ALONG THE BROOK

E. W. NICHOLS

THE brook has a beginning among the swamps that lie somewhere between the Old Farm and the Sandwich Road. These swamps are not very deep or very extensive; indeed in the dry part of the summer they are scarcely to be noticed as one cruises in leisurely fashion through the woods, but in spring and autumn there is some unpleasant walking, and in the winter the lumbermen need to be sure that the ground is soundly frozen before they begin to team across it. Here and there a pool stands like a dark and gleaming eye in the face of the wooded bog. The ground slopes downward a little, and one perceives in places a tiny current or a bubbling spot like a little fall; but it is hard to say at what precise point the continuous flow of the brook begins. It would be a different place at different seasons. The debatable land is soon passed, however, at any season, and shortly below the swamps there is no sort of doubt that the brook is a living entity.

Its course is not very long, perhaps scarcely above three miles. All the way it flows through land that is in some sort wooded, though the heavy timber has been cut from the surrounding country; and much of this woodland is enclosed within the fences of various pastures, so that the cattle can stray into and across the stream almost where they will. They come in to drink at any season when they are abroad, and to cool themselves in the rare hot days of summer; sometimes, where the bushes lean across the stream, standing in deep content to enjoy the double comfort of these automatic brushes that remove the pestilent fly, and the peaceful opportunity for philosophic rumination. Boys, too, may visit some of the pools during the hot days to enjoy a pretence of swimming. There is probably in the summer no pool in the entire course of the stream that is over three feet in depth; but where the water is dark and the bottom to casual inspection invisible, imagination may produce a lake, or, to the closed eye of natatory faith, a little ocean, and there is real danger to limb in the jagged points that sometimes rise from the slippery rocks below.

Not very far from its starting point, the brook passes close beside one or two burntland fields, fields of a type that is becoming increasingly rare. The timber has been cut from these fields, and the débris removed as far as it can be removed by burning.

Perhaps a first crop of buckwheat has also been raised among the charred stumps. The soil here is rich and virgin, and is further fertilized by the ashes of innumerable cords of brush. In the early summer the buckwheat covers the field with glorious blossoms, and the stumps are as isolated black islands in a creamy sea; in the autumn leaves and stalks redden, and the creamy whiteness gives place to occasional gleams of the soft grey kernels amid the red-green of the diminishing leaves. The land has then been sown with timothy and clover, and the tall stalks of timothy rise above the clover-like old spruce among the underbrush; the whole carpet of grass sinks suddenly into the hollows, or mounts triumphant above the cradlehills. Before the hay has been gathered, the strawberries thrive in their appointed place where the strong sunshine is tempered by a shade that protects but does not overwhelm; as do the squash in cornfields among the lucid interspaces of the stalks. After haying there are not many strawberries left, but the visibility is much better. The pickers come for them chiefly before haying at times of semi-leisure. Sometimes they bring lunch that may be eaten in the pleasant shade beside the brook where a spring of ice-cold water invites the hot and thirsty. A few gnarled and rugged old pines stand near, from one of which when the place is deserted a solitary raven lifts his hoarse note. There is no raven above when lunch is going on. The scene suggests the picture that the ancient poet drew

propter aquae rivum, sub ramis arboris altae,

but there is little Epicureanism in felling timber and clearing burntland and harvesting buckwheat or hay among the stumps. Even the picking of strawberries is labour and weariness of the flesh. The smiling field of grain or grass, like most other achievements of value, implies infinite and patient toil of hand and brain.

