

REV. C.G. BECK
BURYING A PIKE
(Why I hate fishing)

Judging from an old desk diary, this happened one year on the twelfth of April. In my mind, however, it coincides with a wonderful thorn tree that was growing by the lake, covered in porcelain pink and white blossom – suggesting it was May. Whichever, it was definitely out of the fishing season. The water was a series of large private gravel pits. I and my son, aged fifteen, had taken the bus there to catch pike.

It promised to be a very bright spring day. As we crossed the rough ground towards the biggest lake, we became aware of a large vixen watching us by a bramble patch a hundred yards away; then of some cubs dodging awkwardly about behind her. The vixen turned aside and all of them melted into cover.

By the lake there was healthy new growth of rushes, mint and forget-me-nots. One or two swallows slid around high overhead, a kestrel was hovering above the meadows beyond the lake, and a tern winged past peering down its red toothpick beak into the water. As well as a mob of ducks and the inevitable Canada geese, it looked as though lapwings were nesting on the half-wooded island in the middle of the lake, because several shot up now and then to wheel around passing crows.

The place was alive with creatures and we seemed to be the only people there.

My son decided to spin with a new Finnish lure from behind some reeds where the shore sloped gently and fish could easily be launched back in. I opted to deadbait round the corner of the lake from him, because I fancied there was a hollow about twenty yards off, from which I had taken one or two nine-pounders in the past and which might hold something bigger.

The shore here was firm, with short grass on it, and there was even a dilapidated fishing-stage at the water's edge. I ignored that and unpacked my bag behind the mature willows to the right of it. A glorious moment! The float-box gashed its reds against the dewy grass, my reel with the thirty-pound monofilament lay next to it, then out came the various polythene bags of deadbait. I took out my flask, poured myself a cup of coffee, and stood up to enjoy it. If I had smoked a pipe, that is when I would have lit it.

A brimstone butterfly hurtled along the row of radiant sallows set back from where I was standing. I could see now that all kinds of plants were thrusting up in the grass around

me and by the water's edge: sorrel, moonstruck silverweed, the curiously ratchety leaves of gypsywort, willowherb, portwine-marked mint, forget-me-nots, horsetails, true bulrush. There was also a willow sapling to the left of the fishing-stage, with a wisp of vegetation in front of it, and that was where I decided to position my rod. Over in the reeds, my son held up a 'jack' pike of a couple of pounds or so.

I tied on an eighteen-inch thirty-pound wire trace with two black, size ten Partridge doubles on it. This set-up may sound overdone, but the gravel pits were supposed to harbour pike over twenty pounds and I can't bear the thought of my tackle breaking with a fish on it. I had already threaded a small weight and an orange-and-brown free-sliding float with a stop above it at about six feet. The sprat, still firm from the freezer, pricked onto the 'tandem' system very cleanly and realistically.

I had to cast a couple of times to get the float how I like it – erect, half-submerged, tightly flush with the stop, ready to register the slightest interest from a pike. Also, I deliberately cast well beyond where I intended to fish, because I am one of those anglers who believe that the secret of a 'static' is to move it, in two or three stages, into the position you want. I did this from behind the withy, then stood well back from the rod where I could see the float.

After a while, there was some flicking and bobbing. My hand went to the rod. The float slowly went under. I struck and was into a decent fish that rasped twenty feet of line straight off towards the middle of the lake. I shouted to my son to bring the big net (we shared it) and I easily turned the fish, which now ran across me to my left, bucking and diving. I played him, he crossed again, closer to my right, and suddenly he'd had enough. He thrashed a bit in the shallows when he saw the net, but he was swiftly landed. He was one of those coal scuttle headed pike of about ten pounds and I could see that he was held by one hook in the cartilage right at the front of his lower jaw, where the teeth look like broken glass on a wall. As I went to extract the hook with my forceps he writhed very snakily in the sopping net and the hook was jerked out by the upper double catching in the mesh.

A magnificent, darkly marked brute in prime condition. He weighed in at nine and a half pounds. My son took a quick photo and within three minutes the fish was gliding out into the depths spurting bubbles behind him.

There might well have been bigger specimens in that channel, but it's my policy never to risk catching the same fish twice. So I loosely repacked my bag, hooked the trace on a rod-ring, and, chuffed with this start to the morning, set off for another spot.

