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It's over three years since we published Bill Brown's The Star Ducks (F&SF, Fall, 1950); but readers still refer to it affectionately as a perfect example of science fiction on a quiet, intimate, scale. Here is another Brown fantasy of humdrum, homey life — the story of a middle-aged couple, a pregnancy, a goose . . . and a lightning-blackened stump invested with strange powers.

Spunk Water

by BILL BROWN

MA CAME in the back door shuffling the mud off her outdoor shoes on an old gunny sack. She held the eggs in her apron close to her body. The screendoor was ajar and she pried it open with her elbow and shoved it wider with her shoulder and entered the kitchen. The wash boiler was on the stove making the atmosphere heavy and the windows fogged.

"Hubert," Ma said in a voice loud enough to be heard in the front room, "Hubert, old Gussy's done it again!"

Hubert took his feet down off the fender of the heating stove and he peered around into the kitchen.

"Solid or just the shell?"

Ma was putting the eggs gently into a crockery bowl on the kitchen table. The last egg was a large, yellow goose egg and Ma held it up to the window.

"Can't see through it. 'Tain't heavy enough to be pure gold, though."

Hubert put his feet back on the fender.

"If ole Gussy can make a shell outen gold, she orter be able to make a whole damn egg! Other geese have did it."

Ma sharpened her voice into a scold. "Pa! Ain't no call for you to swear around this house. If you can't use clean, decent language, you go out to the barn and swear." Ma polished the golden egg with a dishtowel. "Anyhow," she said, "maybe other geese have did it but Gussy's looking pretty peaked and I think the strain's too much for her."

"Posh," Hubert said. "That's a female goose's natural function and it don't put no strain on 'em at all."

"Well, Hubert Wilkens, somethin's bothering her. 'Tain't natural for a goose to sleep all day. Besides, she ain't teched her dinner."

Hubert pried himself out of his chair with his hands on the arms and nudged his rubbers from under the stove with his foot.

"You men jest never know what a woman has to endure," Ma said and there was the beginning of the old whine in her voice, the whine she developed four months ago when she discovered she was going to have a baby — another baby after her first children had grown up and gone away to have children of their own.

"You can say layin' eggs and havin' babies is a natural function but that's a woman's sacrifice," Ma said. "It's the Hand o' God on 'em. Bein' a man, you'll never know."

Hubert was slipping out of the room with his rubbers in his hand. Ma's voice was still whining on about the endurance of women when Hubert quietly closed the back door and slipped the rubbers on before he stepped out into the muddy back yard.

Hubert found Gussy asleep under a gooseberry bush, her head under her wing, issuing soft, restless sounds.

"Well, Gussy," Hubert said, "you must of really went on a bender to still be sleepin' it off."

Gussy's soft sounds stopped and she shivered a little.

"Here Gussy," he said, "here's a aspirin." He pulled the goose's head gently from under her wing and Gussy opened her eyes long enough to scoop up the white pill in his hand. Then her head went back under her wing as though pulled by a rubber band.

Hubert crouched down by Gussy and stroked her back. "Old girl, when you get a snifter of this new stuff like as not you'll lay eggs twenty-four carat and solid all through." He clicked his tongue in anticipation. "Got raisins in it this time, Gussy, and twice as powerful!"

Gussy moved a little but kept her head under her wing.

Hubert crossed the creek on three widely separated stones placed just far enough apart to be beyond Ma's stretch and he slopped up the trail to last summer's wood lot.

Behind a huckleberry bush was a black stump that had been blasted by lightning fire and burned into the shape of a monstrous leaning three-legged cauldron. It was burned out between the three twisted roots to make a cavern and the lightning fire had burned out the top to make a charred crater for spunk water alive with mosquito wigglers.

Hubert lifted away the slab of bark that concealed the cavern and inside was a small barrel and an ancient copper teakettle with two feet of coiled copper tubing soldered into the spout. There was a rusty camp stove and a broken crockery dish.

Hubert reached behind the barrel and drew out a stone jug. He sloshed it

around and found it was still almost half full. He lifted the jug and took a strong pull, shutting his eyes against the shock. He muttered "smoooooooooth" under his breath and shuddered.

Hubert put the jug back and he picked up the crockery dish. He scooped it up full of sour mash and lifted it to his nose and sniffed. The fumes almost choked him. He sniffed again, and then he carried the dish around to the upper side of the stump. He stirred the spunk water with his hand to make the wigglers go to the bottom and he sank the dish carefully until half a cup of water flowed in over the sides. He stirred the mash with a twig and poked at the bloated raisins that came to the top. Whether it was the liquor or the spunk water that did the trick, Hubert didn't know, but he had experimented with both and it was only in combination that it seemed to work. And Hubert was mighty careful not to get spunk water in his own jug because . . . well . . . no use taking chances.

Crossing the creek on the stones, Hubert held the dish at arm's length and before he offered it to Gussy, he gave a cautious glance toward the house.

"Here girl, here's a nip of the hair of the dog that bit you."

