

Queer Little Folks

By

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HEN THAT HATCHED DUCKS

Once there was a nice young hen that we will call Mrs. Feathertop. She was a hen of most excellent family, being a direct descendant of the Bolton Grays, and as pretty a young fowl as you could wish to see of a summer's day. She was, moreover, as fortunately situated in life as it was possible for a hen to be. She was bought by young Master Fred Little John, with four or five family connections of hers, and a lively young cock, who was held to be as brisk a scratcher and as capable a head of a family as any half-dozen sensible hens could desire.

I can't say that at first Mrs. Feathertop was a very sensible hen. She was very pretty and lively, to be sure, and a great favourite with Master Bolton Gray Cock, on account of her bright eyes, her finely shaded feathers, and certain saucy dashing ways that she had which seemed greatly to take his fancy. But old Mrs. Scratchard, living in the neighbouring yard, assured all the neighbourhood that Gray Cock was a fool for thinking so much of that flighty young thing; THAT she had not the smallest notion how to get on in life, and thought of nothing in the world but her own pretty feathers. "Wait till she comes to have chickens," said Mrs. Scratchard; "then you will see. I have brought up ten broods myself--as likely and respectable chickens as ever were a blessing to society--and I think

I ought to know a good hatcher and brooder when I see her; and I know THAT fine piece of trumpery, with her white feathers tipped with gray, never will come down to family life. SHE scratch for chickens! Bless me, she never did anything in all her days but run round and eat the worms which somebody else scratched up for her."

When Master Bolton Gray heard this he crowed very loudly, like a cock of spirit, and declared that old Mrs. Scratchard was envious, because she had lost all her own tail-feathers, and looked more like a worn-out old feather-duster than a respectable hen, and that therefore she was filled with sheer envy of anybody that was young and pretty. So young Mrs. Feathertop cackled gay defiance at her busy rubbishy neighbour, as she sunned herself under the bushes on fine June afternoons.

Now Master Fred Little John had been allowed to have these hens by his mamma on the condition that he would build their house himself, and take all the care of it; and to do Master Fred justice, he executed the job in a small way quite creditably. He chose a sunny sloping bank covered with a thick growth of bushes, and erected there a nice little hen-house with two glass windows, a little door, and a good pole for his family to roost on. He made, moreover, a row of nice little boxes with hay in them for nests, and he bought three or four little smooth white china eggs to put in them, so that, when his hens DID lay, he might carry off their eggs without their being missed. This hen-house stood in a little grove that sloped down to a

wide river, just where there was a little cove which reached almost to the hen-house.

This situation inspired one of Master Fred's boy advisers with a new scheme in relation to his poultry enterprise. "Hallo! I say, Fred," said Tom Seymour, "you ought to raise ducks; you've got a capital place for ducks there."

"Yes; but I've bought HENS, you see," said Freddy; "so it's no use trying."

"No use! Of course there is. Just as if your hens couldn't hatch ducks' eggs. Now you just wait till one of your hens wants to sit, and you put ducks' eggs under her, and you'll have a family of ducks in a twinkling. You can buy ducks' eggs a plenty of old Sam under the hill. He always has hens hatch his ducks."

So Freddy thought it would be a good experiment, and informed his mother the next morning that he intended to furnish the ducks for the next Christmas dinner and when she wondered how he was to come by them, he said mysteriously, "Oh, I will show you how," but did not further explain himself. The next day he went with Tom Seymour and made a trade with old Sam, and gave him a middle-aged jack-knife for eight of his ducks' eggs. Sam, by-the-by, was a woolly-headed old negro man, who lived by the pond hard by, and who had long cast envying eyes on Fred's jack-knife, because it was of extra fine

steel, having been a Christmas present the year before. But Fred knew very well there were any number more of jack-knives where that came from, and that, in order to get a new one, he must dispose of the old; so he made the purchase and came home rejoicing.

Now about this time Mrs. Feathertop, having laid her eggs daily with great credit to herself, notwithstanding Mrs. Scratchard's predictions, began to find herself suddenly attacked with nervous symptoms. She lost her gay spirits, grew dumpish and morose, stuck up her feathers in a bristling way, and pecked at her neighbours if they did so much as look at her. Master Gray Cock was greatly concerned, and went to old Dr. Peppercorn, who looked solemn, and recommended an infusion of angle-worms, and said he would look in on the patient twice a day till she was better.

"Gracious me, Gray Cock!" said old Goody Kertarkut, who had been lolling at the corner as he passed, "ain't you a fool?--cocks always are fools. Don't you know what's the matter with your wife? She wants to sit, that's all; and you just let her sit. A fiddlestick for Dr. Peppercorn! Why, any good old hen that has brought up a family knows more than a doctor about such things. You just go home and tell her to sit if she wants to, and behave herself."

