

AT BAY!

A Nature Story. By CLIVE FENN

IT had been an extraordinarily busy day for the otter—called by some folks who are keen on Latin names, *Lutra vulgaris*—and there had not been any worrying incidents except the bark of a dog some distance off down the fields. The otter had had some narrow squeaks in her time, but of late life had been fairly peaceful, and the family of young ones in the snug burrow reached from the river bank, the entrance to the sanctuary being under where the reeds grew thick, had been well provided with fish.

But the children were almost in a position now to fend for themselves, which was fortunate, considering the hard season for their mother, with ever-growing appetites to cater for and all the risks inevitably attendant on the career of an otter.

To be sure, the home was all right, safe out of harm's way, and though Mr. Greensmith, the farmer, through whose land the river ran, kept dogs, and subscribed to the otterhounds, he was not accounted a bad man, from the point of view of the otter.

He was rather proud of his own stretch of the Brawl River. He kept it stocked, and clear of the trailing green reeds, which would have choked the water-course had they been left free to grow as they choose. Moreover, the farmer had never grumbled about the loss of his gooseberries. That is another tale.

Greysides, the otter, was more than partial to gooseberries, and the small orchard was quite handy to the river. Greysides had encountered Mr. Greensmith on several occasions. There had been no introduction. Greysides had been taken unawares the first time. Crouched in the long, wet grass, as she went back to her snugger in the river bank, the farmer had found her, and had stooped and rubbed her nose before she really understood exactly what was happening.

Somehow, the farmer took a real fancy to Greysides. He had been much interested in

otter hunts in days gone by. Now things were different. He was too busy to take part in the sport. You never saw him in the regular rig of the otter hunter—breeches, stockings, brogues with light nails, and with plenty of ventilation about them. After he had struck up a friendship with the otter, Greensmith felt quite different about otters in general. Greysides used to keep a look out for her new friend; she was bashful yet, but she knew she had nothing to fear from the big, kindly fellow who always came down the river path two or three times a day.

But Greysides remained shy. All her training had taught her that the world was crammed full of peril—especially for an otter in a sporting countryside. She felt she could trust the farmer, but, all the same, one had to be careful.

Then one thing led to another, and—well, there it was: the friendly little otter felt that the farmer was not, take him all in all, a bad sort, and she was dwelling on this side of the case that identical day in early spring as she moved cautiously out of the water and gained the rough bit of country from which you could see the old mill and the red gables of the farm.

She had left a nice fish for the youngsters to play with. She had caught it an hour before, as she was moving up against the stream. The fish came to meet her, and that finished that part of the story.

It was a joyous morning. She overlooked the fact that the farmer owned a terrier and an otterhound, and, moreover, that he knew another person who was keen on otter hunting, a form of sport which the Houses of Parliament ought to put down. It was a wonderful day. The sometimes careworn mother of a large family—Percy was, as a matter of fact, getting a bit out of hand; and Clorinda was becoming anxious concerning the sit of her fur; but what will you? the world is for the young, take it or leave it!—felt happy.

Winter was past and gone. There would be fresh young gooseberries in a month or two, or three—springs were getting later—and the air was soft and delightful. There was a flash as a bright-hued beetle skimmed over the river. Greysides pushed on, when suddenly, from out of nowhere, as it seemed to her, there was a frenzied rush, and the otter hound dashed at her, while the uncertain little

Her assailants could bark. They made plenty of noise. That was their undoing, for, as the three stood facing each other, there was a heavy tramping, and Mr. Greensmith himself, in his brown leggings and with his old soft hat on the back of his head, stood looking down at the combatants.

And what should he do but stoop down and stroke the otter. Greysides was trembling,



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terrier, whom the otter had always sedulously avoided, tried to grab her by the throat.

Greysides thought of her responsibilities, of the inexperienced youngsters who still looked to her. They knew practically nothing of fish catching yet, and had neglected the continuation classes on food, and what to avoid. She could not afford to die. The old fighting spirit of her race was strong in her just then, and she faced the attackers with grim resolution.

but her fear was leaving her. She remembered that incident in the orchard when she sampled the gooseberries. It was all right. The farmer picked her up. The dogs hung their heads, then made friends. The little family party in the cosy den of the river bank did not wait in vain for the return of their mother. Greysides has come to recognise that even dogs are all right—when you know them!