

ISAAC WALTON

By LLEWELYN POWYS

IT would seem that gently flowing waters in some strange way lend themselves to thoughts of a meditative and religious complexion. It is reported of Confucius that whenever he sat by the side of a river he would cry, so deeply would his mind be disturbed by philosophic contemplations engendered by the sight of a gliding stream. And there is about the writing of Isaak Walton just this quality of reflective piety. As has been well said by Professor Sainstbury, there hangs over the pages of the "Complete Angler" a "singular and golden simplicity."

The book carries with it the very sights and sounds and scents of sweet river-side pastures, the very glimpses of their wide silver reaches, the very cries of their half-hidden water fowl—of moor hens, coots and dabchicks, the very aromatic smells of the over-grown water flowers that cluster about their damp margins. The "complete angler," Charles Lamb declared, "would sweeten a man's temper at any time to read it," and indeed its "smooth writing" has had a most consoling influence upon generations of human beings who, less wise or less fortunate than its author, have had for their life's occupation not the "disporte of fysshying," but "the diligence of trades and noiseful gain."

A certain similarity has been observed between "The Complete Angler" and Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," and truly it would seem, as one remembers the two books, that something of the same lovely sunlight that lit up the green slopes of the delectable mountains falls also upon those glorified meadows of the Thames which used to seem to the old angler "too pleasant to be looked upon but on holy days." It is extraordinary how Isaak Walton has managed to convey to his readers the intense relish and enjoyment

that he was wont to experience on the occasions when he was able to leave his little shop in Fleet Street and go a'fishing. Never has the peaceful radiance of green fields under a May-day sun been more surely described. From each artless sentence, from the very words he uses there is evoked the actual look of the gleaming spring-grass, the actual smell of the cowslip-grown meadow-sod under the soft influence of a "smoking shower."

All day long in our fancy those enchanted meads seem to be echoing with "the curious ditties of the little nimble musicians of the air," while at night time "when the very laborers sleep" the nightingale holds them spellbound with the ecstasy that she pours out from her "instrumental throat." All day long between the cool shadows and cheerful sunshine of those verdant fields it would seem that boys and girls are out gathering lady-smocks and culverkeys.

And it is not only the green fields, but the whole countryside of that far-off time that is brought before our eyes, that opulent homely countryside of England that even today has scarcely changed its familiar aspect from when Chaucer's Frankleyn enjoyed the largesse of its acres.

"Ful many a fat patrich hadde he in mewe
And many a breem and many a luce in stew"

We ourselves actually see the grey park walls, the gnarled oak trees, the graceful beaches; we ourselves actually walk along the King's highway to Tottenham Cross under the cool shadow of a high honeysuckle hedge, with the golden discs of dandelions wide open in the ditch grass, and our boots floury white with the first thin dust of early spring. We ourselves enter that "honest ale-house" and see with our own eyes the sweet marjoram, the springs of rosemary, the green aromatic parsley on the cleanly kitchen table, delicious friendly simples, awaiting the dressing of that trout whose belly when taken "was part yellow as a marigold and part white as a lily." We ourselves sit in the raftered guest room and read one or other of the twenty ballads that are stuck about its walls and later when darkness has fallen and over the thatched roof and over the

dreaming shire the stars of eternal space shine down, take our rest between those sheets that "smell of lavender" and are as white as the milk drawn by modest Maudlin from the udder of her red dairy cow.

There is in the writing of Isaak Walton a quality so devout, so charged with a simple unadorned beauty that it can only be described as "apostolic" and indeed one might almost fancy that certain of its more inspired passages were taken directly from the Scripture, might have actually been written by one of the evangelists had chance led his holy steps to the flowering primrose banks of a river in England. "We anglers," Walton writes, "seldom take the name of God into our mouth, but it is either to praise him or to pray to him," and again "Let the blessing of St. Peter be upon all that are lovers of virtue and dare trust in providence and be quiet and go a'fishing."

What a winning insight we get into the good old man's temperament and disposition as we read his book. Like George Herbert and like Sir Thomas Browne, he represents in his character that unassuming devoutness, that humane sanctity, liberal but at the same time catholic, that has appeared from time to time amongst the sons of the Church of England. And what a rooted affection he cherished for that decorous island religion! In his will, written on his ninetieth birthday, he boldly declares his attitude, "I take it at least to be convenient to declare my belief to be, in all parts of faith as the Church of England now professeth . . . I give to Dr. Hawkins, Dr. Donne's sermons which I have heard preacht and read with such content." Again he refers to Dr. Nowel Dean of St. Paul's as the man who "made that good, plain, unperplexed catechism which is printed with our good old service book."

Always a stout Royalist, he had no love for Puritans or doctrinal controversialists and constantly deplores the fact "that the common people in this nation think they are not wise unless they busy themselves about what they understand not, and especially about religion." He himself put his own theological erudition to the good purpose of justify-

