

The Diary of a Goose Girl

by

Kate Douglas Wiggin

Web-Books.Com

The Diary of a Goose Girl

Chapter 1.....	3
Chapter 2.....	6
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	12
Chapter 5.....	15
Chapter 6.....	17
Chapter 7.....	19
Chapter 8.....	23
Chapter 9.....	26
Chapter 10.....	28
Chapter 11.....	30
Chapter 12.....	33
Chapter 13.....	35
Chapter 14.....	37

Chapter 1

Thornycroft Farm, Near Barbury Green, July 1, 190-.

In alluding to myself as a Goose Girl, I am using only the most modest of my titles; for I am also a poultry-maid, a tender of Belgian hares and rabbits, and a shepherdess; but I particularly fancy the role of Goose Girl, because it recalls the German fairy tales of my early youth, when I always yearned, but never hoped, to be precisely what I now am.

As I was jolting along these charming Sussex roads the other day, a fat buff pony and a tippy cart being my manner of progression, I chanced upon the village of Barbury Green.

One glance was enough for any woman, who, having eyes to see, could see with them; but I made assurance doubly sure by driving about a little, struggling to conceal my new-born passion from the stable-boy who was my escort. Then, it being high noon of a cloudless day, I descended from the trap and said to the astonished yokel: "You may go back to the Hydropathic; I am spending a month or two here. Wait a moment--I'll send a message, please!"

I then scribbled a word or two to those having me in custody.

"I am very tired of people," the note ran, "and want to rest myself by living a while with things. Address me (if you must) at Barbury Green post-office, or at all events send me a box of simple clothing there--nothing but shirts and skirts, please. I cannot forget that I am only twenty miles from Oxenbridge (though it might be one hundred and twenty, which is the reason I adore it), but I rely upon you to keep an honourable distance yourselves, and not to divulge my place of retreat to others, especially to--you know whom! Do not pursue me. I will never be taken alive!"

Having cut, thus, the cable that bound me to civilisation, and having seen the buff pony and the dazed yokel disappear in a cloud of dust, I looked about me with what Stevenson calls a "fine, dizzy, muddle-headed joy," the joy of a successful rebel or a liberated serf. Plenty of money in my purse--that was unromantic, of course, but it simplified matters--and nine hours of daylight remaining in which to find a lodging.

The village is one of the oldest, and I am sure it must be one of the quaintest, in England. It is too small to be printed on the map (an honour that has spoiled more than one Arcadia), so pray do not look there, but just believe in it, and some day you may be rewarded by driving into it by chance, as I did, and feel the same Columbus thrill running, like an electric current, through your veins. I withhold specific geographical information in order that you may not miss that Columbus thrill, which comes too seldom in a world of railroads.

The Green is in the very centre of Barbury village, and all civic, political, family, and social life converges there, just at the public duck-pond--a wee, sleepy lake with a slope of grass-covered stones by which the ducks descend for their swim.

The houses are set about the Green like those in a toy village. They are of old brick, with crumpled, up-and-down roofs of deep-toned red, and tufts of stoncrop growing from the eaves. Diamond-paned windows, half open, admit the sweet summer air; and as for the gardens in front, it would seem as if the inhabitants had nothing to do but work in them, there is such a riotous profusion of colour and bloom. To add to the effect, there are always pots of flowers hanging from the trees, blue flax and yellow myrtle; and cages of Java sparrows and canaries singing joyously, as well they may in such a paradise.

The shops are idyllic, too, as if Nature had seized even the man of trade and made him subservient to her designs. The general draper's, where I fitted myself out for a day or two quite easily, is set back in a tangle of poppies and sweet peas, Madonna lilies and Canterbury bells. The shop itself has a gay awning, and what do you think the draper has suspended from it, just as a picturesque suggestion to the passer-by? Suggestion I call it, because I should blush to use the word advertisement in describing anything so dainty and decorative. Well, then, garlands of shoes, if you please! Baby bootlets of bronze; tiny ankle-ties in yellow, blue, and scarlet kid; glossy patent-leather pumps shining in the sun, with festoons of slippers at the corners, flowery slippers in imitation Berlin wool-work. If you make this picture in your mind's-eye, just add a window above the awning, and over the fringe of marigolds in the window-box put the draper's wife dancing a rosy-cheeked baby. Alas! my words are only black and white, I fear, and this picture needs a palette drenched in primary colours.

Along the street, a short distance, is the old watchmaker's. Set in the hedge at the gate is a glass case with *Multum in Parvo* painted on the woodwork. Within, a little stand of trinkets revolves slowly; as slowly, I imagine, as the current of business in that quiet street. The house stands a trifle back and is covered thickly with ivy, while over the entrance-door of the shop is a great round clock set in a green frame of clustering vine. The hands pointed to one when I passed the watchmaker's garden with its thicket of fragrant lavender and its murmuring bees; so I went in to the sign of the "Strong i' the Arm" for some cold luncheon, determining to patronise "The Running Footman" at the very next opportunity. Neither of these inns is starred by Baedeker, and this fact adds the last touch of enchantment to the picture.