One after another I rejected the swims along the willows and alders on this side of the lake; they did not have enough headroom for casting. I settled for the wide gap at their end, which provided plenty of space on my right. It was a completely different spot from the first, as it sloped very gently into deeper water and this slope was mainly firm fine gravel. I set up behind the trees on my left, cast just over twenty yards, waited, then slowly retrieved to about fifteen yards offshore. From being stiff in the water at twenty yards, the float now lay flat on the surface, but I ignored that.

Almost immediately there was a sustained twitching, as though the bait were being tickled. I smiled. There were wavelets on the lake, but this frequency could only be a fish – a pike. Then the float set off rightwards on the surface. I stepped out into the gap holding my rod up, but had not actually made contact with the fish, i.e. hadn't set the hook. The float now turned and sped off to the left. I laughed (I may even have whooped), as I could imagine a grey old pike hugging the bottom, holding the bait across his mouth, and basically playing about with me. The float was heading away from me, however, slipping beneath the surface, and at this point I struck.

It felt very big indeed, and very deep in the water. It took off yards of line, I tightened the clutch, and still I couldn't stop it. I shouted to my son. As he came running with the net and my arm was being wrenched off struggling with the rod, I spluttered: 'This is a big one...well into double figures...it could be *very* big!'

The trace and hooks were holding solidly, but they felt as though they were in the jaws of something leviathan, something the dimensions of a boiler or a baker's oven. It ripped the line out to the right again, then to the left, then closer in to the right, this time I was able to turn it towards us, and then it was in only a couple of feet of water and splashing near the surface.

I could not believe what I saw. The fish was evidently just a 'jack', a pickerel of about three pounds.

'I could have sworn it was bigger than that,' I said to my son as I drew it in still scrapping and he netted it. 'It felt so strong! I thought it was at least thirteen pounds. They can certainly fight, these young fish!'

He swung the net round onto the bank, and we saw at once that only the end of the trace was protruding from the fish's mouth. I went down to the pike with my longest forceps, muttering: 'Oh no, I hope it's not deep-hooked...'

I slipped my fingers under one gill, the fish opened its mouth, and I peered down its

velcro-lined throat. There was absolutely no sign of the bottom double, although the top one was free. I grabbed the line just above the trace and stood up holding the fish over the net. I don't think I have ever held a fish suspended like this before, but I knew it would hang limp in that position, probably open its mouth wide, and we should be able to see the hook.

All this happened. The weight on the trace was pulling the pike's dough-like stomach right forward and we could see both black points of the bottom hook sticking through past their barbs. The fish hung there completely quiet, as though it knew precisely what had happened and what we were thinking. Its eyes, of course, were looking straight at us. I said to my son: 'It's telling me "you bloody idiot, you got me into this mess, you get me out!"'. Then it gave a flick and I felt the same power as in the water. The reason it had been able to produce such power was that it was then already hooked in its deepest part, its very centre, its pivot.

I laid the fish down again on the net and my son ran for his wire-cutters. The creature was gleaming in the spring sunlight, it was fin-perfect and immaculately marked, superbly streamlined and bright eyed. It lay without moving, in a natural posture on its stomach, and apart from the wire coming from its mouth you wouldn't have thought there was anything interfered-with, slighted, injured, about it.

In fact, I was not over-worried that it was deep-hooked. I had successfully 'operated' on one or two much bigger fish deep-hooked by other fishermen, and that was without using wire-cutters; I had no doubt we would get these hooks cleanly out. What felled me, however, was the realisation of my own stupidity. I had broken all the most elementary rules of fishing. I hadn't 'tightened' my float, I had left it in the water when it was quite obviously 'overshot', that's to say when there was slack line waving about under the surface. I hadn't struck within the first few twitchings, before a pike turns the bait round and swallows it head first: by the time the float was moving across the surface and I was cheering at the 'sport', the hooks were in its stomach. I had been incredibly unskilled and negligent.

My son arrived with the cutters. I held the fish in a semi-vertical position with its tail on the net, it opened its jaws, we eased forward its stomach, with deft movements my son clipped off and extracted the hook ends, I clamped my forceps on the top double, and everything came out easily. I picked the fish up gently in both hands and held him in the water. He seemed to revive very rapidly, so I pointed him towards the open.

He moved a few feet and stopped. We watched apprehensively. Then he gave a thrust and moved again. A puff of dull red appeared in the water around him.

