The Diary of a Goose Girl

Kate Douglas Wiggin

Table of Contents

The Diary of a Goose Girl....1
Kate Douglas Wiggin....1
CHAPTER I....1
CHAPTER II....2
CHAPTER III....4
CHAPTER IV....6
CHAPTER V....8
CHAPTER VI....9
CHAPTER VII....11
CHAPTER VIII....13
CHAPTER IX....15
CHAPTER X....17
CHAPTER XI....18
CHAPTER XII....20
CHAPTER XIII....22
CHAPTER XIV....22

The Diary of a Goose Girl

Kate Douglas Wiggin

CHAPTER I

THORNYCROFT FARM, near Barbury Green, July 1, 190−.

In alluding to myself as a Goose Girl, I am using only the most modest of my titles; for I am also a poultry−maid, a tender of Belgian hares and rabbits, and a shepherdess; but I particularly fancy the role of Goose Girl, because it recalls the German fairy tales of my early youth, when I always yearned, but never hoped, to be precisely what I now am.

As I was jolting along these charming Sussex roads the other day, a fat buff pony and a tippy cart being my manner of progression, I chanced upon the village of Barbury Green.

One glance was enough for any woman, who, having eyes to see, could see with them; but I made assurance doubly sure by driving about a little, struggling to conceal my new−born passion from the stable− boy who was my escort. Then, it being high noon of a cloudless day, I descended from the trap and said to the astonished yokel: "You may go back to the Hydropathic; I am spending a month or two here. Wait a moment−−I'll send a message, please!"

I then scribbled a word or two to those having me in custody.

"I am very tired of people," the note ran, "and want to rest myself by living a while with things. Address me (if you must) at Barbury Green post−office, or at all events send me a box of simple clothing there−−nothing but shirts and skirts, please. I cannot forget that I am only twenty miles from Oxenbridge (though it might be one hundred and twenty, which is the reason I adore it), but I rely upon you to keep an honourable distance yourselves, and not to divulge my place of retreat to others, especially to−−you know whom! Do not pursue me. I will never be taken alive!"

Having cut, thus, the cable that bound me to civilisation, and having seen the buff pony and the dazed yokel disappear in a cloud of dust, I looked about me with what Stevenson calls a "fine, dizzy, muddle−headed joy," the joy of a successful rebel or a liberated serf. Plenty of money in my purse−−that was unromantic, of course, but it simplified matters−−and nine hours of daylight remaining in which to find a lodging.

The village is one of the oldest, and I am sure it must be one of the quaintest, in England. It is too small to be printed on the map (an honour that has spoiled more than one Arcadia), so pray do not look there, but just believe in it, and some day you may be rewarded by driving into it by chance, as I did, and feel the same Columbus thrill running, like an electric current, through your veins. I withhold specific geographical information in order that you may not miss that Columbus thrill, which comes too seldom in a world of railroads.

The Green is in the very centre of Barbury village, and all civic, political, family, and social life converges there, just at the public duck−pond−−a wee, sleepy lake with a slope of grass−covered stones by which the ducks descend for their swim.

The houses are set about the Green like those in a toy village. They are of old brick, with crumpled, up−and−down roofs of deep− toned red, and tufts of stonecrop growing from the eaves. Diamond− paned windows, half open, admit the sweet summer air; and as for the gardens in front, it would seem as if the

inhabitants had nothing to do but work in them, there is such a riotous profusion of colour and bloom. To add to the effect, there are always pots of flowers hanging from the trees, blue flax and yellow myrtle; and cages of Java sparrows and canaries singing joyously, as well they may in such a paradise.

The shops are idyllic, too, as if Nature had seized even the man of trade and made him subservient to her designs. The general draper's, where I fitted myself out for a day or two quite easily, is set back in a tangle of poppies and sweet peas, Madonna lilies and Canterbury bells. The shop itself has a gay awning, and what do you think the draper has suspended from it, just as a picturesque suggestion to the passer−by? Suggestion I call it, because I should blush to use the word advertisement in describing anything so dainty and decorative. Well, then, garlands of shoes, if you please! Baby bootlets of bronze; tiny ankle−ties in yellow, blue, and scarlet kid; glossy patent−leather pumps shining in the sun, with festoons of slippers at the corners, flowery slippers in imitation Berlin wool−work. If you make this picture in your mind's−eye, just add a window above the awning, and over the fringe of marigolds in the window−box put the draper's wife dancing a rosy−cheeked baby. Alas! my words are only black and white, I fear, and this picture needs a palette drenched in primary colours.

Along the street, a short distance, is the old watchmaker's. Set in the hedge at the gate is a glass case with Multum in Parvo painted on the woodwork. Within, a little stand of trinkets revolves slowly; as slowly, I imagine, as the current of business in that quiet street. The house stands a trifle back and is covered thickly with ivy, while over the entrance−door of the shop is a great round clock set in a green frame of clustering vine. The hands pointed to one when I passed the watchmaker's garden with its thicket of fragrant lavender and its murmuring bees; so I went in to the sign of the "Strong i' the Arm" for some cold luncheon, determining to patronise "The Running Footman" at the very next opportunity. Neither of these inns is starred by Baedeker, and this fact adds the last touch of enchantment to the picture.

The landlady at the "Strong i' the Arm" stabbed me in the heart by telling me that there were no apartments to let in the village, and that she had no private sitting−room in the inn; but she speedily healed the wound by saying that I might be accommodated at one of the farm−houses in the vicinity. Did I object to a farm−'ouse? Then she could cheerfully recommend the Evan's farm, only 'alf a mile away. She 'ad understood from Miss Phoebe Evan, who sold her poultry, that they would take one lady lodger if she didn't wish much waiting upon.

In my present mood I was in search of the strenuous life, and eager to wait, rather than to be waited upon; so I walked along the edge of the Green, wishing that some mentally unbalanced householder would take a sudden fancy to me and ask me to come in and lodge awhile. I suppose these families live under their roofs of peach−blow tiles, in the midst of their blooming gardens, for a guinea a week or thereabouts; yet if they "undertook" me (to use their own phrase), the bill for my humble meals and bed would be at least double that. I don't know that I blame them; one should have proper compensation for admitting a world−stained lodger into such an Eden.

When I was searching for rooms a week ago, I chanced upon a pretty cottage where the woman had sometimes let apartments. She showed me the premises and asked me if I would mind taking my meals in her own dining−room, where I could be served privately at certain hours: and, since she had but the one sitting−room, would I allow her to go on using it occasionally? also, if I had no special preference, would I take the second−sized bedroom and leave her in possession of the largest one, which permitted her to have the baby's crib by her bedside? She thought I should be quite as comfortable, and it was her opinion that in making arrangements with lodgers, it was a good plan not to "bryke up the 'ome any more than was necessary."

"Bryke up the 'ome!" That is seemingly the malignant purpose with which I entered Barbury Green.

CHAPTER II

July 4th.

Enter the family of Thornycroft Farm, of which I am already a member in good and regular standing.

I introduce Mrs. Heaven first, for she is a self−saturated person who would never forgive the insult should she receive any lower place.

She welcomed me with the statement: "We do not take lodgers here, nor boarders; no lodgers, nor boarders, but we do occasionally admit paying guests, those who look as if they would appreciate the quietude of the plyce and be willing as you might say to remunerate according."

I did not mind at this particular juncture what I was called, so long as the epithet was comparatively unobjectionable, so I am a paying guest, therefore, and I expect to pay handsomely for the handsome appellation. Mrs. Heaven is short and fat; she fills her dress as a pin−cushion fills its cover; she wears a cap and apron, and she is so full of platitudes that she would have burst had I not appeared as a providential outlet for them. Her accent is not of the farm, but of the town, and smacks wholly of the marts of trade. She is repetitious, too, as well as platitudinous. "I 'ope if there's anythink you require you will let us know, let us know," she says several times each day; and whenever she enters my sitting−room she prefaces her conversation with the remark: "I trust you are finding it quiet here, miss? It's the quietude of the plyce that is its charm, yes, the quietude. And yet" (she dribbles on) "it wears on a body after a while, miss. I often go into Woodmucket to visit one of my sons just for the noise, simply for the noise, miss, for nothink else in the world but the noise. There's nothink like noise for soothing nerves that is worn threadbare with the quietude, miss, or at least that's my experience; and yet to a strynger the quietude of the plyce is its charm, undoubtedly its chief charm; and that is what our paying guests always say, although our charges are somewhat higher than other plyces. If there's anythink you require, miss, I 'ope you'll mention it. There is not a commodious assortment in Barbury Green, but we can always send the pony to Woodmucket in case of urgency. Our paying guest last summer was a Mrs. Pollock, and she was by way of having sudden fancies. Young and unmarried though you are, miss, I think you will tyke my meaning without my speaking plyner? Well, at six o'clock of a rainy afternoon, she was seized with an unaccountable desire for vegetable marrows, and Mr. 'Eaven put the pony in the cart and went to Woodmucket for them, which is a great advantage to be so near a town and yet 'ave the quietude."

Mr. Heaven is merged, like Mr. Jellyby, in the more shining qualities of his wife. A line of description is too long for him. Indeed, I can think of no single word brief enough, at least in English. The Latin "nil" will do, since no language is rich in words of less than three letters. He is nice, kind, bald, timid, thin, and so colourless that he can scarcely be discerned save in a strong light. When Mrs. Heaven goes out into the orchard in search of him, I can hardly help calling from my window, "Bear a trifle to the right, Mrs. Heaven−−now to the left−−just in front of you now−− if you put out your hands you will touch him."

Phoebe, aged seventeen, is the daughter of the house. She is virtuous, industrious, conscientious, and singularly destitute of physical charm. She is more than plain; she looks as if she had been planned without any definite purpose in view, made of the wrong materials, been badly put together, and never properly finished off; but "plain" after all is a relative word. Many a plain girl has been married for her beauty; and now and then a beauty, falling under a cold eye, has been thought plain.

Phoebe has her compensations, for she is beloved by, and reciprocates the passion of, the Woodmancote carrier, Woodmucket being the English manner of pronouncing the place of his abode. If he "carries" as energetically for the great public as he fetches for Phoebe, then he must be a rising and a prosperous man. He brings her daily, wild strawberries, cherries, birds' nests, peacock feathers, sea−shells, green hazel−nuts, samples of hens' food, or bouquets of wilted field flowers tied together tightly and held with a large, moist, loving hand. He has fine curly hair of sandy hue, which forms an aureole on his brow, and a reddish beard, which makes another inverted aureole to match, round his chin. One cannot look at him, especially when the sun shines through him, without thinking how lovely he would be if stuffed and set on wheels, with a little string to drag him about.