When Gray Cock came home, he found that Master Freddy had been before him, and had established Mrs. Feathertop upon eight nice eggs, where she was sitting in gloomy grandeur. He tried to make a little

affable conversation with her, and to relate his interview with the doctor and Goody Kertarkut; but she was morose and sullen, and only pecked at him now and then in a very sharp, unpleasant way. So after a few more efforts to make himself agreeable he left her, and went out promenading with the captivating Mrs. Red Comb, a charming young Spanish widow, who had just been imported into the neighbouring yard.

"Bless my soul," said he, "you've no idea how cross my wife is."

"O you horrid creature!" said Mrs. Red Comb. "How little you feel for the weaknesses of us poor hens!"

"On my word, ma'am," said Gray Cock, "you do me injustice. But when a hen gives way to temper, ma'am, and no longer meets her husband with a smile--when she even pecks at him whom she is bound to honour and obey--"

"Horrid monster! talking of obedience! I should say, sir, you came straight from Turkey." And Mrs. Red Comb tossed her head with a most bewitching air, and pretended to run away; and old Mrs. Scratchard looked out of her coop and called to Goody Kertarkut, -

"Look how Mr. Gray Cock is flirting with that widow. I always knew she was a baggage."

"And his poor wife left at home alone," said Goody Kertarkut. "It's

the way with 'em all!"

"Yes, yes," said Dame Scratchard, "she'll know what real life is now, and she won't go about holding her head so high, and looking down on her practical neighbours that have raised families."

"Poor thing! what'll she do with a family?" said Goody Kertarkut.

"Well, what business have such young flirts to get married?" said Dame Scratchard. "I don't expect she'll raise a single chick; and there's Gray Cock flirting about, fine as ever. Folks didn't do so when I was young. I'm sure my husband knew what treatment a sitting hen ought to have,--poor old Long Spur! he never minded a peck or so and then. I must say these modern fowls ain't what fowls used to be."

Meanwhile the sun rose and set, and Master Fred was almost the only friend and associate of poor little Mrs. Feathertop, whom he fed daily with meal and water, and only interrupted her sad reflections by pulling her up occasionally to see how the eggs were coming on.

At last "Peep, peep, peep," began to be heard in the nest, and one little downy head after another poked forth from under the feathers, surveying the world with round, bright, winking eyes; and gradually the brood were hatched, and Mrs. Feathertop arose, a proud and happy mother, with all the bustling, scratching, care-taking instincts of

family-life warm within her breast. She clucked and scratched, and cuddled the little downy bits of things as handily and discreetly as a seven-year-old hen could have done, exciting thereby the wonder of the community.

Master Gray Cock came home in high spirits, and complimented her; told her she was looking charmingly once more, and said, "Very well, very nice," as he surveyed the young brood. So that Mrs. Feathertop began to feel the world going well with her, when suddenly in came Dame Scratchard and Goody Kertarkut to make a morning call.

"Let's see the chicks," said Dame Scratchard.

"Goodness me," said Goody Kertarkut, "what a likeness to their dear papa!"

"Well, but bless me, what's the matter with their bills?" said Dame Scratchard. "Why, my dear, these chicks are deformed! I'm sorry for you, my dear; but it's all the result of your inexperience. You ought to have eaten pebble-stones with your meal when you were sitting. Don't you see, Dame Kertarkut, what bills they have? That'll increase, and they'll be frightful!"

"What shall I do?" said Mrs. Feathertop, now greatly alarmed.

"Nothing, as I know of," said Dame Scratchard, "since you didn't come

to me before you sat. I could have told you all about it. Maybe it won't kill 'em, but they'll always be deformed."

And so the gossips departed, leaving a sting under the pin-feathers of the poor little hen mamma, who began to see that her darlings had curious little spoon-bills, different from her own, and to worry and fret about it.

"My dear," she said to her spouse, "do get Dr. Peppercorn to come in and look at their bills, and see if anything can be done."

Dr. Peppercorn came in, and put on a monstrous pair of spectacles, and said, "Hum! ha! extraordinary case; very singular."

"Did you ever see anything like it, doctor?" said both parents in a breath.

"I've read of such cases. It's a calcareous enlargement of the vascular bony tissue, threatening ossification," said the doctor.

"Oh, dreadful! Can it be possible?" shrieked both parents. "Can anything be done?"

"Well, I should recommend a daily lotion made of mosquitoes' horns and bicarbonate of frogs' toes, together with a powder, to be taken morning and night, of muriate of fleas. One thing you must be

careful about: they must never wet their feet, nor drink any water."

"Dear me, doctor, I don't know what I SHALL do, for they seem to have a particular fancy for getting into water."

"Yes, a morbid tendency often found in these cases of bony tumification of the vascular tissue of the mouth; but you must resist it, ma'am, as their life depends upon it." And with that Dr. Peppercorn glared gloomily on the young ducks, who were stealthily poking the objectionable little spoon-bills out from under their mother's feathers.

