I

On the Chicken Training of Dogs

Mosey opened the door to the Apple Cottage and confronted the man who stood outside in his sock feet. “That chicken’s not coming in this house, Steven Stewart” she declared.

Lately, Mosey had begun insisting that everyone remove their shoes prior to entering her home, as her son-in-law Paul , in his capacity as live-in caretaker, had just installed new carpet. Paul had recently moved into the main farmhouse with his wife, Oincy Jane and their two children, in order to care for the property and for Ouincy Jane’s sister, Mosey’s oldest girl, Marnie, whose wickedness was such that the Lord has stricken with blindness. His timing couldn’t have been more perfect, as the Frederickson were just concluding their mission work in darkest Africa and, wondering what to do next, began considering the family farm back in East Tennessee. It had been clear for years that Mosey lacked both the ability or the interest to keep up two houses , and now there was a disabled adult to be cared for. So Mosey moved into the guest house and gave the main house over to the Fredericksons, who set about making the world a better place through organic gardening and free range poultry. The farm had never been profitable, and it became less so under the Fredericksons. But it continued to serve as the gathering place for Mosey’s nine children – a grand stage on which family dramas could unfold.

The farm continued . Her eldest son now stood outside in dutiful compliance, carrying his shoes and a silver-spangled Hamberg hen. The laying hens milled about nearby, as did two enormous turkeys, which had come to investigate. The family dogs

Steve released the bird. It fluttered and clucked and came to a rest near the free range laying hens, which happened to be gathered near Mosey’s front porch when Steve arrived. The newcommer, mostly white with dramatic black flecks, stood in striking contrast to the Rhode Island reds which. They regarded the newcomer with suspicion. Their adjustment to cage-free life had taken time, and there had been missteps along the way. Flightless birds in the open are not eager embracers of change.

“Chicken training the dogs, that’s the trickiest part,” Uncle Clark had told the Fredricksons when they ordered the chicks. “If you’re determined to let them range free, you’ll have to chicken train these dogs, and here’s how you do it: when a dog chases a chicken, just let him catch it. After he kills it you t beat him with it. I mean work him over good!” Uncle Clark spat in a Pepsi bottle. “When you’re done the chicken probably shouldn’t still have head or legs attached. If it does, you’ve not done a damn bit of good, so hit him some more. He turned to his 11-year-old niece. “Cindy, that can be your job.”

Cindy recoiled in horror, but she need not have. The family did not follow Clark’s instructions. Instead, their Paul Frederickson, who was married to Ouincy Jane Stewart, intercepted each dog during its first chicken chase and gave each several sharp whacks with the handle of a broom. This appeared to work. Clark, seeing his good advice spurned and no ill effect coming from it, took to brooding and quietly wished harm upon the reds.

Clark’s older brother, Steve, released the new hen, and Mosey invited him in. It was early afternoon but Mosey was still in her nightgown, as was typically the case. Often she would have curlers in her hair, and the fact that she didn’t indicated she wasn’t planning on going out today. She offered to reheat in the microwave a cup of coffee from the pot she’d made that morning. The Stewart children were used to this practice, and Steve gratefully accepted. The room was cozy but cluttered. Mosey was not a fastidious housekeeper. Unread newspapers and magazines, along with unopened junk mail spilled onto the floor, as every square inch of surface area was occupied with framed family pictures and objects des art purchased at thrift stores and rummage sales. Pictures owls and vases hung on the wall, as did a shotgun that had belonged to her husband. The carpet, being brand new, was clean.

“Your chicken is pretty next to the reds,” said Mosey, looking outside.

She seemed amused, and this pleased Steve, although he would have been just as pleased to have seen her aggravated. Steve, like many reared among multiple siblings, considered any sort of attention to be better than no attention at all, and so he had come to enjoy her diatribes and denunciations. Approval from Mosey was hard to come by, being reserved for a few limited activities. These included the suffering of privations in the interest of thrift, and the completion of tasks that directly benefitted her. Though she could afford to hire help, she was loath to call repairmen, plumbers, electricians, roofers and other “rip off” artists and have them in her home.