Phoebe confided to me that she was on the eve of loving the postman when the carrier came across her horizon.

"It doesn't do to be too hysty, does it, miss?" she asked me as we were weeding the onion bed. "I was to give the postman his answer on the Monday night, and it was on the Monday morning that Mr. Gladwish made his first trip here as carrier. I may say I never wyvered from that moment, and no more did he. When I think how near I came to promising the postman it gives me a turn." (I can understand that, for I once met the man I nearly promised years before to marry, and we both experienced such a sense of relief at being free instead of bound that we came near falling in love for sheer joy.)

The last and most important member of the household is the Square Baby. His name is Albert Edward, and he is really five years old and no baby at all; but his appearance on this planet was in the nature of a complete surprise to all parties concerned, and he is spoiled accordingly. He has a square head and jaw, square shoulders, square hands and feet. He is red and white and solid and stolid and slow−witted, as the young of his class commonly are, and will make a bulwark of the nation in course of time, I should think; for England has to produce a few thousand such square babies every year for use in the colonies and in the standing army. Albert Edward has already a military gait, and when he has acquired a habit of obedience at all comparable with his power of command, he will be able to take up the white man's burden with distinguished success. Meantime I can never look at him without marvelling how the English climate can transmute bacon and eggs, tea and the solid household loaf into such radiant roses and lilies as bloom upon his cheeks and lips.

CHAPTER III

July 8th.

Thornycroft is by way of being a small poultry farm.

In reaching it from Barbury Green, you take the first left−hand road, go till you drop, and there you are.

It reminds me of my "grandmother's farm at Older." Did you know the song when you were a child? −

My grandmother had a very fine farm
'Way down in the fields of Older.
With a cluck−cluck here,
And a cluck−cluck there,
Here and there a cluck−cluck,
Cluck−cluck here and there,
Down in the fields at Older.

It goes on for ever by the simple subterfuge of changing a few words in each verse.

My grandmother had a very fine farm
'Way down in the fields of Older.
With a quack−quack here,
And a quack−quack there,
Here and there a quack−quack,
Quack−quack here and there,
Down in the fields at Older.

This is followed by the gobble−gobble, moo−moo, baa−baa, etc., as long as the laureate's imagination and the infant's breath hold good. The tune is pretty, and I do not know, or did not, when I was young, a more fascinating lyric.

Thornycroft House must have belonged to a country gentleman once upon a time, or to more than one; men who built on a bit here and there once in a hundred years, until finally we have this charmingly irregular and dilapidated whole. You go up three steps into Mrs. Heaven's room, down two into mine, while Phoebe's is up in a sort of turret with long, narrow lattices opening into the creepers. There are crooked little stair−cases, passages that branch off into other passages and lead nowhere in particular; I can't think of a better house in which to play hide and seek on a wet day. In front, what was once, doubtless, a green, is cut up into greens; to wit, a vegetable garden, where the onions, turnips, and potatoes grow cosily up to the very door−sill; the utilitarian aspect of it all being varied by some scarlet−runners and a scattering of poppies on either side of the path.

The Belgian hares have their habitation in a corner fifty feet distant; one large enclosure for poultry lies just outside the sweetbrier hedge; the others, with all the houses and coops, are in the meadow at the back, where also our tumbler pigeons are kept.

Phoebe attends to the poultry; it is her department. Mr. Heaven has neither the force nor the finesse required, and the gentle reader who thinks these qualities unneeded in so humble a calling has only to spend a few days at Thornycroft to be convinced. Mrs. Heaven would be of use, but she is dressing the Square Baby in the morning and putting him to bed at night just at the hours when the feathered young things are undergoing the same operation.

A Goose Girl, like a poet, is sometimes born, sometimes otherwise. I am of the born variety. No training was necessary; I put my head on my pillow as a complicated product of modern civilisation on a Tuesday night, and on a Wednesday morning I awoke as a Goose Girl.

My destiny slumbered during the day, but at eight o'clock I heard a terrific squawking in the direction of the duck−ponds, and, aimlessly drifting in that direction, I came upon Phoebe trying to induce ducks and drakes, geese and ganders, to retire for the night. They have to be driven into enclosures behind fences of wire netting, fastened into little rat−proof boxes, or shut into separate coops, so as to be safe from their natural enemies, the rats and foxes; which, obeying, I suppose, the law of supply and demand, abound in this neighbourhood. The old ganders are allowed their liberty, being of such age, discretion, sagacity, and pugnacity that they can be trusted to fight their own battles.

The intelligence of hens, though modest, is of such an order that it prompts them to go to bed at a virtuous hour of their own accord; but ducks and geese have to be materially assisted, or I believe they would roam till morning. Never did small boy detest and resist being carried off to his nursery as these dullards, young and old, detest and resist being driven to theirs. Whether they suffer from insomnia, or nightmare, or whether they simply prefer the sweet air of liberty (and death) to the odour of captivity and the coop, I have no means of knowing.

Phoebe stood by one of the duck−ponds, a long pole in her hand, and a helpless expression in that doughlike countenance of hers, where aimless contours and features unite to make a kind of facial blur. (What does the carrier see in it?) The pole was not long enough to reach the ducks, and Phoebe's method lacked spirit and adroitness, so that it was natural, perhaps, that they refused to leave the water, the evening being warm, with an uncommon fine sunset.

I saw the situation at once and ran to meet it with a glow of interest and anticipation. If there is anything in the world I enjoy, it is making somebody do something that he doesn't want to do; and if, when victory perches upon my banner, the somebody can be brought to say that he ought to have done it without my making him, that adds the unforgettable touch to pleasure, though seldom, alas! does it happen. Then ensued the delightful and stimulating hour that has now become a feature of the day; an hour in which the remembrance of the table−d'hote dinner at the Hydro, going on at identically the same time, only stirs me to a keener joy and gratitude.

The ducks swim round in circles, hide under the willows, and attempt to creep into the rat−holes in the banks, a stupidity so crass that it merits instant death, which it somehow always escapes. Then they come out in couples and waddle under the wrong fence into the lower meadow, fly madly under the tool−house, pitch blindly in with the sitting hens, and out again in short order, all the time quacking and squawking, honking and hissing like a bewildered orchestra. By dint of splashing the water with poles, throwing pebbles, beating the shrubs at the pond's edges, "shooing" frantically with our skirts, crawling beneath bars to head them off, and prodding them from under bushes to urge them on, we finally get the older ones out of the water and the younger ones into some sort of relation to their various retreats; but, owing to their lack of geography, hatred of home, and general recalcitrancy, they none of them turn up in the right place and have to be sorted out. We uncover the top of the little house, or the enclosure as it may be, or reach in at the door, and, seizing the struggling victim, drag him forth and take him where he should have had the wit to go in the first instance. The weak ones get in with the strong and are in danger of being trampled; two May goslings that look almost full−grown have run into a house with a brood of ducklings a week old. There are twenty−seven crowded into one coop, five in another, nineteen in another; the gosling with one leg has to come out, and the duckling threatened with the gapes; their place is with the "invaleeds," as Phoebe calls them, but they never learn the location of the hospital, nor have the slightest scruple about spreading contagious diseases.

Finally, when we have separated and sorted exhaustively, an operation in which Phoebe shows a delicacy of discrimination and a fearlessness of attack amounting to genius, we count the entire number and find several missing. Searching for their animate or inanimate bodies, we "scoop" one from under the tool−house, chance upon two more who are being harried and pecked by the big geese in the lower meadow, and discover one sailing by himself in solitary splendour in the middle of the deserted pond, a look of evil triumph in his bead−like eye. Still we lack one young duckling, and he at length is found dead by the hedge. A rat has evidently seized him and choked him at a single throttle, but in such haste that he has not had time to carry away the tiny body.

"Poor think!" says Phoebe tearfully; "it looks as if it was 'it with some kind of a wepping. I don't know whatever to do with the rats, they're gettin' that fearocious!"

Before I was admitted into daily contact with the living goose (my previous intercourse with him having been carried on when gravy and stuffing obscured his true personality), I thought him a very Dreyfus among fowls, a sorely slandered bird, to whom justice had never been done; for even the gentle Darwin is hard upon him. My opinion is undergoing some slight modifications, but I withhold judgment at present, hoping that some of the follies, faults, vagaries, and limitations that I observe in Phoebe's geese may be due to Phoebe's educational methods, which were, before my advent, those of the darkest ages.

CHAPTER IV

July 9th.

By the time the ducks and geese are incarcerated for the night, the reasonable, sensible, practical−minded hens−−especially those whose mentality is increased and whose virtue is heightened by the responsibilities of motherhood−−have gone into their own particular rat−proof boxes, where they are waiting in a semi−somnolent state to have the wire doors closed, the bricks set against them, and the bits of sacking flung over the tops to keep out the draught. We have a great many young families, both ducklings and chicks, but we have no duck mothers at present. The variety of bird which Phoebe seems to have bred during the past year may be called the New Duck, with certain radical ideas about woman's sphere. What will happen to Thornycroft if we develop a New Hen and a New Cow, my imagination fails to conceive. There does not seem to be the slightest danger for the moment, however, and our hens lay and sit and sit and lay as if laying and sitting were the twin purposes of life.

The nature of the hen seems to broaden with the duties of maternity, but I think myself that we presume a little

upon her amiability and natural motherliness. It is one thing to desire a family of one's own, to lay eggs with that idea in view, to sit upon them three long weeks and hatch out and bring up a nice brood of chicks. It must be quite another to have one's eggs abstracted day by day and eaten by a callous public, the nest filled with deceitful substitutes, and at the end of a dull and weary period of hatching to bring into the world another person's children−− children, too, of the wrong size, the wrong kind of bills and feet, and, still more subtle grievance, the wrong kind of instincts, leading them to a dangerous aquatic career, one which the mother may not enter to guide, guard, and teach; one on the brink of which she must ever stand, uttering dryshod warnings which are never heeded. They grow used to this strange order of things after a bit, it is true, and are less anxious and excited. When the duck− brood returns safely again and again from what the hen−mother thinks will prove a watery grave, she becomes accustomed to the situation, I suppose. I find that at night she stands by the pond for what she considers a decent, self−respecting length of time, calling the ducklings out of the water; then, if they refuse to come, the mother goes off to bed and leaves them to Providence, or Phoebe.

The brown hen that we have named Cornelia is the best mother, the one who waits longest and most patiently for the web−footed Gracchi to finish their swim.

When a chick is taken out of the incubytor (as Phoebe calls it) and refused by all the other hens, Cornelia generally accepts it, though she had twelve of her own when we began using her as an orphan asylum. "Wings are made to stretch," she seems to say cheerfully, and with a kind glance of her round eye she welcomes the wanderer and the outcast. She even tended for a time the offspring of an absent−minded, light−headed pheasant who flew over a four−foot wall and left her young behind her to starve; it was not a New Pheasant, either; for the most conservative and old− fashioned of her tribe occasionally commits domestic solecisms of this sort.

