

Chapter VII

The Cat Robber

"Go up to your room and stay there until you think you can behave yourself!"

This stern injunction from my mother had been my boyhood's worst possible summer's day punishment, more painful than a whipping, with the enticing sounds of ballgames and other youthful joys assaulting my ears through the open windows. In trying to devise measures that might permit the cats to eat in peace, I had thought of everything possible until my mind turned to this childhood restraint that had been applied to me. But how do you chase a goose to his room to meditate upon his shortcomings and sins?

"No use trying to confine him," reason told me, for once confined he'd surely find some way of punishing us for it, like setting up an awful din, or shaking his enclosure, or making a still greater mess. Then suddenly, the only possible answer dawned upon me.

"Confine him out."

The idea rang in my mind like a bell. And it worked, as almost anything the opposite of what it should be did with Oskar.

A piece of stiff wire mesh about two feet high, ^{BENT} made into a square about a yard each way, fixed to the ground by four stout stakes, did the job. Oskar was too young to even think of flying.

None of the domesticated geese can ever fly much, anyway, unless their wings are full grown, and then they can fly for but short distances and at very low elevations. None of ours had ever really flown, except when I had underfed them before the breeding season to be certain they weren't too fat and clumsy and disinterested. Even then, they required a downhill run to do more than barely get their feet off the ground. Never in his life did Oskar ever achieve even that limited degree of flight. It was consistent with his concept of himself as a non-~~goose~~ that he never once even tried to fly.

At/^{his}young age, without even the show of white color that presages the growth of wings, it was a completely safe assumption that he couldn't scale such a barricade. Oh, how proud I was to think I had outwitted him, for even by then Oskar was really something to cope with!

"Feed the cats inside," I told my wife, "and feed him outside."

She did, and it worked.

He didn't like it, not a bit. When Lil put the cats' breakfast inside the fence the next morning, the cats scaled it with ease. Oskar, his almost expression-proof face seemingly spread in a nasty grin, rushed toward them in evil anticipation of his perverse fun. Smack up against the mesh he charged, with enough force to be thrown over backwards. Was he surprised! And he uttered a long, plaintive, ungoosely whine of protest, as though asking, "What kind of a foul conspiracy denies me my self-proclaimed right to torture and torment every other living thing?"

He tried it again, several times in rapid succession. Each time he failed to walk through the fence, and each time the cats simultaneously reacted with a quick jerk, as though the same electric shock

contracted the muscles of each with the same impulse. But they kept their faces in the food and ate. All, that is, save Big Ears and Spotsy. They hadn't even gone near the pan. They didn't until Oskar had given up and returned to his own repast, the weight of the injustice pressing heavily on his down, but wise enough to know that if he couldn't eat their food, he'd better eat his own.

Characteristically, once he recognized defeat, he lost all interest in this particular sport, as my wife learned one rainy day when she took a chance, rather than risk a skin-soaking in the falling torrents. She placed the food for both in the shelter of the house and Oskar didn't turn to the cats' until he had eaten his own. By then the cats had downed theirs and were washing themselves under shelter. Thereafter, she often dared feed the cats in the open, without interference from Oskar, who remained content with his own meal, knowing full well that he could drive us back to the use of the cat pen any time he wanted.

Things stayed that way until "Gimp" came into his life. By then, Oskar was more than half-grown. His wings had lengthened to almost their full size and almost all of his body was suited with feathers.

Gimp was an unwise, inquisitive and overly venturesome little White Pekin duckling who had almost committed suicide one night. He performed a self-impaling manoeuvre none of the thousands and thousands of chicks, ducklings and goslings we had brooded in an old Jamesway battery brooder had even conceived.

A battery brooder is an arrangement of layered cages, each supplied with a source of heat, provision for food, water, and the

collection of manure, and so designed as to confine the young fowl. This particular battery was excellent for young waterfowl, who instinctively seek to swim the minute they see water. I have seen countless mother geese and ducks lead their broods directly to the pond from the nest in which they were hatched and seen the babies unhesitatingly and happily enter the water after such a short period of life that they had never even walked out of the nest before. They bee-line for the closest water, and the parents, who want to teach them the importance of water for survival and sustenance, invariably lead them there. Of course, the young always recognize another use for water-sport. They are too young to understand life is fraught with dangers. As yet they need no food, for the yolk that was enclosed within their bodies as the last step before hatching satisfies their needs for several days. Understanding that water must be for something, because mama took them there, invariably they conclude it is for fun, and that is what they have.

