



## ONLY A SUCKER BITES

*by J. C. Stanley*

*Tenhag was an outlaw and a killer, but even a bitter enemy like Arget, the king, had to recognize the courage of the clever, wily, old Northern Pike!*



Arget sinuously moved his huge head back along the length of Tenhag's body and slashed viciously at the tail fin

THERE were small weeds growing around the entrance, and a school of horned minnows swam up, peered inside into the murky darkness and swam past.

I didn't care. I was full of years and besides, I wasn't hungry. Far ahead, through the iridescent gleam of the water, I saw the stump, and smiled to myself. For I knew who lurked behind its twisted branches.

A small shadow came by and I moved quickly. The minnow tasted good. Yet I had swallowed him without any consciousness of desire. It was just that he had ventured too close. I was busy, concentrating on that patch of gloom ahead out there near the center of the lake.

Then I saw them! There were eight or nine of them, fat, juicy sunfish, swimming close to each other, the leader a bit ahead of the rest. I swam closer to the mouth of the cave. It happened with the quickness of death.

He was a streak of light, a lance of speckled fire eating into their midst. Silvery streaks parted the water as the small fish tried desperately to escape Tenhag. But only five got away. Tenhag had had his breakfast.

I came all the way to the lip of the cave.

Tenhag was a killer. The worst kind, the kind

who killed for the sheer joy of killing. It was impossible that anyone could be that hungry. His ravening mouth seemed never to have its fill of food. Nor did he fight and kill the natural things which were food for him. Whatever came across his path was legitimate prey; yes, even the females of our tribe. That was why they had outlawed him. Yet I had to admire those very qualities which the rest hated.

I swam close to him and saw him move to one side, the long muscles contracting in sudden tension, as he waited to see what large shadow was crossing his path. He saw me and waited.

I had to admit the size of him; I was smaller by half a foot, not so lean. But I was older, wiser, nor did my jaws bear the scars of the hooks, nor my flanks and belly the scars of teeth. His had both. He followed, a head behind me.

"Where do you go?" he asked.

"To the wild celery weed," I said. "It is warm there, and soon the sun will be up. I know of a nest of ducklings . . ."

There was no need to say more. Food was the only thing on his mind. But there were other things on my mind. Age was with me, and the remembrance of things past. They stirred in me as I thought of the plump, Jerra, the one who swam by

the side of Arget, the king.

We lurked, the two of us, in the wild celery weed. The sun came up. I felt the waters warm and saw the clearness grow above. It would not be long before the little furry food swam out . . .

ONCE more he swam beside me. And this time, even he was full. I headed back to the cave.

"Why is it," he asked, "that *you* come to me. I am an outlaw."

"And what is an outlaw?" I asked. "Once I was king. Now Arget is king . . . You know the law of the tribe. I was king and did not fight for my kingship. So now I live my years out in peace. But I do not like Arget . . ."

He lay deeper, into the slime at the bottom. Yet though he said nothing, I knew my words had stirred him. He also hated Arget.

"But you can go back," he said. "Even though Arget is king. I have seen him swim beside you . . ."

I did not answer. The wheel I had started in revolving would not stop now until it had completed its circle.

When we awoke, the sun was high. Its light filtered down to where we lay. I stirred and the movement woke Tenhag. He seemed barely to move yet in an instant he was at the mouth of the cave. I saw his head swivel in search. I joined him.

Wordlessly, he started out. His long, lean length cleaved the water and broke a path for me. He headed upstream, to where the perch collected in the afternoon, close to the logs near the inlet. But we had overslept. There were those others who came to search for food. We saw the wild swirl of waters before we reached the spot. Our cousins had beaten us to the perch. And though they were many to our two, they fled before us.

Tenhag raged in the water. He turned this way and that, his speckled body flashing silver streaks of light, as he twisted about, searching for even a single morsel. But there was not even one. They had fled.

I saw the long length of boat before Tenhag did. Calling a warning, I went for deep water. Nor did I turn to see if he followed. It wasn't till I was down in the weeds at the bottom that I turned to see where Tenhag was. What I saw made me shoot back up again. Whether he had snapped at the red-covered thing in anger or because he was hungry, I didn't know. But he had and it wasn't another fish he had taken.

I swam beside him, as he headed for the shore, and I saw the length of line in his mouth. He had taken the bait clean and deep. Whoever had hooked him had hooked him good. But they had never had such as Tenhag on their line. He was no walleye, or pickerel. He was a northern, and we are made of fighting stock.

