

My Wife, His Mother

Chapter III

If "it's a wise father who knows his own child", there is no child who at birth knows its own parents. Not so with goslings. They know their mother as soon as they are born, if she hatches them. Sooner, according to some naturalists, who hold that the gentle grunts the mother utters in response to the "pheeping" from within the shell is imprinted upon the conscious but unhatched birds. In this way, again according to the same experts, the young recognize their real mother, distinguish her from all other geese, who look so remarkably alike that few men can even tell the boys from the girls of most species. Other scientists believe that, because the mother is the first thing the young see when they hatch, and she supplies them with warmth and protection from the elements and predators, she is imprinted upon them and in this manner they distinguish her from all other geese and regard her as mother.

Most young fowl recognize their parents immediately. Tree-nesting wild birds mouth-feed their young, providing an immediate identification. Ground-nesting birds, such as geese, known as "pre-social", lead their young to food and, really, teach them what to eat. This education is ^{totally} valueless, for without a mother to show them, goslings still instinctively find and eat the same plants mama would

recommend and shun those mama would order them not to eat. But it tends to strengthen the bond.

Papa goose is very much of a family man. He protects his mate and his flock from all dangers, real and fancied, mostly the latter with domesticated geese. The vigor with which he approaches ^{his} the responsibility immediately establishes his identity to his brood.

All birds are not this way.

Some never know their own parents, either as just-hatched chicks or later; some parents guarantee they will never know their young or ever be burdened by them; sometimes the father assumes part or all of the hatching responsibilities of the mother; and at least one odd species makes a massive incubator.

The European cuckoo may not be as dumb as its name implies. For both parents, as with the aptly named cowbird, sex is all fun and no responsibility. The female merely lays her eggs in the nests of others and forgets about them. Several different families of other birds may hatch and feed parasitical bird chicks. Where the unmasked foster-mother is of a smaller variety, she may find her own natural young forced from the nest to die by the larger and more vigorous and faster-hatching feathered Frankenstein with which she has innocently become burdened. "Burdened" is hardly the word for the terrible plight of some parents of those kinds who make their nests off the ground. The capacity - really the need - of those who are born blind, helpless and naked or almost so, known as "altricial", is almost beyond belief. These babies are enormously gluttonous. They may eat their own weight in bugs and worms daily. Nature helps the parents only a little, by endowing the young with a tremendous

growth rate. Within three weeks of hatching, they can weigh as much as fifty times what they did at birth. That's an awful lot of worms and bugs for the parents to find and stuff down the ever-clamoring throats of their nestlings. What a break it is when the nestlings are fledged and can scrounge around for some of their own food, when the parents can sneak in a snack on their own from time to time!

Any number of bird mothers are blessed with husbands who share in the incubating and give them a chance for a little stretching and flying and a little hunting on their own. One of the best-known of these is the predatory gulls, who predigest the fish, birds, eggs and nestlings of other species as well as their own, and regurgitate the delicacies for their fortunately few own babies. Few, if any, fathers and husbands have the dedication of the Emperor Penguin, who spends several frigid Antarctic months with a pair of his eggs on his feet. A pair, that is, unless he leaves them briefly or is distracted and successfully pirated by the skua, a gull with the well-developed gull appetite for eggs. Nature and his own biological development over the years of his evolution help a little. While he withstands some of the highest winds and lowest temperatures in the world, the eggs are covered by a pendulous droop that has evolved like a giant dewlap from his belly. But when the kids are hatched and he has lost maybe a third of his weight, mama takes over the rearing chores and gives him a chance to stoke up again.

Possibly the first artificial incubator, a seeming remnant of the reptilian progenitors of fowl, predates man. It is built by the strange Mallee Fowl of Australia and amounts to a monstrous big compost pile. The adult birds make a vast hole in the ground. They

fill it with rotting organic matter and cover it with sand. As the vegetation decomposes, it generates heat. Deep in this malodorous mess the female buries her eggs. Unlike most birds, who lay their eggs as winter ends and the period of natural abundance impends, Mrs. Mallee may lay hers for most of the year. Because she isn't going to sit on them, she doesn't have to lay them all at one time, in a clutch of such short duration that the germ in the first-laid still sparks with life when the last is deposited. So she may wait almost a week between eggs, enjoying the freedom bestowed by the strange mechanism of the reproduction of her kind. Her husband, meanwhile, tends the putrescent incubator. His beak, if not his nostril, is sensitive. It tells him when adjustments in the pile are required, for he uses it as a thermostatic prod. If his beak registers "hot", he aerates the stinking incubator. When he feels it is too cool, he adds more material whose rotting generates more warmth.

