

BY FRAMLEY STEELCROFT.

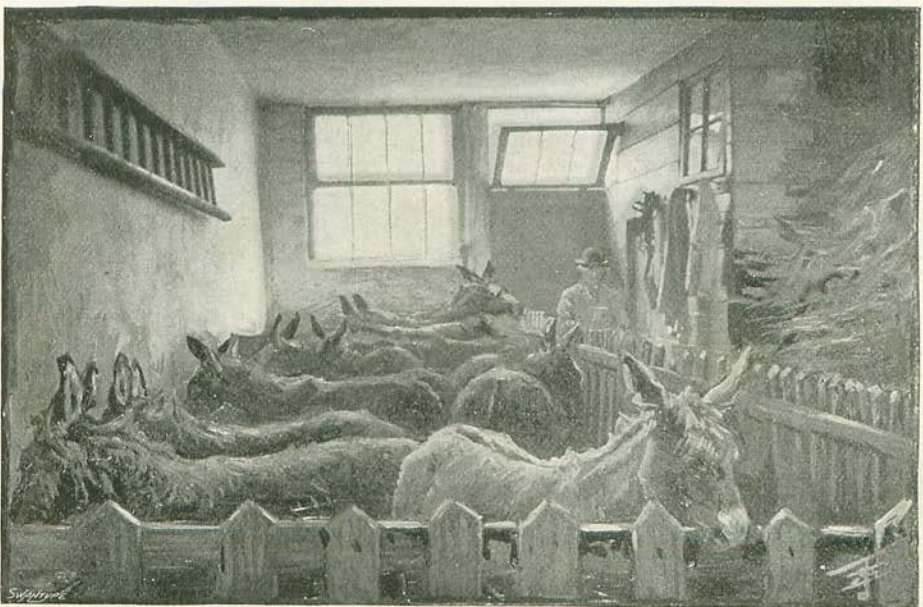


HAT the wealthy *malade imaginaire*, luxuriating in sunny Carthage, should order a sleek, well-groomed milch ass to be brought to his door every morning in order that he may drink of the thin, sweet fluid, is quite in accordance with the fitness of things; but we venture to doubt whether it is generally known that a fully-equipped donkeys' dairy is established within a few hundred yards of the Marble Arch, at Hyde Park.

Accompanied by an artist, we visited this extraordinary establishment, which, by the way, is nearly one hundred years old. On

entering from a mews at the back of the premises, one stands in a long stable, wherein are about twelve or fourteen asses of eminently respectable appearance. Really, they resemble Mr. Walter Rothschild's zebras rather than their own humble and long-suffering brethren on Hampstead Heath and elsewhere.

The visitor notes with interest that a certain sweet smell pervades the place, just as though it were a cows' dairy. A wooden railing, running the whole length, forms a kind of pen for the asses; and at one end of this pen is a sort of reserved inclosure for a few foals, or baby donkeys, whose presence is an absolute necessity to the milch asses.



THE INTERIOR OF THE STABLE.

The foregoing illustration shows the interior of the dairy itself. The donkeys, apparently for want of other employment, are jostling each other in an unobtrusively persistent sort of way, rendering it almost impossible for any one animal to have a minute's uninterrupted nibble at the sweet hay in the racks.

Every one of these placid, lovable animals has been fortuitously redeemed from a life of appalling drudgery, and, in the ordinary course of things, will revert thereto as soon as the yield of milk has ceased. The stoical philosophy of these animals is absolutely perfect. They trudge through the dreary desert of a donkey's life with utter indifference, regarding the vigorous thwack of their owner's bludgeon in the same light as the persistent annoyance of an errant fly—at least, to the outward seeming.

Then come the oases (no joke meant), and with them a fleeting period of idyllic repose; but you will notice no change in the donkeys' demeanour—no exulting joy at emancipation from dire slavery; just a meek acceptance of things, and what may be described as an apathetic readiness to resume the fearsome *status quo ante*, which has an appropriate termination on the banks of the asinine Styx.

Upon no other animal does maternity confer so great a boon as on the patient and

much-abused ass. The wretched animal may be a mere machine for giving carefully-measured rides to children, not to mention hilarious adult holiday-makers who certainly ought to know better; it may pass its days in semi-starvation, varied only by unmerciful and undeserved hidings administered at frequent intervals; but the moment it brings a little foal into the world, these things belong to the past, and the milch ass enters upon a glorious period of *otium cum dignitate*, since the life of a ducal baby may depend upon its daily yield.

