

LOST IN THE FOG (A Tale of Adventure)

By Irving Bacheller

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IT'S odd how some people take to geese. As a boy I never could understand, for the life of me, how one could ever have any love of a goose in him. When I came out in the glory of my first trousers a whole flock of geese came after me, tweaking the sacred garment with their bills, and hissing me to shame of my new dignity, and screaming in derision as they pulled me down. After that and for long I treasured a most unrighteous hatred of the whole goose family. They were to me a low, waddling tribe with the evil spirit of envy in them. The worst thing about Mother Tipton was her geese, I used to think. She lived in a shanty all by herself—a lonely man-hater—and the bit of land that climbed to the ridges on either side of it was known as Mother Tipton's Hollow. Every day skirmishers, sentinels, and reserves of geese covered the green slopes of the Hollow, and a white squadron of them was always sailing the black waters of the pond in its center. I came betimes, of a summer day, and peered over the circling ridge in a tremble of fear, whereupon a stir of white wings and a yell of defiance greeted me. Mother Tipton herself was a kindly creature who rescued me whenever I was captured by that noisy rabble of boy-haters. She was an Englishwoman, the daughter of a rich man, I believe, in the city of Bristol, and turned out of her home for some reason—we never knew why. I know she had in her shanty wonderful trinkets of gold and silver, the relics of a better day, and more than once I had the inestimable pleasure of holding them in my hands. The Hollow was half a mile from the shore of the broad Sound, and Mother Tipton took her geese and feathers to market in a rowboat. There was a big town across the bay, and she went always from the end of Shirley Point when the weather was fine, rowing as strong an oar as any man of all the many that made their living on those waters.

One morning—I was then a boy of eight years—I got permission to go with her in the boat. I remember she had a cargo of ten young geese, that were stowed away, their legs tied together, in the bow of the boat.

It was a mile and a half across the bay, and the water lay like a mill-pond, with scarcely a ripple showing. A thin mist hovered about the farther shore as we pulled away, but we could see the dock clearly and the building that lay beyond it.

“Land o’ Goshen!” Mother Tipton cried, after rowing a few minutes, “it’s foggin’ “; then she sat a long time, as it seemed to me, looking over the water at

a misty wall that lay not far ahead of us. Of a sudden she began to pull vigorously on the right oar.

“It’s the ebb-tide,” said she, “and we must get back as quick as we can or we’ll be in trouble.”

Evidently she saw it coming, for she began to pull with redoubled energy. I could just see the dim outline of rocks on Shirley Point as we turned about.

“The tide has taken us half over,” she muttered. “It runs like a mill-race.”

Now I could see mist rising on the water under the side, as if it had turned hot suddenly. The fog thickened fast, and presently the boat had seemed to lengthen, and we to go far apart, so that I could see but dimly the face of Mother Tipton. Then I could hear her groan and breathe heavily as she put all her strength to the oars. She was lifting the bow from the water every stroke now, but suddenly I heard the snap of an oar, and the boat turned in the tide; then a splash of water hit my face.

Mother Tipton rose in the boat and shouted a long halloo. We listened for some answer, but, hearing none, she called “Help!” a dozen times, at the top of her voice. Between her cries we could hear nothing but the tide rippling under the boat.

I felt a fine thrill then, having little sense at best, and none of our danger. I remember growing very manly and chivalrous when I saw Mother Tipton crying in her seat, and did my best to comfort her.

She was up to shouting for help again presently, but not a sound came back to us. We drifted of course, with the tide, and could see nothing. She kept calling all the time, and when my tongue was dry for the need of water, and the thought of cake and cookies kept crowding on me, I lost a bit of my bravery. It was time to be getting home—there was no longer any doubt of that.

“Mother Tipton,” I said, “where do you suppose we are?”

“The Lord only knows, child,” was her answer. “I’m afraid we’re out in the deep water half over to Long Island. But the tide has turned, and it may take us back before night comes. We’ll just sit still and keep calling.”

I was lying on my back in the stern, resting my head on the seat behind me, and was feeling very miserable indeed, when I heard a great disturbance among the geese.

“Willie, come here,” said Mother Tipton. Two of the geese were lying in her lap, and she was unwinding a long fish-line.

