

except, I seem to remember, on Wednesdays, when he left after a single pint of Guinness and bitter, abandoning the *Tennants* for an evening's dominoes at the *Devonshire Arms* a few miles down the valley in a little village called Cracoe.

Jerry was my hero. In London I was taught by eminent scholars, men who had written books on Vergil and Homer and half a dozen other Greek and Roman authors, men who composed Latin or Greek hexameters in the bath and who emended classical texts while chewing their breakfast sausages, men who spoke at least seven languages and dreamed in six of them; but I held none of them in such high reverence as I held Jerry Ingleby, who spoke nothing but slow Yorkshire English and blinked between the end of each sentence and the start of the next. Jerry was the servant – for me he was at the same time the mouthpiece and the embodiment – of the institution I most admired, of an institution which was to my mind almost as venerable as the papacy; he was the keeper of the Kilnsey Angling Club and I hung upon every slow word that fell from his lips.

Jerry was a short man. He generally wore a dark, threadbare suit and a flat cap. He smoked twist and coughed a lot. His face was deeply lined, looking almost as though it had been roughly shaped from the weathered limestone of his native fells. It was a face slow to express emotion; it shaped itself very gradually into a smile or a rare scowl. There was indeed something almost geological about the changing features of Jerry Ingleby's face; they took time. When first I met him Jerry was about seventy and had been the Kilnsey keeper for at least forty years. He pronounced, often and very solemnly, that he had entered the club's service as a means of avoiding proper work; it was not, on the face of it, an absurd claim.

He lived no more than a few minute's walk from the *Tenant Arms* but, showing a true countryman's disdain for unnecessary exercise, he always drove there, arriving each morning at roughly nine o'clock. Before his breakfast he had already driven to Conistone bridge, to look at the river and declare it a 'full water', a 'fly water', a 'low water' or occasionally, in time of summer drought, even 'a worm water'. But, if on the previous night he had been trapped at the bar for longer

than usual, this was a part of his daily round that could be abandoned; on such mornings he guessed the state of the river, or learned it second-hand; on such mornings the ritual of the telephone became his first duty.

Between nine and ten, although there was some flexibility in his interpretation of when to arrive and when to leave, Jerry sat in the clubroom, smoking his pipe and coughing down the phone, advising members where to fish, chalking their names onto the slate and, between mouthfuls of smoke, dispensing slow wisdom to those members who appeared in person to book their beats. At some time around ten o'clock Jerry decided that his continued presence in the clubroom was unnecessary and, climbing back into his van, he then drove up to the rearing ponds to feed the stock-fish. Next came a leisurely tour of the beats, with pauses to survey the water from all the best places. If the day was warm, Jerry would park on the high bank above Wash Dub, which caught the morning sun, and then settle down to read his newspaper for half an hour in a thick fog of smoke.

Jerry's tour of the river was partly intended to discourage poachers, or to detect any that remained doggedly undeterred. It seemed to achieve its purpose, for very few fishers ventured onto the club's preserves without permission, and not many fished there without being spotted by old Jerry. His binoculars were soon focussed on any suspicious presence along the banks, and he was willing, if he thought it advisable, to delay or to bring forward the time of his setting out; he was even prepared to tamper with his immemorial route; and there were days, he often assured me, when he had already driven the water before he came into the clubroom to deal with the phone.

There was also a social purpose to Jerry's unhurried progress along the roads of upper Wharfedale. Many of the older members of the club had known him for thirty years or more and they looked forward to the appearance of his van at some predictable time. Jerry knew perfectly well that, when Mr. So-And-So fished a particular beat, he always came to the road bridge at eleven o'clock and rested there smoking for a while. Jerry's van would appear five minutes after eleven and, when Jerry had wound down his window and relit his pipe, he would talk with Mr. So-And-So about old times and speak disrespectfully of the few members

he did not like. Then he would continue on his way to Kettlewell or Starbotton and find out what had happened there since yesterday. He knew everybody in the dale and everybody was happy to interrupt his work for an exchange of news with Jerry. He was a feature of the place, he was himself an institution; he might easily have become a tourist attraction. Certainly he was a potent element of the spell that drew me to Kilnsey.

Jerry learned much that was useful in the course of his morning round. He also learned much that had nothing to do with the club or the river, for he was interested in everything that happened under the Wharfedale sun and not in very much that happened elsewhere. But this leisurely progress from place to place possessed a value far beyond the importance of the information Jerry gathered from it; for his van and his presence inside it and the words he passed with the people he met in the course of each morning: all this meant that the inhabitants of Conistone and Kilnsey, of Hawkswick and Kettlewell and Starbotton, looked upon the club as a familiar and welcome part of the life of the dale. The affection they felt for old Jerry diffused itself over the institution that he served, and so they thought of the Kilnsey Angling Club, as they thought of Jerry himself, as something which had always been there, as something that would surely continue to be there for years and years to come, and as something of which, on the whole, they rather approved.

Jerry never drank at lunchtime, except, I believe, on the day of Kilnsey Show. His afternoons were quieter than his mornings. Sometimes he made a second and shorter round. He fed the trout in the ponds again before making his tea and then resting at home until it was time for the pub. He supplemented his income by castrating and slaughtering pigs. In winter he joined the beating teams on local shoots. He was an expert flanker on the moors. His position, as keeper of the Kilnsey Angling Club, was known in Wharfedale as 'best job i'North'. And Jerry himself was, I think, inclined to agree. More than once, after we had drunk a pint or two together, he took the pipe from his mouth and, blinking solemnly, revealed the great secret of his success as a river-keeper:

‘To do my job properly, sir,’ – there was a pause here, followed by a few more blinks, before he continued with a slow emphasis on the assonance of the vowels – ‘you have to be born idle and bone idle.’