The line trailed deep as Tenhag zoomed with terrific speed for shallow water. All the instincts which a hundred fights had given him were aroused. Suddenly, and with a movement that was like light, he turned his full length, and went straight down. But not for long. Whoever was at the end of the line was also a fighter. Tenhag was pulled up sharp.

And now he went straight up. Not to stop at the water's edge, but to continue straight up in a wild leap. I saw his tail go out of the water, so high did he go. And when he came down it was straight down.

He went past me, whirled, and suddenly stopped moving. I wondered if he had gone crazy. And so must have the man above. But Tenhag must have weighed better than thirty pounds. And when the fisherman started to drag that dead weight up, it was more than a job. Tenhag let him drag him on until he had almost breasted the water again. And Tenhag made his move. It was the last thing the fisherman had thought, that a fish would come straight for the boat. For a bare instant the line went slack. And in that instant Tenhag whirled again and went in the opposite direction, with all the speed at his command. That did it. The line parted with a singing sound. And Tenhag was free.

But only from the man.

FOR now there was another enemy to face, and more than one. We had come too close to Arget's domain. And two of his clan had been attracted by the commotion of the fight and had swam close to see what it was about. The sight of Tenhag, the line still trailing from his jaws was too much for them. He was their sworn enemy, and wounded or otherwise, was fair game for them. They attacked instantly.

It should have been over in an instant. Tenhag still had the cruel hook in his jaw. He was at a great disadvantage. Yet he turned to give battle.

The first of his attackers, a giant of a warrior, was even larger than Tenhag, but younger, with less fighting experience. He came straight at him,

and at the last second shot to one side to come in from there. But he had come faster than his companion. And had arrived first. It was the only mistake he made. But it was also the last. Tenhag waited until the gaping jaws were spread only a foot from him before he moved. Then it was to face the other. The great teeth closed along the side of the attacker's head and ripped along the jaw, taking away one eye and the part of the neck. And Tenhag whirled on the second.

The second was older, wiser, and a better fighter. He moved in a slow circle around Tenhag, watching and waiting the chance to bore in. He wasn't going to make the same mistake the first made. The two circled for a very short time. Tenhag was the first to attack. Straight in, then down and from the bottom up. But the other wasn't to be taken in so easily. As swift as Tenhag, he whirled and ripped downward, their teeth clashing as they met. And again the circling and watching. Once the other made a feint to bore in and Tenhag tensed to meet the charge. But it was only a feint. And once again it was Tenhag who came forward.

This time he came in from the side. But just as he reached the other, he stopped, started downward. And the other whirled again to meet the new thrust. Only now Tenhag stopped, stood almost straight up on his tail and came from above, trying to get the other at the joint of the neck.

It was a mistake on Tenhag's part. Either the fight with the man had taken more from him than he thought, or he had lost some of the speed necessary, but he was a little too slow.

At any rate, the other managed to get out of the way, and as Tenhag went by, the other came in from above.

It was then I moved. I was old and slow, but the other's back was to me. He never knew what hit him. My teeth were still long and sharp. I needed only the first slash. He fell to the bottom, with slow, jerky movements.

We had to get out. There were others beside these two, I knew. We did not travel in schools as the lesser fish, but we were still where enemies lay thick about us. And this time when I turned tail and sped away, Tenhag followed swiftly.

We were in luck. Halfway to where I had found a hiding place, way down deep in the slime of the deepest part of the lake, we came across a pair of bluegills. And we ate them.

Tenhag could not be still. He swam back and

forth agitatedly, as though he were in torment.

"Some day," he said, and stopped.

"Yes . . .?"

"I will meet Arget," Tenhag said. "I will meet him on my terms. May it be soon."

My friend had desires on the kingship. Good! That suited me also. But there were one or two things first.

"And how will you know?" I asked.

He couldn't answer. I had the answer, though.

"You," I said, "are an outlaw. But I am free to come and go as I please. I will go back to the tribe. Who knows but that some day I will find the place where Arget can be found?"

I watched him swim away and knew that I had sowed the seeds deeply enough.

IT WAS as though I had never left. Arget swam close, rubbed his side against mine, and swam away to where Jerra moved among the tall weeds. The others lay quiet or moved in search of food. I found a deep place and watched.

A pair of young ones made play. They swam swiftly about in simulated combat. The older fish paid small attention to them. They knew it was but in preparation for their later years. A pike lives but to eat or fight.

But though there were many there, it is only when we go out into the waters away from our feeding grounds that we travel alone, none came near. I was an outcast, to be tolerated only. For I had run from combat.

