

Chapter XVI

Oskar the Workman

However, Oskar was not a worker, even though he enjoyed tending the fire, which some might consider work. The truth is, he was downright lazy, disgracefully so.

Of course, he did serve a few useful functions in our establishment. He was a real watchdog, as might be expected by those who know geese. They are famed as sentries. If he wanted to Oskar could hear a gnat bat its eyes. This acuteness of hearing is an inheritance. History records that the geese sacred to Juno and resident in her temple on Cataline Hill once saved Rome from the barbarians. The invaders had overrun the Italian peninsula as far as Rome. The legions of soldiers posted their guards at night and staked out watchdogs as an added precaution. But those barbarians were like American Indians in the days of the wild west. They filtered past the dogs on silent feet and evaded the sentinels. Just as they were nearing the gates of Rome, Juno's geese sounded the alarm that awakened the beleaguered defenders. Just in time, too.

Some of the descendants of these geese lived with us at the time Oskar did, but he never associated with them. Our Sacred Romans lived on the animal side of the fence and Oskar on the people side. Roman geese are now so rare that it took us almost four years to locate

these, and then we had to import them.

Their hearing was no sharper than that of other geese, wild or domesticated. All geese have a remarkable acuteness of hearing. The Ballantyne distillery in Scotland employs as nightwatchmen a flock of graceful White China geese. These geese, also known as "swan geese" because of their resemblance to the larger waterfowl, in their graceful, effortless, seemingly motionless swimming and in the prominent knob on their foreheads, march around the stacked hog-heads of whiskey at night and, at the slightest indication of any intrusion, honk a warning that brings the armed guards running.

Oskar's sense of hearing was what, from his inheritance, it should have been - very sensitive. Like the geese of Rome and Scotland, he announced everything that came near - dogs, cats, skunks, people, and sometimes, I think, bugs, because he was always honking an alarm and we were always running and often saw nothing. No useful purpose was served by the announcement of the arrival of our own cats and dog, but, faithful to tradition, Oskar proclaimed it. The skunk needed no announcement, for he sent his own ahead. Nightly on his rounds he visited briefly with Oskar while gleaning after the cats, and nightly Oskar informed us before our noses. Once this almost led to the imaginable disaster when I hastily opened the door on the nearby skunk who, fortunately, was not unnerved.

Oskar thus became our unwatchdog, for he honked so frequently, but not once in discovery of a marauder, that we had to learn to ignore him. At the same time, he untrained our gentle Susie, who had been a real watchdog. It was not that she huffed up in indignation at his usurpation of her function. She had rendered us valuable ser-

vice for ten years, and in that time had learned her services were both valued and appreciated. It was that she submitted to his tyranny. Not having questioned his assumption of authoritarian powers over the area of our homesite when he was a gosling, making the same mistake the cats did, out of her compassion and tenderness, it was too late when she had a bellyfull, for he had conditioned her, too, to fear him. Because she could not bring herself to snap his sassy neck, she had to accept his abuses or stay out of his reach.

Now, Susie has a mighty roar, a full-throated voice that frightens strangers with its depth and volume. Unlike Oskar, she never used it without a clearly defined purpose that we could comprehend. If an animal was prowling, we knew it and knew the direction, which was where she pointed. If a stranger came down the road or into the lane, Susie told us. She had her disadvantages, too, but they were not as numerous as Oskar's and she didn't indulge them as frequently. The dark of night and the heat of the midday sun were alike to her if she wanted to enter the house, and she cared naught if the lights were out, which told her we were asleep. Day began at three or four o'clock for me, but if Susie decided to come in at two, she was untroubled by the already foreshortened night's sleep our schedule and needs imposed. She mounted the back step and roared her desire. Naturally, she was admitted expeditiously.

Oskar did break that up. Susie was too much afraid of him to get close to the back door at night, for the step became his favorite bed after he adopted Liliput and Magniput. Because of her fear of Oskar, when she wanted to come in the house, where she could spend contented hours behind my platform rocker, safe from cats, kittens

and Oskar, she learned to bark sotto voce, a wee faint bark^N, like Bottom's lion's roar. It was a whisper of a bark, a falsetto imitation. All our dogs have had falsetto voices, ~~but~~ Always they reserved them for the expression of highly emotional ideas, like, "How glad I am that you are home," or, "How fine a meal this smells like it is going to be." But Susie, thinking thereby to escape detection by Oskar, learned to bark, sotto voce, thank Oskar!

It was almost six months after his kidnapping before she returned to full decibel. By that time she had fixed nocturnal habits and no longer demanded entrance after she was put out for the night. For the uninterrupted nights we continue in Oskar's debt.

So, we cannot honestly say that Oskar worked as a watchdog.

Geese generally are among nature's best weeders. Unlike goats, which can and do eat almost anything, geese have selective appetites, eating only what they like and then only when they like it. Goats, who also enjoy a well-earned reputation as land-clearers, must be securely fenced in on a farm unless they are ranged on land not in cultivation. The common-law requirement in our area, that a fence must be "hawg-tight, bull-strong and horse-high", is the minimum for a goat. For clearing overgrown land, the goat is ideal but the goose ill-suited.

Much of the honeysuckle, briar and weed growth that was mowed down when ~~I~~^{we} began to reclaim our farm from 51 years of abandonment was actually eaten by goats. I bought our first one when I was driving along a road about eight miles away and saw a white creature I thought might be a goat only by the rapid elimination of all the other species that suggested themselves to my ill-informed city man's

~~man's~~

mind. While I was watching, it bit a rosebush in half and contentedly munched the severed stem. Fifteen minutes later she was named "Buttsy" and was riding alongside me as I drove home. That winter Lil's Aunt Maud, annoyed every time she looked out of her kitchen window to see a tangle of honeysuckle that was both dense and high, asked if she might borrow Buttsy to battle the honeysuckle. The goat and I walked up to Aunt Maud's that evening and I left the animal tethered to the fence through which the vine had woven itself.

