

CATCH

By Steve Bowkett

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REG BUTTON didn't care about anyone much. Which was why I loved him. He was old long before I was born, most of his life spent in a past that I had never seen and could hardly imagine. His wife had died fifteen years earlier, his children were grown up and moved away. He had a house and a pension, some money put by and a lot of empty time left to him to spend as he wished.

We became friends not because he saw himself mirrored youthfully in me, nor because either of us went out of his way to be sociable. It was simply that he liked solitude and so did I, and on a cold, late September day at Pitsford Water, neither of us expected to meet a soul. I'd come down to the reservoir to get away from people; a bossy sister, irritated snappy mother, a Saturday boss who expected you to do a paper round for peanuts and thank him for it. Besides, things hadn't gone too well that week at school. I'd fancied my chances with Anna, took a week to build up the guts to ask her out and then had been stared at as though I'd caught green measles. Great eh, especially when later in the day I'd seen her with Royston Simms—a kid with about as much personality as a warped plank.

I decided to walk the three miles out to Pitsford, following the old railway cutting most of the way, as far as the bridge (which is no longer there). And the tracks have gone, taken up for the metal: even the gravel's been scooped away for re-use. Not that I mind, because the land has been left to settle back into itself and become natural again.

After dawdling through the labyrinth of brambles, pausing every few yards to stuff a mouthful of fruit, I got a move on to arrive at the water before one o'clock. I'd come to catch fish—not 'to fish'—that was about as boring as I could imagine—but to pick up the few trout I wanted as quickly as possible and spend the rest of the afternoon thinking, dozing, watching the grey rippling flatness of the lake, like polished iron in a wind that had in these past few days begun to smell of autumn.

I reached the reservoir with time to spare, turning off the road into the lane that took me through the village (no post office, one pub and six houses) to the great open grass slope that swept down to the waterline.

I went straight to my favorite spot, a deep clear backwater pool half hidden by rocks. It was fed by a stream draining off the hill, the water tumbling whitely over pebbles. Trout liked to gather there, enjoying the fresh, aerated water with its boil of bubbles. Maybe the movement of it made them sluggish or dazed, because it was always easy to prod them with my bits of dowel that had onion netting stretched between. Drifting reluctantly a while, those fish seemed to guess they were being hunted, and turned to swim for it, straight into the mesh. Then I'd haul them out, bash their heads on the rocks to kill them quickly, cleanly. And that would be that.

'Course, it was not allowed even though I had a licence to fish the water, and no one would ever call it sporting, old man. But I didn't do it for sport: I did it to eat trout.

The reservoir was slightly choppy that day, with a few boats out, distant like slivers of drifting white paper. I cast a glance to make sure nobody was nearby or watching, then I stooped to net my first fish...

It was easy. I caught a big two-pounder within minutes, hauled out a second slightly smaller one soon after and got busy stalking a third. That would be enough. No point taking more than I wanted.

I saw the shadow cast over the water and heard the voice at the same time, and nearly jumped in with the shock.

"That takes me back, though I used ash-sticks and not them fancy bits o' stuff you got."

I whipped round, both guilty and angry all at once.

The old man was standing on the high bank to my left, with the cloudy grey sky behind: I had to squint to look at him properly. He looked like a fisherman: great baggy corduroy trousers and canvas-lined wellies, a big green waterproof that crackled when he moved, tackle box slung round one shoulder and his rod, all packed up now, hanging by its strap from the other. Damn! Just my luck. Now he'd fetch the water bailiffs out and that would be the end of the game.

At least, that's what I expected. But he simply stood and watched and I thought to hell with him. I turned back round to fish for my third trout.

"You used to do this, then?"

"Oh yes, years ago. Matter of necessity then. Not for you though, eh?"

"No."

"Do it for sport?"

"No, for the taste of trout."

He chuckled at that, a sound worn smooth in his old throat. "Best reason there is," he said and, "My name's Reg Button."

"Philip Stevens—Phil." I broddled about with my sticks in the water for a moment longer, but I was getting stiff. When the third fish turned its heavy body aside from the drifting net, lazily like a bar of hammered lead, I stood up with a grimace and shrugged. Reg Button was smirking, his face all lines and creases, and suddenly it occurred to me that he didn't really look like a fisherman after all, but like something else that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"You like trout too, then?" he nodded and I picked up the bigger fish and told him to stick it away in his box pretty quick.

"Thank you son. Saves me the bother. You'll share a spot o' lunch wi' me for that?"

"OK," I said after a slight hesitation. "I've got nothing else to do, man."

We sat on the grass slope some way from the rock pool and Reg delved into his box for a bag of sandwiches. The food was wrapped, but I made a face when I saw the Tupperware container rustling with maggots that he kept right next to it.

