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CHAPTER TWO

Much Hadham

RABBITS DOMINATED my thoughts for the next three years. They were charming pets and the more I had of them, the more I loved them. At one stage pretty well the entire lower lawn at Gaytons, the long rambling house fronting on Much Hadham's main street which Mummy and Aunt Nancy had rented, was covered by rather wonky wood and chicken-wire runs in which my young stock, who had been weaned and were advertised for sale, spent their youth. They did a better job on the grass than the push-mower, but little for the look of the garden.

My foundation does, Snowy and Rosy, had been well handled as babies and were very tame. You could let them run free in the walled garden and catch them again with ease, and unlike most animals, they actually seemed to like being cuddled. There is nothing so soft and luxurious for a child to bury her nose in as the thick silky fur of an Angora rabbit, and this amazing fluffy fleece kept growing, even when they were shorn twice a year.

The shearing was quite a performance, requiring time, patience and nerve – all heroically supplied by Mummy, armed with dressmaking scissors, while I held the rabbit as still as possible on the kitchen table. Angoras have rather loose, curiously yellow skin, which makes them unsuitable for culinary purposes – or so the Breed Society advice booklet informed us, and even in the hungriest days of the war none of us would have dreamed of popping them in the pot. However, the loose wrinkles were all too easy for the amateur barber to nick with her shears, thereby

My Animals and Other Family

ruining the snowy fur from which I derived most of my pocket-money.

In those days you could get ten shillings an ounce for white Angora wool, though it always astonished me what an enormous mound of the airy fluff had to be heaped into the scales to achieve that tiny weight. The company which bought all we could supply probably weighed it at their end, too, but they paid up faithfully, never less than the sum I billed them for.

Not having proper clippers, Mummy's attentions left the shorn rabbits' coats covered in ridges and they looked very odd for a few weeks until the fur began to grow again. Rosy, however, never endured this indignity because by some fluke we had chosen from the breeder's large litter a show champion.

To my eye, she was almost indistinguishable from her sister, but when I took them to a Breed Society show in the nearby town of Bishop's Stortford, Rosy came home with six first prizes and a cup, while poor Snow White won precisely nothing. One of the judges told us that shearing would spoil her looks, so to the end of her life she remained as nature intended, a gigantic powderpuff who had only to appear on a show bench for honours to be showered on her.

The drawback was that this made her a high-maintenance female, who needed daily grooming and ultra-clean living conditions. Feeling through her coat for mats was something I could do in my sleep; as soon as your fingers encountered the smallest seed or blade of grass that could form the basis of a clump, you had to tease it out very gently, gradually easing it away from the skin until at last it was loose enough to pull free without tweaking. Snowy, in contrast, was the ultimate in easy-care – two strokes of the brush and she was perfectly soignée.

For about a year, the two sisters lived a peaceful celibate existence in a big hutch just outside the stables, but things changed dramatically with the coming of Snowball. I can't remember if I nagged Mummy into buying him, or if she got him off her own bat, being now quite as keen on the rabbits as I was. Anyway, we let him into the outer compartment of the does' hutch, and almost immediately had to take him out smartish as they erupted from their sleeping-quarters in fury at the invasion, scratching

A tactical rethink suggested introducing them on neutral territory, one at a time, and this was more successful. I felt sorry for Rosy, left alone in the big hutch while her sister cavorted with the young buck, jumping over one another, boxing and nuzzling playfully, but when we felt sure they weren't going to damage one another we left them alone for a few days, and later repeated the exercise with Rosy. The result was two cracking litters, and soon an urgent need for extra housing.

The temptation to peek inside the sleeping-quarters at the newborn rabbits was overwhelming but had to be resisted, because if the doe caught you at it, she was liable to eat her naked helpless offspring. In any case, the deep nest of fluff in which she cradled them hid all but a tiny movement of the top layer to confirm that the babies were there. It always seemed an age – but must have been about ten days – before they opened their vivid pink eyes and ventured out into the open section of the hutch. Then there was the excitement of counting them, handling them to make them tame, and determining their gender – not easy, and one always hoped for a preponderance of females, for which there was more demand.

Snowball was a prolific progenitor, smaller and faster-moving than the laid-back does. He was also quite aggressive, kicking and scratching when transferred from one pen to another, so my arms and legs were usually decorated with long parallel lines of half-healed scabs.

I wasn't altogether sorry when he was killed by a visiting terrier which broke into one of the wonky pens, but by the time that happened we were almost snowed under with rabbits, despite selling as many as we could bear to part with. It was like that poem by W.B. Yeats about seagulls in a storm:

*First there were two of us, then there were three of us, then there was one bird more,
Four of us wild white seagulls, treading the ocean floor,
And the wind rose and the sea rose and the angry billow's roar,
With four of us, eight of us, ten of us, twelve of us seagulls on the shore.*

He goes on about: 'A wild white welter of winnowing wings...' which in our case was more like a wild white carpet of fluffety fur, but when Mummy eventually called a halt to the breeding programme because I was going away to weekly-board, we had twenty-seven rabbits to feed, muck out, and house according to age and sex, and the sense of

sample page from plate section



Left: More suitably dressed for Ascot than farmwork, my grandmother Lady Barstow turns hay with a pikle.

Top right: The geese that escaped the fox come racing for morning corn.

Below: Wartime haymaking at Abernant.

Bottom: Merry, the shire horse, pulling the gambo.