“Tie it tightly,” said she, “just above the *big* joint of the leg. Wait—let’s cut it first into even lengths. That’s right—now cut it. “

She measured for me, and I cut the line, as she held it into ten pieces, with probably as many feet in each. Then we tied them securely to the geese, above the big joint of the legs, and fastened the loose ends together, winding them with a bit of string. We tied another fish-line to this ten-stranded cable, cut the

geese apart, and let them all go at once. They flew for a little distance, and, being not all of a mind, came down in a rather bad tangle. I had hold of the line, and if I had not paid it out quickly we would surely have lost them. They ducked their heads in the water, and shook their wings, and screamed as if delighted with their liberty. Meanwhile they had begun to pull like a team of horses, and I could feel the stretch of the line. It had parted in a minute—and a thick, strong line it was at that—and I had gone overboard and was clutching for the loose end. There was a thunder of wings when they saw me coming upon them, and when I got my hand on the cord they began to pull me through the water at a great rate. I was a good swimmer, but was glad to lie over on my back and rest a little after the violence of my exertion. Then, suddenly, I heard the voice of Mother Tipton calling me, and it seemed far away. I looked in the direction it came from, and then I got a scare I hope never to have again. I could see nothing of the boat. The geese were swimming with the tide, and over all, the fog lay on the sea as thick as darkness. I was breathing hard, and lay for a long time floating on my back, my fingers clutching the tight strings.

When I turned over and got a little of the water out of my eyes, I could hear faintly in the distance the voice of Mother Tipton calling the geese just as I had heard her many a time over there in the Hollow. I could see them turn and listen, and then the whole flock veered about, cackling together as if they knew the meaning of it. The ten of them were now swimming comfortably. Every moment I could hear more distinctly the voice of Mother Tipton, and after a little I could hear the water on the boat. Suddenly its end broke through the wall of fog, and I saw my companion looming above me in the thick air, her head showing first. She answered with a cheery “Thank Heaven!” as I called to her, and the whole flock rose out of the water and tried to fly.

The geese came up to the boat-side, and she touched their beaks fondly with her hand as she came to help me in. The water had chilled me through, and I was glad enough to set my feet on the boat-bottom, and to take off my coat and wrap my shoulders in the warm shawl that Mother Tipton offered. You may be sure I kept a good hold of the strings, and before I sat down we made them fast to some ten feet of the small anchor-rope and tied it at the bow. Then those that had got their feet over the traces were carefully attended to. They lay quietly under the gunwale as Mother Tipton fussed with them, sometimes lifting one above another. She shooed them off in a moment, and they made away, turning their heads knowingly as she began to paddle.

“I believe those creatures will have sense enough to go ashore. They know more than we do about a good many things,” said she. “That old gray gander of mine goes a mile away sometimes, but he’ll get home, if it *is* foggy, every night of his life.”

It was growing dark, and in five minutes we couldn't see our team. I was kneeling in the bow, my hand on the rope, peering to get a view of the geese, when I heard a loud quacking and a big ripple in the water just ahead. I was about to speak, when I saw a drift of dark objects on either side of the boat. I made out what they were, and caught one of them by the neck just as Mother Tipton shouted, "Ducks!" Then there was a roar of wings that made me jump back, and that set the geese in a panic. I hung on to my captive, and brought him in flapping and drenching my sleeve with spray.

"Bring him here," said Mother Tipton, as I crept to the middle seat, the poor creature fighting me desperately all the way.

"We shall need him for our supper, my dear child," said she, as she took him. "I think we're coming to shore somewhere, and I know you're hungry."

It was not long before we heard our boat-bottom grinding on the sand, but it was very dark. Mother Tipton went to the bow of the boat, and I was near the middle seat.

"Thank Heaven, we're somewhere!" I heard her say; and then she stood up, and I heard her paddle strike in the sand, and felt the boat lift forward and go up on the dry beach. I was out pulling in a moment, and I tell you the firm earth had never so good a feeling. I felt my way up the beach, and Mother Tipton came after me. It was so dark and foggy we could see nothing. After a little I felt the grass under me, and my companion lit a match and touched it to a bit of paper she had taken off of a bundle in the boat.

"Make haste, now," she said, "and pick up all the bits of small wood you see around."

The dry drift lay all around us, and in half a minute a good bit of it was crackling on that flaming wad of paper. Then we brought sticks as thick as a man's leg, and fed the flames until they leaped higher than our heads and lit the misty reaches of the shore a good distance.

"Lawsy me!" said she, presently, "I think we're on Charles Island." Then she took a brand out of the fire, and walked away in the thick grass, waving it above her head. She was calling me in a moment.

"Bring the fish-line and the tin pail!" she shouted.

I went to the boat for them, and was shortly groping through the tall grass in the direction of that flickering torch. She was not nearly so far away as I thought, the fog had such a trick of deepening the perspective in every scene. I found her by an old ruin of a house, peering into a deep well, the cover of which had mostly rotted away. We were not long tying that line to the pail and dropping it down the well-hole. The line raced through my fingers, and the pail bounded as it struck, and rang like a bell on the splashing water. When I had hauled it up, we sat looking at the slopping cylinder of cold, clear water, the

golden flare of the torch shining in it, each insisting that the other must drink first, until I was quite out of patience.

