

THE PRINCESS OF WALES'S TAME BIRDS.

By ERNEST M. JESSOP.



THE DUKE OF YORK'S PIGEON LOFT.

ARMED with the necessary permission of our always gracious Princess, I started from the pretty inn at Dersingham one brilliant morning in mid-September. My companion, a knight of the camera, had his light artillery girded around him, and his baggage in the shape of rapid "plates" swinging by his side. Straight up the wide sandy road which leads from Dersingham village to Sandringham House we strode, with many a pause to comment on the beauty of our surroundings.

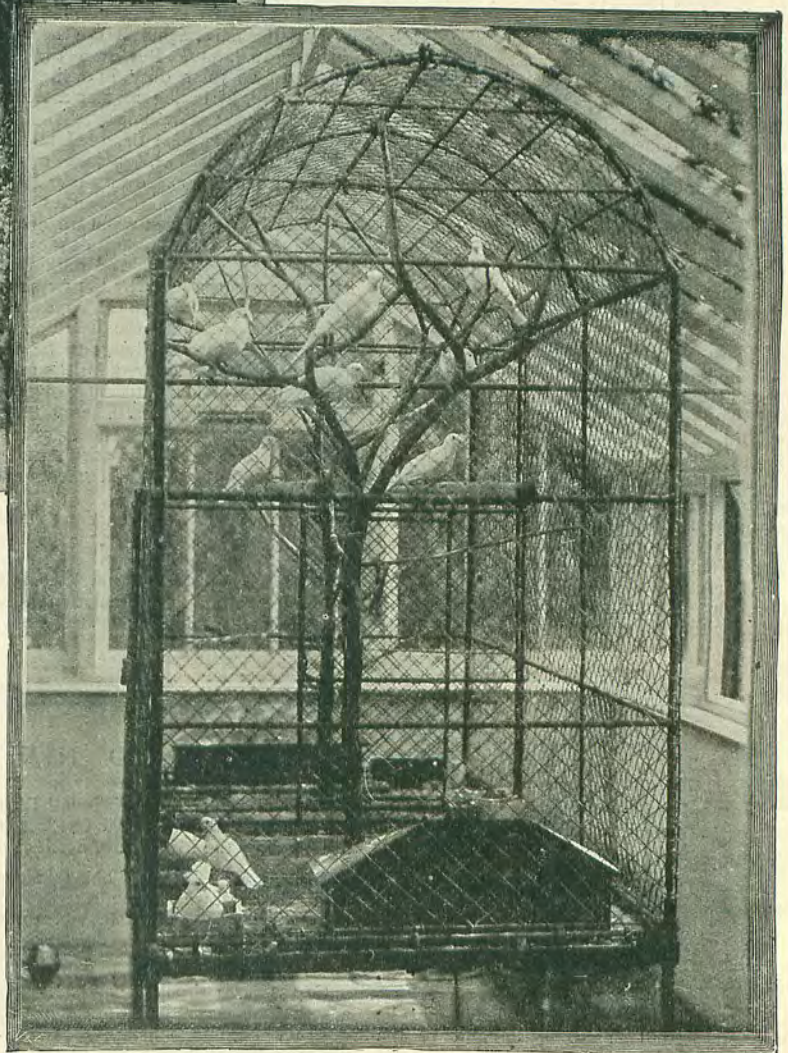
The broad stretch of greenest turf on either side of us, backed up as it is with grand trees and thick undergrowth, naturally gives rise to many a pleasant surprise in the shape of domestic scenes of bird and animal life, and it is with the greatest difficulty and only through constant reminder of our appointments that I can prevent the camera-legs being pitched in all kinds of likely and unlikely spots. Here it is a foreign pheasant, looking like a small specimen of an earthly rainbow, showing a gorgeous spot of colour against some dark shrubs; there it is a squirrel taking an early bunch of fir cones *au naturelle* on the spreading branch of an elm, or maybe the happy parents of some half dozen small brown bunnies teaching their offspring the difference between the animal man who does and him who does not shoot: an important branch of education, as this same Dersingham road is the usual wind-up of

the big "shoots" with which the Royal owner of the demesne gratifies his guests.

