

Chapter XIII

Oskar and Kids

Kids loved the Oskar-swatter, both the concept and the real thing. Their little imaginations did wonderful contortions with the very thought of having a special swatter for punishing an errant goose. Our regular juvenile visitors, once they learned its special name and function, laughed each time they came and saw it hanging on the door. Lil was always careful^{ly} not to take a swipe at Oskar when kids were present, knowing she had little chance of connecting with him. Instead, she'd bawl him out and menace him with it.

"You bad boy, if you don't behave, I'll spank you!" she would threaten in feigned severity. Often, when inspired by her audience, she would wave the swatter and embellish the threats. Innocent of wrong-doing themselves, children were delighted at Oskar's chastisement. To their fertile imaginations at first it seemed ridiculous to address a goose as a person. Probably most children, in a sense, are pleased at criticism of others; partly through^{out} the perverse streak in all of us, partly uncontrollably, like the man who involuntarily smiles at another's broken leg only to feel guilty and embarrassed by it later; and partly, if not largely, because they feel a little more saintly, a little self-righteous to be in the midst of wrong-doing in which they themselves ^{are} were not involved.

Whatever their reasons, and I am not expert in reading the child mind, there is no doubt of the great pleasure all the children got from the Oskar-swatter, whether or not in Lil's hand. Often when a child was accompanied by a friend who had never visited us before, the explanation of the odd name and purpose of this particular fly-swatter and the reason for its unusual resting place gave the children, particularly the ones who knew, exceptional enjoyment, judging from their reactions. Strangers were at first ~~always~~ incredulous and suspected they were being put on.

Even 11-year-old Eric Metzger, an intelligent lad and the son of old friends, although himself somewhat cowed by Oskar, once introduced this most unusual aspect of a day on a farm for a city boy to his neighbor Jonathan with this question:

"Guess what this is," pointing to the swatter hanging on the door.

Jonathan was, naturally, surprised at the question. "Why, that's a fly-swatter. Anybody knows that."

"Why is it hanging on the outside of the door?" continued Eric, building up to his coming tag line.

"Gee, I don't know that. Never saw one there before."

On that particular occasion, Oskar was preoccupied elsewhere and had not yet made his noisy appearance.

"Well, don't you think there must be a reason for its being there?" Eric persisted, struggling to preserve his poise and restrain his laughter.

"Suppose it's for smashing outside flies?" By this time it was beginning to dawn on Jonathan that there was more than was encom-

passed by his experience in this particular fly-swatter. "Why else would anyone have an outside fly-swatter?"

"Are you sure its flies? How about moths, 'r bees, 'r mosquitoes?"

"Sure, that's all the same idea. Bugs."

"See any?"

"Well, no; but they don't have to be around all the time. They gotta be here sometimes, and that's when they use it."

"How about snakes?" Eric was squeezing it hard, and his eyes and the flickering creases at the ends of his quivering lips disclosed the trouble he was having in keeping even the semblance of a straight face.

"Silly! Who ever heard of using a fly-swatter on snakes! You'd get bit!"

"How about cats, 'r dogs, maybe?"

"Naw; it's just some kind of bug swatter." Jonathan tried to deprecate the whole thing. He knew for sure by this time that it was not simply a fly-swatter, else Eric would not be making such a big deal of it. Yet he could not conceive any utility for the device outside the insect world. He realized he was about to be trapped, he could sense it; but he hadn't the remotest notion how. His whole manner revealed a caution against an unknown. He knew something was up, that probably his leg was being pulled. But he could not guess how, for certainly this was a plain, red fly-swatter, and whatever else would it possibly be used for?

When Eric could no longer restrain himself, he tried not to smile, succeeding only partially, and announced as seriously as he

could, "That's the Oskar-swatter."

"Never heard of it," Jonathan grudgingly conceded after a brief silence in which he hastily tried to formulate the least compromising, the least demeaning response. Eric, in turn, was silent for a second and Jonathan, hesitatingly and against his better judgment, asked, "What is an Oskar-swatter?"

Eric roared the falsetto belly laugh of the pre-puberty boy, waving his arms and slapping his sides in glee. "Think I'm puttin' ya on, don'tcha? I'm not. It's an Oskar-swatter, for swattin' Oskar when he needs it."

"Who is Oskar?"

"He's some kinda goose. A pet, kinda a member of the family."

Eric never liked being alone with Oskar, though he wouldn't have dreamed of sharing this secret fear with his friend. "Can we feed him?" he asked me. I agreed we could and got some bread. We strolled around to the other side of the house, where we found him. Eric used the time to display his possession of intelligence to which Jonathan was not privy, always a minor glory to a boy.

"You know, they have teeth. And they can bite, too - can't they?" addressing ^{the question to me.} ~~me to invoke his~~ authority.

"Well, yes - " Before I could assure Jonathan he need have no fear, Eric cut me off. He wanted Jonathan to be a little afraid, as he secretly was, even with me present. "Careful, now; don't let him bite you," he warned Jonathan. "He can hurt, too, so be careful." Eric was switching it to a build-up for his own courage, a display of which he was about to make. "Can I feed him first?" he asked me.

