

#### OUR PIGEON-COTE, AND HOW WE STOCKED IT.

I HAVE often heard it said that if you wish to breathe the atmosphere of laziness in perfection, you must join the throng of people who lounge up and down Milsom Street, Bath, on a winter or early spring afternoon.

Our mother had a tall old maiden aunt, who lived with her learned and eccentric bachelor brother in a substantial stone house in Pulteney Street, where we sometimes went to spend a few days, which were looked upon in the light of dull duty-visits, and from

which we eagerly returned to the delightful freedom and manifold interests of our home. Those Milsom Street promenades were the essence of weariness to me, and so they were to father and mother, who always came over for a few hours once or twice during our stay, to satisfy themselves about our health and our good behaviour. We always coaxed the latter into the Pump-room, and listened untiringly to her anecdotes of Mr. Wilberforce and Mr. Jay walking and talking together up and down the great bath, looking as unlike their familiar every-day selves as the exigencies of bathing costume could make them.

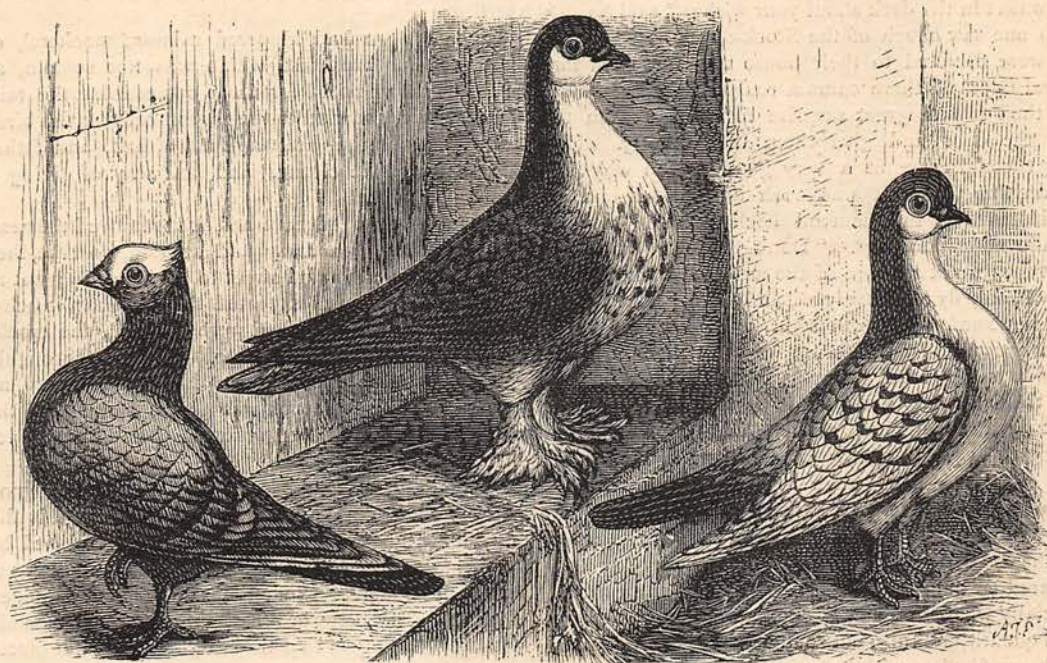
It was an unmitigated pleasure to any of us who might happen to be staying with our old relatives when father came over, for he had an acquaintance whom he never failed to visit, and to whose shop we invariably accompanied him. This worthy was

known by the name of "Old Hobbs," and was familiar to every lover of pets at that time in the West of England. No. 1, Trim Bridge, was his abode, and the troubles of life had made him prefer the companionship of the creatures to that of man. When I remember him he must have been between seventy and eighty—thin, small, and stooping; with black piercing eyes, and nose which bore a curious resemblance to a parrot's beak. His garments were as quaint as himself, and exactly suited to him, the short jacket and fur cap looking like the ruffled plumage of some strange bird. Father always declared that if he had one day gone to the shop and beheld him in a large cage, eating hemp seed or pecking at groundsel,

for my eldest boy at the gable-end of an unused stable, and wish to have all in readiness by his birthday, which he has taken care to inform me is at the end of next week."

This was a joyful hearing for me, and I took the keenest possible interest in the selection of the birds and the purchase of the utensils necessary for their future home.

Nest-holders were among the articles required, and these were of red unglazed earthenware, such as flower-pots are made of, round like a plate, and about two inches deep. They were of different sizes, so as to suit large or small pigeons, varying from six to ten inches wide. The crockery holders bear brushing and wash-



OUR PIGEONS AT HOME (p. 398).

it would have seemed the most natural thing in the world.

Mr. Hobbs' *spécialité* was pigeons, and very learnedly he discoursed on them, though he was rather sour and, like many other elderly people, fancied that times were not so good as in the golden days when he was young. "Things are not what they used to be, sir," I remember his saying once; "there are fewer visitors, and so the towns-people have less money to spend with me, and the boys do get so impudent," and here he anathematised a couple of youngsters with mortar-boards on their heads, who were leaning open-mouthed over the half-door, and vanished at sight of his threatening gestures, only to reappear when his back was turned, and his attention otherwise occupied.