Without a mother to teach them, young waterfowl instinctively reach the same conclusion. Water is for fun. You drink it because you have to; you play in it because you want to. Ducklings, more nimble and alert than the larger and clumsier goslings, make this joyous discovery sooner and pursue it with even less inhibition.

To allow just enough of the head of the young fowl access to the water while denying them space for any more of their bodies than a splashing foot they might elect to place in the watertrough, this battery has notches on the ends of the trough in which a grill is secured. As the birds grow and require more headspace, moving the grill into more outward notches gives this space. Because the rest

of the body grows in proportion to the head, the impish ducklings ^{still} cannot get into the trough to swim. The restraining grill is fashioned of steel rods reinforced laterally. The bottom ends reach almost to the bottom of the trough.

For the duckling who promptly became "Gimp" to have accomplished his manoeuvre, he required quite some cooperation. I have never been able to even guess where he got it. ^{Early} One morning as I neared the brooder house in which the batteries were kept, I could hear his hysterical call.

"Help! I'm in trouble! Bad trouble! Help!" he told me, as clearly as if in English.

All young fowl have a genetic conversation. I call it genetic because they are born with it. No one teaches them their language, yet they each know what to say for the appropriate occasions, and all others, including adults, understand it with complete accuracy.

If young chicks or waterfowl are being brooded and the temperature gets too hot, there is never any doubt in the mind of the husbandman; if the heat goes off, or just gets too low, the shrill clamor so piercing and penetrating to his ear is immediately comprehensible to him, and with any experience at all, he knows without entering the building and seeing for himself, because for each of the necessities and emergencies of their lives, the young have this inbred conversational ability they use unerringly, never ever confusing themselves or their parents or attendants. The various distress calls (for there are gradations, each representing a different degree of fear) are the most ^{piercing} penetrating. When the entire flock is in distress, it does not require a large number to ^{make a terrible din.} ~~create a loud noise.~~ And when the attendant

enters a closed building, even though he has heard and identified the sound from without, it has such a penetrating character that it hurts ^{an ear-splitting} his ears, hitting him almost as a pressure wave as ^{with} the opening of the door, ^{It whaps around him} releases a greater volume.

That morning I knew something had had happened, and I rushed to the building. By flashlight I could see that one duckling was in the watertrough. All the rest were disquieted and as far away from it as they could get, under the hover. That one was screaming his head off but not moving.

He couldn't. He had impaled himself on one of the rods of the grill! It seems impossible that, even if by some intelligence those ducklings had determined how to raise the grill, their combined strength could have done so. Without its being raised, how could that duckling have run it into, completely down and through its little thigh?

In a brief moment I released him and put him on the mesh floor with the others. He hopped back to them on one leg. He didn't even try to use the injured one. If it had been lashed into a useless position, he could not have held it there more securely.

It became clear to me that he couldn't use it, that something had happened to the nerves and muscles that denied him the use of that leg. With the callous indifference to the rights and needs of their siblings which typifies the behavior of all young fowl raised artificially, I knew he would shortly be trampled if he remained with the flock. So I cupped him between my palms to ~~keep him~~ warm and comfort him and returned to our home, in which my wife was still asleep, joined in her slumber by Spotsy. I placed the little fellow in a shoe box in which I cut a few small holes in the side and top to give him air

~~while~~

while conserving the heat his body generated, and returned to my chores. He was asleep when I finished them and returned, but awake and sounding off as soon as I lifted the lid from the box. Spotsy, like all animals, understood the distress call of others, and bounded instantly from the bed, waking my wife.

"Don't think the little fellow will make it," I informed her after recounting how I had found him.

One of the most difficult things we had to learn in operating our poultry farm is that sometimes it is necessary to kill birds that are not slaughtered ^{for} sale. After the first week, it was not really difficult to slaughter for a meaningful purpose. The first week, I admit, was hard, especially hard as the chickens, already irreversibly dead and their brains destroyed, spontaneously and automatically struggled against the inevitable, with a wild flapping of the wings that merely splashed the blood that gushed from the slits in their throats.

