

## Chapter X

## On Soaking Mice

Eventually, despite his overbearing ways and the abuse he heaped upon them, the other cats also accepted Oskar - I think got to like him. The larger ones were careful to stay out of his reach, and they always kept an eye on him when they were near the house. Even the memories of the pummelings he had given them, especially to their soft, unprotected bellies, must have been painful. Had I been one of those cats, I'd have had a bellyache every time I saw him. They were more forgiving. Perhaps theirs is a higher social order, one in which grievances are not held.

The cats wound up feeding Oskar. Mice, that is. Their kindness, or their intended kindness, was a sort of retribution, although I am confident they had no such design.

As did most, this custom began with his boorishness.

Our cats have always been proud of their hunting prowess, for which we also prize them. They don't eat most of their mouse catch, and I have only once <sup>^</sup> <sup>^</sup> seen one eat a rat, although I have found rat tails with no visible bodies to match. Whatever they catch they bring, like trophies, to the back of the house, the regular gathering place of the entire cat <sup>sodality.</sup> family. Showoffs, that's what they are. Often the mice are still alive, and the game consists of not letting

the mouse escape while not letting any of the others steal it.

"Look who's coming, and with what," the non-hunters ~~would~~ meow, as the feline nimrod struts up with the trophy in her mouth. I <sup>af</sup>ssy "her" because it is not with us as it was with Noah. We have cats who defy the law of averages and award us mostly female kittens. There is never a shortage of male cats, <sup>anyway,</sup> All you need is a female. They have their own remarkably effective Madison Avenue techniques. Two months later you have kittens. From time to time our few tomcats are so worn out from fending off the visiting gentlemen that they just move out, ~~into~~ the freedom of the woods, where they become happy hermits, untroubled by the responsibilities of a feline harem. By <sup>may</sup> now they/have established a cat monastery in the 150 overgrown acres across the road.

As the successful hunter returns with her catch, the others, with thinly feigned detachment, saunter over to examine it. Possibly the words "strut" and "saunter" seem unlikely descriptions of cat movements? Well, not of our cats. The bearer of the mouse is so proud in her walk that she carries her tail like a flagpole, stiff as a rod and fully erect. Some of them have even developed a special leg motion suggestive of comic-strip exaggerations. They lay their feet down with such pomp and pride that it seems as though the lower half of the leg has an extra joint bending the wrong way, giving the appearance of a very large foot rather than a tiny pad, slapping firmly against the earth and taking a strong grip on it. They lift their feet in a comparable manner, like drum-majorettes, the upper half of the leg parallel with the <sup>r</sup>ground and the lower half perpendicular, until, on stamping the leg down, the lower half suddenly shoots

forward to become part of the foot. That's the way it looks, even if it can't really be that way.

The cat audience also enacts a role. They pretend <sup>elaborate</sup> disinterest <sup>and</sup> ~~as they~~ casually <sup>ness in</sup> approach <sup>the</sup> the hunter. But there is larceny in their hearts.

The rule of the game, as it developed over the years, calls for the deposit of the mouse for sport and inspection as soon as the hunter reaches the closest corner of the house. She plays with it, whether it is dead or alive. If the mouse has expired, with short, sharp bats with one paw, she motivates it into a semblance of life while <sup>with</sup> the other paw she pounces upon it. At this point, the others are supposed to try to steal the mouse. <sup>they don't often</sup> ~~The cats rarely~~ eat the mice because they are well fed. This pleases me, for if they killed only to eat, our place would be overrun with mice. When they do eat mice, I think it is for either a variety in the diet or for ostentation.

These mice, however, dead or alive, provide an endless series of subordinate games of almost infinite variety, but all beginning with this prelude. The names of the games, all calling for appropriate attitudes of the body and its various parts and suitable facial expressions, are: "Who's Got The Mouse?"; "What Is a Mouse?"; "Who Said Mouse?"; "What's a Mouse For?"; "Where Did the Mouse Go?"; "Mice are For People"; "Here, Mousey, Mousey", and other similar ones sometimes improvised.

One sunny morning Oskar entered the play. He invented a new game: "Oskar's Got the Mouse". Everybody was surprised, the cats, my wife and I, and especially Oskar. ~~It~~ took a turn he did not anticipate. But once he got into the game, for which there was no

precedent, he had to carry it off. He couldn't just chicken out. And that was difficult, even for Oskar!