And so we dawdle up the pleasant walk, the pheasants and rabbits scarce troubling to make way for us, an odd village cart or so and a few pleasant-voiced labourers being all the signs of human life we meet with until we find ourselves in front of the stately "Norwich Gates," so called from their manufacture at, and presentation by, that loyal town. Just inside these same gates a sufficiently startling surprise awaits us—this is no less than a stalwart London policeman in full uniform: a being who looks sadly incongruous amid his rural surroundings.

On investigation we find that he is almost the only sign and token of the residence of Royalty on the estate. Here is no fuss and bother, no pomp or state, no liveried menials to demand one's business and put obstacles in the way of its execution. The whole great estate of some 8,000 acres is managed in the simplest but most perfect manner—that manner which the whole world over distinguishes the English gentleman.

Past the gates and their smiling keeper we turn to the left, following the course of an ancient wall seemingly composed of most nutritious materials, as all kinds of vegetation are springing from the interstices between its bricks with apparently no other diet to depend on than a course of mortar. Bending now to the right, past the stables and the lovely green-covered East Lodge, opposite to us we notice a well which in its way is a perfect little picture, with its moss-grown



THE PRINCESS OF WALES'S AVIARY.



WHITE "SILKY" FOWLS.

steps and its curious thatched roof, something of the shape of a lych-gate, overhung by great wide-spreading trees.

Open once more comes that camera stand—in vain. Business must be attended to, and we are now close to the head keeper's house, which is our destination. Still it is hard to pass by without a peep behind the well into the fairy-like glen beyond, where, judging from the sounds, a birds' parliament is just now in full sitting, its deliberations presided over by some splendidly dressed cock pheasants who bar our further progress.

But now out from an opposite gate comes dear old Snowball, one of the handsomest and kindest of pure white collies, and peeping behind him a lovely white cat, two indications that show me, who have been here before, that kindly Mrs. Jackson, the wife of the head keeper, is not far distant. Snowball, with whom I have been on the best of terms since I took his portrait some years since, waves his great white tail and looks at me as much as to say, "Are you coming in?" The cat, who is a comparative stranger, echoes the invitation with a slight "meow" and I at once accept it.

Waiting for us at the door of her pretty green-covered house is Mrs. Jackson, wife of the Prince's head keeper.

Always ready to take a helpful interest in one's work is Mrs. Jackson, and our present subject especially commends itself to her. "First of all you ought to photograph 'Willie,' as she is the Princess's special pet dove, and very fond of her mistress she is." Every morning when in residence at Sandringham does the Princess

