

Toy Soldiers

By Peter Neville

Chapter Eight

Moments later, Walter said, "Now that's what I call a brilliant idea."

But Dennis, not liking the plan one bit, wailed a distraught, "But I don't want to let that ol' goose attack me again."

"If you do it this time, Dennis, I bet it'll never bother you again. And remember, I'll be guarding you," said Reggie.

"You said that when we were running down to the shelter that day before the German plane machine-gunned us. Its bullets nearly hit us."

"Oh, Dennis, that Jerry Messerschmitt could never have hit us. It was up too high."

"But it made big holes in the road all around us and made me mess my pants."

"Well, this is different. This is just an old goose, not a Jerry plane firing guns at us."

"And we'll make sure that it never reaches you, I promise," said Walter. "He'll never get close enough to hurt you, and it'll never bother you again. So, come on. Let's go see what we can find in the shed."

Dennis reluctantly followed his brothers to the farming equipment shed where they found a great variety of interesting items that could be used for their intended plan of attack. Two poultry feed bins that had galvanized metal lids were the first items to catch Reggie's eyes. "Just what I need. I'll use these," he said, taking the lids from off the feed bins and quietly bringing them together as if they were huge cymbals.

Walter picked up a yard long length of metal tubing used for some unknown purpose, and then found an old, empty baking pan in which their aunt grew seedlings. The metal tubing and the baking pan should be ideal, thought Walter. And then, walking toward where the trap normally stood when not in use, he came upon a square biscuit tin. Prying off the lid, he found that it contained a variety of brass harness fittings. This should do nicely, he thought. Replacing the lid securely, he handed Dennis the biscuit tin. "Dennis, you use this," he said. "And when you hear us yell, shake it as hard as you can so that it makes lots of noise."

Meanwhile, Patrick had found a garden trowel among his aunt's gardening tools, and while considering its potential, Reggie handed him a galvanized bucket, saying, "Those two should go well together."

“You’re right,” said Patrick. “I’ll use them.”

“Alright, let’s go,” said Walter. “You all know what to do.”

“But I’m scared,” said Dennis, appearing as if at any moment he was going to break into tears. “I don’t want to go. I don’t want it chasing me again.”

“Don’t be daft, Dennis. You’re our decoy.”

“I don’t want to be a decoy. Anyway, what is a decoy?”

“Dennis, you’re the only one who can lure that damn bird away from the geese. That’s called being a decoy. So walk slowly out into the middle of the field and let him see you,” said Walter. “We’re not going to let you get hurt.” Then, speaking to Reggie and Patrick, he said, “OK. Let’s take up our positions. Dennis, away you go.”

Alone and reluctant, Dennis, carrying the biscuit box, walked slowly and fearfully toward the old car standing in the middle of the farmyard. Walter ran to the meadow where, now hidden from the gander, he ran as fast as he could behind the hedge until he was close to where their unsuspecting prey was preening its feathers, surrounded by the fifteen geese. Patrick, meanwhile, walked as unobtrusively as he knew how toward the cowshed, but instead of entering it, he darted into a hiding place behind the steps leading up to the barn. And Reggie, using the woodpile as cover, stationed himself at the edge of the orchard.

The gander was already eyeing Dennis, and saw that he was alone and in the middle of the farmyard. The boys, in their separate hiding places, waited expectantly. They had only moments to wait. Waddling away from the geese, the gander, hissing menacingly and with his neck outstretched, stalked ominously and with evil intent toward Dennis. Though so fearful he desperately wanted to run, Dennis behaved as if he had not noticed the approach of his dreaded tormentor and carried on walking slowly toward the car. The gander, alone now and also in the middle of the farmyard, was so intent on attacking Dennis that it failed to see the other boys quietly leaving their hiding places and slowly closing in for the coup de grace. Then Walter gave the signal. “Tally Ho!” he shouted at the top of his voice. Whereupon the three elder brothers yelled in unison, “Charge!” Then, hollering their heads off, they rushed as one at the gander, Reggie ferociously clanging his giant cymbals, Walter whacking the metal pan with the length of pipe, and Patrick banging on the galvanized bucket as hard as he knew how with the garden trowel. The suddenly bewildered bully of a gander stopped, stuck out its long neck and hissed viciously at Dennis, then, seeing that he was surrounded by the oncoming rush of the noise-making and shrieking elder brothers, it looked for an opening through which to escape,

but found none. Picking up courage, Dennis, furiously shaking the biscuit tin containing the brass harness fittings and screaming at the top of his voice the few obscenities he knew, such as 'you big bugger, you bloody rotten bird', joined in the fray by running straight at the gander. No longer hissing, the cowardly bird squawked fearfully, and with a great flapping of its huge wings took off, flying low over Walter's head to make a hurried retreat to the narrow drainage ditch flowing beside the far hedge. There, the beaten gander wagged its tail feathers and sulkily joined his flock of geese.

