



The Golden Fish

Michael tells me now that he never did hear the tale of the Golden Fish. It's hard to believe he did not ever hear tell of a fish that that talked with as great a command of language of any fish that ever lived. It could be seen and - more to the point - heard for several months in a previously quiet fishing village up on the Connemara coast of Ireland. It lived, for this period of time, in a fabulously large saltwater tank displayed prominently in O'Donnell's Bar. Though the Fish was considered quite a beauty the tank was a work of art in itself, constructed at great expense by craftsmen who came all the way from Wicklow.

Tales of flying fish you may be familiar with, or of animated cartoons of fish who chatter with accents of the American West coast, even fish conjured out of thin air in biblical stories, but an articulate fish with scales spun from the finest gold? I ask you, was there ever such a wonder in the world? Well, perhaps there have been one or two. In times past they could recall a fish with golden teeth caught off the shores of these cold isles, when the teeth alone were said to have weighed over 50 ounces. And it is impossible to count the number of occasions on which fisherfolk claim to have caught fish with gold rings lodged in their jaws; but a fish that was coated in gold from gill to tail, with the power of speech thrown in, that is indeed a rarity in my book.

The fellow that caught the most fluent fish of present times went by the name of Noel O'Donnell. A nervous tall fellow with a bit of a stoop, he had been a fisherman all his life, making a living by catching bass, monkfish, cod, lobster and crab in his nets and pots. Now, if you wanted to buy a decent bit of fresh fish in the village where Noel lived it is a fact that you had to go to the Post Office, where Noel's sister Sinead was Post Mistress. Early each morning, even on a Sunday, God bless, Noel tied up his boat at the old harbour lined by fuchsia bushes and strolled up the hill to the Post Office with his choice catch of the day to put upon her cold slab.

On his way back down to the boat to sort the remainder of his catch he would stop in at the bar run by his brother Mark for his second breakfast - which consisted of a pint of stout, cheese and bread. Noel often attributed his good

health to this daily routine, which he had followed for over 20 years. One day, however, was different to the others and the start of it all.

It was a fine fresh day in early Spring. Noel's boat bobbed up and down on the ocean with dizzying irregularity; it was believed that you required a stiff measure of acrobatic skills to fish in these parts. Far away in the distance, beyond the line of the shore, the bleak moorland and bog were covered in grey rain shadows but out here the sun broke through fast moving clouds, glittering on the water. These waters were never still, shook up and frothed by an unremitting wind that blew from far out in the Atlantic.

Noel pulled at his fishing nets, tugging them up into the boat by hand, one clump after the other, when the net made a sudden leap out of his grip - as though it had become snagged on the sea floor. Careful not to rip his nets, he plied them out a little, then yanked them gently to free them of the entanglement below. Gradually, with some twists and turns, he hauled the catch in.

He noticed it straightaway. There was no mistaking it. They say the Arctic char has the finest yellow tint but this was not one such fish. Trapped in the mire of the usual booty from beneath the waves, it lay slowly squirming like a splinter from the sun itself. A fine fat fish that looked as if it had been freshly dipped in gold paint. As Noel stared at it, he noticed in the one briny eye facing him that there were even flecks of gold.

It was a fish whose colour reflected the fine buttery tones of the seaweed heaped upon the shore in these parts, or the glow of a freshly thatched roof. It was little more than twelve inches long, but the most exquisite fish you could ever imagine. Noel didn't know what to say and he didn't have chance to say anything because the Golden Fish opened its mouth and spoke first.

'Don't think you're going to eat me, you big fella,' it said. 'I'm not the Salmon of Knowledge to be roasted over a fire and stuffed down your throat. You won't learn a thing from me that way.'

Noel was so flabbergasted that he took a step backwards in his shaky boat and nearly toppled over the side into the sea. Desperately trying to steady his nerves and sense of balance, his boat bobbing up and down, he opened his mouth to reply and found that only a gurgle of gibberish came out.

'Aaahaaah... I... errgh... aah... ermm,' he gibbered.

'And what language on God's Earth is that?' said the Golden Fish. 'By my reckoning, it is not the Old Tongue of these parts and it does not pass for Modern English, that is for certain.'

Noel wondered if he was still at home in bed and dreaming as the Fish piped up again. 'Is it a bad case of indigestion that you have this morning? Is the soft gentle heaving of the waves too much for your stomach?' Noel's legs turned to jelly and he slid down into the wet bottom of the boat, his mouth wide open, his heart hammering loudly inside his chest.