I found a warm place and sank into it. I was asleep but for my eyes. They never left off watching Arget and the plump, Jerra. She was the finest female I had ever seen. A something stirred in me, a something which had not been stirred in a long time. I wanted her. But first Arget had to be taken care of.

The days went by slowly. Nothing much marred the serenity. We ate, slept and ate. Once there was a fight between Arget and another who rose to challenge him. We gathered around and watched. The one who fought was barely old enough to consider himself a fighter. It did not take Arget long. A half-dozen lunges, a few slashes of the sharp teeth, and it was over.

And the days went by.

But though I was as the rest, I was not like them. For they did not know the passing of time. I did. What I had to do had to be done before mating

time. Already the days of heat were drawing to a close. The sun no longer warmed the water as it did before.

We each had our favorite feeding spot. Arget's was near a clump of weeds almost in the center of the lake. It was here the bass came to feed on smaller fish. Arget was fond of bass.

One day I swam away, nor did anyone notice my passing. I had a rendezvous to make. Tenhag was there as if he had been waiting my coming. I swam in and rested. The huge length of his body went to and fro past me. At last I spoke:

"I have found many things."

"What is it that you have found?" he asked.

"Where our brothers feed . . . where they fight . . . and who goes where and with whom," I said.

"It is good to know," Tenhag said.

"Aye," I said. "For instance, in the bulrushes where the water is deepest near the shore, they go two by two, as though in fear. But Arget is the bravest. The bass lie close near the weeds and rocks by the bottom. He goes there alone."

"It is good to know," Tenhag said.

"Aye," I said. "Before the first streak of light comes to make shadows in the water, Arget finds his hunger appeased there . . ."

I waited a while and continued:

"He is a mighty eater. And he eats his fill. One cannot fight well on a full belly . . ."

"Full or otherwise . . ." Tenhag said.

But I broke in:

"The rest will never know how much he had eaten. They will only know that you are king, and that you fought him alone, for I will be among them."

"I do not like it," Tenhag said.

"Like it or not," I said. "You will never live to fight him alone except this way. You are an outlaw and cannot challenge."

"I will fight them all, one by one," Tenhag said.

"You will have time for that later," I said. "First, Arget."

He had to agree.

The seeds I had sown were starting to ripen. Jerra would soon be mine.

"There is only one thing," Tenhag stopped me as I started back.

"Yes?"

"Where the bass feed deepest is where our brothers travel most," he said. "For in order to go to the east shore they must go across the center of the

lake."

I had forgotten.

I THOUGHT quickly. There had to be a way out. But where? I knew their habits. It was true what Tenhag said. What was to be done? And the solution came; find them other feeding grounds. It wasn't as hard as it sounded. The lake was twenty or so miles across. I thought back in my memory. Where, in the long days gone by had I found food? Because we fed until there was no more, feeding grounds did not last too long. Soon, the smaller ones became frightened off, or learned to be more wary.

Once, in the years ago, I had found a school of horn-headed minnows in where we most disliked to go, shallow water. I kept the secret to myself. But I was younger then, more voracious, and soon they had made for other waters. Perhaps . . . ?

But I was in luck. They had come back.

The tribe had grown more irritable. The younger fish had grown. Soon they would seek mates, would have fights which were more than just the play of their youth. One of them snapped at me as I passed. I gave it a wider berth and continued to where some of the oldsters lay.

"It is good to be old," I said to one. "When one is young, food is gulped quickly, as though there isn't going to be enough. Now we can pick and choose. Even go afield in search of delicacies. Like the horned minnow."

"The horned minnow?" he said. "I haven't seen one of those in a while."

I told him where he could find them. Another heard and swam close. I told him also. I knew the rest would hear of it soon. And once more I left.

I did not go far. The depths are full of places where one could stay and hide . . . and watch.

Early the next morning, a while before the sun came up, they swam out toward the feeding grounds. I watched them skirt the edge of the lake away from where Arget had his favorite feeding. I did not wait to see the last of them off. I had never swam so fast, not since I had run from Arget.

But Tenhag was not in his hole. I had forgotten that he was always hungry. The lake was large. It could take me a whole day to find him. It would have to wait. I had waited a long time. Another day would make little difference.

This time I made sure I'd find him. I came as it turned dark. But he wasn't there. I waited all the

night, but he didn't return. Early the next morning I started out in search of him. One by one I visited the places where food was to be found. I missed only the minnow feeding grounds.

