

Chapter XII

The "Oskar-Swatter"

"The stubborn fool learns slowly," my wife said when Oskar had had his nose blooded for the third time, twice more in the same way. Each time he was flabbergasted, each time he made the same silly motions and wore the same silly expression as he bled. After the third time he was convinced, and he never again intruded into the privacy or domain of the honkers. When last I saw Oskar, which was some months after his last encounter with Mr. Orchard Honker, he still had three sets of scars on his beak. As I said, he learned only the hard way.

From this experience with the honkers, however, Oskar gained one major benefit: he learned the importance of timing, sparring and dodging. This newly acquired aptitude he promptly used to thwart my wife in her efforts to discipline him.

Especially with the arrival of new kittens coinciding with Oskar's greater size and strength as he approached the full size of his kind, we became apprehensive. The kittens were smaller and he was larger and stronger.

"Might he not hurt them?" Lil wondered. Her affection for Oskar greatly exceeded the regard one has for a pet, but her cats, all of them, no matter how many she had, she also loved. There were more

veterinary than medical consultations in our family. She could not bear the thought that any one of them might be hurt by Oskar's play.

"We'll have to teach him the difference between right and wrong," she announced one morning, after watching Oskar nibble suckling kittens with what she regarded as unnecessary vigor. Now this was quite an undertaking, for as Oskar conceived it, he already understood this difference, and he reflected his understanding in his actions. Had he expressed it in human language, he would have said, "What I want is right; all else is wrong." Converting this already fixed belief from his concept to my wife's was no simple undertaking. The truth is, she enjoyed only a limited success. Honesty dictates the admission that the most ^{that} I can truthfully ^{be said} say for her campaign is that his footwork improved and he developed an acute sense of impending punishment.

Once she decided to straighten Oskar out, Lil kept a careful eye on him through the window. When she decided he needed punishment, for example, when biting the cats for no reason or intruding himself roughly into their play, she would grab a newspaper and roll it into a club, as one does to chastise dogs, intending more to frighten than to hurt them. Her tactics were wrong, for instead of walking out of the house casually, as that sneak Oskar would have, she went in haste. She connected only once or twice before he quite accurately correlated her haste with his hurt. Thereafter, Oskar kept one eye on his intended victim and the other on the door.

One time Lil was near the door with a flyswatter in her hand when she observed some bad offense. She was out ^{and} on him before he had time to escape. The handle gave her a little longer reach, upsetting

his careful calculations having to do with how close he could let her get without getting hit. He delighted in tormenting her by staying just beyond her range and angering her with close calls, for he could easily have moved faster and been farther away. He was a very lazy fellow, as other events show, but he did not like being spanked, more because of the indignity than the pain.

The few seconds Lil gained on him by not having to roll up the newspaper enabled her to swat him full on the head just as he was intent upon one of his favorite sports, biting a cat's tail while she was nursing her kittens. Invariably, the cat would react violently and fast as a coiled spring, scattering kittens helter-skelter as she rose from the semi-circular prone position, with her paws laid lovingly upon her babies' backs, a picture of utter peace and contentment. The higher the cat sprang into the air, the greater Oskar's glee. He came as close to laughing as a goose can, honking away raucously, standing firmly on both feet with his long neck stretched bolt upright, and flapped up a storm of noise, wind and loose fluff and feathers as he waived those massive appendages backward and forward, like flags of victory.

He was shocked when the flyswatter landed on his noggin, so surprised that he stopped in mid-honk and mid-flap, his mouth open and his wings spread, and just stood there, long enough for Lil to ~~zero~~ zero in again. Of course, with a flexible wire handle and the plastic swatting surface, he felt no pain. But his sense of importance and invulnerability, his pride that, from the human point of view, was so misplaced, suffered a deep hurt. Oskar didn't know pain, except from Mr. Orchard's retaliations; certainly not from the newspaper

clubs or the flyswatter. But, strange as it may seem for a creature most humans consider ungainly, he had a great sense of dignity that went with his colossal conceit. That is what Lil hurt, and to Oskar that hurt was deeper than physical pain.