Mosey’s nine children gave her little to approve of. Her husband had made his fortune in the manufacture and distribution of string art kits in the ‘70’s. He and a partner sold at the right time and invested in low-rent housing at about the time the World’s Fair came to Knoxville. The income from these was such that his heirs could make a living, though a meager one, without benefit of steady employment. So they were free to turn their efforts to enterprise. Among these were emu ranching, spec home building, crash-up derby competition, aluminum smelting, metal lathing, wooden boat building, the restoring of a 1964 F750 dump truck, and alpaca husbandry. They planted orchards, crafted scented candles, matriculated into universities..

Mosey denounced each after the other. The engineering of fossil fuel alternatives, the hiking of the Appalacian Trial, the distilling of moonshine whisky, the identifying of edible mushrooms for fun and profit, the counterfeiting of designer tomatoes, breeding of exotic Lagotto Romagnolo truffle sniffing canines and proselytizing on dark continents would come to naught but bunions, blindness, poisonings, imprisonment, fiery explosions, unintended pregnancies and ghastly shrunken heads displayed on spikes.

By and large, she had been right, at least in principal. Many of these activities concluded in disappointment, though most never concluded at all. All of them required subsidies; some of them bail money, civil fines and penalties. Mosey’s fortune dwindled. Her thyroid gave out, her heart murmured and her diabetes went unaddressed in either exercise or diet. She occoupied herself with her bargain hunting and her doomsaying and complained vigorously of the inconveniences of living on a farm. Occasionally, though she appreciated the benefits as well – the serenade of birds and wind and the site of an especially pretty hen.

“I guess one more chicken can’t hurt,” she said, by way of blessing.

But in this she was wrong. There came a commotion from outside: barking and clucking. Young Cindy came in, shrieking and bawling, and buried herself in Mosey’s couch. Uncle Clark followed. He seized the shotgun from its resting place over the mantal. “Them dawgs aint chicken trained at all,” he muttered as he inserted shells, dropping several on the floor. They left a trail as he dashed out the door. With the door still open, he stopped, aimed and opened fire.

It was never clear what Clark was shooting at or what he had hoped to accomplish in doing so. Upon his his first two blasts, pellets entered and exited Paul Fredrickson’s blue jeans, which, in a instance of good fortune that was rare on the Stewart farm, were not on him at the time but rather were hanging from a clothesline. The third peppered a pattern onto the door to the crawl space under the farmhouse, and the fourth brought down the ceiling fan over Mosey’s porch -- a struggle having ensued between Clark and Mosey over control of the weapon.

The dogs were the clear losers in the pandemonium and tumult that occurred on that day in history, as the Silver Spangled Hamburg proved a prodigy at inflicting hannahbarbaric cruelties on her pursuers. Bobbit’s flop-eared head became hopelessly lodged between the pickets of the farm house rear deck. Paul freed her with a pry bar, then reinforced her chicken training with several smart whacks on her rump with the handle of a broom. The Irascible Androclese, who was half exotic truffle sniffing Ragotto Romagnolo retreiver and half Dunder or Gunther or whatever it was the neighbors from the top of the hill called their unneutered beagle-chow mix, had been incapacitated by a falling ceiling fan. He received no whacks with the broom. Moppet, the \*, went missing entirely and was discovered hours later when the children investigated an upended bucket in the basement of the Apple Cottage which had taken to moving about on its own volition bumping into things.

