

# THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

or tales of days  
when fish triumphed over anglers



Wood engravings by Christopher Wormell

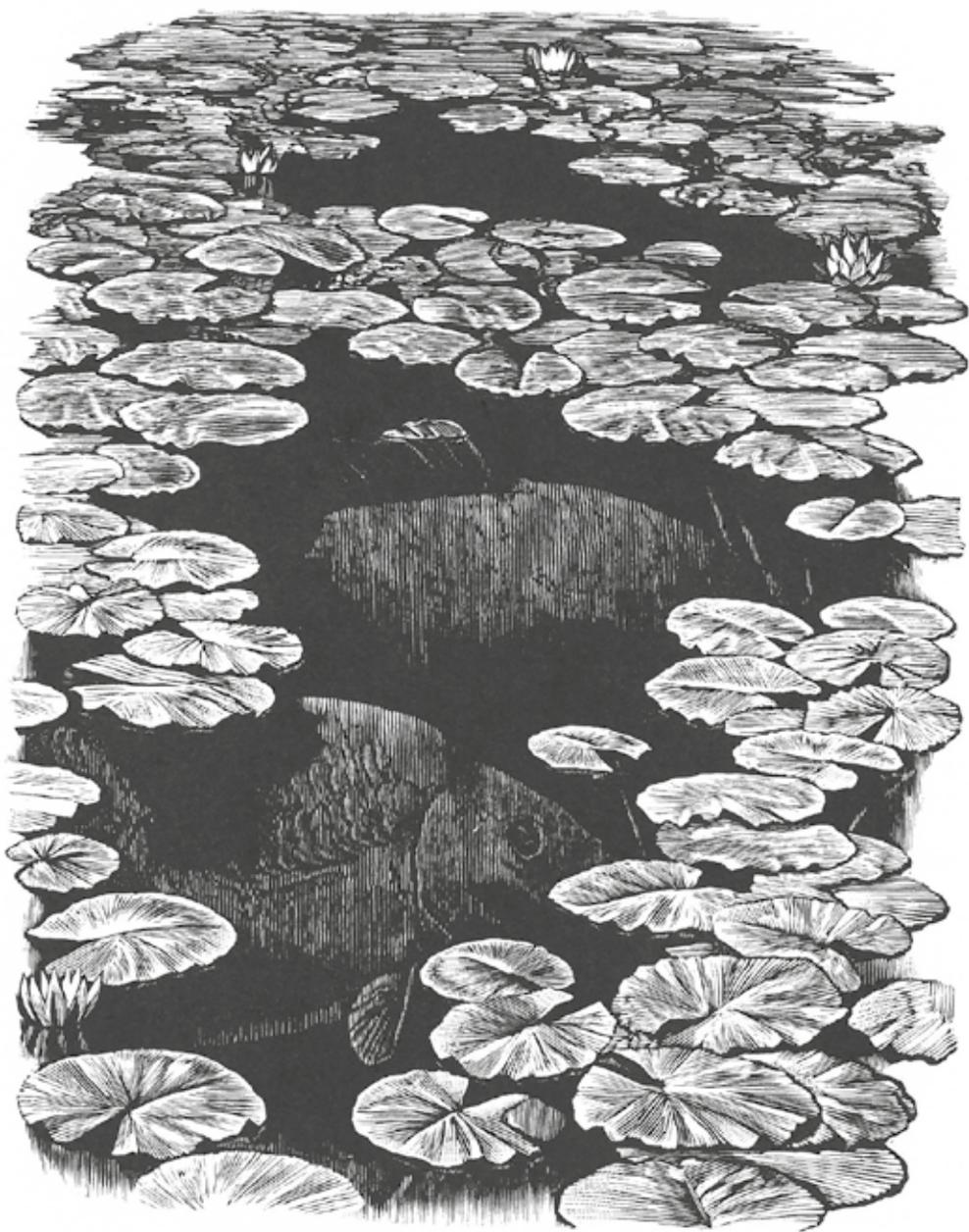


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right. On they came until they were level with and almost directly below me, but then turned without nosing down for the cockles and dematerialised into the depths again.

After a time, I became aware of a vague cloud of disturbed mud, perhaps four feet across, similar to the cumulus-like boilings thrown up by a carp burrowing for larvae, except that this was less turbid. Almost obscured within it was a dim shape that I presumed was the remains of a dying weed bed. It couldn't possibly have been a fish, as it was simply too big. Gradually, however, the dark form loomed higher in the water, revealing itself as a stupendous blue-black leather carp. At the time it was easily the largest freshwater fish I had ever seen and the clear sight of it made me almost fall out of the tree. I could see the huge pectorals rapidly fanning, unfurling the mud cloud still wider. Then zeppelin-like, it floated forward into clear water, drifting perhaps twenty feet before sinking to the bottom again. With its pectorals it wafted up another thin cloud until it was once more almost wholly obscured.

But I could tell it wasn't bottom-feeding in the normal carp fashion. It seemed to be feeding on whatever it was filtering from the cloud, just as a whale feeds on plankton. In all my years of carp angling I had never seen such behaviour before. For the half hour or so that I watched, the monster rose up, heaved forward and descended again several times, leaving a trail of slowly dissolving clouds in its wake. I was so intrigued that I almost overlooked the fact that the fish had sunk down directly over my bait. Once again, I almost fell out of the tree. Like a dying monkey I slithered and scrambled down the trunk, then crept back to my rod. There was a

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fold of silver foil over the line and within a few minutes it rustled up to the butt-ring and the loose line began to hiss through it. I struck with reasonable self-control and the reel began to slowly tick off the yards. I knew instantly that it was the monster.

Before that day, I had landed several huge carp including one of forty-three pounds, but none of them felt remotely like the Black Queen. The sensation it gave was of inexhaustible, uncontrollable power, as if I had just hooked a tractor. But Redmire is not a big water, only three acres, and the carp was heading not down its long length but across its width, never more than a hundred yards. Therefore, I told myself to do nothing more than keep in touch, for the monster would soon reach the far bank and I guessed it would then move right, remaining in deep water within my range. Only if it headed left, up towards the distant shallows, would I be in danger of a nervous breakdown. The pool was now free of weed, my tackle was sound, my rod was an especially lucky one (a 1934 Hardy Victor) and it was surely just a matter of time before I would coax this fabulous creature into my net.

Suddenly, the reel stopped singing and an enormous patch of bubbles broke surface under the far bank. There was a great, bumping swirl and the rod shook and sagged. An amazing dorsal fin rose up, cutting the water from right to left – in the wrong direction – and for the first time I tried to exert some control, winding down and applying as much pressure as I dared. It made no difference at all. But then, not because of anything I was doing, the fish turned and began heading straight towards me, diving majestically into the deep trench that runs along the centre of the pool. I felt it falling,

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like a sinking liner, and the surrounding trees and hills and clouds were all sucked down after it, snapping back into their rightful positions as the hook sprang free.

I didn't snap back, but went down in the undertow and was lost with all hands.