

Chapter IX

Mothering Kittens

As Oskar grew, nothing seemed to make him as happy as abusing the cats. This was not his intention, though it was the consequence of his belligerence. He merely wanted them to submit to his reign. The cats did not so understand it. Besides, they have their own personalities and characters. They are, almost without exception, ruggedly independent. They recognize a social structure in their own family. Each knows which he can beat and which can best him, like the pecking order in chickens, in which each hen among hundreds recalls which of apparently identical-appearing permates she has whipped or has lost to.

Oskar didn't play or fight by their rules. While he was young, they tolerated him, as they tolerate their own upstarts. By the time they decided to call a halt, they couldn't. Not a cat in the bunch could handle him! He was then fully feathered and much larger and heavier than any of the cats. When he bit them, he bit much harder. His jaw muscles were so strong he could chew pieces of bread I could not break with my hands. He had the added and even more formidable weapon of his strong and massive wings, which opened almost five feet and struck with an enormous leverage. I have heard it said that an

adult goose, hitting a man at the right angle, can break an arm. I have seen a gander knock a ten-year-old tormenter down, mount his back and flog the living daylights out of him while securely latched onto the victim with an unbreakable bill-hold on the ear. This manner of attack, a sort of avian karate, amplifies the already great power of the wings. In catching and handling our own, tame geese who knew I was their friend, I have been hit with sufficient force to double me over.

Oskar had equipment the cats could not cope with, and he used it.

Angry cats roll over on their backs and flail away with four sets of claws that are long and sharp enough to rip through the hides of large, thickly coated dogs. They kill with these claws, climb with them, use them with deadly skill and speed.

When Oskar's ^{the full-grown} punishments exceeded their great patience, one after another ^A did him battle. Each rolled over and tore away. The first time I expected to see an eviscerated goose. ~~I had to recognize he was a courageous fighter,~~ His back was toward me. The cat was under him - I believe it was Junior, our oldest female and toughest and best hunter - and she was slashing his underparts mightily. For his part, Oskar was using his bill as a combination sledge-hammer and claw, hitting and biting almost as rapidly as Junior cut away. The fight was a blur of cat feet and goose head, all moving faster than the eye could follow.

About the time I expected Oskar to ^{fall,} ~~roll over,~~ mortally wounded, Junior, quick as only a cat can be, again rolled over, onto her feet, and fled to the safety of the nearby peachtree, where she sat and

angrily mused, moaned, meowed and licked herself, especially her belly, which had taken most of Oskar's blows. She was defeated.

Oskar rushed to the tree, reached his long neck toward the sky, pointed his face at it, rose to tiptoe and extended his wings to their full capacity, then honked his bravery and victory to the loud accompaniment of the flapping wings, for all the world like Tarzan challenging the jungles with his foot on the dead gorilla's chest. Inconceivable as it seemed, Oskar had won the fight!

"But at what cost?" I asked myself.

There was only one way to find out, for there wasn't a trace of blood on the ground. I grabbed the rascal by the neck - the only safe way of catching a goose. The legs of geese are weak and their wings strong. A one-legged grip followed by a single flap of those wings can dislocate or break the leg as the goose rotates under the impulse of the effort to fly. So I examined him carefully. I separated the feathers down to the skin, and looked and looked and looked. There was not a single scratch on him! Not even a misplaced feather!

One by one the other adult cats reached Junior's conclusion as, one by one, Oskar whomped the daylights out of them if they offered resistance. Most were game, and tackled him several times before it dawned on them that this was one bird they couldn't manage. Rake away as they did at the full length of that enormous belly, they never once hurt him. He lost only a few feathers. Their claws had no more effect on him than ^mwater, and their resistance was a glory, for he longed to fight, apparently, and there was nothing to fight. For some strange reason, none of the cats ever struck his face, for there, without doubt, they could have gashed him. For weeks after

the Oskar battles, we had the most subdued and frustrated cats in the countryside. And without doubt, they had the most belabored and sorest bellies.