There have been and perhaps occasionally may still be found among the woods and pastures along the brook wild beasts of different sorts. They speak no tongue but their own, though if they or any of their compeers acquired human speech, their remarks would perhaps be unlike those attributed to the animals of canonized fable. They would, it may be, discuss the savage and subtle biped, weak and wily, who subdues them and theirs to his own use; the common and just complaint of most of the animal creation. There are authentic tales of the visits of the prowling bear to that vicinity; perhaps he no longer comes so near to the shore, but he continues in the spring or fall to kill an occasional sheep within a mile or two. Foxes are sometimes snared within easy distance. The prowling

wildcat—whatever his proper name may be, his claws are just as sharp—pads softly through the brush, or noiseless leaves his clearly outlined track upon the soft newfallen snow. The gentle deer is not unknown, and there are tales, not incredibly ancient, of the passage of the mighty antlered moose. What are locally known as rabbits and partridges, though both are said to be wrongly named, abound at their proper times and places.

The brook further provides its own game, in the shape of a vast number of diminutive trout. Why has one no longer the courage to say "trouts", as some wise old writers did? It is a question never to be settled whether these trout are so small because it is their nature to grow no larger, or because the anglers are too numerous to allow them a chance to reach maturity. It is an easy sport for the neighbouring boys, resorted to on a dull day when nothing presses. The traditional bent pin is not in evidence. Our trout are too intelligent for that. The barbed hooks from the store are fastened on some orthodox sort of fishline, slender and strong, and that is tied to a pole cut somewhere or anywhere beside the brook. With this equipment the career of many wary but hungry little fish has been averted. The same fish are usually proof against the visits of the professional angler, who in these parts is often a quite unprofessional humbug. When such a one appears upon the scene, generally a visitor, not improbably a tourist, he comes in all the panoply of piscatory war. He wears a long waterproof coat, a tall and wide waterproof hat, and most convincing rubber boots. He wields a pole of many cubits length, provided with a quite authentic reel. His flies are gorgeous in appearance and infinite in number. Above the modest stream he towers like impending doom. The little trout look up and do not bite. They swim between his feet, and gaze with placid indifference at the vast superstructure. They prefer to be caught by old acquaintance in old-fashioned ways. Even the boy familiar with brook and trout, however, can receive a disappointing shock, when a promising bite yields a writhing eel. An eel is an unlovely beast, and the youthful angler finds it difficult to decide whether the thing is fish or snake.

But game and even trout are not of frequent occurence or great importance to the neighbours of the brook. The friendly cow may stroll almost anywhere, but will usually at her appointed hour meet her courteous escort at the pasture bars. Attendance upon her is a part of every day's normal round. Sometimes she fails to keep her engagement. It is a weary task on some sultry evening, when thunder threatens and the angel of the perverse has descended upon the little herd, to find them in the thick woods beyond the

brook. The bearer of the bell does not on these evenings come forth as did Evangeline's heifer. She hides her bell, and lurks in the thickest brush. If the insistent gnat causes her to shake herself and stamp her impatient foot, any sound is muffled in the dense cloud of boughs. Angry and worn is the hunter on that night before he dislodges his gentle game. Perhaps as they take their unhurried way homeward while darkness settles fast over all the shady paths, the storm bursts, and every branch of fir or spruce or hemlock becomes a loaded showerbath. This is the time that tests the resolution of the man of virtuous language. When on the dreary and dripping road homeward they cross the brook and come into the open grazing ground, the cows stroll with genial and shambling deliberation and triumphant chewing of the cud. A warm shower means nothing to them. They have not even the satisfaction of knowing that they are annoying their driver. And the brook leaps a little, glad for the temporary increase in its diminished summer stream.

On its way to the head of tide water, the brook crosses only one public highway. There are wood roads at a few places, and they provide rough, strong bridges of stout poles in the ground, supported on heavy timbers. Where it reaches the main road, the brook is flowing through pasture lands. These pastures are fenced in the open with an upright snake fence, and in the thickets with the straight brush fence. Neither would serve across the brook; the spring freshets cannot be trusted. So a huge hemlock log is firmly fixed in place, and supplemented above by a pole of moderate dimensions. The latter is to save the self respect of the cattle. Otherwise they might think it necessary to step over the end of the log merely for the sake of appearance. Cattle can usually leap over or tear down pole fences if they wish. Respectable cattle do not thus conduct themselves. Their habit is to stay within the fence; and where habit is concerned, cattle are as docile or stupid as men. But they expect men to pay a decent respect to their agility, and preserve the semblance of restraint.