Sometimes, however, one was injured, or one was incurably ill. In these cases it is an act of kindness to destroy them as rapidly and painlessly as possible. A simple snap of the neck accomplishes both purposes, for it paralyzes the nerves, thus destroying sensation, and death is painless and immediate. Yet despite the thousands of chickens, ducks and geese I had slaughtered for human consumption, each time I faced the necessity of killing one for another ^{cause} purpose, I rebelled instinctively.

Against all reason and knowledge, the foolish hope that it would somehow heal its fatal wounds or overcome its incurable illness ^{welled up} always arose. I never got to ~~the point~~ where I could kill any living thing without a constructive purpose, and ^F food for people was to me a constructive purpose.

There was every reason why I should have put the duckling, who that day became known as Gimp, out of his pain as soon as I saw him in his crippled condition. Yet I just couldn't bring myself to do so. Even if he recovered the use of his leg and on reaching maturity seemed perfectly normal, there was no possibility I'd ever sell him for food. We could heal him only by keeping him with us at home. Then we'd be so attached to him, as a previous long history made unmistakably clear, that we could never think of killing him. Even if there was a chance we could return him to the flock where he might eventually lose his identity, we wouldn't, for no matter how well that leg healed, there was always the possibility it should never be served to a human to eat.

So in taking him to our home I was consciously doing a foolish thing, preparing an exercise in futility and adding profitless burdens to a life in which there were already more demands upon time than there was time to meet these demands.

In two days my wife had him happy and eating from her hand. He hopped around on his one good leg as though ducks never had any more, contented and at peace with the world which, for him, held all he needed: loving care, food and water, and warmth during the cold nights. If the bad leg pained him, it was naught to his obvious happiness at realizing he was wanted, a feeling he detected every time my wife raised him from his box to talk to, play with and comfort him. Never a chirp of pain did we ever thereafter hear from him.

After two weeks we began to wonder what would happen when we put him outside to bathe in the healing rays of the sun, to move around and meet the things that would be his companions in life, the bugs he

would eat, the grass he would pull, the cats and dogs who would be his neighbors if not his companions - and Oskar. We were concerned only about Oskar, who by this time had clearly established his authority over his domain, which covered all the land inside the fences on three sides of our home and out to the road in front of it.

There was no choice. It had to be done. So out Gimp went. But we waited until Oskar was not in sight to place the duckling tenderly on his one usable leg on the warming and sustaining earth that he, until then, had never touched.

After a brief moment of surprise, Gimp began to explore his new surroundings. He savored the grass with his bill, pulling up shoots as the whim struck. He hopped around and looked things over, knowing what to do with each bug within his reach, with each leaf of clover. He liked it. He liked the sun and the fresh air and the new sensations and sights and proclaimed his happiness in a few sprightly chirps.

Oskar heard his happy sounds. From the other side of the house he shouted a challenge as he ran to greet the new creature in his dynasty. Running for Oskar consisted in advancing one ^{short} leg past the other in as rapid succession as possible. But it also meant more: extending his wings as wide as they'd stretch to catch the air and lighten his load and to balance him, for without so doing his kind tends to swing from side to side, as though on a vertical axis, much in the manner of their waddling walk. By so using his unflapping wings he ran much less clumsily, needing only the tips of his toes to propel him along the ground. He could outrun me.

His honking was a mixture of curiosity and stern challenge, a clamorous accompaniment of the charge which carried him to the by

this time terrified duckling. To Gimp, Oskar was big as a whale, and he was intelligently and thoroughly frightened at the noisy monster whose sudden and threatening advent immediately shattered the beauty, ^{peace} and pleasure of the new world into which he had just been introduced.

What I should have been able to anticipate happened. Gimp instinctively sought to flee this terror bearing down on him. I tried to catch him. Small as he was, and adept in the use of the one strong little leg as he had become, I closed an empty hand around the air his little body had occupied just a split second before as I made a succession of futile grabs for the little fellow. Oskar's aim was better. He nipped Gimp the first time, and hard, too. Gimp kept moving and Oskar kept nipping. Before I could overtake them, it dawned upon me that no matter what he might do, Oskar clearly did not intend to visit any permanent harm upon this new thing, to him an intruder. Had he so desired, he could toss the little cripple fifteen or twenty feet away by a simple flip of his long neck any time he took hold of him.

"Okay, we'll watch," Lil agreed when I proposed to wait and see what transpired. "But nothing better happen," she warned me.