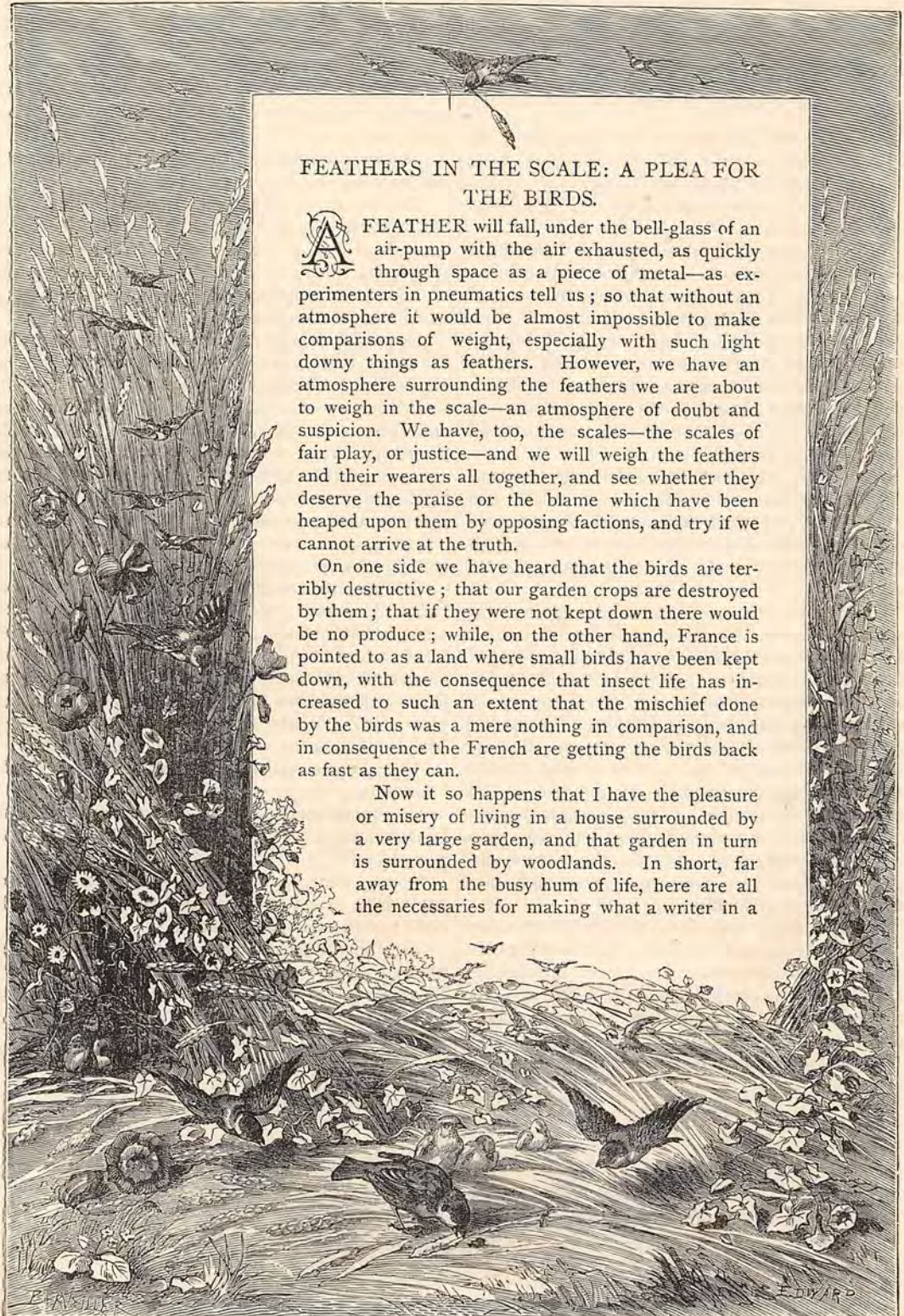


FEATHERS IN THE SCALE: A PLEA FOR THE BIRDS.

