

Chapter VIII

Oskar the Duck Mother

Oskar, it soon developed, had limited purposes in mind. Clearly, he felt the need to preserve his authority unchallenged. He was boss, he was going to remain boss, and to him, any new creature, no matter how small and ineffective, was a possible threat to his kingship. That is what he was taking care of with his nippings: he was establishing his authority. Once Gimp submitted, remaining quiet and motionless after a nip, Oskar got the message.

"Okay. You're boss. I acknowledge it," Gimp's silence was saying in his cringing act of submission that ends all conflicts between ^{contending} conflicting species where the victor is not a predator. Wolves, dogs, chickens, cats all acknowledge defeat that way, by silence and cowering motionlessness. As long as they move and offer resistance, the attack is pressed. The act of surrender is understood and, sensibly, ends the conflict.

Also, Oskar was curious. He wanted to see the source of this new sound in his kingdom. Apparently he liked it, for thereafter, his interest in Gimp was anything but passive. Although from time to time he infrequently nipped at him, as though to remind the younger and smaller one who was boss, from the very first he accepted the duckling and, more, assumed responsibility for him.

Gimp at once found a new mother, a new father, and a playmate, all clothed in a single and as yet not quite complete set of feathers. Thereafter, wherever Oskar roamed, Gimp limped around with him or, at worst, after him, never letting his new provider-protector-pal get far away. On his part, seemingly unaware that Gimp was a duck, Oskar never moved very far without a backward glance or a quiet, inquiring honk to be certain Gimp was near. If Gimp didn't answer his call, Oskar whipped around and located him, as though apprehensive some horrible fate he could prevent impended. When he really feared for Gimp's safety, "whipped" is hardly the word for his motion. He charged, like a tank, wings spread for balance and speed, ^{hurling} uttering a loud mixture of ridicule, scorn, slander and threats at whatever he had not seen but might, determined to intimidate any possible adversary in advance of their encounter.

From that day on we allowed Gimp to remain outside. We had no fears, save for the cold, and Oskar eliminated that fear the first night, as though he had been trained in the responsibilities of a Mother Goose ^{had learned} or by his own experience, neither of which, of course, had happened. At dark that night, when Oskar settled down, he called Gimp closer, or at least we so understood the honking sounds he uttered, and Gimp snuggled right up against Oskar's larger and warmer body.

At birth, ducklings and goslings should have some means of warm-ing themselves when they chill. On a farm, the farmer provides a source of heat giving about an 85- to 90-degree temperature the first week. This can safely be lowered about 5 degrees a week, with all artificial heat removed about the sixth week. In nature, when the young are cold,

the mother enfolds them with her wings. The instinct is even stronger with geese than with chickens or ducks, for young goslings have an unfortunately fatal love for raising their heads to the cleansing Spring rains. With their heads erect and their wings spread slightly and arched, as is the back, they funnel the rain to the small of the back. Until the goslings are completely feathered over at that point, which is the last to grow its full suit of feathers, the water can enter their lungs through the thin skin and they can drown if the rain is hard enough. A rather strange oversight on the part of an almost all-wise nature, for these same goslings can safely go swimming as soon as they come into the world. Instinct tells them when they must leave the water, for until their feathers are waterproof, which comes with growth and age, they can get waterlogged and drown. I have seen seven-pound goslings drown in a water-box into which they blundered, although it was only two feet deep, because its sides were straight and they could not struggle out of it. A mother goose can so completely cover her young that they are not visible to the untrained human eye. With broods of eight and nine requiring cover until they are half her size, this is quite a cooperative manoeuvre, for with her wings and her body she may be covering four or five times her own weight and considerably more than that in bulk.

When Oskar undertook responsibility for Gimp, he undertook it completely and thoughtfully, extending his obligation even to Gimp's feeding. Again, no cats! Leading his new "son" to the pan, this immature gosling bit and pummeled the cats so persistently that my wife had to resort to her cat guard again.

