

THE SPIRIT OF SERPENTINE (Episode 4)

Once upon a time a small group of flightless birds, mostly Ratites, sought refuge from predators in the low scrub of the Serpentine Valley. In order to regain the dignity of flight, lost by their ancestors, these birds build and restore wonderful flying machines. The joy of flying is not limited to the freedom of the sky, but lingers on, after dark, in the nests where story telling often challenges credibility.

The Serpentine River, which flows from the Darling Scarp to the Indian Ocean, drains the flatlands between the Mundijong Clays from the East and the Coastal Limestone to the West. The soil in this low lying area, sometimes known as the Drift Sand Belt, is almost devoid of organic matter. It is a barren sequence of sand, silt and shale. Waterlogged in winter and parched in summer, this valley has failed any farming attempt including the rearing of flightless birds and viniculture. The latter had a brief period of success before conceding to the richer soils of the Margaret River and the Swan Valley. This fleeting encounter between Ratites and wine however, has had a lingering effect. Cheese, wine and aeroplanes on the grass at Serpentine is the ultimate experience of a late summer afternoon when the sun casts long shadows and a steady breeze from the West softens all landings.

Many birds wish to secure a nesting place at Serpentine Air Field which has been transformed into a wondrous park by the hard work of a few dedicated Ratites. All attempts to formalize tenure in perpetuity have failed. The magic of the Park offers security only to True Ratites. It is no wonder that many birds aspire to such distinction which is not the result of parentage. Most flightless birds are uncertain not only of their paternal, but also their maternal lineage because of the unusual incubation method¹. A True Ratite is difficult to define, but is immediately recognized by others. It is an honour bestowed by the magic of the Park for deeds such as: assiduousness to its beauty, constructions of innovative machines, restorations of ancient flying apparatus and courage to test unproven contraptions. How can the sceptics, who do not believe in the magic of the Park, explain why Darwin Rhea's flying machine is faster than all other comparable contraptions? The Park can also humble the arrogant and admonish the mischievous. This is the likely reason why wind gusts whenever a stool pigeon flies.

It is part of the natural selection of species which promotes Ratites above others. They are what they are because of what they do. In so doing, the deserving Ratites become True Ratites thus reinforcing their dominance. This episode is the story of a Cassowary's tortuous efforts to become a True Ratite. His success is an inspiration to many. Some do it by hard work, others by chicanery, but the Cassowaries do it with style. Wine, cheese and aeroplanes is how this Cassowary attained the status of True Ratite.

The following are fictional characters. Any resemblance to reality is purely unintentional and totally coincidental.

¹ The male is polygamous and incubates eggs some of which may have been inseminated by others.

THE SERPENTINE FLOCK

The Episode of Wine not Alcohol

Cassowary is a large Australian flightless bird capable of high speed when frightened. It can also display great courage. Its inner toes bear long, straight, knife-like nails, which are deadly weapons of defense. Our Cassowary at Serpentine was an easy going, friendly, relaxed Ratite. Some birds misunderstood this pleasant nature as a sign of weakness.

Why the Penguin became antagonistic is uncertain. Some speculate, that it was alcohol, others suspect rejection by the council. Whatever the case he perceived the Cassowary as a soft target and accused him of non Ratite behaviour. Instead of lashing out, our Cassowary took it on the chin. In time he was proven correct. His diligent approach to enhance the beauty of the Park proved a great success. That act alone had probably elevated him to the status of True Ratite, but other deeds established his position indisputably. In true Cassowary style he did it, not only by hard labour, but with flair and imagination.

At least once before he had attempted to build a flying machine. The daunting task of years of hard work did not appeal to him. He had heard however, of a magic place, in a distant land. There, in a blink of an eye, he could build with plastic and elastic rubber bands a wonderful flying craft. Assisted by his personal cultural attaché he left the Serpentine Valley in search of this magic. He found in a far away continent where its great rivers flood the valleys with rich black soil. There our Cassowary and his consort discovered the culture of cheese, wine and aeroplanes. When he questioned why flying was allowed after drinking alcohol he was corrected: "L'alcool, c'est du whiskey, du cognac et du gin, le vin, ce n'est pas de l'alcool."²

The beauty of the land, the taste of food and the effects of wine were the magic potion which shrunk time into a blink of an eye. So it was that his wonderful flying machine was soon ready for assembly. As summer gave way to autumn, the warmth of the Southern skies stimulated the Cassowary's migrating instinct. He did not wait to assemble the flying machine in a far away land, but chose to return to the Serpentine Valley.

This was not a straight forward matter. The master builder was greedy. He wanted more before releasing the machine. "Trust me. You return to your home land and I will arrange for transport. I will let you know the cost." Fortunately he was not dealing with an ostrich. Our Cassowary showed courage and flair. With a stolen vehicle, under the cover of darkness, the flying machine was taken across the mountains to a port ready for shipment. By the time the Master Builder and the gendarmes were informed, the evidence had vanished. So it was that the Serpentine Flock of Flightless birds welcomed once again the prodigal Cassowary and his flying machine.

It was during one of the many story telling sessions that the infamous collision between two flightless birds occurred at Serpentine. In his nest, late in the

² Alcohol is whiskey, brandy and gin. Wine is not alcohol.

evening our Cassowary was recounting his adventures. The rowdy laughter suggested an atmosphere mellowed by wine and cheese. When it was realized that one bird had not joined the festivities the Cassowary volunteered to fetch him. At the same time the missing bird had decided to cycle toward the sound of laughter.

It was a dark still night. The faint star light outlined the taxiways which directed the staggering birds into a head on collision. Catapulted through the air, one bird imagined that he had struck an enormous kangaroo and passed out upon hitting the ground. The other, immobilized by the pain, thought that he had collided with a bird who had done a runner. "Help, help" he screamed at the top of his voice. When the other bird regained consciousness he sought help from the drunken flock who refused to take him seriously. Gradually a gaggle gathered around the wounded bird.



Eventually the secretary bird³ took charge and delivered the injured animal to hospital. To ensure prompt attention he announced that two pilots had collided at an airfield. This led the doctor to ask the patient if he had consumed alcohol. "Pas de l'alcool, seulement du vin"⁴ he replied. No wonder the hospital quickly dismissed the patient and its entourage before the police became involved.



It took a further two days and more X-rays to identify the injuries as two broken ribs and a partially collapsed lung. The other bird boasted of not going to hospital, but to a restaurant to drown the pain with wine. It is said that six weeks later the Cassowary had fully recovered and the other bird, probably an ostrich, was still lame. Perhaps he was a duck.

In spite of the injuries, the assembly of the flying machine continued unabated. The test flight however, had to wait until the Cassowary was able to exhale his lungs sufficiently to squeeze into the cockpit. In spite of the low power and the pilot's corpulence, the speed of his craft defies aerodynamic laws. Generally the copilot is the petit cultural attaché who made much of this adventure possible. It is also said that this machine flew with both of the birds who had collided on the ground. Their combined weight extended substantially the maximum takeoff and C of G limits of the craft. Perhaps this is further proof of the magic of the Park.

Now Cassowary and machine fly freely to entertain the Serpentine crowd. It is a sight to behold. Immediately after sunset when the twinkling runway lights make a few more circuits possible. Other Ratites gather on the grass and toast with "vin, fromage et pain" the origin of such a fantastic plastic, elastic contraption.

³ A bird of prey endowed with quills tucked behind the ear.

⁴ Not alcohol, only wine.