Unusually enough, man's first/^{artificial} incubator was built in an unknown copy of the Mallee's. From pre-Biblical times, the Egyptians have incubated eggs in large caves. The attendant, whose skill has been passed from father to son in an ageless familial craft guild, maintains fires that supply the heat. His own body is his thermometer. When he is unbearably hot, the fire is too great/^{for} the eggs and he banks it; when he approaches comfort, it is too cool and he adds fuel and forces the draft. Just as the Mallees still hatch their eggs in their ancient way, so are there still in Egypt such operating incubators older than the Christian era.

When the Mallees' young, the epitome of "precocial", pip the eggs, they dig their way out of the sweltering refuse that has given

them life and blythely go about caring for themselves as competently as if prepared by doting parents rather than instinct. But they know no parents; and their parents know no young. And when the right time comes, these young in turn perpetuate themselves in exactly the same way.

So Oskar's inheritance, if it is traced back far enough, is certainly a mixed bag.

In his case, we hadn't the slightest idea who his parents were. He, however, immediately decided Lil was his mother. If he felt the need for a father, he didn't show it, and he never treated me with either the respect or courtesy most fathers expect.

Lil was the first thing Oskar saw. She provided his first food, placed him where he got his warmth, and kept him for as much of his first few days of conscious life warmed in her hands or loling on her lap as her chores allowed. Thus, to him, she became mama. The more she tended and babied him, the more fixed her identification as mother became to him.

Warm, sunny days we put him on the grass behind the house, where the fifteen cats and our dog Susie kept careful watch over him while learning to accept a simply incredible amount of abuse from him. If he tended to wander toward the road, one of the four-legged creatures turned him around. There was nothing to harm him, unless their patience ran out - and it is a wonder it never did. Had there been a threat, I'm certain the cats would have reacted to the danger as though their own offspring had been threatened. So Oskar grew to fear nothing and to learn that whatever he did to the other creatures who shared his place behind the house, he'd get away with it. All

the others soon came to regret it.

Cold days, when it was wet, or when she just wanted to fool with him, Lil kept Oskar on her lap. He is probably the only gosling in history who learned to enjoy the 6:30 p.m. Huntley-Brinkley report before he was a week old, regarding it with an ever-increasing suspicion, cocking his head from one side to the other as though he understood the droll wit of the Washington half of the team, all the while sitting on his "mother's" lap. Even calls of nature didn't

pause briefly in whatever they are doing to perform the function, assisting it a little with a downward motion of the coiled wings, as though squeezing the matter out.
void, they ~~raise themselves if they have been reclining, squat slightly and move their wings slowly, as though they were levers.~~

Geese don't move a single feather. Whatever they are doing - flying, walking, eating, even fighting - when the urge comes it is indulged, with no fuss or bother, for all the world as unnoted and unmarked as the act of breathing.

Holding Oskar on her lap thus became a problem for Lil. However, she soon solved it. She fashioned "baggie" panties from plastic bags, which she lined with folded Kleenex "diapers". It reminded me of some of the more unusual garb of Arabs in North Africa during World War II. Cloth of any kind was both scarce and expensive. When ingenious soldiers needed funds, they sold their heavy blue-denim barracks bags, which thereupon were reported lost or stolen and were replaced by an indulgent Uncle Sam who, in any event, had no shortage of denim. The inventive and underclothed Arabs, who seemed to buy for the sheer joy of bargaining and buying, soon learned that two round holes through the bottom of the bag would accommodate two legs. It thereafter became a not uncommon sight to

see "B" bags (or the second of the two issued) walking down the dusty roads, the large white letter "B" rolling to the motion of the buttocks it surmounted while the rest of the lettering proudly proclaimed Joseph P. Zabladowski or Patrick J. Muldoon; the whole improvisation prevented from creating a public scandal by the judicious drawing of the heavy sashcord by which the soldiers carried their baggage. But Oskar was no Arab, and he cared little for this concession to civilization. In fact, he resented it.

"Isn't he cute?" Lil asked, really telling me she thought he was very cute, when Oskar insinuated his inquiring head around all the edges of the bag. With a neck like his, it was not a trick at all to reach to the extreme south end of his anatomy and pull the whole thing off. If undetected, the consequences were messy.

