

Chapter XVIII

Oskar's First Love

Oskar's other major phobia was a compound of aberration and precocity. The aberration was not as unusual for a born male goose as it may seem. If I knew who had fathered him, I might have traced it to that source. Oskar was subject to a fetish. To him it was love, but to us, there is no denying it, it was something less. Our pre-Oskar favorite Emden gander, "Big Papa", was also for a brief period fetish-ridden. He could have been Oskar's father or grandfather. In the lovelorn or frustrated male goose, these aberrant manifestations are not unknown.

Oskar's precocity is likewise easily, if uncomfortably, described. Let's face it, he was just over-sexed. And he reached the age of sexual interest and desire earlier than any Emden of whom there is a record. He was at what might be termed a pre-puberty age when smitten.

The fetish seems to have been related to pyromania. It was certainly related to his sex drive. And both come from the most truly admirable qualities in any animals, part of Oskar's inheritance, although, from the way it showed, you wouldn't think so.

The male goose is one of the most responsible, constant and devoted creatures in the world. Most are not monogamous, but all are

faithful to their mates. The domesticated species enhance their economic value to the farmer by taking more than one wife. But the common wild Canadian goose ^{takes only} has a single wife. The permanence of the bond and the intensity of the loving relationships more than justify the use of the word "wife". Many wives would be happy to find their husbands as totally indifferent to other women as is the gander to geese other than his own.

The only philanderer we ever had in the hundreds of geese we raised was a white Chinese gander who earned a brief period of international front-page fame when he was the leader of our "Geese for Peace" project. This was my first effort to direct attention to the needs of the newly emerging lands for inexpensive sources of animal proteins and the suitability of the goose for this purpose, because it inexpensively converts weeds and vegetation into these proteins.

We called him "Grandpa". Grandpa was always normally faithful to each of his four wives. He let his eye wander only on ^{our} my behalf, never in lust. It was only when ^{there was} I had an unmated Emden goose that Grandpa hopped into the strange bed. Had he not, the eggs of that goose would have been infertile and would have produced no goslings. Grandpa never showed any attachment to the few Emdens he served, and they never attempted to join his family. His function, so far as he ^{they} and I were concerned, was purely utilitarian.

His valued services, in fact, became apparent only after the eggs hatched, when the hybrid nature of the goslings was clear.

White Chinese ganders can adequately meet the requirements of as many as five wives. Emdens, larger, heavier and more sluggish, normally serve two or three, but Big Papa was married to as many as

four at a time, without complaint from any of them. The other domesticated species are of similar dispositions, the smaller ganders enjoying the larger harems and the larger geese the smaller harems.

When ganders have more than one wife, they are human about it. They have a favorite. They do not disguise their favoritism, and none of the other wives show any resentment at not being first. Nikita Khrushchev did not have geese in mind, but his phrase is an apt description of the position of the number one wife. She is "first among equals".

There are many ways in^{which} the gander demonstrates the equality of his wives. During the breeding and hatching season, he keeps them all together. He sees to it, not always successfully, that they all establish their nests close to each other, for he is on guard when any of them is in her nest. Usually, he has the then-occupied wives near his side so he can protect them all while any one is laying an egg.

When they are pasturing, he intersperses his eating with declarations of unending devotion, descriptions of the consummate beauty and attractiveness and the great desirability of each. To people it all sounds like "honk, honk, haronk", but geese and people who study and love them know exactly what he is saying and how much he really means it. As they walk to and from the pasture and move from one part of it to another, he leads them with courtly gestures in which he makes special, meaningful use of his long neck, one of his organs of expression. He molds it into a graceful curve, then stiffens it and waves it like a wand over their backs and necks and around them in an upward and downward or sideways motion which accompanies his intense

and passionate vocal declarations. Closest to him is his favorite, but he is diligent in making his deep feelings similarly known to his other wives.

So great is his love and so strong his jealousy that he suspects every other creature in the world - not only ganders - wants to steal his lady-loves from him. He trusts nobody and nothing, although in farm life he tends to become a little less suspicious of his attendant. Not, however, to the point that he will permit close proximity, such as when the attendant seeks eggs in the nest on which one of his wives is sitting. Often, in fact, he considers the nest itself equally inviolate and attacks the attendant of whom he may be fond if he sees him at the nest.

"All the world loves my goose" seems to be his motto that is so complimentary to his wives. His actions reflect his belief that all the world should want to love them, an additional delicacy of emotion that his wives sense and appreciate.

Should his family separate, the gander is apprehensive and anxiously calls them together. He recognizes their voices that seem so much alike to the human ear, and they know his from all others. A call that is ^{by others} otherwise unnoticed is a clarion to him, and he rushes off in fear of the worst disaster when he hears a separated mate call.

The goose family is constantly declaring and demonstrating love and devotion to each other in what to me is the barnyard's most charming and touching reflection of those wonderful human qualities people think they alone possess.

If the gander is distraught by the temporary separation from a mate, how much greater his distress at a permanent separation! When

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thus bereaved, Big Papa "fell in love" with a waterpipe, buckets and other miscellaneous objects that, for reasons he alone understood, reminded him of his lost love. However, until Oskar, I had never seen a fetish in a bachelor gander, an immature one, at that; only in widowers.

Some of the heavier breeds of geese often do not mate and may, in fact, be incapable of mating until after they are a year old. They are not considered really mature and in their prime until about their fifth year. They have probably the longest productive life on the farm, certainly the longest life. There are authenticated cases of geese living past their hundredth year.