From the above it may be seen that Oskar was an enemy to cats, a brute, a vicious dangerous creature. Nothing was farther from the truth, as long as he got his way, which meant being treated like the boss he considered himself and, in reality, was. Not once did he attack a sleeping cat. Never did he hurt a kitten. He chased them from the food, true. His play was rough, yes. But his intentions were, really, not at all evil. He was merely following the instincts of a responsible male goose. Those urgings, natural to him, were not immediately comprehensible to other creatures, and the cats may never have understood them. They just adapted to him. But they were the basic demand of survival, the protective mechanism by which the gander fulfills his secondary role in species perpetuation, without doubt, Oskar did not behave this way as the conclusion of a line of conscious thought. Something told him he had to do it, so he did.

One of the cats became very fond of Oskar. It was Mister Whiskers, a half-grown tom, all black except for his eyes and whiskers, which sprayed from his face like a pair of oversized white fans. Mister Whiskers was to tomcats what Ferdinand was to bulls: he loved everything, and especially Oskar.

For his part, Oskar merely wanted an acknowledgment of his pre-eminence from his associates, both his permanent companions and those who came for brief visits, whether cats, dogs, children or grown people. Once he got that acknowledgment, he was satisfied. He usually ignored those who showed no fear and gave no peace to those who did, which he unerringly detected.

Mister Whiskers didn't fear Oskar, didn't kowtow to him, didn't fight him. He ignored Oskar's blows, he alone. And he alone never ran away. When Oskar bit, Mister Whisker's arched his back against Oskar's breast or under his chin as though pleased, pretending the pain he felt was ^{NOT PAIN BUT} a sign of Oskar's affection. He alone baffled Oskar, and they wound up good friends. When the cat came to the house after his hunts and explorations, for he was off on various cat adventures from time to time, he first sought out Oskar and rubbed against his thigh or scratched his convexed back under the goose's chin. Oskar came to love it ^o as much as a sign of surrender. They spent much time together.

Kittens, accustomed to punishment from their mother, do not normally run from punishment. Instead, they cringe, drawing their small bodies into the smallest possible target. That's what they did when Oskar nipped them. So the kittens never had any trouble with him. The opposite, in fact, is the case. Oskar bestowed kindnesses and consideration upon them, and believe it or not, that is possible.

"How," you may ask, "can a goose befriend kittens?"

Oskar had no difficulty learning how. Again, it was instinctive. Spotsy had had a litter of kittens and a bad attack of sinus trouble at the same time. It is difficult to say which she regarded as the greater affliction. She suffered. She came to her milk slowly and then didn't have enough. All but the two strongest perished quite young. These two, each, like the mother, almost entirely black, soon took to accompanying her on her short trips to our home where, she felt, the rest of her family resided. It was too cold for a home in the open air, so she had not moved them up from her shed. The back

step became a home away from home for them as they learned to wait, with a cat's patience, for their mother. Normally, as the pressure of the milk builds up, nursing mothers seek their young, whose suckling gives relief from the ^{ACHE} pain. This is one trouble Spotsy didn't have for she had little milk, and she was not often in haste to leave the house. So the kittens soon adjusted to waiting a long time for her.

However, Spotsy's sinuses were giving her great trouble. She breathed with audible and sickening difficulty. Great thick cords of mucus began to hang from her nostrils. We feared the effects of the infection itself and its possible collateral effects. Cats are reluctant to eat when they cannot smell. Sometimes they just won't eat and go on a hunger strike. They can die of starvation when there is no physiological need to die. The kittens were half-weaned when Lil decided I could no longer postpone the 50-mile round-trip to the vet - a hundred miles ^{IF} as I had to leave her and return later to pick her up. We had by this time little fear for the kittens, who were lapping milk from a pan. Besides, there was the well established practice of wet-nursing among our cats. I got my orders.

