

Versions of the following tale have been found by folk tale collectors across the world. Though it was never included in the definitive Aarne-Thompson folk tale index, Herbert Halpert and Gerald Thomas located forty different versions and found that the story dates back to at least 1566 in France. Within the UK variants of the story have been collected in England, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man as well as in Ireland.

The tale I include here is based on a combination of the story recalled by Jack Barrett as being popular in the pubs around Brandon Creek, and a version told by a retired Great Eastern Railway Guard whose boyhood had been spent in Cambridgeshire, to Mr E W Paddick of Hoddesdon who relocated it within Hertfordshire. I have also included a rhyme in the letter, which was found in many versions of the tale.

3.2 TWO FAT GEESE

There lived once, not far from Ely, two old farmers, who farmed next to each other, got married at the same time and had sons of the same age. Being good chapel going men they named their sons Alpha and Omega but over time the boys acquired the nicknames Start and Finish.

So it was that the years passed and the boys became men, and the parents died and the sons farmed the land themselves. Well, the two men used to chat to each other over the fence that divided their land, and often used to call round to see each other for a cup of tea.

One day Finish was outside his back door looking at the large tub in which he collected the swill for feeding the pigs, thinking that he ought to get round to emptying it. As he bent over, one of his goats, a large billy, was watching from a distance, decided to charge across the yard and deal his owner a blow such that he fell head first into the stinking swill tub.

Having done the deed, the billy goat glanced at his master briefly, lifted up his head calmly, and then walked off into the spinney to the rear of the house.

As Finish lifted his head out of the tub, Start just happened to arrive near the back door carrying under his arm a long piece of wood. He saw Finish, pulling pieces of cabbage leaves and potato peel out of his hair and could not stop himself from laughing.

Finish, not realising that it was the goat that caused his predicament, blamed his friend and despite Start trying to explain, in amongst laughing, he refused to believe him and walked indoors swearing revenge.

The next day happened to be market day in Ely and Finish took the opportunity to go to visit his lawyer. He explained to the lawyer that he wanted to get compensation from his neighbour for assault and battery. The lawyer agreed to take on the case, assuring Finish that he would win.

Later that day, on hearing that Finish was telling everyone about the assault, Start went to see the same lawyer to bring a case of defamation of character. The lawyer explained that he had agreed to represent Finish and he could not work for both of them. He said that he had a friend who was also a good lawyer who may be happy to represent him and that he would give him a letter by way of introduction.

The lawyer then scribbled a few lines on a piece of paper, folded it and carefully added his seal. Then he handed the letter to Start, who went off to visit the other lawyer. However, by this time Start was feeling quite thirsty and so decided to go for a drink first.

Calling in at The Lamb, Start sat down in his usual seat by the fire and drank a pint of beer, followed by another and yet another. After a while he noticed that the seal on the flap of the envelope was coming loose in the heat and he decided to have a peek inside.

He was astonished to read the following rhyme:

" Here are two fat geese fallen out together,
If you'll pluck one, I'll pluck the other,
And make 'em agree like brother and brother."

Finish immediately saw what the lawyers were intending to do and so he went to see Start, who was having his customary end of market day drink at The Sun and showed him the letter.

The two immediately shook hands and over another pint, or two, agreed to get revenge on the lawyers for trying to make fools of them.

It just so happened that it was Michaelmas time and there were many geese for sale and Finish brought two fat geese, one of which he gave to his friend, saying "You pluck this and save all the feathers."

Start did this and the following week both men carried two sacks full of feathers to Ely Market. They went to the lawyers office and as they climbed the stairs they spilt the feathers as they went. They reached the landing still doing the same then went back down the stairs and returned to The Lamb for dinner and a drink.

When the lawyer returned from his dinner he saw the feathers all over the stairs and the landing and was furious. When he opened his office door the draught from the windows caught the feathers and blew them this way and that, including out of the window and down onto a fishmonger's stall in the market.

The fishmonger was not best pleased to find his fish covered in feathers rather than scales and he called for the constable.

In time the constable called on the two farmers, who were by this time good friends again, and gave them each the summons to appear before the magistrates on charges of causing a breach of the peace.

The two men arrived in court on the appointed day to find that one of the lawyers in the court was the man to whom the letter had been addressed. In their defence Start and Finish said that they had heard that the lawyer had a part-time job plucking geese.

When the magistrate asked what they meant by saying that, Finish produced the letter which was read before the court

" Here are two fat geese fallen out together,
If you'll pluck one, I'll pluck the other,
And make 'em agree like brother and brother."

After much laughter, the case was dismissed and Start and Finish left the court to go and have a few celebratory drinks!

THE M I N G H I S T O R Y

In the Fenland town of March, there seems to have been a factual incident, within living memory, that resembles the tale.

Apparently a couple of wealthy farmers from the Manea area had a dispute over the drainage ditch that provided the boundary between their land. It was customary in the area for each landowner to maintain their own side of the ditch, but these two had never done this, instead they kept both sides clear for a distance each.

Both farmers went to see their usual solicitor in the town, only to be told by the managing clerk that the solicitor could not act for both parties. However the clerk offered a letter of introduction, to a solicitor in Peterborough, who could represent the other party..

So one of the farmers took the letter and set off, with his wife, to drive to Peterborough, a distance of about 20 miles.

His wife sat in the passenger seat, and in her nervousness, she kept turning over the sealed letter in her hand. By the time the couple had reached Thorney, the envelope had come unsealed and out of curiosity she opened it.

Inside was a brief note, saying “I have two fat chickens to pluck, one for you and one for me!”

Reading the note enabled the farmer to see that the only people who would benefit from the dispute were the solicitors. He turned his car round, returned home and reached an amicable settlement with his neighbour.