She took the pail at last, and buried her mouth at the rim, and nearly smothered herself with the water. I thanked her with a good heart when I got my hands on it, for I had a mighty fever of thirst in me. When my dry tongue was soaking in the sweet, pure water, I could feel my heart lighten, and soon it was floating off its rock of despair.

“Now let’s take a pailful with us, and get supper,” said Mother Tipton. “We’re on Charles Island, five miles from home, but it isn’t more than half a mile from Milford. We’d better stop here for the night, and maybe it’ll be clear before morning.”

I took the torch, and she dragged behind her a bit of the fallen roof that had once covered the old house. By the light of the fire we began to dig clams with the oar and paddle. In ten minutes we had enough for a fine bake, and laid them out on a rock, and raked the hot coals over them. Mother Tipton had killed and dressed the duck, and while I tended the clams she was cutting turf and shaking the clay off it into a hollow she scooped out of the sand. She wet the clay then with salt water, and, when it was thick and sticky, rolled the duck in it until the bare skin was coated. Then she poked it into the ashes under the hot fire, and came to help me uncover the clams. We ate them with sharpened sticks, and, while some butter would have helped a bit, they went with a fine relish. The duck came out of the fire looking like a boulder of gray granite. Mother Tipton broke the hard clay with a stone, and the duck came out clean and smoking hot, leaving its skin in the shell. A more tender and delicious bit of fowl I have never eaten, the salt clay having given it the right savor.

After supper we untied the flock and set it free, and dragged the boat above tidewater. Then we drove two stakes in front of a rock near the fire, and set our strip of roofing over all. Under it we threw a good layer of hot sand from near the fire, and built high ridges on either side of our shelter. There were sacks of down for pillows, and my overcoat and the big woolen shawl as covering. Though it is so long ago—I was, as I said, only eight years old—I remember still when Mother Tipton told me to creep in and draw up the wraps around me. The warm sand gave me a grateful sense of comfort. I lay for a time and looked at the dying firelight, but before very long I fell asleep.

As I awoke, next day, I could hear the bellow of a great fog-siren, away in the distance, that sent its echoes crashing through the dungeon of mist. Next I noticed the sound of the noisy water on the rocks near by. It was growing light, and somebody was poking the fire. When I lifted my head I felt a warm breeze and saw that the fog had gone. A man with a wooden leg and a patch of gray whiskers on his chin was standing by the fire. I crept out and greeted him, rubbing my eyes with drowsiness.

“Ketched in the fog, I suppose,” said he, kicking the fire.

“Yes, sir,” I answered; “we were caught by the tide and lost, yesterday.”

“Hum!” he muttered, as he glanced under the lean-to roof of our shanty and took a good look at Mother Tipton. “Rather a tidy bit of a woman—stout as an ox an’ a good-looker.”

“I’d thank you not to disturb her,” I said with indignation.

“Not for the world,” he answered, returning and shying another bit of wood at the fire. “I like t’ see ‘em sleep—it’s good for ‘em. Got anything for breakfus?”

“I’m going to dig some clams,” I answered.

“You jes’ wait,” he said, winking at me, “an’ I’ll go off to the tug an’ bring ye some coffee an’ fish an’ bread an’ butter. Got loads of it aboard there. No trouble at all.”

He made off for his boat, that lay on the beach near by, and rowed around the point. I walked down the shore a few rods, and from a high rock saw the tug lying at anchor a little way off the shore. He came back in a short time, bringing a basket of provisions. Mother Tipton was up, and by that time I had a good fire going.

“Madam,” he said, laying down the basket, “may I be so bold as to offer you su’thin’ for your breakfus? Here’s a snack o’ coffee an’ fish an’ a tidy bit o’ bread an’ butter.”

She thanked him politely, and while we were getting breakfast, he told us that he was a menhaden-fisherman “—as owned his own tug.” Then we told him our story. Afterward he insisted on taking us home. We were glad to accept his kindness, and the sun was shining brightly when we put off for the tug, with all our geese in the boat; I made Mother Tipton promise me that not one of them would ever be sold. The captain brought a big armchair and made her very comfortable in the bow of the boat. We were home in an hour, and I was as glad to get there as all were to see me. The adventure resulted in great good, for it gave me some respect for geese, and gave Mother Tipton a greater regard for men. It was not long after that she added to her museum in the Hollow a man with a wooden leg; and you may be sure I went to the wedding.