

High Noon in a Lagoon Garden

DES FLYNN TELLS OF THE SHOWDOWN

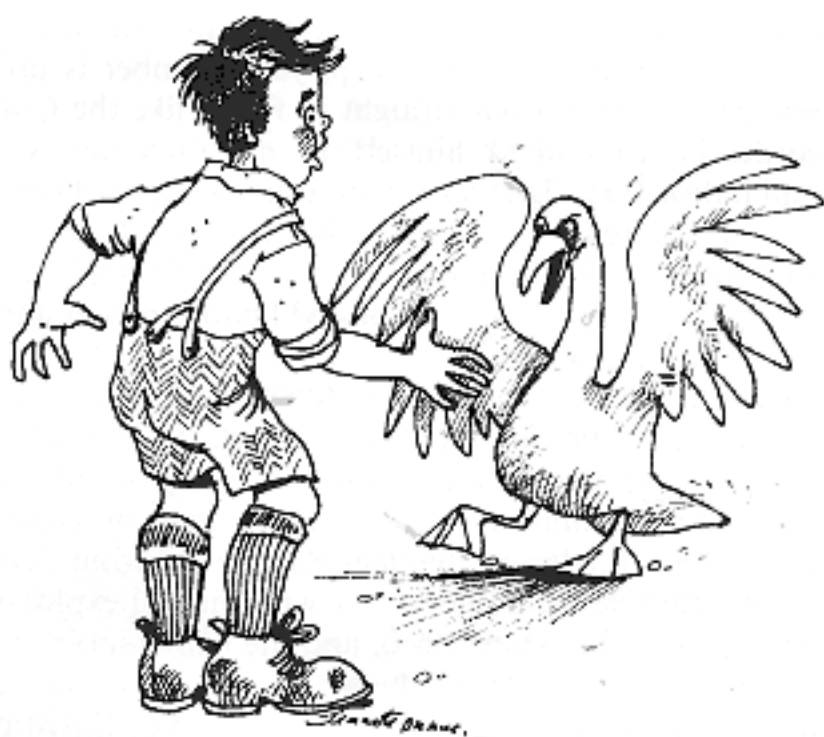
Conjunctivitis I'd say it was, maybe mental strain, or hardening of the arteries. Whatever the name, I can tell you that the gander at home, years ago, suffered from some complaint, some vile trake which drove him to attack me every time he laid eyes on me. For two months, solid, he made my young life a living hell. When, in later years, he was presented to me for my dinner, I attacked the bird with a fervour, fuelled more by revenge than hunger. It served him right, and Devil the much loss!

Caesar himself is not entitled to introduce thorns into your life when you are only four. And, if I will not cede this right to Caesar, I will not be compromised by a long-necked degenerate gander, a 'registered' malefactor. To be honest about it, I did not, at the time, indulge in any philosophy, nor explore the area of right and wrong. I could say I was gandered into a situation where I had to make a vital decision, and I made it – that was it. It was me or the gander. It was life or death. War was declared on the gander.

Before you castigate me for a sabre-rattling, blood-thirsty, war-monger, wait until you hear my side of the story. A boy of four is an excited animal. He can't wait: new boys, butterflies, spiders, girls, flowers, birds, broken clay-pipes, puddles of water, soft muddy things, mankeepers, and yokes with split tails. All is excitement, and every fresh discovery a new friend (sarcasm, scepticism – and the menagerie of other isms, which poison the human pilgrimage, have not yet bellycrawled into his world). So, naturally, "Sailor" our dog, and myself were the best of friends; There were, maybe, fifty hens around our street and I was on first-name terms with them all. Feily, the drake, and his five ducks shared my friendship and, often, my crusts. I knew the cows by name and Billy, the ass, and Nellie, the mare. I knew Sishly, the brown goose, a haughty bird who should have been self-conscious, for she was of outrageous appearance, and ungainly – even for a goose. Ebenezer, her white gander was a seldom-spoken and harmless looking gent. A victim, without any doubt, of morbid curiosity, forever looking around him, he shared the weakness of many a newsgatherer and scoundrel in that he took in more than he understood. Ebenezer had a robust appetite and, between stooping and lifting, ran little risk of developing rheumatism in the neck. When he stood up, neck extended and beak in the air, as far as he could stretch it, he was quite tall.