After running under the hemlock log, the brook turns rather sharply to the left and flows for a few rods parallel with the road, then swerves down a little rapid to the right and resumes its regular course. Beside the road there is a rather wide and shallow pool, and an opportunity for passing horses or oxen to slake their thirst. Immediately adjoining this pool and next to the road stands an ancient rock easy of access on the landward side and running sheer down into fairly deep water on the other. The rock may, according to geological mythology, have been at some time under water; it is much worn and smoothed on top, and there is a very definite

pocket-like step on either side, which was never worn by human feet. The rock is surmounted by a gnarled and stunted sort of nondescript white maple, and spotted here and there with diminutive green moss. It is a place for the meditative angler to sit and muse in utter peace. In the pool beneath is a relatively large trout, an ancient grandfather who has carried the science of hook-dodging to the verge of the miraculous. He is a rather dark fish, whose pleasure it is to watch the frustrate efforts of the ineffectual angler. There he stands motionless, suspended in his element, maintaining his sentinel position by an occasional slight quiver of his tail. Fat worms cannot tempt him, nor gaudy flies dazzle his steadfast mind. Sometimes he appears to warn away from the baleful hook a smaller and younger brother, and sometimes his efforts are in vain. Always he haunts the neighbourhood of the rock, a wily veteran, proof against flattery, the patriotic guardian of his little pool.

Across from the rock, and a few feet further downstream, a thicket of evergreens interspersed with alders clothes a piece of level ground. On some fine morning in late spring or early summer, a thin column of smoke rising from somewhere in this thicket indicates the arrival of a wandering family of Indians. Their reservation, locally known as the Indian Hill, lies only a few miles distant, and they are always wandering afield when the season permits. A passer-by would never notice their camp—perhaps to add colour one should say wigwam—if it were not for the smoke. The camp is built of the material of the surrounding woods, and does not strike the eye; and their work or play is carried on in a manner singularly quiet. Some day when one looks for them they have disappeared, leaving behind no trace but the camp, now turning brown and dropping its needles, a few blackened stones, the unobtrusive remnants of their fire, and a little heap of ash shavings, the byproduct of their manufacture of axe-handles and baskets. They may have gone back to the Hill, but are more likely to have withdrawn to a spot ten or twelve miles distant, along the shore, a far country, there to make knicknacks for the tourist trade, to catch haddock or pollock for daily use, and perhaps in some moment of triumphant ecstasy to shoot the elusive porpoise.

After passing the pool and rock, the road rises sharply up the steep bank that forms a prelude to the hill beyond. The brook appears to dive under the road, flowing between stone walls ten or twelve feet high. A bridge above is formed of flattened poles placed on stringers; there is no railing of any sort to protect the unwary traveller. The unwary travellers do not here amount to more than two or three per diem, and are not hurried or crowded

near the edge. Somewhere around the stones in the vicinity of the bridge, two large brown snakes hold their court. To memory they seem to have been gray, but they are always classified as brown. Sometimes they come out with a large family of small snakes and spread themselves in writhing content above the bridge. Sometimes they lie in silent bliss beneath the grateful sun. Imagination no doubt multiplies their number, as they crawl and twist and turn themselves about; harmless as they are, they start ancestral terrors in the mind, reminiscences equally appropriate of the primitive caveman or of the Garden of Eden.

