

Chapter X

Goose with a Bloody Nose

If the mouse theft was a defeat for Oskar, it was not his only one. He survived it, as he did all his few reverses, with no perceptible loss of aplomb. But an earlier misadventure, as funny as any I have ever seen among animals, baffled him. As usual, he was not slow to learn from it, for he was, actually, quite perceptive. He was just unwilling to learn. Yet his instincts should have warned him against it. Knowing Oskar, I believe his instincts worked well, only not well enough to surmount the powerful drive of his vanity.

Without doubt, Oskar was a thoroughly "bad" boy, a mixture of Penrod, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. But the origin of his character, the one thing that should, above all others, have dictated his behavior, was his heritage. ^{in some way} As reflected in Oskar, this inheritance bears but little resemblance to its natural incidence in nature. Perhaps it would be more precise to say the root is of natural origin, but that in Oskar, as from a gene gone mad through radioactivity, it grew beyond casual recognition.

^(Extra space)
The feeling of responsibility and the willing acceptance of that responsibility is one of the most admirable attributes of the male goose. It comes even before sexual maturity and the assumption of the obligations imposed by a mate and a family. Geese have those

wonderful human qualities we like to think people have. In a flock of immature geese, one or two ^{YOUNG} immature ganders will act as head of the family, ordering the others around, making at least the pretense of threatening real or fancied dangers, and, in general, acting like father geese do. In a flock of adult geese, each married gander is, in fact, head of a family, and he never forgets it or ever acts in a way other than proper for pater familias.

Polygamous but faithful to their wives, ganders make a great fuss over them. As they walk to graze or to water, ^{each} he may lead his family, or may walk alongside one of his wives, usually his favorite, loudly honking his affection, proclaiming his unending fidelity, declaring her or their beauty and charm are without equal, and whatever else he at the moment feels will let her or them know that she or they are unique in the world; that life would be barren for him without her or them, and that as long as he lives he will never change. Above all else, he assures, nothing ^{evil}/will ever befall her or them. He accompanies his loud, intense and cacophonous declamations with gestures that to humans may seem as awkward as his walk until they learn how geese should look. When people understand that, then, in their own way, these bulky creatures, designed originally for flying rather than walking, are indeed graceful. Especially is this true in their exclamatory use of the neck and wings.

The devoted gander making over his mate caresses her without contact by the forceful and expressive gestures of his head and neck. The neck is long and flexible, allowing for the rotation of the head almost 360 degrees. He uses it like a thick whip in slow motion, sinuously weaving it in a charming pattern over her head and back,

sometimes in front of her, while he ^Nprances stiff-leggedly. His head goes through a veritable dance on the end of his gesticulating neck. Sometimes it is straight out, when his elocution waxes strongest; sometimes it is close by her ear, when his neck is curved and his voice more subdued. He may extend it poker-straight toward the sky, opening his mouth wide as he honks, ^{MORE SHRILLY.} In all these postures, his neck, normally so plastic, is rigid. It moves from its root on the body. If he is holding it curved, it remains as though frozen in that curve, although from its base he may wave it, wand-like, in any direction. Infrequently, he entwines her neck with his for a brief, rare moment of physical contact. Most fowl do not get the pleasure humans and fur-bearers derive from physical contact and stroking or petting.

The honk that is raucous and coarse to the untrained human ear is capable of great modulations and expresses a wide variety of nuances of feeling, all quite comprehensible to the seemingly stolid but deeply touched female, who often, like a Slav applauding his own speech, responds in a like manner. It may be noise to a human but it is love and affection to a goose, and she appreciates it and never fails, in honk and deed, to let him know.

All the while he is ^{GOING} doing a heavy little dance, ~~for he is~~ walking sideways, looking at his mate rather than where he is going, and is spiritually and often actually on tiptoe and half-prancing. Such manoeuvres are not easy for such a cumbersome bird, and nature ill-prepared him for it. He is bulky and has legs and thighs that are, as might be expected of a creature nature intended to fly, both short and weak. This places his body so close to the ground when he is fully erect that, in the heavier breeds, the best ^{SPECIMENS} seem to slide

their bellies on the ground when they walk.

The emotions I have said the gander expresses are not a poetic imagining. They are the real thing and part of the everyday life of all geese, to whom each day brings another opportunity for the display and proof of unending love and togetherness. The gander spends all his life showing his wives how much he means what he says.

Knowing how beautiful of mind and body and lovely in character his loves are, each gander believes, with the certainty of the day following the night, that everything else in the world is dedicated to separating him from this best of all possible good fortunes, the love and company of such desirable creatures. Therefore, he considers everything that draws near them, especially other ganders, as intent upon only sinister purposes. To frustrate this, to defend his honor and the sanctity of his home, he is willing to battle, and does. He never dreams that another may walk past his love with complete indifference. He conceives only of rape. As anything nears his mate, he first honks a warning, then adds meaningful and unmistakable gestures and, if these fail, attacks, strong and hard - and very loudly.

