

POOR JOSIE:

THE STORY OF A RESCUED STARLING.

UNCLE ALFRED'S home was in the country. My little sisters and I lived with our parents, in the very heart of a great, busy, bustling

were trained. There was a summer-house, too, with creepers trailing over it; so that upon the whole we might have been worse off. It was very pleasant in



"THERE WAS AN UNUSUAL UPROAR AMONG THE STARLINGS" (p. 77).

manufacturing city. Our house was a very nice one, it is true, and although a narrow strip of garden with a strong iron fence was all that separated it from the street in front, behind was quite a large lawn, with shrubs, and trees, and flowers, and a high brick wall round it, against which apple, pear, and plum-trees

spring-time to find the crocuses and snowdrops peeping up through the brown earth, and the trees all bedecked with blossom and leaves, that for weeks to come the smoke and the grime of the city did not seem to soil. But notwithstanding all this, we thought about the country as a kind of far-off

fairly land, and our annual summer visit to Uncle Alfred's great farm was something to look forward to months before the time came round, and to talk and dream about months after it was past and gone.

Uncle Alfred was a bachelor, but he dearly loved children, and was so good-natured, and pleasant, and nice, that we used to fight for places on his knee, and those of us who couldn't get up hung around his easy-chair, or squatted on his footstool beside him. It was so delightful to hear him telling stories about all our country friends and favourites—of course I mean the live stock about the farm, not human friends. We never failed to inquire about each and all of them every time he came up, and used to ply him with questions that few save Uncle Alfred would have taken the trouble to answer.

"Oh yes!" he would tell us; "old Dobbin the mare was as motherly-looking as ever, and would be delighted to carry four of us on her back when we came down again; and the filly, oh! it was growing, to be sure, though as yet it looked nought but legs; and Jemmy the donkey seemed to be getting wiser-like every day; and the brown cow that cropped the lawn still licked the milkmaid's hair, and it was the cow that had sent us the cream and the sweet butter, to show she hadn't forgotten us; and the game-cock was more impudent and independent than ever; and the big sow, that always said 'Yes,' when spoken to, and threw herself down to be scratched, wasn't a bit altered; and Bruce, the Highland sheep-dog, cocked his head and barked whenever any of our names were mentioned." And so on.

But one winter I fell ill of whooping-cough, and did not seem to get easily over it.

"Send him down to the country," said Uncle Alfred, who paid us a visit one fine day in spring; "that'll make him all right in a month or two."

So it was arranged that I should go with uncle.

Oh, didn't my brothers and sisters envy me! they thought it quite hard that they hadn't had the whooping-cough as badly as I.

I promised to bring them something nice when I returned, but at the time I had no idea what it would be.

Now, it is no part of my intention to tell you how I enjoyed myself in the country, at dear old uncle's farm. Suffice it to say I did enjoy myself, as only a town boy could have done, and I seemed to get better every day, and in less than a month could boast of a pair of rosy cheeks and a sunburnt brow, that said well for the way I fared. There was not an animal about all the place I did not make friends with, and even the wild birds that built in the tree-tops and hedgerows never seemed the least

bit in the world afraid of me. It is somewhat strange, though I am very glad, that it never occurred to me to get a young bird, and try to rear it. It was great fun to watch the lovely creatures, however, and listen to their songs.

I was an early riser, and one of my chief delights used to be watching the starlings. There was a cottage on the farm in which, I dare say, somebody at some time or other had dwelt, but which was now given up to the rats. Not that these busybodies occupied the whole of the cottage, for the starlings had taken possession of its chimneys: there they built their nests and brought forth their young, and there on sunshiny mornings they were in the habit of holding high carnival.

I used to laugh as I looked up at them, for although they made plenty of noise, and were evidently impressed with the idea that they were singing most melodiously, there was no more music in it than you could get out of the frying-pan by scraping it with a knife.

One day there was an unusual uproar among the starlings. One of their young ones had fallen down the chimney, and I believe I entered only just in time to prevent it from being devoured by the rats.

What a beautiful, funny little innocent it was, to be sure! Not a bit like the old ones, with a broad yellow mouth, which it gaped when I went to pick it up, and no tail at all worth mentioning. If I could have done so, I should have placed it back in the nest to which it belonged; but this I knew I could not do, as I did not know from which one it had fallen.

So I thought, "Oh, if I could only keep it, and tame and rear it, what a nice present to take home to my brothers and sisters!"

I was more successful than I could have dreamed of being.

I placed it in a tiny wire cage in my bedroom window all day, and, strange to say, its parents came and fed it. I took it in all night, and it screamed so early in the morning that I had to get up, and feed it with peas-pudding and worms, that I had gathered the night before, and then go back to bed again.