Below the bridge the land is a part of the farm whose owners are the eponymous heroes of the brook. The brook has had at least three names during the last hundred years, and the two latter names followed the change of ownership of the farm. The foremost man among them all was no doubt he who built the great farmhouse that used to stand forty or fifty rods from the stream, set among huge cherry trees. The living room of the farmhouse contained a mighty fireplace, high piled in winter with hardwood logs. Once the house was occupied by a family of musicians who discoursed melodiously upon organ and violin. It was pleasant then to sit and watch the fire, as the beech logs turned almost noiselessly into glowing coals. If a freshet were on in time of thaw, one might during a pause in the music hear the hoarse voice of the fall a quarter of a mile below, as the brook hurled itself with an angry roar over the cliff on its impatient way toward the sea. The old house burned down one night without much warning, and the broad acres have an unkempt appearance. The brook is somewhat attenuated by time and the cutting of the forest. But standing beside the sordid ruins of the farmhouse one may still on summer days hear the peaceful chatter of the stream; still when the rains are high the torrent lifts its raucous shout.

The builder of the house and clearer of most of the cultivated acres was a man of worth and substance, deserving to be the hero of a much larger brook. Tales are told of his strength of mind and muscle, of the sterling virtue of his character and the unyielding anfractuosities of his temper. In his day all farmers of substance wore beaver hats, and some wore wigs. It is recorded of him that he went to sleep in church, that the clergyman woke him from the pulpit with audible remonstrance addressed to him by name, and that next day he saddled his horse and rode to the clergyman's door. He dismounted, and the clergyman came to meet him, strong in the consciousness of duty done, but uncertain of the purpose of his parishoner's visit. His uncertainty was soon resolved: "Here, parson, here's two dollars; next time I go to sleep

in church, wake me up and I'll give you a pound note." Of his brother it is told that he once ventured upon a second experiment in matrimony. He wore a wig, and as he walked up the aisle of the church the wig fell off; whereupon he continued his path unperturbed, kicking the wig methodically before him at every step. This brother's farm lies near the end of the brook, just across from the wharf. The farms remain in some sort to this day; but characters like those of their founders are increasingly difficult to find. The name may be called Hollins, though that is not what men consider it.

Just below the house, and only a few rods from the road, the greater Hollins had built a mill whose foundation timbers can even yet be detected, or could a few years ago. The dam has disappeared, though it is not very long since one large log was visible lying across the stream. Whether it has been washed out or merely covered up, no one perhaps has troubled to inquire. There is no depth in the pool that was the millpond, merely a shallow widening of the stream. Thirty or forty years ago, so the elders say, it was usually possible to catch a good mess of trout there at almost any time. Only a very small or very silly trout would trust himself there now. Of the activities of the mill no trace remains. The necessary heap of sawdust has receded into the soil or been carried away by the freshets. Not the smallest mound exists. A tangled mass of alders with blackberries intermingled covers the site where once lumber must have been piled, and the road over which teamsters and oxen held their laborious course. No sound but the ripple of the brook and the song of the birds in summer rises where once the greedy saw with strident cry devoured the clean spruce logs.

The brook lingers here for a few rods, as though quietly reminscent of the past, then gathers itself up for swifter action, and speaks in a more impatient tone. Soon it is flowing in a narrow channel of solid rock, with sharp and jagged little peaks rising through the current here and there. On the left side is a small grove of aspiring young spruce, productive of clear and fragrant gum. This substance cannot properly be mentioned in a world divided between civilized people and ruminating bipeds, but the trees that produce it continue to grow along the course of the stream straight on to the top of the cliff that surmounts the falls.

This is the meaning of the swift current below the milldam. It is only the coming of the rapids before the cataract. The fall is in three sections, separated by level pools. It is hard to judge distance so distributed, but probably from top to bottom it is between thirty and forty feet. The first fall is almost perpendicular, and about twenty feet high. In summer the water spreads in a

thin curtain of no strength, so that one may with care work one's way up the sheer face of the cliff in very midstream, holding by projecting bits of rock and by the clinging green moss. Below this fall is a pool beside the smoothest and flattest slab of rock in the world. There are odd pots in the channel where the stream has drilled out round, smooth holes. The next fall is of only a few feet, short and abrupt, gathering up the current and hurling it in a concentrated mass that springs through the air for a few feet to strike with a dull and heavy splash. This pool below is dark and seems deep, and the bottom is diversified with sharp and ugly teeth. Then the stream spreads fanlike to glide ten or twelve feet down, smooth, swift, and gentle over a rich carpet of moss. Now it is in a deep canyon, and the high banks on either side are surmounted by tall and ancient hemlocks, saved from the axe by their perilous position.