There is no telling when, where, or how the maternal instinct will assert itself. Among our Thornycroft cats is a certain Mrs. Greyskin. She had not been seen for many days, and Mrs. Heaven concluded that she had hidden herself somewhere with a family of kittens; but as the supply of that article with us more than equals the demand, we had not searched for her with especial zeal.

The other day Mrs. Greyskin appeared at the dairy door, and when she had been fed Phoebe and I followed her stealthily, from a distance. She walked slowly about as if her mind were quite free from harassing care, and finally approached a deserted cow−house where there was a great mound of straw. At this moment she caught sight of us and turned in another direction to throw us off the scent. We persevered in our intention of going into her probable retreat, and were cautiously looking for some sign of life in the haymow, when we heard a soft cackle and a ruffling of plumage. Coming closer to the sound we saw a black hen brooding a nest, her bright bead eyes turning nervously from side to side; and, coaxed out from her protecting wings by youthful curiosity, came four kittens, eyes wide open, warm, happy, ready for sport!

The sight was irresistible, and Phoebe ran for Mr. and Mrs. Heaven and the Square Baby. Mother Hen was not to be embarrassed or daunted, even if her most sacred feelings were regarded in the light of a cheap entertainment. She held her ground while one of the kits slid up and down her glossy back, and two others, more timid, crept underneath her breast, only daring to put out their pink noses! We retired then for very shame and met Mrs. Greyskin in the doorway. This should have thickened the plot, but there is apparently no rivalry nor animosity between the co−mothers. We watch them every day now, through a window in the roof. Mother Greyskin visits the kittens frequently, lies down beside the home nest, and gives them their dinner. While this is going on Mother Blackwing goes modestly away for a bite, a sup, and a little exercise, returning to the kittens when the cat leaves them. It is pretty to see her settle down over the four, fat, furry dumplings, and they seem to know no difference in warmth or comfort, whichever mother is brooding them; while, as their eyes have been open for a week, it can no longer be called a blind error on their part.

When we have closed all our small hen−nurseries for the night, there is still the large house inhabited by the thirty−two full− grown chickens which Phoebe calls the broilers. I cannot endure the term, and will not use it.

"Now for the April chicks," I say every evening.

"Do you mean the broilers?" asks Phoebe.

"I mean the big April chicks," say I.

"Yes, them are the broilers," says she.

But is it not disagreeable enough to be a broiler when one's time comes, without having the gridiron waved in one's face for weeks beforehand?

The April chicks are all lively and desirous of seeing the world as thoroughly as possible before going to roost or broil. As a general thing, we find in the large house sixteen young fowls of the contemplative, flavourless, resigned−to−the−inevitable variety; three more (the same three every night) perch on the roof and are driven down; four (always the same four) cling to the edge of the open door, waiting to fly off, but not in, when you attempt to close it; nine huddle together on a place in the grass about forty feet distant, where a small coop formerly stood in the prehistoric ages. This small coop was one in which they lodged for a fortnight when they were younger, and when those absolutely indelible impressions are formed of which we read in educational maxims. It was taken away long since, but the nine loyal (or stupid) Casabiancas cling to the sacred spot where its foundations rested; they accordingly have to be caught and deposited bodily in the house, and this requires strategy, as they note our approach from a considerable distance.

Finally all are housed but two, the little white cock and the black pullet, who are still impish and of a wandering mind. Though headed off in every direction, they fly into the hedges and hide in the underbrush. We beat the hedge on the other side, but with no avail. We dive into the thicket of wild roses, sweetbrier, and thistles on our hands and knees, coming out with tangled hair, scratched noses, and no hens. Then, when all has been done that human ingenuity can suggest, Phoebe goes to her late supper and I do sentry−work. I stroll to a safe distance, and, sitting on one of the rat−proof boxes, watch the bushes with an eagle eye. Five minutes go by, ten, fifteen; and then out steps the white cock, stealthily tiptoeing toward the home into which he refused to go at our instigation. In a moment out creeps the obstinate little beast of a black pullet from the opposite clump. The wayward pair meet at their own door, which I have left open a few inches. When all is still I walk gently down the field, and, warned by previous experiences, approach the house from behind. I draw the door to softly and quickly; but not so quickly that the evil−minded and suspicious black pullet hasn't time to spring out, with a make− believe squawk of fright−−that induces three other blameless chickens to fly down from their perches and set the whole flock in a flutter. Then I fall from grace and call her a Broiler; and when, after some minutes of hot pursuit, I catch her by falling over her in the corner by the goose−pen, I address her as a fat, juicy Broiler with parsley butter and a bit of bacon.

CHAPTER V

July 10th.

At ten thirty or so in the morning the cackling begins. I wonder exactly what it means! Have the forest−lovers who listen so respectfully to, and interpret so exquisitely, the notes of birds−− have none of them made psychological investigations of the hen cackle? Can it be simple elation? One could believe that of the first few eggs, but a hen who has laid two or three hundred can hardly feel the same exuberant pride and joy daily. Can it be the excitement incident to successful achievement? Hardly, because the task is so extremely simple. Eggs are more or less alike; a little larger or smaller, a trifle whiter or browner; and almost sure to be quite right as to details; that is, the big end never gets confused with the little end, they are always ovoid and never spherical, and the yolk is always inside of the white. As for a soft−shelled egg, it is so rare an occurrence that the fear of laying

one could not set the whole race of hens in a panic; so there really cannot be any intellectual or emotional agitation in producing a thing that might be made by a machine. Can it be simply "fussiness"; since the people who have the least to do commonly make the most flutter about doing it?

Perhaps it is merely conversation. "Cut−cut−cut−cut−cut−DAHcut! . . . I have finished my strictly fresh egg, have you laid yours? Make haste, then, for the cock has found a gap in the wire−fence and wants us to wander in the strawberry−bed. . . . Cut−cut−cut− cut−cut−DAHcut . . . Every moment is precious, for the Goose Girl will find us, when she gathers the strawberries for her luncheon . . . Cut−cut−cut−cut! On the way out we can find sweet places to steal nests . . . Cut−cut−cut! . . . I am so glad I am not sitting this heavenly morning; it IS a dull life.

A Lancashire poultry−man drifted into Barbury Green yesterday. He is an old acquaintance of Mr. Heaven, and spent the night and part of the next day at Thornycroft Farm. He possessed a deal of fowl philosophy, and tells many a good hen story, which, like fish stories, draw rather largely on the credulity of the audience. We were sitting in the rickyard talking comfortably about laying and cackling and kindred matters when he took his pipe from his mouth and told us the following tale−−not a bad one if you can translate the dialect:−

'Aw were once towd as, if yo' could only get th' hen's egg away afooar she hed sin it, th' hen 'ud think it hed med a mistek an' sit deawn ageean an' lay another.

'An' it seemed to me it were a varra sensible way o' lukkin' at it. Sooa aw set to wark to mek a nest as 'ud tek a rise eawt o' th' hens. An' aw dud it too. Aw med a nest wi' a fause bottom, th' idea bein' as when a hen hed laid, th' egg 'ud drop through into a box underneyth.

'Aw felt varra preawd o' that nest, too, aw con tell yo', an' aw remember aw felt quite excited when aw see an awd black Minorca, th' best layer as aw hed, gooa an' settle hersel deawn i' th' nest an' get ready for wark. Th' hen seemed quite comfortable enough, aw were glad to see, an' geet through th' operation beawt ony seemin' trouble.

"Well, aw darsay yo' know heaw a hen carries on as soon as it's laid a egg. It starts "chuckin'" away like a showman's racket, an' after tekkin' a good Ink at th' egg to see whether it's a big 'un or a little 'un, gooas eawt an' tells all t'other hens abeawt it.

"Neaw, this black Minorca, as aw sed, were a owdish bird, an' maybe knew mooar than aw thowt. Happen it hed laid on a nest wi' a fause bottom afooar, an' were up to th' trick, but whether or not, aw never see a hen luk mooar disgusted i' mi life when it lukked i' th' nest an' see as it hed hed all that trouble fer nowt.

"It woked reawnd th' nest as if it couldn't believe its own eyes.

"But it dudn't do as aw expected. Aw expected as it 'ud sit deawn ageean an' lay another.

"But it just gi'e one wonderin' sooart o' chuck, an then, after a long stare reawnd th' hen−coyt, it woked eawt, as mad a hen as aw've ever sin. Aw fun' eawt after, what th' long stare meant. It were tekkin' farewell! For if yo'll believe me that hen never laid another egg i' ony o' my nests.

"Varra like it laid away in a spot wheear it could hev summat to luk at when it hed done wark for th' day.

"Sooa aw lost mi best layer through mi actin', an' aw've never invented owt sen."

CHAPTER VI

One learns to be modest by living on a poultry farm, for there are constant expositions of the most deplorable

vanity among the cocks. We have a couple of pea−fowl who certainly are an addition to the landscape, as they step mincingly along the square of turf we dignify by the name of lawn. The head of the house has a most languid and self−conscious strut, and his microscopic mind is fixed entirely on his splendid trailing tail. If I could only master his language sufficiently to tell him how hideously ugly the back view of this gorgeous fan is, when he spreads it for the edification of the observer in front of him, he would of course retort that there is a "congregation side" to everything, but I should at least force him into a defence of his tail and a confession of its limitations. This would be new and unpleasant, I fancy; and if it produced no perceptible effect upon his super−arrogant demeanour, I might remind him that he is likely to be used, eventually, for a feather duster, unless, indeed, the Heavens are superstitious and prefer to throw his tail away, rather than bring ill luck and the evil eye into the house.

The longer I study the cock, whether Black Spanish, White Leghorn, Dorking, or the common barnyard fowl, the more intimately I am acquainted with him, the less I am impressed with his character. He has more pride of bearing, and less to be proud of, than any bird I know. He is indolent, though he struts pompously over the grass as if the day were all too short for his onerous duties. He calls the hens about him when I throw corn from the basket, but many a time I have seen him swallow hurriedly, and in private, some dainty titbit he has found unexpectedly. He has no particular chivalry. He gives no special encouragement to his hen when he becomes a prospective father, and renders little assistance when the responsibilities become actualities. His only personal message or contribution to the world is his raucous cock−a−doodle−doo, which, being uttered most frequently at dawn, is the most ill−timed and offensive of all musical notes. It is so unnecessary too, as if the day didn't come soon enough without his warning; but I suppose he is anxious to waken his hens and get them at their daily task, and so he disturbs the entire community. In short, I dislike him; his swagger, his autocratic strut, his greed, his irritating self−consciousness, his endless parading of himself up and down in a procession of one.

