

Hens at Plover Cottage

'What you need,' said my husband, 'is a cockerel. That will keep the hens in order.'

Oh right, I thought, how sexist can that be. As if women need a man about to keep everything peaceful. The next day saw us visit our favourite chicken breeder, Tony, looking for another Marans hen. Going round the corner to his pens we saw the most fabulous cockerel.

'That's the Lace Winged Wyandotte I told you about,' I said to my husband.

'No it ain't,' said Tony. 'That's a Marans, that is.' He was beautiful and I said so. 'You can have 'im if you like,' replied Tony. So we did.

Napoleon, as we called him, loved his hens. He would cluck to them when I sprinkled hen treat in the run and would share the grains with them, waiting while they took their pick and at night he would escort any late hens to bed. He was a beautiful bird. With his plumage growing sleek and silky his tail grew full and arched in layered curves. The grey down around the back of his legs grew soft and fluffy. His neck feathers lay glossy and fluid over his shoulders. As can happen with Marans he did suffer a little from scaly leg mite, so we kept on top of this, regularly picking him up for treatment. At the same time I would stroke the back of his head, admiring his shiny feathers.

After we'd had Napoleon for a few months I met a self-sufficiency group at Pymore show. We discussed raising chicks. I hadn't thought about it before, but it all seemed so easy. It was too late that year to raise a brood but I started to plan for the following season.

Early the next Spring I picked up a magazine and discovered that if I was going to raise any birds I should be incubating right then, with a view to hatchings in April. I collected some eggs and ordered an incubator for immediate dispatch.

Supported by a handbook and the incubator manual we successfully hatched out our first brood of chicks. Pleased with our success we raised a second clutch. All this time the beautiful Napoleon continued to sunbathe with his wives, to share his dust bath and chicken treats. I didn't like to tell him that his crowing was causing a neighbour to complain.

I told a friend that I needed to find a new home for Napoleon. 'Oh, I'll have him,' he said.

He came round later with a cat box, I caught Napoleon, who rested comfortably in my arms expecting a cuddle, and then I put him through the small door of the box. With no trouble, no fuss, he went in and turned to make himself more comfortable in the straw. I could see his sleek feathers, his lovely barred plumage and then he was gone.

Later that day I visited the hen run, now quiet and feeling empty. The girls seemed to be having difficulty working out what to do on their own. There were small scuffles as they established a new order. There was a vacuum where Napoleon had once been, and I felt it too.

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After only a few weeks the cockerel was back, my friend's hens were complaining. They were pampered ladies and they ran from Napoleon. When his attentions proved too much for them, they went off lay, so my friend put Napoleon in a pen on his own while we built a new run. As soon as it was ready Napoleon returned.

We'd moved some young cockerels into the run before Napoleon arrived. From the spring hatchings I now had about fifteen cockerels and twelve hens. I hadn't expected such a large number of cockerels, but here I was with fifteen, all primed to start crowing within a few weeks. More trouble.

As soon as Napoleon moved in with the youngsters he made it clear that he intended to be boss and chased them around the pen for a while, before taking a break to crow a little and eat more food. He soon took to sunbathing with the young birds and, although he would chase them around the pen, he never showed any real aggression.

When I was letting the cockerels out one morning a strange sound came from inside the poultry house. It was an unusual cry, as if a cough had formed into a call. The birds emerging through the pop-hole scattered in alarm. Then one of the young birds came to the hatch, opened its mouth, and the same sound rang out. The bird himself looked surprised. When he repeated the sound he looked pleased. It wasn't a good sound as far as I was concerned; it was bad enough with one cockerel crowing. Time was nearly up for these youngsters.

I knew someone who could carry out the culling for me. A former shooting man who had always lived in the country, my friend had been able to kill poultry from a young age. I rang his wife and asked if he would be likely to do this for me.

'Well,' she said, 'I think he's gone a bit soft with age, he doesn't like doing it now.'

'I know,' I replied, 'would you ask him if he'll do it for me?'

He rang back and replied that he would.

My friend arrived the following Sunday. It was mid-September and the birds were now about nineteen weeks old. He joked when he arrived saying he'd wondered if he should bring a cape and scythe, I also laughed but more nervously. I'd woken that morning listening to the cockerels crowing. There were a few different calls now. I always knew Napoleon, his call was a kind of cock- a-squawk, it had never been melodious. Some others were a bit more tuneful, they had been improving with practice. Then amongst them I heard a new call, a fluting cry, with pitch perfect notes. I imagined the young bird in his house wondering at the special sound he had made. He'd managed a beautiful, balanced call, and now, because of that, this day was going to be his last.

'Right, get me one of those birds then,' said my Grim Reaper friend. 'And don't let any of them others know what's going on or they'll go crazy and we won't get anything done.'

I walked into the pen with my husband and watched him select a cockerel. He carried it away to the side of the house, I heard a flutter of wings, then nothing. Husband came back and I selected another bird for him. Each bird was carried away and I would hear a flutter of wings, then nothing, and my husband would return for another bird. The cockerels in the pen were at the feeder undisturbed by anything that was going on. I picked up one of the cockerels to hand to my husband but he picked another bird and told me to just hang on to the one I had until he got back. I held the cockerel in the crook of my arm while we waited, and stroked the back of his neck. He turned his head to look at me. He knew me but I didn't know which cockerel this was. He was one I would have hatched and put under the heat lamp to dry out, in the brooder he would have made his first attempts to eat chick crumb, later he would have nestled up to the other chicks. Unlike male birds culled at day old he'd had a summer living in a pen on the lawn and there he pecked at grass and perched in the sun with his companions. More recently he'd been part of the flock living happily in this pen, spending his days in the company of birds he'd known from the very start. I put him down not knowing if my husband would pick him up next, whether he would be in this culling, or if he would make it through to another day. The feeling of the soft

feathers on the back of his neck, and the way he relaxed while I held him in my arms, stayed with me for the rest of the day.

'That's about it then,' said my husband after a couple more cockerels had gone. 'We'll leave those others. They can stay until Christmas.' I went round to look at the now dead cockerels. There they were, hanging, heads down, eyes closed.

'It looks a neat job,' I congratulated my Grim Reaper friend. He was pleased at my comment. 'Yeah,' he said, 'they all went well, just a quick click, killed straight away.'

Next morning Napoleon's call woke me at six. As usual I didn't hear him call any earlier, just when it was time for me to get up. Then there was another call and my heart sank, still more noise nuisance to worry about. This crow rang out, a tuneful, fluting call. It was the cockerel from the day before, with his gift to this world, a perfect musical cry of 'cock-a-doodle-doo'.

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