

The Man Who Did Not Believe In Luck

Jerome K. Jerome

He got in at Ipswich with seven different weekly papers under his arm. I noticed that each one insured its reader against death or injury by railway accident. He arranged his luggage upon the rack above him, took off his hat and laid it on the seat beside him, mopped his bald head with a red silk handkerchief, and then set to work steadily to write his name and address upon each of the seven papers. I sat opposite to him and read Punch. I always take the old humour when travelling; I find it soothing to the nerves.

Passing over the points at Manningtree the train gave a lurch, and a horse-shoe he had carefully placed in the rack above him slipped through the netting, falling with a musical ring upon his head.

He appeared neither surprised nor angry. Having staunched the wound with his handkerchief, he stooped and picked the horse-shoe up, glanced at it with, as I thought, an expression of reproach, and dropped it gently out of the window.

"Did it hurt you?" I asked.

It was a foolish question. I told myself so the moment I had uttered it. The thing must have weighed three pounds at the least; it was an exceptionally large and heavy shoe. The bump on his head was swelling visibly before my eyes. Anyone but an idiot must have seen that he was hurt. I expected an irritable reply. I should have given one myself had I been in his place. Instead, however, he seemed to regard the inquiry as a natural and kindly expression of sympathy.

"It did, a little," he replied.

"What were you doing with it?" I asked. It was an odd sort of thing for a man to be travelling with.

"It was lying in the roadway just outside the station," he explained; "I picked it up for luck."

He refolded his handkerchief so as to bring a cooler surface in contact with the swelling, while I murmured something genial about the inscrutability of Providence.

"Yes," he said, "I've had a deal of luck in my time, but it's never turned out well."

"I was born on a Wednesday," he continued, "which, as I daresay you know, is the luckiest day a man can be born on. My mother was a widow, and none of my relatives would do anything for me. They said it would be like taking coals to Newcastle, helping a boy born on a Wednesday; and my uncle, when he died, left every penny of his money to my brother Sam, as a slight compensation to him for having been born on a Friday. All I ever got was advice upon the duties and responsibilities of wealth, when it arrived, and entreaties that I would not neglect those with claims upon me when I came to be a rich man."

He paused while folding up his various insurance papers and placing them in the inside breast-pocket of his coat.

"Then there are black cats," he went on; "they're said to be lucky. Why, there never was a blacker cat than the one that followed me into my rooms in Bolsover Street the very first night I took them."

"Didn't it bring you luck?" I enquired, finding that he had stopped.

A far-away look came into his eyes.

"Well, of course it all depends," he answered dreamily. "Maybe we'd never have suited one another; you can always look at it that way. Still, I'd like to have tried."

He sat staring out of the window, and for a while I did not care to intrude upon his evidently painful memories.

"What happened then?" I asked, however, at last.

He roused himself from his reverie.

"Oh," he said. "Nothing extraordinary. She had to leave London for a time, and gave me her pet canary to take charge of while she was away."

"But it wasn't your fault," I urged.

"No, perhaps not," he agreed; "but it created a coldness which others were not slow to take advantage of."

"I offered her the cat, too," he added, but more to himself than to me.

We sat and smoked in silence. I felt that the consolations of a stranger would sound weak.

"Piebald horses are lucky, too," he observed, knocking the ashes from his pipe against the window sash. "I had one of them once."

"What did it do to you?" I enquired.

"Lost me the best crib I ever had in my life," was the simple rejoinder. "The governor stood it a good deal longer than I had any right to expect; but you can't keep a man who is always drunk. It gives a firm a bad name."

"It would," I agreed.

"You see," he went on, "I never had the head for it. To some men it would not have so much mattered, but the very first glass was enough to upset me. I'd never been used to it."

"But why did you take it?" I persisted. "The horse didn't make you drink, did he?"

"Well, it was this way," he explained, continuing to rub gently the lump which was now about the size of an egg. "The animal had belonged to a

gentleman who travelled in the wine and spirit line, and who had been accustomed to visit in the way of business almost every public-house he came to. The result was you couldn't get that little horse past a public-house —at least I couldn't. He sighted them a quarter of a mile off, and made straight for the door. I struggled with him at first, but it was five to ten minutes' work getting him away, and folks used to gather round and bet on us. I think, maybe, I'd have stuck to it, however, if it hadn't been for a temperance chap who stopped one day and lectured the crowd about it from the opposite side of the street. He called me Pilgrim, and said the little horse was 'Pollion,' or some such name, and kept on shouting out that I was to fight him for a heavenly crown. After that they called us "Polly and the Pilgrim, fighting for the crown." It riled me, that did, and at the very next house at which he pulled up I got down and said I'd come for two of Scotch. That was the beginning. It took me years to break myself of the habit.

"But there," he continued, "it has always been the same. I hadn't been a fortnight in my first situation before my employer gave me a goose weighing eighteen pounds as a Christmas present."