A FEATHER will fall, under the bell-glass of an air-pump with the air exhausted, as quickly through space as a piece of metal—as experimenters in pneumatics tell us ; so that without an atmosphere it would be almost impossible to make comparisons of weight, especially with such light downy things as feathers. However, we have an atmosphere surrounding the feathers we are about to weigh in the scale—an atmosphere of doubt and suspicion. We have, too, the scales—the scales of fair play, or justice—and we will weigh the feathers and their wearers all together, and see whether they deserve the praise or the blame which have been heaped upon them by opposing factions, and try if we cannot arrive at the truth.

On one side we have heard that the birds are terribly destructive ; that our garden crops are destroyed by them ; that if they were not kept down there would be no produce ; while, on the other hand, France is pointed to as a land where small birds have been kept down, with the consequence that insect life has increased to such an extent that the mischief done by the birds was a mere nothing in comparison, and in consequence the French are getting the birds back as fast as they can.

Now it so happens that I have the pleasure or misery of living in a house surrounded by a very large garden, and that garden in turn is surrounded by woodlands. In short, far away from the busy hum of life, here are all the necessaries for making what a writer in a

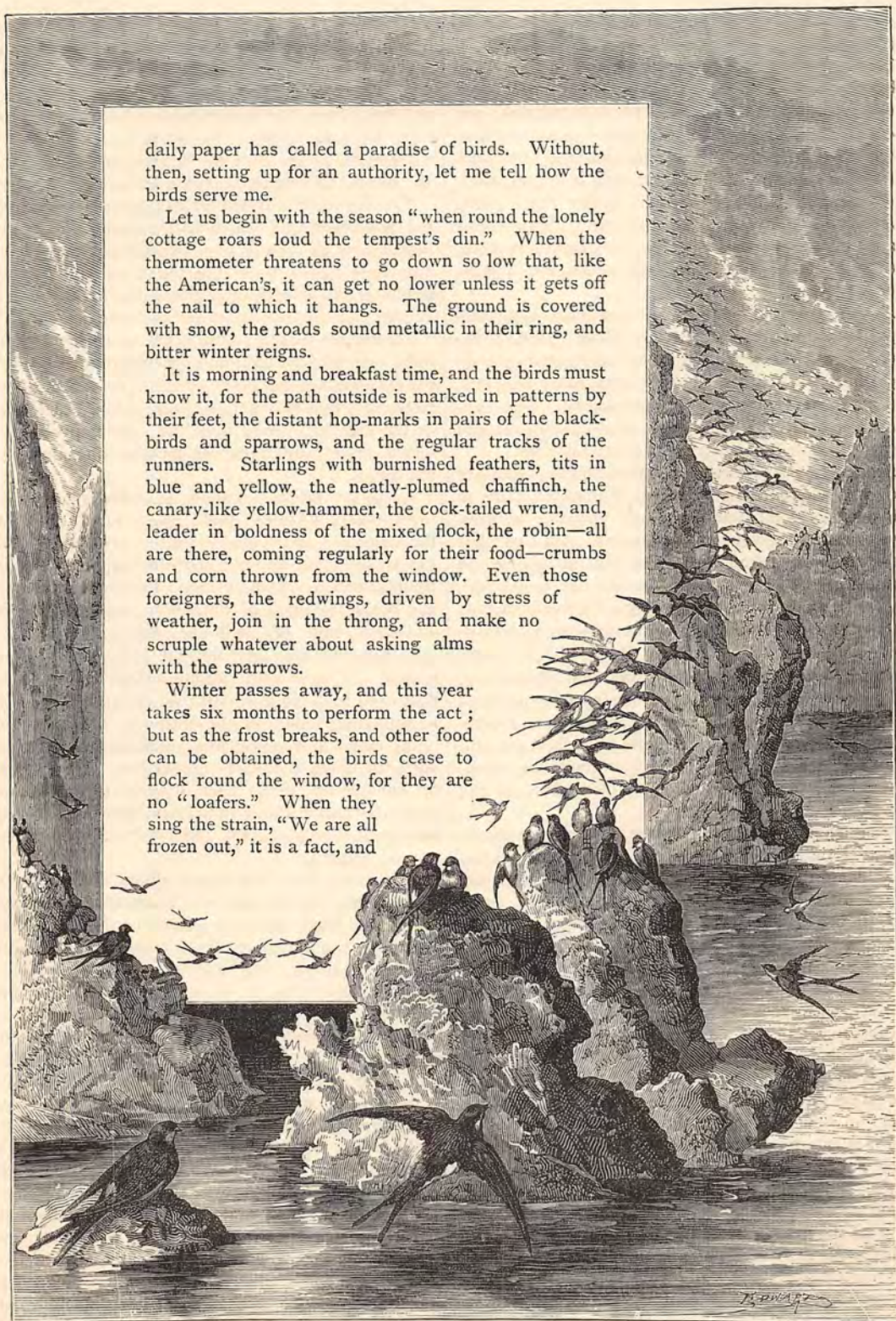


daily paper has called a paradise of birds. Without, then, setting up for an authority, let me tell how the birds serve me.

Let us begin with the season "when round the lonely cottage roars loud the tempest's din." When the thermometer threatens to go down so low that, like the American's, it can get no lower unless it gets off the nail to which it hangs. The ground is covered with snow, the roads sound metallic in their ring, and bitter winter reigns.

It is morning and breakfast time, and the birds must know it, for the path outside is marked in patterns by their feet, the distant hop-marks in pairs of the black-birds and sparrows, and the regular tracks of the runners. Starlings with burnished feathers, tits in blue and yellow, the neatly-plumed chaffinch, the canary-like yellow-hammer, the cock-tailed wren, and, leader in boldness of the mixed flock, the robin—all are there, coming regularly for their food—crumbs and corn thrown from the window. Even those foreigners, the redwings, driven by stress of weather, join in the throng, and make no scruple whatever about asking alms with the sparrows.