'Are you a useless fella?' said the Fish irritably, flapping under the net. 'Can you not have the decency to put me somewhere more comfortable, like back in the fair ocean where I belong?'

'I will not,' said Noel, in a very quiet and tremulous voice, rubbing his befuddled head. After several moments deliberation, eye to eye with the fish, he

reached over to one of the ice coolers he kept on board for his best catch, tipped out the ice and filled it with sea water. His hands had the shakes.

‘You might regret this,’ said the Fish.

‘I will not,’ said Noel, his voice a little firmer this time. He took hold of the net and cut it open with his knife. He carefully took hold of the Golden Fish and deposited it in the cool box.

‘I really must insist that you treat me with the deference that you would accord to...’ the Fish began to say, but then its last words were muffled as Noel slipped the top on the box and fastened the catches.

He threw the rest of his haul back into the ocean, then lit his pipe and puffed on it for a little while before turning the boat back to shore. With great haste, he took the Fish to show his brother Mark, who at first thought he was dreaming too and had to go back to bed and get up again and have a dram of whisky before he was sure of his own eyes and ears. Once he was sure though, he declared that the best thing to do would be to install this marvellous catch in his bar in nothing less than the finest fish tank in the land.

He soon convinced Noel that this joint venture would bring their family both fame and fortune. ‘Sure, we’ll have droves of people coming to the bar,’ he said. ‘It’ll be grand for business. It’ll put us on the tourist map, it will. The Shrine at Knock, the Book of Kells in Dublin, the West Meath International Ploughing Championships and The Golden Fish of Connemara - that’s what people will come for. People are always looking for miracles.’

Noel had some misgivings, as did Sinead. They remembered when their brother had tried to introduce karaoke to the Singing Bar – it did not go down at all well, not even the Country & Western numbers. ‘I do admit it’s a miraculous thing, Mark,’ he said, ‘But where there’s a miracle there’s usually a martyr or two.’

‘Are you daft, man?’ said his brother. ‘This will be the making of us.’ He looked over at the Golden Fish and winked. ‘Don’t worry, little fella, I promise we’ll look after you.’

‘A promise is a debt,’ muttered the Fish.

The Golden Fish, which had a name but refused to reveal it to anyone, was grumpy for several days and didn’t say much that was not expressed as a complaint until its magnificent tank was built. Then it began to talk, almost non-stop, to whoever would listen and it was impossible to get a word in edgeways.

‘It was surely the first to kiss the Blarney Stone,’ said Sinead, herself no small talker over the Post Office counter. ‘If it was entered in the Doolin Non-Stop Talking World Championships it be more than a match for Pat O’Toole!’

The Fish made claims to be older than the most ancient woman in the country, at least 116 years old. It even remembered first hand the tragic wreck of The Desdemona, bound for New York, with a Captain who had drunk too much to know his starboard from his port or to know when and where to drop anchor in a storm, who sent the crew to their lifeboats without the passengers, forgetting he had locked them below decks previously that night. The Fish made it clear it was not and never had been a granter of wishes. It loved to tell a yarn and had a volume of tales of lighthouse keepers carried off into the depths by sea serpents and

worse. It claimed to have been immortalised in oil paint and watercolour by Paul Klee, having conversed with him in the brisk waters where the Elbe drained into the North Sea. It could spin a saga about the Pirate Queen of Connaught pillaging the Spanish Main or the Seven Unmarried O'Malley sisters who practiced their dark arts under the Mullaghareirk Mountains or antediluvian tribes from the far ends of the earth who subsisted entirely on a diet of mashed insects. It knew about the primeval customs of Firbolgs and Fomorians and teased eager listeners with clues to the location of the Isles of the Blessed, where it said there were seven rivers of milk and eight of wine, where weary travellers could enjoy a luxuriant bath of cinnamon, water and hot dew.

When asked how it could recount so many stories, it claimed that the oceans contained more stories than could be currently calculated by any living mathematician.

‘And if you can learn to navigate in between the folds of the currents far below, beyond the caves and grottoes with crimson and purple seaweed,’ said the Fish, ‘Why then, there you will find memories of stories from the mouths of dead sailors who are stuffed tightly into every nook and cranny on the ocean bed.’ Those present who made their living from the sea - and there were many - shuddered in their boots.

