

A Poultry Thing

By Julian Scutts

A chicken's tale by Dr Gallicantu

SOME CHICKEN

'Hitler has said that he will wring Britain's neck like the neck of a chicken. Some neck! Some chicken!'

Sir Winston Churchill

I am presently engaged in scientific research at the Hahn Foundation. My field is high energy physics. I differ from my colleagues in one important respect.

I am a chicken.

That is: I look like a chicken. I have the external attributes of a chicken - beak, feathers, wings and so on.

Being male, I sport a handsome comb. I eat chicken-feed.

The statement 'I am a chicken', does not convey the full truth, however. I don't think like a chicken. I don't mix with other chickens socially. I know of no other chicken doing research work into sub-atomic particles. I know of no other chicken capable of expressing itself in English. By the way, I can't really speak English, but I can understand it and, as you may have gathered, I can write it. In fact I am now using a special purpose-built typewriter. My speed isn't very good yet. That probably accounts for my style, my short, pithy sentences.

At one time I wasn't a chicken. How come I'm a chicken? Your query, my problem.

I've got a lot of explaining to do.

I was born in England. I had an unexceptional middle class background. In the Sixth Form I always came top in Physics. I read Physics and mathematics at Cambridge. I was awarded a Double First. I became a Ph.D., often contributed articles and learned papers and held lectures at international conferences. I became very well known in my field.

One day I received an invitation to visit the Weizman Institute in Israel. I accepted. All expenses were paid. I booked a flight and within a month I was in the MiddleEast.

I had just given my first series of lectures and had time on my hands. I was not a chicken then. I decided to do some touring and see something of the country. I was particularly intrigued by old Jerusalem. The Armenian quarter is full of jewellery and antique shops. I was looking for a present

for my mother. My eye was attracted by an antique oriental lamp. It was like something out of A Thousand and One Nights. Yes, that was it, it was just like Aladdin's lamp.

Having bought it, I congratulated myself on the find. Jerusalem impressed me deeply. All that history.

I saw the Wailing Wall, the Dome of the Rock and the Holy Sepulchre.

Outside the city wall I found a church that commemorated Peter and the cock that crew three times. The priest was kind enough to show me some excavations around the foundations of the church. Apparently, they used to store corn in cavities hewn from the rock. It was so interesting.

Next day I went to a market town near Jerusalem. Roaming its streets, I came across the old market area or Suq. The shops were all open, that is windowless (like some fishmongers' I know). Booths and stalls lined the streets. Nearly all the vendors were in the food line vegetables, fruit, meat (I'll come on to that shortly) and spices.

And chickens!

I'd never seen so many - dead or alive. First, I only saw dead ones. They were either piled up on boards or stone slabs, or hung from beams and rails. Their slit throats afforded no pretty sight, I can assure you. Having turned into a narrow arcade, I could hear heart-rending clucking noises. Once round the corner, I found myself in a street chock-full of crates containing chickens.

One after the other the crates were being winched up to overhead abattoirs. Once a crateful had been done, a plastic crate was dumped into the street for re-use. Not being a vegetarian, I felt no inclination to dwell on the way the chickens met their end and allow myself to get maudlin, at first, that is. After a few minutes, if the thought of the collective fate of the chickens may not have caused me undue concern, I was at least able to feel pity for any individual chicken that happened to attract my notice from the great mass.

Whenever a little nervous or worried, I always used to rub any object that I may have been holding. As it happened, I was holding that Aladdin's lamp at the time.

I cast my eyes downwards, and what should I see on the ground but a cockroach running along. A rivulet of blood lay in its path. This the cockroach forded without a moment's hesitation.

Strange world, I thought. What has that cockroach got to do with a Beethoven symphony, yet both could impinge on my consciousness at the same moment. All things co-exist in the same spatial-temporal continuum, funny...?

Just then I noticed this chicken looking up at me. It seemed to be pleading with me. It was almost as if it knew what fate had in store for it. I felt sorry for that chicken like I had never felt sorry for a chicken.

Now it was fixing me with its sad, sad eyes. Next moment I was on the borderline

between very nervous and extremely nervous. Not another guilt complex! My resistance was cracking. 'If only there was something I could do about all this,' I thought.

The chicken cocked its head as though to suggest we swapped places. My degree of nervousness was now at the other end of the 'extremely nervous' band, touching on panic. I was shaking all over.

