

## God's Fishing-Line

When, after a day spent contemplating it from his kitchen window, the old man decided to inspect it close up, he discovered that it was not a trapped children's kite at all. It was the float at the end of a fishing-line which stretched up into the evening sky and far out into the ether. It was, in short, by its very length, the business-end of God's fishing line.

It should be pointed out that, since the old man was neither highly religious nor immediately impressionable, he took his own observation with a pinch of salt. "God's fishing-line? What kind of nonsense is that!" he said to himself, shook his head, and finished his lonely walk in the cold air of the evening in the park. He retired to a night in front of the television, and then wrapped himself in bed-socks, faded track-suit and dressing-gown to retire to a bed grown cold over the years in a bedroom grown colder still. "I've never fished in my life – what would I know about it?!"

The next morning he met Mr Finnie, his elderly next door neighbour. "I see that kite's still down there," observed Mr Finnie. "You would have thought it might have blown away in the night." The old man, whom we shall call Mr McDace if only to avoid any confusion amongst the ageing population of this parable, nodded distractedly.

Widow Magill three doors down was sad about the kite. "Most likely some wean has lost it and is crying her eyes out," she lamented. "Perhaps the Corporation can rescue it? They've got ladders and that for the street-lights." Mr McDace shook his head. "But you used to work for the Corporation, Mr McDace? Could you no telephone them and get them to come out?" Mr McDace doubted it, raised his hat to Mrs Magill, and continued on his way to the newsagents at the corner.

No more was said of the kite to Mr McDace by anyone that day. In the evening, when the traffic on the main road had to a degree subsided, Mr McDace went back down to the park and approached the tree over which the fishing-line now bobbed, almost motionless in the air, but moving up and down distinctly, as if floating on a calm stream. For safety, because he was prone to falling over these days, he leaned back against the trunk of the neighbouring beech tree and looked up. There it hung, quite clearly not a kite, quite distinctly a float at the end of the dark filament which went straight up into the sky, higher and higher still until Mr McDace's eyes began to water, and then it abruptly switched out into the evening sky, at the height of many dozen feet. Mr McDace could not see at what point the line disappeared: sometimes it was just there; but when he looked closer to the ground, it had already vanished and merged with the darkening sky.

The hook must be caught in the branches of that tree, he said to himself, even though he could see nothing between the float and the top of the tree. "Now, if I was thirty years younger," he said to himself, "I would climb that tree and have a look, maybe unhook the barb." But even as he said it, he knew he was fooling himself: sixty years younger, maybe, and at that age he would not have been looking studiously upwards. It was time to go home – the cold earth was making his feet numb. "Do you call it a barb? Or just a hook?"

On the third day, the red and yellow and fluttering object still hung almost motionless over the park, still caught in the twigs and branches. Mr Finnie was out at his front path again, talking to Mrs Magill. "A good morning to you, Mr McDace," he called, "I understand from Mrs Magill that you've called the Council men in. No sign of them yet, I see?"

Mr McDace muttered something in embarrassed reply, having quite forgotten about Mrs Magill's ludicrous suggestions. He hurried past them and made for the park. A few mothers with small children were walking about, accompanied by dogs. Mr McDace walked slowly towards the clump of trees, anxious not to attract any attention. The float bobbed about thirty feet off the ground. In the morning sunlight, Mr McDace could clearly see the line which rose up into the sky. He wondered how the aircraft which passed overhead avoided collision with the line, with great loss of life. Perhaps he

should alert the Authorities. “No,” he decided aloud, “I don’t know what Authorities to alert. Anyway, they wouldn’t listen to me.”

Now he noticed also that the line continued below the float at an obtuse angle to entangle itself in the tree. “That’s where the hook is,” he thought to himself. “Best leave it alone. Maybe the Council will come and remove it.” He stood immediately under the tree, leaning against the trunk with both hands to support himself, and peered upwards. He felt dizzy long before he could make out anything other than a lacy net of black twigs and branches against the leaves, and had to sit down on a bench before he could get home. Young women with babies smiled at him as they passed, reminding him of far happier days; but the children looked at him quite doubtfully and averted their eyes when he waved his fingers at them.

In the evening, he heard some boys down in the park. Feeling displaced, he walked down. There were five boys playing football; the single set of goal-posts was formed by two of the trees over which the float snapped and danced. Mr McDace wandered into the shade of the trees. The football came crashing through the low-hanging branches and rolled to a halt at his feet. If he had been forty years younger, he might have been tempted to pick it up and kick it back to the boys. Or he’d be better to throw it back: he had never kicked a football in anger even forty, sixty years ago. He could hear the boys shouting “Come on, mister, give us our ball back!”, but could not think how to do it with any dignity. In the end, one of the boys came running among the trees, grabbed the ball and belted it out to his friends.

Perhaps he could ask one of the boys to climb the tree and release the hook. He found it odd that none of them had even bothered about it.

When the boys threw themselves down on the grass for a break, he went over to them. “Do you boys see that kite that’s stuck up there?” he asked. The boys looked at him, looked into the sky where he pointed, then at each other. They muttered, laughed, jeered, as boys do. “You seeing things, mister? You a nutter?” asked one of them. “There’s no kite! Stupid old git!” And they went back to their game, dodging, dribbling, kicking around him as he stood in the middle of their playing-field.

Dusk came up on him gradually, leaving him solitary near the trees over which the coloured float rustled and jiggled in the increasing wind. The branches of the trees whispered hugely. The float danced ever more wildly as the wind grew in strength. All light faded from the sky and Mr McDace stood on his cold patch of ground, listening, occasionally raising his eyes to watch the red and yellow object above him.

In a particularly strong gust of wind, there was a sharp crack and the sound of a branch splintering. Mr McDace had just enough time to look up and see that the float was now moving away freely, before a large hook grabbed his raincoat under the collar; he was lifted up, high above the trees, high above the park and the town, over the hills surrounding the town into a vast, vast dark place where the clouds spread out underneath were lit from above by the moon, and the wind chilled him.

God’s line was reeled in and reeled in. The float was fixed at about twenty feet above Mr McDace’s head, as he shot ever upwards. The Earth was now invisible below him. All that was real was the huge leering mass of the moon and the billions of stars in the sky. Mr McDace’s rise and rise continued for hour upon hour, and he grew ever colder. Just when he thought that he was dead for sure, the upwards motion abruptly halted. He heard a reedy voice; he imagined Stan Laurel: “Mary, Mother of God, but would ye look at that – that’s only a tiddler! Jesus! just throw it back, won’t you!”. Something fiddled at the collar of his coat and then he was floating free of the hook, down and down, back through the night, back under the moon, down through the clouds until he landed, to his great surprise and disappointment, in the park. The impact, while not great, bowled him over.

After a few moments, he picked himself up, he assured himself that the float had gone and he went home, considerably cheered to think that that Mrs Magill would not be pestering him to phone the Corporation.

