

DAL STIVENS

HOOKED

One hour before sunset Y., a well-preserved man of fifty, was fast to one of the largest rainbow trout ever to inhabit a New Zealand lake — or a lake or stream anywhere else. And Y. knew he couldn't land the trout because the trout, a twenty-seven pound lambent hen, was telling him why he couldn't.

"You know you haven't a chance of landing me," the hen was addressing Y. from about 25 ft. from Y's launch.

"I wouldn't say that," said Y. "I can tire you out even if it takes me an hour or two."

"If I chose to fight," said the hen. "I don't."

Y. considered the trout's words for some seconds. Y. will do for his name — you'd recognize his real name, that of a world famous zoologist. Y. or even Why will do.

"I see your point," said Y.

"In an hour it will be dark," said the trout.

Already the sun was dropping down to the western edge of the great, green forested bowl of the lake. The 1000 ft. high ridges of the extinct volcano clasped the blue waters — like the ring setting of a sapphire, Y. had thought earlier.

"I might beat you in less than an hour," said Y.

"If I were silly enough to fight you," said the trout. "You'll observe I haven't fought except for those first two leaps."

Y. experienced again the bump on his rod and the scream of the reel that ripped fifty yards off in the hen's first blazing run. He had braked the reel gently on the inner spool with a finger of his right hand so the reel would not spin too fast and tangle. And he saw again the great trout's first explosive leap. "Two feet out of the water!" he'd cried and he'd caught a glimpse of her power and beauty: the small head, thick shoulders, light-blue back, rainbow-hued side and silver belly.

Then she'd gone deep before the second leap, greater than the first, three feet clear, the hen dazzlingly beautiful in the sun, flinging the water from her Joseph's-coat sides.

"Those leaps were so you'd see my quality," said the hen.

"I admired them greatly," Y. admitted.

"I could do better but they'll suffice."

Y. wound the reel slowly, keeping the line tight. He could see the Red Taupo Tiger fly in her bottom jaw.

"You're afraid I might spit out the hook?" asked the trout.

"I haven't given up yet," Y. told her.

"I can believe that," said the hen. "You are a man of great ambition and determination. As well as being exceptionally talented, you have great powers of concentration — far beyond those of ordinary men. Otherwise you wouldn't have got where you are."

"You are most kind," Y. told the trout.

"Irony is wasted on me," the hen said. She lifted her head well clear of the water and shook it before continuing, "And, you are a good fisherman. You excel at anything to which you put your mind."

That, Y. observed wryly, was how he came to be here on this millpond clear lake. He'd gone to New Zealand on work and because he was a V.I.P. they'd taken him trout fishing. He hadn't fished for years but the skill came back to him quickly — to keep the rod at 60 degrees so the fish should have to work against its springing power, the almost intuitive anticipation of what the fish was about to do in the split second when it began to do it, so that you retrieved quickly when the fish veered towards you and let the line run when it unleashed a withering run. The first day he'd caught the limit — eight fine hen trout, averaging 5 lb. and the largest 7 lb. That night he'd overheard them talking about him in the fishing lodge. "And he didn't lose a fish." Y. hadn't thought about that until that moment. He learned that on average even a good fisherman only landed half of these spirited trout he hooked. Y. had reflected, "I deserved to lose one — I should have." He'd tried to brake the reel during one electrical run and by mistake had jabbed his fingers among the spinning hands, momentarily stopping the reel. The light trace had a 4 lb. breaking strain and should have snapped. The next day Y. hooked and landed seven.

That night in the Lodge the owner had talked of some of the very large trout in the lake. "Very large and very wary," he'd said. Then and there Y. had decided to return later to the lake when his work was finished and try for one of the big trout. The first day of his return he hooked six and returned them all gently to the water when they were beaten and netted so he could remove the hook. None were over six pounds. The next day was much the same with seven trout caught and released, and then he'd hooked the hen who was now talking to him.

"You know, of course, you can't reel me in," she was saying.

"In spite of your earlier compliments, you appear to take me for a fool," said Y. "Of course, I can't."

"I was merely about to state some of the obstacles in your way," said the trout. "You can't gaff me because gaffs are illegal — always allowing that I am foolish enough to fight against you and become exhausted. And you can't net me."

"Why not?" asked Y., although knowing the answer.

"For the same reason you can't gaff me."

"You have thought of almost everything," said Y. "But there's one you've overlooked. If in theory I tired you out, I could tow you to the Home Beach — very carefully, of course — and beach you in shallow water.

"In theory," the hen conceded. "But it's about eight miles away. A not impossible feat, I agree."

Y. looked at the forested bowl. The red disc of the sun hovered just above the trees. He said, "You have overlooked one thing — if you'd thought of it, you would not have allowed yourself to get hooked."

"Oh, what's that?" asked the trout, calmly.

"I can sit it out," said Y. "You said I was patient —"

"Determined," the hen corrected. "But it's unimportant. I know you're patient."

"In that case, I have only to wait," said Y. "You're bound to get hungry and want to get free."

"Eventually, I'll get hungry," she said, rolling gently in the water, her sides opalescent. "You've overlooked a small matter."

"What's that?"

"Mosquitoes and sandflies will eat you alive tonight."

Y. considered this before answering. "I have some repellent with me."

Neither spoke for half a minute then Y. said "If I let you go, it's for one reason. There's not much fun in catching a fish which lets herself get hooked."

"There's some truth in that," said the hen. "But there's another bigger reason —"

"I was coming to that," said Y. cross suddenly. "Fish have no vocal chords and so speech is theoretically impossible, even allowing for the fact that the brain is too small for — "

"I'll overlook the slighting words," said the hen. "Now we are getting somewhere. You've stopped being the fisherman and have resumed being the zoologist."

"It's a lesson to me," said Y. "I give you my word that if you approach me, I'll release the hook."

"I'll trust you," said the hen. "As for your question, as a zoologist you know it's merely rhetorical."

She swam in slowly and Y. freed the hook. The hen undulated away gently. "Good night," she called civilly and submerged.

As Y. started the motor for the return to the Lodge, the sun grew momentarily as large as a rising full moon before it blinked out of sight.