Lil was very pleased with herself, for she really expected to reform the rascal. Part of her satisfaction with the flyswatter, I am certain, came from the knowledge she could not, no matter how much she walloped him, damage the reprobate with it.

"I've got the answer now," she reported after her first success, little dreaming it would be almost her last.

"If I can always have the flyswatter handy, I can hit him while he is being bad and can associate the wrong and the punishment in his mind. In that way, I can teach him what he mustn't do."

Her touching faith in the accepted principles of child-raising as transposed for geese with flyswatters impelled her to buy another one.

"I can't keep a flyswatter in my hand all the time," she explained to me. "I can't wash the dishes or sweep the floor with it. So I'll have to get another one."

And she did, that very day. As flyswatters go, she got a very pretty one for Oskar. It is a bright, flashy red. The handle was almost as vivid. The plastic was attractively patterned, with nine diamond-shaped areas of perforations, each of which had 64 tiny, diamond-shaped holes cut into it, the better to squash the flies. Oskar, without doubt, appreciated "his" flyswatter as much as he could have appreciated any, for the brilliance of its color gave him his own "early warning system". Had she set herself to it, Lil could not

have succeeded in selecting any other color as well calculated to catch the eye, including Oskar's eye, for red is the color fowl see best.

As she returned to the house from her first and almost last successful use of a flyswatter in Oskar's rehabilitation, Lil noticed a little hook we have on the back door on which we hang a pad and pencil for visitors to leave notes when we are not home. Its utility struck her immediately, and that evening, after the shopping expedition, she put it to an added use.

"This is a fine place to hang the 'Oskar-swatter'," she said in a moment of glibness, accidentally coining a phrase that became a source of much delight to us and our guests, especially children.

"'Oskar-swatter'! You know, that's good!

(Picture) That's just what it is," she added, savoring the phrase with the pleasure she usually reserved for mixtures of herbs and spices in her superb cooking. "Oskar-swatter!"

Probably no one ever hung a flyswatter in such a conspicuous place before. It took the place of a coat of arms on our door. As visitors entered, they looked at it questioningly. Lil enjoyed answering the question she read in their faces, always using as matter-of-fact tones as she could muster to explain, "That's my Oskar-swatter." Of course, explanations had to follow, and just as the uninitiated enjoyed the tales of Oskar's exploits, so she enjoyed ~~their~~ retelling *them*.
~~For all his rascality, he was a funny little devil.~~

All we ever got from the Oskar-swatter was fun, for he soon mastered the trick of staying just out of the new range. He had to move a little faster, to learn to bite and run, so to speak. But he

did respect the new weapon, and from his respect the innocent cats got a slight surcease from his tortures. The knowledge that the time between his thought, which he somehow got to understand Lil could anticipate, and Lil's attempt at punishment, was considerably lessened, caused him to nip and flee, without standing over his prey chortling to himself about getting away with it. Once he adjusted to the existence of the Oskar-swatter, he bragged after running away, always turning to face the door so he could see Lil dashing out, grabbing the swatter as she ran. Soon frustrating her became as great a delight to him as tormenting the cats and getting away with it.

Lil was certainly correct in believing she could educate Oskar by punishment. Without doubt, she did teach him. He knew that what he was doing was wrong, so far as she was concerned - bad - that he should not do it, that she didn't want him to. His understanding was as complete as it could possibly have been. But what he learned was not that he should no longer do it, but how to do what he knew he should not do and yet escape punishment. That added zest for him.

The Oskar-swatter was not a conspicuous success in Oskar's training. It was, however, an added enjoyment we got from our life with this strange character with the Satanic twist of mind. It remains, today, one of our tangible reminders of him, for it still hangs on the same hook, on the same door and, if the truth be acknowledged, serves ^{as much} the same purpose, for it never relieved the cats, except from the added indignity of his gloating directly over them rather than from a distance. People still look at it quizzically, and in explaining this bizarre decoration we again, briefly, relive the pleasure he brought us.