It used to be said by old men that the brook at the falls had changed its course and made another channel. There are strange formations around; in one place a steep and semi-circular row of cliffs surrounding an ampitheatre which looks as though it were due to the action of water. Of these things, knowing nothing, one can say only what one has heard, as did Herodotus in similar circumstances. There is at the top of the fall the Glooscap rock, thrown by that hero after the retreating beavers. Glooscap has vanished, and though traps have been seen in the vicinity, it is not recorded that beavers have been found in them. The rock stands to this day, just at the end of the grove of spruce before mentioned. It overtops the falls; and one who climbs upon it may survey their entire course, and may catch through the hemlock boughs a glimpse of the distant blue mountain, miles beyond the limits of the brook.

Past the falls the brook runs with peaceful swiftness on its way to the sea. It passes here through a well defined gorge. At the top of the bank there are woods, occasional grazing grounds, and once or twice a neatly-fenced hayfield. Further on the channel widens suddenly, and at the same time sinks to a greater depth; and if it is low tide, the current of fresh water flows smoothly between sloping walls of gray-brown mud. Above, on one side, stands a bit of genuine saltmarsh. After another forty rods or so the stream unites itself with a somewhat larger current, gives up its own course, and moves lazily on to its destination in the salt water beyond.

At high tide the scene is quite different. Then the brook empties itself into a peaceful lake at a point not far above the little saltmarsh. A wooden bridge crosses the gorge just below. The road on the right side of the brook climbs very sharply up the bank and disappears over the crest. On the other side it rises more

gently and winds up the bank of the tidal river, passing between two houses not far from the bridge. Above the road here stand two huge old barns. It is a quiet spot, and the road bears traces of only infrequent travel. In summer it is sometimes occupied by inquisitive tourists; but they soon pass, and silence reigns again.

It was not always so quiet here. Below the bridge stands the remains of an old wharf, a wharf that even now elevates itself above the tide at high water, though it is inclining yearly nearer and nearer to the mudflats below. Once its every gap was speedily repaired, and it stood like a tower above the channel that touches its base. Here an earlier generation through the years shipped thousands of cords of wood to the Boston market. During the winter the wood is cut and started on bob-sleds out to the main road. There it is piled in a convenient clearing, to await the arrival of summer and the schooner. With the coming of the ship, the period of strenuous activity begins. The wharf is already piled high with cordwood. A cord of wood, according to the old arithmetic, is a pile four by four by eight feet. Everyone knows that the cords on the wharf are piled four feet four inches high, and the ignorant stranger sometimes asks why. He is told that the four inches are to allow for the scarf. If he has a logical mind, he goes on to ask about the scarf. Otherwise he departs with his new formula, and a blissful illusion of knowledge.

The schooner is not usually very large, and a hundred cords or so furnish a cargo. She sails well and carries a small crew, so that the expenses of a trip are not great. There is also the return cargo. The captain probably has to worry over customs and revenue officers, but these seem to the boys upon the wharf far distant evils. The wood pours into the hold of the schooner with cheerful thuds. The men who stow it away—in big ships they would be stevedores—seem always to resemble a well-known character in English history; they are never in the way, and never out of the way. As the piles in the wharf diminish, teams bring their loads down the steep hill. It is necessary to put a brake on the wheel of a loaded waggon here. The brake is a hardwood shoe, so fastened by a chain that it stands just under the hind wheel. When the chain grows taut, and wheel and shoe settle into their places, a most strident screech fills the air as the shoe, under its heavy load, grinds its way into or over the dry gravel of the road. Reluctantly, the waggon squeaks into its appointed place upon the wharf; the oxen heave a mighty sigh, and resume the calm discussion of their philosophic cud. Soon they will come slowly into action again, and pursue their magnanimous way up the hill and after another load.