"Well, that couldn't have done you any harm," I remarked. "That was lucky enough."

"So the other clerks said at the time," he replied. "The old gentleman had never been known to give anything away before in his life. 'He's taken a fancy to you,' they said; 'you are a lucky beggar!'"

He sighed heavily. I felt there was a story attached.

"What did you do with it?" I asked.

"That was the trouble," he returned. "I didn't know what to do with it. It was ten o'clock on Christmas Eve, just as I was leaving, that he gave it to me. 'Tiddling Brothers have sent me a goose, Biggles,' he said to me as I helped him on with his great-coat. 'Very kind of 'em, but I don't want it myself; you can have it!'"

"Of course I thanked him, and was very grateful. He wished me a merry Christmas and went out. I tied the thing up in brown paper, and took it under my arm. It was a fine bird, but heavy.

"Under all the circumstances, and it being Christmas time, I thought I would treat myself to a glass of beer. I went into a quiet little house at the corner of the Lane and laid the goose on the counter.

"That's a big 'un,' said the landlord; 'you'll get a good cut off him tomorrow.'

"His words set me thinking, and for the first time it struck me that I didn't want the bird—that it was of no use to me at all. I was going down to spend the holidays with my young lady's people in Kent."

"Was this the canary young lady?" I interrupted.

"No," he replied. "This was before that one. It was this goose I'm telling you of that upset this one. Well, her folks were big farmers; it would have been absurd taking a goose down to them, and I knew no one in London to give it to, so when the landlord came round again I asked him if he would care to buy it. I told him he could have it cheap,

"I don't want it myself,' he answered. 'I've got three in the house already. Perhaps one of these gentlemen would like to make an offer.'

"He turned to a couple of chaps who were sitting drinking gin. They didn't look to me worth the price of a chicken between them. The seediest said he'd like to look at it, however, and I undid the parcel. He mauled the thing pretty considerably, and cross-examined me as to how I come by it, ending by upsetting half a tumbler of gin and water over it. Then he offered me half a crown for it. It made me so angry that I took the brown paper and the string in one hand and the goose in the other, and walked straight out without saying a word.

"I carried it in this way for some distance, because I was excited and didn't care how I carried it; but as I cooled, I began to reflect how ridiculous I must look. One or two small boys evidently noticed the same

thing. I stopped under a lamp-post and tried to tie it up again. I had a bag and an umbrella with me at the same time, and the first thing I did was to drop the goose into the gutter, which is just what I might have expected to do, attempting to handle four separate articles and three yards of string with one pair of hands. I picked up about a quart of mud with that goose, and got the greater part of it over my hands and clothes and a fair quantity over the brown paper; and then it began to rain.

"I bundled everything up into my arm and made for the nearest pub, where I thought I would ask for a piece more string and make a neat job of it.

"The bar was crowded. I pushed my way to the counter and flung the goose down in front of me. The men nearest stopped talking to look at it; and a young fellow standing next to me said—

"Well, you've killed it.' I daresay I did seem a bit excited.

"I had intended making another effort to sell it here, but they were clearly not the right sort. I had a pint of ale—for I was feeling somewhat tired and hot—scraped as much of the mud off the bird as I could, made a fresh parcel of it, and came out.

"Crossing the road a happy idea occurred to me. I thought I would raffle it. At once I set to work to find a house where there might seem to be a likely lot. It cost me three or four whiskies—for I felt I didn't want any more beer, which is a thing that easily upsets me—but at length I found just the crowd I wanted—a quiet domestic-looking set in a homely little place off the Goswell Road.

"I explained my views to the landlord. He said he had no objection; he supposed I would stand drinks round afterwards. I said I should be delighted to do so, and showed him the bird.

"It looks a bit poorly,' he said. He was a Devonshire man.

"Oh, that's nothing,' I explained. 'I happened to drop it. That will all wash off.'

“It smells a bit queer, too,’ he said.

“That’s mud,’ I answered; ‘you know what London mud is. And a gentleman spilled some gin over it. Nobody will notice that when it’s cooked.’

“Well,’ he replied. ‘I don’t think I’ll take a hand myself, but if any other gent likes to, that’s his affair.’

“Nobody seemed enthusiastic. I started it at sixpence, and took a ticket myself. The potman had a free chance for superintending the arrangements, and he succeeded in inducing five other men, much against their will, to join us. I won it myself, and paid out three and twopence for drinks. A solemn-looking individual who had been snoring in a corner suddenly woke up as I was going out, and offered me sevenpence ha’penny for it—why sevenpence ha’penny I have never been able to understand. He would have taken it away, I should never have seen it again, and my whole life might have been different. But Fate has always been against me. I replied, with perhaps unnecessary hauteur, that I wasn’t a Christmas dinner fund for the destitute, and walked out.