"They for your afters?" I asked with a sickly grin.

"Lovely spread on toast," Reg answered with no trace of mischief in his eyes: they were pale blue eyes like a long-ago sky, and the whites of them had gone a bit yellow and wet. He had a big bulbous nose with burst of purple blood vessels at the sides. I made a bet with myself that he used a huge red spotted handkerchief to blow with.

"Here." He handed me a wedge of sandwich, two thick roughcut slabs of brown bread stuffed with yellow cheese and succulent slices of tomato. It was a man's sandwich with nothing delicate about it.

"Come on, don't you cut the crusts off?" I asked him in mock surprise. He smiled and his eyes twinkled as if to say stop yapping, start eating.

We tucked in.

Afterwards Reg shared his two-pint flask of tea, the strong dark brown liquid making the roof of my mouth feel like the inside of a furred-up kettle. And we talked, endlessly, which was ridiculous, because an hour earlier we had been complete strangers. Now we swapped yarn like old friends. I moaned on about school—petty problems really—and grumbled about my parents. Reg listened without saying much, nodding occasionally in a way that did not imply either agreement or disagreement. Sometimes he spoke about his own childhood. It sounded sepia, faded now and distant. Reg's voice was thick with nostalgia, a keen longing for summer afternoons that would never come again.

"Well," I said, my voice lazy in the thin sunlight that had made the afternoons as warm as it was going to be. "I've never bothered much about the past. It's gone, man. What's done is done."

"But what's never done remains forever undone," Reg said. I made my mouth screw up.

"Come again?"

"The past is full of lost potential. Most people have wasted their lives. Perhaps I've wasted mine."

"I hope you're not saying I'm wasting mine!"

Reg said nothing. I looked round too late to see him nod or shake his head.

"So, not keen on fishing?" he went on after a silence.

"Not much, not really."

"I'll show you fishing, son." He stood with a grunt. I followed him, shivering a bit now because the sun was close to the trees and the wind off the water had turned colder.

I asked him, "You live close by?"

"In Pitsford. Why, you got to get back home, Phil?"

"Naa, I got all the time in the world, me."

Reg's house was maybe the biggest in the village, an old three-story Victorian redbrick with brown and green rooftiles and light blue paintwork now peeling. A tatty yew hedge ran the length of the frontage and down the side. The place loomed. It was not as neat and trim as the other houses in the village, but it looked lived in and a bit scruffy around the edges, like Reg himself. Which is why I took to it straight away.

He made some sort of mumbled apology about the state of the garden: didn't look too bad to me with its lime trees still brightly in leaf, well-used plot for vegetables, and grass summer-long, September-golden: the sort of garden where little kids never run out of adventures to play.

We went inside to a hallway that smelt of sweet tobacco. And the same smoke seemed to have stained the place honey-colored, almost the sepia of Reg's distant past. There was a tall coat-stand with a place for walking-sticks and umbrellas, a mirror, and a small round table. I stood and stared. On the table was a green bronze dragon, a foot long, wingless, lizard-backed, aggressively beautiful.

"Chinese, from the Chou Dynasty," Reg was telling me. "Nearly two thousand years old as far as I can judge."

"It's brilliant... Must be worth a fortune."

"Probably."

Probably! I nearly dropped where I stood. The old guy had to be cracked to leave something like that lying about unprotected on his hall table. Hadn't he got it valued? Insured?

But now he was hanging up his waterproof and beckoning me into the front room.

The place was a museum, cluttered with glass display cases, boxes piled high in the corners, all roughly labelled with faded embossed tape. The room was dark with heavy curtains pulled half across, but despite the gloom my eye caught the grey gleam of weaponry; swords and knives, the white shine of bones, paintings of past ages with their strange perspectives hung on the walls.

It might of course have been forged, all of it; or reproduction stuff, but somehow I doubt it. I had begun to know him and that told me that this vast miscellany of objects was real. Real and true like the old man's heart.

"This is amazing, Reg," I said quietly. "I've never seen anything like it."

He hum-hummed a bit with pleasure and showed me one of the swords.

"No," he said as I started to admire it, "not a sword. It's a scramasax, single-edged longknife used by the Anglo-Saxons. This is one of the bigger sorts. You can get them as short as nine inches. Look at the handle here, gold inlay, gorgeous workmanship. One of my better catches."

That's when I began to feel cold prickles along my neck. I thought that Reg might have been eccentric up until now—the rich reclusive kind of eccentric you read about in magazines. But the way he was talking made him crazy—or else something was happening that I could hardly imagine.