‘Uh-oh,’ said my son.

‘Oh no...’ I muttered. It could mean that one of the fish’s internal organs had been punctured, or even that its heart had burst from all the stress. But it was only a puff.

‘Probably from the gills,’ I said, knowing how easily these produce blood.

‘I don’t know,’ he commented.

The fish was moving off, slowly but confidently, into the dark. My son went back to his fishing. He knew as well as I did why this had happened. We had not had this problem since our very first years of fishing together.

Pike, like eels, are famously indestructible. Although I do not subscribe to some anglers’ belief that a pike’s stomach can ‘liquidize’ hooks and metal lures – on the contrary, I am with the other anglers who maintain that the pike’s stomach is its most sensitive part – I have caught pike that have clearly thriven for years with only one eye, hardly any tail, or missing much of their upper jaw; not to mention horrible wounds in their backs inflicted by other pike. I had high hopes, then, for this ‘jack’. Pike are so highly developed they even seem to learn. This fellow had probably never been caught before. He would be more wary next time, and the time after that. He might live another ten years. He might become one of those fabled twenty-pounders that no-one ever sees.

But my attention was caught by some movement on the lake about twenty yards to my right; the opposite side from where I had released the pike. Something seemed to be swimming with difficulty just under, or at, the surface. It splashed and paddled round in a wide curve and started coming in my direction. It was progressing briskly and it was lunging its nose out of the water, as though it were trying to launch itself into the air, to *fly*!

It was the pike. There was no doubt about it. I had never seen a pike do this before, but my heart sank because this extraordinary movement looked unnervingly like that of a dying fish. It had come back out of nowhere, was going to die now and float on the surface. But no, it did something even worse, something uncanny. It struggled on with half of its snout showing and seemed to spot me. It veered towards me and came within ten feet of the shore. When it was exactly opposite me it sank in the water and lay on its side before me. The water was clear, the fish’s rippled flank glowed gold and green, and it just lay pike-perfect before me on the gravel.

The most awful thing was that I felt the fish had chosen to do this. It had decided to re-establish contact with what had attacked it. Why? When I saw it pumping along as though trying to launch itself out of the water, the thought actually crossed my mind: it’s

trying to get to its maker, to the 'Almighty Fin' in the sky as Rupert Brooke called him. Perhaps when it saw me it decided *I* was the omnipotent creature it had to surrender to? By lying down directly in front of me was it signifying defeat? Or was it wanting to shame me? I mentioned the look in its eyes when we were fumbling with it. I now felt certain it was wanting to lay its blame literally at my feet. All this anthropomorphism went through my mind as I contemplated it in the water, like some modern jewel on a cushion, because the pike's action seemed so premeditated, so conscious, that a bond sprang up with it.

Obviously, there was no time to lose. I took my shoes and socks off and walked into the lake. The pike did not stir. I slipped both hands beneath it and lifted it out. It gave a kick, so surely it was still alive? But what could I do?

I crouched in the edge and gently rocked the fish back and forth to aerate its gills. It stirred in my hands, but when I let go of it in a vertical position it moved a length or so in the water and lay down on its side again.

I was desperate. Very, very rarely had I killed a fish in forty years of angling. But this fellow was going to die on me right at my feet so that I could be sure of the fact and that it was I, no-one else, who had killed him.

I realised that if I was going to resuscitate him, I was in the wrong place. The whole fishing spot was exposed to the sun, which was pretty strong by now, and the water was too shallow to be dark and cool. I knew, however, that a bit further on the shore swung round, trees on either side shaded the corner, and there was even the traditional notice DEEP WATER. (In fact, it looked excellent for large pike; the only reason we had never fished there was that the willows had purposely been planted too close together to cast through.)

I lifted the pike in both hands and with his beak pointing forwards literally ran round the edge of the lake. His eyes and skin still gleamed in the sunlight. From above, I saw mainly his head, which was so square it looked more like a dog's. Again I had the feeling that I was not carrying a cold, slimy, reptilian creature but something with which an absolute bond of communication existed. I remember thinking as I contemplated the head jutting in front of me: 'This is surreal! I am dashing round a lake holding a pet dog and we've got to get there as soon as possible for us both to save its life and the dog is ignoring the fact that I nearly killed him in the first place, he's come to me for help, and we're collaborating in a race against time to save *his* life.' The tip of the pike's jaw was open slightly and I half expected it to say something, or bark.