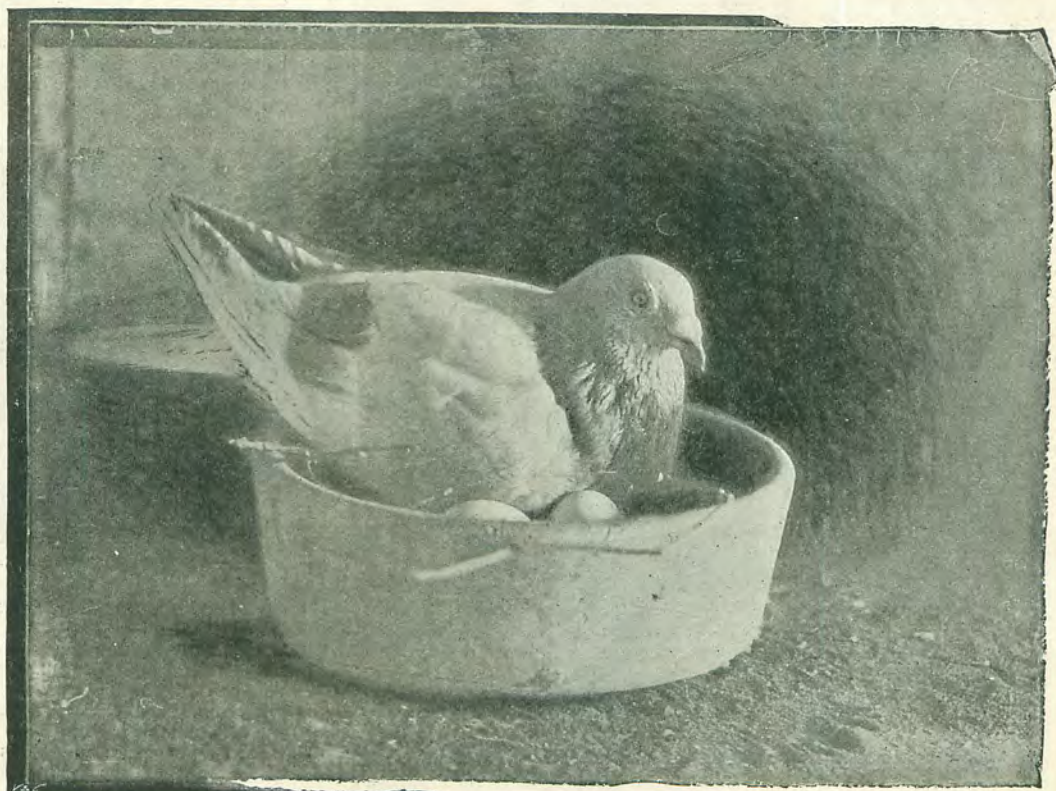
repeatedly making a sound like a happy little laugh, flies from one to the other of the party, but declines to remain still for a moment.

Although it is very flattering to have so much notice taken of one by such a favoured pet, we badly want a photograph of "Willie," and the poor photographer begins to wear a

call at Mrs. Jackson's to feed and caress Willie, who on her part does her best with pretty little endearments to repay her kind mistress. Walking or flying about the house as she does, without restraint or fear of cat or dog, on the Princess's arrival she at once flies to her hand or shoulder and rubs her beautiful little head against her mistress with soft bird-like murmurings of contentment, and so loath is she to give up her position that confinement in a cage has always to be resorted to before the Princess can leave her.

By-the-by the masculine name of Willie is somewhat of a misnomer, as the little dove has of late laid some eggs.

But now Mrs. Jackson calls "Willie" by name, and fluttering in at the sitting-room door comes the little pet, so trim and glistening her feathers that she seems to be clothed in white satin, while her ruby-red eyes sparkle like genuine gems. This morning she is in very high spirits, and