Of course his character is largely the result of polygamy. His weaknesses are only what might be expected; and as for the hens, I have considerable respect for the patience, sobriety, and dignity with which they endure an institution particularly offensive to all women. In their case they do not even have the sustaining thought of its being an article of religion, so they are to be complimented the more.

There is nothing on earth so feminine as a hen−−not womanly, simply feminine. Those men of insight who write the Woman's Page in the Sunday newspapers study hens more than women, I sometimes think; at any rate, their favourite types are all present on this poultry farm.

Some families of White Leghorns spend most of their time in the rickyard, where they look extremely pretty, their slender white shapes and red combs and wattles well set off by the background of golden hayricks. There is a great oak−tree in one corner, with a tall ladder leaning against its trunk, and a capital roosting−place on a long branch running at right angles with the ladder. I try to spend a quarter of an hour there every night before supper, just for the pleasure of seeing the feathered "women−folks" mount that ladder.

A dozen of them surround the foot, waiting restlessly for their turn. One little white lady flutters up on the lowest round and perches there until she reviews the past, faces the present, and forecasts the future; during which time she is gathering courage for the next jump. She cackles, takes up one foot and then the other, tilts back and forth, holds up her skirts and drops them again, cocks her head nervously to see whether they are all staring at her below, gives half a dozen preliminary springs which mean nothing, declares she can't and won't go up any faster, unties her bonnet strings and pushes back her hair, pulls down her dress to cover her toes, and finally alights on the next round, swaying to and fro until she gains her equilibrium, when she proceeds to enact the same scene over again.

All this time the hens at the foot of the ladder are criticising her methods and exclaiming at the length of time she requires in mounting; while the cocks stroll about the yard keeping one eye on the ladder, picking up a seed here and there, and giving a masculine sneer now and then at the too−familiar scene. They approach the party at

intervals, but only to remark that it always makes a man laugh to see a woman go up a ladder. The next hen, stirred to the depths by this speech, flies up entirely too fast, loses her head, tumbles off the top round, and has to make the ascent over again. Thus it goes on and on, this petite comedie humaine, and I could enjoy it with my whole heart if Mr. Heaven did not insist on sharing the spectacle with me. He is so inexpressibly dull, so destitute of humour, that I did not think it likely he would see in the performance anything more than a flock of hens going up a ladder to roost. But he did; for there is no man so blind that he cannot see the follies of women; and, when he forgot himself so far as to utter a few genial, silly, well−worn reflections upon femininity at large, I turned upon him and revealed to him some of the characteristics of his own sex, gained from an exhaustive study of the barnyard fowl of the masculine gender. He went into the house discomfited, though chuckling a little at my vehemence; but at least I have made it for ever impossible for him to watch his hens without an occasional glance at the cocks.

CHAPTER VII

July 12th.

O the pathos of a poultry farm! Catherine of Aragon, the black Spanish hen that stole her nest, brought out nine chicks this morning, and the business−like and marble−hearted Phoebe has taken them away and given them to another hen who has only seven. Two mothers cannot be wasted on these small families−−it would not be profitable; and the older mother, having been tried and found faithful over seven, has been given the other nine and accepted them. What of the bereft one? She is miserable and stands about moping and forlorn, but it is no use fighting against the inevitable; hens' hearts must obey the same laws that govern the rotation of crops. Catherine of Aragon feels her lot a bitter one just now, but in time she will succumb, and lay, which is more to the point.

We have had a very busy evening, beginning with the rats' supper−− delicate sandwiches of bread−and−butter spread with Paris green.

We have a new brood of seventeen ducklings just hatched this afternoon. When we came to the nest the yellow and brown bunches of down and fluff were peeping out from under the hen's wings in the prettiest fashion in the world.

"It's a noble hen!" I said to Phoebe.

"She ain't so nowble as she looks," Phoebe answered grimly. "It was another 'en that brooded these eggs for near on three weeks and then this big one come along with a fancy she'd like a family 'erself if she could steal one without too much trouble; so she drove the rightful 'en off the nest, finished up the last few days, and 'ere she is in possession of the ducklings!"

"Why don't you take them away from her and give them back to the first hen, who did most of the work?" I asked, with some spirit.

"Like as not she wouldn't tyke them now," said Phoebe, as she lifted the hen off the broken egg−shells and moved her gently into a clean box, on a bed of fresh hay. We put food and drink within reach of the family, and very proud and handsome that highway robber of a hen looked, as she stretched her wings over the seventeen easily−earned ducklings.

Going back to the old nesting−box, I found one egg forgotten among the shells. It was still warm, and I took it up to run across the field with it to Phoebe. It was heavy, and the carrying of it was a queer sensation, inasmuch as it squirmed and "yipped" vociferously in transit, threatening so unmistakably to hatch in my hand that I was decidedly nervous. The intrepid little youngster burst his shell as he touched Phoebe's apron, and has become the

strongest and handsomest of the brood.

All this tending of downy young things, this feeding and putting to bed, this petting and nursing and rearing, is such pretty, comforting woman's work. I am sure Phoebe will make a better wife to the carrier for having been a poultry−maid, and though good enough for most practical purposes when I came here, I am an infinitely better woman now. I am afraid I was not particularly nice the last few days at the Hydro. Such a lot of dull, prosy, inquisitive, bothering old tabbies! Aunt Margaret furnishing imaginary symptoms enough to keep a fond husband and two trained nurses distracted; a man I had never encouraged in my life coming to stay in the neighbourhood and turning up daily for rejection; another man taking rooms at the very hotel with the avowed purpose of making my life a burden; and on the heels of both, a widow of thirty−five in full chase! Small wonder I thought it more dignified to retire than to compete, and so I did.

I need not, however, have cut the threads that bound me to Oxenbridge with such particularly sharp scissors, nor given them such a vicious snap; for, so far as I can observe, the little world of which I imagined myself the sun continues to revolve, and, probably, about some other centre. I can well imagine who has taken up that delightful but somewhat exposed and responsible position−−it would be just like her!

I am perfectly happy where I am; it is not that; but it seems so strange that they can be perfectly happy without me, after all that they−−after all that was said on the subject not many days ago. Nothing turns out as one expects. There have been no hot pursuits, no rewards offered, no bills posted, no printed placards issued describing the beauty and charms of a young person who supposed herself the cynosure of every eye. Heigh−ho! What does it matter, after all? One can always be a Goose Girl!

* * *

I wonder if the hen mother is quite, quite satisfied with her ducklings! Do you suppose the fact of hatching and brooding them breaks down all the sense of difference? Does she not sometimes reflect that if her children were the ordinary sort, and not these changelings, she would be enjoying certain pretty little attentions dear to a mother's heart? The chicks would be pecking the food off her broad beak with their tiny ones, and jumping on her back to slide down her glossy feathers. They would be far nicer to cuddle, too, so small and graceful and light; the changelings are a trifle solid and brawny. And personally, just as a matter of taste, would she not prefer wee, round, glancing heads, and pointed beaks, peeping from under her wings, to these teaspoon−shaped things larger than her own? I wonder!

We are training fourteen large young chickens to sit on the perches in their new house, instead of huddling together on the floor as has been their habit, because we discover rat−holes under the wire flooring occasionally, and fear that toes may be bitten. At nine o'clock Phoebe and I lift the chickens one by one, and, as it were, glue them to their perches, squawking. Three nights have we gone patiently through with this performance, but they have not learned the lesson. The ducks and geese are, however, greatly improved by the application of advanced educational methods, and the regime of perfect order and system instituted by Me begins to show results.

There is no more violent splashing and pebbling, racing, chasing, separating. The pole, indeed, still has to be produced, but at the first majestic wave of my hand they scuttle toward the shore. The geese turn to the right, cross the rickyard, and go to their pen; the May ducks turn to the left for their coops, the June ducks follow the hens to the top meadow, and even the idiot gosling has an inspiration now and then and stumbles on his own habitation.

Mrs. Heaven has no reverence for the principles of Comenius, Pestalozzi, or Herbert Spencer as applied to poultry, and when the ducks and geese came out of the pond badly the other night and went waddling and tumbling and hissing all over creation, did not approve of my sending them back into the pond to start afresh.

"I consider it a great waste of time, of good time, miss," she said; "and, after all, do you consider that educated poultry will be any better eating, or that it will lay more than one egg a day, miss?"

I have given the matter some attention, and I fear Mrs. Heaven is right. A duck, a goose, or a hen in which I have developed a larger brain, implanted a sense of duty, or instilled an idea of self−government, is likely, on the whole, to be leaner, not fatter. There is nothing like obeying the voice of conscience for taking the flesh off one's bones; and, speaking of conscience, Phoebe, whose metaphysics are of the farm farmy, says that hers "felt like a hunlaid hegg for dyes" after she had jilted the postman.

As to the eggs, I am sure the birds will go on laying one a day for 'tis their nature to. Whether the product of the intelligent, conscious, logical fowl, will be as rich in quality as that of the uneducated and barbaric bird, I cannot say; but it ought at least to be equal to the Denmark egg eaten now by all Londoners; and if, perchance, left uneaten, it is certain to be a very superior wife and mother.

While we are discussing the subject of educating poultry, I confess that the case of Cannibal Ann gives me much anxiety. Twice in her short career has she been under suspicion of eating her own eggs, but Phoebe has never succeeded in catching her in flagrante delicto. That eminent detective service was reserved for me, and I have been haunted by the picture ever since. It is an awful sight to witness a hen gulp her own newly−laid fresh egg, yolk, white, shell, and all; to realise that you have fed, sheltered, chased, and occasionally run in, a being possessed of no moral sense, a being likely to set a bad example, inculcate vicious habits among her innocent sisters, and lower the standard of an entire poultry− yard. The Young Poultry Keeper's Friend gives us no advice on this topic, and we do not know whether to treat Cannibal Ann as the victim of a disease, or as a confirmed criminal; whether to administer remedies or cut her off in the flower of her youth.

We have had a sad scene to−night. A chick has been ailing all day, and when we shut up the brood we found him dead in a corner.

Phoebe put him on the ground while she busied herself about the coop. The other chicks came out and walked about the dead one again and again, eyeing him curiously.

"Poor little chap!" said Phoebe. "E's never 'ad a mother! 'E was an incubytor chicken, and wherever I took 'im 'e was picked at. There was somethink wrong with 'im; 'e never was a fyvorite!"

I put the fluffy body into a hole in the turf, and strewed a handful of grass over him. "Sad little epitaph!" I thought. "He never was a fyvorite!"

CHAPTER VIII

July 13th.