It was not a fish who smoked a pipe or danced a jig, but great talker who knew how to entertain the crowd. It knew jokes about light bulbs, jokes about Michael Flatley and his peculiar one-footed river dance, and even jokes about the Irish Republican Army, though Noel didn't find them very funny. The Fish could even speak the Gaelic language with some proficiency, and knew more than a poem or two, more than Noel himself or anyone in the village knew.

‘Tell us, how come you know all these verses?’ asked Noel one day. ‘You're not making them up, are you now?’

‘Not at all,’ said the Fish. ‘When he was staying in these forlorn parts, Pádraig Pearse - that well-known poet and revolutionary - spent many an hour at the waters edge, composing his fine verse. He made most of it up in his head you see. Then he repeated it out loud, over and over and over again, stretching his legs as well as his vocal virtuosity along these strands and coves. Fine verse, as you well know, requires practice. It was only later, much much later I believe, that he committed the verses to paper proper. I'd hear them day in, day out, though I must confess my attention did drift.’

The Fish paused for a moment and then added assuredly, ‘It's well known that any old fish from these parts can recall a verse or two by that obdurate fellow.’

But this was not any old fish and within a matter of weeks, as Mark had predicted, O'Donnell's Bar became the hottest spot on the coast. It was nearly impossible to get a casual drink there. Bookings were made several days in advance, with coachloads of tourists coming directly from Shannon International Airport. Mark calculated that in one week over two thousand people came to see the Fish, just from word of mouth, and the clamour and custom in his bar alone quickly drained the brewery stockpiles in Galway. It was indeed great business for all concerned.

The National Fisheries Training Centre at Greenville sent a team of three experts to study the phenomena. A daily update could be heard on Radio Teleis Éireann, but Mark resolutely refused all television companies access to the Fish. Instead, illustrators, whose job normally was to sketch pictures of court scenes for the evening news, were deployed in all four corners of the bar to capture a likeness of the amazing Golden Fish.

Tourists inspected the nets cast up on the quayside like balls of fluff, wondering if in amongst these was the very one that had netted the legendary Fish. German, French and Dutch tourists formed disorderly queues along the road to take each other pictures in front of O'Donnell's Bar, as no cameras at all were allowed inside by the proprietor. As it came to be a famous attraction, greater security precautions were required – door searches were rigorous, a close circuit television system was installed and the Garda placed a police box on the little quay from where they could observe the bar twenty four hours a day. Visitor attraction management consultants were consulted. The lighting in the bar was overhauled to provide a more dramatic visual effect and the bar itself was finally moved into the barn at the back. There was a scale of entry charges, though both Noel and Sinead insisted that locals could get in free. Strict time limits were imposed by the newly employed guides. Mark spent two weeks filling in an application form to the Regional Development Commission to get a grant for education and interpretation staff.

‘And what exactly are they going to interpret?’ asked Noel. ‘The Fish does enough talking for a hundred fellows as it is.’

‘I was thinking,’ said Mark, ‘That they could double up as bar and catering staff.’

‘I am not a performing seal,’ said the Fish, on more than one occasion, before being called upon to perform one more time for the growing congregation.

People flocked from all over to hear him talk and even if they only got five minutes - judging by the comments overheard up and down the busy streets of the village - they seemed to think it worthwhile. In deference to the Fish, Mark quickly disposed of his old bar menu standards like Fillet of Plaice and Chips and soon opened a new café next door offering a comprehensive vegan menu, though some customers felt it overly reliant on mushrooms.

Videos and postcards of the Fish were sold in the village's only gift shop. A compilation of Fish Sayings was published, edited by scholars from Trinity College, Dublin, and stayed in the The Times Top Ten Best Sellers list for 37 consecutive weeks. Pressure groups campaigned for new roads to be built, and a hotel was planned. Dignitaries visiting the country tried to include O'Donnell's Bar in their busy itinerary. It was said that even one of the holiest men in the world wished to visit - though critics said it was rumour started by the Fish himself.

Some people, however, remained unimpressed. Roy Keane, an 87 year old fisherman from the island of Inishmore, told TV Éireann reporters: ‘In the old days, when I was a lad on the boats, you'd see a fish that talks all the time. Now a talking sheep, that would be something.’