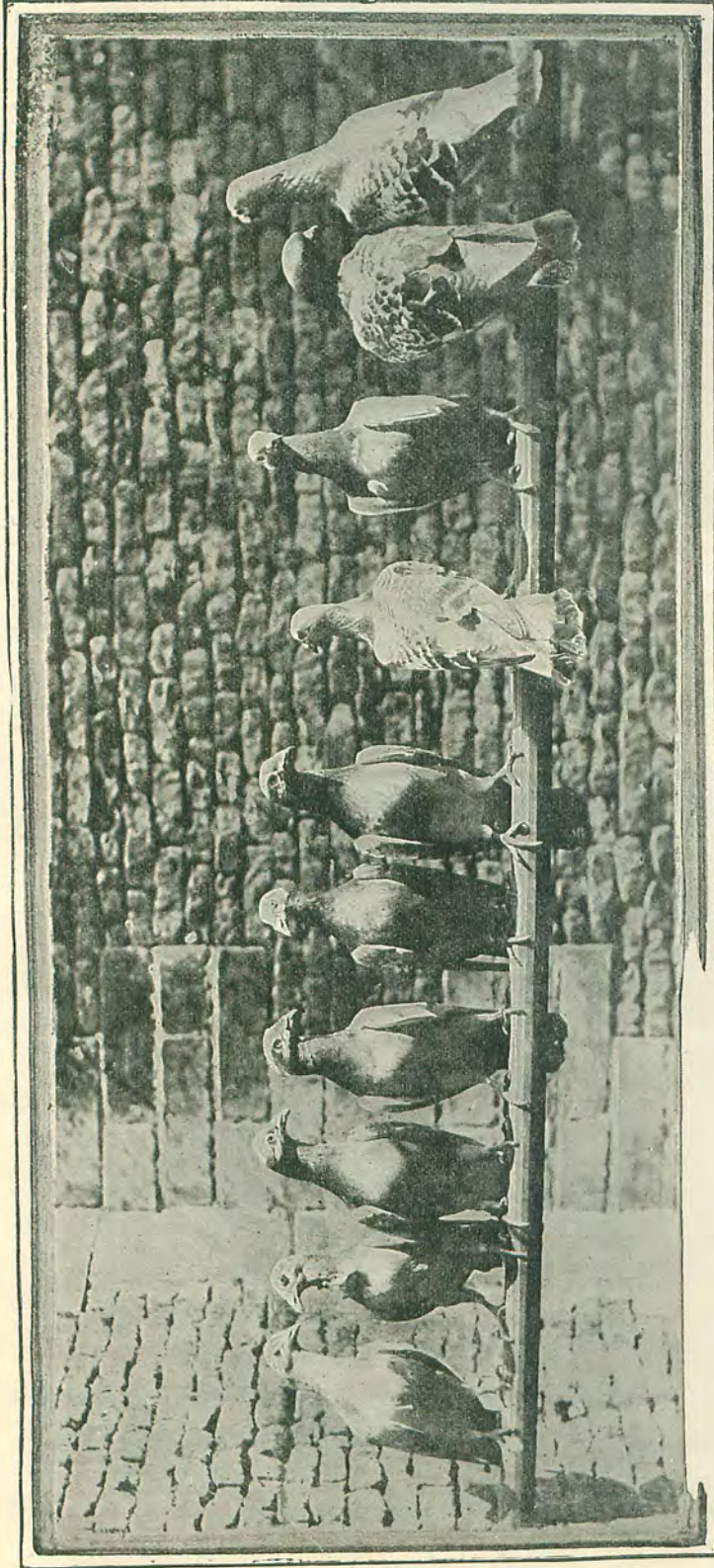
IN THE DUKE OF YORK'S PIGEON LOFT.

worried look as plate after plate is spoiled by her capricious movements. Quite suddenly, however, and without warning she develops a tremendous fancy for me, nestles down on my arm, and with her satisfied little laugh seems to say, "This is the one I have long loved, and here you may take my portrait," so at last all goes well.

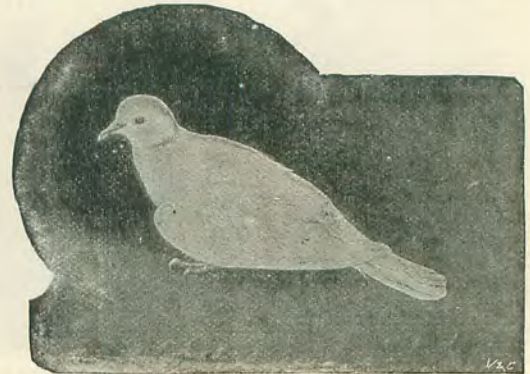
With *Willie still on my arm*, and followed by the white cat and dog, we now cross the sunny road to visit some of her friends and relations. Here we find an open door framed in climbing roses, within which is a glass and wire aviary inhabited as to its centre division by

some twenty or more white doves. A charming picture they make perched on twigs in the bright sunshine, gently cooing soft nothings to one another. In the left hand corner of the cage may be seen two of them sitting on their own eggs, and probably comparing notes as to future results. All these doves, we are told, are descended from a pair given to the Princess when in Ireland, and they also are special pets of Her Royal Highness, who always feeds them when at Sandringham.