Reg Leaned the sword—the scramasax—against a drab 'Forties double wardrobe and picked up an oval lump of bone about twice the size of a hen's egg. It was a carving, crude but powerful, of a girl's head. The features were simple and smooth and innocent. Reg smiled distantly as he handled it, turning it over and over in his hands. The surface of his palms was as brown and as shiny as onionskin.

"It's a portrait, one of the earliest you'll ever find. Cro-Magnon sculpture was rare, and most of it was religious. This is probably a sister or daughter."

"Where'd you buy it?" I asked, almost aggressively skeptical.

"Found it, son. A long cast, this was, and a difficult one."

"What the hell are you talking about? Where, Reg, did you find it?"

"Let's go fishing," Reg said simply.

I followed him out of his room of treasures into the hallway again and up the stairs. The light was going now, just deep red puddles of it in corners and strips of it cast on the walls. The house seemed to be bigger, less friendly, and I felt we were walking deeper into strange hostile territory.

A half open door at the end of the landing showed me Reg's bedroom (stuffed with more of his priceless junk), but we went the other way, to a room at the back of the house.

This place looked less well cared for: the landing carpet was threadbare, the floral wallpaper faded and dull. The air smelt, not musty, but not far from it, kind of old: an earthy smell. The smell of history.

And over and above it all I could hear the sound of the sea.

"What is that, Reg?" my voice came out just above a whisper. Reg answered me by pushing open the big pine door of the back room. Night had come, or maybe it had never left. The room was very dark, and chilled with air that moved steadily in a strong draught across our faces. Here the sound was much louder, a huge and distant crashing of wave over wave; of breakers over pebbles on an unseen shore.

"I'm scared Reg."

He put his hand on my shoulder, a heavy and solid and calming hand. When he spoke his voice had changed: now he was like a kid again about to open presents on Christmas morning.

“Don’t be. Just take some care Phil. Do as I say. Now, two steps forward—that’s it. See what’s there...”

I strained to see. The darkness was not quite complete, and looking back I noticed a pale fan of natural light sliding in under the door, now shut. But besides that some far away and faint illumination was in the air around me. And because of it I could pick out a clutter of objects scattered in a ragged line on the bare floorboards at my feet; some sticks and lumps of soil, bent scarps of metal, a Coke bottle, other stuff I couldn’t identify. The floor faded beyond this into darkness.

Reg squatted down and pick among this flotsam like a beachcomber, muttering to himself in disappointment, disgust—then in some excitement.

“Here’s something.” He scarped away a thin crust of grey mud with his fingernail to reveal a small imperfect disk of dull yellow metal. He pressed it into my hand.

“Souvenir. Roman I think, by the ear of corn symbol. Anyway, keep it safe. It’s yours.”

“What’s going on here?” It wasn’t that I was scared any more, just curious now, and beginning to get caught in Reg’s excitement. He chuckled.

“You’ve got imagination enough to guess. sit there, cross-legged is best. Are you cold?”

“Not really.”

He walked a few steps away and came back with an ordinary fishing rod and another tackle box, like the ones I had seen him with before, but not quite the same.

Reg sat beside me, check for snags in the line, drew the rod back and cast out. The weight sailed into the night and the reel spun with a zing of uncoiling line. I heard no splash, but the line kept going, farther, father into the depths.

“What,” I asked wryly, “do you use for bait?”

He smiled. “Curiosity, son. Works every time.”

“You’ve fished for all those things downstairs?”

“Every one of them, but you can never tell what you’ll haul out. For every bit o’ stuff worth keeping, there’s twenty things I throw back—”

“Back to where they came?”

“Probably not—”

“Coins in coal!”

“Wha’s that?”

“I read about it,” I said. “People have found coins in coal that was millions of years old, and in 1961 in California, miners found what they thought was a sparking plug in a lump of fossilized stone. A guy called Charles Fort wrote all about this stuff.”

“Ha, well I hope you’re not blaming me? I don’t suppose I’m the only angler along these banks.”

I thought then that maybe I’d offended Reg, because he said nothing more for nearly an hour. At one point he passed the rod to me and went away.

I sat in that nowhere-place, in the near dark, listing to the sea that was not a sea, wondering what strange ships sailed out there and if they ever visited still backwaters like Pitsford—until Reg came back with two big white mugs of steaming coffee. He was saying sorry, and I said it to by drinking every drop.

We caught nothing that night except a rather modern looking bottle of green glass. I wanted to hang on to it, but Reg hurled the thing away.

“Useless rubbish,” he said grumpily.

We never heard the splash.

After that, I visited the old man a couple times a week. He always showed me some more of his treasures and any new finds, and we’d go to fish. The winter drew on and so I never saw the back room in the day time, and I think I never wanted to. I dreamed it might be still as black as midnight.

One time I asked him, “Why’d you do this Reg? Not to get rich?”