"Certainly, if you want to."

"Yes, I do want to. I want to show Jonathan not to be afraid and how to do it." That was stretching the hero act a bit thin, even if Jonathan was unaware of it, because with Oskar you need only have bread. He did the rest.

"Watch, Jon; here's how you do it, if you're not afraid." Eric, carried away by his own game, did something he had never before dared but had seen me do. He grasped the slice of bread between his teeth and leaned toward the goose, calling him through the clenched teeth. "Here, Oskar! here, Oskar!"

Oskar came toward us at a fast and only semi-rolling waddle. The closer he got the less happy Eric's face looked; but having cast the die, he was without choice. All he could do was shiver in fright. It was clear he had suddenly wondered what would happen if Oskar missed.

Oskar never missed. The first swipe freed Eric's mouth for a broad smile and unspoken pride in his valor. Modestly, he said to his playmate simply, "See?" But his manner was a clear challenge, and Jonathan so understood it. "Let's see if you're chicken," his eyes dared.

Greed ended Jonathan's dilemma. I handed him a slice of bread and Oskar grabbed it from his hand before he had time to screw up the requisite courage for offering the bread with his mouth.

"That's enough for now, boys," I declared, tossing a couple of extra slices at the feathered glutton as a bribe to keep him from tormenting Eric, whose reluctance Oskar recalled only too well, and from trying out the new boy, as was Oskar's practice with strangers. As he munched away, we returned to the other visitors inside the house.

[Empty Space]

Two-year-old Mark Loeb was a charter member of the Oskar fan club, but he never got over his apprehensions after an accidental nipping that drew no blood. Yet his passion for Oskar was undiminished by his fear. Now, it must be conceded that Mark was an unusual child. While not yet four years old, he was already a "drop-out" from nursery school. He enjoyed his home life more and raised so much commotion in expressing his strong preference that when explanations, importunings and whippings didn't change his mind, his parents gave in to him, thereby restoring peace in the household, if at the cost of the earliest known blight on a child's scholastic record. He insisted on visiting Oskar almost every Sunday, and demanded his father have stale bread from his restaurant for Mark to feed both Oskar and the other geese - from the safety of his father's or my arms.

Oskar was part of Mark's dreams, his imaginative games - the whole mythology an intelligent child constructs for his earliest life. Oskar was very real to him. In his eyes and in his mind, Oskar was not a goose.

The weather was inclement at the time of Oskar's kidnapping, and the Loeb's had not been to see us for several weeks. During this interval we liquidated our ^{chicken} flocks and went out of the ^{egg} poultry business. Mark had been unwilling to eat eggs until he had some of the very, very large ones in the production of which our hens and pullets specialized. Just the size of those eggs made them attractive to children, and we reserved most of them for families with children not normally fond of eggs. Long before we went out of business, a day could not begin for Mark, the erstwhile-egg-hater, without one of those eggs.

115

First he had to see it; then, while smiling in his never-ending amazement at its size, he had to handle it. Caress it might be a better description. Then he had to watch it fry - all this before he ate it. If the family was running out of eggs, enough of these had to be put aside for Mark's breakfasts until my next delivery, unless the family was coming up to visit us.

Finally the unhappy day came. Mark had waddled into the kitchen after his nurse, whom he called "Miththith B". He still communicated in single words, such as "hungry", which, after all, did say all that was necessary to make his desires known. He hadn't even once said, "Mark is hungry." He probably had his own reasons for so torturing his parents, who, naturally, wanted their intelligent son to shine.

"Hungry," he announced to Mrs. B that morning.

"Okay, Markie, sit at the table," she told him as she went to the cupboard where the cereals were stored rather than to the refrigerator.

"No!" he called after her. "No!"

"That's all we have this morning, Markie."

"No, no!"

"But we haven't anything else."

"Egg!"

"I'm sorry, Markie, but we have no eggs this morning."

"Egg!" he commanded. Every morning he could recall began with one of those special eggs; how could this be any different?

"We just don't have any eggs this morning."

"No egg?" He was incredulous, and his beautiful, expressive

brown eyes opened wide as the full enormity of his catastrophe filtered through his little brain and collected in the proper lobe.

"No egg, Markie." The poor woman could see the acute disappointment in the child's face. Then, suddenly, it broadened into a smile.

"That'th awright, Miththith B. When Othkuh Pump'nickle find out I got no egg, he'll thend me thome."

That was the first sentence Mark ever spoke in his life. It so impressed itself upon Mrs. B, probably more so because she had undoubtedly expected an unrestrained outburst from the strong-willed little creature of habit, that it was the first thing she told Mrs. Loeb that night. It was the first thing Mrs. Loeb told Lil the next time they met.

Oskar, of course, never thereafter "sent" Mark any eggs, and Mark started eating other eggs, induced to do so by a subterfuge that exploited his admiration for the goose. "These were the biggest Oskar had, so he sent them until he has some big ones again," he was told. To Mark, if they were from Oskar, they had to be good. He ate them without complaint.

Finally, because the weather could not always be bad and Mark could not always be diverted, he had to be told the truth, properly edited for his young emotions.