We reached the cusp of the corner. It certainly was in deep shade, and over there was

the notice, but for about fifteen feet out from the side there was no water at all, only thick black mud. Now what to do? I came to an instant decision, which I realised was probably precipitated by a frantic desire just to be rid of the problem, to leave it behind; to deny, perhaps, that it existed and was of my own making.

As far as I could see, it was impossible to release the pike in any deeper water round the lake that was in shade. In any case, I would probably lacerate my feet on stones, twigs and hard earth if I ran further. Every second counted. The fish suddenly seemed limp.

I strode out, therefore, into the mud, and got to where the water was just lapping over it but there was still shade. Then I buried the pike up to its head in the mud, pointing out into the lake.

Again I acknowledged a variety of motives. The mud *was* cool. Pike do occasionally lie in mud – or at least, they can send up an impressive cloud of it when they are disturbed and want to get away. So if the fish's propulsive energy revived enough it would undoubtedly be able to shoot forward into the deep water that was out there. Secondly, when any fish is recuperating it's vital for it to be held in the vertical so that it can recover its balance and buoyancy. Thirdly, the water lapping over the fish's face and into its mouth would, probably, aerate it naturally and constantly stimulate it to 'go for home'.

But equally I was cowed by the thought of leaving a dead fish floating white belly up in the water. Many laymen would not believe it, but I swear this is an angler's worst nightmare. It was so awful to contemplate that I would probably have packed up my tackle for the rest of the day.

There was an element, then, of burying *the problem*. I wasn't, hopefully, burying a corpse, but there was a Cain-and-Abel element to it. What I was desperate to bury was my incompetence, shame and guilt. Even if the fish died, the mud would anchor the corpse for a while. It might look as though it were still alive, even if it wasn't.

The pike's jaw now curved up out of the mud like Mr Punch's, or like when it was straining out of the water to 'fly'. There was nothing for it but to leave it 'in peace' to 'get on with it', to 'let Nature take its course' – which had, of course, the convenience of allowing me to hurry away. With utter fatuousness, I may even have said to it: 'There, you'll be all right now, mate.'

I ambled back to my fishing-place, washed my feet and hands in the somewhat rich-smelling water, dried them with my fishing towel, and put my socks and shoes on.

More than the peace of a spring day was shattered. What had happened was, of

course, precisely why human beings of the twentieth century should give up fishing. I have observed fish in the water and out that are hooked in the hard parts of their mouth and I do not believe that in itself a hook lodged there causes them pain. I agree that being 'played' and landed can exhaust them, and surely the act of being hooked is a cause of shock, even panic for them. I am sceptical, though, that they are 'traumatised' by all this, because (especially if one plays them not long on line of the right strength) they easily recover sufficiently to shoot off into the wild again. But how can a highly evolved creature like a pike *not* feel excruciating pain when it has two hooks with specially sharpened and hardened points embedded in its centre and is actually being wrenched by its stomach through the water? The pain, surely, would be enough to make any creature unleash a surge of unprecedented power to get off again?

However, look more closely at my use of 'excruciating'. Really it is totally subjective. It is what I assume the pike would feel, because I am pretty sure it is what *I* would feel if I were 'deep-hooked' in my stomach – as Byron and some 'animal rights' terrorists might wish me to be. But it is simplistic, illogical, egocentric and patronising to assume the fish does feel 'the same' pain as a human. I have no objective evidence of it. As far as I know, in the year 1998, scientists have not proven that fish experience what we know as pain and suffering. They, and philosophers, have not even established the difference between 'pain' and 'suffering', words which are almost always coupled as synonyms in these arguments. Perhaps the first is a particular kind of reaction to stimuli, which all creatures may experience and (like humans) be capable of surviving, but only human beings can experience 'suffering' because only they are self-conscious?