The boys, who are spectators in the principal drama, have other interests of their own. The mere relentless ebb and flow of the tide is always a fascination till long experience has turned it into a custom. It comes up over a strip of sand that lies on one side of the wharf, with a queer little bubbling sound as the air rushes out from below. That strip of sand is a good place to beach a boat, and sometimes in the morning one finds on it as the tide recedes a dory filled with little herring. Someone has visited the weir during the night, has presumably anchored his dory until nearly high water, then gone off for her and brought her within easy reach of his team. Into the destination of the small fishes it is perhaps unnecessary to enquire. There are provincial laws and local customs. Once at least, a shark eight or nine feet long entangled himself in the weir and was found squirming in the water of the hurdle. Like any large craft, he was unable to manoeuvre in the shallows. Someone produced a rifle, and shot him. Once also a shark was hauled backward out of the weir at low tide. A noose was slipped over his tail as he lay stranded, and a pair of undistinguished oxen towed him ignominiously to his gloomy fate, a dreadnought led captive by a pair of barges. The shark is a fish of distinction, but lacks altruism even by the standards of civilized men. His oil is a marvellous weather protection for wooden shingles, and his teeth may be found as trophies suspended in many an ancient woodshed. But even a captured shark cannot surpass for long the attractions aboard the schooner.

There are always for the youthful landsman the pleasant mysteries of the ship and rigging. Adventurous boys may, if they refrain from ostentation, climb aloft and shin about in the ropes. If they become noisy or too obvious, some one will bring them again to earth. One of the initiated may explain the compass, or even set forth in some unguarded moment something of the hidden ways of a ship in the sea. The captain is a great man, much greater than anyone else there; in course of time he remains in memory as a composite captain. Even then he often stands out as a stoutly built man of medium height with a thick dark beard and clear blue eyes. From him boys expected nothing more than a slight but friendly nod. One of his actions will seem strange to this generation. He not infrequently paid for his wood in gold coin. Gold was not then the mythical and hypothetical substance that it has since become. And no one seems to have heard him talk of any strange adventures on sea or land. He had often a puzzled look, as of one who could not make it all out; and his silence may have been due to his unwillingness to talk of what he did not understand. The cook too offered possibilities, a man of quiet kindliness

who was skilled at his trade. To well mannered boys he was always a willing host. The thought of something that he called Johnny-cake still rouses gustatory memories of no mean delight. One always visited his shining galley whenever the ship appeared in port. Sometime after schooners ceased to come to the wharf for wood, the news came that he had been lost at sea in some ship before unheard of. As remote now as Lycidas he lies somewhere in Poseidon's vast domain, leaving to an ever-lessening group of former boys the memory of grave courtesy and careful craftsmanship and perfect Johnny-cake.

The cook is gone, and the captain is heard of no more. The old wharf will not again be visited by any schooner, and will in time sink into the mud beneath. The waters of the brook will turn the wheels of no more mills, and hear no more the song of the remorseless saw. The Hollins family, great and small, rest in their graves or live in distant lands. Not long ago, as history records the length of time, the wandering Indian was the only man who had seen the stream; now its chief contribution to human activities has been made, its greater days are over, and it flows indifferent and unheeded to the sea. Men come and go, but it is not certain that the brook will go on for ever. The famous rivers of antiquity had their river gods whose statutes may be seen in the great galleries of the world. The Hollins Brook, unworthy of such dignified protection, is entitled to the attendance of its tutelary nymphs. The nymphs, perhaps, pay small account to human reckoning of time. It may be that for generations they will sport in summer where the sunshine glances through the boughs upon the quiet pools, and listen, when the stream is swollen by the melting snows, to the unceasing thunder of the sullen falls.