



This is a story of a distant relative of mine called Albert Watling. Older than me had played no part in my life until I heard his name mentioned at a family gathering.

The gossip was he had been badly affected by some bizarre event which in itself held no interest to me until I heard the word fishing slip into a conversation. I was just into long trousers and expected to speak only when spoken to and not to earwig but when I caught another mumbled whisper which was 'Albert's 'orrible experience' intrigue crept into my mind and all kinds of thoughts began to form. As a youngster I had always been highly inquisitive although my father called me a nose-y bugger.

I quizzed various family members on the subject but my questions were invariably met with a shake of the head. Leaving my teens behind and adult enough to do my own research I eventually visited

Albert with the motive of solving the mystery without making it obvious.

I travelled to his home by train as he lived very close to a quiet rural station. I found his drab neglected cottage and knocked on the weather-beaten entrance door. A few seconds later a movement at a small window caught my eye and through a flimsy net curtain I could just make out a face. Assuming it was Albert I gave a reassuring wave. The face faded away and I was left waiting until, on the point of knocking again the door moved in about six inches and after a short pause slowly opened. He eyed me with suspicion as I introduced myself and he slowly pulled the door back and walked inside leaving me to close it.

He was old and feeble

and the room's dated furnishings indicated he lived alone. It was immediately clear to me his days left on this earth were numbered. His face was pale and drawn and ragged clothes hung shapelessly on his skeleton-like frame. His advanced years had taken their toll physically but he lacked nothing regarding his grey matter and we talked about many things. My respect for him and his vast wealth of knowledge grew as time passed but it became clear he was not a happy man, in fact he never displayed a hint of a smile.

Time passed too quickly and I had to act. I mentioned fishing and he totally threw me by claiming he had no interest in the sport but then admitted he had in the past so I asked him when gave

it up. He shrank back from my question clearly hiding something and obviously disturbed. It took time and persuasion but I got the distinct impression he really wanted to talk and after a little more coaxing he began to recount the strangest tale. I have never told the story to anyone before but here it is exactly as he told it to me.

In the spring of 1959 Albert took a short fishing holiday staying at a small inn on the edge of Dartmoor in Devon. An avid trout angler his point of interest was the nearby river Tavy and as it was his first visit he called into a local gun and tackle shop for guidance. Behind the counter was a white haired man who freely gave his time to Albert, furnishing him with both license and permit before going on to

describe some pools that had produced many good trout and salmon. One of the pools he described in detail really fired Albert up. It was called 'the Gut.'

He began to tell Albert of a tragic affair that occurred at the Gut and of a legendary but elusive monster trout that inhabited the pool when he was interrupted by the entrance of another customer. Impatient to get fishing Albert told him he would call again to hear the story.

He soon found himself beside the river excitedly assembling his gear before starting to wander off. The only sounds were the mewing cry of a distant buzzard and the gentle gurgling water as it ran over stony shallows. He found himself being drawn obsessively to seek out the Gut and within minutes interest in other pools on the river had evaporated. He had never walked the banks before yet somehow seemed to recognise some parts. Suddenly he was there, he had found the Gut, he knew it, his whole being told him so and he felt complete. The urge to walk had left his legs and he had eyes only for what was in front of him. He laid his gear on the ground, moved to the water's edge and stared down. It appeared bottomless as the narrowing banks reduced the river's width from some twenty five feet to about twelve.

He was gripped by anticipation like never before and believed it to be sign that something really special was about to occur. He flicked a small lure into the tail of the pool and allowed it to sink before he began to slowly retrieve it but the line tightened as if snagged on the bottom. Then the 'bottom' began a ponderous but unstoppable move against the powerful current. Seconds later a huge fish hurtled up straight up through the surface like a

missile. It crashed back into the water and disappeared from view still attached to Albert's line.

