

HENS AND CHICKENS

HOW intelligent is a hen?

When one of my Rhode

Islanders disappeared a few weeks ago, and was discovered a week later sitting on eight eggs, my first thought was that only a hen would do anything so stupid. I did not expect her instinct to tell her that it would be love's labour lost, since

we had been without a **MAY 4** mature rooster for a little more than a month, but I did think that instinct would have prevented her from brooding on the eve of her moult. I was, as it turned out, wrong about the fertility of the eggs, since she succeeded in bringing out two live chicks and one with enough life in it to chip and almost burst its shell. But I was not wrong about the impending moult. She is now running about half-naked, and I wonder every day how long it will be before her maternal instinct disappears with her feathers. So far that has not happened; but I can't think why it hasn't, and I look in on her every night to see what the chicks are doing to keep warm. I found them three nights ago sitting on her back as darkness fell, but when I returned with a torch an hour or two later each was under a

by "SUNDOWNER"

wing. They are vigorous chickens, though their chance of life to begin with was almost negligible—non-existent according to some authorities—and I now feel that they deserve a better fate, if they survive the winter, than the pot to which commercial poultrymen would consign them.

But the question is: Has domestication robbed this hen of the knowledge of good and evil? Has she lost the instinct that should have told her when to sit and when to avoid bringing chickens into an unfriendly world? The biological changes that precede moulting must have been on the way when she laid her first egg, but if she felt them she could neither interpret them nor adapt herself to them.

It is not a satisfactory answer to say that nothing better could be expected of a hen. If no one would say that a hen's intelligence is high, I have read somewhere—perhaps in Thomson and Geddes—that the educability of hens is greater than we realise, and of chickens a little remarkable. Not many of us take the trouble to try to teach hens anything; unless it is to keep out of the garden, and in that matter I have had



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no more success than my hens have had in improving my methods or my manners. But it is impossible to watch chickens during the first few days without realising how quickly and efficiently they learn the lessons necessary for survival. If hens seem to have lost the capacity to learn it may not be the whole explanation that their brains reach the limit of their development in their

first month or two. Something should perhaps be allowed for the drugging and blurring of their intelligences by our practice of removing all those lessons life would bring them if they had to find all their food and shelter themselves and learn how to escape life's hourly dangers.

I WAS reproved today by a farmer for writing about footrot without reading the latest literature. It would have been better if I had accepted the reproof, which I deserved, and promised to mend my ways. But I asked what the latest literature was, **MAY 5** when and where it had appeared, and if anything had come out quite recently that farmers ought to see.

"If you're talking about New Zealand, very little has ever appeared that farmers ought to see. They know nothing about footrot in this country."

"Where do they know?" "In Australia and England. That's where the work has been done."

"But research results are always passed on. They must know at Wallaceville what has been done overseas."

"If they know why don't they tell us?"

"I thought they did. I have recently re-read Dr. Filmer's pamphlet, and that begins and ends with an appeal to New Zealand farmers to pay more attention to the results of research in Australia."

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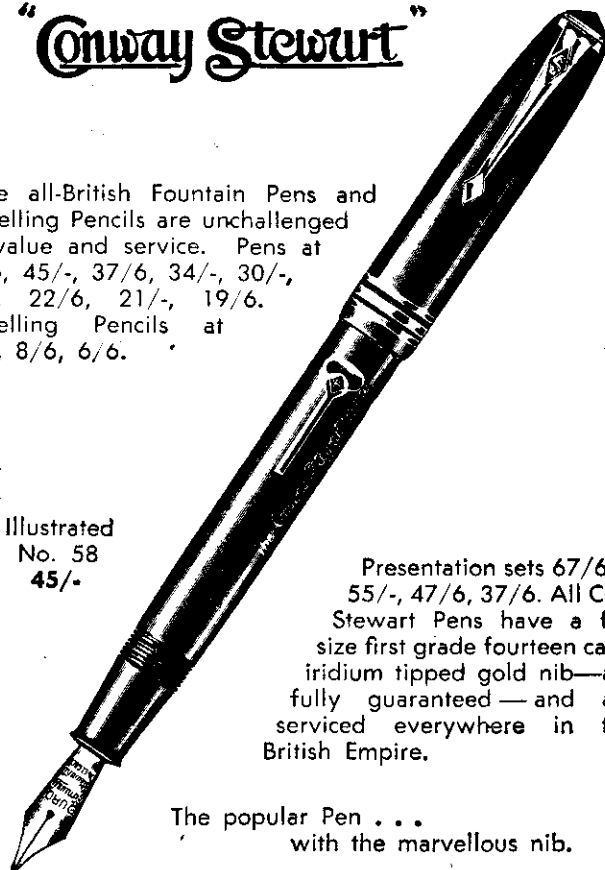
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