"It is only their natural curiosity and appreciation of your live-stock," answered my father; "but I am a *bonâ fide* customer, and want two couple of Stock-doves, for I am having a pigeon-house constructed

ing out, and are vastly superior to the plaster ones formerly in use.

Then there was a water-fountain of the same material, but glazed inside, which looked something like a bottomless water-bottle turned upside down in a large cup or small basin, in the sides of which were four holes, big enough for a pigeon's head to go into easily. This complex kind of construction, I was told, was to prevent any dirt getting into the water, as the well-being of pigeons depends very much on cleanliness. The food trough was covered with a piece of zinc, with round holes two or three inches apart, also for the purpose of keeping the grain clean; and there were two or three triangular scrapers similar to a mason's trowel, to remove dirt from the floor.

"Have a stock o' vetches, sir," said Hobbs; "look how black and heavy they are in this sack. Store's no sore, and they agree with the birds as well again when they are a year old as they do when they're new."

So a large bag of vetches was ordered, as well as some maize of the kind called "forty-days," and we arranged that all these valuables should be at the station in time for the six o'clock train to Bristol.

Tom's birthday was on the 10th of June, and I, being in the secret of his present, was anxious to be home beforehand; but as father knew my chattering tongue was not to be trusted, I was not sent for till late on the previous day; and though I was determined to be up with the sun in the morning to watch the preparations, sleep claimed the mastery, and I did not arrive on the scene till Tom was capering with delight round and round his father, and declaring that pigeons were the very things he wanted.

"You've given me some pretty broad hints, my boy, so I wasn't in the dark about your wishes," said he.

No one saw much of the Stock-doves at first, for they were confined to their house and there fed for several days, till there came a rough, rainy morning, and then to our great surprise father told Tom to open the door and give them their liberty. He always could give us a very good reason why he did anything, and it was such an obvious one in this instance as to commend itself at once to our juvenile understandings. "Don't you see," said he, "that they won't approve of the wet and wind, and so they will only fly a little way off, and finding themselves rather uncomfortable, will soon come back to their warm house, and that is what we want them to do." He always impressed upon us that pigeons only attach themselves to their home as long as they find it a safe and sufficient shelter, and convenient for rearing their young ones. On the ground, out of the way of the ladder, there was always a shallow pan of water to serve as a bath; and the floor of the dove-cote was covered with about an inch of fine sand, and the droppings raked off its surface every day and scattered on the earth in various parts of the garden, especially where seeds had been lately sown. A very small quantity was also put sometimes into an old cask, which was filled up with water and always stirred before use. This was employed to water young fruit-trees with, and, to judge by the quantity and quality of the fruit they produced, must have suited them admirably.

In the course of time the young Stock-doves, being about eight months old, began to coo very prettily and make a great deal of fuss with each other, so each pair was secluded for a day or two in a wicker cage, and when restored to liberty some old mortar was strewn about, two nest-holders put into their apartments, and some straw cut in short pieces and laid in a corner, with which they speedily furnished the little receptacles, each of which soon contained a couple of eggs. Two or three days after the squabs were hatched the straw was taken away and replaced by some that was clean: this was to prevent the dung which quickly accumulates from breeding insects—mites, and all sorts of little horrors which are injurious, and sometimes so troublesome as to induce the mother to forsake her offspring. Most people allow the young ones to grow up with their parents the first year, but father always stuck to the principle that if you wish your birds to

be healthy and strong you must separate the young ones from the parental nest, and increase your stock if you wish to do so by the introduction of young strangers to the family abode. So he always had the little birds taken from the nest when they were twenty days old, fat, plump, fleshy fellows, which after being picked and drawn usually weighed about four ounces each. In after-years, when the pigeon-house had become a commercial speculation on a small scale, a higgler used to call regularly throughout the summer and give sixpence apiece for them; but at first mother bought them of Tom at fourpence each for pigeon-pies, which were always left for the elders to eat, as we juveniles would have thought the devouring of our pets nothing short of sacrilege.

Whenever we had kippered salmon, mackerel, or dried cod for breakfast, which was not seldom, as Bristol is rather noted for these comestibles, the tails of the fish were carried to the pigeon-cote for the birds to peck at, for they are very fond of salt, and father said this was the cleanest and best way of giving it them.

When the young pigeons had been removed the nest-holders were taken away and scalded, so that they were perfectly clean and sweet to go in again; but as no second brood was expected the first year, it being October when those we had were hatched, the crocks were put aside, and the floor of the house thoroughly scrubbed one fine day when its inmates were all abroad, and this operation was always repeated in the spring before the first eggs were laid, and about twice during the summer.

Small grey peas and buckwheat were very good food for them during breeding-time, but if this did not quite agree with the squabs it was remedied by scattering a little hemp or canary seed or putting it into their troughs. Sometimes they were indulged with lettuce, cabbage, or cress, but it was always made fast to something so that they might peck small pieces out, and now and then they were treated to some boiled potatoes with which scraps of fat bacon or ham were mixed. We girls were of course forbidden to climb up to the pigeons, but curiosity sometimes got the better of us and we made a surreptitious ascent. The care and management of them really devolved on father, Tom, and the gardener, the former of whom however did the lion's share of the work. The cote was capable of being divided into three distinct parts, and after awhile Tom invested in Pouters and Dragons, and ultimately some Carriers were added to the stock, which were very successfully trained to fly, and obtained good reputations for both strength and swiftness.