"Oskar is on vacation," his mother informed him just before they planned a visit.

"Where did he go?" Mark wanted to know.

"Florida. It's warm there."

That made good sense to Mark. His relatives and his family's

friends sometimes went to Florida in the winter, and Mark had spent hours playing with colorful picture postcards that had been identified with Florida in his mind. But Florida was strictly a grown-up business. Mark had never been there, and he knew no children who had ever been there. Florida was a high-status symbol for him. He associated it with importance. Thereafter he referred to Oskar as "Mr. Pumpernickle."

Several times he asked me, "Where's Mithtuh Pump'nickle?" or "Did you hear from Mithtuh Pump'nickle?" Properly forewarned, I always had the right story.

"He hasn't come back yet," or "He's having too good a time," I'd say.

Mark was satisfied. It sounded just like people to him, so it was appropriate for Oskar.

It was a full year before he was told the truth. Even though told in the morning, this great iniquity disturbed him enormously. He wouldn't even try to take a nap that afternoon, and he fussed all day. When he finally fell into an exhausted sleep that night, after a full and lurid account of the foul deed to his father at supper, Mark tossed and turned, crying out from the depths of his nightmares.

Whenever he visited us thereafter, Mark never in any way acknowledged that Oskar is no longer part of my family. He always asked ^{we had} if I ~~have~~ heard from him, possibly, like Ralph, thinking Oskar might ^{we} himself write me. Oskar was a person, a very real and important person to Mark. To ^a Mark, there could be no question about whether or not Oskar was alive. Even though Mark knew we never expected to see Oskar again, he never conceded he wouldn't.

#

Children all loved Oskar. They never considered his abuses mistreatment. If any ~~so~~ resented the way he treated them, they never acknowledged it ~~to me~~. Even those who feared him and would not set foot on the ground near him, still loved him.

That imp manipulated children as a master does chessmen. He knew and planned every move and almost every move succeeded. In practice, however, he was more like a farmer driving geese. When he wants the geese to go to the left, the farmer holds out his right hand; if to the right, the left hand is extended. For straight ahead, he uses both hands. All geese always obey these directions. They need twist their heads but slightly to see behind them, for they have an unusually wide field of vision with each eye, as do most fowl. ^{Driving} ~~This~~ is something the farmer does not have to teach the geese. They know it at birth, ~~I have never seen one who did not react this way~~ ^{and that} instinctively and spontaneously. Most farmers raising their first geese learn this from the geese. No cattle or other animals ever ^{handle} ~~drive~~ as readily as geese. In all of Europe, for generations, a single youthful shepherd has gathered up the village geese in the morning and ^{escorted} ~~driven~~ them to pasture, alone and unassisted. After a day of grazing, he returns with them before nightfall. As the gooseherd and flock pass each cottage and farmstead, the right geese fall out and return to their proper homes. It is impossible ~~for me~~ to conceive of any animal more easily managed than decently-treated geese. Abused, they have the capacity and disposition to take vicious and painful revenge.

Oskar knew all about driving. He was a people-drover. Self-trained, too, drawing only upon his own heritage. He just reversed

the positions and became a goose who drove people to do his "pasturing" for him. Whenever there were people nearby and he felt like eating - and, sometimes, I believe, for either sport or to indulge a queer sense of officiousness - he shepherded them to the barrel in which we kept his feed.

He would walk up to them, slowly, from directly opposite the barrel. If the person didn't move, Oskar would nip, lightly. If they still didn't move, he would bite harder. Pretty soon he got his idea over. If the person was to the left of the barrel, Oskar would move farther to the left, thus directing him to the right and toward the barrel. Oskar was straightforward about this. There was no subterfuge. He aimed his intended feeder directly toward the barrel, with no unnecessary nips or bites, no raucous insults. He had but a single objective, to get fed. He couldn't get into the barrel himself, but he could persuade people to do it for him.

Once he herded his elected provider to the barrel, Oskar did no more driving. He would wait a brief instant to see if the person knew what was expected of him. If it was one of the uninitiated, Oskar would honk and flap his wings with great vigor, rising on his toes, with his head in the air and his wings going from front to back rather than in the flight direction, up and down. He would just hover in the same position, keeping his person near the barrel. If the person didn't understand there was a connection between his being nudged toward the barrel and the barrel itself, usually my wife or I was there to inform him. Often this bit of Oskar-lore passed from child to child, adult to adult, for each one who had felt the bite of Oskar's mandibles also felt an obligation to pass on the intelligence needed to avert it.

Kids were the first and fastest to learn. It soon became a tradition with them to bee-line ^{to} ~~for~~ the barrel on arrival, ~~They~~ ^{pay} ~~paid~~ their tribute and saved their skins. Adults, observing the children, learned from them, and they were happy and Oskar was happy. Peace prevailed. Unless there was a game to be played, like "Making People Holler," one of his favorites, or "Women Scream Nicely," another of which he was particularly fond, or "Run, Kiddie, Run," Oskar would waddle off with his little proventriculous packed and take a short nap. He would select a spot from which he could see most of his domain. And he slept lighter than a cat. As a matter of fact, I never once saw him with his eyes closed.