon some distance above the bridge, and had to take the deep water under it, in pursuit of his fish. Happily, he was tall and strong, and a good fisherman, and he eventually most deservedly landed his fish below, one of between seventeen and eighteen pounds.

But I am wandering from my trout. I was returning my boat from fishing just above Thorverton weir, very well satisfied with my morning's sport, when I hooked a nice trout close in to the bank between the weir and railway bridge. He would not respond to the efforts of my little single-handed rod, but kept low down, and after a few minutes' play suddenly became stationary.

Alas! I knew by the humming character of the water as it flowed against the line that I was fixed in a snag. I regretted having lost so good a fish just at the last, but there was no help for it, and I told my lad to get hold of the snag with the boat-hook. He did so, out of about six feet of water, and raised it to the surface, and there was the trout, a fine fat one, still attached. I thought this a piece of luck indeed, but even as he was about to get the landing-net under the

fish, the hold gave, and down sank the snag, snapping my casting-line and carrying all three flies away.

I mournfully took out my fly-book, and set about preparing another cast, at the same telling my man to lay hold of the vexatious snag and get rid of it. After some probing about he got hold of it some distance below its original position, again raised it, and we had the satisfaction of seeing that the trout was still there, the flies being probably caught in some part which gave to his struggles like a rod. This time we safely landed him and I recovered my flies. He weighed half an ounce over a pound, and was the fish of the day, though one other ran him close. So, contrary to usage, the best trout of the day was *not* lost.

It is all these varied incidents and chances which give so great an additional charm to sport. The cynical genius, who defined fishing so contemptuously as a rod with a fool at one end and a worm at the other, did not, possibly could not, realize what underlies sport, considered as the act by which man's predatory instincts seek to destroy or capture wild creatures. What knew he of the

deep excitement felt by the salmon fisher, when mid the turmoil of waters comes the boil of a rising fish, the thrill which passes through him when he raises his rod, feeling the plunge downwards of the hooked fish, and then the rush, the screeching reel, the leap, and all the manifold details attending the struggle between man and the noblest fish which haunts our rivers? What could he know of the delicacy required in making a cast above a rising trout, and the care and precision so requisite to success in all the manipulations of luring and playing it?

Then the surroundings, the scenery, the numberless interests which nature offers to those who seek her secluded places!

Will the reader forgive me, if I offer a new arrangement of Wordsworth's old lines—

> 'A fisher by a river's brim.
> A foolish fisher was to him,
> And he was nothing more.'

Nothing more! because, like Peter Bell, his perceptive faculties failed to realise anything more. With this protest I think I may well conclude my rambling chat on fishing matters; but, before closing the chapter, I will refer to some of those natural enemies of sport which infest our river.

Otters abound. I have seen them in the middle of the day. A pack of otter-hounds occasionally visit our water, but there is such a long stretch of deep water that they never kill just here, though above they sometimes get better sport. Otters destroy trout by the dozen at a time. Several friends have watched them fishing, but I only know personally of two salmon killed by them near my house.

Herons are frequently to be seen standing, solemn and watchful, on the look-out for any passing trout who may incautiously venture within reach of the accurate dart of that powerful bill. We are rather too well supplied with these beautiful additions to the river landscape, from the heronry at Lord Carnarvon's place of Pixton, some twenty miles up the river.

Water-hens, or moor-hens, breed here in numbers, but somehow, so far as I am concerned, go free. I delight in watching them with their broods, but feel some compunctious visitings at the same time, for I fear they do a great deal of harm.

I have something of the same sort of feeling with respect to the water-ousels. We have plenty

of them, and they have the reputation of being very partial to salmon spawn. I greatly regret it, for they are great pets of mine. He is such a perky cocky little fellow as he sits on some bare stone or overhanging branch, jerking up his tail, and looking so energetic. A pair built last year, on one of the stone buttresses under the railway bridge, apparently quite unconcerned at the rumble of the trains passing just over their heads.

Their allies, the king-fishers, we also have, and in considerable numbers. A pair of these nested one year in a hole in the bank of the river a little way above my house, and a somewhat unusual incident happened to me in respect of them.

I was seated in my boat, moored in a little creek, with my salmon-rod protruding beyond the bushes at its entrance. A king-fisher flying down just outside these bushes alighted on the end of my rod, and balanced himself for a few seconds, till, catching sight of myself and a young nephew who was with me in the boat, it flew off with a startled cry.

I mentioned this one day to a gentleman, and fellow-angler, and he said that an almost

identical occurrence happened to him on our river. He was daping for trout well concealed among the bushes, when a king-fisher similarly perched on his short rod, and, not perceiving him for some time, sat there.