Whereas Sishly was a long-winded and garrulous bird, himself seldom strayed beyond the telegram words. He would, for instance, remark "good grass", "worms small but sweet", "lets try corn-field, nobody watching but small boy", or "young roosters no matter" – (public displays of affection were anathema to our gander and, to the day he died, he blamed roosters for inspiring and promoting the worst excesses of Hollywood "morality").

The strange thing was that, for four years, goose and gander had ignored the young lad in Flynn's with a degree of self-discipline which bordered on the heroic. I did, indeed, suspect, more than once, that they were laughing at me but I'd be lying if I said that I had caught



them red-handed. Like I said earlier, it might have been a brash of galloping conjunctivitis or hardening of the arteries in the gander that set him on the persecution trail. I am more inclined to the view that himself and herself met in solemn conference, gaggled over the issue, and reached a definite decision: - "small boy getting tall; peaceful co-existence no longer an agreed option; MUST BE CHASED AND CHASTISED". If only I had been privy to the deliberations of this clandestine gaggle I could have conferred with myself as to what steps I should take. I knew nothing about it, more is the pity, and when the time came, my steps had to be middling long ones!

The day I waddled up past the gable of the barn was the day I would never forget. Sun shining. No hurry. I remarked that butterflies never wore shoes. Lucky devils! No laces to tie in the mornings! I peeped in between two stones in the gable and saw slayers scurrying away, in behind the mortar, tried with my stick to get them out for closer inspection, broke my stick, flung the pieces at a duck, and ambled on.

I was up near "the bigbush", a shady elm growing beside the barn when I spotted them; the goose with her ten goslings, awkward looking, golden velvet birds – and cut down off the father. There, she was, feeding, or pretending to feed, but, for all that, keeping a beady eye trained on her surroundings. Sishly missed nothing. Whenever she guzzled a worm or snatched a piece of grass, up went the beak, high in the air – this helped her to swallow and to get the news of the country at the same time. On one of these stretches she eyes me coming up the lane. She emitted a few nervous cackles, and I was puzzled only by her final cackle, which sounded, somewhat, like "KILTY". I thought she might be saying "Isn't it great to see the ten of them so happy!" I was wrong. I will tell you, in a minute, what she said but, first, where was General Ebenezer himself? Not far off, and standing to attention. Had he forgotten the conference resolution? Had he considered "What if this lad meets violence with violence?" or was he waiting to get me so close as to enhance his own prospects of victory? How was I to know!, but, to this day I blame the goose. I believe hers was no, harmless, small-

talk but an accusation of cowardice levelled against the gander:- "Small boy coming, Ebenezer. Actions speak louder than cackles. Show me, now, if you're white or yellow. . . auld softy. . . and your goslings looking at you. . . goose pimpled glingeen. . . make-believe gander. . . , think of your brave father, "the Lagoon Warrior", who maimed the ganders of Kilty. . ."

Stung to the quick, the gander, at that, changed shape and his double squawk demanded and threatened "white-headed cub, look sharp, your number is up". His neck stretched out straight in front, like the Concorde, he catapulted himself in my direction with outlandish fury. The chorus of squawks from herself and her excited brood was further instigation to rank and gratuitous belligerence. . . "down with him," they shouted, "cut his throat, bacon-fed knave, crass-grained rogue, gosling-choker, . . . murder the villain!" I waited for neither verse nor chorus – down, like the hammers of Hell, past the barn, and he after me; turned left at the byre, and he after me – and, pounding in my ears, the whack of webbed feet on gravel, then on cobble stones, and, finally, on the flags outside our front door.

I brought door and door-case with me as I exploded into the kitchen, white faced, and the hair standing on my head. Poor mother, always so careful about her words, half-screamed an ejaculation 'Crass of Christ be about us' – one I never heard afterwards except in forked lightning and severe thunder. Meanwhile my pursuer, frustrated and infuriated, did a step of a hornpipe on the threshold flag, ridiculed me, warned me never to go near him, his goose, or his goslings, while I lived, or he'd put me where I'd have dry feet for a while, reminded me that my first cowardly escape would be my last, and then, unceremoniously, left his card on the flag, and retraced his steps to Sishly.