'I wish I really knew what it was like to be in that chicken's position,' I thought, mouthing the words audibly.

My wish was granted. I had only myself to blame.

I had become a chicken, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Some kind of transfer must have taken place. I saw the body of my earlier self wobble and cluck down the street - like a frightened chicken. The lamp had fallen into the gutter. An old man picked up my last hope and vanished behind a bale of straw.

Thus it was I came to know what it was like being a chicken cooped up in a crate in death row. No fun. My first thought was: 'How did I get into this fix?' My second was: 'How do I get out of it?'

And my third? Just panic.

As though all this wasn't enough, I felt extremely uncomfortable. There were other chickens in the crate, too many. I felt like having a cup of coffee and a piece of cake. The prospect of getting them was bleak.

The prospect of having my throat slit was far from remote.

More panic.

I gave myself a peck. It's just a nightmare, I thought. Roger Hercules, snap out of it! I just had to wake up, and everything would be fine, just fine. People don't turn into chickens in real life. How did I get those feathers then?

This was no time for philosophising. In such a situation the mind is wonderfully concentrated. Nothing is taken for granted. You think fast and extremely lucidly.

We were up. I edged over to the end farthest from the enemy. My chances of survival would increase, the more time I had to make observations. Then the enemy seized one of the chickens, simultaneously grabbing its neck with one hand and its feet the other.

He held the chicken upside down, then cut its throat. As slaughtering methods go, this one is doubtless quite humane.

But at that point in time, I was in no position to adopt such a sanguine, academic approach.

After observing the process a few times, I worked out a survival strategy.

Clearly, I would have to use my beak. I had to incapacitate the enemy long enough for me to effect my escape. I remembered there was a pile of sacks on the ground which, provided that I fell from the left hand of the stage, would enable me to make a soft landing.

Precisely when should I strike? When the enemy first put his hand in the crate? No, for then he would trap me there, and I wouldn't have a dog's chance. I would have to let him grab me by the legs and neck. If I appeared passive and apathetic, I might be able to catch him off his guard.

I had noticed that a period of two to three seconds elapsed while the chicken was held dangling neck downwards while the enemy grabbed his knife. I could just possibly strike then, but the timing would have to be dead right. A second too soon or too late, and curtains.

I did get the timing right, I had to. I slashed his wrist. When he let me go, I darted for the left side of the stage. I missed the sacks but landed on some empty crates.

Recovering from my fall I ran between people's legs, under stalls and skirted walls until I found relative security in a pile of refuse in an open space at the edge of the market. At last I could have a breather. Under the circumstances I was prepared to share my new habitat with lice, mice and cockroaches without demur.

By this time I was feeling distinctly peckish. After nightfall I would embark on a scavenging expedition.

Now having survived the first physical crisis, I became painfully aware that I faced a psychological dilemma which would prove no less daunting in its own way.

The problem involved the question of deciding who or what I now was : A man? A chicken? Something in between?

First, arguments in favour of the proposition that I, all outward signs notwithstanding, was a man:

I experienced the thoughts and feelings of a man. My memories were those of a human being.

Arguments against: I evinced all the external attributes of a chicken. Was I then some kind of hybrid like a minotaur or a mermaid? This was an agonizing thought. I wanted to know which side of the borderline I was. I couldn't stand the idea of being in a limbo. Therefore I purposed to think of myself only as a human being. Human beings do not - repeat do not turn

into chickens.

Hey man, how come them feathers? What makes you so damn sure?

Retort: This absurd conjecture runs counter to the total sum of all human experience. It has never happened before. "There can always be a first time," an insuppressible voice gave answer. Thus continued the interior dialogue:

The physical laws of the universe rule out the possibility of this supposed metamorphosis.

A freak reallocation of subatomic particles, the essential nature of which still remains a mystery to modern science, might give rise to such a phenomenon. The science of Paraphysics is very young.

But the chances of such a change coming about are infinitesimal, totally negligible in fact.

Same old question: How come you're a chicken?

Obviously I had to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that I wasn't a chicken despite the apparent evidence of my sensory perceptions, which seemed to suggest that the possibility of my being a chicken could not ruled out categorically.