Which one of the cats brought that fateful mouse up for the inspection, admiration and torment of her relatives we don't know. Neither my wife nor I saw the beginning of the incident. We just presume that Oskar decided the trophy was his, on the simple basis that he wanted it, this was his domain, everyone in it was his serf, and, naturally, all the property was his, too, if he wanted it. Our knowledge and observation began with my wife's exclamation, "Look at this! Look at Oskar! I think he's going crazy!"

First I rushed to the window through which she was looking, then we rushed outside together. Oskar was standing over a large enameled dishpan located in the shadow of the peachtree. It was his private water fount, bath and swimming pool. Like all waterfowl, he has a perfect passion for water. Their digestive systems require relatively large amounts of water. It is a common fiction that they require water for successful breeding. They do not, although the larger and more awkward ganders have their efforts assisted by the flotation of the female. Waterfowl do love to bathe, and Oskar was no exception. He had adequate provision for his drinking water in a utensil that largely defied his greatest interest in water, play. Like all other geese and ducks, water was, for him, primarily a means of making a mess for humans. He, like all his kind, <sup>WAS</sup> ~~is~~ adept in inventing means of splashing and wasting water in a manner guaranteeing the biggest mess over the largest area, hence, the narrow utensil, into which he could get only his head.

After watching his successful efforts to bathe in the shallow

trench in which the rainwater runs off behind the  
 (Picture) house, and touched by the obvious pleasure this afforded  
 him, my wife thought he deserved better accommodations and gave him  
 her largest dishpan, a vessel that permitted him to sit in it without  
 touching the sides and deep enough for the water to rise almost to  
 the top of his back. Muttering contentedly to himself, Oskar would  
 spend long periods of time in his tub, flouncing and splashing the  
 water all over his body. With the skill of his kind, he could force  
 droplets under his wings and between them and his body. The sun fil-  
 tering through the leaves of the tree played flickering lights on  
 the sparkling droplets and made his toilet a beautiful thing to behold.

The origin of the instinct he was indulging when we stopped  
 discreetly behind him is unclear to me, for I cannot trace it to  
 either his wild heritage or to his domesticated ancestry, but he,  
 like all other domesticated geese we have had, soaked anything he  
 wanted to eat that was too large to swallow and too hard to break.  
 In the wild, geese face no such needs. They eat seeds, grains and  
 grasses. Through the years of evolutionary development, their harvest-  
 ing equipment has adapted itself to handle these foods. In addition  
 to the fine needle-like serrations edging both mandibles, their thick  
 and rather large tongues have sprouted a series of sharp spines along  
 both sides and toward the rear. These are more like thorns than teeth.  
 In the Canadian Honker they are about a quarter of an inch long, yet  
 are invisible except upon the closest inspection. With admirable con-  
 cern for function, Nature arranged these like a transmission belt with  
 flexible appendages to propel the food toward the gullet. Thus the  
 serrations of the bill, which serve as but are really not teeth, facili-

tate the biting off of blades of grass and seeds, and the tongue spines help in swallowing them. Neither is designed for chewing.

There are some wild birds, like Jays, who soak their hard foods. Jays shell peanuts, for example, and soak and break them into bite-size before <sup>eat</sup> swallowing the pieces. But these are not Oskar's ancestors.

Domesticated geese, through generations of cultivation, have lived largely on a grass diet, supplemented by grains, the largest of which can be readily swallowed even by immature fowl. Oskar and his domesticated ancestors have developed much larger and stronger mandible "teeth", as grass has through the centuries during which they were evolving from the wild become the most important part of their diet. Their jaws have also become much more powerful than those of wild geese. While not contrived for chewing hard substances, between their larger "teeth" and more powerful jaws, domesticated geese can crunch or break some hard things they want to eat but do not dare to swallow whole.

Among our customers were a number of restaurateurs who never served day-old bread. They gave this to me and I used it ~~as~~ as a feed, but more as a means of attaining a more intimate relationship with the birds as I taught them to trust me and to eat from the hand. Sometimes the bread accumulates, and as it stales, it hardens. Rye and pumpernickle get so hard a strong man has trouble breaking it. And bagels? They get like rocks!

