

NOTES

A CASE OF INSTINCT

A young sparrow hawk fell out of its nest in the broken cornice of one of the college buildings and was brought to my office. I took it home and put it in a wire cage, set on a large stone at one side of the lawn, where it remained for two months. The first meal I gave it was of fish worms which I dropped into its mouth. The second day I fed it cooked liver cut into small bits, which I placed in its mouth. On the third day I placed a piece of roast beef half the size of an egg on the bottom of the cage. The hawk looked somewhat cautiously and then thrust out one foot and grabbed the meat, viciously sinking his claws into it. Its feathers ruffled, it spread its wings and fluttered about the cage still holding the piece of meat which it continued to strike with its bill, its other foot and its wings. With its outstretched wings, its curved back, its ruffled feathers and its savage thrusts with beak and claw, it seemed a much more formidable creature than it had when swinging on the swing a moment before. The transformation from the sleek, handsome, open-eyed bird to the infuriated beast was so sudden and complete as to be really startling. One could well imagine that such behavior would be effective in intimidating any small creature such as mouse or bird that might be so unfortunate as to fall its prey. Under the circumstances it seemed quite useless behavior in view of the already docile character of the roast beef.

I continued to feed the hawk on some form of cooked meat and the food always elicited the same sort of behavior. The extent of the demonstration seemed to depend somewhat on the hunger of the bird and the size of the piece of meat, great hunger and a large piece producing the more exaggerated behavior.

Since the hawk was evidently too young to fly when brought to me, it seems improbable that it had ever killed any animal or that it had ever witnessed such killing. If this is true we have here a clear case of the congenital tendency to kill prey. Whether one could analyze the hawk's behavior into that concerned directly with the act of killing and in addition certain

elements of behavior which could only be useful in intimidating the prey I am not sure. I am inclined to think that such an analysis could be made. That the instinct is not absolutely rigid is evidenced by the fact that the stimulus lacked most of the characteristics that the normal stimulus would have. There was no movement, no feathers, no hair, no odor of living animal. It may have been the odor of the meat, for bread did not stimulate the behavior, nor did any other kind of food even though it was dark like the meat.

The hawk was quite tame from the start and I could handle it with impunity. Only once did I find out the razor-like quality of its beak and claws and that was when in changing it from one cage to another I hurt its wing. The dogs nosed about the edges of its cage but it was never frightened by them nor did it show any disposition to attack them.

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