



MICHAELMAS GEESE.

THE name of the goose has come to be almost synonymous with a noodle. This is scarcely fair, as any one who will take the trouble to examine a few testimonials to character will be convinced. Geese are very far from being the stupid bipeds that they are ordinarily taken for. It is true that they have rather a waddling way of getting about in the world when on land, and are a good deal given to hissing and cackling; but then there are very few human bipeds even who may not be said to waddle more or less if they get a little out of their element; and as to the cackling, it is scarcely to be regarded as cynicism to say that half the talk that goes on in the world is very little better, and a great part of the other half a good deal worse.

It is true that geese waddle, but they are remarkably clever waddlers, and are proverbially difficult to catch. Nobody, it has been observed, ever yet ran over a goose; and although their hissing and cackling may not be very dignified or sonorous, where is the orator who

ever declaimed with greater practical effect than the geese of the Roman Capitol when they cackled and woke the slumbering guard, thus, as it has been said, preserving a nation destined to conquer the world? There have been a good many versions of this story—Livy, Plutarch, Dionysius, Ælian, and many others having given it with certain variations. The variations, however, only in matters of detail. All are agreed that while half-starved sentinels and watchdogs slumbered and slept, the besieging Gauls silently climbed the Capitol, and would undoubtedly have surprised the garrison but for the sleepless vigilance of the geese, birds sacred to Juno, and therefore religiously preserved in the temple of the goddess. Aroused by their screams and the flapping of their wings, says Livy, M. Manlius seized his weapons, raised an alarm, and then rushed to the rampart just in time to strike down the first of the Gauls who had thus almost seized the citadel.

Plutarch tells the same story, and incidentally speaks of the goose as naturally quick in its perceptions and sensitive to sounds. Ovid alludes to the

same characteristic in one or two passages, and so does Lucretius, the latter curiously attributing their keenness to their sense of smell. Pliny testifies to the watchfulness of the goose as being greater than that of dogs, and there are many other writers who have done the same. They most of them appear, however, to base their opinion on the incident of the Capitol, which in course of time led to the very general substitution of geese for watch-dogs, whose fate it was to become the victims of an annual slaughter for their perfidy in betraying the Capitol, while at the same time a goose was carried round in a costly litter and treated with the most reverent honour. Rome, says Augustine, sank almost into an Egyptian superstition of animal worship in offering sacred rites to the goose. Aristotle says that the bird is cautious and shy, and Buffon recognises its vigilance.

Notwithstanding all these witnesses to character, the domestic goose has somehow acquired a reputation for silliness, and there have not been wanting those who have doubted altogether the story of their saving the Roman Capitol from the Gauls, and have endeavoured to explain it away, quite regardless of the feelings of the vast number of their fellow-mortals who entertain a tender regard for these Michaelmas martyrs, and may therefore be assumed to be sensitive to any disparagement of their merits. To all such it is gratifying to be able to quote so weighty a testimony as that of Professor Owen, who emphatically declares that he has not the smallest sympathy with the sceptics as to Livy's statement. "Opposite the cottage where I live," he says, "is a pond which is frequented during the summer by two brood flocks of geese. These geese take up their quarters for the night along the margin of the pond, into which they are ready to plunge at a moment's notice. Several times when I have been up late or wakeful, I have heard the old gander

sound the alarm, which is immediately taken up, and has been sometimes followed by a simultaneous plunge of the flocks into the pond." This was found to be probably due to the fowling or other predatory vermin, or by a deer stalking near the flock. "But often," continues the writer, "has the old Roman anecdote occurred to me when I have been awoken by the midnight alarm notes of my anserine neighbours, and more than once I have noticed when the cause of alarm has been such as to excite the dogs, that the geese were beforehand in giving loud warning of the strange steps." It seems, indeed, to be generally agreed by all who have taken the trouble to observe that geese are particularly wide-awake individuals, and that the friskiest of little dogs can be caught napping far more easily than the most stolid of geese.

Still, the fact remains that after all they are but geese, and in the dedication of the 29th of September to St. Michael and St. Goose, there certainly seems some little incongruity. The connection between the two names appears to be due to the simple fact that the birds were usually found to be in excellent condition on St. Michael's Day. The harvest had been gathered in, the flocks of birds had usually had a week or two at gleanings in the stubble lands, and about the end of September were plump and toothsome; and when St. Michael's Day was kept as a real feast a "Michaelmas goose" was naturally a favourite item in the bill of fare. It is difficult to say when the goose was not considered a great delicacy in England, though it may be considered doubtful whether the bird is to be regarded as a genuine native of this country. Naturalists tell us that our domestic geese originated in the gray-lag which is found in most parts of the globe, and some say used to be a permanent resident in this country. It is not so now, at any rate, and probably never was, though it may

have been more common as a temporary visitor when we had better accommodation to offer in the shape of vast fens and desert swamps. The white goose of our poultry-yards is no doubt, however, the domesticated descendant of *anser ferus*, the change of colour being nothing more than usually happens when wild creatures are tamed. The large white goose, however, although the one most familiar in our London markets, is not of course the only variety of the domesticated bird. Besides the white or Embden goose, there are three principal varieties—the large grey or Toulouse goose, the common mottled grey-and-white, and the curly-feathered or Sebastopol goose.

The Embden and Toulouse appear to be the favourites in the market, and careful breeding has succeeded in turning out birds a pair of which have been known to weigh considerably over half a hundred-weight.

Of all poultry breeding, the rearing of the goose in favourable situations is said to be the least troublesome and the most profitable; it is not surprising, therefore, that the trade has of late years been developed enormously. They will live, and to a certain extent will thrive, on the coarsest of grasses, though of course if birds are to be brought to market in good condition they must be treated to something more than coarse grass. The fattening of geese has now become an established industry in some parts of the country. They are not bred here perhaps so much as they were. In the swampy regions of the eastern coast of England they used to be produced in enormous numbers; but a good deal of fen country has been drained, and much of the breeding of geese has died out. Even the neighbourhood of Norwich, which was once, and indeed is now, so famous for its geese, has of late taken to importing birds to be fattened, and passed on to market as genuine "Norwich geese." Holland now sends us enormous numbers of its birds to be

fattened, and in the neighbourhood of Colchester there are establishments specially devoted to the business of preparing them for market. At Christmas we get large numbers of birds from France, where they are very extensively bred.

It is, however, from Ireland that we now get a main part of our supply. Geese appear to thrive well everywhere in Ireland, and the trade in them between England and the sister island is rapidly increasing. A kind of poultry census was taken two or three years ago, when it was shown that in Munster alone there were over 800,000 head of geese. Ulster had over half a million, Connaught had 483,000, and Leinster 440,000. Altogether there were in Ireland no fewer than about $2\frac{1}{4}$ millions of these birds, which, reckoned to be worth not more than 3s. each in the market, represented some £337,500, much of this property being in the hands of those who are content to share their cabin accommodation with their anserine protégés.

In America immense flocks of the Canada Goose wing their way southwards from the Arctic regions, spreading over Canada and the United States. The autumnal flight, says Wilson, lasts from the middle of August to the middle of October, when the frosts begin. No sooner do they arrive in Canada and the States, than the work of slaughter commences. They run the gauntlet, so to speak, for many hundreds of miles, through such destructive fires, that by the time they have reached the shores of the Middle States, their numbers are not only greatly reduced, but the survivors have become exceedingly shy and watchful. The English residents at Hudson's Bay depend greatly on the supply of Canada geese for their winter provision; and it is stated that in favourable years as many as three or four thousand have been killed and barrelled up; a single native from the ambush of his bough hut will sometimes kill two hundred in a day.