"I think we've won," said Walter. "Gosh, Dennis, you were fantastic."

"It was me or him," said Dennis, strutting now with newly found bravado.

"I bet he'll never bother you again, not after today," said Patrick.

"I didn't know geese could fly," laughed Reggie. "Wow! Did he take off!"

"Like a bat out of Hell," said Walter, laughing.

"Meanwhile, Queeny, the brown mare, having taken fright at the terrible din, had become like a crazed racehorse. With mane and long tail flying, she was galloping wildly around the meadow. Randy the rooster had flown to the top of the barn steps and although out of sync from its normal time, was lustily crowing Cock A Doodle Doo. Aunty Beat's many fowls, loudly clucked their alarm and flew off in all directions, and the geese and ducks, quacking and squawking, were making an awful row.

And that's when Florence appeared on the scene, hurrying frantically toward her four sons. "My goodness me, what was all that that terrible noise I heard?" she demanded. "What have you been up to? You've frightened all the animals. And what are you doing with all those thing- that don't belong to you?"

"They're our musical instruments, Mam," said Reggie, his red cheeks one big smile. "We've just played a symphony concert to the gander, but he didn't seem to like our music too much. I bet, though, he won't ever bother Dennis again."

"Well, it's a good job your Aunty Beat is not here. She'd be furious. Now put those things where you found them, clean your shoes and come straight into the house." Knowing that her sister could arrive home at any moment and would see that all was not as it should be on the farm, Florence had suddenly become apprehensive. She didn't want her boys to cause her sister worry or anger in any way, especially after Beatrice was being so kind and generous to them all. "Right this moment, do you hear me?" she shouted at the top of her voice.

"Yes, Mam," Walter said, meekly. Puzzled, the boys looked at each other. Never before

had they seen their mother in such a tizzy, not even when bombs were dropping all around them. "Come on you three. Hurry up and do what Mam says," said Walter.

It wasn't until an hour later, when all was again quiet and peaceful on the farm, that Tommy could be heard clip clopping through the farmyard gateway and across the cobbled stones outside the dairy. Aunty Beat and Jack had returned from their journey to Bugle market. And as the four brothers dashed out of the farmhouse to greet them, the trap came to a stop outside the pigsty that adjoined the barn.

"Hey, boys, look yer and see what we've brought home," Jack was hollering at the top of his voice.

All smiles, Aunty Beat jumped nimbly down from the driver's seat. "Hush, Jack, or your hullabaloo will stop the chicken from laying," she admonished him.

Walter winked at Dennis.

"What have you brought back?" Reggie asked, curious now because he had seen movements in the back of the trap, ominous movements wrapped up in two Hessian sacks.

Jack carefully pulled one of the sacks down from the trap and using his pocketknife he cut the binder twine that secured a bundle of agitated movement and squealing animal noises. "Here, Dennis. You open it," he said.

"Will it bite?" asked Dennis nervously.

Jack roared with laughter. "No, Dennis, it's too young to bite."

"Go on, Dennis, open it," said Reggie.

Gingerly holding the neck of the sack open with one hand, Dennis patted it with the other, and with squeals of fright out ran a pure white piglet.

"Crickey! It's a baby pig," exclaimed Walter.

"Aize. And there be two of um," shouted Jack, pulling the other sack from the trap and releasing a second piglet, which squealed as noisily as the first as it looked around with frightened little eyes at the crowd of strange people and at its new surroundings.

"We'll soon fatten them up and then -----," Jack was saying, when Aunty Beat curtly shut him up.

"Hush, Jack," she snapped. "We don't need to know. Boys, you can help me get these little ones into the sty. It's been a long day for um and they be sorely in need of victuals. Jack, you fetch down the other stuff," she ordered her son. "Take the sacks of maize to the barn and the bag of salt licks for the bullocks, and leave um in the cow shed." Turning to the boys, their

aunty said, "That's why we couldn't take any of you boys to Bugle with us. I knew that coming home the trap would be full of stuff from the market. I even bought myself a newfangled hand plough." And then she noticed her flock of geese gathered around the drainage ditch at the far side of the farmyard. Normally at this hour of the day they would be preening themselves or napping, their heads stuck comfortably beneath their wings. But now they appeared to be agitated and, as if in turn, with flapping wings, feathers flying and squawks of alarm, a goose would half fly, half run several yards away from the rest of the flock. And then she saw the reason for their strange behaviour. The gander was the culprit. Waddling from one goose to another, it was viciously attacking them by striking and biting them with its hard strong beak, an act she had never witnessed before by a gander or for that matter by any other member of the poultry family. She thought to herself, you're ready for the table, my lad. Turning to Dennis, she asked, "Did the gander bother you today, Dennis?"

