

HOW TO ENJOY THE COUNTRYSIDE

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How to enjoy the countryside by Marcus Woodward

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MARCUS WOODWARD

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THE COUNTRYSIDE**

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HOW TO ENJOY THE COUNTRYSIDE

BY
MARCUS WOODWARD

By Hedge-row Elms, on Hillocks green.

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

General Preface

THE object of HODDER AND STOUGHTON'S PEOPLE'S LIBRARY is to supply in brief form simply written introductions to the study of History, Literature, Biography and Science; in some degree to satisfy that ever-increasing demand for knowledge which is one of the happiest characteristics of our time. The names of the authors of the first volumes of the Library are sufficient evidence of the fact that each subject will be dealt with authoritatively, while the authority will not be of the "dry-as-dust" order. Not only is it possible to have learning without tears, but it is also possible to make the acquiring of knowledge a thrilling and entertaining adventure. HODDER AND STOUGHTON'S PEOPLE'S LIBRARY will, it is hoped, supply this adventure.

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A true guide to the enjoyment of the countryside will presently lead the way to a farmyard, always a place of high attraction to the student of all things rural, and especially to the observer of wild life. The domestic creatures are a lure to their wild brethren. In winter, the stackyard gives shelter and food to a multitude, and sparrow-hawks come swooping on the hungry bands of finches. Every night may come a fox, with admirable perseverance seeking the chance, which will surely come to him one night, of taking fowl or duck. The farmyard has its seven ages in a year much like those of a man's life; and the last age is likely to be such a tragi-comedy as to make a visitor both weep and laugh.

It is always pleasant to wander about the old barnyard. For first greeting there is the watch-dog's honest bark as you pass the farmhouse. Poor old Rover spends his life at the end of a short chain, his life that consists of eating, drink-

ing, sleeping, rushing furiously to the end of his tether till he is pulled up with a neck-breaking jerk, and, more than all, of barking. Yet he has a sense of humour, and knows how to amuse himself. He buries bones and re-discovers them. He pretends to be asleep, to tempt the chickens to peck at the crumbs of his biscuits, so that he may send them flying helter-skelter—a rare joke. Sometimes he falls asleep while pretending, and a rat steals out from the barn to make off with his biscuit.

For the children there is no happier playground than the old barnyard. Every rural child revels in a hayloft, with its happy hayhills, whereon they climb and toboggan by the hour. And then there is the heart-quaking pleasure of opening just a little way the door where the great bull is stalled, to look fearfully at his magnificence, and meet the baleful glance of his limpid eyes as the short, strong neck is turned. And then there is the fun of calling in the cows, and watching the milking and hearing the music of the milk pattering into the pail.

In the days preceding Christmas the farmyard

pulsates with life, and all the creatures wear a look of fat contentment. Though they live that they may be sacrificed in the end, their days, one supposes, pass serenely. But as Christmas draws on, ominous events happen. One fine day the turkeys find themselves made prisoners in a small shed, where, as they may or may not observe, they grow speedily fatter on the plentiful meals supplied. And then six fine cocks at one fell swoop find themselves taken prisoners, to their amazed indignation. Alas, poor birds of dawning! Pitiably they thrust their necks through the wooden bars of their cage. There is only one good point about their captivity; they are better fed than before. They do their best to show an unconquerable spirit. Hard as it is to observe the swaggering gait put on by their despicable rival, the bantam cock, as he passes the prison, they crow defiance, daring him to come on. They speak their minds to their mistresses. But the old note of assurance has a quaver.

A feature of Christmas at the farm is holiday sport among rabbits and rats. Custom of the

country ordains that every countryman with a right to carry a gun must have a shot at the rabbits, and many without a right will do likewise. Sport of some sort there must be, if only a day's rattling. Boxing-Day ferreting is an old-established institution; the day is a black one for rabbits, and ferrets too.

There is a Sussex farm where the Master of Ceremonies on these occasions is a venerable bailiff, since time out of mind the leader at Christmas of a motley crew of rustic sportsmen. As he leads his merry men down the village street, half the boys of the place fall in to heel. Those without guns are armed with sticks, spades, crowbars, or nets. The scene of operations is a big rabbits' warren at the foot of the Downs. Holes are netted, ferrets put in, and any rabbits not too terrified by the mighty uproar which goes on bolt to their doom, if not to be netted or shot, to be taken by dogs, or run down. The everlasting wonder of the day is that any sportsman survive. Legs are peppered in plenty, and some lively language comes from the old bailiff as shot rattles against