

# IN MEMORY OF "THE COM- PLEAT ANGLER"

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I READ *The Compleat Angler* in an afternoon and an evening, and found it full of charm from start to finish. But I looked in vain for thrills. For a "compleat" angler, Walton leans over much to still-fishing in peaceful streams. He is not bold and arduous in the pursuit of fearless fish in virgin waters. He meets stealth with craftiness, and wariness with guile. He does not follow broken rivers through rugged scenery. He prefers the gentle meadow-brook, and the placid surroundings of the simple countryside. He does not pitch his tent beneath the shadow of the northern pines. He does not fry his trout above the embers of an open camp-fire. He does not roll himself in woolly blankets, and sleep upon a bed of balsam boughs. He takes his catch back to some homely inn, where the hostess dresses it and serves it in fine style. Walton does not smoke his after-supper pipe beneath the starry heavens. He seats him in the chimney-corner, and feels the near glow that lights the under-surface of the mantelpiece. He takes his candle, climbs the narrow staircase, and retires to where the turned-back coverlet reveals the gleaming sheets that "smell of lavender".

But one should not expect too much of linen-drapers. The opportunity for adventure seldom comes their way. Although it has been recorded since Walton's time that one of their number encountered an unforeseen adventure, and acquitted himself nobly, Izaak would have found little opportunity to "study to be quiet" in a similar predicament. Nevertheless

Izaak was a fisherman  
Of credit and renown;  
He often pulled the fishes up,  
And seldom let them down.

There is no doubt as to Walton's "credit", and in his own day he certainly enjoyed a fair share of renown amongst people of some note, particularly churchmen. Since his death he has been all but canonized by anglers, and his name has become a household word amongst English-speaking peoples. Students of literature, whether anglers, "well-wishers of the game", or of the less enlightened

laity, can read his book with "instruction and delight". Whether they be men of action or of the contemplative type, they cannot but find in it a very pleasing recreation.

*The Compleat Angler* might fitly be termed an English Prose Pastoral. It reflects simply and without affectation the rural delights that inspired its author. It is the key to Walton's character. He is, above all, a man of peace and calm contentment. His is the happy nature that adjusts itself to its surroundings, and draws from them all the delights that they afford. Walton found his place in life, and was content to fill it. He accepted without question the authority of the Church and of the King. He read widely, and believed most of what he read. Nor was he slow to communicate his knowledge, especially when it concerned his "art", or gave him an opportunity to quote one of the innumerable authorities with whom he was familiar. Walton felt keenly the joys of an open-air English country life, and could express his feelings with a pleasing facility. He writes with perfect ease about those things that hold a never-failing charm for him—the country road, the homely inn, the worthy hostess and the comely milkmaid, peaceful meadows, shady streams, the angler's art, good company, a hearty meal, a jolly song.

Walton overflows with love of nature:

Look! under that broad beech tree I sat down, when I was last this way a-fishing. And the birds in the adjoining grove seemed to have a friendly contention with an echo, whose dead voice seemed to live in a hollow tree, near to the brow of that primrose hill. . . .

He loves to impart his "quaint" knowledge. He is a pleasing instructor in his "art". The learner listens eagerly, and is ever ready to heed when his master says: "And now you are to notice", or "The next thing I will recommend to your consideration. . . ." Walton is a genial companion, full of courtesy and kindness, and not without a sly sense of humor. When the three travellers discuss the relative merits of angling, hunting and falconry, they all use the most amazing arguments. Piscator speaks last (and longest), and incidentally gets the best of the controversy. All three seem to rely upon the volume rather than upon the aptness of the evidence they bring to bear. For the multiplicity of the authorities he quotes, for the delightful *illogic* of his reasoning, Piscator certainly deserves to win. Both the Old and the New Testament furnish him with conclusive proof that it is next to impossible to be a good Christian without first becoming an angler. Here is a sample of Walton's method:

....Solomon....who before his conversion was remarkably carnally-amorous, and after, by God's appointment, wrote that spiritual dialogue, or holy amorous love-song, the *Canticles*, betwixt God and His Church, in which he says his beloved had eyes like the Fish-pools of Heshbon.... And if this hold in reason, as I see none to the contrary, then it may be probably concluded that Moses, who, I told you before, writ the *Book of Job*, and the Prophet Amos, who was a Shepherd, were both Anglers; for you shall, in all the Old Testament, find fish-hooks, I think but twice mentioned, namely by meek Moses, the friend of God, and by the humble Prophet Amos.

And so on he goes. He prefers the "affectionate, loving, lowly, humble Epistles of St. Peter, St. James and St. John, (whom we know were all Fishers)," to the "glorious language and high metaphors of St. Paul, who we may believe was not". Walton has much biblical knowledge, and is never at a loss for a quotation when the necessity arises. He is ready, too, with innumerable references to all sorts of histories, both natural and unnatural. The latter fill Walton's head with marvellous ideas. "Pliny hath an opinion that many flies have their birth, or being, from a dew that in the spring falls upon the leaves of trees:"

And it is observed by Gesner, that the jaw-bones and hearts and galls of pikes are very medicinable for several diseases, or to stop blood, to abate fevers, to cure agues, to oppose or expel the infection of the plague, and to be many ways medicinable and useful for the good of mankind; but he observes that the biting of the pike is venomous, and hard to be cured.

Walton's prose is a very proper setting for the lyrical gems that sparkle in it. His poetry, however, is by no means confined to his verse:

But turn out of the way a little, good scholar, towards yonder high honeysuckle hedge; there we'll sit and sing whilst this shower falls so gently upon the teeming earth, and gives yet a sweeter smell to the lovely flowers....

A happy mixture of narrative and dialogue renders *The Compleat Angler* dramatic, and gives it a perfectly natural movement—except, perhaps, where Piscator catches his fish. There the movement is altogether too rapid. Poor Venator and the Scholar fish beside him, watching him and imitating him. Yet these two get not so much as a nibble, while Piscator catches 'three brace of trouts' in less time than it takes to tell about it. Walton is not above telling a "fish story."

*The Compleat Angler* is full of Elizabethan quaintness. This is noticeable in the diction of the opening sentences of the

paragraphs: "Concerning which, some have endeavoured to maintain..." "And on the contrary, there want not men." "And for that I shall tell you": and so on. The following is quaint and "choicely good":

But the nightingale, another of my airy creatures, breathes such a sweet loud musick out of her little instrumental throat, that it might make mankind to think miracles are not ceased. He that at midnight, when the very labourer sleeps securely, should hear, as I have very often, the clear airs, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth, and say, Lord, what musick hast thou provided for the Saints in Heaven, when thou affordest bad men such musick on earth?

Andrew Lang says concerning Walton: "Without ambition, save to be in the society of good men, he passed through turmoil, ever companioned by content. For him existence had its trials; he saw all that he held most sacred overthrown; laws broken up; his king publicly murdered; his friends outcasts; his worship proscribed. He himself suffered in property from the raid of the Kirk into England. He underwent many bereavements: child after child he lost, but content he did not lose, nor sweetness of heart, nor belief. His was one of those happy characters which are never found disassociated from unquestioning faith..." Here is a comparison between Walton and Bunyan by the same author: "Differently constituted, these excellent men accepted religion in different ways. Christian bows beneath a burden of sin; Piscator beneath a basket of trout. Let us be grateful for the diversities of human nature, and the dissimilar paths which lead Piscator and Christian alike to the City not built with hands. Both were seekers for a City, which to have sought through life, in patience, honesty, loyalty, and love, is to have found it."