I found him. But it was a sore and wounded Tenhag that I found. He had had a fight with another. Inwardly, I raged at him. He had set my plans back, if not made them impossible. He needed rest. To fight Arget he would have to be in the best of condition.

"I could not help it," he said. "There was this school of bass. I plunged in, and from the other side came another. We met and fought. I won but he was a good opponent."

That was fine, I thought. He was a good opponent.

"But Arget," I said. "We haven't much time."

"Tomorrow," he said. "I will meet him."

"Not the way you are," I said. "Tomorrow, we meet him."

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"You are in no condition to meet him, wounded as you are. He will make minnow bait of you."

It was the wrong note. I realized it the instant I said it, and almost at the same time made amends:

"... And that, Tenhag, will do you no good. Everyone knows you are the bravest pike in the lake. But even the bravest pike must use his head when the odds are against him."

"You mean we will both go to meet him?" Tenhag asked.

I thought I had made it clear. But I answered, "Yes," anyway.

"Very well. But I do not want you to interfere unless he is in much better condition than I," Tenhag said.

I agreed.

**W**E WERE just in time. Another moment and we would have missed him. He swam away from the weed-grown hiding place of the bass, a long, lean, muscular length of destruction.

He was swimming lazily, but at sight of the two of us, a change came over him. He knew without being challenged that this was a great moment in his life. Tenhag hated him; Arget was the cause of his being made an outlaw, and when he saw the two of us, he knew we had come for the one purpose of killing him. But fear was not in him.

"A challenge, Arget!" Tenhag cried. "For the kingship."

"I do not fight outlaws," Arget said.

"But I fight kings," Tenhag said, and made his first dive.

I swam quickly away from them, and moved back and forth, watching them and waiting for the moment which I knew had to come, the moment Arget would come too close to me.

It didn't seem possible that Tenhag stood any chance. Arget was in the prime of his life, and though his body bore many honorable scars of combat, he at least was fresh. Tenhag was not.

Arget, wise fighter, waited for Tenhag. He wanted to see the method of the other's attack. But it was impossible to gauge correctly, either the caliber or method of a fighter like Tenhag. Firstly, Tenhag had always bought life dearly, and improvised as he fought; secondly and last, Tenhag was not like any other opponent. He never gave up, though he was wounded unto death.

Tenhag dove in a frontal attack. Arget let him come in and did not move away. He wanted the first slash of his teeth to be the last. But Tenhag also wanted the same thing. Their teeth met and their jaws almost locked; if they had the fight would have been over for the both of them that instant. But somehow they managed to disengage their mouths. Blood was scored by both.

They circled warily for a while, and again it was Tenhag who attacked. He started as though he were going to continue the circle, then came in from the side. Arget almost bent double and slashed at the other as he went by, but in turn felt Tenhag's razor-sharp teeth also. It was only flesh wounds they both inflicted.

The next blow was given by Arget.

He came in from below, and as Tenhag turned to meet him, Arget sinuously moved his huge head back along the length of Tenhag's body and slashed at the tail fin. Had he caught it properly, Tenhag would have been an easy prey. The tail fin is our method of maneuver.

Another fighter would have sent it out of harm's way. Not Tenhag. It was as though he felt what Arget desired of him. For instead, he slapped powerfully at the gaping jaws and knocked Arget sideways. It was as though he knew that Arget had wanted him to turn the fin away. Because if he had, Arget would simply have continued the dive and caught it.

Tenhag gave the other no chance to recover. He was instantly on Arget, his jaws wide-open, ready

to slash or envelope. And Arget used discretion. It was then I saw where Tenhag, unless he made quick work, would lose out. Arget was much the swifter swimmer.

Arget made for the weeds and rocks. It seemed as if a thousand smaller fish hid there. They erupted from the weed-grown grotto, as if the devil of all fishes were after them.

Tenhag followed, and I after the two.

But Arget made a mistake in choosing the grotto, though he knew it well. For Tenhag had lived for a long time in such surroundings, and could play hide and seek as well, if not better, than the other.

I could not follow the play of their fight too well. The weeds grew thick, and the rocks would hide their swiftly moving bodies now and then. Once I saw them, they seemed joined, so close were they pressed, and they were tearing at each other in wild frenzy. But I also saw in that instant, that they were not inflicting the kinds of wounds from which they would die. It was as if they only wanted to tear each other to bits. Then they were gone from view again.

Quite suddenly, they came out of the grotto, Arget in the lead. The other was almost on his tail. And I saw that Tenhag had done much better than Arget. Blood came from a dozen wounds on the king's body.