So let's get thinking on this one:

So sensory evidence points to the existence of a putative chicken. But we receive sense impressions of a kind when we dream. In dreams the visual and auditory impressions we receive do not correspond to events in real life. How do we know? Hmm. The dreamer is not aware that he is dreaming during the dream itself. He or she only recognizes a dream for what it is after the cessation of the dream - on the point of waking. Until that point his or her critical faculties are in abeyance.

The sense impressions we receive during our waking hours, however, convey a coherent and rationally verifiable whole. In dreams elements based on memories of the real world, interact in a way which proves incompatible with our experience of reality.

If we wish to decipher the true significance of a dream, we must consider the symbolic meaning it expresses, the synthesizing operations of the subconscious, and so on.

Yet my dream seemed to be inextricably involved in my day-time experience of the real world.

Had I been dreaming when I bought the lamp in Jerusalem? Had I been dreaming when I walked through the suq? Had I been dreaming when I felt pity for that chicken just before my apparent metamorphosis? Perhaps my memories of everything to that point had been real. But why should the change-over occur just at that point? Might I have fallen asleep on my feet? But then, human beings don't do that kind of thing, even if chickens do.

Perhaps I had walked on, spent the rest of the day doing something other and finally gone to sleep in the usual way. My subconscious had simply suppressed all memory of events after my meeting with the chicken . So all I had to do was wait until I woke up. I waited and waited but I remained a chicken.

Besides, I was conscious of being in full possession of my day-time critical faculties. When we wake up these return to us; only then are we able to recognize that we have been dreaming, as we can remember having woken from them.

Perhaps I had gone mad. Here the objections to the dream hypothesis would also apply. Hallucinatory states are attended by a loss of one's rational faculties. Hallucinations can hardly continue for hours on end without the loss of their quasi-logical coherence.

Finally, I sent up a prayer in the hope of striking a bargain with my Creator. Would God change me back into human form, if I tithed my income for charitable purposes and devoted the rest of my life to the quest for religious truth?

No deal. I remained a chicken.

In the given situation I had to devise some kind of strategy. I deliberated that three approaches lay open to me.

A. Try to re-establish contact with the human world.

B. Go chicken.

C. Remain in splendid isolation.

Approach A would involve considerable physical risk. Would I have time to convince the first human with whom I made contact that I wasn't a chicken?

Experimentation with my vocal chords had established that I was unable to produce a sound much different from that made by any other chicken. Given the tools, I would be able to write but would I be given enough time to prove my skill? The B option was even more problematical. Would other chickens accept me on equal terms? What common language would we share? What intellectual stimulation was there to expect? Even then, the danger of having my throat slit remained. No one feeds chickens out of the goodness of his heart. Might I not be able to start some kind of chicken's lib movement? Little reflection was necessary to reveal the futility of that ambition.

Willy-nilly, I would have to adopt course C, for the time being at least. I would survive somehow hoping that something would turn up. I might be able to get out of this mess the same way I got into it. If only I could lay my claws, talons, whatever, on that lamp!

I would lie low during the day, forage and explore during the night. It was now dark, and I was ready for my first meal. I waited until the sound of footsteps died down. The moon was shining when I

eventually came out. I pecked at anything that might prove edible for a chicken. Sometimes I made a lucky strike, but more often than not all I found was grit. The night was saved when I found a bag of chicken feed.

Having taken my fill, I returned to the refuse pile and lay low for the day.

Next night I went foraging again. This routine continued a few days longer. I couldn't imagine myself going on like this for ever. It was intellectual suicide.

The day arrived when they came to collect the refuse. I was sleeping at the time. Despite the rude awakening I kept my cool. Slowly and deliberately I strutted into the open. When one of the refuse collectors pointed at me, I did a sort of Charlie Chaplin walking act. This had the desired effect of freezing the dustmen (garbage collectors for my American readers) in their tracks.

Once I was off-side, I vamoosed from the scene and didn't stop running till I found the welcome protection of a thick bush. After nightfall I reconnoitred the area. I came across a large chicken farm just off the road connecting two urban areas...I squeezed my way through an opening in the wire fence. The chickens there were still asleep.

There was fresh water and chicken-feed galore to be had. After a good meal I decided it was time to go. It was obvious that the chickens were being reared to supply the market with eggs and meat. I got out the way I had come in.

My nocturnal visits to the chicken farm turned into something of a routine. Then the inevitable happened. The farmer must have suspected that something strange was up. It may have been my claw prints that gave the game away.