With the advent of the breeding season, the coming of which he feels with the hormonal outpouring of his pituitary that in turn is stimulated by the lengthening part of the day that is light, he becomes even fiercer in his suspicious and more demonstrative in his attentiveness. When the union is blessed with young, he is so conscious of their defenselessness and so overcome with pride and emotion that there is nothing he will not do, no danger he will not hazard, if he ^{ONLY IMAGINES} feels they are threatened.

- But perhaps above all he is a practitioner of the live-and-let-live philosophy. He lusts for no other's mate, threatens no other's children, and is incapable of deliberately injuring an innocent, so long as his family is not troubled by the intentions, always suspicious to him, of any others. Stay a reasonable distance away without menacing them and he is the safest of animals; get too close and he is a powerful, dangerous, feathered fury. Rarely are his goslings under real danger from without, but often they are from him, for in the intensity of his protectiveness, while he is gesticulating and hissing his warnings, with his head low and his mouth menacingly open, with his strong wings widely spread as a shelter for his young and a threat to his opponent, his passion is unheeding and he is quite likely to unknowingly trample and kill the very babies he thinks he is protecting.

On the farm, countless goose families live and graze together in peace and harmony, ^{each} respecting the rights and ^{feelings} sensibilities of others. They are no problem to themselves or the understanding attendant, whose good friend they become and whom they trust. ^{HARMONY AND} The unity of their family life ^{is} ^{of} ^{an} ^{inspirational} beauty. ^{It} ^{derives} from this devotion and responsibility. ^{They}

How these fine instincts found such unlikely manifestation in Oskar, God alone knows. But this, ^{EMOTION,} I am confident, is the origin of his vigorous and autocratic behavior. I cannot explain how, like other geese, he failed to recognize and respect ^{SENSIBILITY} the same ~~instinct~~ in others. He did not respect their territories, yet he had a very clear concept of his own, where he was unchallenged and would brook no challenge. He knew his territory was bounded by the fences, and he never

even tried to go beyond them. Everything that lived here knew it was his domain. Everything and everybody that visited he soon, in his own inimitable way, told, "I'm boss here." His manner was simple, direct and convincing. He would waddle right up to them, flash his long neck like a striking snake and bite. Little things he would just nip. The larger the person or animal, the harder the bite. He knew just how hard to bite, for we never say him draw blood. If the visitor stood still, that was all there was to it. Oskar had made himself clear. If they resisted or fled, he'd flog and bite and honk up such a storm that whoever he was attacking, animal or human, took to its heels, the victim of a combination of surprise, clamor, fear and pain. The tiniest child could walk around safely as long as he displayed neither fear nor aggressiveness. Oskar could smell fear as a cat smells fish, and he loved it as much. He enjoyed few pleasures equal to the delight of chasing a coward.

So it is surprising ~~to me~~ that he didn't respect the rights of others or the territories in which he really had no interest. Especially is this true of our wild geese, Canadian honkers, who live on the other side of the fences. His education by them was painful, but he was educated.

Mr. Orchard Honker, so named because his wife (honkers are monogamous) had her nest in the orchard, is the first wild bird I trained to come at my call and eat from my hand. It required a month of the most persistent effort on my part, a month during which I risked the most brutal kind of beating, while his wife was incubating their eggs. Finally, I earned his confidence. He showed his trust by bringing first his wife and then his babies to eat from my hand.

Two or three times a day they appeared at the gate near the back of our house and he called. Once the babies learned to like the bread crumbs we fed them, neither of the ^{parents} honkers would then eat. Instead, they went through the most frightful hissings and honkings and warning motions that succeeded in keeping all the other geese (and the cats on their ^{opposite} side of the fence) away. The tremendous feeling of responsibility found in domesticated geese reaches its apotheosis in wild geese, and in ours most of all in Mr. Orchard. Every step of the slow journey, adjusted to the speed of the babies, from the orchard to that back gate, was carefully announced by the proper honkings, and ^{living} nothing was at all close to any of the family during the trip.

Once the babies were eating, the parents were happy, for all their demonstrations. But they were always on guard, always fancying a horrible danger threatened the young. The ability of these geese to detect the presence of other fowl walking silently on the grass, even when their backs were turned and above their own loud clamor, is simply incredible and never ceases to astound me. I can recall no occasion on which any other living thing approached within twenty feet of their rear or sides without being detected and put to flight.