In the side cages of the aviary live (seemingly from choice, as the doors are wide open and they can walk about without let or hindrance) some Australian crested pigeons, very gay in colour and harmonising splendidly with the brilliant but homely flowers by which they are surrounded. And here, as diarist Pepys would say, it is mighty pretty to notice that not any of the birds seem to have the slightest fear of the cat which accompanies us. Mrs. Jackson says it is quite easy to train cats when young not to notice or interfere with birds, and this particular specimen frequently,



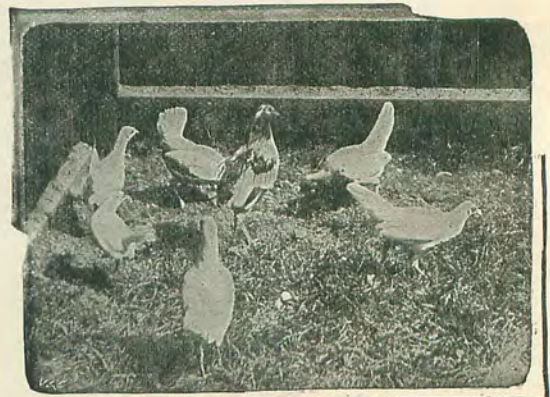
SOME OF THE PRINCESS OF WALES'S PIGEONS.



"WILLIE," THE PRINCESS OF WALES'S PET DOVE.

as one may see, lies down and sleeps by the doves, his long white hair mingling with the snowy feathers of the sitting birds. He has his uses, too, as a poor little lame rat, who looks in just now at the door of the aviary, quickly finds himself an example of the doctrine of the non-survival of the unfittest.

This same aviary in which we have been talking was once used as a monkey-house, but in the words of the sailor who, when asked to describe the manners and customs of some aborigines, answered, "Manners they had none, and their customs were abominable," the same was observed of the monkeys, and so they were duly evicted and their places filled by the present pretty



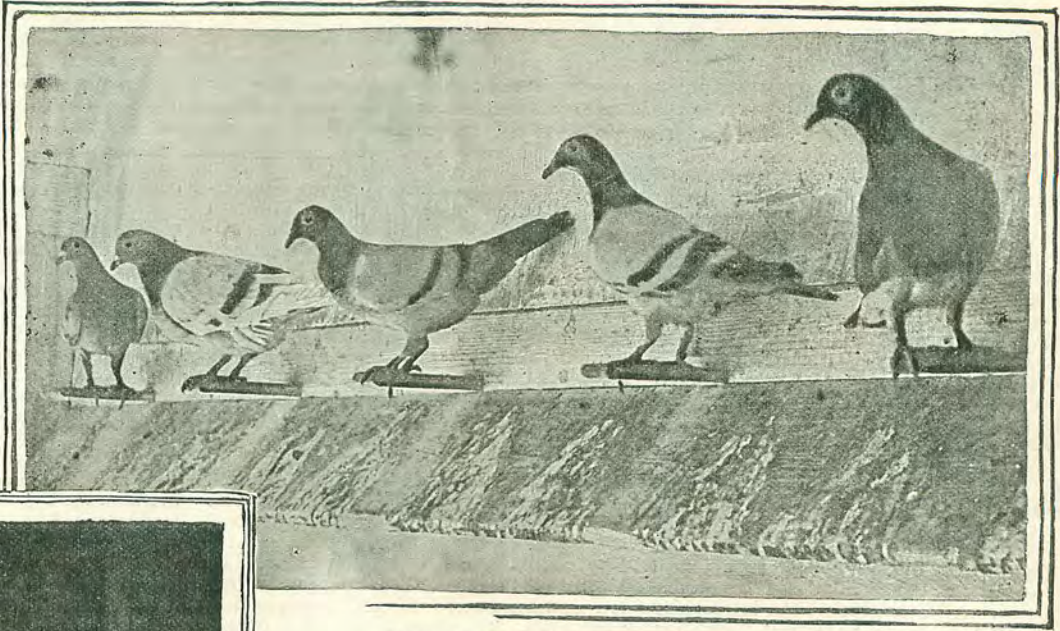
A GROUP OF THE PRINCESS'S PET BANTAMS.

occupants, who, until their removal, had lived in the Princess's own boudoir.