ing his favorite pastime, pointing out with considerable pertinence "that God is said to have spoken to a fish, but never to a beast." In his more secular researches his inquiring and observing wit made record of some extremely curious facts, facts that even he confesses would appear to be as incredible as the "resurrection of an atheist," but which, for all that, he declares have their place, "he whose name is Wonderful only knows how" in the obscure ordering of the laws of nature. There is, he asserts, "a certain river that turns sheep's wool to vermilion color if they drink of it" and he also tells us "that the stones of otters are good against the falling sickness," that "fish can smell an hundred yards away," that "hares change sexes every year," that "carp come to the surface at the ringing of bells," that "smelts smell like violets," and that eels "are bred of a particular dew falling in the month of May or June on the banks of some particular ponds or rivers apted by nature for that end." Of the means by which pike are brought into this world he is less certain, at first declaring with significant reticence "that some are bred by generation and some not" and then later suggesting that they, in some mysterious way, derive their life from picker-el weed. However, this initial uncertainty about the life's history of these "tyrants of the water," as he calls them, by no means deters him from further investigations. His "nice curiosity" even explores the emotional prejudices of this particular fresh-water fish, for he does not hesitate to assure us that "there has always existed between pike and certain frogs a great antipathy." Frogs, he declares, will make hard shift to overreach pond pike "beyond common belief." And he is at no loss to give evidential support to his contention, for he records how Bishop Thurzo, as he walked by one of his ponds, observed a frog, whose swollen cheeks expressed either malice or anger, to leap onto the head of a pike that was at hover near the surface of the water. They both sank together and the good prelate, being inquisitive to discover the upshot of the strange incident, called his gardener and had the pond dragged. The pike when

recovered was founded to be dead and with both its eyes clawed out. The Bishop expressed no little surprise at such an issue, but the gardener, who doubtless had had more opportunity of studying the hidden ways of nature, exhorted the reverend dignitary to "forebare wondering," saying that "*he was certain that pikes were often served so.*"

Isaak Walton also affirms that he was told "by a person of honor now long in Worcester" that so cunning is the strategy of these irascible roguish frogs "that collars of tadpoles are often to be found hung like chains about the necks of pike to kill them." In this case, however, even Isaak Walton is unsure as to the immediate motive prompting the subtle and deadly proceeding. For he concludes his narration by saying, "*whether it be done for meat or malice must be to me a question.*"

If frogs had the best of it in their relations with pike, it was a far different matter when they fell into the hands of the old fisherman himself. In his directions for using frogs as bait he writes, "Put your hook—I mean the awning wire—through his mouth and out of his gills and with a fine needle and silk sew the upper part of his leg with only one stitch to the awning wire of your hook—and in so doing, use him as though you loved him; that is, harm him as little as you may possibly that he may live the longer."

After reading such a passage, one can hardly wonder that Lord Byron was provoked to write:

"And angling too, that solitary vice
Whatever Isaak Walton sings or says
The quaint old coxcombe, in his gullet
Should have a hook and a small trout to pull it"

But Byron was not Isaak Walton's only critic. Richard Franck, a Cromwellian trooper, tells us that once at Stafford he faced the old man with his own writings, "urging his own argument upon him that pickerel weed of itself breeds pickerel (pike) and with such directness that the good honest man went huffed away."

What glimpses, with the very stamp of authenticity upon them, we get of the old angler from time to time. How

well we can see him under "yonder sycamore" saying his grace before partaking of his radishes and powdered beef and bread! And what engaging thoughts doubtless he revolved in his sober mind as with fingers, silver-scaly from cleaning the weeds and grass from the gills and throat of a newly caught logger-headed chub he sat there in the pleasant coolness munching at his brave breakfast! Now he would perhaps be weighing the possible advantage to be derived from his friend Oliver Henly's guarded secret for making the contents of his bait box the more palatable by anointing it with one or two drops of the oil of ivy berries, now musing over the country saying that "perch will not bite till the mulberry tree buds," now recalling that eels in a hard winter will unbed themselves and seek warmth in haystacks, and now brooding over the fact that tench are the physicians of fishes and carry in them a natural balsam.

The last piece of instruction he believed to have come through the Jews, a race of people who, he says, have carried down from past ages a vast amount of useful knowledge and yet so he declares, and surely in this case his vehemence cannot have been altogether dispassionate: "It is thought that they, or some spirit worse than they, first told us that lice swallowed alive were a certain cure for the yellow jaundice!"

The old man passed away at Winchester on December 15, 1683, when all England lay under the iron grip of a severe and pinching frost. And as he lay a'dying under the shadow of that ancient and monumental edifice that holds beneath its cold flagstones the bones of William Rufus and a hundred other Englishmen of the old time, we are justified surely in believing that during "that last hour of his last day as his body melted and vaped into spirit" his innocent and guileless soul was supremely conscious of the blessed assurance that it was about to enter, without dispute or hindrance, into the presence of that gentle Savior of the world whose last taste of food on earth had been, as Isaak Walton himself reminds us, a fish.

HISTORY AS IT IS TAUGHT

By M. MUNSTERBERG

AGNES REPPLIER, recently declared that "of all the direct products of education (of education as an end in itself, and not as an approach to something else), a knowledge of history is most essential." Who can disagree with this? And yet, though the possession of historic knowledge is undoubtedly not only desirable but a source of unlimited inner satisfaction, one cannot help wondering why the acquirement of such knowledge is often in school and even in college such a dreary task. The most human of studies becomes in the classroom so inhuman, arid and abstract. Leigh Hunt, I believe, uttered the sentiment that in tales and romances he found the serious records of life, whereas the histories were frivolous and futile. This judgment may not be as paradoxical as it seems, if by frivolous is meant superficial, and by superficial, abstract.

Every abstraction is, in a sense, a superficial view; for there can be no depth without plasticity, and no plasticity without the full presence of the whole. If history, the history that the student eager for humanistic education desires, is the story of man in the successive ages, then we must have man—the man of Pericles' time, the man of the Renaissance, the man of Queen Anne's day—presented to us not in his arbitrarily chosen role as political unit, but in the fulness of life. Do the text-books in history written for school use and the docile teachers who follow them line for line present the historic man as a plastic complete human being? The heroes, the kings, the mother of the Gracchi and Mary Stuart may no doubt be presented most plastically, with no picturesque possibility left unused. But is this true of the Athenian, the Roman, the Elizabethan? The individual teacher of unusual gifts and enthusiasm may, of course,