A Carmelite priest from Galway wrote in a parish newsletter: *“In recent months, we have seen great reverence given to this Famous Fish of Connemara,*

but it was nothing unusual for the Saints to understand the language of the animals and the fish. I ask you, is it possible that in amidst the wicked ways of the world the animals of the sea become more Godly in their ways than us? ”

The Fish thus far had not shown an inclination to declare the end of the world was nigh or discuss any signs of the apocalypse. However, one day, in the middle of telling a story to an audience of Japanese businessmen and Benedictine Nuns, a new revelation was observed by the O'Donnell brothers.

‘There have been stories in these country parts of a demon cat, a cat that was rude and quarrelsome and generally the cause of much trouble,’ the Golden Fish was saying, chattering on much as usual. ‘With a fiercesome appetite for fish - so it is not a tale I am fond of - but it was believed the beast could be despatched with a light sprinkle of Holy Water from Maynooth...’

The Fish paused here for what seemed an eternity and Noel fancied that a shudder ran through it. It stared at Sister Alphonsa from Tipperary and told her that she would receive correspondence from Australia on Wednesday week, the feast day of St. Keiran, from a brother she had thought long dead. This strange interjection was over in a flash, before hardly any of the audience could comprehend what was going on, and the Fish brought the tale of the demon cat to a satisfactory conclusion.

‘What was that all about?’ said Mark.

‘I don't know, I really don't,’ said Noel. ‘It's most peculiar.’

A week later it was confirmed to be a peculiar thing indeed when the Benedictine Sister, upon receiving the correspondence as foretold, fainted with joy when reading the letter, fell over and cracked her head on the edge of the kitchen table and had to be rushed to hospital where she was reported to be doing well.

This uncalled for fish fortune telling was not a full time occupation by any means; as a rule, the Golden Fish stuck to telling a finely embroidered tale for his never decreasing visitors and reeled them out to great effect. But occasionally, he would break off mid-sentence, stare off into someone's eyes and speak to them of future events.

They were simple things at first. The Fish told old Naihlm Quigley that by the time she got home, her chicken would have laid the most beautiful brown egg, speckled around the top in a manner reminiscent of the crown of thorns placed on Our Lord's head. And she said it was so. (Some people, including Noel, suspected the Fish played to the innate superstitions of the supplicants, but they generally kept this opinion to themselves.)

The Fish told Eamonn Duffy that by the time his tea was on the table that evening he would be better off by €150 due to a casual bet on an outsider at the Galway Races. Eamonn had backed a 10-1 horse in the 4.15pm and was indeed a fortunate man that day.

Daniel Robinson, an accountant from Athlone, had a miraculous escape when his boat overturned in Lough Corrib. He proclaimed on The Late Late Show that his rescuers had only been in the vicinity due to the suggestion of the Fish the previous day.

Once news of its prophetic ability leaked out – and, as you can see, it did not take long - the popularity of the Golden Fish increased ten fold, if that was at all

possible. Whole forests were demolished to provide the pulp for special supplements in all the daily newspapers. Meteorologists consulted the Fish on the weather reports, though it was generally agreed the resulting forecasts were a hit and miss affair. Strangest of all was the appearance of a Texan businessman, who wrote a cheque for 500,000 dollars and laid it upon the bar in front of Mark's eyes without saying a word and then walked straight back out. Mark had no intention of giving up the Fish just yet and dropped the cheque straight into the tank, where it floated for some days before the dyes and inks in the paper dissolved into a worthless mass.

Believing that less went further, Mark decided to give the Fish a rest and announced that the bar would be closed to the public for a whole month. Locals said that the closure was because the Fish had become less and less garrulous in recent weeks. 'It saves its best breath for the children,' they said. 'The poor creature's probably fed up with the whole business and is in dispute with the management.'

There was enough in these rumours for Mark to think to counter them by organising a special televised event, where a select group of local primary school children would be filmed meeting the Fish. The event would go out live to over forty countries, and Mark hoped that this presentation would fix their fortunes forever.

Noel, who had become a minor media celebrity in his own right, found he no longer enjoyed the hustle and bustle very much. He could no longer put in a quiet day's fishing without being hounded by paparazzi and sightseers, hoping to get a picture of some new sensational catch.

'You can't keep exploiting the Fish forever,' he said to his brother, late one night. 'We should give it up.'

'Noel, this is a big opportunity,' said Mark. 'We'll sit on it for a while and wait for the highest price. Just think, you'll never have to fish for your daily bread ever again.'

'That's exactly it,' said Noel. 'I used to love to fish.'