The landlady at the "Strong i' the Arm" stabbed me in the heart by telling me that there were no apartments to let in the village, and that she had no private sitting-room in the inn; but she speedily healed the wound by saying that I might be accommodated at one of the farm-houses in the vicinity. Did I object to a farm-'ouse? Then she could cheerfully recommend the Evan's farm, only 'alf a mile away. She 'ad understood from Miss Phoebe Evan, who sold her poultry, that they would take one lady lodger if she didn't wish much waiting upon.

In my present mood I was in search of the strenuous life, and eager to wait, rather than to be waited upon; so I walked along the edge of the Green, wishing that some mentally unbalanced householder would take a sudden fancy to me and ask me to come in and lodge awhile. I suppose these families live under their roofs of peach-blow tiles, in the midst of their blooming gardens, for a guinea a week or thereabouts; yet if they

"undertook" me (to use their own phrase), the bill for my humble meals and bed would be at least double that. I don't know that I blame them; one should have proper compensation for admitting a world-stained lodger into such an Eden.

When I was searching for rooms a week ago, I chanced upon a pretty cottage where the woman had sometimes let apartments. She showed me the premises and asked me if I would mind taking my meals in her own dining-room, where I could be served privately at certain hours: and, since she had but the one sitting-room, would I allow her to go on using it occasionally? also, if I had no special preference, would I take the second-sized bedroom and leave her in possession of the largest one, which permitted her to have the baby's crib by her bedside? She thought I should be quite as comfortable, and it was her opinion that in making arrangements with lodgers, it was a good plan not to "bryke up the 'ome any more than was necessary."

"Bryke up the 'ome!" That is seemingly the malignant purpose with which I entered Barbury Green.

Chapter 2

July 4th.

Enter the family of Thornycroft Farm, of which I am already a member in good and regular standing.

I introduce Mrs. Heaven first, for she is a self-saturated person who would never forgive the insult should she receive any lower place.

She welcomed me with the statement: "We do not take lodgers here, nor boarders; no lodgers, nor boarders, but we do occasionally admit paying guests, those who look as if they would appreciate the quietude of the plyce and be willing as you might say to remunerate according."

I did not mind at this particular juncture what I was called, so long as the epithet was comparatively unobjectionable, so I am a paying guest, therefore, and I expect to pay handsomely for the handsome appellation. Mrs. Heaven is short and fat; she fills her dress as a pin-cushion fills its cover; she wears a cap and apron, and she is so full of platitudes that she would have burst had I not appeared as a providential outlet for them. Her accent is not of the farm, but of the town, and smacks wholly of the marts of trade. She is repetitious, too, as well as platitudinous. "I 'ope if there's anythink you require you will let us know, let us know," she says several times each day; and whenever she enters my sitting-room she prefaces her conversation with the remark: "I trust you are finding it quiet here, miss? It's the quietude of the plyce that is its charm, yes, the quietude. And yet" (she dribbles on) "it wears on a body after a while, miss. I often go into Woodmucket to visit one of my sons just for the noise, simply for the noise, miss, for nothink else in the world but the noise. There's nothink like noise for soothing nerves that is worn threadbare with the quietude, miss, or at least that's my experience; and yet to a strynger the quietude of the plyce is its charm, undoubtedly its chief charm; and that is what our paying guests always say, although our charges are somewhat higher than other plyces. If there's anythink you require, miss, I 'ope you'll mention it. There is not a commodious assortment in Barbury Green, but we can always send the pony to Woodmucket in case of urgency. Our paying guest last summer was a Mrs. Pollock, and she was by way of having sudden fancies. Young and unmarried though you are, miss, I think you will tyke my meaning without my speaking plyner? Well, at six o'clock of a rainy afternoon, she was seized with an unaccountable desire for vegetable marrows, and Mr. 'Eaven put the pony in the cart and went to Woodmucket for them, which is a great advantage to be so near a town and yet 'ave the quietude."

Mr. Heaven is merged, like Mr. Jellyby, in the more shining qualities of his wife. A line of description is too long for him. Indeed, I can think of no single word brief enough, at least in English. The Latin "nil" will do, since no language is rich in words of less than three letters. He is nice, kind, bald, timid, thin, and so colourless that he can scarcely be discerned save in a strong light. When Mrs. Heaven goes out into the orchard in search of

him, I can hardly help calling from my window, "Bear a trifle to the right, Mrs. Heaven-- now to the left--just in front of you now-- if you put out your hands you will touch him."