After this poor Mrs. Feathertop led a weary life of it; for the young fry were as healthy and enterprising a brood of young ducks as ever carried saucepans on the end of their noses, and they most utterly set themselves against the doctor's prescriptions, murmured at the muriate of fleas and the bicarbonate of frogs' toes, and took every opportunity to waddle their little ways down to the mud and water which was in their near vicinity. So their bills grew larger and larger, as did the rest of their bodies, and family government grew weaker and weaker.

"You'll wear me out, children, you certainly will," said poor Mrs. Feathertop.

"You'll go to destruction, do ye hear?" said Master Gray Cock.

"Did you ever see such frights as poor Mrs. Feathertop has got?" said Dame Scratchard. "I knew what would come of HER family--all deformed, and with a dreadful sort of madness which makes them love to shovel mud with those shocking spoon-bills of theirs."

"It's a kind of idiocy," said Goody Kertarkut. "Poor things! they can't be kept from the water, nor made to take powders, and so they get worse and worse."

"I understand it's affecting their feet so that they can't walk, and a dreadful sort of net is growing between their toes. What a shocking visitation!"

"She brought it on herself," said Dame Scratchard. "Why didn't she come to me before she sat? She was always an upstart, self-conceited thing; but I'm sure I pity her."

Meanwhile the young ducks thrived apace. Their necks grew glossy, like changeable green and gold satin, and though they would not take the doctor's medicine, and would waddle in the mud and water--for which they always felt themselves to be very naughty ducks--yet they grew quite vigorous and hearty. At last one day the whole little tribe waddled off down to the bank of the river. It was a beautiful day, and the river was dancing and dimpling and winking as the little breezes shook the trees that hung over it.

"Well," said the biggest of the little ducks, "in spite of Dr. Peppercorn, I can't help longing for the water. I don't believe it is going to hurt me; at any rate, here goes," and in he plumped, and in went every duck after him, and they threw out their great brown feet as cleverly as if they had taken swimming lessons all their lives, and sailed off on the river, away, away among the ferns, under the pink azaleas, through reeds and rushes, and arrow-heads and pickerel-weed, the happiest ducks that ever were born; and soon they were quite out of sight.

"Well, Mrs. Feathertop, this is a dispensation!" said Mrs. Scratchard. "Your children are all drowned at last, just as I knew they'd be. The old music-teacher, Master Bullfrog, that lives down in Water-Dock Lane, saw 'em all plump madly into the water together this morning. That's what comes of not knowing how to bring up a family!"

Mrs. Feathertop gave only one shriek and fainted dead away, and was carried home on a cabbage-leaf; and Mr. Gray Cock was sent for, where he was waiting on Mrs. Red Comb through the squash-vines.

"It's a serious time in your family, sir," said Goody Kertarkut, "and you ought to be at home supporting your wife. Send for Dr. Peppercorn without delay."

Now as the case was a very dreadful one, Dr. Peppercorn called a council from the barn-yard of the squire, two miles off, and a brisk young Dr. Partlett appeared, in a fine suit of brown and gold, with tail-feathers like meteors. A fine young fellow he was, lately from Paris, with all the modern scientific improvements fresh in his head.

When he had listened to the whole story, he clapped his spur into the ground, and leaning back laughed so loudly that all the cocks in the neighbourhood crowed.

Mrs. Feathertop rose up out of her swoon, and Mr. Gray Cock was greatly enraged.

"What do you mean, sir, by such behaviour in the house of mourning?"

"My dear sir, pardon me; but there is no occasion for mourning. My dear madam, let me congratulate you. There is no harm done. The simple matter is, dear madam, you have been under a hallucination all along. The neighbourhood and my learned friend the doctor have all made a mistake in thinking that these children of yours were hens at all. They are ducks, ma'am, evidently ducks, and very finely-formed ducks I daresay."

At this moment a quack was heard, and at a distance the whole tribe were seen coming waddling home, their feathers gleaming in green and gold, and they themselves in high good spirits.

"Such a splendid day as we have had!" they all cried in a breath.

"And we know now how to get our own living; we can take care of ourselves in future, so you need have no further trouble with us."

"Madam," said the doctor, making a bow with an air which displayed his tail-feathers to advantage, "let me congratulate you on the charming family you have raised. A finer brood of young, healthy ducks I never saw. Give me your claw, my dear friend," he said, addressing the eldest son. "In our barn-yard no family is more respected than that of the ducks."

And so Madam Feathertop came off glorious at last. And when after this the ducks used to go swimming up and down the river like so many nabobs among the admiring hens, Dr. Peppercorn used to look after them and say, "Ah, I had the care of their infancy!" and Mr. Gray Cock and his wife used to say, "It was our system of education did that!"