"No more excuses! You take Spotsy to Doctor Holbrook right away."

I did. She remained there a week. Harold Holbrook has done magical things with our cats, saving them from distemper and the only too numerous related and normally fatal diseases. And we knew that, if need be, she would be force-fed, a task for not even the most experienced amateurs.

After dark that night, when I returned from inspecting the

chickens and locking the buildings, I was bone-chilled, despite my heavy clothing. My teeth were still chattering when Lil asked, "How are the cats?"

Dutifully, I reported which cat had staked out which chicken house for its hunting. ^[EXTRA SPACE] During the winter, the cats had all learned, they could ^{CATCH} hunt mice while in the warmth of the buildings. No matter how cold it gets, a chicken house is always warmer than the outside. A hundred adult chickens give off as much heat in 24 hours as 35 pounds of hard coal. The buildings were insulated and had automatic ventilation, so, besides being warm, they even smelled good and the air, though warmed by the chickens' bodies, was fresh. Most of the cats preferred the henhouse, the largest building. It was divided into four pens, so there were no problems of who had which territory. The cats didn't trespass into each other's dominion. The hunting, unfortunately, was equally good in all pens. Despite the wire closures over each window and the concrete floors and masonry walls, mice entered the building as though by invitation. As each winter approached, when the night air began to get cold, gravid mice converted the more inaccessible nooks and crannies into rodent maternity wards. I suppose this situation, of the unwanted mice and the hunting cats, might be called the working of nature's balance. I liked the hunting the cats did, the cats were happy about it, and Lil was satisfied that her pets were comfortable. It was an ideal arrangement until three a.m., when the lights came on automatically. At that precise instant, the cats all developed the most unnatural fear of the chickens. As the switch in the time-clocks clicked on turning on the lights, the cats fled to whatever haven they considered safe. For

most it was a nest, which hung on the wall, and where, ^{they} she felt, the single entry was ^{defensible} one she could defend. Some, however, climbed the posts and huddled on the girder that bore the weight of the center of the building. Each morning I'd have to retrieve each cat, carry it to a doorway and put it outside where, no matter how inhospitable the weather, she was happier. They just wouldn't walk through the buildings with the lights on, so great was their terror of chickens who, somehow, they all understood, could not see in the dark, or at least didn't move.

As with everything, there sometimes is an exception. Once Bulgy, Junior's mother and one of the best cats we ever had, measured by her hunting prowess, her skill in training her offspring in those talents of which she had such a generous store, her good manners and generally sweet disposition, decided, in the way of cats, inscrutable to man, that she would deliver her coming litter in the henhouse. At all other times, she was possessed by the most unsettling and all-pervading fear of the hens. The morning of the day they arrived, she chose, of all unlikely places, the row of nests most distant from the entrance to the upstairs west pen. Knowing her normal fear of the chickens, we decided that, due to her condition, she was temporarily deranged. We moved her to a well lined bushel basket under the stairs, a warm spot to which chickens had no access and where she had in comfort lolled away many a winter's day on the shavings we stored there. Immediately she developed a strong aversion to this usually choice spot and returned to the same remote nest in that upstairs west pen. She didn't walk through the pen - she walked over ^{to the second floor,} it! She climbed the steps, mounted the feed bin, climbed from that

up a post to the girder, and climbed over each of the twenty-three pairs of ceiling joists that the girder supported until she got to the west wall. From there she sprang down onto the perch of the nest she had selected. ^{back to the shafts} I moved her three times. Each time she returned the same way, always to the same compartment of the same nest.

We gave up. The kittens had moved down in her abdomen; they were about to be born. The chickens, except for the few who showed a mild curiosity at the cat who did things their way and in their place, paid no attention to her or her travels. Bulgy again became master of her own destiny. I went for the camera so I could photograph the cat and her kittens in the chickens' nest.