Phoebe, aged seventeen, is the daughter of the house. She is virtuous, industrious, conscientious, and singularly destitute of physical charm. She is more than plain; she looks as if she had been planned without any definite purpose in view, made of the wrong materials, been badly put together, and never properly finished off; but "plain" after all is a relative word. Many a plain girl has been married for her beauty; and now and then a beauty, falling under a cold eye, has been thought plain.

Phoebe has her compensations, for she is beloved by, and reciprocates the passion of, the Woodmancote carrier, Woodmucket being the English manner of pronouncing the place of his abode. If he "carries" as energetically for the great public as he fetches for Phoebe, then he must be a rising and a prosperous man. He brings her daily, wild strawberries, cherries, birds' nests, peacock feathers, sea-shells, green hazel-nuts, samples of hens' food, or bouquets of wilted field flowers tied together tightly and held with a large, moist, loving hand. He has fine curly hair of sandy hue, which forms an aureole on his brow, and a reddish beard, which makes another inverted aureole to match, round his chin. One cannot look at him, especially when the sun shines through him, without thinking how lovely he would be if stuffed and set on wheels, with a little string to drag him about.

Phoebe confided to me that she was on the eve of loving the postman when the carrier came across her horizon.

"It doesn't do to be too hysty, does it, miss?" she asked me as we were weeding the onion bed. "I was to give the postman his answer on the Monday night, and it was on the Monday morning that Mr. Gladwish made his first trip here as carrier. I may say I never wyvered from that moment, and no more did he. When I think how near I came to promising the postman it gives me a turn." (I can understand that, for I once met the man I nearly promised years before to marry, and we both experienced such a sense of relief at being free instead of bound that we came near falling in love for sheer joy.)

The last and most important member of the household is the Square Baby. His name is Albert Edward, and he is really five years old and no baby at all; but his appearance on this planet was in the nature of a complete surprise to all parties concerned, and he is spoiled accordingly. He has a square head and jaw, square shoulders, square hands and feet. He is red and white and solid and stolid and slow-witted, as the young of his class commonly are, and will make a bulwark of the nation in course of time, I should think; for England has to produce a few thousand such square babies every year for use in the colonies and in the standing army. Albert Edward has already a military gait, and when he has acquired a habit of obedience at all comparable with his power of command, he will be able to take up the white man's burden with distinguished success. Meantime I can never look at him without marvelling how the English climate can transmute bacon and eggs, tea and the solid household loaf into such radiant roses and lilies as bloom upon his cheeks and lips.

Chapter 3

July 8th.

Thornycroft is by way of being a small poultry farm.

In reaching it from Barbury Green, you take the first left-hand road, go till you drop, and there you are.

It reminds me of my "grandmother's farm at Older." Did you know the song when you were a child? -

My grandmother had a very fine farm
'Way down in the fields of Older.
With a cluck-cluck here,
And a cluck-cluck there,
Here and there a cluck-cluck,
Cluck-cluck here and there,
Down in the fields at Older.

It goes on for ever by the simple subterfuge of changing a few words in each verse.

My grandmother had a very fine farm
'Way down in the fields of Older.
With a quack-quack here,
And a quack-quack there,
Here and there a quack-quack,
Quack-quack here and there,
Down in the fields at Older.

This is followed by the gobble-gobble, moo-moo, baa-baa, etc., as long as the laureate's imagination and the infant's breath hold good. The tune is pretty, and I do not know, or did not, when I was young, a more fascinating lyric.

Thornycroft House must have belonged to a country gentleman once upon a time, or to more than one; men who built on a bit here and there once in a hundred years, until finally we have this charmingly irregular and dilapidated whole. You go up three steps into Mrs. Heaven's room, down two into mine, while Phoebe's is up in a sort of turret with long, narrow lattices opening into the creepers. There are crooked little stair-cases, passages that branch off into other passages and lead nowhere in particular; I can't think of a better house in which to play hide and seek on a wet day. In front, what was once, doubtless, a green, is cut up into greens; to wit, a vegetable garden, where the onions, turnips, and potatoes grow cosily up to the very door-sill; the utilitarian aspect of it all

being varied by some scarlet-runners and a scattering of poppies on either side of the path.

The Belgian hares have their habitation in a corner fifty feet distant; one large enclosure for poultry lies just outside the sweetbrier hedge; the others, with all the houses and coops, are in the meadow at the back, where also our tumbler pigeons are kept.

Phoebe attends to the poultry; it is her department. Mr. Heaven has neither the force nor the finesse required, and the gentle reader who thinks these qualities unneeded in so humble a calling has only to spend a few days at Thornycroft to be convinced. Mrs. Heaven would be of use, but she is dressing the Square Baby in the morning and putting him to bed at night just at the hours when the feathered young things are undergoing the same operation.

