

Chickens

All country folk keep chickens; it is impossible to imagine a farm without chickens, they are a most essential tho' often little regarded part of its equipment - are integral part of the farm economy, and "hogs and chickens" in the farm yard are a combination as natural and harmonious as "hens and eggs" in the frying pan.

The chicken on the farm, however, the barn yard fowl as she is euphuistically denominated, is far from being the pampered and petted aristocrat of the poultry show; she is a most enterprising and self supporting plebeian. Accustomed from earliest chick hood to scratch for a living, she here forces sumptuously upon what is spilled and wasted about the place. If she has a place to scratch and can find a hole in the straw in which to lay her eggs she is satisfied, if she has a comfortable hen house in which to sleep, she is uncommonly favored. The size and colors of the hens even on a single farm are likely to be extremely various and it would be an experienced fancier indeed who could determine the various strains of blood which were combined in them. However doubtful the ancestry of the farm hen may be there is no question of her usefulness. The unwearying statistician has recorded the performance of Iowa hens in terms of dollars and cents and the total is staggering. With the slightest encouragement the hen, foraging

for herself in feed yard and about granaries, pays the family grocery bill, and as she ~~clucks~~ ^{discovers} the ~~hatched~~ ^{fresh} ~~fresh~~ ^{fresh} ~~fresh~~ ^{fresh} egg which she has just laid we may apply to Iowa the famous Kansas ditty.

"Kansas, where they've struck the shackles
From the farmer's leg.

Kansas where the hen that cackles,

Always lays an egg.

Even when a chicken house and yard are provided the farm hen does not confine herself to them, not, at least, unless the fence is remarkably high and tight. She is to be found everywhere in granaries, corn-cribs, carriage houses and hay mows and her chickens are as fruitful a source of exasperation to the farmer as are "his pigs" to the farmer's wife. It is no trifling matter to keep the hens out of these places for when once a hen has made up her mind to perch in a particular spot she evinces a calm determination which is superior to most other earthly forces. The person who wishes to persuade that hen to remove to another place must combine the patience of Job with the wisdom of Solomon, the calmness of a dove with the subtlety of the devil, and even then success is doubtful.

The hen has a strong tendency, transmitted doubtless from her wild progenitors, to lay her eggs in some spot as inaccessible as possible. One provides tempting nests upholstered with clean straw and biddy

ignores them to lay her precious eggs under the hay
tione, in the hay loft or in some manger where
they will be difficult to find and almost
impossible to gather when found. This perverse
disposition of the hen is to be blamed for a
circumstance which is often made a cause of
reproach to the farmer - that is the appearance of
rotten eggs among the dozen "strictly fresh" which
we purchase of the corner grocer. One who finds a
nest containing fifteen or twenty eggs naturally
assumes that they are fresh, he wishes to believe
that they are fresh and since to investigate would
be to destroy good as well as bad eggs, he gives them
the benefit of the doubt and sends them all to
market.

There are other respects in which the character of
the hen is open to criticism, she appears to entertain
a deep seated aversion to grass, flowers and vegetables, at
all events she will scratch and wallow in the flower
bed or in the vegetable garden so as to destroy as much
as possible and do her best to keep grass out of
the lawn. On some farms she is entirely victorious
so far as grass and flowers are concerned and the
door yard consists of bare earth, with a few hardy
weeds for the sole green. In other places the contest
is still fought with the aid of fences and perhaps
of a vigorous dog.

In spite of all these objections, however, there is

no creature on the farm more profitable in consideration of the money invested and of the care given her than this same feathered pest. She responds most quickly to better care and where some attention is given to the constant remarks of the agricultural college expert as to breeding and feeding, wherein such terms as "egg-strainers" and "balanced rations" seem to be favorites the profit is greatly increased.

Nowhere does one find a wider range of intelligence or greater idiosyncracies than in the hen. At times she exhibits an amazing degree of intelligence and at others a perfectly incomprehensible stupidity. It is in the spring time when she has the cares of her family on her mind that these characteristics are most marked. Early in the spring after she has laid a certain number of eggs the hen makes up her mind to set; she selects a place to set which is usually not at all the place where you wish her to be. The amateur chickens raiser needs no signs to inform him of this desire on the part of the hen for, having established herself in the chosen spot, she proceeds to set, and set and set. She does this without regard to what she may be setting on, eggs or stones or an empty nest are all one to her. If time and place are fitting and eggs are provided then, indeed, is she a happy hen. As the eggs are slipped into the nest she

