

THE DOCTOR'S DUCKS, AND HOW HE REARED THEM.



THE eldest girl of a family generally has a great many small privileges—of which the younger members sometimes have the bad sense to be not a little jealous. Our parents did all that they could to make their small favours perfectly impartial, and if I had a day's pleasure with

father, Jennie always had one with mother; Tom was taken out by either parent indiscriminately, but one of the girls was sure to go too, and he was expected to make himself gallant and useful, as all gentlemen should do who have the privilege of escorting ladies. So there were very few opportunities of grumbling in a general way; but visits away from home were so few and far between that when they did occur a very sharp look-out was kept, and mother no sooner mentioned an invitation than there was an exclamation of—"It's my turn to go with you, because so-and-so went last time."

When I was about twelve years old mother took me to London for a week, and of course the next little holiday was regarded by Jennie as her right; so that a few months after, when a letter came from a bachelor uncle of our father's, asking for a visit from mother and the eldest daughter, there was a not unnatural burst of tears from my little sister. But when she heard that our great-uncle, who rejoiced in the unusual cognomen of Simeon Sherwood, had seen me when I was a babe, and bestowed more attention on me than he usually accorded to infantile specimens of humanity, and that he was a very great fidget—so that even I, with all the weight of twelve summers on my head, would be obliged to mind my "p's" and "q's," and submit to be as quiet as a mouse whenever I was indoors—she dried her eyes, and wished me joy of the fortnight to be spent in the doctor's dull old house, separated, as father told us, by three fields from the dreariest of rotten boroughs, seven miles among the hills from the nearest railway-station! I certainly thought it was going to be a very doleful time, and when father and Jennie saw us off, I heartily wished that I had been the one to stay at home, and I do not think mother anticipated much pleasure from her excursion into Buckinghamshire.

Our journey was by way of Birmingham, and though

we travelled by express to that smoky town, and changed there into another quick train for Rugby, we were obliged to wait at the latter place for a slow one, which would stop at every station and deposit us during its progress at Tring, where Dr. Sherwood was to meet and drive us across country to his house at Leaseover. He was a little old man, with head sunk between his shoulders, and a sharp pair of eyes; and he mounted mother beside him in the front seat of a park phaeton drawn by a stout cob, while I was consigned to the back one. Our luggage was to be brought an hour or two later in the postman's cart, which, as I afterwards saw, was a spring vehicle of very different shape and size from the mail-carts in vogue in more civilised districts. Mother and I both thought we were going to be pitched out head first in going up and down the steep chalk hills, where there certainly would not have been room for anything to pass us; but we met nothing save a stray donkey, and were very glad to be deposited without broken bones at the substantial white house, in front of which a smooth lawn descended to a clear stream, whereon floated, as it seemed to me, innumerable white ducks, numbers of which waddled up the bank and came quacking over the grass to the hall-door. Uncle Sherwood might have been their grandfather by the way they crowded about and welcomed him; but he dismissed them with a wave of his hand, and they immediately retreated, while he read a note that had come in his absence, ordered a fresh horse to come round at once—commending mother and me to the care of the housekeeper, and saying that he should probably not see us again till to-morrow morning at breakfast-time.

I was too tired for anything but bed, after doing full justice to a good meal; and in the morning, while we were dressing, mother rejoiced my heart by telling me that there were three or four Alderneys grazing in Whichell, the big mead over the stream; that Uncle Sherwood carried on the artificial hatching of eggs and rearing of poultry for market in the building we saw on the right of the house; that his white ducks were of the purest Aylesbury breed; and that beyond the rustic bridge over which we had driven into the grounds was a swan's nest among the reeds on a little island, where the advent of cygnets was daily expected. There was no longer any fear that either of us would be dull, and we went down cheerfully to a pleasant breakfast, laid in a long, low-ceilinged room, full of book-cases and stuffed birds, and with a wonderful array of guns and fishing-rods over the chimney-piece. Uncle was very entertaining in his own way, and told us how he shot one particular kingfisher on the Halton Reservoir; how he landed the enormous pike which was suspended in a glass case by the window, from a pond near the church; and pointed out the town of Aylesbury four miles off in the valley, which he said was famous for white ducks as long ago as the reign

of King John. A goodly number of the latter creatures were, during our conversation, perambulating the garden and rummaging in the thick box-edgings for slugs and snails, of which they must have found a plentiful supply, as that particular kind of bordering harbours more of such gardeners' plagues than any other. I was brimful of curiosity about the artificial hatching, and how many young ducklings might have been produced that morning.