I have kept many strange pets since poor Josie died, but never one whose whole life and history formed a better example of the power of kindness, and to this day I have a soft heart towards starlings.

My Josie never had any fear. He was the boldest, not to say the most impudent, bird ever I had.

Why did I call him Josie? I did not name him so. He himself fancied the name, and took to it.

There was at my uncle's a horse called Josie, and when I hung the bird's cage on a nail outside the window, which I did every morning at four o'clock, for peace sake, he used to listen to all the sounds about the farm, and soon learned them.

In less than four months Josie not only could pipe a simple tune, but he could talk, and did talk constantly all day, except when doing mischief: then he was so very quiet that some one always went to see what he was about.

He was never confined to his cage, but slept there, and could retire whenever he wished. He used to follow me about the garden, and if he did not know the ins and outs of every shrub and flower in it, it was not for the want of examining them, and in about six months he was a very good linguist.

He was very fond of the old horse called Josie, whose name he had adopted. He would sit between his ears, and call out, "Gee up, gee up, Josie!" most clearly.

Then he would whistle on the dog, then crow like the game-cock, or mew like the cat, then pipe a bit of a tune, and finish off by pecking the horse's brow, and crying, "Gee up, Josie, gee up!"

My uncle was delighted with him, and after one of Josie's little performances would nearly always say to me—

"Well, well, isn't it funny?"

Josie soon learned this, and though he never laughed himself, whenever any of us laughed Josie would cock his eye, and inquire with such a knowing air, "Isn't it funny?"

I could not attempt to describe the delight and wonder of my little sisters and brothers when they became acquainted with Josie, on my return to town.

They had read of birds that talked, but had never seen one before, and were at first a little afraid of him.

As soon as Josie got out of his cage, he flew straight to the fender, very much to the surprise and alarm of pussy. But Joe perched there, turning his back on her, and spreading out his wings to the kindly blaze.

Pussy eyed the bird with her ears back, but when he coolly remarked, "Joe's cold, poor Josie's co—co—cold. That's it, co—old. Isn't it funny?" then pussy flew out of the room, and we did not see her again for a week.

But pussy and he got good friends at last, and it was highly amusing to see them both eating out of the same dish.

Sometimes he used to peck at her in mere wantonness; then pussy would hit at him with a

gloved hand, on which Josie would back a step or two, and say—

"Oh! you rascal! you ra—ra—rascal! Me-aw—me-aw. Come on, come on. Poor Josie. Isn't it funny?"

Whenever Josie got a little excited he suffered from a nervous impediment in his speech. But at all times his speeches were about the most ridiculously amusing pieces of oratory ever anyone listened to. Simply a jumble of nonsense. Here is one, so you can judge for yourself. It began with whistling, and the words that followed were brought out with surprising rapidity:

"Whew, whew, whew. Me-aw—meaw, call the cat, call the cat; pretty, pretty, pretty cold, call the cock, call the cold, gee up, poor Jo-Jo-Jo—Josie, whew, whew, whew, isn't it funny?"

Josie soon became perfectly at home in town; he used to fly about the garden with us children, often perched upon our heads, more often on a bush, or even on the wall. Sometimes he used to fly up to the house-top, and have a little conversation with the sparrows, but suddenly he would startle them all with a wild "me-aw!" and thinking the cat was after them, off they would fly. Then Josie would look all round in astonishment, and finding himself alone down he would come again, and settle with us perhaps, saying to himself, "Poor Jo, Jo, Josie, isn't it funny?"

Poor Josie indeed! I cannot tell you how very much we all loved him; even the servants were fond of him, although he was constantly doing mischief of some kind in the kitchen. He was so inquisitive, he must see into everything. His beak did duty for a chisel and hammer both. He opened or bored through every little parcel that came in; he was never tired of examining the servants' straw bonnets, ribbons, and hats, and that did not at all improve them.

When any of my sisters got a new doll, Josie was never content until he had seen the sawdust; and all the satisfaction my sisters got from Jo was this remark, "Isn't it fu—fu—funny?"

Alas for our pet! a strange cat one day laid his back open with her claws.

We bore him in, and laid him tenderly by the fire. But he never rightly rallied.

And about the third day he staggered on to the fender.

"Poor Jo," he said; "Jo is co-co-cold. Isn't it —"

He never spoke more. We buried him under an apple-tree on which many a song he had sung, many the laugh he had given us. Then we placed him in a cigar-box. And in the bark of the tree I cut the letters—**POOR JOSIE.**

ARION.