Necessity mothered Lil's invention of a combination draw-string and shoulder harness by means of which Oskar upset himself every time he tugged too vigorously. He soon learned, however, that his plastic diaper was also his lap ticket; no ticket, no lap. In the first few days, it was discreet for Lil to place him upon the floor when he divested himself of his protection. Clever rascal that he was, Oskar soon learned that when a new diaper was applied, he got to sit on mama's lap again.

I don't know whether it was the thrill of her lap or Huntley-Brinkley that did the trick, but he soon adjusted to the civilized necessity.

Not until we learned that we could also view the competition on video tape at 7:00 p.m. did Oskar take to walking along Lil's legs as she raised them for comfort, extended, naturally, toward the

TV tube. But shortly after we found Walter Cronkite on video tape at 7:00 p.m., Oskar took to walking toward the screen, often chattering as though informing Mr. Cronkite of a different Huntley-Brinkley version of the news.

By the time he was five weeks old, when he was heavier than a full-grown hen, Oskar was taking his news in silence, without blinking an eye, no matter how monstrous the crime reported, how loud the noises on the sound track, how violently the war was recorded, or how pretty the girls filmed. In this alone, in his televiewing, he became prematurely sedate. In every other thought and act he was a subteen-age monster. By the time he was six weeks old, he was too heavy to bear, too large to see through or around, too tricky to trust, and too strong and quick with the bill, which could playfully demolish the entire protective structure with a single lash of the long neck. Then Oskar became strictly an outdoorsman.

But wherever he was, Lil was always mama. He would talk with her as though each understood what the other was saying. Sometimes, the way he suddenly departed, I'm certain he did. Usually, though, when he saw her, he walked or ran toward her, chattering all the time. He spoke goose, most of the time; and she spoke English. But they communicated.

Chapter IV - Imprinting

There is a penchant today for giving commonplace things a scientific or a pseudo-scientific name and pretending they are new and a tribute to our modern scientists and ingenuity. Thus, we have "imprinting", or "the revealer technique", as nomenclature for the not-at-all new phenomenon of lower forms of life falsely identifying strange things as their mother. That wonderful person and superb

scientist, Dr. Konrad Z. Lorenz, who spent much of his life with his animals in residence with him and his wife, is popularly considered the "father" of imprinting. I am certain Lorenz would be the first to disclaim the honor, for imprinting must extend as far back into antiquity as the domestication of the first animals - back to the cave man. This is no reflection on either Lorenz or his magnificent and continuing contributions to the growing understanding of animal behavior. When the human replaced the natural mother, the animal was "imprinted"; when the orphaned animals received needed love and protection from substitute mothers, they came to regard their caretakers as their real mothers.

One of our unusual experiences with imprinting followed a disastrous theft late one wintry Sunday afternoon. I was feeding the hens their "scratch" feed. This mixture of whole grains is "goodies" to the biddies, but it is sound nutrition to the farmer. In cold weather, it also warms the chickens at night as their gizzards unlock the energy built into the whole kernels. The old gals always could tell time. They knew when everything was supposed to happen and complained when something didn't come off on schedule. At the time of the day their "scratch" treat was due they were, naturally, always waiting at the doors of the pens, patiently calling to me in ladylike but impatient clucks. Once I appeared, their fine feminine manners disappeared, and their polite chatter turned into a strident cacophony of impatient demand.

While I was enveloped in this high-decibel "happy song" noisily chanted by a thousand hens, all of the seed stock of our beautiful, rare and flightless ducks was poached - shot and then stolen! The

entire operation was carefully observed by the two youngest sons of the Wrights, our neighbors to the south. The boys just happened to be bicycling on the road along which our farm extends. The western end of the farm is hidden from our home by the henhouse; and in it, the joy of our hens was so loud I could hear nothing. Selecting that moment, when my wife could not see and I could not hear them, the well prepared poachers were banging away at our ducks when the Wright children came upon them.

There were two men with a rifle and a truck. One man shot the ducks and tossed them to his companion, who loaded them. The Wright youngsters were careful to note everything they could. Then they raced to the henhouse and gave me (and later the police) a description of the men, their clothing, and the vehicle, complete even to detailed elaborations of where the paint of what color was peeling or chipped. They noted everything - except the license number!