"Not one, my dear," said the old gentleman; "but I hear that there are sixty chicks."

"You ought to be making a fortune by artificial incubation," observed mother.

"No, no," he answered; "I've found out that we can't better nature; hens must continue to hatch their own eggs and nurse their own chicks. My hydro-incubator might do its work tolerably, considering that I cannot bestow much personal attention on it, but there are some difficulties in feeding and rearing. I've quite given it up with ducklings, and this will be the last lot of chicks."

He showed no disposition to continue the subject, though he afterwards exhibited his arrangements for incubation, which were curious enough. But he had spent and lost far too much money over his experiment for it to be anything but a sore point, and he was much happier and more communicative about the portion of his large family that lived in a natural way.

The duck community was regulated in the proportion of one gentleman to every two or three ladies, and their offspring was, for the most part, fatted and sent off to market as soon as they had attained the depth of breast and breadth of back, together with the complacent plumpness, for which Aylesbury ducks are celebrated. For this purpose the juveniles were kept in an open shed, where there was plenty of room for them to run about, supplied with water only in shallow receptacles, and fed on pease, oat and barley meal, mixed with mashed potatoes. When let out they only had a run on the grass, which I thought quite cruel when there was the pretty stream at hand, which would have added so much to their enjoyment of life. But uncle asked me if I should like to think that the roast duck we hoped to have for dinner had grown up on a diet occasionally varied by a decomposed rat or fat black snail, and said it would never do to let the young ones intended for table run and swim about and eat whatever garbage and offal came in their way, although that kind of food was suitable enough for the elders, whose sole duty in the world was to lay eggs, and hatch them when they could be trusted to do so.

While we stood looking at the ducks they all clustered round their owner, and one particular duck contrived to be always at his heels. The gardener brought him a brown dish of lettuce and cabbage-leaves roughly chopped and mixed with bran, which he threw about among them to their great satisfaction; but when the duck who showed so marked a preference for her master had gobbled up a mouthful or two, she re-

turned to her post, and followed him all over the place. He told us that she was the only survivor of a brood hatched by the incubator, and that he fed and cosseted her indoors himself, till she became so domesticated as to share the hearth-rug with the cat, and expect an equal amount of caressing.

There were a few beautiful black East Indian ducks in the shrubbery which ran along the side of the stream; but they were for exhibition rather than use, and had already taken several prizes. They were small, and had bright metallic-looking plumage, and we were told that they were kept in this ornamental condition by being fed sparingly at stated times, as it was not good for them to have a stock of food to help themselves to at their own pleasure.

There were plenty of homely-looking brown Rouen ducks, which bore admirable characters as model parents and abundant layers. Uncle said he did not care for the plan of putting duck's eggs under a hen, and could always find motherly ducks among his stock who laid nightly eggs in snug corners near the brook, and sat on seven or eight of them with great care and patience, provided that they were collected and placed in nests away from the water, as the old ones were apt, when they had access to their favourite element, to let the ducklings get chilled in it, or to lead them through rough places on the banks before they had strength to bear it.

When we went round to the stable there were some Muscovys, or Musks, grubbing about, and apparently as happy as could be.

"Dirty things!" said mother; "they are just like mine used to be, and prefer either stable or piggery to nice clear water."

"Don't abuse the creatures," answered uncle; "they know their own business best. The reason of their not taking to water is because their feathers are not waterproof. All the same for their webbed feet, the quill and tail feathers get as thoroughly soaked and miserably matted by the wet as those of a hen would do, so that if long in the water they would sink and be suffocated."

