

### An Ostrich Farm.

VISIT TO A TROOP OF THE BIG BIRDS IN CALIFORNIA.

There are two ostrich farms in California. One is at Norwalk and the other at Coronado Beach, the resort just across the bay from San Diego. Interest of the tourists is divided between the little old adobe church in the Mexican village of Old San Diego, where Ramona, Helen Hunt's Indian heroine, is said to have been married, and the ostrich farm kept by W. H. Bentley within a few minutes' walk of the hotel at the Beach. The farm has sixty-five birds. Whether spreading their wings and tilting along in their peculiar Delsartean gait, or greedily snatching at whatever morsels come in their way, they are droll and interesting. Everybody has heard the expression, "a stomach like an ostrich's," but nobody can quite realize the significance of the comparison until he attends a luncheon given to the creatures and watches them despatch their food. They eat all sorts of vegetables, but above all things they like oranges. The avidity with which they seize and gulp down whole oranges is at once startling and amusing. When the keeper appears with a fine orange in his hand there is a scramble and fluttering of great fluffy wings. The fortunate fellow stands blinking his satisfaction while the orange slowly travels by easy stages down his long throat. Cabbage leaves, beet tops, natural grasses, alfalfa, bits of broken shell, and gravel are all esteemed great luxuries by these ungainly birds. A three-months-old chick stands fairly four feet high. The female does not mature until four years old, nor the male until five. The color of the young birds is brown in general effect, and the hens retain that hue. As the cock nears maturity he turns a deep, glossy black and gets a row of pure white plumes among those of jet. Down the front of each leg is a stripe of vivid red, and a ring of the same color surrounds the big, vicious eyes, giving the creature a peculiarly rakish and dissipated appearance. The cock is at times very ugly to manage, and the hens, too, must be carefully handled. They particularly dislike strangers, and visitors are always cautioned to keep a long way from the paddock.

As fast as the birds mate the pairs are confined in the paddock. Just after the rainy season sets in the hens begin to lay. The nest is a most primitive arrangement—merely an excavation, about three feet across, scratched in the sandy soil. Every other day an egg is deposited in this nest until the hen is satisfied with the number. Then the cock turns to and does the principal part of the sitting. Every afternoon at 4 o'clock he relieves the hen and does not quit the nest until 8 o'clock the next morning, thereby giving the female only the short daylight watch. The usual custom, however, is to remove the eggs to an incubator as fast as they are laid. In this case the hen will often lay thirty eggs before resting. Then, after an interval of six weeks, she resumes her work. The ostrich farmer can count upon three periods of productiveness in a year, and an aggregate of seventy-eight to ninety eggs from each hen. In California the eggs hatch in forty days—two days sooner than in Africa. The unmated birds are allowed to herd, and are known as the "feather troop."

The plucking comes once in ten months, and is a difficult undertaking. The first plucking takes place when the chick is six months old. The feathers are of inferior quality, and are used to make dusters. These first feathers are called spadones. When the chick is one year old its feathers can be used for trimmings. At two years a good plume can be obtained, and after that the bird is a regular producer of fine plumes. As a rule each wing furnishes 104 plumes, while about 125 are obtained from the tail, making more than 300 feathers to each bird. The tail feathers are termed "boos" in ostrich slang. The members of the regular feather troop are docile enough when undisturbed, but if provoked in the least grow very ugly. It is necessary to blindfold the birds before plucking. They are brought into the paddock, and while engaged in feeding on the corn or cabbage leaves which have been thrown to them, two men who have had experience in the work approach, seize a bird by the neck, and quickly thrust a long hood over its head. The ostrich is then forced into an enclosure about three feet square and a gate is closed behind it. It is necessary still to hold the bird, though while thus hooded it rarely shows fight. The plumes are snipped off, and the stub of each quill is allowed to remain until the juices have been diverted into other growing feathers. The stub then becomes transparent to the eye and is pulled out. After the ostrich has been plucked its thigh is marked with red paint; also after the stub has been pulled out. Thus it requires but a glance from the ostrich farmer to learn the condition of any bird in his flock.