pushes them under her one by one, singing all the time a low, monotonous, infinitely contented lullaby and settles herself with an air of complete satisfaction for three weeks of patient waiting, of cooling the eggs, of turning them, until the day when a soft "tap, tap" against the shell and a muffled "che-e-eh" prelude the appearance of a wet, helpless little object which in the course of an hour or so becomes the most appealing little ball of fluff with two bright and bead-like eyes and a clear, chirping voice. Then, indeed, does the hen feel a happiness and assume an importance which is second to nothing in the world. She talks continually to her chicks and her chucking varies to express her every sentiment, which the listener can easily interpret each one from the excited "cree-cree" when she finds food to the sleepily soothing sound with which she gathers her chickens under her wings at night. She seems to fancy that she herself has created out of nothing the food which is scattered for her, such is the energy of her scratching and the self-assurance of her chucking. The chicks know better, however, and very soon learn to cluster, half running, half flying, to the mistress where she brings their food. They leave the most bewitching ways; the is pretty "thank-you" bows, as they bow; the timid way in which they crouch under their mother only their heads with the bright eyes

showing from under her feathers; the same way in which some bold explorer pecks on his mother's back, or where they are a little older, the pitched battles between two embryo cockroaches & there are likely to make the care of the little chicks a time-consuming operation.

The earlier in the spring the hen determines to set, the better are the farmer's prospects for timely "fries" and for eggs during the winter months when prices are high and hens reluctant to lay. With an incubator, of course, one can have chicks at the exact date one wishes, otherwise one is dependent on the caprice of the hen. From the latter part of March to the end of May there will be one brood after another, fluffy and bewitching, to care for, but by the end of May the farmer considers the season for chicks at an end. Not so the hen, however, every day or two one discovers a hen, who, having laid her quota of eggs desires to set. These desires must be discouraged and to discourage them various methods have been suggested; there are the old-fashioned and somewhat cruel methods of holding the hen under water or of confining her so that she cannot sit down without sitting in water, or the more humane one of shutting her up with water but without food for a couple of days. Sometimes the first attempt is successful, sometimes a second and even a third is required; some hens display an almost unbelievable obstinacy. In any case the

care of the belated setting hen who chooses a nest in the hen house is simpler than that of her more crafty sister who steals quietly away and makes her nest in some unexpected spot. One has scarcely missed the hen when one day she reappears in the chicken yard with one chick or a dozen.

If it be July or even August the chicks have an opportunity to make a considerable growth before cold weather, but such is the natural forewisdom of the hen that it is more likely to be at the end of September that one is presented with such an unlooked for brood. The really simple way would be to dispose of the little creatures at once but that one can never do, so there follows for the mistress a season of watching and anxious care, special food and any amount of trouble to get the little family in a coop in a warm dry place. "Alas!" says one's practical neighbor, "you'll have to knit stockings for them." One would rejoice if the problem might be solved so simply, but the care cannot be relaxed until, after six or eight weeks, if the season be a moderately open one, those very unreasonable babies have acquired coats of feathers and the ability to eat the food of the adults.

However individual and charming the baby chicks may be, they fortunately become less interesting as they

grow older, else no one could have the heart to select from his cherished flock candidates for the frying-pan. The custom of the country demands the first spring chickens, the first green peas and new potatoes for the Fourth of July; accordingly on the night of the second the first choice is made from the band and is so guarded and cared for. Two, three or four plump young roosters are imprisoned to be slain and dressed on the morrow and on the next day, the great day, to appear in a form which would make most mortals exclaim that the last state of that fowl was better than the first — as crispy brown fried chicken.

Not as "fries" alone are chickens toothsome and tempting, the variations of the skillful housewife upon this theme are infinite. Just beyond the frying-pan, the fowl chicken enters upon his second incarnation as the "poulet roti" which is so inevitably a part of the European table d'hôte. He does not answer to that name it is true, and it would be incomprehensible alike to his cooker and to his devourer, but "poulet roti" he is, the very sublimination of the viand, of incomparable savor and deliciousness. As creamed chicken, enriched with lavish quantities of separated cream, he proves anew the superiority of simple, natural flavors over what someone has designated as "landscape cookery"; chicken

noodle soup, the richest of broths, thickened with
boiling lengths of hand made noodles is a feast for the
most exacting of kings or commons, and chicken
minced, chicken pressed, chicken in salad combine
to take us further from that desirable standard of
plain living and high thinking. Eggs on the farm, too,
have a peculiar delicacy of flavor, for one need be
in no uncertainty as to the age of his breakfast egg,
the triumphant sackle of the hen, the gathering of the
egg, its cooking and devouring may follow in one-two-
three orders, and new laid eggs, I think the Germans
say, have the testimony of many a fairy tale and folk
story as to their savoriness.

What is a farm without chickens? Unhonored and
unsung, they are, nevertheless, essential to the
completeness of the picture. The modern prodigal is
welcomed not with slices from the fatted calf but with a
heaped platter of fried chicken and when the
unfortunate dweller in the city wishes to picture at
its remotest the joy of country life, he feastes of fried
chicken and cream. This is a day of leagues and societies
and some of those who now think with hopeless
longing of the chicken which tasted so good back
home on the farm, should form a "Society for the
Appreciation of the Barn Yard Fowl" of order then.

wallowing with such abandonment in the janny bed
might catch a "Nunc Dimittis" would she be made
to realize that at last the merits of her family have
been realized and that their age long services in the
matter of savory flesh and dainty eggs have been
recognized and acknowledged.