(Picture)

For the first few times, Oskar led Gimp to the pan, after chasing the cats, and showed him that the food, which was strange in appearance to Gimp, was good to eat. He then did not himself eat until Gimp had finished. Once Gimp fully understood and needed ~~no~~ encouragement, he and Oskar ate together, Oskar first because he got there

(Picture)

faster. This was pure Oskar, not a trait of his kind of geese. Even our wild geese eat contentedly with cats and kittens, at the same time and from the same pan. Emperor Oskar just would not brook such plebeian transgressions against him or his, which is what Gimp became and remained.

(Picture)

With all the loving care and affection he got - and he got it from everybody - and with Nature's benign intercession, Gimp gradually got the use of his leg back. He grew to a normal size. Had it not been for Oskar, even more attention would have been lavished upon the duckling. My wife and I had no problem getting close to and even handling the duck. Oskar knew he couldn't stop us. With Oskar's major sollicitudes, the little fellow had much care. The cats would undoubtedly have offered theirs as we have often seen them do to other motherless things. But Oskar behaved as though he alone was responsible for Gimp.

[EXTRA SPACE]

Care of the orphans or ^{e/} even seeming orphans merely temporarily separated from their real parents is not unusual among the wild species. It is well known in both birds and mammals, including ferocious wolves, the thundering bison and the antlered mammals, and even the killer bears. Nature endows her own with this impulse, which is part of the instinct of preservation of the species - of life. Not all of them,

however; some, like the gulls, not only relish the young of their own species, but even badger and fight the parents to be able to cannibalize their nests.

On numerous occasions our suckling cats have been killed while their kittens were too young to fend for themselves. The other cats always took over the maternal chores, always finding a spare teat, a trickle of milk, and the time to lick, preen and mother their adopted young. More often than not, the young were switched around from one foster mother to another. Frequently all the kittens became a community ^{al} ~~community~~ cat operation, with the identification between mother and young disappearing in the community spirit and need.

Our smallest cat, Sister, is the size of a half-grown kitten at the age of five. She was orphaned before her eyes opened. We did not detect the death of her mother until she alone of the litter was alive, and she was just barely alive. We had so many adult cats at that time that poor Sister was constantly being bathed. As soon as one finished the chore, another assumed it. Cats lick their young to clean them, but not alone for this purpose. The licking of the kitten is like the cuddling and singing of a human mother to her baby. It is the means by which the kitten is comforted and reassured, made to feel wanted.

The cats know instinctively it is important for the young to feel wanted. Each and every one of them saw to it that Sister felt very much wanted. By the time she was old enough to go her own way, the vet informed us, all those rasping tongues, intending only to dole out love, had permanently damaged her eyes. Sister is no less happy for it. She is, without doubt, the most persistently and relentlessly

affectionate cat we have ever had. She feels that our place is hers, more than any of the hundreds of other cats have ever shown themselves to feel. In short, she is an affectionate pest, undeterred by criticism or even harshness. She feels too much wanted. Uncomplainingly, she tolerates almost anything.

Gimp seemed almost as happy as Sister. He certainly knew he was wanted. Actually, though, we really didn't want him. We just wanted him to live and be happy. Elsewhere suited us fine.

Memorial Day 1963 the opportunity arose. A County road crew working in the neighborhood several days earlier had observed and marveled at the menagerie behind our house. Believing I was in the presence of possible "suckers", I asked, off-handedly, "Any of you want a good pet?"

"Free," I added, sweetening the bait.

"What do you mean?" the foreman, Fred Linthicum, asked.

"Cats or a duck - free, if you have any children."

"My little girl would like that duck," said Fred.

"Whenever you want him."

"We'll come for him Memorial Day."

They did. Gimp is now a member of the Linthicum family where, if the cuddling and squeezing he got before he left for his new home is any sample of his subsequent life, he is, without doubt, the most cuddled duck in the world.