

## Chapter XX

## The Kidnapping

Recognizing a goose for what she is will be important for Oskar, if he has not already greased a poacher's chin, for Oskar does not know he is a goose. Further, he is convinced he is not a goose.

Once, when the wind was blowing strong and a gate had been left unlatched, his curiosity took him down a flight of eight concrete steps set into a bank to the west of the house and the lane. These steps end in the yards around the chicken houses, where Osker had never been, although he could see there through the fence. The other geese grazed there and often rested there of a night, especially during the winter, as though realizing the large electric light in the corner of the fence, where the lane and road join, protected them from predators, those with four legs and those with two.

Neither my wife nor I was present when Oskar entered this strange territory, nor do we know how long he was there. That he was there we discovered when my wife heard that awful, ungoosely wail, that sound ~~he~~ alone among our many creatures invented and uttered to express his mixed fear and embarrassment at his blunders.

When she following the wail to its source she found Oskar, <sup>the wrong side of</sup> pushing hard against the unyielding fence, in mortal terror of his parents and miscellaneous other relatives of all categories. He was

Panic-stricken at being with them, or even near them without the protection of an intervening fence.

"What are these creatures I am with?" he seemed to be asking Lil. "Will they hurt me?" Loudest and clearest of his questions, what came through with unmistakable meaning was, "Get me out of here. I'm afraid."

There was no doubt about that, according to Lil. He was almost shivering with fright, and when she lashed the gate open and got behind him to drive him to the people side of the fence, he even had trouble walking. His feet just didn't want to work or his nerves denied him control over them, for he fell over them, as though he tried to take a step without lifting the backward foot.

He was quiet when he reached one of his favorite, closest-to-people spots, the back step. He remained there for more than an hour, without moving and in silence, Lil told me when I came home from an errand. The mere thought of his ridiculous fear and appearance sent her into spasms of laughter as she told me the story.

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Oskar's most daring attempt at watchdogging resembled watch-manning more. It was an unusual day. <sup>Lil and</sup> <sup>she</sup> We were both away. <sup>we</sup> It was in Frederick shopping, and I had gone to the local grocery where we pick up our mail and had gotten into a conversation. Oskar had been wooing Sand, which took him near the road. He heard a truck stop at the henhouse. <sup>when</sup> Neither of us came out to see who was there, <sup>he felt responsible</sup>

My information about what happened comes from Jack Finney, foreman of the crew that the nursery had sent for a load of chicken manure.

"We hadn't been here very long," he told me on my return, "when

I saw your goose stick his head around the corner of the fence. He cocked it first one way, then the other, as though he might see better or understand more from the other eye. Then he walked back a bit and we lost sight of him through the trumpet vine you have growing there. Minute or two later one of the boys said, 'There he is again, Jack,' and sure enough he was, giving us the once-over again, ~~as though~~ trying to study out what we were up to. Three or four times he did that, and each time he went back where we couldn't see him.

"Then, all of a sudden, one of the boys said, 'I'll be damned.' That's the way I felt, too, when I looked up the road. Here was the goose, staying close to the shoulder, waddling down with a look about him ~~saying~~, 'What are you doing here?' Just slow and easy, head high and pointed up some, and twisting a little around as he walked, like he was changing eyes again. Never ~~saw~~ anything like it. He knew just what he had in mind. Wanted to know what somebody was doing at your henhouse when you weren't home.

"Well, sir, I'm afraid of geese. Not that yours ever bit me or anything, or that this one acted mean. Nothing like that. Just that daddy had a gander I made mean by teasing him when I was a boy, and that gander use to flog the living daylights out of me. Yes, sir! He could hurt! Black and blue, with big, raised welts, that's what I was when he finished working me over. Never teased him again after the first whipping he gave me, either, but he never forgot. I remember that every time I see a goose, and I stay away from them. Truth is, I'm afraid of them.

"But we couldn't let your goose stay on the road. Might get

run over. So two of us, me and Jimmy, run him back. We just kind of got side by side, with our arms out <sup>like</sup> as we had seen you do once, and walked up to him just before he got to the truck. He turned around and marched back, just as nice. Kept his head real high, though, and kept it twisted around just a little so he could keep an eye on us. Beats all how he could see forward and backward at the same time. We run him to the back of the house and then got on the manure again.

"Two times after that, maybe three or four minutes after we run him back, he came down again. Last time we took him back he stayed.

"But do you know, I believe he must have been out to the edge of the road a half-dozen times after that. Took a look at us, satisfied himself everything was all right, and went back by himself."

That was the only time, to our knowledge, Oskar was ever on the road. It was also the only time of which we knew that a truck had stopped at the henhouse when we were away. Others may call this curiosity on Oskar's part. He certainly was a very curious fellow. But I believe it was his sense of responsibility, that he was just taking charge in our absence. He was doing in a human society what geese do in a goose society. He was acting like a proper, responsible human.

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Had it not been for this human quality in our rare bird, we might have him still. The day he was kidnapped is one I will never forget, aside from his loss.