Respecting this wonderful display and anticipating Oskar's jealousy, we made it a point to feed him first and generously, at some distance, on his own side of the fence. Usually we shared the feeding, my wife attending to the babies and I to Oskar. One day, however, the phone rang just as the feeding commenced. I placed all of Oskar's food beside him and answered the phone. Without me to block his way, Oskar ignored his own ample meal, deciding he wanted what the babies were getting. Having never had any real opposition from

anything but a human, he ignored the clear warnings from Papa Honker. Oskar understood them, as even the cats and dogs did. He just ignored them.

Mr. Orchard Honker's restraint was as surprising as it was admirable. Oskar was then larger than he, though then not full grown. First the father honked in a special way, a little higher in pitch and a lot faster in tempo. It sounded as though he were honking while inhaling and while exhaling. When Oskar ignored this, the honker very pointedly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, somewhat like a sparring fighter. Next in his ritual was a combination device: while continuing the prancing, he spread his wings, vibrated his entire body rapidly, and simultaneously fluffed out his feathers - all of them - making them seem to be standing up and giving the impression he was twice his actual size. This is a warning mechanism common among many species of wild birds. Oskar, without doubt, correctly read his intentions. But he paid no heed. When this failed, the dutiful father made his final and completely unmistakable gesture, one made by all the geese we have known and the prelude to imminent attack. Because of his color and shape, this warning seemed even more menacing coming from him, and because of his obvious and natural concern for his young, Lil never dreamed Oskar would ignore it. The gander lowered his long, sleek black neck to the ground, so close that his breast seemed to touch it and his lower mandible barely to clear it. With his black bill wide open and his red tongue flicking rapidly, he looked like an angry snake. He hissed his final warning as for the first time he advanced. It was at this point I returned.

There was nothing casual about the honker's manner. Clearly, he was deadly serious. Yet he did not plunge ahead wildly. He planted

each foot with determination as he slowly advanced, the gentleman giving the interloper ample opportunity to withdraw safely.

Oskar, meanwhile, with all the foolish confidence of a spoiled child who always has his own way, kept working his head through the fence and stealing the breadcrumbs from the goslings. Only when the irate father was within striking distance did Oskar pull his foolish head back through the fence. I recall that when they were close together, Oskar the boy Emden was much larger than the grown honker. I also recall wondering if at long last Oskar had come to his sense.

Not for long did I wonder. As the gander continued his deliberate advance to the fence, like a gladiator sizing up his opponent, Oskar held his ground and just looked at the gander. I have never seen any creature move with the slow determination of that father. It was almost as though, while fulfilling his obligations to his family, he was giving the young upstart a chance to retire gracefully, almost as though he had carefully thought the whole thing through.

Now a gander who is an expectant or a new father is a much more formidable fighter than he ordinarily is. Mr. Honker had demonstrated this very clearly by keeping away from his nest and his flock other ganders who had earlier whipped him.

At the very moment he reached the fence, some wild, insane impulse took possession of Oskar. Apparently recalling only that everything else had yielded to him, he thrust his foolish head through the wires of the fence and awkwardly, amateurishly, made an unsuccessful effort to bite Mr. Orchard.

I have never seen a cobra strike; I have heard it is a very fast motion, so fast the eye cannot follow it. It cannot be any

faster than Mr. Orchard's retaliation. With no other part of his body moving, with both feet firmly planted, he coiled his supple neck just far enough back to avoid Oskar's bite and then lashed his head forward, fast as a cracking whip.

As he latched onto Oskar's intruding protuberance, that astounded young man uttered a plaintive, surprised cry, almost a sob, a very unusual sound for any fowl, and especially for a goose. After a vigorous shaking, the gander relinquished his hold and just stood there, glaring at the offender.

In the fastest move I ever saw him make, Oskar pulled his head back through the fence and held his beak out as though it were a smashed thumb.

For the first time in my life, I saw a goose with a bloody nose!

Hard as Oskar's bill is, and relatively weak as a honker's jaws are, I was absolutely astounded that the enraged father had found the strength to draw blood from that bone-like beak.

Oskar was even more astonished. Continuing to wail, he twisted his head first to one side and then to the other and, in complete bewilderment, watched his blood as it dripped, dripped, dripped down his bill and onto the ground.

"Serves you right!" Lil scolded him, between her peals of laughter. "Keep your nose where it belongs and it won't get hurt," she added in mock severity, waving her pointed finger at the distressed goose.

It was a ludicrous scene, that big bully of a foolish goose, weeping like a baby, baffled by the audacity of anyone who had the

gall to defy him, humiliated by his defeat, in pain, and bewildered by the shedding of his own blood. He could think of nothing to do but stand there and wail, and that is what he was doing when we denied him our sympathy and returned to the house.