Gussy shivered a little and pulled her head from under her wing. Hubert took a little mash on his finger and held it up to Gussy's beak. She nibbled at it and swallowed. She blinked twice in a glassy-eyed way and plunged her beak into the dish, scooping up the bubbly mess, raisins and all. The mash was half gone before Gussy had to pause to hiccup.

The hiccup was followed by the soft sound of shoes mashing the wet earth. Hubert turned his head slowly until he could see the shoes, Ma's old black outdoor shoes, and the hem of the gray coat that came down almost to the shoes.

"Hubert!" Ma said, her voice rising on the last syllable.

Hubert tried to make his voice sound off-hand. "Jest givin' Gussy her dinner."

Ma bent over and snatched up the broken dish still half full of sour mash and raisins. She thrust her nose almost into the mash and drew a deep breath and reared back, coughing.

"Hubert! What's in this?"

Hubert rubbed the mud off one rubber against the other while the goose thrust her neck up towards the dish high over her head.

"Nothin' but chicken feed, Ma. And maybe a few mouldy raisins."

"Chicken feed! Pa, you been stealing my chicken feed again to make sour mash. And if that ain't bad enough, just lookit what you done to poor old Gussy!"

Gussy was up and walking in circles but her webbed feet were too big for each other. When one foot would step on the other, Gussy would pitch

over. She got up again and spread her wings for balance and promptly sat down backwards.

Hubert started to laugh but choked it off when he saw Ma's glare. Ma pitched the dish and the mash into the creek. "How could anybody — even a man — be so cruel to a poor dumb beast?" she demanded and marched off toward the house, her old coat flapping around her legs.

Gussy came back to Hubert and tried to climb into his lap but Hubert pushed her away. "Nope, Gussy, 'tain't no time to be affectionate. You and me is in trouble."

Hubert started for the house and stopped at the back door to wipe his feet on the gunny sack. He looked back to see Gussy waddling toward the old Plymouth Rock rooster, her neck stuck forward aggressively. The rooster took one look and started for the safety of the henhouse with a squawk. Hubert shook his head and went into the house.

Ma was standing by the sink staring stonily out the window. She had just seen the ungallant retreat of the rooster.

Hubert tried to put his arm around her but she shook him off.

"Take your drunken hands off me!"

"But I ain't drunk, Ma."

"You got the soul of a drunkard, you beast — you degrader of woman-kind!"

"Shucks, Ma, Gussy ain't exactly a woman."

"She is too a woman. Ain't a man alive that's got the faintest spark of respect for womankind. Takin' a poor innocent goose and makin' a drunkard out of her!" Ma stood stiff as an icicle and stared out of the window.

Hubert rubbed his stubbly chin and tried another approach.

"But it all happened as sort of an accident, Ma. I just had this little dab of sour mash, Ma. . . . It just sort of went sour when I wasn't lookin' and Gussy found it and ate it all up and a couple days later here you come in with a gold egg."

Ma turned on Hubert with her eyes blazing.

"Well, it wasn't no sour mash done it!"

"Yes 'twas. Cause ever since I been keepin' her on sour mash and she keeps layin' gold eggs."

"That's a man for you . . . sacrifice a goose's morals just for gold!"

"But Ma, it's you likes them gold eggs. Jamieson down to the store won't even give egg prices for 'em because he said they won't candle on account of the shell."

"Hubert! You didn't try to sell *my* gold eggs!"

"Well now, Ma, I figgered them eggs ought to be worth maybe a dollar, dollar and a half apiece and I thought maybe our fortune was made."

Ma turned back to stare out of the window. "Only thing I ever get around here that's pretty and you want to sell it. Only gold things I ever had in my life."

Pa got up and kicked off his rubbers and let them fall behind the kitchen stove.

"Well, they won't be no more gold eggs, so no use takin' on about it."

"There better not be," Ma said, "if it's that devil's brew that makes 'em."

On second thought, Pa picked up his rubbers and headed for the woodlot for another pull on the jug.

That night Ma ate her supper off the stove and let Hubert do the same. In the night Hubert woke up and saw Ma with a lamp on the book case arranging her four gold eggs in a little nest in front of the clock. In the morning Ma left hot oatmeal on the stove for Hubert and was out tending the chickens when Hubert got up.

Later, when she came in with her apron full of eggs, she picked out a gold one and held it up obviously for Hubert to see, pretending to look through it.

"Sour mash . . . humph!" she said.

"Sure sour mash," Hubert said. "That's from yesterday's mash. There won't be no more."

And there weren't any more. For two days Gussy moped around refusing the sweet mash Ma tried to feed her and she didn't lay at all. On the third day Ma found a white egg in the nest. She brought it in grim-faced and put it in the bowl with the other eggs without a word.

That night again Ma was up rearranging the five gold eggs on the dining table and the next day she punched holes in the shells and blew them so they wouldn't spoil. And every hour she would go out and look in the nest and pet Gussy but there were no more eggs, gold or white.

Gradually Gussy returned to the way of all normal geese. She ate a little of her feed and she explored under damp leaves with her bill for bugs and she paddled in the still parts of the creek. But she slept little in the daytime and although the old rooster would still run in terror when he saw her, she showed no more interest in him than she would in a block of stove wood. Hubert watched her and shook his head sadly.

