

## He Should Never Have Been Born

### Chapter II

Oskar should never have been born. By this I mean all the odds were against it. Several hundred potential brothers, sisters and cousins were in eggs that looked exactly like his and were in the same incubator with him when my wife forgot to turn the heat back on after tending the machine.

If the goose who lays the eggs is allowed to set upon them, she will produce eight or nine eggs and then stop laying, to devote herself to the hatching. But if the farmer removes these eggs from the nest and incubates them mechanically, she may lay as many as two dozen. Thus, the farmer can increase the number of goslings he has by using an incubator, which is really an electric setter. Properly operated, it supplies the heat that first causes germination and then fosters embryonic development, heat that would otherwise be supplied by the mother's body.

Setting for four weeks or more on goose eggs is quite a strain on the mother. She rarely leaves them, and is off the nest too short a while to eat much. By the time her patient vigil is rewarded, she is little more than skin and feathers, a self-starved proof of Nature's determination that all species perpetuate themselves. Her pride in her fledglings and her joy in her success swell her decep-

tively. She looks fat and big as she struts with her young, but she isn't. She is lean and hungry.

On the other hand, even the most modern incubators do not entirely eliminate the need for man's attention. Those we had were anything but modern. They were old and frequently broke down. For good hatching, we had to turn the eggs by hand, three times daily.

If the eggs are not turned, the life-giving yolk, one of Nature's great wonders, sticks to the side and cannot, as the last marvel before the gosling breaks free of the shell, be absorbed into its body where, for as much as three days, it nourishes as it dissolves. With a month of time on her hands, so to speak, the setting goose finds egg-turning no burden. Periodicaly each day, she hooks the large end of each egg with the lower part of her broad bill and carefully chins it over, then nestles it carefully in the clutch before smoothing them out, fluffing out bar feathers, and gently, squirming in a circular motion, settles down upon them again.

With several hundred eggs weighing almost a half-pound each, this was a tedious late winter and early spring chore on our farm.

Most of the attention the incubator got that season came from my wife. Actually, women are better than men in caring for incubators or young stock, perhaps a reflection of their real life-function. But ordinarily I did this chore as I cared for the chickens, <sup>for</sup> the incubators <sup>were</sup> in a chicken house. That year I was away more than usual because I had talked the poultry associations into a spring-time egg promotion I believed would suggest to the housewife that she should use more eggs. People are staying out late at night, getting up in the morning without enough time for even a scant meal before

the headlong dash to walk, or pouring breakfast from a box. So there has been a gradual but steady drop in per capita egg consumption. This hurts egg farmers, of course. It also hurts city people, for the egg is the closest thing to a perfect food in Nature.

My idea was to comb the northeast for the increasingly rare double-yolk eggs, usually also the largest, and to give each Congressional family a dozen. We planned to have that year's poultry beauty queen lead a procession of farm equipment through the Capitol area, with a front-end loader on a tractor as a throne. ("Front-end loader on a tractor" is polite city talk for an automated manure fork.) We thought the young lady's charm and beauty and the novel throne would attract further attention to eggs.

Despite Nature's lack of cooperation with us farmers, the stunt was a big success. It delighted millions of people throughout the country. Two television networks filmed it. It made both the "Today" and "Tonight" shows, several newsreels, and was reported in both word and picture by the major wire services. Congressmen and Senators were appalled at the idea that such monstrous eggs could come from a little hen who didn't die in the process, but they also fought for the few extra double-yolkers we had. It rained something terrible, sweeping the street in shimmering sheets, but the wonderful poultry princess, smiling her beautiful smile as she made each ascent of the interminable Capitol steps for the camera, never once complained as she became saturated to the skin for the cause - eggs.

Wet and tired, I reached our farm thirty miles north of Washington after dark that night. Immediately I plunged into preparations for my weekly deliveries beginning four o'clock the next morning.

Something seemed wrong. It bothered me.

"What's wrong here?" I asked my wife.

"Is something wrong?" Lil asked. "I'm not aware of anything wrong."

