“SOMEWHERE BACK OF MEMORY:” BY WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

BRIGHT cold Mid-March day, the northern shore of Lake Erie still frozen a mile out, and the wind just down with the sun. I had come forth from the city to think it over for a day and smell wood-smoke, a spring symptom. In the noble stillness, which for many moments had been broken only by the sagging of the dead ice, there came now a great cackling of geese, so that I looked up the lane a quarter of a mile to the nearest farmyard, wondering who had turned loose the collie pups. It didn’t occur to me to look up; and that, when you come to think of it, is one of the tragedies of being city-bred.

Presently I had to. Voices of wild geese carry with astonishing force and accuracy. A hundred yards ahead was the long-necked gander, with the lines of a destroyer, his wings sweeping more slowly because of their strength and gear, yet he was making the pace. Then came his second in command, also alone, and as far back again, the point of the V. In this case, the formation was uneven, the left oblique being twice as extended as the right. ... They were all cackling, as I imagined, because of the open water ahead, for geese either honk or are silent in passage. They began to break just above, the formation shattering piece by piece as they swept on with wild ardor toward the ice-openings. Coming up from the thrall of the thing, I found my hat in hand.

It would shake any one. Indeed, there’s a fine thrill in the flight of ducks—darting dwarfs compared to these standard-breds, whose pinions sweep but once to the triple-beat of the twinkling redheads and canvas-backs. You tell the difference by the twinkle when the distance over water confuses the eye as to size. Mighty twelve-pounders with a five-foot spread of wing, many of these, and with more than a suggestion of the swan’s mystic grandeur in passing.

Somewhere back of memory, most of us have strange relations with the wild things. Something deeper than the beauty of them, thrills. Moments of music stir these inward animations, or steaming for the first time into certain Oriental harbors, suddenly we are estranged from the self, as we know it, and are greater beings. I feel as new as a tourist, before Niagara or Montmorency, but as old as Paul and Silas in the presence of the Chinese Wall. The lips of many men, strange save to common sayings, are loosed to murmurings of deepest yearning before the spectacle of a full-rigged ship; and it matters not if, within memory, they have ever felt the tug of filling cloth in the timber underfoot, or crossed even an inland
waterway without steam. It was something of this that the flight of geese gave me—a throb from the ancient and perennial romance of the soul.

Many a man goes gunning on the same principle, and thinks that the urge is game. It isn’t so, unless he is a mere animated stomach; and many think they have come into their own as they go to sea, the vibration of triple-screws singing along the keel. . . . They pass an iceberg or a derelict, some contour of tropical shore, a fishing fleet, or an old fore-and-after, and the steamer is a stifling modern metropolis after that—galley and stoke-hole its slums. Then and there, they vow some time really to go to sea.

Sing the song of steam—the romance of steel—there isn’t any, yet. Generations hence, when the last turbine comes puffing into port, taking its place like a dingy collier in the midst of ether-driven hydroplanes—some youth on the water-front, perhaps, will turn his back on the crowd, and from his own tossing emotions at the sight of the old steamer—emotions which defy mere brain, and scorn the upstart memory—will catch the coherent story of it all, and his expression will be the song of steam. For the pangs and passions of the soul can only become articulate at the touch of some ancient reminder, which erects a magnificent distance of perspective, and permits to flood in the stillness of that larger time, whose crises are epochal and whose yesterdays are lives.

WAITING for the suburban car that night in the little lake town, I mentioned the flying wedge.

"Why, those are Jack Miner’s geese," remarked a voice of the waiting-room.

I ignored the reply. A local witticism past doubt—the cut-up of the place. Jack Miner, as I saw it, might own Pelee Island, Lake Erie or the District of Columbia, but no man’s pronoun of possession has any business relation to a flock of wild geese, the same being about the wildest things we have left. I recalled the crippled goose which the farmer’s boy chased around a hay-stack for the better part of a June afternoon, and only saw once; the goose being detained that particular once with the dog of the establishment, which ranged the countryside for many years thereafter, but couldn’t be coaxed past a load of hay, and was even sceptical of corn-shocks. I knew, moreover, that the geese are shot at from the Gulf rice-marshes to the icy Labradors; that they fly slightly higher since the common use of smokeless instead of black powder.

Yet the stranger hadn’t been humorous. Any one of his fellow townsmen would have made the same remark. In fact, I had the
good fortune several weeks afterward of seeing several hundred wild geese playing and feeding on Jack Miner's farm—within a hundred feet of his door-step, many of them.

Years ago, a winter came on to stay before the corn was all in—a patch of corn on a remote back-field of Jack Miner's farm. A small flock of geese flying north in March, knew as much about the loss as Jack did. A farm-hand was first to note their call, and got such a case of _wanderlust_ when he observed the geese, that he kept on going without returning to the house. He wrote, however, this significant news:

"Jack: Wild guse on your pleace. Leve corn on wood-lot. Ile come back mabe. Steve."

Jack Miner did just that; and the next year he left the corn a little nearer the house and so on. Meanwhile he made a law that you couldn't come onto his place with a shotgun. He couldn't stop the townspeople from taking a shot at the small flocks as they passed over from the farm feeding ground to the lake, but the geese didn't seem to expect that of Jack. He says they would miss it, if the shooting stopped, and get stale; and then it does a similar lot for the town in the critical month of April.