We were, of course, ^{distressed} heartbroken. These ducks
 (Picture) are gorgeous. They look exactly like Mallards, except that they are twice as large. The females are brown, etched with a black penciling. Like the males, they have a broad rainbow of blue slashed through the wing, a mark of perfect and perfectly blended symmetry whether the wing is folded or open. The males, especially when facing a winter sunset, are among Nature's most brilliant beauties. Their glorious plumage includes a full range of browns from darkest to as light as beige, oranges, whites, yellows and greens. Their upper breasts are mahogany, delineated with a white ring, above which the neck and head are a shimmering, iridescent green that pulses into and out of a purplish cast as the

light plays upon it. Both sexes carry a rare gene which I had bred into them until a third of their offspring were born with a beautiful pompon on top of the head, a variegated topknot of feathers that flounced around charmingly as the ducks moved, whether they were just walking, eating, drinking, playing, or engaged in the preludes to procreation. They were old, very old, and irreplaceable. To the best of my knowledge, the exact blood was not anywhere else in the world available, although the basic breed, Rouen, is not uncommon. Such people as then President Dwight D. Eisenhower had and enjoyed our ducks. Arthur Godfrey's secretary obtained some for him in the hope their presence on his farm would entice the wild Mallards to light on his pond during their migrations.

With the greedy and thoughtless slaughter of these magnificent but almost inedible birds, there vanished, perhaps forever, a combination of genes, the patient labor of ten years it took to blend them, and all for no good reason. From their progeny, scattered around in the back yards of the humble and the estates of the great and important, similar ducks are from time to time born, but they are not exactly the same, and the crests are neither as ample nor as plentiful.

"Murderers! Butchers!" my wife called the Sunday slaughterers. She was visibly and deeply upset by the loss of these old and treasured friends. As we talked it over, it suddenly occurred to me that our poachers were in for a real surprise.

"Imagine trying to eat a five-year-old duck without knowing how to cook it!" I exclaimed, and I do believe that my mild and modest wife took a slight pleasure at the coming certain discomfiture of those nasties.

While we discussed it, I recalled a similar incident in 1959, when several ducks and geese had been stolen by adult delinquents among our neighbors and turned loose miles away, beyond reclaiming. At that time, with the cooperation of the Washington Post, I evolved a simple mechanism which dismayed these evil men whose sole objective had been to hurt us.

That June I had become the "National Barbecue King" with a recipe that used a marinade as a barbecue sauce. So that whoever stumbled upon these waterfowl would not cook them in vain, which would have rendered their deaths pointless and disappointed the diners, I gave the Post a method of preparation for elderly waterfowl. Ducks and geese live much longer than chickens. They are also much more active, get indescribably tougher, and even an expert sometimes has trouble determining their age.

When our hateful neighbors saw the story in the paper, they learned that a minor theft would not hurt us. They equated the publicity with good which, apparently, was anathema to them, and they never again robbed us.

So I phoned the Frederick paper to report ^{this} the poaching. They are always interested in local news, and this is the kind of news some readers find almost as interesting as unprintable scandal. After stating the simple facts I said, "These men must have been awful hungry for duck to commit a crime in broad daylight, and on a Sunday, when there is more road traffic. I have lost my ducks, and I'm reconciled to that, but I am sorry their killers won't enjoy them."

"Why?" the reporter wanted to know.

"They are old and tough - so tough I warrant a fork won't

puncture the gravy. Now, what I'd like to ask of you is that you at least give meaning to the crime and tell the men how to keep from breaking their teeth."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. My ducks are gone. Those guys and their innocent families are going to eat them - or at least try to. But they just won't be able to. Now, I have a recipe that I guarantee will tenderize an owl. Would you mind printing it? Everybody around here reads your paper. Then these men or their wives will know what to do to enjoy the ducks and their crime will at least have some meaning."

Between chuckles the reporter took down a description of a marinade and the recipe for a good one. The next day he had a half-column of prominently displayed text that had the Kentire countryside laughing. The companion evening paper reprinted it. TIME Magazine thought it sufficiently humorous for reproduction in abbreviated form, and a surprising number of other publications throughout the world, judging from our mail, took it from TIME.

A young German boy asked us if we could possibly send him a roasted duck, something he had never tasted. Besides being a humorist, he was also a stamp collector, and we put him in touch with American philatelists.

Two schoolgirls in Frederick city also read the story and phoned me. At first I thought I was being put on.

"My name is Maria Callas," this quite musical voice was saying. "We need some duck eggs for a school project and wonder if you might help us."

"Maria who?" I asked, for the famous diva of that name was then very much in the news with one of her well publicized feuds.

"Maria Callas. My father is John. Perhaps you know him?"