Look at the "milkers, not workers," in the accompanying reproduction; then think of the lot of the common or beach donkey, and you cannot fail to understand the *pons asinorum*—to an evanescent Elysium. In fact, no pauper to whom fickle Fortune's wheel has brought untold wealth was ever so much courted as the erstwhile coster's moke. Now let us get to the practical side of this curious and interesting subject. The astute middleman in London will purchase milch asses in the remotest parts of the kingdom; it matters not whether the animals hail from the heights of Hampstead, the Welsh mountains, or the pastures of Kerry. All expenses are added to the price of the donkeys. The middleman, however, seldom pays more than thirty shillings for a milch



"MILKERS, NOT WORKERS."

ass and foal (the two invariably go together) ; and he retails the pair for about thrice that sum to the proprietor of the London dairy.

It is a remarkable fact in connection with milch asses on hire, or bought altogether by wealthy invalids, that servants somehow acquire an idea that the milk is possessed of certain magical virtues ; consequently, natural repugnance is conquered by a supreme effort, and asses' milk swallowed by the pint below-stairs. Then, of course, the animals are sent back ; or complaints are received at the London depôt that the asses are unsatisfactory. One lady in London had four asses on hire, one after the other, and would probably never have known why the daily yield was so surprisingly meagre, were it not that she beheld her cook using asses' milk at tea, just as though it were ordinary cows' milk, only the allowance was far more liberal.

Talking of prejudice against asses' milk reminds us that a lady of title, living at Windsor, suffered a serious relapse when she discovered what "medicine" she had been taking. This lady was ordered to drink two pints of asses' milk per diem, but the nature of the fluid was carefully concealed from her. During her convalescent period, however, she chanced upon some screw-stoppered bottles, inclosed in wooden receptacles, the labels on which gave her a disagreeable surprise, which culminated in a feeling of utter loathing quite disproportionate to the occasion.

Our next illustration shows the donkey and its little one standing in the yard near

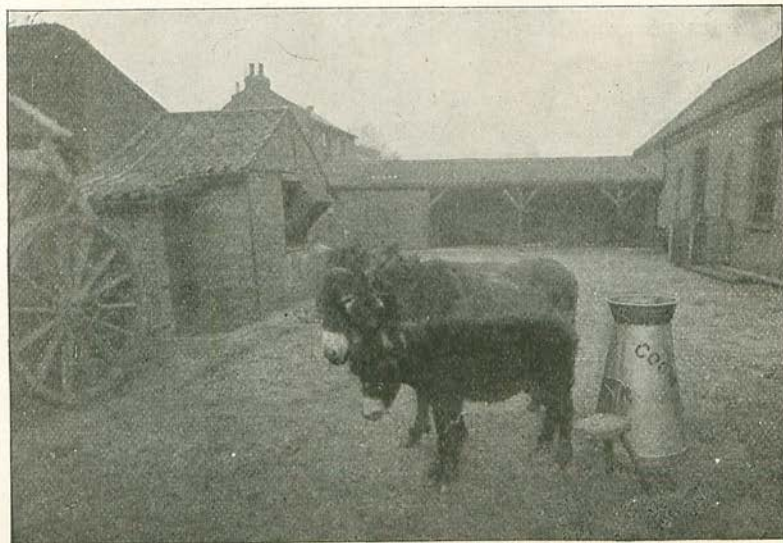
some outhouses. The milking-stool and churn have been placed in readiness.

Asses' milk is retailed at six shillings per quart. As one might expect, the trade is practically made by fashionable physicians and trained nurses, who recommend the milk in consumption cases, and for pulmonary complaints generally. Therefore, the winter season finds the donkeys' dairy exceedingly busy ; and wealthy invalids, who fly to the Riviera to escape the London fogs, actually pay ten guineas for a milch ass of their own, and take the animal with them—foal and all—so that from first to last the humble ass costs as much as a decent park hack.

In the "babies' pen," a photograph was out of the question. Where two or three donkey-foals are gathered together, the spirit of sheer exuberance is surely rife among them. They jostled each other without apparent cause ; they indulged in spasmodic gyrations, and leaped into the air, giving their woolly little bodies a playful twist as they leaped ; and it was very evident the playful creatures possessed an inexhaustible amount of energy and vitality. We even took all the foals out of the pen save one, the smallest of all—a mischievous little wretch called Tim, who certainly was not two feet high.

But if we thought that Tim, deprived of the companionship of his fellows, would remain quite still, we were grievously mistaken. Having none of his kind to jostle, the aggravating little brute rolled upon his back with calm deliberation, and then swayed backwards and forwards with a slow, rhythmical motion that

was intensely exasperating. We finally took Tim into the court-yard of the dairy ; and after he had run round and round, with praiseworthy determination—for all the world as though he was training for a circus on his own account—he consented to stand with the chief drover—a serious man who went by the name of "Ginger," and whose chief delight was to christen his queer flock



WAITING FOR THE "MILKMAID."



"GINGER," AND THE BABY "TIM."