The Pouters proved very liable to asthma, which made itself apparent by a difficulty of breathing, shown in the painful heaving of the flanks at every respiration. It was sometimes caused by inflammation, arising from a too stimulating diet, and in this case was curable by a change of food. It frequently, however, came from exhaustion after bringing up a number of young ones, for the efforts made by this kind of pigeon to

get back into its beak the grain it has swallowed for the purpose of feeding the squabs, produces a kind of affection which is best treated by a regimen of canary and hemp seed in small quantities, with a little salt. A tiny pinch of alum must be dissolved in the drinking water, and the invalid shut up alone, in such a case.

I remember one poor Pouter, which was a great favourite, whose crop hung down heavily, till fatigue overcame her, and she crept into a dark corner, apparently to die. Father saw her just in time, and sent Jenny to fetch one of her knitted stockings, into which he slipped the bird, taking the precaution to secure her feet by extending them to the length of her tail, so as to prevent her from making frantic and dangerous efforts to get free. A bit of string was tied round the stocking below her extremities, and only her head and neck appeared at the top. Thus swaddled, she was hung against a vertical plank by means of a broad tape passed round her, and her swollen breast rested on the board. This position allowed the grain in the crop to pass slowly and gradually into the stomach, and after a few days it was all properly digested; and then a little barley was given her, and she was allowed to drink, though still encased in her bag. When released from durance vile, she was moderately fed and kept alone, and the muscles of the crop appeared to recover their vigour. Tom finally discarded these pretty but delicate birds in favour of some Lises, which have also the power of swelling their throats, but in a less degree, and in the form of a pear, the narrowest part of which is towards the breast, and the largest under the beak. They are elegant and not very common creatures, and have never shown any tendency to complaints of the crop. Once upon a time some of our pigeons were attacked with canker, a very unpleasant complaint, causing the head to have small swellings on it, which look something like cheese and have a very unpleasant smell. The sick birds were separated from the others for fear of infection. Father cut off the excrescences with a sharp knife, touched the places with caustic, fed them on spare diet, and allowed them plenty of exercise. It was not the only kind of cure he attempted, but it proved as efficacious as any other. Occasionally he found one or two suffering from atrophy, or wasting away, and then he supplied the invalids with as much of their favourite kinds of food as they would eat, put a rusty iron nail in their drinking-water by way of tonic, and, following Bechstein's advice, provided them with plenty of watercress, which was eagerly devoured. Some recovered and some did not, but taken altogether the misfortunes of the pigeons we kept were few and far between.

Tom often exchanged eggs with some of his friends, and found this a famous method of obtaining fresh blood, as the young ones grew up under the care of their foster-parents as naturally as if they had been their own veritable offspring. In this way he became the possessor of some Capuchin and Dutch Helmeted Pigeons, which were very handsome, to say nothing of the Fantails, for whom he had a separate establishment, made of wood, and fastened against the wall at the back of the house. When we were at a loss for out-door employment, which did happen sometimes in spite of our many pets, he used to set us to tie up little bunches of sage, mint, lavender, or balm, which were hung round the pigeon-house, as they are very fond of the smell of aromatic herbs. I need hardly say that "our" pigeons were very tame, for kindness and attention always produce this effect, and children and dogs are not by any means the only creatures who invariably find out those who like them. They would alight on the heads of any of us, and come flying for food or strutting about our feet in the most familiar manner. Tom and father always whistled when they fed them, and I should have done so if I could, but somehow my lips never would produce that undesirable sound for a girl. Jenny was more successful in her endeavours, but was promptly checked by mother whenever she attempted it.

Father once asked Old Hobbs to come over and spend a day and make acquaintance with our live stock, and he seemed quite touched by the kindness, but he had not quitted his furred and feathered family for forty years, and, after hesitating a minute, looked round the shop and said—

"No, sir; I thank you kindly, but I couldn't leave 'em. Nobody knows their little wants and ways as I do."\*

The next time any of us went to Bath, the old man was dead, and his son occupied his accustomed place. He was less bird-like than his father, but a good judge of what he dealt in; and he often wrote to know if Tom had any choice pigeons to dispose of to particular customers. He took a great interest in the Bath and West of England shows, and usually relieved Tom of all trouble about the birds he exhibited at them, and where, among many honourable mentions, he once or twice obtained prizes that were the delight of his eyes and pride of his heart. I don't think father was less proud or pleased, but Tom had all the credit as well as the pleasure of possession.

ELIZA CLARKE.

\* "We hope to see pigeons better understood, and as a consequence better loved; and to this end, and with the desire to carry the love of them into many English homes, we commence our efforts towards an extension of the 'Pigeon Fancy.'"—*Fulton's Book of Pigeons*, p. 6.