I knew who he was, having eaten in his restaurant, but I still wondered how she was expecting me to have any duck eggs when all my adult ducks had been killed. She sounded quite distressed at my question and was apologizing for her call with so much sincerity that I asked her to explain her need on the chance we could provide a substitute. I supposed she had in mind an incubation experiment, in which eggs at various stages of embryonic growth are broken out and preserved in formaldehyde, thus demonstrating the development of the embryo. In fact, I had helped a number of youngsters with such studies. Chicken eggs would do as well, and we then had our own breeding flock.

"Have you ever heard of imprinting?" she asked, almost apologetically, almost as though she were expecting soap in her mouth.

"Yes, indeed," I replied, surprising her.

"you did?" unbelievably. "Our teachers haven't."

"Yes, I'm familiar with it. But where did you hear of it?"

"In my girl friend's brother's psych book. He's in college. But none of our teachers ever heard of it. How did you?"

"We live with it. Why do you need duck eggs?"

"Well, that's what Doctor Lorenz used."

"First, you should know that he also used geese. And second, why do you have to copy him?"

"Well, all we know is that when he acted like their mother, the ducklings really thought he was their mother. Have you any goose eggs?"

It happened I had three, laid out of season. Normally, most species of geese lay only in the spring and then for only a short period. One of our Chinese geese - later to become famous in the Peace Corps - had just laid three eggs for which I had no use. Once satisfied I was serious, she was as happy as only a healthy high-school junior can sound on the phone. I also offered a small incubator and invited her to bring her girl friend and project associate and either of their parents.

They soon drove in, chaperoned by their boy friends. Maria was a beautiful, dark-complexioned Southeastern-European type, with laughing eyes and a bell-like and almost perpetual chuckle. Everything seemed to make her happy, and when she was happy she laughed, so her visit was the occasion of almost constant giggling. Her friend, Mary Ellen Creed, had a different type of beauty, a quiet, almost reserved Anglo-Saxon kind. She was tall, thin, quiet and blond. Both were very bright kids, each enthusiastic in her own way, and each delighted to find an adult who didn't think they were kooks and who was willing to help.

After a brief period of instruction in the use of the incubator and the hatching of eggs, they were off in a cloud of laughter. Almost nightly thereafter our phone rang with progress reports and questions and, toward the end of the incubation period, apprehensions that needed soothing.

The girls were diligent in their duties and they carefully nurtured to the point of hatching the two eggs that developed embryos. As the critical time approached, the school permitted them to take turns watching the incubator. They had converted the attic of the

Creed home into the maternity ward, and in the last hours one was always there and awake. The two goslings were born to two of the most excited girls in the world at about three o'clock in the morning.

During the ensuing 24 hours they continued with their experiment. We were, of course, almost as delighted as they were with their success. Maria reported it to us.

"So the goslings now think you are their mother?" I asked.

"No," she said, "we only imprinted one. The other is our control."

That, of course, was scientifically desirable. The "control" is the norm. In nutritional or medical experiments, for example, those animals fed a standard ration or not getting the drug are considered the controls. In this case, the normal behavior of goslings would be represented by the control, the one not imprinted. Then she explained the imprinting.

"We decided not to use ourselves," she said. "We thought something inanimate would be more significant. So, we imprinted the other one with a toy stuffed skunk."

I could hardly believe my ears. These cute kids had impressed my wife and me as two of the sweetest, most charming and brightest we had ever met. It also turned out they were among the most imaginative. They ran away with the Science Fair with their live demonstration of the goose with the "skunk" mother. Months later that goose, then grown larger than the toy, still followed it dutifully as the girls jerked the string. It took quite a bit of ^{carewhile} feeding, henking and comforting which the girls had to supply the just-hatched gosling while hiding themselves from it and showing it ^{only} the toy skunk. Had

the gosling seen the girls, it might have called them "mama".

Mary Ellen and Maria paid us back quite handsomely that June, the last day of school. We had planned to attend the annual poultry festival. Our helper couldn't be there the second day. The girls volunteered themselves and the services of their parents and, as it turned out, of their boy friends, who supplied the transportation. Working in shifts, as the closing exercises permitted, they rushed to our chickens, fifteen miles away, then hastened back to school, then to our farm, in a mad series of races against the clock that wore out their chauffeurs but left them unflustered.

So, for Oskar to believe my wife was his mother was not at all unusual. In fact, it was hardly a compliment to my wife when the potential competition is considered! A gosling can believe anything is its mother. And Oskar, especially, was to develop very strange concepts of what is feminine and attractive - such as barrels. No, it was no compliment to my wife; but it was a source of great pleasure to both of us and hundreds of friends and acquaintances of all ages who came, eventually, all to be "imprinted" by Oskar.

They regarded him not as a goose but as a person!