"Yes, it did, Aunty," Dennis replied. "It attacked me but we -----."

"But we shoed it away," Reggie butted in hastily. Then, wanting to change the subject, he asked, "Aunty, shall we catch the baby pigs and put them into their new home?"

"Aize. Do that Reg," their aunty replied. And then she hastened away, running in her Wellington boots to the furze bush woodpile where she grabbed a charred branch of sizeable length before hastening toward the flock of now scattered geese. I must stop that gander from doing more mischief, she told herself. But the gander saw her coming and took off, partly running and partly flying until it reached the meadow, well out of her reach. "You blackguard. Mark my word, one more attack and it'll be your last," she muttered angrily.

Hurrying back to where Dennis was having great fun playing with one of the piglets, she chuckled at the sight of the pair, knowing that they could not hurt each other. Patrick was holding on to the other piglet which, seemingly knowing that it was in safe hands, did not struggle. Jack, meanwhile, was busily showing Walter and Reggie how the new hand plough worked. Thirsty and famished Beatrice left them and went into the house for a cup of tea and a piece of the apple pie she had baked yesterday.

The following morning, with the cows already milked, the contents of the slop bucket from the privy double trenched into the garden, and the two piglets fed, Beatrice rested awhile. Then, with a bucket of maize in one hand, she had just opened a rear door of her chicken coop car and was about to crank down a window when she heard the angry hissing of the gander coming from very close behind her. Turning, she was too late to ward off the attack as the

vicious gander flew at her, flapping its strong wings, its webbed feet clawing at her and its beak going for her face. Heavy blows to her left side and face knocked her to the ground; but instinctively she held on to the heavy galvanized bucket. Rolling over to a sitting position, she managed to ward off the next attack by swinging the bucket at the aggressive gander. The bucket missed striking the bird but it saved her from further attack. With the element of surprise gone, and its victim armed, the cowardly bird stretched out its long neck, hissed menacingly at her and then retreated to a safe distance.

“You blackheart! You Bounder! You Varmint! You, you, you,” Beatrice fumed. Lost for further suitable adjectives, she furiously shouted, “I’ll put a stop to your nonsense, m’lad. I’ll have your head, you’ll see!”

Getting to her feet was painful. Her left leg was scratched and bleeding, her whole left side and arm hurt terribly, and her face was badly bruised. Shaking her aches and pains off as a mere inconvenience and keeping a tight hold of the bucket, she hobbled to the woodpile where her curved-bladed chopper was embedded in a well-worn chopping block. With that same chopper and on that same wooden block she had chopped off countless fowl and duck heads, but never a gander’s, and a powerfully strong and fully-grown one at that. Dropping the bucket, she wrenched the chopper from the block. “We’ll see who the boss is on this farm,” she growled. “It’s you or me.” Then, having for several years during her much younger life been a noted cook in service for gentry in the City of London, she instinctively thought, ‘That bird is too old for roasting. He must be more than five years old and sure to be tough. I’d best make a tasty goose ragout out of it, or braise the beggar.’

Clutching the well-worn handle of the chopper in the hand of her good arm, though making sure to keep the weapon hidden behind her back, Beatrice sallied forth like a gladiator in an arena, ready to meet the foe, the vicious gander. Already it had spotted her, and saw that she was alone and apparently unarmed. Now, menacingly it approached her, its neck outstretched and hissing angrily. “Keep that neck well out,” Beatrice muttered softly. “That’s it. Come on, m’beauty.”

Next moment, giving a loud and angry squawk, the gander flew at her, fully intent on attacking her face. Beatrice did not attempt to avoid the assault on her but instead swung her good arm that held the chopper, aiming the sharp blade at the gander’s long, outstretched neck. The huge bird hit her, knocking her off balance; but she had struck first. Without even a last squawk the gander fell dead at her feet, decapitated.

“And I didn’t even have to use the chopping block,” muttered Beatrice. “Well, we’ll have you for dinner, m’lad.”

Later that morning, unaware of the gander’s demise, the four brothers, their Uncle Albert and a joyful Dove, set off for a day on the moors, where eventually they filled a basket with mushrooms and a punnet with delicious wild blackberries that were just coming into season. It wasn’t until their return to the farm late that afternoon that Reggie noticed the geese were contently preening themselves on the grassy banks of the drainage ditch, but strangely there was no sign of the gander.