I like to watch the Belgian hares eating their trifolium or pea− pods or grass; graceful, gentle things they are, crowding about Mr. Heaven, and standing prettily, not greedily, on their hind legs, to reach for the clover, their delicate nostrils and whiskers all a− quiver with excitement.

As I look out of my window in the dusk I can see one of the mothers galloping across the enclosure, the soft white lining of her tail acting as a beacon−light to the eight infant hares following her, a quaint procession of eight white spots in it glancing line. In the darkest night those baby creatures could follow their mother through grass or hedge or thicket, and she would need no warning note to show them where to flee in case of danger. "All you have to do is to follow the white night−light that I keep in the lining of my tail," she says, when she is giving her first maternal lectures; and it seems a beneficent provision of Nature. To be sure, Mr. Heaven took his gun and

went out to shoot wild rabbits to−day, and I noted that he marked them by those same self− betraying tails, as they scuttled toward their holes or leaped toward the protecting cover of the hedge; so it does not appear whether Nature is on the side of the farmer or the rabbit . . .

There is as much comedy and as much tragedy in poultry life as anywhere, and already I see rifts within lutes. We have in a cage a French gentleman partridge married to a Hungarian lady of defective sight. He paces back and forth in the pen restlessly, anything but content with the domestic fireside. One can see plainly that he is devoted to the Boulevards, and that if left to his own inclinations he would never have chosen any spouse but a thorough Parisienne.

The Hungarian lady is blind of one eye, from some stray shot, I suppose. She is melancholy at all times, and occasionally goes so far as to beat her head against the wire netting. If liberated, Mr. Heaven says that her blindness would only expose her to death at the hands of the first sportsman, and it always seems to me as if she knows this, and is ever trying to decide whether a loveless marriage is any better than the tomb.

Then, again, the great, grey gander is, for some mysterious reason, out of favour with the entire family. He is a noble and amiable bird, by far the best all−round character in the flock, for dignity of mien and large−minded common−sense. What is the treatment vouchsafed to this blameless husband and father? One that puts anybody out of sorts with virtue and its scant rewards. To begin with, the others will not allow him to go into the pond. There is an organised cabal against it, and he sits solitary on the bank, calm and resigned, but, naturally, a trifle hurt. His favourite retreat is a tiny sort of island on the edge of the pool under the alders, where with his bent head, and red−rimmed philosophic eyes he regards his own breast and dreams of happier days. When the others walk into the country twenty−three of them keep together, and Burd Alane (as I have named him from the old ballad) walks by himself. The lack of harmony is so evident here, and the slight so intentional and direct, that it almost moves me to tears. The others walk soberly, always in couples, but even Burd Alane's rightful spouse is on the side of the majority, and avoids her consort.

What is the nature of his offence? There can be no connubial jealousies, I judge, as geese are strictly monogamous, and having chosen a partner of their joys and sorrows they cleave to each other until death or some other inexorable circumstance does them part. If they are ever mistaken in their choice, and think they might have done better, the world is none the wiser. Burd Alane looks in good condition, but Phoebe thinks he is not quite himself, and that some day when he is in greater strength he will turn on his foes and rend them, regaining thus his lost prestige, for formerly he was king of the flock.

* * *

Phoebe has not a vestige of sentiment. She just asked me if I would have a duckling or a gosling for dinner; that there were two quite ready−−the brown and yellow duckling, that is the last to leave the water at night, and the white gosling that never knows his own 'ouse. Which would I 'ave, and would I 'ave it with sage and onion?

Now, had I found a duckling on the table at dinner I should have eaten it without thinking at all, or with the thought that it had come from Barbury Green. But eat a duckling that I have stoned out of the pond, pursued up the bank, chased behind the wire netting, caught, screaming, in a corner, and carried struggling to his bed? Feed upon an idiot gosling that I have found in nine different coops on nine successive nights−−in with the newly−hatched chicks, the half−grown pullets, the setting hen, the "invaleed goose," the drake with the gapes, the old ducks in the pen?−−Eat a gosling that I have caught and put in with his brothers and sisters (whom he never recognises) so frequently and regularly that I am familiar with every joint in his body?

In the first place, with my own small bump of locality and lack of geography, I would never willingly consume a creature who might, by some strange process of assimilation, make me worse in this respect; in the second place, I should have to be ravenous indeed to sit down deliberately and make a meal of an intimate friend, no matter if I

had not a high opinion of his intelligence. I should as soon think of eating the Square Baby, stuffed with sage and onion and garnished with green apple−sauce, as the yellow duckling or the idiot gosling.

Mrs. Heaven has just called me into her sitting−room, ostensibly to ask me to order breakfast, but really for the pleasure of conversation. Why she should inquire whether I would relish some gammon of bacon with eggs, when she knows that there has not been, is not now, and never will be, anything but gammon of bacon with eggs, is more than I can explain.

"Would you like to see my flowers, miss?" she asks, folding her plump hands over her white apron. "They are looking beautiful this morning. I am so fond of potted plants, of plants in pots. Look at these geraniums! Now, I consider that pink one a perfect bloom; yes, a perfect bloom. This is a fine red one, is it not, miss? Especially fine, don't you think? The trouble with the red variety is that they're apt to get "bobby" and have to be washed regularly; quite bobby they do get indeed, I assure you. That white one has just gone out of blossom, and it was really wonderful. You could 'ardly have told it from a paper flower, miss, not from a white paper flower. My plants are my children nowadays, since Albert Edward is my only care. I have been the mother of eleven children, miss, all of them living, so far as I know; I know nothing to the contrary. I 'ope you are not wearying of this solitary place, miss? It will grow upon you, I am sure, as it did upon Mrs. Pollock, with all her peculiar fancies, and as it 'as grown upon us.−−We formerly had a butcher's shop in Buffington, and it was naturally a great responsibility. Mr. Heaven's nerves are not strong, and at last he wanted a life of more quietude, more quietude was what he craved. The life of a retail butcher is a most exciting and wearying one. Nobody satisfied with their meat; as if it mattered in a world of change! Everybody complaining of too much bone or too little fat; nobody wishing tough chops or cutlets, but always seeking after fine joints, when it's against reason and nature that all joints should be juicy and all cutlets tender; always complaining if livers are not sent with every fowl, always asking you to remember the trimmin's, always wanting their beef well 'ung, and then if you 'ang it a minute too long, it's left on your 'ands! I often used to say to Mr. Heaven, yes many's the time I've said it, that if people would think more of the great 'ereafter and less about their own little stomachs, it would be a deal better for them, yes, a deal better, and make it much more comfortable for the butchers!"

* * *

Burd Alane has had a good quarter of an hour to−day.

His spouse took a brief promenade with him. To be sure, it was during an absence of the flock on the other side of the hedge so that the moral effect of her spasm of wifely loyalty was quite lost upon them. I strongly suspect that she would not have granted anything but a secret interview. What a petty, weak, ignoble character! I really don't like to think so badly of any fellow− creature as I am forced to think of that politic, time−serving, pusillanimous goose. I believe she laid the egg that produced the idiot gosling!

CHAPTER IX

Here follows the true story of Sir Muscovy Drake, the Lady Blanche, and Miss Malardina Crippletoes.

Phoebe's flock consisted at first mostly of Brown Mallards, but a friend gave her a sitting of eggs warranted to produce a most beautiful variety of white ducks. They were hatched in due time, but proved hard to raise, till at length there was only one survivor, of such uncommon grace and beauty that we called her the Lady Blanche. Presently a neighbour sold Phoebe his favourite Muscovy drake, and these two splendid creatures by "natural selection" disdained to notice the rest of the flock, but forming a close friendship, wandered in the pleasant paths of duckdom together, swimming and eating quite apart from the others.

In the brown flock there was one unfortunate, misshapen from the egg, quite lame, and with no smoothness of

plumage; but on that very account, apparently, or because she was too weak to resist them, the others treated her cruelly, biting her and pushing her away from the food.

One day it happened that the two ducks−−Sir Muscovy and Lady Blanche−−had come up from the water before the others, and having taken their repast were sitting together under the shade of a flowering currant−bush, when they chanced to see poor Miss Crippletoes very badly used and crowded away from the dish. Sir Muscovy rose to his feet; a few rapid words seemed to pass between him and his mate, and then he fell upon the other drake and the heartless minions who had persecuted the helpless one, drove them far away out of sight, and, returning, went to the corner where the victim was cowering, her face to the wall. He seemed to whisper to her, or in some way to convey to her a sense of protection; for after a few moments she tremblingly went with him to the dish, and hurriedly ate her dinner while he stood by, repulsing the advances of the few brown ducks who remained near and seemed inclined to attack her.

When she had eaten enough Lady Blanche joined them, and they went down the hill together to their favourite swimming−place. After that Miss Crippletoes always followed a little behind her protectors, and thus shielded and fed she grew stronger and well− feathered, though she was always smaller than she should have been and had a lowly manner, keeping a few steps in the rear of her superiors and sitting at some distance from their noon resting− place.

Phoebe noticed after a while that Lady Blanche was seldom to be seen, and Sir Muscovy and Miss Crippletoes often came to their meals without her. The would−be mother refused to inhabit the house Phoebe had given her, and for a long time the place she had chosen for her sitting could not be found. At length the Square Baby discovered her in a most ideal spot. A large boulder had dropped years ago into the brook that fills our duck−pond; dropped and split in halves with the two smooth walls leaning away from each other. A grassy bank towered behind, and on either side of the opening, tall bushes made a miniature forest where the romantic mother could brood her treasures while her two guardians enjoyed the water close by her retreat.

All this happened before my coming to Thornycroft Farm, but it was I who named the hero and heroines of the romance when Phoebe had told me all the particulars. Yesterday morning I was sitting by my open window. It was warm, sunny, and still, but in the country sounds travel far, and I could hear fowl conversation in various parts of the poultry−yard as well as in all the outlying bits of territory occupied by our feathered friends. Hens have only three words and a scream in their language, but ducks, having more thoughts to express, converse quite fluently, so fluently, in fact, that it reminds me of dinner at the Hydropathic Hotel. I fancy I have learned to distinguish seven separate sounds, each varied by degrees of intensity, and with upward or downward inflections like the Chinese tongue.

In the distance, then, I heard the faint voice of a duck calling as if breathless and excited. While I wondered what was happening, I saw Miss Crippletoes struggling up the steep bank above the duck− pond. It was the quickest way from the water to the house, but difficult for the little lame webbed feet. When she reached the level grass sward she sank down a moment, exhausted; but when she could speak again she cried out, a sharp staccato call, and ran forward.