Now Mrs. Jackson hands us over to the care of Robinson, a careful attendant, under whose charge are most of the domesticated birds on the estate. First he takes us to see some small enclosures planted with shrubs and reeds and furnished with little pools of water in which reside, when they please, various kinds of water-fowl. Here may be seen, when they are not wandering about the gardens or otherwise engaged, teal, sheldrake, harlequins and whistling ducks. One old whistling duck has been here

for thirteen years, and earned for herself a unique distinction. It is believed these ducks were never known to lay in England before; however, determined to make a record, lay this one did, sat on her own eggs, and moreover successfully reared four young ones.

Near by we come on a pen containing a shel-drake and duck. These exhibit some alarm at the fixing of the camera, but it is useless to protest as the plates are extra rapid, and the strange instrument is wielded by Mr. Kearton,



SOME OF THE DUKE OF YORK'S PIGEONS IN THEIR LOFT.



COCKIE.

the most accomplished bird photographer in England.

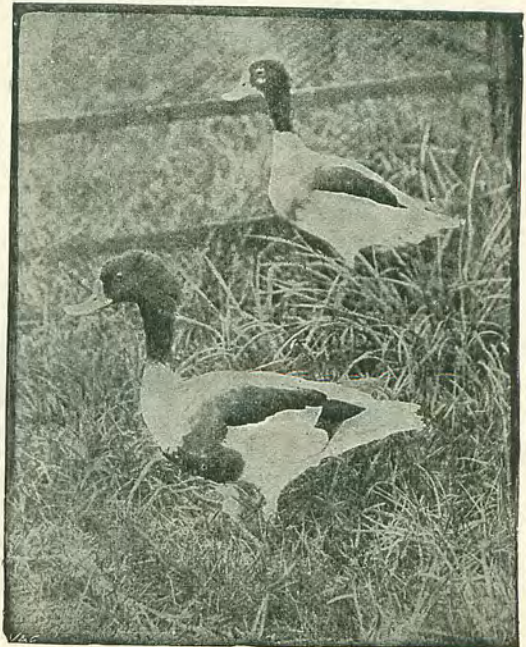
The eggs from which these birds were incubated were found on the borders of the estate and duly hatched out. The young birds were reared by the persevering Robinson, who would walk many miles daily to procure cockles for their delectation. In gratitude for this care, although their movements are quite unimpeded, they seldom wander far from the home of their youth.

In immediate proximity to these fortunate foundlings are three large, fat and happy-looking mandarin ducks obtained in exchange from the Zoo.

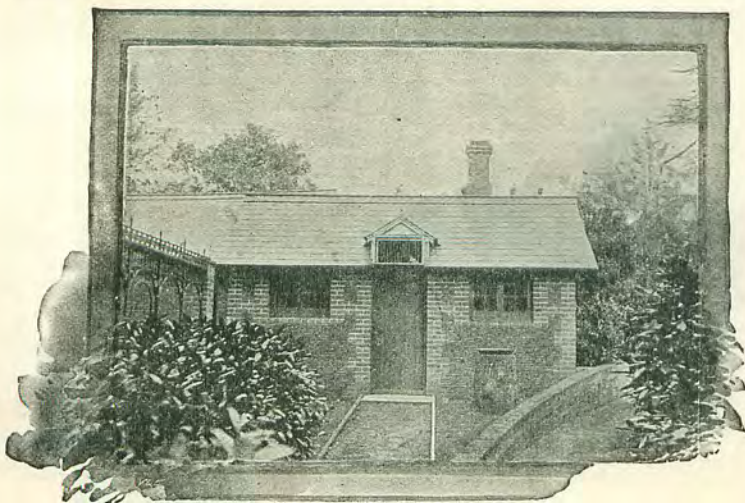
Now we pass through the gates leading to the kennels to visit the most important pet bird on the estate. This is "Cockie," originally a very fine specimen of a white cockatoo with a salmon-coloured crest surmounting his venerable but intelligent countenance. For reasons best known