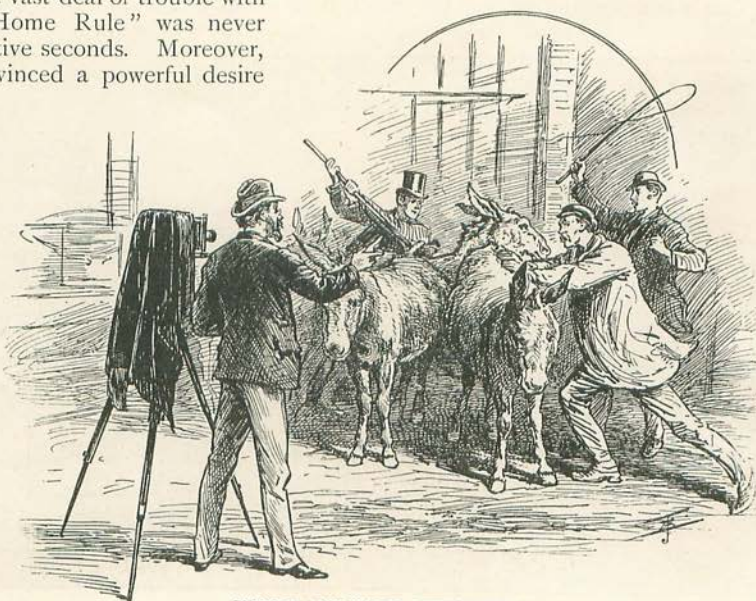
indeed, repudiated such appellations by violent demonstrations which caused the fiery "Ginger" to make use of epithets which we sincerely trust have never before been bestowed on the most long-suffering of donkeys.

At last, by dint of much shoving with brooms and the like handy implements—for the animals offered a quiet, but very obstinate, resistance—we got two asses into a corner of the dairy-yard, and then a white-smocked lad brought the stool and commenced to milk one of these, as is seen in our illustration. The asses, by the way, are milked four times a day, but during this period the yield is seldom more than a quart. Under favourable conditions the animals give milk for about eight months, so it is to the consumer's advantage to hire an ass at a guinea a week, and get all the milk obtainable. This plan is often adopted; but it is a noteworthy fact that the introduction of a milch ass into the *personnel* of an aristocratic family is but too often productive of deplorable dissension and heart-burning.

We will suppose that a certain peer, whose country house is in the north of England, hires or purchases outright a milch ass. A roomy horse-box and enough straw for a big stable are provided by the careful railway company for the valuable animal, upon whose milk a precious life may depend. This accommoda-

by such absurd names as "Peter the Great" and "Queen Anne"; other monarchs were also represented.

Anyway, we had a vast deal of trouble with "Ireland," and "Home Rule" was never still for five consecutive seconds. Moreover, the last-named ass evinced a powerful desire to join its comrades in the pen; and when our artist was on the point of uncovering the lens, the obstinate and dismal-looking brute would make yet another determined effort to get back into the stable. Unfortunately, although imposing names were conferred on the asses, the latter refused to acknowledge them; and in certain instances,



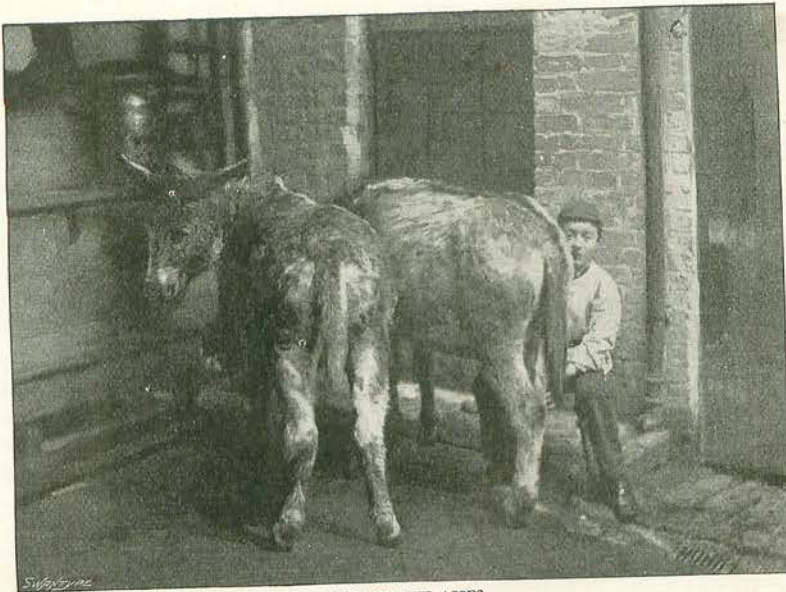
PHOTOGRAPHY UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

twenty years' service, and not to again ask him to milk the donkey. What would his fellow-servants say? Could he again look the housemaid in the face? No, no, the whole thing was horrible.

