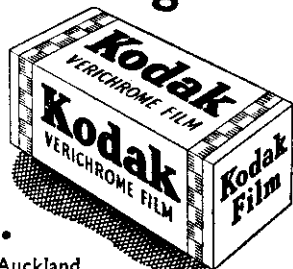




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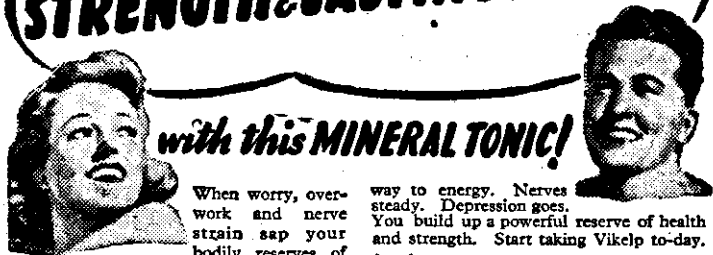
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SHORT STORY

GERTIE

Written for "The Listener"
by A.J.T.

LET us call him Bill Johnson. As he was passing Tom Spooner's house he heard a hail and saw Tom leaning out of a window, beckoning. "Not a chance," he called, "I'm in a hurry."

"I won't keep you a minute," Tom shouted, "come on up."

When Bill reached the window he was asked if he liked poultry. When he said that he did, Tom said, "Would you like a hen? It's alive you know. We had it given to us just before Christmas and we've had it tied up ever since. Tell the truth, I'm not very keen on poultry, and, well—"

"Yes, I see," Bill laughed; "you've become attached to it."

Mrs. Tom was at the window by this time. "We just couldn't bring ourselves to kill it."

Bill's wife happened to be ill and he felt that a little poultry would be an opportune addition to the menu, so feeling a little superior to the squeamish Spooners, he agreed to call for the bird later in the evening.

As the owner of a bird he had never seen he worked out in his mind a neat plan for its dispatch and preparation for the table. The plan felt a trifle abstract, however, for the hen was, after all, only a hearsay fowl; it had not yet become very real. The idea was that he would kill and clean it that same night. Get it out of the way.

LATER he went to collect the hen. "When I got it," said Spooner, "it was in pretty good condition. I don't know whether it is now or not." And he led the way round the house.

And there was Gertie. She was a Black Orpington, sleeping cosily in a petrol-case. Around one of her legs was a long cord which was fastened to a stake in the ground. When she was lifted she gave a tiny squawk—nothing much, a formal protest as it were, and did not seem to resent being carried by the legs.

Always had rather a feeling for Black Orpingtons, Bill was thinking as he carried her home. So motherly-looking, I suppose. I dunno... I'd better change my clothes before I tackle her. Sure to get spattered... I suppose that old pair of khaki shorts... Should tie her neck taut with a cord. Horrible if she moved it and I... (He could feel the warmth of the bird on his hand and had the impression that she was looking up at him with a soft black eye). Perhaps it would be just as well not to do it tonight. I'll leave it until to-morrow.

So he tied her up by her cord in the cellar and went upstairs to his wife. He enthusiastically announced the news of his acquisition and waited for an echo of the enthusiasm. But it didn't come. His wife didn't like the thought of eating something that had been running alive around the place. She liked her meat always to have been dead.

I said—that is Bill did—that that was all right. He understood how she felt. Yes, he'd give the thing away. She

looked at him quizzically, remembering his enthusiasm of a moment before. It had been too easy; she had expected that she would have to argue a bit.

But before she had time to say much more Bill was gone. He was on his way to a neighbour. For some reason he hadn't taken note of the time and his knock hauled the neighbour out of bed. Would he like a hen? He would? Good. Just pop down into the cellar and take it whenever you are ready, old chap.

Bill came home feeling curiously light-hearted.

HE didn't see the neighbour for some time after that. One day he called over the hedge "How was the hen?" "What?"... Oh, it was very nice,



"... looking up at him with a soft black eye"

thanks. "Tender?" "Yes, quite tender." Was Bill mistaken or did the other have an evasive note in his voice. But he thought no more of the matter.

A week later he had occasion to visit an acquaintance in another suburb. As he was leaving the question hit his ear: "I don't suppose you would like a fowl, would you?" He found a quick negative springing to his lips, but quelled it and asked to see the bird.

It was a Black Orpington. Yes, it had the feathers rubbed from its brow in that unmistakable manner. It was that Wandering Jew of a hen, Gertie.

You think this is just a tale? Well, it has more truth in it than I—I mean Bill—would care to admit.

RECENTLY a British seaman overseas wrote asking the BBC for catalogue numbers of certain records.

"I walked into a record shop a short time ago," he wrote, "and asked for *Orpheus in the Underworld*. The Oriental behind the counter said: 'He's gone out, he be back plenty soon quick,' so I just had to laugh and walk out. Some weeks later I was in the Argentine and asked for the same record. The assistant went, as I thought, to look for it but came back with half-a-dozen vigilantes (the Argentine police), and my pals and I spent the next half-hour trying to convince them that we didn't belong to any political party. We managed to get away in the end, and I decided to find out from you the number of the record and only ask for it by that."