As I fed them, the geese would try to chew what they had but would abandon it and seek easier chewing if any were available. <sup>WHEN</sup> After all the softest bread had been gobbled down, they would return to the

hard stuff. After a few unsuccessful crunches, they would bee-line to the pond with the bread and soak it until soft enough to eat. Without ever having had any contact with other geese, Oskar had the same impulse. Actually, he was strong enough at the time of this great embarrassment to chew bread <sup>I</sup> could not break into pieces small enough for him to swallow.

The scene that greeted us was already in technicolor. White Oskar, his blue eyes flashing in mixed anger and frustration, was swishing his white head and neck through the water, a gray mouse in his orange bill, and blood from the tiny rodent was already coloring the water. It was easy to guess what had happened.

Oskar had stolen the mouse, although from his point of view he undoubtedly was only taking what his by right, crunched down on it, and found that it didn't break. Only the bones snapped. He chewed and chewed, and each time he released the pressure of his powerful jaws, the mouse sprang back <sup>INTO MORE OR LESS</sup> to its original shape. The more he exerted himself, the clearer it became he couldn't reduce the mouse to bite-size pieces. In a burst of anger his little mind told him, "Soften it up, like the bread," and he had rushed to the pan for this purpose.

He swished and flailed, chewed and complained, churning the water into a storm of crimson swirls and eddies, to the accompaniment of an ungoosely sound like a blending of the ugly buzz of swarming bees and the frustrated, falsetto notes made famous by the Ritz brothers of an earlier day - a shrill, continuous "mmmmmm" on which the "zzzzz" had been superimposed. After each brief series of gyrations, he would lift the mouse from the water and examine it, looking down his long beak and cocking his head first to one side, then the

other, as though he expected one eye to see what the other didn't, as though asking, "Why haven't you softened up? Why aren't you falling apart?" But neither his massive bites nor the vigorous soaking achieved his aim. His failure increased his perplexity, and with his increasing bewilderment came a rise in the passion with which he applied himself, an even more rapid and more violent cycling of the mouse. By the time the water was a bright red, he decided to try

(picture)

chewing the mouse while holding onto it with one of his big feet and pulling with his strong neck. He is the only goose we ever saw attempt this manoeuvre, not uncommon among other birds. But the mouse did not cooperate. It refused to be pulled apart, into pieces. So he set to renewed chewing, laying his head and neck closer and closer to the ground, like a dog working on a bone. The stronger his effort, the closer his head got to the ground, as though it gave him a fulcrum for leverage. He failed, and his failure was public and complete. Oskar was not one to accept humiliation, with or without grace. He was as persistent as a web-spinning spider. We took pictures of his come-uppance and left him alone with his embarrassment. He was still struggling when we returned to our respective duties.

How long he persisted, we don't know. My wife observed him attempting to undo his self-decreed public disgrace over a period of several hours. He acted as though he realized he had revealed to the cats and Gimp the proof positive that he was not, as he pretended, omnipotent; that he had lost face, and that it had done all this alone and unassisted, in fact, even unprovoked.

Ultimately, he abandoned the mouse. When we changed the water,



it was about a yard away, much flattened, but still recognizable. For the next several days, Oskar was subdued, less active and quieter than usual, as though he recognized he had disgraced himself and had better let things return to normal while attracting as little attention as possible to himself.

The cats, however, made his self-imposed aloofness hard to maintain. Whether because of a streak of feline contumaciousness or because they misread Oskar's own estimate of his encounter with the mouse and thought he was having a good time, I don't know. Beginning that day, there was hardly a morning when one didn't bring up a mouse and deposit it near his feet or abandon it on the step for him! If he had, in their collective opinion, enjoyed the mouse, they were being kind. If they believed he had been embarrassed, they were certainly needling him, giving him a challenge he could not meet. There is also the possibility they were merely paying tribute. Regardless of the reason, I was happy, for to me the only good mouse is a dead one.

Oskar met the situation well. From his reaction of quiet acceptance, it was not possible to determine whether he thought they were saying, "Here, wise guy, let's see what you can do with this," a challenge; or, "Lord of the manor, a tribute," a graceful consideration. His answer could have fit either. He pretended mice were <sup>only</sup> for playing with.

Oskar had never had any interest in such play. When he was younger, feeling that when he was alone for large portions of the day he might be lonely, we had attempted to interest him in diversions with balls, sticks, rubber rings hanging and swinging on a stout twine,