We should like it to be understood that this particular instance is perfectly true. Finally, his lordship simplified matters by actually milking the ass himself—though, being absolutely ignorant

of the operation, he went in fear of his life for many days. The noble earl still has both donkey and foal, the latter having been the children's playmate until it was quite grown up.

The illustration here given depicts the chief dairyman—who has occupied for over twenty years his dangerous position, as sundry bites and other marks upon his person testify—about to place in the wooden case a screw-topped glass bottle containing one pint of



MILKING THE ASSES.

tion, however, has to be paid for pretty dearly in the long run. Then, of course, a man is sent with the ass; and it is this man's duty to hand the animal over to the custody of the purchaser's housekeeper, or some other responsible person.

Now, after all expenses have been paid—and these, you may be sure, are considerable—and the ass comfortably installed in a special outhouse, the fittings of which would cause a belated tramp to weep with envy, the

momentous question arises: *Who is going to milk the animal?* You will ask: *Is this a momentous question?* We rather think it is. We have before us a letter from a certain noble earl, well known in society, who ruefully tells us that his servants were so horrified at the thought of milking a donkey, that they threatened to resign in a body if the dreadful request were persisted in.

The chief groom implored his noble master with tears in his eyes to be mindful of his six-and-



SENDING OUT THE MILK.

asses' milk. The boy on the tricycle then delivers the precious fluid at various West-end mansions.

Astonishing as it may seem, a special train, costing more than £20, has been chartered for the conveyance of one quart of asses' milk, in charge of the chief dairyman. It was ordered by telegram, and was required for a dying child in Oxford. This brings us to the queer uses of asses' milk.

One well-known and fashionable man—a member of the late House of Commons—has one gill every morning, and his valet mixes the milk with patent blacking, in order to impart an exquisite gloss to his master's shoes. Again, a lady who took a furnished house in Mount Street paid two guineas a week for three years in order that a quart of asses' milk might be delivered daily. After this lady had gone to New York, her discharged maid informed the proprietors of the dairy that her late mistress found asses' milk "matchless for the hands and complexion." In a word, the lady used the milk in her bath.

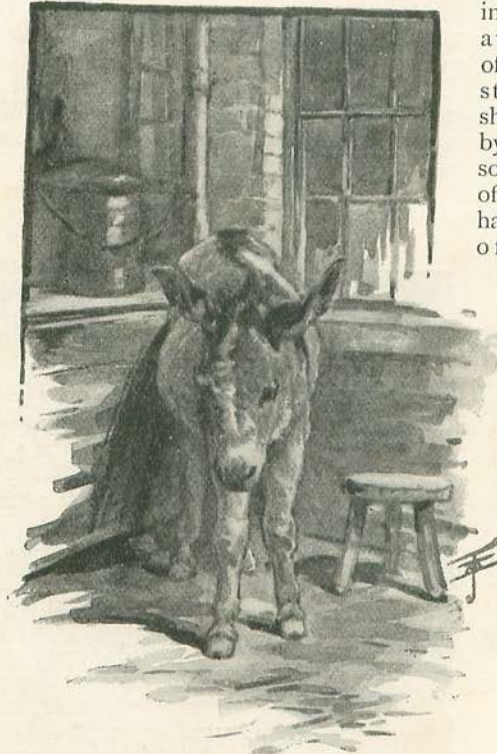
As a matter of fact, the vagaries of wealthy invalids and others who hire and buy milch asses are so extraordinary that we certainly should hesitate to believe them were it not that we have before us, as we write, piles of coroneted letters, coming from some of the most aristocratic addresses in Europe.

We select a long, rambling, but wholly charming letter from the Marchioness of —, who, having been informed that asses' milk is the nearest possible approach to human milk (which is perfectly true),

would be "awfully glad to know" whether the luckless donkey she had bought was to be "fed like an ordinary person." "The ass," wrote the noble marchioness, plaintively, "has steadfastly refused cooked meat and sweets, yet will eat with avidity a raw carrot." We should think so! We read farther on that the plebeian animal descended yet lower, and partook freely of "nice sweet hay"—for all the world like an ordinary donkey. Somehow, the whole species seems to be misunderstood; the milch ass is pampered and surfeited, while the common donkey is slowly murdered. No wonder that, if left to himself for a moment, the unfortunate animal seems to settle naturally into a position of utter dejection. The accompanying sketch, made by our artist in the yard of the dairy, illustrates this trait in a peculiarly happy manner.

Out of curiosity we made further inquiries about this particular ass. It had, we learned, originally belonged to a costermonger of Spitalfields. It was about to be sent away to a gentleman's country seat in

Devonshire, and would in all probability laze away the remainder of its days in flower-studded meadows, sheltered from the sun by giant trees, and soothed by the murmur of running water. The hardest task required of the animal was an occasional romp with high-born children—a labour of love, surely, after dragging monstrous loads of vegetables along the arid stretches of the Bethnal Green Road.



"IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?"