Instantly she was answered from a distant knoll, where for some reason Sir Muscovy loved to retire for meditation. The cries grew lower and softer as the birds approached each other, and they met at the corner just under my window. Instantly they put their two bills together and the loud cries changed to confiding murmurs. Evidently some hurried questions and answers passed between them, and then Sir Muscovy waddled rapidly by the quickest path, Miss Crippletoes following him at a slower pace, and both passed out of sight, using their wings to help their feet down the steep declivity. The next morning, when I wakened early, my first thought was to look out, and there on the sunny greensward where they were accustomed to be fed, Sir Muscovy, Lady Blanche, and their humble maid, Malardina Crippletoes, were scattering their own breakfast before the bills of twelve beautiful golden balls of ducklings. The little creatures could never have climbed the bank, but must have started from their

nest at dawn, coming round by the brook to the level at the foot of the garden, and so by slow degrees up to the house.

Judging from what I heard and knew of their habits, I am sure the excitement of the previous morning was occasioned by the hatching of the eggs, and that Lady Blanche had hastily sent her friend to call Sir Muscovy, the family remaining together until they could bring the babies with them and display their beauty to Phoebe and me.

CHAPTER X

July 14th.

We are not wholly without the pleasures of the town in Barbury Green. Once or twice in a summer, late on a Saturday afternoon, a procession of red and yellow vans drives into a field near the centre of the village. By the time the vans are unpacked all the children in the community are surrounding the gate of entrance. There is rifle−shooting, there is fortune−telling, there are games of pitch and toss, and swings, and French bagatelle; and, to crown all, a wonderful orchestrion that goes by steam. The water is boiled for the public's tea, and at the same time thrilling strains of melody are flung into the air. There is at present only one tune in the orchestrion's repertory, but it is a very good tune; though after hearing it three hundred and seven times in a single afternoon, it pursues one, sleeping and waking, for the next week. Phoebe and I took the Square Baby and went in to this diversified entertainment. There was a small crowd of children at the entrance, but as none of them seemed to be provided with pennies, and I felt in a fairy godmother mood, I offered them the freedom of the place at my expense.

I never purchased more radiant good−will for less money, but the combined effect of the well−boiled tea and the boiling orchestrion produced many village nightmares, so the mothers told me at chapel next morning.

* * *

I have many friends in Barbury Green, and often have a pleasant chat with the draper, and the watch−maker, and the chemist.

The last house on the principal street is rather an ugly one, with especially nice window curtains. As I was taking my daily walk to the post−office (an entirely unfruitful expedition thus far, as nobody has taken the pains to write to me) I saw a nursemaid coming out of the gate, wheeling a baby in a perambulator. She was going placidly away from the Green when, far in the distance, she espied a man walking rapidly toward us, a heavy Gladstone bag in one hand. She gazed fixedly for a moment, her eyes brightening and her cheeks flushing with pleasure,−−whoever it was, it was an unexpected arrival;−−then she retraced her steps and, running up the garden− path, opened the front door and held an excited colloquy with somebody; a slender somebody in a nice print gown and neatly− dressed hair, who came to the gate and peeped beyond the hedge several times, drawing back between peeps with smiles and heightened colour. She did not run down the road, even when she had satisfied herself of the identity of the traveller; perhaps that would not have been good form in an English village, for there were houses on the opposite side of the way. She waited until he opened the gate, the nursemaid took the bag and looked discreetly into the hedge, then the mistress slipped her hand through the traveller's arm and walked up the path as if she had nothing else in the world to wish for. The nurse had a part in the joy, for she lifted the baby out of the perambulator and showed proudly how much he had grown.

It was a dear little scene, and I, a passer−by, had shared in it and felt better for it. I think their content was no less because part of it had enriched my life, for happiness, like mercy, is twice blessed; it blesses those who are most intimately associated in it, and it blesses all those who see it, hear it, feel it, touch it, or breathe the same atmosphere. A laughing, crowing baby in a house, one cheerful woman singing about her work, a boy whistling at

the plough, a romance just suspected, with its miracle of two hearts melting into one−−the wind's always in the west when you have any of these wonder−workers in your neighbourhood.

I have talks too, sometimes, with the old parson, who lives in a quaint house with "Parva Domus Magna Quies" cut into the stone over the doorway. He is not a preaching parson, but a retired one, almost the nicest kind, I often think.

He has been married thirty years, he tells me; thirty years, spent in the one little house with the bricks painted red and grey alternately, and the scarlet holly−hocks growing under the windows. I am sure they have been sweet, true, kind years, and that his heart must be a quiet, peaceful place just like his house and garden.

"I was only eleven years old when I fell in love with my wife," he told me as we sat on the seat under the lime−tree; he puffing cosily at his pipe, I plaiting grasses for a hatband.

"It was just before Sunday−school. Her mother had dressed her all in white muslin like a fairy, but she had stepped on the edge of a puddle, and some of the muddy water had bespattered her frock. A circle of children had surrounded her, and some of the motherly little girls were on their knees rubbing at the spots anxiously, while one of them wiped away the tears that were running down her pretty cheeks. I looked! It was fatal! I did not look again, but I was smitten to the very heart! I did not speak to her for six years, but when I did, it was all right with both of us, thank God! and I've been in love with her ever since, when she behaves herself!"

That is the way they speak of love in Barbury Green, and oh! how much sweeter and more wholesome it is than the language of the town! Who would not be a Goose Girl, "to win the secret of the weed's plain heart"? It seems to me that in society we are always gazing at magic−lantern shows, but here we rest our tired eyes with looking at the stars.

CHAPTER XI

July 16th.

Phoebe and I have been to a Hen Conference at Buffington. It was for the purpose of raising the standard of the British Hen, and our local Countess, who is much interested in poultry, was in the chair.

It was a very learned body, but Phoebe had coached me so well that at the noon recess I could talk confidently with the members, discussing the various advantages of True and Crossed Minorcas, Feverels, Andalusians, Cochin Chinas, Shanghais, and the White Leghorn. (Phoebe, when she pronounces this word, leaves out the "h" and bears down heavily on the last syllable, so that it rhymes with begone!)

As I was sitting under the trees waiting for Phoebe to finish some shopping in the village, a travelling poultry−dealer came along and offered to sell me a silver Wyandotte pullet and cockerel. This was a new breed to me and I asked the price, which proved to be more than I should pay for a hat in Bond Street. I hesitated, thinking meantime what a delightful parting gift they would be for Phoebe; I mean if we ever should part, which seems more and more unlikely, as I shall never leave Thornycroft until somebody comes properly to fetch me; indeed, unless the "fetching" is done somewhat speedily I may decline to go under any circumstances. My indecision as to the purchase was finally banished when the poultryman asserted that the fowls had clear open centres all over, black lacing entirely round the white centres, were free from white edging, and each had a cherry−red eye. This catalogue of charms inflamed my imagination, though it gave me no mental picture of a silver Wyandotte fowl, and I paid the money while the dealer crammed the chicks, squawking into my five−o'clock tea−basket.

The afternoon session of the conference was most exciting, for we reached the subject of imported eggs, an

industry that is assuming terrifying proportions. The London hotel egg comes from Denmark, it seems,−−I should think by sailing vessel, not steamer, but I may be wrong. After we had settled that the British Hen should be protected and encouraged, and agreed solemnly to abstain from Danish eggs in any form, and made a resolution stating that our loyalty to Queen Alexandra would remain undiminished, we argued the subject of hen diet. There was a great difference of opinion here and the discussion was heated; the honorary treasurer standing for pulped mangold and flint grit, the chair insisting on barley meal and randans, while one eloquent young woman declared, to loud cries of "'Ear, 'ear!" that rice pudding and bone chips produce more eggs to the square hen than any other sort of food. Impassioned orators arose here and there in the audience demanding recognition for beef scraps, charcoal, round corn or buckwheat. Foods were regarded from various standpoints: as general invigorators, growth assisters, and egg producers. A very handsome young farmer carried off final honours, and proved to the satisfaction of all the feminine poultry−raisers that green young hog bones fresh cut in the Banner Bone Breaker (of which he was the agent) possessed a nutritive value not to be expressed in human language.

Phoebe was distinctly nervous when I rose to say a few words on poultry breeding, announcing as my topic "Mothers, Stepmothers, Foster−Mothers, and Incubators." Protected by the consciousness that no one in the assemblage could possibly know me, I made a distinct success in my maiden speech; indeed, I somewhat overshot the mark, for the Countess in the chair sent me a note asking me to dine with her that evening. I suppressed the note and took Phoebe away before the proceedings were finished, vanishing from the scene of my triumphs like a veiled prophet.

Just as we were passing out the door we paused to hear the report of a special committee whose chairman read the following resolutions:−

WHEREAS,−−It has pleased the Almighty to remove from our midst our greatest Rose Comb Buff Orpington fancier and esteemed friend, Albert Edward Sheridain; therefore be it

RESOLVED,−−That the next edition of our catalogue contain an illustrated memorial page in his honour and

RESOLVED,−−That the Rose Comb Buff Orpington Club extend to the bereaved family their heartfelt sympathy.

The handsome young farmer followed us out to our trap, invited us to attend the next meeting of the R. C. B. O. Club, of which he was the secretary, and asked if I were intending to "show." I introduced Phoebe as the senior partner, and she concealed the fact that we possessed but one Buff Orpington, and he was a sad "invaleed" not suitable for exhibition. The farmer's expression as he looked at me was almost lover−like, and when he pressed a bit of paper into my hand I was sure it must be an offer of marriage. It was in fact only a circular describing the Banner Bone Breaker. It closed with an appeal to Buff Orpington breeders to raise and ever raise the standard, bidding them remember, in the midst of a low− minded and sordid civilisation, that the rose comb should be small and neat, firmly set on, with good working, a nice spike at the back lying well down to head, and never, under any circumstances, never sticking up. This adjuration somewhat alarmed us as Phoebe and I had been giving our Buff Orpington cockerel the most drastic remedies for his languid and prostrate comb.

Coming home we alighted from the trap to gather hogweed for the rabbits. I sat by the wayside lazily and let Phoebe gather the appetising weed, which grows along the thorniest hedges in close proximity to nettles and thistles.

Workmen were trudging along with their luncheon−baskets of woven bulrushes slung over their shoulders. Fields of ripening grain lay on either hand, the sun shining on their every shade of green and yellow, bronze and orange, while the breeze stirred the bearded barley into a rippling golden sea.

Phoebe asked me if the people I had left behind at the Hydropathic were my relatives.

"Some of them are of remote consanguinity," I responded evasively, and the next question was hushed upon her awe−stricken tongue, as I intended.

"They are obeying my wish to be let alone, there's no doubt of that," I was thinking. "For my part, I like a little more spirit, and a little less "letter"!"