A week later Aunt Maud walked down to visit us. After the proper exchanges of inquiries and small talk, Lil asked how the goat was doing.

"Oh, fine," she replied. "She is really making that honeysuckle disappear. Acts like my boys do when they sit down to a steak. She just loves honeysuckle."

"That's good," Lil said. Then, intending humor, "We knew she liked our honeysuckle and supposed she'd like yours just as well."

Aunt Maud's face was a little clouded and she looked as though something was on her mind. Lil asked if there was, and she admitted a concern over the goat.

"I wonder if she is well," she finally said.

"What makes you think she might not be?" Lil asked.

"Well, she doesn't drink any water. I carry some to her several times a day. When I return, it is either upset or untouched. I watch her and she never drinks. In fact, when I hold the bucket under her head, she pulls back and wrinkles her upper lip like it's something bad. When we raised cows, they drank lots of water unless they were sick."

"I once had the same worry," Lil admitted. "I must have carried water to her for a good month without ever seeing her drink any. Once I picked up a bucket in which Harold had mixed some medication for the chickens, although I didn't know it. She drank some of that and smacked her lips. I guess goats like sulfaquinoxiline, but not water. Don't worry, as long as she eats the vine."

That's what goats are good for. They are also bad for gardens, young fruit trees, flowerbeds, clothes on the line, and almost any decorative shrubbery. They love to climb onto cars and stand on the hood or roof and are more than willing to enter almost any open door and eat the upholstered furniture or auto seats.

On the other hand, geese are more dignified and restrained. They are justly renowned as weeders. In the cotton fields of the south and west and strawberry patches all over the country, they have been responsible for almost as much occupational ^{work} employment as automation. Geese will begin at the end of a row of cotton and eat their way down it, without touching the crop, which they have the fortunate idiosyncrasy of detesting. If they find a bucket of water at the end of the row, they'll wash down what they have eaten, rest a few minutes, and graze their way back down another row, where again they need only water. The same with strawberries, except that there is one time the farmer must guard against. When the berries ripen, they are as dependable as an unwatched boy in a candy store. As they abominate cotton, abhor strawberry plants and shun the green fruit, they relish the ripe berries, and they will harvest the crop without need for bucket or basket, given the opportunity.

Oskar brought us some of the disadvantages of the goat and none

of the advantages of the goose when it came to weeding. He would no more eat weeds than we would. The fact is, less, for there are certain excellent weeds, like lambs quarter and land cress, that we enjoy when they are young. Not Oskar. Partly, he was just lazy; partly, he wasn't goose. He had access to all Lil's many flower beds and he ignored them, except for napping when the plants were high enough to be ruined once he used them as a mattress. But he never pulled a weed from any of them.

Lil had to do Oskar's weeding for him. He had the indecency to keep her company when she did so, and occasionally deigned to take a weed from her hand ^{not} -/from the earth - and eat it in a manner that clearly said, "I'm doing this for you." He liked to keep her company, and he kept up a line of chatter all the time, much as though giving her instructions.

He also "helped" her in other horticultural ways. Once when she was transplanting irises, he stayed a little behind her. She could hear him talking but paid him no heed. When she finished the chore and stood up, stretching to ease her back, there was Oskar about a half-dozen steps behind her, industriously pulling up all the newly-set plants. He hadn't missed a single one as far as he had "worked".

In February, just before he was kidnapped, he "helped" with the early tulips. As soon as they were up through the mellowing crust enough for him to get a good grip on them, and for Lil to be excited with the anticipation of their beautiful form and colors, he pulled them up, too. If I hadn't fenced him out of the flowerbed, none would have survived once he taught himself how to "help" Lil.

Once we caught on to it, he was our "early warning system" against helicopters. These horribly noisy craft were, where we lived, guided by the most irresponsible of men. Even after they learned the helicopters were a disaster to our chickens, who regarded them as enormous hawks, the pilots insisted on flying over or too near our farm. It was their deadly effect on the chickens that put us out of business. As though he understood, Oskar did not like helicopters. Lil was outside on some minor chore toward the end of the winter when she heard an odd sound from Oskar before she heard the "swish-swish-swish" of the oncoming metallic bird. Oskar developed a special disconcerted honk for the helicopters. Thereafter, when Lil heard it, she knew Oskar's signal would soon be followed by that awful noise that she, even more than I, grew to hate and fear.

None of our geese ever paid much heed to the helicopters unless they were both very close and very, very low. Only Oskar, who had no inherited reason for terror, as the chickens did. The poor chickens were restrained in densely populated buildings. Never having had the capacity for sustained flight, their inherited survival mechanism impelled them to take off, in a wild, hysterical panic. They piled up in corners, milling insanely and damaging themselves severely, both physically and emotionally. Geese, on the other hand, do not have this same fear of the hawk. Before domestication, they did have the capacity for protracted flight. On our farm they had ample room on the outside to run, if they so desired. Oskar's dislike of the helicopter was either another of his human characteristics or a sympathetic reaction, something like ^{Lil's} ~~my~~ sister-in-law Belle getting sick when ~~another~~ sister-in-law, Thelma, was pregnant and quite well.

Oskar's value as a workman

was in the complaint of

Unintentionally, it was neatly summed up ~~for me~~ by an Italian stonemason friend, Frank Grecca. "In this country, you got funny sayings," he complained. "You say, 'work like a dog'. In my country, dog no work. Never see him work here, either."

That's the way Oskar "worked", like the dog in Frank's aphorism.