Winter passes away, and this year takes six months to perform the act ; but as the frost breaks, and other food can be obtained, the birds cease to flock round the window, for they are no "loafers." When they sing the strain, "We are all frozen out," it is a fact, and



you may know that they will not impose upon you. "How honest!" you will say. Wait a moment. I am going to prove to you that a bird has no moral rectitude whatever, for he will rob you with all his might.

Though winter clings to us more or less right up to July, the various trees in one's garden insist upon coming out in due time. First the gooseberries; and no sooner do the tender buds begin to appear than down come the chaffinches, greenfinches, and bullfinches in swarms, and eat out bud after bud, aided and abetted by the great and lesser tits. After insects, buds decayed, naturalists say. Stuff! The birds pick the plumpest, juiciest, and healthiest buds, and littering the ground with the scales, eat only the tender centre.

As time goes on the apple and pear buds swell, and begin to bloom pink and pearly white. Here is another feast. They will settle at early morn on an apple-tree, and deliberately strip it of every rosy bud, leaving the leaves completely untouched. The bullfinches get all the blame, but the chaffinches and greenfinches do the greater part of the mischief.

Soon after, the earth is prepared for crops of radishes and beds wherein can be raised the tender plants of cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts. Sow the seeds if you like, but unless some peculiar precautions are taken, not a seed will be allowed to germinate. Place nets over them and leave one solitary hole, and every seed will go. Spread threads across; suspend bunches of feathers; hang up a cardboard cat; stuff a Guy Fawkes, if you like, to scare away the birds; in short, do anything that pleases you, and every hard-billed bird from the sparrow upwards will come all the same. As a last resource I have sown the seeds in the greenhouse, to come back and find that the moment my back is turned they come in at window and door and enjoy themselves all the same.

