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FROM SCHOOLROOM TO POULTRY RUN

The Basic Problems Are Similar

(Written for "The Listener" by W.M.)

I AM a Schoolmistress who manages a large class of children—and looks after a household in her spare time. My sister, a more adventurous type, forsook school-teaching to marry a farmer. She now manages a household—and looks after 300 odd fowls in her spare time. "The basic problems of school-teachers and poultry-keepers in New Zealand to-day," she often says, "are very similar." But I didn't believe it.

However, her proposition sounded attractive enough with eggs at 3/6 per dozen and the rate one per person per fortnight. "Why not," she wrote, "come here for the May holidays? I've been wanting to get to Wellington for a long time, but have to look after the fowls. How about spending a healthy holiday in the country? The poultry wouldn't take up much of your time, and you could have a nice rest, etc., etc."

WELL, the upshot was that May 5th saw a jaded schoolmistress board the South train. Two other teachers of my acquaintance, obviously bound for holiday resorts, and even more obviously trying to disguise themselves as ladies of leisure, were startled out of their languor on discovering that my magazine choice for the journey was a periodical entitled *The Poultry World*.

Not that my hopes of acquiring some scientific knowledge of the duties which lay before me were altogether fulfilled. The current number of that excellent little journal seemed to be devoted chiefly to the ills to which hens are heir, and as I read on I grew more and more depressed by the alarming number of diseases which apparently lie in wait to attack the common fowl. From Toe-picking in Chickens to Intestinal Parasites and Fowl Paralysis, it looked as though a hen's chances of completing a reasonable life-span were extremely remote. After a while I concentrated my attention on the very attractive picture on the cover—a Modern Poultry Farm—which showed a long row of clean, sunny pens and hundreds of keen, cheerful-looking birds massed in the foreground.

BUT my sister's poultry farm didn't turn out to be like that at all. "It is not," explained my brother-in-law, "that we wouldn't like to have an outfit on those lines. But even supposing we could get the timber . . . and the labour . . ." — Then he quoted figures truly staggering. So like most country establishments where fowls are kept as a profitable sideline, poultry-keeping here was in the "backyard" tradition, and I



"I didn't have any major misfortunes"

could see from the first that I was going to get plenty of healthy exercise anyway. Thus besides a couple of orthodox pens for the pullets, the yearlings were housed in a disused woolshed, the "Old Ladies" in a converted pigsty, the population consisting of escapees, roosters and others, wandered about at large. I never rightly discovered where these last spent the night, though I recollect hearing a loud, squawking coming from what was known as the "Garage," when the old Chev. truck came in late one night. The food was stored in the "Red" shed (painted grey), a dim, shadowy place in which I wasn't tempted to linger after I met a rat in one of the bins.

Further disillusionment awaited me that first night. As I had been egg-starved for the last 13 days, my thoughts naturally turned to fresh eggs for tea. I was about to broach a newly-completed crate, when I became aware of a pained silence. I turned round to find the household visibly shocked. "Perhaps we could find a cracked one," they murmured kindly. Family consumption, I was given to understand, was limited to damaged specimens and gruesome freaks without shells.

STILL, all told, I had a lot of fun. I soon discovered that adherence to a careful routine was essential. Any slackening-up of efforts meant a corresponding falling-off in results. Getting up in the mornings was the worst. "Our feathered friends," I was wont to reflect as I lay in bed trying not to hear the peevish grumbling rise to an angry clamour outside, "are not so dumb." In addition to preparing the breakfast mash there was the green feed to be obtained and cut up for distribution at mid-day, the eggs to be collected and the wheat feed to be attended to at night. Cleaning out the houses I was spared, but there always seemed to be something

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