On the other hand, the reason I wrote 'excruciating' is that emotionally it is irrelevant to me whether scientists can prove it is excruciating or not. Even if it were possible to prove scientifically that such a fish *didn't* feel pain, I contend that humanly, emotionally, this will always be difficult for us to accept. We are beings given to compassion, empathy, anthropomorphism. And what could be worse, viler and more senseless, than killing a fish slowly, agonizingly it seems, when you don't even want to eat it? When you do want to eat it, you kill it as quickly and humanely as possible and if it's deep-hooked you kill it first and extract the hook in the kitchen. For this very reason, many anglers would say I should have 'tapped it on the head' without further ado in order to 'put it out of its misery'; that this would have been the genuinely humane thing to do. Perhaps the main reason I didn't was that I would then have felt I had to eat it? For I simply couldn't have faced that I had cruelly

killed something for no reason whatsoever. To face that is to face that a human is capable of being inhuman, i.e. not a human at all if 'humaneness' is an inalienable part of being human, of being significant to oneself; and facing *that* is terribly difficult, fraught with despair and self-destruction even, hence my desperate attempt to convince myself I was saving the pike.

But this isn't a moral or philosophical essay, it is just a true fishing story. It might be interesting to speculate on whether any human enterprise, from ballet-dancing and defensive war to exploration and physiotherapy, is possible without causing pain to oneself or others, and how, therefore, fishing could ever be an exception. Or to consider whether for most men angling is an Izaak Walton-style idyll that exists only in the mind and is inevitably destroyed from time to time by the reality of fish-impaling. Or why we crave this idyll in the first place. Restricting myself to what I actually experienced standing there staring beside my rod and tackle, I have to say I was crushed by a cosmic vision of my own stupidity.

When D.H. Lawrence flung a log at a magnificent snake that had come to drink at 'his', Lawrence's, water-trough in Sicily, he called it a 'paltry', 'vulgar', 'mean' act that made him 'despise' himself and left him with 'something to expiate; a pettiness'. Chekhov tells us that when he went shooting with a painter friend the latter winged a woodcock, Chekhov

picked it up, and the bird, with its 'long beak, great black eyes and fine apparel', looked at them both 'in astonishment'. The painter could not bring himself to finish the bird off, Chekhov had to do it for him, 'So there was one beautiful creature less in the world and two idiots going home to supper.'

I felt similar things having probably killed the pike, but I felt that sheer stupidity was impossible to 'expiate'. After forty years angling, I had committed fundamental errors without batting an eyelid, and this was what had caused the disaster. My own crass stupidity was solely to blame. Thinking more laterally, I realised that although it was entirely legal we ought not to have been pike-fishing there in the first place. Only the previous winter a bailiff had mentioned to me that the pike in these pits spawn very late. This meant they were probably laid up in couples and groups along the shore. In this state pike suspend many of their normal reflexes and can be all too easy to catch. It was unfair, unsporting, crudely interfering. How can a person *be* so stupid?

It's very hard to accept. But that is what the incident faced me with. The 'lord of creation' is capable of an idiocy, a pig-ignorance, that sets him at the very bottom of the evolutionary ladder – far beneath pigs. I was confronted inescapably with my own

ineptitude, my own fallibility and imperfection. Since man seems to be the only animal capable of causing gratuitous suffering (or, at least, he is by far the most 'intelligent' one who inflicts it), I was confronted with my outsider-ness, my own abject superfluosity to the rest of nature; some might say my own 'badness' or 'original sin'. Without exaggeration, when something goes 'wrong' in fishing, this is what you can be left feeling. It is what every so often makes me hate fishing.

Clearly, then, whatever some anglers say fishing can never have a happy end, because any perfect day's fishing could be followed by a disastrous one. A golfer might say the same, but his bad day hasn't been marred by blood and death. His defeat hasn't been experienced so viscerally; so existentially; so morally. And to make matters even worse, a bungling fisherman cannot expiate his own cruelty because repentance involves a commitment not to do wrong again, yet the chance-factor in fishing (including a fit of stupidity) means something can *always* go 'wrong'. You can never become the 'perfect' fisherman who causes no pain, a kind of rose without a thorn. The only expiation for mistakes in fishing, for causing injury or death to fish, is to give it up altogether.

My son joined me, ready to move on, and I told him as optimistically as I could what I had done with the fish. I dreaded walking past the spot and him seeing the pike's white upturned belly on the mud. It would definitely degrade me in his eyes, it would be the nadir of all our years fishing together, perhaps the end of an idyll.

Unaccountably, the pike was not there. 'So it must have got away all right,' I said. But I didn't believe it for a moment. If it had recovered enough to flash out to the deep water, it would soon have tired and a bigger pike would have got it. Or perhaps one of the surprisingly discreet herons had stalked in and carried it off.

Or a rat.