But Oskar, as I have said, was precocious. Really, he was very precocious. ^{and how} When ^A he learned about the birds and bees, I do not know, but he demonstrated his knowledge when he was still, in people terms, a baby, less than two months old. For any species, except Japanese quail, which mature in five weeks, this is a record. For geese, it is spectacular and not even remotely equaled.

He fell in love with a barrel.

To us, there was nothing unusual about this barrel. It had once contained 55 gallons of a cleaning fluid used to freshen ladies' garments. If this was a link with femininity, it was lost upon us. I had ~~chiseled~~ ^{cut} both ends ^{had been chiseled out.} of this barrel and set it upon three bricks ^{and was used} to use it as a trash burner. Its place was behind our house. There are no trash collections in the country, so we separate our refuse, burning what is combustible and hauling the rest to a dump. To us, this was simply another barrel, not larger or smaller, prettier or uglier, than the dozen or so other barrels used for feed storage and

other purposes on the farm. But to Oskar, it was a very special thing. He saw in it qualities and attractions invisible to mere mortals. It was lovelier than a poet's dream to him.

We first saw his interest only when the barrel was aflame. There had been a drought. We had feared, ^{to} ~~burning~~ ^{ING} trash because sparks fly and are dangerous. After the first rain, the earth was again soft and verdant and the grass less likely to ^{catch fire} ~~turn~~. I had just begun to feed the accumulation to the trash burner when Oskar came charging up, roaring a honking accompaniment to the flames.

He pranced a-tiptoe around the barrel, drawing closer and closer to its hot sides, creating a crescendo of cacophony as he strutted. "Oh, thing of rare beauty; oh, light of my eyes and glow of my heart," he seemed to be ^{declaiming} ~~saying~~ as nearer and nearer he drew and louder and louder he honked. Like everything else he did, Oskar did this ^{ly} ~~in a~~ spectacular manner.

The heat of the fire was so intense, I could not stay near it while dropping the paper ^{to} ~~in~~ it. I had to throw the stuff in from as far away as I could stand and still reach it. Even then, it was so uncomfortable I had to retreat in haste to cool off and breathe again. I couldn't bear to remain close to it.

But Oskar's ardor was so great he scorched his entire breast. He is the only scorched goose I have ever seen. The pure white down of his long and broad breast, that down of fabled softness and sparkling purity, was a blackish-brown mass of coarsened and twisted, denuded feather shafts that curled incongruously in all directions. The fine down itself seemed to have disappeared, leaving only its stems, and instead of laying in a smooth pattern, tightly against

his body, like the straight grain in clear lumber, it bristled in harsh, pigtail-like half-circles.

If anyone was ever afire with love, it was Oskar. His love burned off all his down! "Scorching love" and other such phrases from cheap novels were fact with him. Never has there been so ^{literally} torrid a love!

Nor was this a passing fancy, the whim of passionate but fickle youth, a one-time stand. This was the real and unending thing. Every time I burned trash thereafter, incredible as it seems, Oskar got himself a fresh scorch. The faint traces of white no sooner appeared on his seared breast than he singed them off again against his ^{be} loved one. His determination and persistence, despite what was at the very least a great discomfort, shows the magnitude of his passion.

The passing of time in no way diminished his zeal. His enthusiasm for the barrel that, out of respect for his emotion, we gave a name, "Trash", was even greater when she was cool, for then he would also rub against her with his sides and neck, softening his usual raucous voice into modulated coos. The public display of his most intimate feelings abashed him not a whit. He wanted the entire world to know of his enamoration.

Never did the intense heat she radiated in her proper function deter him. As he grew bolder, he kissed her while she was aglow, hard kisses around her top, just under her lip. I expected her intense heat to furl back his beak to its roots; but, like Siegfried, he was immune to fire when his Brunhilde was in his heart.

That part of her anatomy he found dearest, the one part that, above all, he lavished his hard kisses upon, was, as she stood,

pointed to the east; He saw something different there, some special beauty not apparent to others. To say that he fairly smote her with his kisses is not to exaggerate. In time, between her own heat and the vigor with which he kissed her there, she broke down. First, a little hole appeared. Oskar immediately detected it. It did not sadden him; it merely stimulated his passion, and as he kissed and kissed and kissed, he wore out a piece of her so large he could get his entire head through it with ease.

From then on, whenever she flamed, Oskar reached into her and pulled out her burning pieces, dropping them on the ground where he could see them better and dancing around them to the accompaniment of his own ardent song until nothing remained of them but crumpled black ashes. It was a pagan tribute to his love. Amazingly, he never caught fire for real. But the fire inside him was never slaked.

Our own love for Oskar, and our respect for the consequences of his daring and dangerous love, made us give Trash to him alone. We surrendered all our rights to her use. She became all his. We burned papers elsewhere.

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We are
Perhaps ~~I~~ am lucky that Oskar fell in love with a barrel.

Often imprinted animals identify themselves so completely with those imprinted upon them that, upon reaching sexual maturity, they seek to mate with that species. Had he been consistent, he might have fallen in love with my wife, his mother; with some visitor; or, worse, with me. There is no telling of what he might then have been capable.

But just look at what happened to Konrad Lorenz when, with the advent of the mating season, one of the jackdaws he had imprinted

paid ardent court to him. The love-stricken bird plied the scientist with such goodies as normally charm and captivate the female jackdaw, among whom there is a strong liking for caterpillars. The bird correctly correlated Lorenz's mouth with a female jackdaw's bill, and he persistently tried to force his goodies into it.

When the less than completely cooperative Lorenz refused to part his lips, the courting jackdaw switched to his ears, which he promptly stuffed with the fuzzy inducements.