One night I got into the run, as usual, ate my fill, and it was time for me to leave. You can imagine my consternation on finding that the opening in the fence had been wired up. Thus I was trapped.

My only hope lay in remaining as inconspicuous as possible for as long as possible. Perhaps I would be able to construct a secret tunnel.

The trouble was I was in a hen run. I didn't particularly mind the hens amorously brushing up against me; I felt threatened, though, by the presence of the other cockerel (rooster) in the run. Apparently, his role in the set-up was to sire chicks. He didn't want any potential rival to challenge

his monopoly of ruling the roost. One day he strutted up to me, and it was obvious he was going to pick a fight. He lunged his beak at me, made threatening gestures with his talons, flapped his wings irately and crew for all he was worth. The shindy attracted the farmer's attention. The game was up. There was nothing for it but to do my Charlie Chaplin act.

The farmer scratched his head and called his wife. I then adopted more operatic pose, holding one wing over my chest and slowly raising the other in time with the crescendo of an aria.

They took me indoors and-made phone calls. Soon a number of gentlemen arrived.

I did repeat performances. Then a van arrived. They put me in a box and left for an unknown destination.

I was able to look out of a ventilation hole. All I could ascertain was that we were heading south. After a forty minutes' drive the van stopped. When I looked out, the scene was strangely familiar.

Then it came to me. I was back at the Weizman Institute.

What fate now awaited me? Dissection? Vivisection? Were they just going to observe me for the benefit of animal behaviour research?

First they gave me liberal helpings of chicken-feed. Can't be bad, I thought. I was then replaced in my box and carried down a long corridor. I'd never seen so many caged mice in all my life. There were literally thousands of them.

I was taken into a large laboratory and placed in a pen at the front end. A number of observers were present.

They scrutinized my appearance, movements and behaviour. They expected a performance. I gave them everything I had to give in my repertoire.

They took down notes assiduously. One of them smiled slightly when I did the Charlie Chaplin jig. Some of the observers spoke to each other in English. I'd heard that American accent before. Yes, it was one of Professor Kaufman's colleagues. I had even had a drink with him.

Kaufman was a Boston physicist with whom I had exchanged notes and findings. That gave me an idea.

When they left I found that I could scratch marks in the board of the floor of my pen. What should I write though. It couldn't be anything too long. Then had a brainwave: 'KAUFMAN' - followed by a formula familiar to anyone engaged in atomic research. When they came back, I pointed at the marks I'd made in the boarding.

Only one man seemed to take note of them. The others were more interested in my dancing talents. When the session was over, I gave the American a knowing look.

He stayed behind afterwards.

I pointed at the barely legible writing again. He nodded and left. Half an hour later both he and Kaufman entered the room. I pointed at the formula. Kaufman's face lit up. In the meantime I had added two new words: 'PEN, INK'.

They left.

Next day they took me out of the pen. I soon found myself in a small laboratory which

had been placed at Kaufman's disposal during his stay at the Institute. Pen and ink were waiting on the table. The rest was plain sailing.

I wrote: ' "YOU ASK, I WRITE, O.K?"'

During the ensuing question and answer session, Kaufman soon came to realize that I had an immense grasp of the subject. He seemed particularly intrigued by my knowledge of subatomic particles.

He cottoned on. I could prove useful. I had read some of his papers. He was good, but not that good. Being very ambitious, he needed all the help he could get. He made a proposal, and I was in no position to turn it down.

Yes, we were going to collaborate.

I am presently his unofficial research assistant in the States. That is where you come in. Just recently he has published a series of very interesting research papers which have bowled over the scientific world.

What do I get out of it? As Kaufman once darkly intimated, Christmas time was just around the corner. I would be game for anyone in the butchery line if ever I should leave the security of his laboratory.

Reports of a wonder chicken that had leaked into press reports were subsequently denied as a hoax. If anyone finds anything answering to the description of an Aladdin's lamp, will they please contact : Dr Gallicantu, P.O GAL 740, Boston, Mass. Son I'm getting an e-mail address.

That's my cover name. Kaufman's secretary had to be let in on the secret. She thinks I'm cute, and arranged for the P.O. box.

Bipeds of the World unite!

Thanks. I would do the same for you. A chicken's life is a poultry thing.