



LETTER FROM EPHESUS

Henhouse blues

Most humans in our society have a relationship with another species at some time in their lives - a dear dog, a loved cat, even a cuddled duck. They are affectionately recalled with misty eyes and it can be among the most life enhancing experiences we ever know. This is not the case with chickens.

Cows, horses even sheep, will come to recognise and be agreeable to their human keepers. Of all domestic creatures, the chicken is the one that never got used to it. A chicken, even one raised by hand from its first tottering hop out of the shell, will have daily hysterics at your approach. It will never be pleased to see you, nor display recognition of any kind. Sometimes it will go even further - keel over and stick its feet in the air permanently for no discernible reason. Hen husbandry - or wifery - therefore, is most often an emotionally unrewarding business.

Betty Macdonald wrote what must be the definitive account of life with hens in her 'fifties classic *The Egg and I*, and what she said then holds good today. Her chickens - or rather, her husband Bob's chickens - drove her to despair because of the entirely frustrating reality of being involved with them. It was impos-

sible, she reckoned, to become close to a chicken, to ever really regret wringing its neck.

Even baby chicks turn out to have no redeeming qualities beyond their appearance. For those whose knowledge of chicks is confined to non-crucifactory Easter cards, it should be noted that these cute yellow fluffballs love to make a heap of themselves in a corner of their warm, cosy brooder house and suffocate one another to death as quickly as possible. They can also peck to death a weakling or odd one out without a backward cheep - hence the term pecking order, by the way. They are curious creatures.

That chickens do have sensibilities somewhere in their feathery heads is evident from their distress at being kept in battery conditions: they get depressed and quickly suicidal.

It certainly doesn't explain their attraction - why so many people, year after year, used to chuck in good jobs and blow the super on their dream of keeping chooks in some idyllic country setting. It isn't to get away from the stress associated with city living, that's for sure. Keeping chickens is likely to send a decent person round the bend or into the far reaches of psychopathy almost as quickly as having a 110 decibel weekend reggae pool party next door.

Poultry care is not for the faint hearted. Many years ago, my aunt Leila, - who actually never wanted to keep chickens, but never mind, uncle Ben did (which is usually the way of it) - sat at our breakfast table one morning reading bits from the Min. of Ag. pamphlet on the happy hen and how to recognise it and keep it that way. There were all sorts of helpful hints on mites and lice - which chickens love to infest themselves with - basically requiring henhouse hygiene routines which made Matron Sloane's operating theatre scrub-up look slovenly.

Then there was the care of baby chicks: make as warm and comfortable as possible, feed them frequently with delicious bran mash, make

sure they have fresh water to drink ... and, as already stated, a significant percentage of the little dears will form a rugby scrum of the good old neck-breaking style, others will choke on mash, while even more will drown themselves - which is why you keep having to refresh the water by fishing out small limp carcasses.

But aunt Leila had kept the best bit to last. It is a piece of information that remains vivid in my memory to this day: if the hen should become egg-bound, wrote the helpful Min. of Ag. person, immediate action is necessary if the bird is not to be lost. Take the bird under one arm and with the forefinger of the free hand, rub the vent with Vaseline to facilitate passage of the egg.

Getting up before dawn six days a week to tend to suicidal and unfriendly hens was one thing, getting up before-before dawn on the seventh day to bring the eggs into town was another, but the last straw for aunt Leila was ventrubbing. Her career as a reluctant chicken farmer came to an end shortly afterwards.

Except for the minority of 'happy hens' who run free to kill themselves at leisure, being egg-bound is probably the least of the modern chicken's worries. Factory farming methods probably decree a slit throat or preventative drug dose, rather than a Vaseline-covered finger - which is the real problem with food as a profit-based industry: there's simply no room for humanity. And that goes for humanity as a quality of civilised people, as well as for people themselves. There's absolutely no room for humane people when it comes to the production of cheap eggs, cheap barbecued chook, cheap hamburgers - and the profits that go with them. Perhaps the hen has the gift-terrible gift - of prescience. Perhaps *Animal Farm* was all wrong: it was the hen who really saw the shape of things to come in the relationship between animal and human. Suddenly being egg-bound begins to look logical.

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