

THE NEW CHICKS

KEYWORD: Mother love.

Do you all remember what a lot of excitement there was among the hens when Speckles laid her first egg in the nest Shirley made for her?

There was a reason for it. Eggs are wonderful things. They are not only good for food, but they are also little chicks in the making. The hens understand about this and are glad. That is why a hen cackles her little song when she lays an egg.

Speckles was now very busy and very happy. Every

day she sang her little song of "Caw-ca-ca," meaning "I'm going to lay an egg." Then she would go out and sit on her little nest and dream of the future. When she had laid her egg, she would come flying off the nest cackling loudly, "I've laid an egg, I've laid an egg."

When there was a full dozen eggs in her nest, Speckles found it was all she could do to cover them nicely with her wings. She loved her eggs so much that she decided that she would stay with them and cuddle them close to her breast. So then instead of staying outside in the yard with the other hens enjoying the sunshine she sat all day on her eggs. She only left them for a few minutes when she hurried out for something to eat and drink. She had a funny little way of telling the other hens that she was too busy to visit with them. "Cluck-cluck, cluck," she said as she ate her food quickly and then ran back to her nest. She did not want her eggs to get cold; that was why she was in such a hurry.

Speckles knew a great deal for such a little hen, and how she learned it all is a mystery that very few people know. She not only knew how to keep her eggs warm and cozy, but every day she turned each egg over. How could she do that, do you think? She had no hands as we have. Do you think she scratched them over with her feet? Oh, no! that would have been much too rough. She did it gently with her beak, one egg after another until they were all turned. How she knew which ones were turned and which were not is still another mystery. It took a long time to do it, but Speckles never stopped till they were all turned, no matter how tired she was.

Every day Shirley went out to see Speckles and give her something nice to eat. Speckles was getting so thin that she looked tired and weak. Her comb that used to be so red was pale, but still she sat on her nest patiently, keeping her eggs warm with her little body. Then one morning she had

a wonderful experience. Under her breast she felt a little movement. One of the eggs seemed to be alive, then another, and another. Oh, how it thrilled her! Little hearts were beating in the eggs, little bodies struggling to break their prison shells, little chicks preparing to come forth from the eggs. "My babies! my dear little baby chicks!" whispered Speckles, "they will surely soon be hatched."

She would not leave her nest that day for one minute. Shirley brought her some soft bread soaked in milk, which she ate gratefully.

Speckles could hear the little chicks tap, tap, tapping away inside the shells trying to break them open. One after another they managed to make a tiny opening. As soon as they breathed the air into their little lungs, they felt so strong that they just stretched their little legs and pushed just as hard as they could. Little by little they cracked their shells in two, and out they tumbled to snuggle among the soft feathers of their little mother, Speckles.

The next day when Shirley came out to see Speckles, she heard such a lot of little "peep-peeps" that she knew at once the baby chicks had hatched. She ran in to tell her mother and ask her to come out and see them. When they went into the chicken house, one little chick popped his head out to see the wonderful world. He was such a cunning little fellow that Shirley wanted to hold him. But when she put out her hand toward him, Speckles ruffled up her feathers and scolded so hard that Shirley was quite offended. But her mother told her not to mind, because Speckles was just warning her not to hurt her babies; that if she was kind to them and would feed them, Speckles would soon trust her to touch them.

Now Speckles with her babies was placed in a dear little house — a chicken coop. It had slats on one side far enough apart for the chicks to run in and out. Such soft little fluffy

babies they were! Shirley loved to watch them running about.

They had many lessons to learn, just as little boys and girls have. When mother Speckles called, "Chick-chick-chick," they very soon learned that it meant she had something to feed them. She would hold the food in her mouth, and they would scramble to get it. They were such healthy, hungry little chicks that they were always ready for a meal.

How fast they grew! In two weeks they had funny little tails. In four weeks they had grown so big that they were put into the big chicken yard with Speckles. And then what lovely times they had with their mother running about with them. Speckles was so kind to them and knew so many things! She could scratch deep holes in the ground, and find the biggest and fattest worms. She could catch beetles and flies. She knew where to find tender little shoots of grass. She knew when it was going to rain, as well as ever so many other things like hiding from a black crow that lived across the canyon. All these things Speckles taught her children, and as you can imagine, twelve lively chicks to feed and educate was quite a task. When they were tired out and ready to be cuddled under her wing, Speckles had a lovely "sleepy-bye" song that she crooned softly to them in chicken language. The words were something like these: "Sleep, darlings, sleep. Mother will keep you all warm."

They were good little chicks and tried to obey their mother, but as they grew older, they sometimes wandered away from her. But they were always glad to find their way back home again.