to himself, he carefully removes all feathers that grow within his reach from his person, thereby giving himself somewhat the appearance of a very thin judge, who has commenced his toilet by putting on his wig. At the sight of my friend with his camera, "Cockie" commences to dance a sort of barbarian waltz on his perch, at the same time making a few remarks in an undertone that I cannot help thinking are criticisms of the most derogatory nature on our personal appearance and belongings. These remarks are punctuated at short intervals by ear-piercing yells of the most unearthly nature.

However, when called to order by Brunson, his keeper, he at once assumes his most judicial attitude, feels along his perch as though searching for pens and note-book, and preserves a solemn silence while his history is related, although the way that he raises and lowers his crest at certain points



SHELDUCK AND SHELDRAKE.



THE PRINCESS OF WALES'S PIGEON LOFT.

of the narrative, together with an artful wink of one eye, make me expect to hear him break out at any moment with some sharp, cross-examining questions.

He, it seems, has been the property of the Princess for the past twenty-five years, and is exceedingly attached to her. Until the last few years he resided in his mistress's dressing-room, from which he was only banished on account of the increasing power of his lungs. In order to certify to the truth of this statement, "Cockie" here gives utterance to a perfectly deafening shriek. When at Sandringham the Princess pays him a regular morning visit, and as soon as she is near enough to his perch "Cockie" takes her hand with his black claw, rubs his head against her and chatters his best thanks for the kindness he has experienced for so many years. In fact it is sometimes a difficult matter to separate him from the Royal mistress he loves so well.

Much more, no doubt, we should have heard concerning the life and achievements of "Cockie," but the narrative is broken off by that worthy himself, who has for some minutes been regarding the tripod legs of the camera with a fascinated eye, and now endeavours to acquire possession of them with a view to their utilisation as a portable gymnasium. Some little time is occupied with their rescue, as "Cockie" holds firm with beak and claw, but at last he literally tear ourselves away, followed by an unmistakable yell of derision from the featherless magnate.

Now, with Robinson once more for pilot, we cross the road to the new pheasantry, opposite which live the Princess's pet bantams. Here along a turf-bordered path in the neatest of pens are to be found the Princess's latest fancies. Started from a few birds presented by the Hon. Mabel Sturt, the collection now numbers over one hundred, and includes all the best classes known to fanciers. Japanese Speckled, Japanese White with black tails, Black Rose-combs, Scotch Greys, Duckwing game and Pile game—all have their separate pens with their titles on the gates; and, as Pepys would say, a mighty pretty diversion it is for the Princess and her friends to come from the great house with the proper food carried by an attendant, and feed and watch the ways and manners of the bright and graceful little creatures.

We carry off one successful photograph in spite of the opposition of a pile game cock, who, although not more than about a pound in weight, with the proverbial gallantry of his race, is fully prepared to fight the three of us first and the camera afterwards. However, a small tribute to his prowess in the shape of a handful of grain is sufficient to

solace his wounded pride, and we are allowed to depart scathless but amidst a loud crowing of defiance from his friends and neighbours.

In the paddock at the rear of the bantam pens we stop to notice some beautiful white "silky" fowls, so called from their being covered in the place of feathers with a soft thick down closely resembling raw silk in texture. These were reared from French parents and are mainly kept to act as foster-mothers to the young pheasants, of which many thousands are bred every year for sporting purposes on the estate. The "silky," from their lightness and warmth, it is thought, will entirely take the place of the Dorkings which were formerly used for rearing purposes.