For safety he moved down to shallower water and just hung on. He didn't see the fish for another twenty minutes and his body ached all over. As he gained some line a dark form slowly emerged from the depths but before he could identify the fish he realised something was wrong. A couple of minutes later his heart sank. At the end of his line was a brown trout of unimaginable proportions but it was hooked in tail.

It was all Albert could do to keep his footing on the wet stones as perspiring and breathless he managed to lift the fish and lay it onto the bank. Removing his hook he stared in admiration at the colossal specimen which he knew would shatter the rod-caught record. He rolled it over to cast his eye on the opposite flank with a glass case in mind. That's when he spotted a small brass tubular lure held securely in the fish's jaw by a badly corroded treble hook. He prised it free and placed it on top of his wooden lure box.

He then found himself on the horns of a dilemma. Ethics dictated should return it but then he was the only witness. Against all of his deeply held principles he succumbed to temptation and decided to have it mounted. Reaching into his tackle bag he slowly withdrew a sturdy priest. His shaking hand hovered over the fish's head when a voice from behind called out. "Stop!" Albert spun round, scared witless by the intervention. Standing a few yards away was a tall slim man, whose face was scarred by a huge red birthmark. He was clearly a member of the angling gentry and dressed as such. "You didn't hook that fish fairly, it's not legitimate." The stranger said.

He asked Albert to give the fish its freedom but not as an instruction but a plea. Albert, agitated and overcome by guilt complied with the stranger's wishes and watched his fish of a lifetime fade away into the depths of the pool. He turned to see the gentleman's reaction and to his utter disbelief there was no sign of him in any direction. He had simply disappeared.

The events had left Albert's composure in tatters so he decided to pack up. Then he got another shock the old brass lure he'd laid on the box was gone and in its place was a shining new gold sovereign which he slid into his coat pocket breathing a silent thank you to the absent gentleman. Gathering up his gear and heading for town he felt he must tell someone of the incident. Back at the shop Albert was about to explain events when the old shopkeeper interrupted and began to elaborate on the tale of the Gut he had mentioned previously.

Many years earlier a keen game angler and highly esteemed member of the local community by the name of Samuel Tonkin became obsessed by a giant trout he believed lived in the Gut. He spent every minute of his free time as a hostage to his passion. Unfortunately it ended in tragedy. One morning a gamekeeper discovered his body trapped against rocks in the pool, his lifeless fingers were gripped so tightly round the cork butt of his rod that they had to be prised open. The line had parted at a swivel and the lure was gone.

The shopkeeper told Albert of the shock he felt because on the day he died Tonkin had called in and purchased a brass minnow lure. He reached under the counter and brought out a photograph. "That's him," He said, turning it towards Albert who froze in

horror, he recognised him instantly as the angler who had spoken to him at the Gut. Albert couldn't speak, in fact he couldn't move but the shopkeeper hadn't noticed his demeanour and casually remarked, "It was a long while ago now but I still remember it as if it were yesterday, so tragic and such a lovely man."

"When was it?" Albert asked nervously. The man told him to turn the picture over. Printed in pencil was the dedication, Samuel Tonkin, died 1937. The shopkeeper told Albert that locals swear they still feel his presence when they are fishing at the Gut. Then Albert remembered the coin. He surreptitiously slid it out of his pocket keeping it shielded. He glanced down and saw the date and went cold, it was 1937. He hastily thanked the chap for his help and hurried out of the shop. He never finished the holiday but returning home the same day.

As he finished telling me his tale Albert rose from his chair and reached into a small wall cabinet. Pressing a gold sovereign into my hand he whispered the words "It's yours." I didn't look at the date I didn't have and you don't need to ask.

After the incident Albert became a recluse accepting no visitors until I turned up. That night, after telling his tale for the first and only time and gifting me the coin he passed away in his sleep. I know he had eventually made his peace with the spirit of Samuel Tonkin but took to his grave and beyond the soul-destroying shame he felt knowing he intended to kill a magnificent fish then lie about its capture.

**PS. When Albert died he was the last in his branch of the family otherwise I would still have kept his strange story confidential.**