Mother told me the next time we were alone that she had her doubts as to this theory, but she did not wish to contradict or argue the point with a person so much older than herself, so she said nothing, and after admiring the glossy fellows, who were as tame as every other living thing about the place, we heard the history of Dr. Sherwood's very particular pets—a number of wild ducks which he had reduced to a state of domestication. They had been caught for him in the Lincolnshire fens, and had had their wing feathers clipped that they might not fly away. This operation had also to be performed on the next generation, in whom hereditary instincts proved to be so strong that they were not to be depended on in case of sudden alarm or stress of weather, to which they were peculiarly susceptible. They lived on remarkably friendly terms with the dogs and cat of the household, and I often saw them snapping at Rover's hair if he happened to occupy a sunny spot which they particularly coveted—an indignity that he endured with the utmost equani-

mity. They fed from Dr. Sherwood's hand with great confidence; but one warm morning, when he had substituted a pair of white "ducks" for his ordinary dark-coloured nether garments, they ran away from him, though they soon returned on hearing his familiar voice.

In one of my rambles in the shrubbery I saw what I supposed was a small dog-kennel suspended over the water, and thought it a very extraordinary position for such an object. This was just before dinner, and I assailed uncle on the subject of my discovery as soon as he appeared, telling him that I thought somebody had been very mischievous in placing a nice little wooden kennel in such a position. He laughed, and said we would walk down to it by-and-by; and so we did. It proved really to be a kennel, eighteen inches deep, twelve high, and twelve wide, independently of the roof; but, strange to say, it was appropriated to the use of a Carolina duck instead of a dog. It contained the nest of this American favourite, and in the bottom of it a few holes were pierced to facilitate the escape of any water that might find its way in. It was fastened on a pole about six inches above the highest level to which the stream had ever been known to rise, and there was a funny little ladder from the box downwards, consisting of a plain piece of board with cross-pieces nailed on for foothold. Dr. Sherwood said, however, that he should in future put the Carolina eggs under a hen, as their own mother would not nest in any other situation than the one I had seen, and was besides, like others of her species, apt to forget that what was only fun to her was certain death to them, by letting them swim about too often and too long at a time.

Some very beautiful pets were called Cayuga black ducks, and they also hailed from the other side of the Atlantic. They were as large as the Aylesburys, and their plumage resembled that of the East Indians. Uncle said that some of them had weighed as much as sixteen pounds a pair at six months old, while young drakes when cooked had weighed eight pounds

each, and yearling ducks from seven to seven and a half pounds apiece.

When we had been ten days at Leaseover, father came to stay the remainder of the time, and to take us home; and both he and I took great pleasure in the four young cygnets which had been recently hatched, and were fed with oatmeal scattered on the surface of the water. One morning after heavy rain, which had caused the current to run more rapidly than usual, we saw the mother-swan sink herself sufficiently low to bring her back on a level with the stream, when the little ones got upon it, and were in this manner safely conveyed from the islet to the opposite shore. Dr. Sherwood was very proud of them, and anxious that they should be reared, as the swan's eggs had been stolen the year before, and the previous brood had died during the first moult. Father inquired their symptoms, and hearing that they lost appetite, the feathers did not grow, and the body appeared extremely irritable, advised that, if they were again affected in a similar way, they should be placed in confinement, and tempted to eat by putting a large thick sod of grass in a deep vessel, partly covering it with gravel, on the top of which some oatmeal and a few whole oats must be placed, and all filled up with water, which would soon become clear, so that the cygnets might see the grass at the bottom.

When the day of our departure arrived, I felt quite sorry to leave the old-fashioned house and quaint garden, with its sentinel poplar-trees, as well as our kindly host and his large aquatic family. He said we must all come again another year; but before many months had passed, father was summoned to his death-bed, and did not return till he had seen the old man laid in his last resting-place, dispersed his feathered friends, and let the house to a young doctor, who bought the practice, and, I believe, still lives in that secluded district, which is even yet undisturbed by railways, and is as primitive a nook as can be found throughout the length and breadth of rural England.

ELIZA CLARKE.