As we stood there wondering why I had the feeling something was not as it should have been, the only one of the six ancient and noisy freezers we used in our business stopped running. The room was completely quiet. Then it dawned on both of us at the same time.

"The incubator!"

Solid and silent it stood there, proclaiming our misfortune by its silence.

Because of the coming promotion, I had moved an incubator into our basement so Lil wouldn't have to make extra trips in bad weather to the chicken house. The first three weeks of production of all of our geese were in it, several hundred eggs. When it is in operation, it makes a constant but slight noise as its fan gently distributes the warmth through all the trays in the cabinet. Whether or not the heat is on, the fan must be. No noise, no fan!

The eggs were cold, really cold.

Our hearts sank. We not only needed the goslings for our business, but each was worth considerably more than any other domesticated fowl. Our loss was, for us, considerable, both in cash and disappointed customers.

"Let's turn it on, anyway," Lil suggested. Without hope, we did.

We set the eggs weekly. Least likely to survive, if any did, were those closest to hatching. There seemed to be a slight chance

that possibly some of the eggs incubated for less than a week might remain viable. The other embryos were too far advanced to survive the shock, I was certain.

Lil was almost sick with remorse and guilt. As soon as she saw the incubator wasn't running, she clearly recalled what had happened. Early that morning, while she was turning the eggs, the phone rang. Expecting to return to the incubator immediately she had merely closed its door. But a number of other interruptions followed, and she completely forgot about it.

Three days later I returned from a trip to town to find a box on the sofa. There was an electric cord running from the top, which had been partly covered with newspapers.

"What's that?" I asked. This was not intended as a question, for I knew the answer. It was the odd way in which, completely surprised, I involuntarily expressed my disbelief.

Whenever one or two goslings were born ahead of the others, we placed them in a wooden box. A pound tobacco can, warmed by an electric bulb closed inside of it, provided heat. The goslings regulated the heat they got by getting closer to the can or moving further away. They soon learned the comfort zone and stayed in it.

"One gosling," Lil told me while I removed my heavy outer clothing. The pleasure she obviously got from that single yellow ball of fluff that was contentedly "pheap-, pheap-, pheap-" away in the box was unbelievable. We had hundreds of goslings all the time. Though they were commonplace on our farm, we admired and respected them all. But from the beginning this lone little fellow, with such a compelling longing for life that he alone of the hundreds defied all the laws of

Nature and willed himself into living, was something special to her. She smiled broadly every time she spoke of it. Her eyes would glisten and the rest of her face would look like she was practicing for a toothpaste commercial whenever she even thought of it. She was as unabashedly happy with it as a child with a wonderful new toy.

Because I had been busy, and didn't expect any to live anyway, I had just forgotten to get any gosling food. What to give this one?

Normally, because of the special nature of waterfowl, we have their mash pelleted. For the first three weeks, we feed them crumbled pellets. Nutritionally, ordinary chicken feed is very good for them, but mechanically it <sup>can be</sup> is harmful. Nature intended ducklings and goslings to live on and near water. So she designed their ingesting and digesting apparatus to work in the presence of water. Compared to chickens and other birds, young waterfowl have very large and broad bills. If they eat anything fine and dry, in the absence of large quantities of water, the food tends to pack in the bill. The crumbled pellets are coarse enough to be swallowed with ease.

That day we were eating a German bread, pumpernickle. I rolled some into little brown balls and fed it to the gosling. Happily, he swallowed it all. A week later, when it was clear this was going to be a special character in our establishment, we decided to give him a name. There was no chance we'd ever willingly part with that fellow. Certainly the thought of anyone eating him smacked of cannibalism. ~~So~~ he had to have a name. It was easy: Pumpernickle. As time passed, Lil decided he was worthy of a first name. How or why she decided upon Oskar, spelled with a "k", she <sup>or won't admit;</sup> doesn't know; but

Oskar he became and remained. Only later, when his grandstanding became a fixed and permanent characteristic, did <sup>he get a</sup> ~~Lil~~ bestow his middle name.

He became Oskar H. Pumpernickle. The "H" <sup>1st int</sup> ~~was a pun. It~~ stood for Hamm.