Such was my first encounter with a rampant gander. He knew he had won the battle – and so did my brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, all in the townland, and the children in Loughross school. The whole country knew it. For months after – it seemed years to me, my life was one long litany of humiliations. In the house, outrageous suggestions about the Curragh and Epsom; who runs faster than a cheetah? Which bird was first to break the sound-barrier? Great fun! Then, one innocent step outside my own front door. . . loud hiss, and here was 'concorde' coming again. Imagine how I felt. Matthew mark, look on John! I stormed the stars and the heavens, saints, angels, archangels, and, even God, "Save me from our gander". He bested them all and was there hissing – I think he even recognised my nose coming out the door.

If necessity be the mother of invention, desperation is the father. One fine day, when the geese were off in the fields, I went down the plantin – it was the garden area down from the front street – foraged through long grass near the hedge and extricated about fifteen old shoes. Some, for years exposed to the elements, were dried-up and not suited to my designs. Others, with clay inside and rank grass growing out of them were ideal. I rejected the long-range, surface to air, missiles and found myself left with five gallant half-pounders. Good! Next vital question was: Where will it be? Napoleon himself could not have analysed the terrain more minutely nor with more clinical attention to detail – ground advantage, wind obstruction and the like. Finally, two steps down from the street, one step and a jump from a concealed blackthorn stick, and one short step from the rhododendrum, I chose my battleground and put my artillery in place. The enemy

had not yet returned to the arena, so, having made my momentous decision I ambled, innocently, into the kitchen and sat on my stool.

Teeth chattering and knees knocking, I suffered ten waiting minutes, when, suddenly, fortune smiled. Brothers and sisters went over to "Kelly's Ditch" to play; baby sound asleep in the cradle – (at four months she knew little about life and ganders!); my mother started to make a soda cake. Perfect, this will keep her away from window, open-door, and view of rhododendrum. I wanted no audience. This was to be my High Noon in a Lagoon Garden.

Then, ominously, and as if on cue, I hear "gake gake gake". To the unschooled ear, this conveyed the message that a gander was talking to his family seven yards from our front door. To me, this triple incantation meant something else:- "Small boy, laughing-stock of the whole country, we know you are inside! Would fair-haired coward like another sprint? (and, all the while, I could hear her prompting – this long-winded tirade was not his style). Scum of the earth, disgrace to John, Peter, Paddy; to Rose, Briany, and Anthony! *shiver in your shoes*, abnoxious boy, simpering sissy, vile cub. . . " "right, Mr. Gander". I said to myself, got up from my stool, marched boldly out the door, straight for the rhododendrum;. . . you were the one that talked about shoes. We'll see how you like. . . " I had time to say no more. Here was 'concorde', Hell's flames flashing from his furious eye, bearing down on me. My turn to dictate tactics, I let him come to within one yard of the rhododendrum. Suddenly, as if electrified, I bent down, picked up the heaviest shoe and let fly. He raised his neck in the air when he saw shoe, clay, grass and all coming. THUD! A direct hit between full craw and fowl throat! and, then, – well, I have seen ballet-dancers and ice-skaters do magnificent pirouettes, body erect, arms in a line above the head, – one vertical line spinning on a sixpence. Ebenezer scored ten out of ten for this first six rotations but, first, the neck collapsed and, then, the abominable webbed feet went into a drunken dance – one, two, one two, three, four. . . then, higher steps, Five, six – he didn't make it to the seven, heeled over, webbed feet pointing, ingloriously, to the Lagoon sky, and twisted neck in the general direction of Sishly and her cheer-girls.

Up on my podium! gold medal performance! Exultation! victory over the brute. . . All of a sudden, it struck me – "I've killed the gander!" Panic! Goslings, orphans, Christmas dinners, New Year dinners, murder enquiry, Pierpoint and his rope – everything whirled around in my mind! I checked no pulse nor heart-beat, waited for no post-mortems, took to my heels and hid in the cart-shed.

In that half an hour, what a storm raged in my poor mind! Achievement, freedom from daily torture, guilt, apprehension approaching blind terror. Finally, I decided to face it. Around the front of the house, treading very warily, a guilty squint down at the rhododendrum – to my utter amazement, no corpse; looked beyond the byre, and there he was, standing at ease and head almost erect? Do you know something! this scourge, this Cromwell, this fire breathing instrument of Hell, looked at me and never moved from where he stood.

Life has made me wonder which of us had learned the more salutary lesson. I have a feeling, however, that when Ebenezer intoned his "gake a gake a gake", Sishly fairly psalmed out of her about the garden of humiliation.