“It was getting late, and I had a long walk home to my lodgings. I was beginning to wish I had never seen the bird. I estimated its weight by this time to be thirty-six pounds.

“The idea occurred to me to sell it to a poulterer. I looked for a shop, I found one in Myddleton Street. There wasn’t a customer near it, but by the way the man was shouting you might have thought that he was doing all the trade of Clerkenwell. I took the goose out of the parcel and laid it on the shelf before him.

“What’s this?’ he asked.

“It’s a goose,’ I said. ‘You can have it cheap.’

“He just seized the thing by the neck and flung it at me. I dodged, and it caught the side of my head. You can have no idea, if you’ve never been

hit on the head with a goose, how it hurts. I picked it up and hit him back with it, and a policeman came up with the usual, 'Now then, what's all this about?'

"I explained the facts. The poulterer stepped to the edge of the curb and apostrophised the universe generally.

"Look at that shop,' he said. 'It's twenty minutes to twelve, and there's seven dozen geese hanging there that I'm willing to give away, and this fool asks me if I want to buy another.'

"I perceived then that my notion had been a foolish one, and I followed the policeman's advice, and went away quietly, taking the bird with me.

"Then said I to myself, 'I will give it away. I will select some poor deserving person, and make him a present of the damned thing.' I passed a good many people, but no one looked deserving enough. It may have been the time or it may have been the neighbourhood, but those I met seemed to me to be unworthy of the bird. I offered it to a man in Judd Street, who I thought appeared hungry. He turned out to be a drunken ruffian. I could not make him understand what I meant, and he followed me down the road abusing me at the top of his voice, until, turning a corner without knowing it, he plunged down Tavistock Place, shouting after the wrong man. In the Euston Road I stopped a half-starved child and pressed it upon her. She answered 'Not me!' and ran away. I heard her calling shrilly after me, 'Who stole the goose?'

"I dropped it in a dark part of Seymour Street. A man picked it up and brought it after me. I was unequal to any more explanations or arguments. I gave him twopence and plodded on with it once more. The pubs were just closing, and I went into one for a final drink. As a matter of fact I had had enough already, being, as I am, unaccustomed to anything more than an occasional class of beer. But I felt depressed, and I thought it might cheer me. I think I had gin, which is a thing I loathe.

"I meant to fling it over into Oakley Square, but a policeman had his eye on me, and followed me twice round the railings. In Golding Road I sought to throw it down an area, but was frustrated in like manner. The

whole night police of London seemed to have nothing else to do but prevent my getting rid of that goose.

"They appeared so anxious about it that I fancied they might like to have it. I went up to one in Camden Street. I called him 'Bobby,' and asked him if he wanted a goose.

"'I'll tell you what I don't want,' he replied severely, 'and that is none of your sauce.'

"He was very insulting, and I naturally answered him back. What actually passed I forget, but it ended in his announcing his intention of taking me in charge.

"I slipped out of his hands and bolted down King Street. He blew his whistle and started after me. A man sprang out from a doorway in College Street and tried to stop me. I tied him up with a butt in the stomach, and cut through the Crescent, doubling back into the Camden Road by Batt Street.

"At the Canal Bridge I looked behind me, and could see no one. I dropped the goose over the parapet, and it fell with a splash into the water.

"Heaving a sigh of relief, I turned and crossed into Randolph Street, and there a constable collared me. I was arguing with him when the first fool came up breathless. They told me I had better explain the matter to the Inspector, and I thought so too.

"The Inspector asked me why I had run away when the other constable wanted to take me in charge. I replied that it was because I did not desire to spend my Christmas holidays in the lock-up, which he evidently regarded as a singularly weak argument. He asked me what I had thrown into the canal. I told him a goose. He asked me why I had thrown a goose into the canal. I told him because I was sick and tired of the animal.

"At this stage a sergeant came in to say that they had succeeded in recovering the parcel. They opened it on the Inspector's table. It contained a dead baby.

"I pointed out to them that it wasn't my parcel, and that it wasn't my baby, but they hardly took the trouble to disguise the fact that they did not believe me.

"The Inspector said it was too grave a case for bail, which, seeing that I did not know a soul in London, was somewhat immaterial. I got them to send a telegram to my young lady to say that I was unavoidably detained in town, and passed as quiet and uneventful a Christmas Day and Boxing Day as I ever wish to spend.

"In the end the evidence against me was held to be insufficient to justify a conviction, and I got off on the minor charge of drunk and disorderly. But I lost my situation and I lost my young lady, and I don't care if I never see a goose again."

We were nearing Liverpool Street. He collected his luggage, and taking up his hat made an attempt to put it on his head. But in consequence of the swelling caused by the horseshoe it would not go anywhere near him, and he laid it sadly back upon the seat.

"No," he said quietly, "I can't say that I believe very much in luck."