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OSTRICH FARMING AT THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE.

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TO THE PRESIDENT:

The Literary and Historical Society,  
Quebec.

As, I presume, many of your readers have heard of Ostrich Farming, perhaps an account of a visit I paid to a large Farm, (at the Cape) may not be without interest.

Having been furnished by a friend with a letter of introduction to the Farmer, I started by an early train one fine morning, for Stellenbosch. The journey occupied about an hour and a half; the country we passed through was dull, uninteresting, and almost entirely uncultivated. A farm or two scattered here and there in the distance; the country of that nature which is described as the 'Cape flats.'

Having arrived at Stellenbosch station, there being no carts waiting, I was obliged to go to the village to procure one, which afforded me an opportunity of seeing this rather celebrated little place; celebrated, not for its beauty, altho' it is pretty enough, having stately trees and a stream of water running thro' it; but on account of the extreme "sommolen e" of its inhabitants, from whom it has earned the name of "Sleepy Valley;" it certainly bore out its name, although it was not later than 10 a.m. when I arrived.

Having obtained a cart, I started for the Farm which lay about three miles off. The house was large and substantial, more like an English country house than a farm, prettily situated at the end of an avenue of trees. The Farmer was sitting under the stoop-verandah when we arrived; he rose at once to welcome us. I presented my credentials; they were not of much use, as the worthy Dutchman could not read English—it made no difference, however, for nothing could exceed the civility and attention he showed me. At my request, we first went to examine the "Incubator," which is a large square box covered with green baize, the lower half of the box is lined with metal; where the metal ends, a projecting ledge runs round the side of the box, on which rests the bed with the eggs to be hatched. The eggs are then covered with blankets and a - arm but light quilt, with the lid shut down; heat is applied to the bottom by means of powerful lamps. The Incubator holds about 25 eggs at a time; the process of incubation lasts about 42 days; the temperature is regulated by a Thermometer which is kept inside. For the first 14 days, the temperature is kept up to 112°, it is then lowered to 102° for the next fortnight, and the last fortnight it is kept as low as 22°. Of course, before he arrived at such accurate data, he lost many birds; now he hatches nearly the whole of each batch of eggs. The Farmer finds it necessary about the 42nd day to bore a small hole in the shell; this admits air and gives the bird strength and vigour, and he is soon able to break the shell. After the bird is hatched, it remains from three to four days in the Incubator before it shows any inclination for food; it is then placed in a small paddock. I saw a young bird just out of the shell; it looked very curious—a mere ball of feathers with a long neck and black beads of eyes, and being the first of the brood, anxiously awaiting the "coming out" of its brothers and sisters.

The Farmer told me a curious incident about the Incubator: that, if the Paraffin lamps were in close contact with the water under the eggs, the birds came out quite stupefied, remained so for three or four days, and consequently for the last four days they were removed into another Incubator, the water for which was supplied from a Paraffin boiler placed at a distance, instead of immediately underneath.

We then proceeded to see the young birds. Each year's birds were in one paddock. The paddocks were about 80 yards long by 25 yards broad, and fenced in with iron wire to the height of 4 feet. The young birds are fed on lucerne grass, bran and Indian corn. There were about 150 birds in these paddocks; they were perfectly tame, and ran to be fed like barn door fowls. The Farmer informed me that they were very easy to rear, and that he seldom lost any. I only saw one bird ill, out of his large stock.

We then proceeded to the older birds which had been recently plucked. There were about 40 of them, each bird being worth about £50. They were quite tame; we walked in amongst, and examined them. These were the ones kept by our host for their feathers. They are plucked every seven months, each bird yields about half a pound weight of good feathers, which are selling now at the Cape at about £35 per pound weight. The plucking process is as follows: The bird is

caught by the tail, which is the only safe way of laying hold of them, as they are unable to kick out behind; a stocking is then drawn down over their heads, and they at once become quiet and docile. The feathers are then carefully cut with scissors, and precautions used, so as not to cut too close. The bird is then let go, and caught again in two months time, when the stumps of the feathers are removed easily with nippers. Were the stumps not removed, they would injure the points of the new feathers as they tried to force their way out.

We then went to see the old birds kept for breeding purposes. There were plenty of them—separated from each other by wire fences. The best arrangement is for the flock to consist of one cock bird and two hens. These are only plucked once a year, and that just before the breeding season, as at that time they are too savage to be approached with impunity. These birds live in the paddocks summer and winter, and never leave it. I asked the Farmer if he ever let them run in the open like the young ones, and be driven in at night; his reply was very significant. "I expect if I tried to drive them, they would soon drive me." The hen Ostrich begins laying in September; if her eggs are removed, she will go on laying through the spring. The Farmer told me that he had tried the birds at hatching their own eggs, but had found the Incubator much the better plan. The reason of this, I suppose, is that the hen bird, after laying a certain number of eggs in the nest, always lays some, round the outside, to serve as food for the young when hatched; if an Incubator is used, the whole of these are hatched and saved.

Each hen bird lays from 30 to 40 eggs during the season. The task of removing these eggs is always one of danger and difficulty. They are generally allowed to remain seven or eight days in the sun, and then removed by stealth. The Farmer pointed out to me one very savage old bird; the only way they could remove its eggs, was by making a black man stand at the other end of the paddock, when away went the cock after him, (this Ostrich could not bear the sight of a black man) and while the savage bird was after him, some one else stole the eggs. It is only during the breeding season the birds are so dangerous and intractable; at other times they are quiet and gentle. They are very powerful in the legs; their kick being worse than that of a horse. Their bills are quite soft, and their legs are their only weapons. The Farmer told me he had seen an Ostrich kick a dog and send him flying through the air a distance of twenty yards, where he fell quite dead. I was shown one cock—a splendid bird—which the Farmer assured me he would not part with for £200. And to prove that he really was dangerous, a man was sent into the paddock. The bird immediately rose and "gave chase," taking enormous strides, wings outstretched, and hissing loudly as he ran. The man slipped thro' the railing, and the bird finding it impossible to get over the railing, sat down, beating the ground with his long muscular legs, and hissing fiercely—as perfect a picture of impotent rage as I ever saw. In the midst of his rage, the Farmer said something to him in Dutch, when he at once got up, came up to his owner and allowed him to stroke him.

It is a curious fact that in a wild state Ostriches live entirely without water in the most desert and arid spots; when in captivity, they require a great quantity of water. The young birds require a deal of lucerne and other soft green food; oak leaves and the tender branches they seem especially to delight in, as well as any quantity of acorns that you give them. It is curious to watch an Ostrich feeding; his throat winds round his long neck like a corkscrew, so that when he swallows any large substance you may watch it circling round and round his neck until he has it safely stowed away altogether. No disease such as flocks and herds are liable to be attacked with, has shown as yet, and as little care is required, you may form some idea from the few data I have given as to how profitable Ostrich farming is becoming at the Cape.

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