We both muffled up in duffel coats and gloves, scarves and wooly hats. The cold was cruel and our breath smoked in the air. The sound of the waves was fiercer tonight, wilder than ever.

Out there—whatever it was—it must have been wintertime too.

“Nothing to do with money. Why do fishermen sit their Sundays away in any case? They like to catch, but thinking about the catch is just as good. Besides, this is better. Because you never know what’s going to come along.”

Reg was right about that. One night after I'd made about the best and longest cast of my life—and I was getting pretty good at it with all the practice—I felt the line stretch tight and the rod start to judder in my hands.

I called to him, panicking. "Reg, help me, man!"

I could feel some heavy, powerful thing thrashing on the hook, its wild movements communicated up through the line and the rod, which was now arced over like a rainbow.

"Reg!"

I screamed it. The thing was pulling with terrible force, and I took a step forward helplessly. I'd stood up when the line had first tightened, but now I wish I hadn't. My boots gritted on gravel, slid an inch on mud.

"Reg..."

He came clumping over with a swing of his heavy arm he knocked the rod out of my hands. My grip had been frozen to it, clamped in a panic to the cork, and my mind had been frozen too, unable to give the order to let go.

"It was alive! Whatever it was... it was alive..."

"There be dragons, lad," said Reg, grinning wickedly. I forced myself not to let imagination run free, or I'd be sick with the shock.

I bought him a new rod and reel for Christmas with my paper-round money. I'd been saving for a radio controlled car, but that didn't matter. It wasn't the most expensive tackle around, or the best, but he opened the package with tears in his eyes and blew his nose into a huge red spotted handkerchief. I smiled to myself when I saw it.

"You're a good lad Phil. You know I could always have sold one of my treasures to buy the fanciest rod in the country."

But we knew, we both knew, that it would have been just another possession.

For a quirky thank you, Reg took our photo together. He set up the camera, adjusted the shutter delay and hurried round to stand beside me, arm on my shoulder like a proud granddad. He had two copies of the snapshot made, and gave me one just after New Year. I stared at it. No photograph had ever been like this one: not because this was different, but because now, to me, its moment had become as much a part of

the past as the Pyramids or a fossil shell or the world's first sunrise. Now is what counts. And now. and now

"Thanks Reg," I told him from my heart. "I'll keep it forever."

That was the last time I ever saw Reg Button. I was kept busy with schoolwork for a week—teachers always launch into a new term with great enthusiasm—and I didn't get round to Pitsford until the following Sunday.

We'd had some thick gentle snowfall on Friday: Saturday had been fine, but Sunday saw a shift in the wind to the northeast so the day arrived in the middle of a blizzard that only let up well into the afternoon.

By five all the cloud had been swept away and the sky glittered with stars like cut glass glowing in the moonlight. There was a full moon. Reg had said something about it affecting more than just the terrestrial tides, and so I was vaguely worried as I trudged the last mile into the village.

The worry sharpened when I reached the front gate. Something was wrong. The house, normally bleak, looked even more abandoned and empty.

I trudged through the snow piles and went into the house using the key that Reg had given me. When I shouted his name the house echoed with it empty, but no answer came back.

I banged up the stairs and ran along the landing.

It looked as if a storm hit. Fragments of soil, tufts of grass, leaves and twigs lay strewn all down the passageway.

The old-fashioned bowl of a lampshade above the stairwell had smashed, its glass lying like curves of pale eggshell on the threadbare carpet.

I walked into the back room and blustery east-coast wind swept sand grains up into my eyes.

The room was a shambles. Large chunks of wood and fist-sized stoned were scattered all about. One thick stump of a log looked as though it had been hurled into the wall by the doorway, dislodging wedges of plaster. The sea roared. And at our fishing place Reg's tackle box lay overturned, and the handle and a two-foot length of his rod, snapped off sharply; the top section, weights and line were missing.

I will never know exactly what happened. Perhaps the storm was too much and swept him out, or maybe the dragons from the bottom of the ocean came rising through

the depths as Reg sat and dozed away his hours on the lonely shores of eternity. He was a solitary fisherman. No one else was there to help him that night.

I carry on, visiting two or three times weekly, letting myself in with the key Reg gave me. No one notices, there are no suspicious looks or questions asked.

And there is always the chance that I'll find him again, washed up somewhere or floundering in a limbo of nothingness. I'll keep on until people discover that Reg is gone, and his house is sold and its treasures are scattered. And what a stir that will make in the papers!

I'll keep at it, though I've cast far and wide and deep. Sometimes I wonder if you can swim in this sea, or sail in it to summer afternoons I thought might never come again. But I haven't tried that yet, I haven't dared. For deep down I know that the waters are dark and the tides are uncertain.