

THE LOVE AFFAIR OF A DUCK AND A DOG

by

Irene Finley

Written Aug. 3, 1939

Journal
Aug-4-39

Late in the season a friend brought to our house a little wild duckling that he had found in a marsh in eastern Oregon. We put him in a small box in the study as the weather was cold. A reading lamp leaned over him day and night and he cuddled under it and talked to it as if it was a mother. Warmth meant life to him. This memory never left him and when he was a grown bird, the sight of the old reading lamp brought forth an excited low quacking.

Our police dog never lost his curiosity and wonderment about this waif in feathers that had found its way to our winter hearth. Almost any time one could find the dog leaning into the box, his nose sniffing the small fluffy ball with bright eyes and long flat snout. He would stand perfectly motionless for minutes gazing into the little lighted room. What was this bit of life and why was it kept in a box under a light instead of being outdoors like other birds? Why didn't it get scared and try to run away? All the birds he had ever seen before ran for their lives when they saw him coming. Things were very mixed up in his mind.

The police dog had lived for three years at the Phi Delta fraternity house at the University of Oregon, where he took his rough-and-tumble part with the noisy exuberant frat boys. Every day began with some excitement. It might mean a baseball game where he sat perhaps at the foot of the bleachers with the rest of the fellows, sometimes joining in the clapping and shouting with his own sharp yips. He didn't know exactly why, but he couldn't help joining in. When the football squad went out for practice he was right there, unless some traitors in his bunch bulldozed him out of it. About half of the fellows in the frat stood up for him, and the other half had voted to have him sent to the electric chair. But anyway, those were wild joyous days.

His education was rapid and thrilling if not orthodox. There was very little in the line of devilment that his fraternity brothers couldn't hatch

Printed
1/2/40

up. His pet annoyance, that smug pussycat at the Pi Phis', usually showed up on the back porch across the street about the time the milkman arrived. He had been coached to get that cat by hook or by crook. If he had been sleeping on the steps in the rain and had gone to bed cold and supperless - which was not infrequent - his feeling of loyalty to his house was a burning fire. But the smart feline always out-foxed him and got away, much to the glee of the sorority girls. Then there were the robins that persisted in pulling long slinky angle-worms out of the lawn after it had been watered, which wasn't any too frequent. One would plump down on the grass almost under his nose, cock her head as if listening to something, suddenly jab her bill into the sward, sit back on her haunches and haul the wiggling thing out. She moved a few feet and did this several times until she had collected a bill full and flew off somewhere to stuff the mess into a gaping mouth. Sometimes there were half a dozen of these poachers on the dog's lawn. He would lie flat on the ground apparently oblivious, then of a sudden lurch forward as if sky-rocketed on springs and land in the midst of them. But they were too quick on the wing. He never got even a feather. And how the boys derided him from the open windows.

This bird in the box where he had recently come to live was a great puzzle to him. There were no fraternity boys here to tell him what to do. This mite of a bird showed no fear of him or respect, even pecked at his nose, when it wasn't picking up crumbs of hard-boiled egg or snipping lettuce. The situation was queer, but it fascinated him. His new mistress had cautioned him to be quiet and watch and not to chase birds any more. For several months he saw the duckling grow from an insignificant puff of yellow down into a plump, sleek mallard with a glossy-green head, bright wing feathers and provoking curls at his tail that wiggled in friendship and admiration. He could hardly believe it, but he had come to like the bird.

Spring came and the mistress of the house let both him and the duck out of doors. They wandered over the lawns together, slopping about in the mild rain. He had come to understand that he was to protect his bird friend that had had such a queer bringing-up. This was the debt he owed to the one who had been kind to him, always fed him, and furnished him a good bed.

P. G. P. out

partially out

Everywhere he went he was followed by his waddling shadow. The duck, with no companion of his own race, was in love with him. He was aware of it and became a little shame-faced as time went on. It was nothing to be proud of for a dignified police dog to be vamped by a goofy duck. It became so bad that he had no peace. Many a time he was embarrassed and tried to sneak off, but that belligerent bird caught up with him, cuddled down beside him, cooed in his ear and even pulled it, nibbled at his nose- in fact, nibbled him shamelessly all over and said as plain as day that it was time they got married.

The gardener furnished his only relief from mad love. When the warm weather came and the man was digging around the plants, the duck's inherent appetite for worms got the better of his amorousness. He would stop in his headlong chase of the dog, poke his bill into a maddy hole under the shovel, even stepping on the gardener's knee, and gobble up the juicy harvest, bobbing and gurgling with delight. Satisfied, he would return to his main business in life, making love to the dog.

When a hen mallard was provided as a mate for the drake, he made plain the change that had taken place in his whole nature. He trounced her roundly when she approached him and waddled off to his first love, the dog. The bewildered friendless hen wandered about alone. When her first clutch of eggs came she sat faithfully on them through their allotted time. But no soap. They were infertile and a dead loss to the race.

Something had to be done. Life and duck decency had been twisted out of shape. The duck and drake were shut up in a pen with a comfortable place for brooding. The second clutch of eggs fared better and there was a nice brood of ducklings. But the drake never entered into real marriage with the forlorn hen. He was only an instrument and derisive and unfeeling to her. She was always a thorn-in-the-flesh to him, and unwanted.

(Headlong love is usually punished in one way or another. In his own mind, the drake owed nothing further to this hen and her brood, and he fretted at the persecution of being penned up with her. One moonlight night he was fussing about the bottom of the fence trying to find a hole in it, or make one. He was

making too much noise for a sagacious wild bird, and besides he should have been properly in bed where it was safe. He paid no attention to the dark trees down the hill or what might be in them. ^{But} He was neither sagacious nor wild, so how could he know?

Suddenly there was a flare of powerful wings above him, then a sickening choking sound. Those who had raised him under an electric light and petted him into an unnatural member of his race were not there to save him. When morning came, the hen duck and ducklings were cowering petrified under cover. The drake was found lying in the yard, his body almost cut in two and his head eaten off. His love affair had been cut short by the talons and beak of a great horned owl.