We had already liquidated all our chicken flocks and had gone out of business. That was hard enough. To have had such an unusual

and promising business as we had built from nothing, ruined for no good reason, without benefit to anyone, destroyed at just the moment it was going well, was a great blow. The heavy weight it left upon us was intensified, not alleviated, by the knowledge of its inevitability long before we finally closed down. We faced an uncertain future and looked back upon a wasted past, a decade and a half of the hardest toil, achingest muscles, sleepless nights, and now pointless sacrifices. All that remained on our farm the night of January 28, 1964, besides the cats, dogs, a few ducks and Oskar, were our breeder geese. We had given away or promised the rare ducks of our own breeding, almost a new species we had created, and one of the most beautiful. Only the geese to whom, of all our animals, we had the greatest attachment, and three hundred thirty-one thousand, a hundred and a few odd square feet of building space, <sup>remained of</sup> a shattered dreamland.

All these geese, not just Oskar, were like members of the family to us. He was just closer. Over the years I had gathered them from where I could, preserving those who showed the characteristics I wanted to add to our stock. Some of our breeders, like "Big Papa," were our original stock. Some came from its blendings with the new blood. Others, like Henry and Henrietta, were obtained from friends. Our breeding flock was a long labor of love, both the fruit and the test of the husbandman's eye. <sup>Lil and I</sup> We had both formed a respect and love for these admirable creatures that may seem foolish and maudlin, incomprehensible to those never fortunate enough to have lived with well-cared-for, loved and loving geese. Parting with them was a necessity that made us miserable but could not be avoided.

For some time I had searched around, seeking a home for them where they would be allowed to live out their normal lives - nature

allocs them one of the longest lifespans - in as happy an environment as possible. The day some human dog stole Oskar, next to the last shipment of them was to leave. My distress was lightened by the assurance they would never be slaughtered and would be well tended by considerate keepers.

Two fine and elderly friends, Charles Haight and Henry Wessel, from whom we had gotten some of our stock, came to help. Mr. Wessel is retired. He shows geese in livestock competition all over the country. Mr. Haight had earlier faced such an unhappy necessity as I then confronted after his wife died. I had his best birds. This was also an unhappy day for my friends, for those of our flock they had once raised and loved were going where they could never visit them again.

We had just finished a fine but joyless lunch when it started to snow. By the time we had the first family caged and had carried them up to where the truck that was coming could reach them in that weather, more than an inch covered the ground. Four inches accumulated before we brought up the fifth and last cage.

But the truck didn't come. An hour or so later we learned it had been delayed. We moved the cages as close to the road as seemed safe, I fed and watered my old and good friends for the last time and covered them with a tarpaulin to keep the snow from accumulating under their feet. My elderly companions left and I returned to the house.

Darkness was then almost upon us. The geese, who had never before been confined, were unhappy and uncertain. They kept calling to me. I went out and talked to them from time to time, but there

could have been little reassurance in my voice. I finally decided to remain inside. Off and on during the night I heard them call. Possibly some of it I dreamed. It was a restless night of troubled sleep, uneasy and unsatisfying. Neither my wife nor I was at all rested the next morning.

As usual, when I went out for the paper before daylight, I called Oskar. Most of the time he was waiting, but sometimes he was busy elsewhere, so I'd call him. He liked to walk with me to the paperbox at the end of the semi-circular lane opposite from Sand. I enjoyed his company on these short morning walks as much as I had ever enjoyed the company of any of our wonderful dogs. That morning he didn't come. I decided possibly he was worried about the proximity of so many potential rivals stacked up close to Sand, or that, with his customary distaste for snow, he was again under the trailer where he wouldn't show, and returned to the house for the hot coffee already brewed and the paper before breakfast.

After breakfast I carried more feed to the departing geese and looked for Oskar again. There was no sign of him - not under the trailer, not near Sand or Trash - nowhere. Then I realized that there were also no tracks near the house. All traces of his presence there had been obliterated by the snow as it kept falling. His tracks were all around the stacked cages of departing geese, whom he had apparently guarded or just kept company. And there was a single trail from there to the edge of the road. Here they met a set of tire tracks. Both were still clear. A single set of tire tracks, and Oskar's tracks going there but not returning!

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For once, the police answered <sup>my</sup> call promptly. The officers

were in accord with what I believed. Oskar had stationed himself alongside the stacked crates of his departing relatives and had remained there. The heat of his body had melted out a hollow place in the accumulated snow. The wastes of his body likewise piled up, indicating he had not moved for some time. The one-way tracks could have only the obvious meaning.

Oskar was stolen - kidnapped.

We were never to see him again. Neither of us expected to, from the moment we knew of the theft. People don't steal an animal and then return him as their consciences, if any, pinch and hurt. The risk of jail is too great. If they tire of a stolen animal, they dispose of it in a traceless way, leaving no incriminating evidence.

In an effort to relieve the burden, Lil and I made what we intended as jokes about it, all of them centering on the unique kind of vengeance Oskar was more than capable of visiting upon his kidnappers. But that did us no good, for we realized this would not effect his return and was more likely calculated to shorten his life.

This vicious act added an additional bleakness to the cheerlessness and oppressiveness of our lives.

We missed and still miss him very much.