As the word "letter" flitted through my thoughts, I pulled one from my pocket and glanced through it carelessly. It arrived, somewhat tardily, only last night, or I should not have had it with me. I wore the same dress to the post−office yesterday that I wore to the Hen Conference to−day, and so it chanced to be still in the pocket. If it had been anything I valued, of course I should have lost or destroyed it by mistake; it is only silly, worthless little things like this that keep turning up and turning up after one has forgotten their existence.

"You are a mystery!" [it ran.] "I can apprehend, but not comprehend you. I know you in part. I understand various bits of your nature; but my knowledge is always fragmentary and disconnected, and when I attempt to make a whole of the mosaics I merely get a kaleidoscopic effect. Do you know those geographical dissected puzzles that they give to children? You remind me of one of them.

"I have spent many charming (and dangerous) hours trying to "put you together"; but I find, when I examine my picture closely, that after all I've made a purple mountain grow out of a green tree; that my river is running up a steep hillside; and that the pretty milkmaid, who should be wandering in the forest, is standing on her head with her pail in the air

"Do you understand yourself clearly? Or is it just possible that when you dive to the depths of your own consciousness, you sometimes find the pretty milkmaid standing on her head? I wonder!" . . .

Ah, well, it is no wonder that he wonders! So do I, for that matter!

CHAPTER XII

July 17th.

Thornycroft Farm seems to be the musical centre of the universe.

When I wake very early in the morning I lie in a drowsy sort of dream, trying to disentangle, one from the other, the various bird notes, trills, coos, croons, chirps, chirrups, and warbles. Suddenly there falls on the air a delicious, liquid, finished song; so pure, so mellow, so joyous, that I go to the window and look out at the morning world, half awakened, like myself.

There is I know not what charm in a window that does not push up, but opens its lattices out into the greenness. And mine is like a little jewelled door, for the sun is shining from behind the chimneys and lighting the tiny diamond panes with amber flashes.

A faint delicate haze lies over the meadow, and rising out of it, and soaring toward the blue is the lark, flinging out that matchless matin song, so rich, so thrilling, so lavish! As the blithe melody fades away, I hear the plaintive ballad−fragments of the robin on a curtsying branch near my window; and there is always the liquid pipe of the thrush, who must quaff a fairy goblet of dew between his songs, I should think, so fresh and eternally young is his note.

There is another beautiful song that I follow whenever I hear it, straining my eyes to the treetops, yet never finding a bird that I can identify as the singer. Can it be the −

"Ousel−cock so black of hue,
With orange−tawny bill"?

He is called the poet−laureate of the primrose time, but I don't know whether he sings in midsummer, and I have not seen him hereabouts. I must write and ask my dear Man of the North. The Man of the North, I sometimes think, had a Fairy Grandmother who was a robin; and perhaps she made a nest of fresh moss and put him in the green wood when he was a wee bairnie, so that he waxed wise in bird−lore without knowing it. At all events, describe to him the cock of a head, the glance of an eye, the tip−up of a tail, or the sheen of a feather, and he will name you the bird. Near− sighted he is, too, the Man of the North, but that is only for people.

The Square Baby and I have a new game.

I bought a doll's table and china tea−set in Buffington. We put it under an apple−tree in the side garden, where the scarlet lightning grows so tall and the Madonna lilies stand so white against the flaming background. We built a little fence around it, and every afternoon at tea−time we sprinkle seeds and crumbs in the dishes, water in the tiny cups, drop a cherry in each of the fruit−plates, and have a the chantant for the birdies. We sometimes invite an "invaleed" duckling, or one of the baby rabbits, or the peacock, in which case the cards read:−

Thornycroft Farm.
The pleasure of your company is requested
at a
The Chantant
Under the Apple Tree.
Music at five.

It is a charming game, as I say, but I'd far rather play it with the Man of the North; he is so much younger than the Square Baby, and so much more responsive, too.

Thornycroft Farm is a sweet place, too, of odours as well as sounds. The scent of the hay is for ever in the nostrils, the hedges are thick with wild honeysuckle, so deliciously fragrant, the last of the June roses are lingering to do their share, and blackberry blossoms and ripening fruit as well.

I have never known a place in which it is so easy to be good. I have not said a word, nor scarcely harboured a thought, that was not lovely and virtuous since I entered these gates, and yet there are those who think me fantastic, difficult, hard to please, unreasonable!

I believe the saints must have lived in the country mostly (I am certain they never tried Hydropathic hotels), and why anybody with a black heart and natural love of wickedness should not simply buy a poultry farm and become an angel, I cannot understand.

Living with animals is really a very improving and wholesome kind of life, to the person who will allow himself to be influenced by their sensible and high−minded ideals. When you come to think about it, man is really the only animal that ever makes a fool of himself; the others are highly civilised, and never make mistakes. I am going to mention this when I write to somebody, sometime; I mean if I ever do. To be sure, our human life is much more complicated than theirs, and I believe when the other animals notice our errors of judgment they make allowances. The bee is as busy as a bee, and the beaver works like a beaver, but there their responsibility ends. The bee doesn't have to go about seeing that other bees are not crowded into unsanitary tenements or victimised by the sweating system. When the beaver's day of toil is over he doesn't have to discuss the sphere, the rights, or the voting privileges of beaveresses; all he has to do is to work like a beaver, and that is comparatively simple.

CHAPTER XIII

I have been studying The Young Poultry Keeper's Friend of late. If there is anything I dislike and deplore, it is the possession of knowledge which I cannot put to practical use. Having discovered an interesting disease called Scaly Leg in the July number, I took the magazine out into the poultry−yard and identified the malady on three hens and a cock. Phoebe joined me in the diagnosis and we treated the victims with a carbolic lotion and scrubbed them with vaseline.

As Phoebe and I grow wise in medical lore the case of Cannibal Ann assumes a different aspect. As the bibulous man quaffs more and more flagons of beer and wine when his daily food is ham, salt fish, and cabbage, so does the hen avenge her wrongs of diet and woes of environment. Cannibal Ann, herself, has, so far as we know, been raised in a Christian manner and enjoyed all the advantages of modern methods; but her maternal parent may have lived in some heathen poultry−yard which was asphalted or bricked or flagged, so that she was debarred from scratching in Mother Earth and was forced to eat her own shells in self−defence.

* * *

The Square Baby is not particularly attracted by the poultry as a whole, save when it is boiled with bacon or roasted with bread− sauce; but he is much interested in the "invaleeds." Whenever Phoebe and I start for the hospital with the tobacco−pills, the tin of paraffin, and the bottle of oil, he is very much in evidence. Perhaps he has a natural leaning toward the medical profession; at any rate, when pain and anguish wring the brow, he is in close attendance upon the ministering angels.

Now it is necessary for the physician to have practice as well as theory, so the Square Baby, being left to himself this afternoon, proceeded to perfect himself in some of the healing arts used by country practitioners.

When discovered, he was seated in front of the wire−covered "run" attached to a coop occupied by the youngest goslings. A couple of bottles and a box stood by his side, and I should think he had administered a cup of sweet oil, a pint of paraffin, and a quarter of a pound of tobacco during his clinic. He had used the remedies impartially, sometimes giving the paraffin internally and rubbing the patient's head with tobacco or oil, sometimes the reverse.

Several goslings leaned languidly against the netting, or supported themselves by the edge of the water−dish, while others staggered and reeled about with eyes half closed.

It was Mrs. Heaven who caught her son red−handed, so to speak. She was dressed in her best, and just driving off to Woodmucket to spend a day or two with her married daughter, and soothe her nerves with the uproar incident to a town of six hundred inhabitants. She delayed her journey a half−hour−−long enough, in fact, to change her black silk waist for a loose sacque which would give her arms full and comfortable play. The joy and astonishment that greeted the Square Baby on his advent, five years ago, was forgotten for the first time in his brief life, and he was treated precisely as any ordinary wrongdoer would have been treated under the same circumstances, summarily and smartly; the "wepping," as Phoebe would say, being Mrs. Heaven's hand.

All but one of the goslings lived, like thousands of others who recover in spite of the doctors, but the Square Baby's interest in the healing art is now perceptibly lessened.

CHAPTER XIV

July 18th.

The day was Friday; Phoebe's day to go to Buffington with eggs and chickens and rabbits; her day to solicit orders for ducklings and goslings. The village cart was ready in the stable; Mr. and Mrs. Heaven were in Woodmucket; I was eating my breakfast (which I remember was an egg and a rasher) when Phoebe came in, a figure of woe.

The Square Baby was ill, very ill, and would not permit her to leave him and go to market. Would I look at him? For he must have dowsed 'imself as well as the goslings yesterday; anyways he was strong of paraffin and tobacco, though he 'ad 'ad a good barth.

I prescribed for Albert Edward, who was as uncomfortable and feverish as any little sinner in the county of Sussex, and I then promptly proposed going to Buffington in Phoebe's place.

She did not think it at all proper, and said that, notwithstanding my cotton gown and sailor hat, I looked quite, quite the lydy, and it would never do.

"I cannot get any new orders," said I, "but I can certainly leave the rabbits and eggs at the customary places. I know Argent's Dining Parlours, and Songhurst's Tea Rooms, and the Six Bells Inn, as well as you do."

So, donning a pair of Phoebe's large white cotton gloves with open− work wrists (than which I always fancy there is no one article that so disguises the perfect lydy), I set out upon my travels, upborne by a lively sense of amusement that was at least equal to my feeling that I was doing Phoebe Heaven a good turn.

Prices in dressed poultry were fluctuating, but I had a copy of The Trade Review, issued that very day, and was able to get some idea of values and the state of the market as I jogged along. The general movement, I learned, was moderate and of a "selective" character. Choice large capons and ducks were in steady demand, but I blushed for my profession when I read that roasting chickens were running coarse, staggy, and of irregular value. Old hens were held firmly at sixpence, and it is my experience that they always have to be, at whatever price. Geese were plenty, dull, and weak. Old cocks,−−why don't they say roosters?−−declined to threepence ha'penny on Thursday in sympathy with fowls,−−and who shall say that chivalry is dead? Turkeys were a trifle steadier, and there was a speculative movement in limed eggs. All this was illuminating, and I only wished I were quite certain whether the sympathetic old roosters were threepence ha'penny apiece, or a pound.

Everything happened as it should, on this first business journey of my life, which is equivalent to saying that nothing happened at all. Songhurst's Tea Rooms took five dozen eggs and told me to bring six dozen the next week. Argent's Dining Parlours purchased three pairs of chickens and four rabbits. The Six Bells found the last poultry somewhat tough and tasteless; whereupon I said that our orders were more than we could possibly fill, still I hoped we could go on "selling them," as we never liked to part with old customers, no matter how many new ones there were. Privately, I understood the complaint only too well, for I knew the fowls in question very intimately. Two of them were the runaway rooster and the gadabout hen that never wanted to go to bed with the others. The third was Cannibal Ann. I should have expected them to be tough, but I cannot believe they were lacking in flavour.

