

MICKEY'S CHICKENS.

LAST spring when the lingering snow in the hollows of the wood had melted and trickled down the rocks to the Roundout creek, a staid and motherly partridge built a nest in a hollow log and deposited within its cosy environment of leaves and pines needles thirteen speckled eggs. One day, far down the dim aisle of the wood, she heard the sound of coming footsteps. The partridge squatted closer down upon the eggs, and no eye but that of a fox could have seen the difference between her brown back and that of the rotten log. Her little heart beat hard with excitement and fear, but the palpitation failed even to stir the soft feathers under her wing. Her eyes glittered like twin beads as she peeped out of her hiding-place. The big pine sang a low soothing psalm, and a chipmunk stuck its head out of a hole in an oak tree near by. But above the sound of the psalm the footsteps were heard by the partridge coming nearer and nearer. There were shuffling sounds in the dried leaves, and at intervals the breaking of a twig sounded sharply in the silence of the still wood.

Then from around the trunk of a big hemlock which had tossed its green arms in the sunlight for forty years, came the figure of a sneaking boy with a bow-gun held in the hollow of his right arm. By this time the partridge was standing up in the nest. Her neck was outstretched and every fibre in her little feathered body was tense with excitement. Nearer and nearer came the boy, his eyes roving through the wood in search of a victim for his arrow. The chipmunk ran down the oak and jumped upon the log in which the partridge was palpitating.

The old Dominick hen wanted to sit. She had tried to satisfy her natural instinct in the wood-box. When driven from this retreat by Mrs. Finn's broom, she nestled in Mr. Finn's old felt hat. Here, too, she was foiled in her purpose by a pailful of cold water, which perceptibly dampened her enthusiasm and her feathers. Still she persevered in her efforts at propagation, and was found late in the afternoon, after drying herself in the sun, trying to scratch a hole in the best quilt upon the parental Finn bed. To this Mrs. Finn objected with a broom.

"Ye ould blatherskite!" said she, bringing the broom down upon the bed, for the hen wasn't there when the broom came down. "Musha, but I'll wring yer neck wid me fist whin I lay my hands on ye! Phy don't ye g' out an' play marvels wid th' gravel stones stead o' foolin' there wid me best quilt?"

The old hen wandered around the yard disconsolately. Life had no charms for her in her uneasy condition of mind. Besides, there were no eligible places in the yard in which to carry out her designs. Her miserable condition provoked the sympathy of little Mike, and he decided that she should have the pleasure of setting on a nest of eggs if he could by hook or crook procure them for her. For two days, after school hours, he searched the borders of Brown's Pond for duck eggs, and was fortunate in finding two. These were stowed away in an old hat in the cellar, and the hen, with a glad chuckle of content, settled herself upon them. That afternoon he went off hunting in the woods.

When the partridge flew off her nest little Mike examined the hollow log and found thirteen speckled eggs. Warm and smooth they felt in his palms. Holding them close against his breast to preserve the heat, he started on a run for home and dashed into the cellar. His eyes danced with self-gratulation as he said:

"Shoo, Nanny, be quiet till I give ye some more eggs as'll hatch out foine wild chickens."

The hen squeaked a gentle protest against being disturbed, and then settled down to her work again. During the period of incubation little Mike attended to the wants of the hen with jealous care. Corn and meal were always right under her beak, and water in an old tomato can stood so near that she did not have to leave her nest. Every evening when he returned from school little Mike paid a visit to the hen to see how she was getting along, and each time he came he lifted the hen from the eggs to see if there were life in them. This continued for three weeks,

until one evening on opening the cellar door he found two little ducklings with pieces of shells clinging to their backs peeping in the cellar. The hen was in a quandary. The partridge eggs beneath her were yet whole, and she was divided in her affections for the hatched and unhatched. She decided, however, to continue operations on the partridge eggs, and a few days later they too had developed into chickens.

The whole Finn family were so tickled at the result of the Dominick hen's efforts that they could scarcely contain themselves. Mrs. Finn insisted that the brood should be brought up out of the cellar into the kitchen. Here the little partridges hid behind the wood box in a frightened covey. They were startled by the least sound, and whisked out of sight at the raising of a finger.

"Faix," said Mr. Finn, as he gazed upon the bunches of brown feathers darting hither and thither, "thim wild chickens bates the Dootch fur quickness. Begorra, but they're fly. Musha, but they hav' no tails!"

"Don't freeken yersel," said his wife, "they'll hav' foine tail-gin six wakes."

Mickey was so tickled with his new charge that he hated to go to school. One day he put two of the partridges in his trousers pocket, and took them with him. They got out of his desk when he was called up to the spelling class, and great confusion prevailed until the wild chickens had flown out of the open window.

And so the summer faded away into the autumn. And October's chill breath began to kill the leaves in Lindsley's Wood. By this time the partridges had become strong of wing, and following their native instincts made short excursions into the fields near by. Mrs. Finn was in a state of constant fear lest they should not come back, but every evening, when the pan of cornmeal was set out in the back yard, the partridges and the ducks were there feeding amicably together.

Thursday, Oct. 4th, had been set apart as a day of feasting. Mrs. Finn had decided to kill six of the partridges on the previous evening, and Mr. Cronin, the accordion player, Mrs. Doolan and her boy Jack, Mike Murphy and his wife, and Mike Welsh and the sharer of his joys and sorrows, had been invited to attend. It was decided, after a long consultation between Mrs. O'Brien and Mrs. Finn, that the wild chickens should be served up in a potpie with appropriate accompaniments of sliced potatoes, sweet marjory, thyme, onions, carrots, and other herb and vegetable delicacies.

It was the twilight hour in the Finn back yard, when the frogs were beginning to croak and the whippoorwill over the hill was piping his lay. Shadows of the evening were stealing across the sky. Paler and paler grew the clouds, and over against the horizon the outlines of Lindsley's Wood were fading against the eastern sky. Mrs. Finn and her boy were sitting on the doorstep watching the partridges eat their evening meal, and loathed to begin the slaughter of the innocents for the morrow's potpie, when across the meadows between the shanty and the wood there came a curious muffled sound.

"F'what is that?" said Mrs. Finn.

"It's mesel doesn't know," replied Mickey.

Again the sound came over the wide reaches of meadow land. It attracted the attention of the partridges. They lifted their heads from the pan of cornmeal and clustered together. The sound was like soft beating on a muffled drum. There was a sudden movement among the partridges; then as one bird they rose into the air with a whirr which startled Mickey and his mother to her feet. Huddled close together in a bunch which could have been covered by a quilt the partridges flew. There was a fleeting glimpse of brown feathers, a rush of beating wings, and the deep shadows of Lindsley's Wood closed over the fleeting birds.

Mickey looked at his mother in wild-eyed astonishment. Then he managed to stammer out:

"M-m-mother, the ould chicken in the wood called the litt' wans, an' sure an' they've gone home to her!"