'Ah, don't cry, man,' said Mark, who could already see his name in lights. 'That little fellow can take us all the way from O'Donnell's Bar to the Hollywood Bowl.'

On the night of the broadcast, all appeared to be in order. The children were pious, the security was tight as a leprechaun's purse, Mark was eloquent and charming in his introductions, thanking Bono for his rendition of a sea shanty specially composed for the occasion; but the Fish started to act plain peculiar from the moment the cameras rolled. It spoke of a lake where lava flickered on the surface at night and sulphurous smells issued forth. It spoke of children who were afraid of the dark, and about a farmer's little boy who fell down a well and drowned.

Mark began to get a little nervous. 'He sounds like a drunk,' he muttered to his brother. 'He's making a fool of us. Did someone put whisky in the tank?'

After considerable prompting, one of the children at the back shouted out, 'Haven't you got a proper story?'

‘Oh, I do think it is high time we had a moral tale, don't you think?’ said the Fish solemnly. ‘Help me out here. Pass me a suggestion or two.’

‘A boy finds a magic stone,’ called out one lad, ‘And makes three wishes and they come true!’

‘Now that's a fairytale if ever I heard one,’ said the Fish.

‘What about ‘children shouldn't play with fire’?’ said another girl.

‘Ah, now that's promising territory to explore,’ said the Golden Fish. It then unleashed a terrible story about a convent school of boarders which burned to the ground, a conflagration of hellish proportions where most of the innocent pupils were roasted in their beds like trout on a barbecue. It was unremitting in the gruesome and grisly details of the tale.

The live broadcast ended on this sour and depressing note. Some of the children in the audience were clearly upset, trying to stifle sobs, their teachers pursing their lips in disapproval of the whole sorry affair. The TV Producer didn't know whether to be pleased or annoyed by the horrific contents of the story that had been transmitted. Calls of complaint were already flooding into the television network. He leaned on the edge of the tank, a glass of brandy in his hand, and said to the Fish, ‘Ye're supposed to be a funny one. Not a single joke dropped out of your mouth tonight. Instead we get second-rate horror stories to give these poor kids nightmares. Ye should be ashamed of ye'self.’ He was a man of traditional tastes who believed that fish should not talk but be pan-fried in Kerry butter and served with a wedge of lemon, no more.

‘Some things in life aren't at all funny,’ said the Fish. ‘Take a look at yourself, you old soak. Have another drink on the house and then be off with you.’

‘I might need to have a few,’ huffed the TV Producer. ‘What's it to you anyhow?’ He was not sure if things had gone well for his career this night. ‘I'll tell you one thing, I'll never work with a bloody fish again.’

Later that night, the TV Producers' BMW careered across the road into another car, killing both drivers outright; and the following night, in France, a convent school did indeed burn to the ground with tragic loss of life.

Soon after, the Fish stopped speaking. No-one knew whether this was a conscious act of silence, whether some dreadful disease had affected his miraculous oratory organs, whether he had simply run out of things to say, or whether the prophecies he would utter were to describe such doom and destruction that it was too awful to speak of them at all.

Environmental Health Officials took away samples of the water in the tank for careful analysis in their laboratory and pronounced it to be of the highest quality - but they remained on alert. The Irish Fisheries Board convened a special sub-committee to examine the problem. Prayers were offered in St. Patricks Cathedral in Dublin. A Chinese accupressurist, whose experience was primarily with dolphins and whales, was called from Hong Kong to examine the Fish. He pronounced the Fish to be ‘very very baffling’.

‘Silence is Golden’ was never a popular saying in these parts and less so now. There never was such a thing as The World's Quietest Irishman Competition though the Fish would now be a hands down winner had there been such an event. Finally, amidst much tears and hysteria, it was admitted by the President of the

Republic - in a special national broadcast - that it was the considered opinion of the experts consulted that the Fish's unique conversational powers were unlikely to return and if they did it might be better that no-one was there to hear them.

Early one morning, Noel O'Donnell, the world famous fisherman, slipped out of the back of the bar with a large plastic container under his arm. He went quickly down to his boat and put out to sea, where he longed to be again. It was November 12th, the feast day of St. Brendan the Navigator. The Golden Fish was returned to the depths of the Atlantic ocean, at the point from whence it came. It swam away quickly, never to be seen or heard of again.

'Ah now, that was a lovely touch of madness,' said Noel, to no-one in particular as the wind churned the waves to a froth and the horizon vanished into the roughness of the mist.