

# Genghis Khan

This is the story of Genghis Khan. A Mongolian empire-builder in the South of England. OK, so he was a pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*, but his genes originated on the shores of the Caspian Sea and had been mixed with the blood of the Green Pheasants of Japan. This latter strain showed in his melanistic colouring. Iridescent blue, black, and green covert feathers that shone in autumnal sunlight as he strutted over the farmhouse lawns. But I am getting ahead of myself. He was one of seven thousand pheasants reared in deep-litter houses as a crop for the woodlands of a large estate: that crop would be reaped by sportsmen who would pay for the privilege. Not that I am complaining: their money paid my wages. I was one of the gamekeepers.

Genghis earned his name, his reputation and above all his individuality by his aberrant behaviour. This manifested itself in aggression against me. Me! I, who had reared him, mercilessly killed his enemies and fed him religiously every morning and evening, was rewarded by this Mongolian maniac by having my kneecaps pecked to bits. It was quite amusing at first, but events soon became more serious.

I knew he was in deadly earnest when he knocked me out. I had entered his home wood near the farm early one morning and was whistling up his (more amiable) brethren when I was clouted on the back of the head, my legs turned to blancmange and I collapsed. Awful thought of gangs of ferocious poachers filled my mind until I looked up and saw Genghis's glaring black eyes and his wattles shaking with rage. His churring war-cry filled my ears. He had come off his roosting perch at full tilt and quite deliberately felled me. I was face down on the ground; he was on his feet and ready for more. The power struggle had begun: it was war.

His behaviour stemmed from a disturbed childhood. He had been reared with a thousand other birds in his unit. Wood chips on the floor, food pellets in a tray, the day light blocked out to reduce stress-induced cannibalism and a hissing gas lamp instead of the warm body of a hen pheasant. It was like bringing up a human child to the age of sixteen in a black, windowless room with no toys. However, instead of becoming the usual run-of-the-mill air-headed cannon-fodder, with about as much chance of being a wild pheasant as a pig has of soaring like an eagle, he somehow rebelled. Now, it seemed, he was intent on toppling the Establishment (me) from self-appointed power and replacing it with a new Mongolian Empire.

I did not know what to do. He would only attack me, at least at first, and would wait for my pick-up truck to claw its way up the track towards the wood. Only me, no one else. I had been picked out for special attention. After a while he took to waiting further and further down the track, chasing after me and arriving just in time almost to hop into my lap as I opened the door and he made his first lunge. Whenever I was in the vicinity of the farm I was constantly attacked.

One morning I arrived in the farmyard and parked in my usual place by the diesel tanks. No sooner had the engine noise ceased than there was a huge bang on the roof, a scrabbling of claws and the familiar furious churring. As I leapt out of the car I received a sharp peck on the head and then we were face to face. I stared at Genghis dumbfounded, rubbing my head. He stared back, exultant and triumphant. The high ground of the diesel tanks had been taken and he could wait unseen atop his observation post and launch attacks against not only me, but also anyone who wished to fill up a tractor for a day's

work. He now controlled the fuel supply for the farm. The one-pheasant revolution was under way.

It was on that day that I fell in love with him. It was then that I realised that he was not just an overly aggressive pheasant, he was a diabolically intelligent individual whose rearing had been specifically designed to deny intelligence and individuality. He was an extraordinary pheasant.

He quickly expanded his empire to include the whole yard. Every time I went to the corn bins to fill up my sacks with wheat prior to feeding times, he would appear. The sound of the pick-up's engine, or the rattle of wheat down the chute into the sacks, would bring him running across the yard or flying from the wood. He would come round my feet in full aggression display, a performance that was only partly placated by handfuls of grain. Normal farm operations in the yard became fraught with the danger of a surprise attack from the Phasian guerrilla. I began to get complaints from the other farm workers and they showed me their scarred legs. I defended him energetically and was furious when the reactionary backlash against him began to take the form of violent direct action. When a steel toe-capped boot sent him hurtling across the concrete I was ready to leap to his aid, but Genghis was true to his hereditary and lost no time in launching a counterattack of such determination and ferocity that it unlaced the fellow's boots.

I had become absurdly proud of him. Every attack on me was a joy to me and, like a policeman who begins to identify with the criminal, I looked forward to crossing swords with him and became worried on the days he did not appear.

He very nearly came unstuck on the day of his successful assault on the workshop. This place opened onto the farmyard and doubled as the farm workers' tea room. I had arrived in the yard to find the farm workers taking their tea outside in a persistent drizzle. During the morning, I was informed, he had chased the three men out of the workshop and now would let no one in. As far as they were concerned, it had become a question of them or him. This was serious. Grain shovels and adjustable spanners were being hefted in menacing fashion; the revolution could end up as the contents of a casserole in minutes. I rushed the work shop like a SWAT team riot squad, fended off Genghis' bludgeoning attacks and managed to wrestle him to the ground. Having pinned his wings to his sides I took him up to the wood where he was fed and released on parole.

From then on his attacks became less frequent and although he maintained a constant presence in the yard there was a fairly amicable stand-off situation. His greatest hour, however, was still to come. After the shooting season had begun in October, our employer, a foreign gentleman, came to the estate for a week of shooting and to attend to farm business. One morning he was dressed up to the nines in more than one thousand pounds worth of Loden shooting suit ready to go off to a neighbouring estate to which he had been invited for a day's sport. The farm staff were dutifully awaiting his arrival in the yard, but we were astonished to see him hobble around the corner of the farmhouse with three and a half pounds of furious pheasant attached to his thigh. He cried feebly for help but we were too stunned to move. Genghis had dug his spur claws in deep and was tearing beakfuls of expensive material out of the boss' suit. This would definitely have been the action that brought a final nemesis upon his head had he not beaten a hasty retreat. However, this failed assassination attempt upon the head of state proved to be to his advantage. His attack upon our unpopular employer ensured him a protected existence in the farmyard. He now became elevated, in the minds of all of us, to a position of class

hero. Lauded and applauded, he lived through Christmas and the New Year in a state of grace.

It was after the turn of the year, at the end of the shooting season, that his home wood was shot over for the last time. Half way through the drive I saw him running ahead of me through the tall stems of Jerusalem artichokes planted beside the wood. Suddenly he stood up, neck stretched to watch the advance of the beaters. The proud demeanour was gone now and in place of the magnificent revolutionary stood a confused bird in a quandary of indecision. He squatted low, then launched himself upwards into flight and whirred over the beeches to curl back behind the beaters. A loud report from the direction of the farmhouse, and a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, told me that what I had dreaded since October had come to pass. The reapers had gathered the crop in, the empire had crumbled; the revolution was over.

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