Finally Jack built a large concrete pond on his house acres, leaving much corn on the clean marges. He has a strong heart to wait with. The geese "had him" when he first carried forth the corn, but it was a year or two afterward before a daring young gander and pair made a hasty drop. For once there was no chorus of "I-told-you-so's," from the wiser heads cocked stiff as cattails from the low growth of the surrounding fields. That was the second beginning.

The system has been cumulative ever since, and in something like this order: fifteen, forty, one hundred and fifty, four hundred, six hundred—in five years. They never light all at once in the artificial pond—some watching as far back as from the remote wood-lot, others in the south fields across the road. Jack Miner feeds five bushels of corn a day and would like to feed fifteen.

"A rich man can afford a few geese," he remarked, "but it takes a poor man to feed six hundred."

He asked the Canadian Government for one hundred dollars the year to help feed the geese, but the formidable process entailed to get it, evidently dismayed Ottawa at the outset, for it didn't go through. Henry Ford came over from Detroit this spring, and the substance of his call didn't leak out. In any event, Jack Miner is still managing his brick-kiln. Bird-fanciers come nowadays in season from all over the States and Provinces, and Jack feeds them too. Meantime, we
summer folk who come early enough to the shore to see the inspiring
flocks flying overland to the lake in the beginnings of dusk, and hear
them out on the water where they moor at night, a bed-time music
that makes for strange dreaming—we know well what kind of a gift
to the community Jack Miner is; and we are almost as sorry as he
when the keen hardy Norse blood of the birds call them forth from
the May balm.

Of course he’s an individual. He has time to plant roses as well
as corn. At luncheon today, there was an armful of red roses on the
table from Jack Miner’s. He had sent them three miles in hay time;
and didn’t know that I had spent the morning writing about his
geese. He has time to tempt thousands of smaller birds to his acre-
age. It’s one seething bird-song there. Besides he makes a fine
brick. You’d expect him to be a workman. . . . But the wild
geese are a part of his soul.

“I’ve watched them for a good many years now,” he told me.
“I’ve seen them tackle a man, a bull, a team, and stand against the
swoop of an eagle. Two ganders may be hard as swordsmen at each
other when they’re drawing off their flocks, but they’ll stand back to
back against any outsider. Yes, I’ve watched them a long time, and
I’ve never yet seen them do anything a man would be ashamed of.
Why, I’d like to see the wild goose on the back of the Canadian
flag.”

It’s rather too fine an event to go often to Jack Miner’s. It’s
the deeper impressions which count, and these are spontaneous,
and do not come at call. One feels as if breaking into one of the
natural mysteries—at first glimpse of the huge birds so near at
hand—a spectacle of beauty and speed not to be forgotten. They
are built long and clean. Unlike the larger fliers as a whole, they
need little or no run to rise; it is enough to say that they rise from
the water. You can calculate from that the marvelous strength of
pinion. And they are continental wing-rangers that know the little
roads of men, as they know the great lakes and waterways and
mountain chains—Jack Miner’s door-yard and Hudson’s Bay.

“I’d give a lot to see one right close, Jack,” said I.

“You don’t have to. Come on.”

He took me to a little enclosure where a one-winged gander was
held.

“He came home to me with a wing broken one Sunday,” said
Jack. “It was heavy going, but he managed to get here. I thought
at first we’d have some goose, but we didn’t. The fact is, I was sort
of proud that he came home in his trouble. I took the wing off, as
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you see. He’s doing fine, but he tried to drink himself to death, as they all do. That appears to be the way they fix a broken wing. It may be the fever or the pain; anyway they’ll drink until they die. I kept this fellow dry until he healed.”

The splendid gamester stretched out his black head and hissed at me—something liquid and venomous in the sound—the long black beak as fine and polished as a case for a girl’s penknife. He was game to the core and wild as ever. . . . Jack hadn’t let him die—perhaps he felt out of the law because of that.

“I’ll go and do my chores,” Miner said. “You can stay and think it out.”

I knew from that that he understood the same big thing out of the past which the wild bird meant to me. He had the excellent delicacy which comes from experience to leave me there alone.

An hysterical gabble broke the contemplation. Waddling up from behind was a tame goose. The shocking thing was too fat and slow to keep itself clean—its head snubbed, its voice crazily pitched, its wings gone back to a rudiment, its huge food-apparatus sagging to the ground, straining to lay itself against the earth, like a billiard-ball in a stocking full of feathers.

And before me was that Magnificent, who had made his continental flights, fasting for them, as saints fast in aspiration—lean and long, powerful and fine in brain and beak and wing—an admirable adversary, an antagonist worthy of eagles, ready for death rather than for captivity. . . . All that Gibbon ever wrote stood between this game bird and its obscene relative dragging its liver about a barnyard—the rise and fall of the Roman, and every other human and natural empire—the rise by toil and penury and aspiration, and the fall to earth again in the mocking ruins of plenty. . . .

Good Jack Miner expressed the same, but in his own way, when he came back from the chores.