(Picture)

Later that afternoon, when she had in part recovered from her ordeal, we became apprehensive that the chickens might confuse kittens and mice. Hens relish mice and made great sport with them, engaging in a game in which they race around in a wild ecstasy, stealing the poor rodent from each other until nothing remains of it but a red-fleshed grayish pulp. So I got the basket, placed Bulgy and her five not quite dry babies in it, and deposited them under the stairs. She pretended to be content while I was there. As soon as I left with a bucket of eggs, she began to ^{move} ~~re-~~turn them, one at a time, to the very same nest. I caught her at it when I returned for the next bucket of eggs. She used the same route she had traveled alone, each time with a kitten dangling from her mouth.

Not once did a hen bother the unattended kittens while Bulgy was in the transportation business. But we feared that, in curiosity or fear, they might suddenly become less benevolent. I moved the cat family twice more, each time with the camera on hand, to catch her

with a mouthed kitten eight feet in the air. As long as I was in the building, she was immobile, purring in satisfaction with her family and circumstances and elaborately ignoring me. The moment I left, she infiltrated the kittens back into the nest.

I gave up.

Three days later, when she, the hens and her kittens were alone, she arbitrarily decided to move into the understairs nest she had spurned. She remained there with her family until after their eyes were open, when she moved them to the feedroom doorway so that, when I opened it for her, she could move them into the catshed for their adolescence.

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None of this was in my mind that night, nor in the minds of Spotsy's two kittens. I went to bed without thought of them, certain they were in their warm, peat-moss nest or with one of the other cat mothers.

The next morning, a Sunday, was breath-cutting cold. As was my habit, I brewed a pot of coffee and bundled up to go out for the Sunday paper, which I always began to read with the first (and sometimes a second) cup of coffee. We do such things by habit, for we do them regularly and pay no attention to them. I turned on the outside light and started to open the storm door. It had moved but little when it stopped, its passage blocked by an obstruction. I looked down and there was Oskar, squatted right in the middle of the step and as close to the building as he could get.

Now, Oskar had never slept on the step before. His presence there gave me concern, and my apprehension increased when he showed

no signs of moving. I opened the door again, carefully, pushing it against him until he slid, but he would not rise.

"Get out of the way," I ordered him, ^{IMPATIENTLY} He moved only as much as the slight pressure of the door against his body forced him, but he refused to stand up. He sat so tightly on the step he seemed to have no feet. He regarded me with wide-open eyes and total silence. Cold air poured into the house, making me more impatient.

"Come on, now, get out of there," I rasped at him, my usual 4:00 a.m.-Sunday tone of command. It didn't budge him, and I began to fear that somehow he must have been injured. I let the storm-door close again and carefully removed the lower glass panel from the inside. Below-freezing air inundated the house, but I could reach him. With one hand on his neck and the other trapping the inside joints of his wings between the thumb and middle finger, I lifted him carefully, expecting the worst.

"Honk-honk-Hronk!" he protested, loudly, waking my wife. His voice was strong enough to reassure me of his health.

I had lifted him only a little; his feet were still on the ground. But the pressure on the inside wing-joints opened them. Two black balls dropped from under them, one from each wing! It was Spotsy's two kittens, Lilliput and Magniput.

Now, you may wonder about such names. Well, with all the cats we have had, there comes ^a a time when appropriate names ^{did} do not readily suggest themselves, even to such an adequate imagination in animal-naming as my wife's. Her animals have all borne original names, names not often - indeed, sometimes never - carried by any others. It is her whim that no two of hers have the same name. Some names

are very personal and their meaning is lost upon others; but we have them for our own pleasure and name them with ^{that} the same satisfaction in mind. Our first cow was thus "Bessie" because an old friend has a political enemy whose wife was both Bessie and bovine to our friend, who always referred to her as "Bessie the cow". Through much private repetition in the past, cow associated Bessie to us. Our Bessie was a fine cow.