The only troublesome feature of the trip was that Mrs. Sowerbutt's lodgers had suddenly left for London and she was unable to take the four rabbits as she had hoped; but as an offset to that piece of ill−fortune the Coke and Coal Yard and the Bicycle Repairing Rooms came out into the street, and, stepping up to the trap, requested regular weekly deliveries of eggs and chickens, and hoped that I would be able to bring them myself. And so, in a happy frame of mind, I turned out of the Buffington main street, and was jogging along homeward, when a very startling thing happened; namely, a whole verse of the Bailiff's Daughter of Islington:−

"And as she went along the high road,
The weather being hot and dry,
She sat her down upon a green bank,
And her true love came riding by."

That true lovers are given to riding by, in ballads, I know very well, but I hardly supposed they did so in real life, especially when every precaution had been taken to avert such a catastrophe. I had told the Barbury Green postmistress, on the morning of my arrival, not to give the Thornycroft address to anybody whatsoever, but finding, as the days passed, that no one was bold enough or sensible enough to ask for it, I haughtily withdrew my prohibition. About this time I began sending envelopes, carefully addressed in a feigned hand, to a certain person at the Oxenbridge Hydro. These envelopes contained no word of writing, but held, on one day, only a bit of down from a hen's breast, on another, a goose−quill, on another, a glossy tail−feather, on another, a grain of corn, and so on. These trifles were regarded by me not as degrading or unmaidenly hints and suggestions, but simply as tests of intelligence. Could a man receive tokens of this sort and fail to put two and two together? I feel that I might possibly support life with a domineering and autocratic husband,−−and there is every prospect that I shall be called upon to do so,−−but not with a stupid one. Suppose one were linked for ever to a man capable of asking,−−"Did YOU send those feathers? . . . How was I to guess? . . . How was a fellow to know they came from you? . . . What on earth could I suppose they meant? . . . What clue did they offer me as to your whereabouts? . . . Am I a Sherlock Holmes?"−−No, better eternal celibacy than marriage with such a being!

These were the thoughts that had been coursing through my goose− girl mind while I had been selling dressed poultry, but in some way they had not prepared me for the appearance of the aforesaid true love.

To see the very person whom one has left civilisation to avoid is always more or less surprising, and to make the meeting less likely, Buffington is even farther from Oxenbridge than Barbury Green. The creature was well mounted (ominous, when he came to override my caprice!) and he looked bigger, and, yes, handsomer, though that doesn't signify, and still more determined than when I saw him last; although goodness knows that timidity and feebleness of purpose were not in striking evidence on that memorable occasion. I had drawn up under the shade of a tree ostensibly to eat some cherries, thinking that if I turned my face away I might pass unrecognised. It was a stupid plan, for if I had whipped up the mare and driven on, he of course, would have had to follow, and he has too much dignity and self−respect to shriek recriminations into a woman's ear from a distance.

He approached with deliberation, reined in his horse, and lifted his hat ceremoniously. He has an extremely shapely head, but I did not show that the sight of it melted in the least the ice of my resolve; whereupon we talked, not very freely at first,−−men are so stiff when they consider themselves injured. However, silence is even more embarrassing than conversation, so at length I begin:−

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"It is a lovely day."

True Love.−−"Yes, but the drought is getting rather oppressive, don't you think?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"The crops certainly need rain, and the feed is becoming scarce."

True Love.−−"Are you a farmer's wife?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Oh no! that is a promotion to look forward to; I am now only a Goose Girl."

True Love.−−"Indeed! If I wished to be severe I might remark: that I am sure you have found at last your true vocation!"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"It was certainly through no desire to please YOU that I chose it."

True Love.−−"I am quite sure of that! Are you staying in this part?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Oh no! I live many miles distant, over an extremely rough road. And you?"

True Love.−−"I am still at the Hydropathic; or at least my luggage is there."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"It must be very pleasant to attract you so long."

True Love.−−"Not so pleasant as it was."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"No? A new proprietor, I suppose."

True Love.−−"No; same proprietor; but the house is empty."

Bailiff's Daughter (yawning purposely).−−"That is strange; the hotels are usually so full at this season. Why did so many leave?"

True Love.−−"As a matter of fact, only one left. "Full" and "empty" are purely relative terms. I call a hotel full when it has you in it, empty when it hasn't."

Bailiff's Daughter (dying to laugh, but concealing her feelings).−− "I trust my bulk does not make the same impression on the general public! Well, I won't detain you longer; good afternoon; I must go home to my evening work."

True Love.−−"I will accompany you."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"If you are a gentleman you will remain where you are."

True Love.−−"In the road? Perhaps; but if I am a man I shall follow you; they always do, I notice. What are those foolish bundles in the back of that silly cart?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Feed for the pony, please, sir; fish for dinner; randans and barley meal for the poultry; and four unsold rabbits. Wouldn't you like them? Only one and sixpence apiece. Shot at three o'clock this morning."

True Love.−−"Thanks; I don't like mine shot so early."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Oh, well! doubtless I shall be able to dispose of them on my way home, though times is 'ard!"

True Love.−−"Do you mean that you will "peddle" them along the road?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"You understand me better than usual,−−in fact to perfection."

He dismounts and strides to the back of the cart, lifts the covers, seizes the rabbits, flings some silver contemptuously into the basket, and looks about him for a place to bury his bargain. A small boy approaching in the far distance will probably bag the game.

Bailiff's Daughter (modestly).−−"Thanks for your trade, sir, rather ungraciously bestowed, and we 'opes for a continuance of your past fyvors."

True Love (leaning on the wheel of the trap).−−"Let us stop this nonsense. What did you hope to gain by running away?"

Bailiff 's Daughter.−−"Distance and absence."

True Love.−−"You knew you couldn't prevent my offering myself to you sometime or other."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Perhaps not; but I could at least defer it, couldn't I?"

True Love.−−"Why postpone the inevitable?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Doubtless I shrank from giving you the pain of a refusal."

True Love.−−"Perhaps; but do you know what I suspect?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"I'm not a suspicious person, thank goodness!"

True Love.−−"That, on the contrary, you are wilfully withholding from me the joy of acceptance."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"If I intended to accept you, why did I run away?"

True Love.−−"To make yourself more desirable and precious, I suppose."

Bailiff's Daughter (with the most confident coquetry).−−"Did I succeed?"

True Love.−−"No; you failed utterly."

Bailiff's Daughter (secretly piqued).−−"Then I am glad I tried it."

True Love.−−"You couldn't succeed because you were superlatively desirable and precious already; but you should never have experimented. Don't you know that Love is a high explosive?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Is it? Then it ought always to be labelled "dangerous," oughtn't it? But who thought of suggesting matches? I'm sure I didn't!"

True Love.−−"No such luck; I wish you would."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"According to your theory, if you apply a match to Love it is likely to 'go off.'"

True Love.−−"I wish you would try it on mine and await the result. Come now, you'll have to marry somebody, sometime."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"I confess I don't see the necessity."

True Love (morosely).−−"You're the sort of woman men won't leave in undisturbed spinsterhood; they'll keep on badgering you."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Oh, I don't mind the badgering of a number of men; it's rather nice. It's the one badger I find obnoxious."

True Love (impatiently).−−"That's just the perversity of things. I could put a stop to the protestations of the many; I should like nothing better−−but the pertinacity of the one! Ah, well! I can't drop that without putting an end to my existence."

Bailiff's Daughter (politely).−−"I shouldn't think of suggesting anything so extreme."

True Love (quoting).−−"'Mrs. Hauksbee proceeded to take the conceit out of Pluffles as you remove the ribs of an umbrella before re− covering.' However, you couldn't ask me anything seriously that I wouldn't do, dear Mistress Perversity."

Bailiff's Daughter (yielding a point).−−"I'll put that boldly to the proof. Say you don't love me!"

True Love (seizing his advantage).−−"I don't! It's imbecile and besotted devotion! Tell me, when may I come to take you away?"

Bailiff's Daughter (sighing).−−"It's like asking me to leave Heaven."

True Love.−−"I know it; she told me where to find you,−−Thornycroft is the seventh poultry−farm I've visited,−−but you could never leave Heaven, you can't be happy without poultry, why that is a wish easily gratified. I'll get you a farm to−morrow; no, it's Saturday, and the real estate offices close at noon, but on Monday, without fail. Your ducks and geese, always carrying it along with you. All you would have to do is to admit me; Heaven is full of twos. If you shall swim on a crystal lake−−Phoebe told me what a genius you have for getting them out of the muddy pond; she was sitting beside it when I called, her hand in that of a straw− coloured person named Gladwish, and the ground in her vicinity completely strewn with votive offerings. You shall splash your silver sea with an ivory wand; your hens shall have suburban cottages, each with its garden; their perches shall be of satin− wood and their water dishes of mother−of−pearl. You shall be the Goose Girl and I will be the Swan Herd−−simply to be near you−−for I hate live poultry. Dost like the picture? It's a little like Claude Melnotte's, I confess. The fact is I am not quite sane; talking with you after a fortnight of the tabbies at the Hydro is like quaffing inebriating vodka after Miffin's Food! May I come to−morrow?"

Bailiffs Daughter (hedging).−−"I shall be rather busy; the Crossed Minorca hen comes off to−morrow."

True Love.−−"Oh, never mind! I'll take her off to−night when I escort you to the farm; then she'll get a day's advantage."

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"And rob fourteen prospective chicks of a mother; nay, lose the chicks themselves? Never!"

True Love.−−"So long as you are a Goose Girl, does it make any difference whose you are? Is it any more agreeable to be Mrs. Heaven's Goose Girl than mine?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"Ah! but in one case the term of service is limited; in the other, permanent."

True Love.−−"But in the one case you are the slave of the employer, in the other the employer of the slave. Why did you run away?"

Bailiff's Daughter.−−"A man's mind is too dull an instrument to measure a woman's reason; even my own fails sometimes to deal with all its delicate shades; but I think I must have run away chiefly to taste the pleasure of being pursued and brought back. If it is necessary to your happiness that you should explore all the Bluebeard chambers of my being, I will confess further that it has taken you nearly three weeks to accomplish what I supposed you would do in three days!"

True Love (after a well−spent interval).−−"To−morrow, then; shall we say before breakfast? All, do! Why not? Well, then, immediately after breakfast, and I breakfast at seven nowadays, and sometimes earlier. Do take off those ugly cotton gloves, dear; they are five sizes too large for you, and so rough and baggy to the touch!"