When a breeding cock is to be

plucked real trouble begins. This bird is always defiant and ugly, and, if one simply approaches the paddock, will glare and hiss viciously. He is a fighter, too, using his queer, stubby hoofs as weapons, and having the pugilist's trick of kicking forward. Feeding the cock avails little. He is usually taunted and mocked until he is furious, when muscular fellows seize him around the neck, and, bending the head to the ground, hood him. He is then powerless to do harm, but he tires out his captors by the time the plucking is done. An average feather bird yields one and one-fourth pounds of feathers at a plucking, those of the cock being of a heavier and more valuable quality than those of the hen. Body feathers are not taken but are picked up during the moulting season and used for trimmings, boas and collars. The average weight of a full-grown male ostrich is 175 pounds. While to the uninitiated the difference in birds is slight, it is as apparent to the breeder as is the difference in sheep or cattle. An ostrich expert will choose a compact, large-boned bird, and the California-bred ostriches are fine specimens of this style. The life of an ostrich is usually thirty years. The birds are sold at various prices. A chick commonly brings about \$30, a three-year-old bird \$300, a fine breeding pair \$1,000. The prime white feathers sell for \$75 a pound at wholesale, and as much as \$7.50 is often received for a single plume of unusual excellence. The next in value are the long drab ones from the hen. The average value of the plucking from a single bird is \$35, and, as it is plucked three times in two years, the value of the annual product in plumes for each bird is about \$50.

### Insects in Mexico.

In Guerrero the tarantula is sometimes found as big as a man's two fists. Scorpions are of all sizes, but the one which does the most harm by its bite is a smallish gray creature. The larger ones bite so hard that the blood flows freely, and the injected poison flows off. There is a little snake called the coralillo, which is particularly fond of getting indoors and nestling in one's boots. Its bite is fatal. Boots should always be inspected for coralillos before they are put on—in Guerrero. If a scorpion creeps on the face or hands, the person so visited should carefully refrain from making any movement. He should allow the horrible insect to crawl just where it will. If it is not disturbed, in all likelihood it will do no harm; if it is attacked it is quite sure to sting.

The worst terror of the people of Guerrero, says the Boston Herald, is neither snakes nor scorpions, but the red ants. Before these insects, the people flee in terror from their houses. They leave nothing behind if they can help it. An Indian woman rushed out of her cabin with her children on the coming of the ants being announced. In her terror she left her baby behind the house swinging in a hammock. It was hoped that it would escape, but when the ants had departed the mother found that the insects had crept down the cords of the hammock, and had left of the unfortunate child nothing but its bones. On some of the Guerrero sugar estates great lazy-looking snakes are kept in the storerooms to keep rats and mice away from the sugar loaves. These snakes are repulsive in appearance, but harmless to human beings. Not all the places in Mexico, however, which have an agreeable climate are cursed with insects and reptilian pests. Such places as Cuernavaca, in the state of Morelos, are too high above the hot plains to suffer from venomous insects, and yet so much below the cold table land that the climate is a perpetual summer. Cuernavaca unites many of the advantages of the temperate zone with all that is delightful and alluring in the tropics.

### Trees with Muffers On.

"What odd notions people get," said a landscape gardener. "In riding through the East End you will find trees on every side muffled up with cotton, looking as if they had sore throats. You ask what this is done for, and you are told that it is to keep the insects from injuring the foliage. It is a peculiar idea people have that if they wrap a tree with cotton it will prevent the caterpillars, the most destructive pests we have in trees, from climbing up into the branches and feeding on the leaves. The theory is all very well if the facts were so. That is, if caterpillars climbed up trees in the manner these people say, it would be a good way of keeping them from the leaves. But, unfortunately, caterpillars do not climb trees. The butterfly deposits eggs upon the leaves where, in course of time, the caterpillar is hatched out. He is born on the leaves, and no amount of cotton tied around the trunk of a tree will get him off them. The only way to rid trees of caterpillars is to spray them with Paris green or some other poison. Don't be misled by others, and expect cotton to protect your trees from them."

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