“I wonder where that rotten gander is,” he said.

“I’d like to see it in a roasting dish,” said Walter.

“So would I, and then it wouldn’t attack me ever again,” said Dennis, his face purple from eating far more blackberries than he had added to the punnet.

“T’would make a great feast, I bet, especially with sage and onion stuffing,” said Patrick. “Yummy yummy, good for the tummy.”

Being a strict vegetarian and an animal lover, their Uncle Albert said nothing, though he strongly suspected that the bird would be, at this very moment, sizzling in the oven. He couldn’t fault his sister Beat for having got rid of the bird after witnessing the way it had so viciously attacked the youngest and littlest of the four boys.

Washing their hands with water taken from the rain barrow and a brand new bar of yellow carbolic soap, the boys then, as they usually did, dried their hands on their pants. Then, ravenously hungry, the four stormed into the house with an excited and barking Dove hard on their heels. Their Uncle Albert brought up the rear at a more leisurely pace. There, filling the whole house, a most appetizing aroma met them.

Reggie sniffed the air hungrily. “Is that yummy smell what I think it is?” he asked his aunty.

“I bet it’s the gander,” said Walter.

Busily stirring a saucepan on the stove, Beatrice looked up with a victor’s smile on her scratched and puffy face, but before she could say a word, Cousin Jack hollered, “Aize, ‘tis the old gander himself. He won’t be bothering you again Dennis, that be certain.”

“You didn’t kill it because it attacked me, did you Aunty? I wouldn’t want it killed because it didn’t like me,” said Dennis quietly.

“Oh, no, Dennis, don’t think that,” quickly assured his aunty. “I didn’t kill the gander

because it didn't like you. It had to go because it attacked me this morning, and far more fiercely than it has ever attacked you. He was just too dangerous to have around the farm any longer," she told him. "And while you've been playing on the moors, your mother and I have been busy preparing him for our dinner."

"You've done all the work, Beat. All I've done is to prepare the vegetables," said Florence. And then she laughed. "But at least I've learned how to work the Primus stove whilst you boys were away." And turning to her brother who had seated himself in the rocking chair, she asked, "Were they any trouble, Albert?"

Albert smiled. "They were as good as gold," he replied meekly.

"That's good. I'm glad they went with you today."

Actually, as soon as Beatrice had killed the gander, and not wanting the children to see the dead bird before they set off for the moors, she had hidden it in the dairy. But as soon as the family had breakfasted and those going to the moors were out of sight, she had begun the task of preparing the gander for the table. First, scalding the bird with boiling water to loosen the feathers, she then quickly plucked it and cleaned out its innards, making sure to save the liver for one of her specialties, a tasty pate de foie gras.

"Can we see him?" asked Walter.

"Is he stuffed with sage and onion stuffing?" asked Patrick.

"I bet he's nice and brown," said Reggie.

"No, he not nice and brown and not stuffed with sage and onion stuffing," said their mother.

"Look!" their aunty said, opening the oven door. "Isn't he a beauty? He's cut up and simmering in that good sauce I made, and he's ready to eat."

"Well, in that case, let's all tuck in to him," said Patrick. "I'm starving."

Footnote:

Here is Aunty Beat's recipe for:

Goose Ragout a la Bonne Femme.

Cutting the goose into uniform pieces, she seasoned them with salt and pepper and placed them into her largest iron skillet in which bacon fat had been heated. She then added a

large cup of roughly chopped onion and two carrots quartered. Once the pieces of goose and the vegetables were browned well she sprinkled in flour to make a roux, carefully stirring the contents of the skillet until the flour was cooked. She then added a large glass of her home made red current wine and two large glasses of chicken stock to which had been added a bouquet garni, bay leaves, garlic and a couple of cloves. This mixture she cooked for almost an hour, keeping the pan uncovered.

With the goose now semi cooked, she drained the liquid from the skillet to cool and transferred the remaining contents to a large iron pot to go into the oven. She then added small onions that had been lightly tossed in butter, several strips of lean bacon that had been cut into small square pieces and lightly fried, and several potatoes quartered. First skimming the fat from the cooling sauce, she then poured this over the goose, placed the pot on top of the stove until it simmered, and then, covering the pot she placed it in the hot oven for almost an hour, or until the goose was tender.

Runner beans and buttered baby carrots accompanied the entree, and as there were many mouths to feed, an extra large bowl of new potatoes smothered in a delicious parsley sauce was also served.

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