Ma spent more time with her gold eggs, dusting them twice a day, arranging them first on top of the book shelf filled with chipped tea cups and petrified wood, and then on the table, and with the bowl of waxed fruit. One day when Hubert came in from the barn, Ma was painting six hen's eggs with gilt paint but when she was done she sighed with disappointment and put them all into a chocolate layer cake.

Another day when Hubert came in the kitchen from outside his nose

quivered a little like a rabbit's. He sniffed again and when he came closer to the kitchen stove the smell was stronger. Behind the stove was the old sauerkraut crock and Hubert bent over and lifted the lid. The crock was half full of bubbling mash.

Ma was leaning against the book case studying her gold eggs.

"Ma," Hubert said, "you got some chicken feed in here a-spoiling."

Ma came in and sniffed behind the stove. She opened her eyes wide with surprise. "Well, what do you know, it's sour as swill."

"Sure does smell powerful," Hubert said.

Ma wiped her hands on her apron. "Don't know how it ever happened to sour. I'll throw it out tomorrow."

"Be sure you don't throw it where Gussy'll get it or you'll have some more gold eggs."

"Pa, I know what you're a-thinking. I know you're a-thinking I made that just apurpose to feed Gussy!"

"You're all mixed up, Ma. Now what do you really want, a sober Gussy or more gold eggs?"

Ma suddenly turned to Hubert and put her apron over her face.

"Oh, I'm a wicked, sinful woman, Pa. I'm the evilest wickedest woman in the world!" She sobbed into her apron. Pa waited.

"I just love them gold eggs so much and I keep wishin' Gussy'd lay some more and then I let that mash get sour and I was just about to . . . to . . . contribute to the delinquency of a poor innocent goose.

"I just can't sleep at night thinking about those eggs," Ma wailed. "And then I think about poor drunk Gussy trippin' over her own feet . . . and I think about her chasing after that old rooster. And I know I'll go on thinkin' about them eggs and wantin' more so much I can't stand it."

"Now Ma," Hubert said. "You just stop that cryin'. Ain't no women folk in this family going to be all mixed up like that when they're in a family way!" Hubert took his hat off the peg by the door and slapped it on his head. "There's only one thing to do and I aim to do it!" He slammed the door behind him and stopped by the woodpile for the ax.

Hubert did a good job on Gussy out behind the henhouse. He stuffed all the feathers into an old feed bag so they wouldn't blow around and start Ma crying again every time she saw them. He dug a hole with the ax and buried Gussy's head and he took the insides up the creek and laid them on a rock so the coons would get them.

When Hubert brought the body in Ma cried a while and then she dried her eyes and singed Gussy over a burning newspaper on top of the stove. The smell of singed fowl went all through the house, making the death definite and final and then it wasn't so bad. Ma stuffed the goose with dry bread

dressing and tied her wings over her breast in a respectful way. She cried a little again when she filled the stove with dry oak for a hot fire.

Hubert was washed and shaved for dinner and he wore a clean blue shirt and his hair was combed. Gussy lay in the platter and Ma had taken the wire of an old Christmas wreath and she had woven it with flowers and put it around the platter. She'd picked the two calla lilies by the front steps and she lay the lilies beside the body.

When Hubert came in and saw the table he stood still for a minute.

"Well, Ma," he said after a while, "Gussy's finally taken her fit and respectful place in this family."

Ma adjusted one of the lilies a little and then she went into the living room and came back with the five gold eggshells and laid them carefully among the flowers on the wreath. She stood back admiringly.

"You know, Pa, I guess Gussy really did enjoy layin' those gold eggs. I think she was right proud of 'em."

"Sure, Ma, sure Gussy was proud of 'em. And she'd be proud if she could see her and the eggs now."

Ma wiped her cheek with her apron. "But it's going to take a lot of courage, Pa, to eat Gussy." She took a little handkerchief out of her apron pocket and blew her nose. "You don't suppose you got a little something — just a little something maybe to give me courage?"

Hubert reached for his hat on the peg. "Sure, Ma, I got something that'll give you real courage. Just a little nip for ole Gussy's sake." He reached a glass down from the cupboard and closed the door behind him. He went off toward the woodlot where the old stump had been blasted by lightning fire into the shape of a leaning three-legged cauldron and the top was burned out to make a crater for spunk water.

Hubert took a strong pull on the jug and he poured out two fingers in the glass for Ma. He held it up and looked at the yellow liquor. "Courage," he thought. "She's going to need a lot of courage," and he poured in another finger and he held up the glass again and watched the light filter through the liquor. "Women sure likes funny things when they's having babies. Like gold eggs." He stared at the liquor, fascinated. "Ma sure likes gold things."

Then, almost as though the light coming through the liquor had hypnotized him, Hubert walked around the stump to where he could lean over the top and see the spunk water. He reached in with his hand and stirred around and around until all the mosquito wigglers went to the bottom.

"Eggs and babies is just about the same thing," he thought. "Not much difference." He sank the glass slowly to the rim and watched a trickle of spunk water flow in.

"Ma sure would like a gold one," he said, just under his breath.