

Basic Instincts

by Martin Mayhew

The old farmhouse seemed to crouch back into the hillside in its attempt to shelter from the countless winter gales. Over the years the weather had made it part of the hillside. Moss and ivy had completed the illusion. Set high up it played sentinel to the valley divided into two by the River Wolf.

The city dweller stood in the road that led to the farm and stared down at the view. On his side of the valley the rich grass had been neatly cropped by sheep that didn't seem to care too much about the river's name. The smooth hillside swept steeply down to the water's edge then rose almost vertically out of the water on the far bank in a thick wild wood. A brooding, ancient wood, that reached up black and tangled against the sky. Its trees clutched tenaciously to a hillside steep enough to have kept the woodsman's axe at bay. Thick grey clouds scudded overhead and there was rain on the wind.

Opening the gate set in a dry stone wall he made his way down the steep incline to the river. Walking diagonally eased the angle of the slope, it would also bring him to a distant clump of trees that marked the start of his beat. Primitive hunter stirred in a corner of the city dweller's mind. He shook himself awake, looked around and sniffed the breeze. This was his day, one of the few away from the urban dirt and noise.

The city dweller reached the trees just as the expected shower of rain enveloped the valley in a flurry of windy wetness. Sheltering there, with the sound of the rain pattering on the leaves, he stood with his back to the wind and put up his rod. The squall soon moved on and all became calm again. Easing himself carefully into the water, keeping below the skyline, he began to wade cautiously up-stream. This was primitive hunter's favourite kind of fishing. He had been looking forward to it for weeks.

The cry, when it came, was only faint, but it stopped the city dweller in mid-cast. Could it have been a stoat killing a rabbit he wondered? He had never heard anything like it. Where familiarity would suppress the explosive clatter of a diesel or the screech of a worn escalator, in the stillness of these surroundings and relieved from the constant din of city traffic, small unobtrusive sounds - sounds not heard in a city, became exaggerated.

Picking up the line from around his feet he made his way to the next pool slowly working his way upstream, casting as he went. The wood thickened the further he went, rising steeply on his right, dark and impenetrable, undisturbed by time. A wild place where nobody walked. Kept out by a barrier of ever-sharp thorns and a tangle of root and branch that would resist anyone foolish enough to try.

When the cry came again it was much nearer. It seemed to come from the very depths of the dense undergrowth high above his head. The trees leaned over him and dripped into the river with loud plops, making rings that were quickly whisked away in the fast current. It came again, louder this time. He stood transfixed in the rushing water. A city dweller, more at home in the blare of the rush hour, now unnerved by this single alien sound that

shattered the unfamiliar silence. The cry drifted down through the dark trees moving around them like coils of smoke. Then, like a bird of prey, it swooped down to lose itself among the rocks and dark water where he stood leaving the echo to rush back to its source in the wilds above. No, he decided. He hadn't heard anything like that before. There was a strange alien feeling about it. Could that cry really have come from the throat of an animal born on this planet? There was one thing he was sure of. It certainly didn't belong here in the soft hilly countryside of Devon.

Another cry rang out, this time from up-stream; could there be two of these terrible beings? Was that an answering call? Standing knee-deep in the fast water, his line washed downstream, long forgotten. The trees somehow became darker, taller. They leaned closer, blocking out the light. A rush of wind swept downstream ruffling its surface and sending some of last year's leaves twisting away in the air to land on the water only to be grabbed by the current and tidied away somewhere downstream.

Silence ... only the river murmured and chuckled to itself. Nothing stirred or made a sound in the wild wood stacked up so high overhead. It glowered down, the hiding place of that strange cry. Standing there, he thought about the cry of the Nazgul - those hideous winged mounts of the ring wraiths from Tolkien's book, *Lord of the Rings*. The cry that had sent the brave Hobbits to cower in their burrows. He smiled to himself: "Here I am," he thought, "a creature of the city, away from the reassurance of the herd and losing valuable fishing time". Shaking off any more imaginings - or was it a shudder - he lifted his rod, got some line into the air, and cast to a fish rising in the shadow under the far bank.

At that moment a huge black shape launched itself over his head. It seemed vast. He felt rather than saw it. Its cry hammered his senses. At the same instant, its dark mass reflected up from the surface of the water to add to his horror. Was it some lingering remnants of a forgotten memory that made him crouch down in a split second of panic? A memory of when pterodactyls terrorised our ancient ancestors. After all, wasn't it a primeval urge that made him take up fishing in the first place? Primitive hunter cast away his spear and fled in panic. Fortunately, modern man took over and managed to stand up in time to see a peacock, tail streaming out behind it, winging its way, with all the aerial dexterity of a racing pigeon, across the valley and up the slope to make a perfect landing on the roof of the farmhouse. Then, just to add insult to the city dweller's frayed nerves, it sent its weird cry floating back across the void to be picked up and returned from another source on the other side of a large oak tree that shadowed the next pool.

Watchdogs! The cries and their echoes started to fill the whole valley. Most people use dogs, some use geese. But down here in Devon, somebody had the exotic taste to use peacocks. From behind the tree stepped another very fine specimen. It shyly cocked its head, gave a beady stare and with a bloodcurdling yell, set off to join its mate as it strutted about on the roof of the farm looking as out of place as a drag queen at a funeral.

With the sound now established as coming from a couple of overdressed chickens, primitive hunter and the city dweller pulled themselves together. Bluebells now carpeted the wood. Bird song echoed through the trees following the shafts of sunlight to dissipate those dark primitive thoughts like an early morning mist. The trout, not to be left out, also took up the euphoria and without him really trying, managed to hook themselves effort-



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lessly as his fly bobbed happily away on the sunlit water.

"Err, I was fishing on the Wolf Beat 8B ... " he began, when greeted by his hostess back at the hotel. "Oh yes, 8B, isn't that a beautiful beat? One of my favourites." She must have caught the look in his eye. "By the way, did anyone warn you about the peacocks?"

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"As in marriage, so in fishing; one's choice is made by accident. One opens the door of a room; and there, for better or for worse the lady sits. One sees a river from a train, a car, one halts to stretch one's legs and is lost."

John Inglis Hall, Fishing a Highland Stream - A Love Affair With A River