He was proud of it.

The easy rhythm of Jerry’s life only became clear to me once I had joined the Kilnsey Angling Club. In the early days, when I bought day tickets for the water, I knew little more about him than was revealed by his pub talk. But it was this pub talk that so enthralled me, even though Jerry was no expert in the way that some river keepers are practical entomologists of distinction or innovative flydressers or themselves master anglers. There was nothing of William Lunn or of Frank Sawyer about Jerry Ingleby; I am not at all certain that he was much interested in fishing and I would not swear that he had ever caught a trout on the fly.

It was not Jerry’s expertise that held me spellbound; it was the sense of tradition that emerged from his recollections of dead members and times gone by; it was his talk of men who had been happy to fish the fly if the fly was what the trout wanted, but who had always fished the upstream worm for preference, fishing it with long rods and silk lines and Stewart tackles whipped onto casts of gut; it was his memories of seasons forty years ago when the creeper had been so numerous, and the trout so wild for the creeper that, in the month of May, those members who still practised the old skills had regularly filled their creels to overflowing with dozens and dozens of trout.

I would say to Jerry that I had caught or missed a couple of nice fish in the runs on either side of Black Keld; he would remember a September afternoon a few seasons before the war when he had been there with the secretary, who had taken thirty trout before lunchtime and then slept through most of the afternoon in the shade of the old sycamore, waking in time to kill a further dozen before he drove off to his dinner in the clubroom. I would mention that there had been a big hatch of iron blues once the wind had got up in the afternoon; Jerry would compare it with the hatches there had been twenty years ago and dismiss it as no more than a trickle.

make further arrangements for this to be checked by something called ultrasound.

I have already told you that I walked out of the surgery a condemned man, but this was not entirely true. I walked out a deeply worried man, half convinced that I had bowel cancer and half persuaded that my heart might at any moment explode, bringing to a sudden end the beginnings of a rather promising retirement. There was no celebratory claret, although there was sherry and red wine, more of it than usual instead of the better-than-usual stuff that I had been hoping to drink; there was whisky as well and the booze was good for me. The sense of doom retreated under its influence. I went to bed more or less sober and woke up without a hangover and determined to be positive. I told myself that there was probably nothing much wrong with me. It was simply a question of waiting to make sure. In the meantime far the best thing would be to go fishing as often as possible.

And to begin with it worked, although I did not go over to the Wharfe. I told myself that I should save the Wharfe until I had been given the all-clear, when there would, of course, be a huge celebration, although it would have to be a very private celebration because I had told no one among either my family or my friends about my forthcoming trial by colonoscopy and ultrasound. I think this was the first of my mistakes. Anyway, to begin with the fishing worked; there were days on the Eden and its tributary Scandal Beck when I forgot for a few hours that I should probably soon be dead. But the fear of illness was beginning to take hold of me; I was haunted by the spectre of disease, more and more convinced that there was something dreadful wrong with me; and this dark and terrible conviction began to poison the air of my fishing world. Of all days for it to happen, it was Easter Sunday when I finally realised that I could no longer find refuge or peace along the margins of running water. I decided that I would not go fishing again until doctors, surgeons and consultants had acquitted me or, much more likely, put on sympathetic voices to pronounce sentence of death.

There followed a strange and very lonely month. I saw virtually no one because I wanted to be alone. When my friends or my brother or my sister rang to say hello or to arrange a meeting I hid my fear from

them and made excuses to avoid their company. Human contact was painful and even now I cannot tell you why, unless it was that in other men and women I saw health and happiness and found this contrast with my own condition very difficult to bear.

I put my rods away but I was frightened of the crushing fear and loneliness that laid hold of me in my house almost as soon as I woke every morning, and so each day, now that I could no longer fish, I fled to my land at High Park, spending as long as possible there occupied with both useful and entirely useless activity, although from one point of view all of it seemed useless because I felt certain that I should not live long enough to benefit from anything that I was doing. On the other hand it was all better than useful; it was essential because it helped me to push that dreadful sense of doom just a mental inch or two from the centre of my thought.

I dug, I dammed, I cut cover and I mended pheasant pens. I roamed the farm with my two spaniels. I lay in the sunshine and smoked my pipe. I said my prayers. The weather was glorious. Each day brought a blue sky with a light breeze and a slow drift of white clouds with broad shadows moving patiently beneath them. The morning air was tonic and sharp but by noon my little valley was basking in temperate April warmth and over it all lay the wonderful shimmer of spring: in the fields and the grass, in the branches and their swelling buds, in the violets and the primroses and the anemones and the celandines. The bright air and its shimmer seemed almost a living thing pulsing with birdsong, with the singing of blackbirds, thrushes, dunnocks, robins, chaffinches, willow warblers and croaking pheasants. Every day there was a woodpecker drumming in the Douglas firs and every day the sound of curlews floated through the clear sky. It was the April when Icelandic volcanoes cleared the sky of aircraft for a time and so the sounds of spring faced no competition from their roaring or their drone. As well as birdsong there was the splashing of the beck and the stirring of the breeze and the grating of my spade or my saw. Sometimes for just a few seconds there was almost silence.

It was a glorious spring and often there was comfort in this, often my mind was unable to resist the shining power of the season; there