Bofor, the venerable black lab mix, gave up the chase after just a few lumbering steps and was spared injury and humiliation. He collapsed himself down into a comfortable patch of grass and watched the drama unfold. The hen darted beneath the long wooden deck that started at the back of the farmhouse and came to an end at the carport in front. She disappeared into the carport via the door, which had been left slightly ajar, and was followed by Bobbin, Moppet and the Irascible Androcles. The carport housed no cars, nor had it done so for many years. Mosey had claimed it long ago as a place to maroon the ovarage from her bargain hunting at thrift shops, big-box stores and salvage houses . In it now were rolls of wallpaper decades out of date, cans and cans of spray paint, stacks of full and twin headboards and unmatching footboards, picture frames, broken lamps, dishes, kitchen sinks and clothing.

Pursuing hounds toppled mounds and stacks of items that hadn’t been disturbed for years. Metal frames groaned under sagging particle board shelving then yielded themselves over to ruin. From the wreckage emerged the hen, along with Bobbin, Moppet and the irascible Androcles. Marnie waved a kitchen towel and little young Robert blew on his silent dog whistle to no avail. Ouincy Jane, Paul, and Steve chased after waving arms and shouting “bad dog” and “no” and “no!”

Bobbin was now covered head to tail in blue paint. She left periwinkle tracks back across the deck, the driveway and parking pad in front of the Apple Cottage, and an the new carpet in the Apple Cottage itself, the door there having been left ajar. Her race ended in a second lap across the farmhouse deck, as the family marveled to learn that pickets were spaced just the right distance to allow a hen to pass through, and the head of a lithe figured collie-shepherd mix, but not the body.

The pursuit continued past the nose of aged Bofor who made as if to rise but, thinking better of the matter, gave a few supportive barks and eased his bones back into the grass. Beside him sat young Louis, Ouincy Jane’s nephew and frequent weekend visitor to the farm. Bofor and Louis occupied a sort of courtyard that separated rear deck of the farmhouse from the ground-level concrete front porch of the Apple Cottage. The driveway ran nearly a quarter of a mile to the road, split at a parking pad at the farmhouse,split again at the carport, and curved into a slight downhill grade before ending in a parking pat at the front of the Apple Cottage. The grade from the farmhouse to the Apple Cottage was not very steep, but it was steep enough to allow the children to reach troubling speeds on their skateboards and their razor scooters. And now, the 1964 F-750 dump truck was also reaching a troubling speed. It had unexplainably come out of gear and was rolling toward Clark and Mosey and the Apple Cottage front door.

Clark abandoned the shotgun and ran toward the advancing truck. He dove headfirst into the driver’s side window as three red hens flapped out the passenger-side. With effort, the upside-down Clark was able to stop the truck by mashing the breaks with his hands. It came to a rest on the porch just short of the front doors. The support column it knocked over was ornamental only, and not load-bearing, so the damage to the Apple Cottage had been minimal.

Mosey trembled and her featured had turned to ash. “Lord,” she said. “You kids are going to kill me yet.”

II

The event became known as

The event gave rise to a deal of finger-pointing and recriminations. One thing was agreed upon, however: it was time to clean that carport. This task would fall on the shoulders of the Fredericksens, Oincy Jane and her husband, Paul, and their children, Cindy and Robert, who had recently returned from their proselytizing in Darkest Africa. Contrary to Mosey’s predictions, no heads were shrunk in the course of their work there. Indeed, they felt they were making real proress in their work there, but agreed to return home after the lord in his terrible justice struck Marnie blind. It was agreed that the Frederickens would return home to live in the farmhouse and tend to Marnie. Mosey would move to the Apple Cottage, which was originally constructed as a sort of guest house.

“Maybe we’ll find treasure,” said young Robert.

“I get the treasure!” called cousin Louis.

“You don’t call dibs on treasure,” said Cindy. “We all have to share it.”

“No,” said Robert. “We have to fight for it!”

“Cindy’s on my team!” called Louis. Cindy was two years older than Robert and was generally regarded as the more formidable of the two.

“Well then Dad’s on my team!” countered Robert.

“There are no teams when you’re fighting for treasure,” said Cindy.