A Goose Girl, like a poet, is sometimes born, sometimes otherwise. I am of the born variety. No training was necessary; I put my head on my pillow as a complicated product of modern civilisation on a Tuesday night, and on a Wednesday morning I awoke as a Goose Girl.

My destiny slumbered during the day, but at eight o'clock I heard a terrific squawking in the direction of the duck-ponds, and, aimlessly drifting in that direction, I came upon Phoebe trying to induce ducks and drakes, geese and ganders, to retire for the night. They have to be driven into enclosures behind fences of wire netting, fastened into little rat-proof boxes, or shut into separate coops, so as to be safe from their natural enemies, the rats and foxes; which, obeying, I suppose, the law of supply and demand, abound in this neighbourhood. The old ganders are allowed their liberty, being of such age, discretion, sagacity, and pugnacity that they can be trusted to fight their own battles.

The intelligence of hens, though modest, is of such an order that it prompts them to go to bed at a virtuous hour of their own accord; but ducks and geese have to be materially assisted, or I believe they would roam till morning. Never did small boy detest and resist being carried off to his nursery as these dullards, young and old, detest and resist being driven to theirs. Whether they suffer from insomnia, or nightmare, or whether they simply prefer the sweet air of liberty (and death) to the odour of captivity and the coop, I have no means of knowing.

Phoebe stood by one of the duck-ponds, a long pole in her hand, and a helpless expression in that doughlike countenance of hers, where aimless contours and features unite to make a kind of facial blur. (What does the carrier see in it?) The pole was not long enough to reach the ducks, and Phoebe's method lacked spirit and adroitness, so that it was natural, perhaps, that they refused to leave the water, the evening being warm, with an uncommon fine sunset.

I saw the situation at once and ran to meet it with a glow of interest and anticipation. If there is anything in the world I enjoy, it is making somebody do something that he doesn't want to do; and if, when victory perches upon my banner, the somebody can be

brought to say that he ought to have done it without my making him, that adds the unforgettable touch to pleasure, though seldom, alas! does it happen. Then ensued the delightful and stimulating hour that has now become a feature of the day; an hour in which the remembrance of the table-d'hote dinner at the Hydro, going on at identically the same time, only stirs me to a keener joy and gratitude.

The ducks swim round in circles, hide under the willows, and attempt to creep into the rat-holes in the banks, a stupidity so crass that it merits instant death, which it somehow always escapes. Then they come out in couples and waddle under the wrong fence into the lower meadow, fly madly under the tool-house, pitch blindly in with the sitting hens, and out again in short order, all the time quacking and squawking, honking and hissing like a bewildered orchestra. By dint of splashing the water with poles, throwing pebbles, beating the shrubs at the pond's edges, "shooing" frantically with our skirts, crawling beneath bars to head them off, and prodding them from under bushes to urge them on, we finally get the older ones out of the water and the younger ones into some sort of relation to their various retreats; but, owing to their lack of geography, hatred of home, and general recalcitrancy, they none of them turn up in the right place and have to be sorted out. We uncover the top of the little house, or the enclosure as it may be, or reach in at the door, and, seizing the struggling victim, drag him forth and take him where he should have had the wit to go in the first instance. The weak ones get in with the strong and are in danger of being trampled; two May goslings that look almost full-grown have run into a house with a brood of ducklings a week old. There are twenty-seven crowded into one coop, five in another, nineteen in another; the gosling with one leg has to come out, and the duckling threatened with the gapes; their place is with the "invaleeds," as Phoebe calls them, but they never learn the location of the hospital, nor have the slightest scruple about spreading contagious diseases.

Finally, when we have separated and sorted exhaustively, an operation in which Phoebe shows a delicacy of discrimination and a fearlessness of attack amounting to genius, we count the entire number and find several missing. Searching for their animate or inanimate bodies, we "scoop" one from under the tool-house, chance upon two more who are being harried and pecked by the big geese in the lower meadow, and discover one sailing by himself in solitary splendour in the middle of the deserted pond, a look of evil triumph in his bead-like eye. Still we lack one young duckling, and he at length is found dead by the hedge. A rat has evidently seized him and choked him at a single throttle, but in such haste that he has not had time to carry away the tiny body.

"Poor think!" says Phoebe tearfully; "it looks as if it was 'it with some kind of a weeping. I don't know whatever to do with the rats, they're gettin' that fearocious!"

Before I was admitted into daily contact with the living goose (my previous intercourse with him having been carried on when gravy and stuffing obscured his true personality), I thought him a very Dreyfus among fowls, a sorely slandered bird, to whom justice had never been done; for even the gentle Darwin is hard upon him. My opinion is undergoing some slight modifications, but I withhold judgment at present, hoping that some of the

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