And now we make the discovery that both the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York are pigeon fanciers, so of course our next move is made to see the Prince's loft of homing pigeons. The management of both this and the Duke of York's loft is in the hands of Mr. J. Walter Jones, the head master of the Prince's schools at Sandringham, and from his conversation and the appearance of the lofts, it is easy to see that Mr. Jones is both an enthusiast and an expert, and it is a real pleasure to hear him discourse on his treasured charges. The Prince of Wales's loft contains twenty-one nest boxes, and is usually full. The aviary attached is at present inhabited by fourteen birds of high pedigree, who require a coloured illustration to do justice to their beauty as they preen themselves in the brilliant sunshine. The loft as shown in our photograph is a brick building situated close to the house of Mr. Jackson, the Prince's head keeper. It is divided into two compartments for old and young birds. During the winter season the birds are separated, the hens occupying the young bird portion and the male birds that of the old ones where the nest boxes are situated. About a week before the pairing season commences, say the end of February, the entrances to the nest boxes are opened and each male bird selects the one he fancies. Their mates are then placed in these, and the boxes are for the time being closed. In front of each nest box hangs a drinking tin of an ingenious pattern which always keeps the water clean.

The water supply in the loft is kept in enamelled iron pans with covers, as Mr. Jones has a strong objection to any drinking fountain the interior of which cannot be seen and well cleansed.

Outside the loft is the bath placed in the hollowed trunk of a tree. This is available for the birds both winter and summer, except during the training and racing season, when it is overturned before the return of the birds in order that they may at once enter the loft.

The birds are fed from a hopper, beans being the staple food. Failing the most careful and regular hand feeding, the hopper is considered the best method. The loft is cleaned out every morning and the floor and nest boxes strewn with fine gravel, or silt, to use the local name. This is stated to be the secret of the good health and vigour of the birds: plenty of coarse grit means good digestion, without which good health is impossible. During the moulting season plenty of change of diet is given, Mr. Jones believing that the more nutritious the diet the better the quality of the growing feathers. He notices that with the wild pigeon the moulting season is also the time of plenty and variety of diet.

Some of the pretty birds we are now inspecting have flown home from places as far distant as Ventnor, Cherbourg, London, Chard, Newcastle-on-Tyne and Berwick. The smartest birds in the loft are some pretty "blues" descended from a pair presented by Monsieur A. Jurion. Number five from the right in the aviary photograph was presented by M. Duchateau, president of the National Flying Club of Belgium.

Neither the Prince's or the Duke of York's pigeons are flown with the idea of winning matches, and the interest on race days is mainly at Sandringham as to which of the lofts does best.

And now a short walk over the meadows, past the pretty school-house at West Newton, takes us to the pigeon loft of H.R.H. the Duke of York. It is a charming little place adjoining York Dairy, without a chance of feeling a breath of north or east wind, and surrounded by such an old-fashioned garden full of old-fashioned flowers, fruit and vegetables, as one seldom even dreams about.

The loft consists of two storeys, the upper with fourteen nest boxes, where we get our pretty picture of the patient parent who is known as No. 659; and a ground floor with six nest boxes and an aviary attached which contains some very valuable birds, mainly the gifts of distinguished foreign fanciers. The illustration of the Duke's homing pigeons shows the projecting perches provided for the birds, and my attention is also called to the peculiar trap through which the birds enter the top storey of the loft. This is specially designed to keep stray cats in their proper place, *i.e.*, on the outside. So with a last look at the pretty loft, the adjoining trim-built "Alexandra" model cottages, and with a wish for long life and happiness to the gracious lady to whose fostering care so much of the quiet happiness which seems to pervade all the Sandringham estate is due, we bid farewell to the last of our courteous guides and the lucky birds in their care.