Our first goat was named Buttsy, not because of the comic-strip character of goats, for she was the soul of tranquillity, but after the man from whom I purchased her, Rufus Butt. When her first kid was born, my wife thought she'd lampoon the fancy stock breeders and the cumbersome monickers they hang on their stock, incomprehensible to the outsider, stuffy and pretentious. When the kid arrived on the Fourth of July, naming her was easy for Lil, and the name punctured, for us at least, the pomposity of the breeding bluebookers. It became "Coq d'Or Buttsy's Independence", "Inde" to our friends.

Spotsy's little female cat, a runt among dwarfs, was dubbed Lilliput, the country of small people in which Jonathan Swift deposited Gulliver in writing his satire. When, after a decent period, no other name was awarded the larger-than-average boy kitten, he became Magniput. Nonsense, perhaps, but our nonsense. Magniput doesn't suffer from it. He is now a sedate, polite, excessively affectionate, almost Milquetoasty young man, many times over a grandfather, well mannered and completely trouble-free and untroubled. Except, that is, when other gentlemen cats come to render that service to the females ^{which} that he regards as exclusively his droit. Lilliput died young.

The night Oskar adopted them, they had no names. They did have

him, however, and with the extreme bitterness of the cold, he was next best thing to their missing mother, ^{perhaps even better.} Without him, they'd surely have frozen, or at least sickened fatally, once they left their berths that night.

What understanding impelled Oskar to shelter those kittens ~~under~~ under his ~~un~~folded wings I'll never know. It is exactly what geese do, but it had never happened to him nor had he ever seen it done. Both the understanding and the act were completely beyond his experience or training, for he'd had none of either. Except for the cats, he had had no occasion to observe how infants are warmed by the bodies of their parents. Possibly he had seen the cats wrap themselves around their young. But even if he had, the most he could have recalled was the encirclement that takes place, for no matter how hard she tries, a cat can do no more. More is physically impossible. Placing a leg over a kitten in itself accomplishes little, for ^{on} to even a small kitten its mother's ^{thin} leg leaves much of the body exposed.

Oskar had completely enveloped those two kittens, holding them up against his body, one under each wing. When adult geese protect their young, they kind of hunch themselves, and with that motion propel the babies up higher on their sides. The act requires at least the willingness, if not the cooperation, of the young. Never having seen it done and never having himself experienced it, Oskar by instinct, despite his opposite sex, must have performed the same manœuvre. And he must have had the complete trust of the kittens, for on opening the door I saw no trace of black. The kittens did not show until I had lifted Oskar, when they fell from under his wings.

All the time Spptsy was in the hospital, Oskar covered those

kittens nightly. Either they chose the step or he did, for each morning the same scene was re-enacted, and each morning, when I disturbed Oskar, he had to unwrap himself before I could leave the house. He complained, but the kittens didn't. They just walked off a few steps, turned and "meowed". A saucer of warm milk which they shared silenced and satisfied the three of them.

Those pre-dawn winter mornings stayed cold. When I returned from the chores, the three of them were in the same position, the same two invisible and the third with as much of an expression of contentment and self-satisfaction as it is possible for a goose to muster. Oskar didn't move when I re-entered the house. He merely raised his head to the full limit of his neck, and that's pretty high, and looked at me ^{IN SILENCE} as though to say, "Now, you don't have to disturb my children, do you? They're asleep. Let them sleep."

I did. I had to turn sideways to do it, to slide through the slight arc in which I could open the door. The ~~odd~~ unmoving trio remained in the same position until after daylight.

When Spotsy returned from the hospital, she had a surprise waiting for her: part-time children. During the day and when hunger groaned in their little stomachs, she was mother. Night-time, she was abandoned. I rather think that, once she ^{adjusted} ~~got used~~ to it, she preferred the arrangement, for it gave her freedom in the favorite time of the day of her species. If she felt she suffered a loss of face, she never in any way indicated it.

with Lil

"Well," she almost seemed to say as she got in bed/early each morning when I left for the first round of tending the chickens, "at least I don't have those two to worry about!"