

#### **Harriet Beecher Stowe**

## **Queer Little Folks**

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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

HEN THAT HATCHED DUCKS . A STORY.

THE NUTCRACKERS OF NUTCRACKER LODGE.

THE HISTORY OF TIP-TOP.

MISS KATY-DID AND MISS CRICKET .

**MOTHER MAGPIE'S MISCHIEF.** 

THE SQUIRRELS THAT LIVE IN A HOUSE.

**HUM**, THE SON OF BUZ.

**OUR COUNTRY NEIGHBOURS.** 

THE DIVERTING HISTORY OF LITTLE WHISKEY.

# HEN THAT HATCHED DUCKS. A STORY.

#### Table of Contents

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 middleaged 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 jackknife, 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,—