Either Arget had grown tired during combat or he had eaten too much or his wounds were beginning to slow him down, but he was not so swift. On the other hand, Tenhag seemed to have gained speed. He was only half a length behind the other.

AND in a hundred feet, he caught Arget. Though he didn't catch him as he wished, from behind. Arget turned at the last second and the battle was on again. Arget fought with desperation born of despair.

Once more they met head on. Arget gave up his power tactics. He used the method of slash and get away. And for the first time, it began to pay. For now Tenhag became tired. It seemed as if he couldn't quite manage to get away fast enough to escape. Arget's teeth left more and more scars. Yet as often as they met in the tough hide of Tenhag, they somehow always just missed a vital spot. And now Tenhag was running from the other.

It was not a straight run. He swam first straight-

away, then from side to side, and again doubled on his self. And always, half a length behind, Arget trailed, desperately trying for the death bite.

It was only when they entered the grotto again, that I *knew* Tenhag's intention. He had led Arget to believe that he was wounded so badly he was only trying to escape. And Arget had fallen for the ruse. Tenhag had done his best work in the grotto. Now he was back among the weeds and rocks.

I was a few seconds behind them.

Now the fight raged with increasing terribleness. Tenhag was done with subterfuge. It was as if he realized that it was to be now or never. He attacked, and as many times as he was repulsed, he came back until by the sheer power and will of him, Arget was brought to bay, helpless.

I saw the lean sides, blood-covered, of the king, heave, as moved back and forth in rhythmic movement, his large eye watching every move of Tenhag.

Now Tenhag took care. It was going to be a single last lunge and . . . death!

Yet Arget was not done. He had his last reserves to call on, though they were limited. For as Tenhag swept in, Arget swam backward into an opening behind him. Tenhag did not care. He followed. I did not want to miss a single second of the battle, and moved slowly behind them.

Once more they were together and now there was no room for maneuvering. The grotto was at its narrowest. In fact it was almost too tight a squeeze for Tenhag. He could only come straight forward. But Arget was half a length smaller, and the difference almost proved Tenhag's undoing. Though Arget was wounded badly, he had a last strength to call on.

Three times Arget whirled and dove in and each time Tenhag could not fend off the great teeth. The last time Arget struck it was at a vulnerable point, the juncture of the throat to the head. Another inch and the fight would have ended. Tenhag barely escaped, though Arget tore a great piece of flesh out. And this time it was Tenhag who used discretion. He backed out of the grotto.

The instant he came out he whirled and came toward open water. Arget could do nothing else but follow. I could have touched Tenhag as he came by me. As it was, the desperation in his eyes was plain to be seen. It was time for my move. For Arget followed the other in a straight line.

It was time, but I didn't move.

For as I turned with them I saw something for which I had not taken into account. The savagery of the fight had attracted not alone the curious of our world, the pan fish and minnows, but also the larger ones, Arget's tribe. All around us they swam idly, their eyes intent on the battle.

A single move toward Arget would have meant my death.

It was up to Tenhag now. He had to prevail over the king. But it looked like he was through. Arget was on him. They were side by side, and Tenhag turned his head inward, trying for a last slashing bite. But it was an old trick, well-known to Arget, who simply moved his own head, and came in and up. It should have been the end.

And it was, for Arget.

**H**E HAD come in and around, his head twisting to get under Tenhag so that he could get the soft underside of the throat. Arget's jaws were wide. And as he twisted his head, the trailing line which Tenhag had ripped from the fisherman's pole, twined itself in some manner around Arget's jaw. He yanked savagely at it, trying to free

himself. But all he succeeded in doing was bring the other's teeth closer. Tenhag made one last snap, and in the proper place. Blood spouted from Arget's throat, and he began the last twisting roll toward the bottom of the lake.

Tenhag was now king!

Outcast though he was, it was still the rule of the tribe. He had fought the king in fair combat and won. Slowly, the rest joined him as he swam for the tribal grounds. And beside him, Jerra, plumper than ever, more desirable, swam beside him. I moved alongside, rubbed sides with Tenhag, and said:

"One favor, king. The female Jerra."

But I had forgotten that Tenhag had been without a female for a long time. And Jerra was the loveliest of them all. He flicked me contemptuously with his tail. It was Arget all over again. I had gained nothing!

I swam away, my blood boiling. A dace-headed minnow floated by and I snapped savagely at it.

It eluded me at the first snap but I tried again and caught it.

It wasn't till the hook sank deep into my jaw that I knew the minnow wasn't alive. . . .

THE END