What should be spring comes, and the primrose peeps. It does but little more, for as fast as the blossoms bloom the sparrows scissor them off to strew the ground. Rabbits and rats bore the blame for some time, till the little mischievous rascals were caught in the fact. Later on they practised their snipping powers on various tender plants that were set out to grow, and all apparently from sheer love of mischief.

At last, with seeds above ground, and buds developed into blossom and leaf, one's troubles seemed to cease, for the birds had paired and begun to nest. There arose the soft coo of the dove in the wood where the nightingale came and sang by day; speckled thrushes were sitting on blue eggs in the laurel; the blackbirds laid their mottled-green eggs in the bay; the hedge-sparrows' tiny green eggs were warm in the holly; and sparrows were carrying long strands of straw about in the most insane way, to make a terrible litter among the tender green of the trees. Half hidden in the yew were the robins, with their home of moss and hair; whilst the starlings wheezed about the chimneys, and darted in and out from the holes beneath the tiles. Matrimony was usurping all their time, and the garden had a rest.

So we thought, but the game of voracity began directly after. Currants, as they formed, were taken one by one from the bunch; such gooseberries as struggled into existence were cut off and left to rot. The peas had two attacks—the first as they came all tender above ground, the second when the pods were full. Some of the sparrows chiselled open so many and swallowed the juicy peas to such an extent, that their feathers seemed to stand on end, while at early morning the blue bar-winged jays came out of the wood and breakfasted upon them with impunity.

The moment the strawberries began to grow rich and red, the blackbirds, which had been innocence itself, began; and as soon as they had helped to destroy the crop they began upon the black currants, literally stripping the boughs of the luscious berries, and invariably picking the ripest and the best.

I must say to the credit of the sparrows and starlings that they did not join in the nefarious raids upon the strawberries and black currants, though this is due to the fact that they were working with all their might at the cherries, whose pulp they deftly peeled from off the stones, which they left hanging dismally among the leaves.

As to the plums, I cannot say who it was picked them, but fully believe that it was a joint attack; but the damsons and bullaces were carried off wholesale by the jays. Here it might be supposed that the troubles ended. By no means: there were the apples and pears, the ripest of which were dug out into holes and caves, while the mellowest pears were pecked at until they fell, and then finished to the skin upon the ground. I have said nothing about the seed-beds destroyed to make dust-baths for the sparrows; of the investigating habits of the starlings, who poked out bulbs, pulled up young plants, and removed the manure out of the holes that were prepared to grow fine beet, for enough has surely been brought forward in this perfectly truthful bill of indictment, drawn up to prove how great a nuisance the birds of "a bird paradise" are to a garden.

Fortunately there is a reverse side to every question. Were it not for this, one would feel disposed to take a gun and shoot down every bird in the district, and so strip a beautiful part of the country of one of its greatest beauties. So now, having played counsel for the prosecution, let us take up the brief for the defence.

On behalf of the birds, then, I plead guilty, my lord the umpire, to all that has been said by the prosecution. For the blackbird it is owned that he gluts himself with gooseberry, strawberry, and currant—you see he owns to another fruit beyond that mentioned—for he knows naught about *meum* and *tuum*, though he seems to take toll as his wage. For what has he done in company with the thrush? All the year round he has ferreted out snail and slug from their damp holes and corners, and as the caterpillars appeared upon the fruit-tree leaves, hunted them out by hundreds of thousands. Snail, slug, and caterpillar would have denuded the garden, so the sweet piping blackbird and melodious thrush are welcome to their feast—though,

without the good they do, they earn it by making music through the spring.

The finches, what have they to say? That they work early and late, destroying the seeds of thousands of prolific plants that would make our gardens a mass of weeds, while at other times they are seeking tiny beetles, green flies, with the various blight insects unnumbered, and scorn not to feed wholesale upon the caterpillars that turn gooseberry-trees into skeletons.

And the sparrows? They work with the finches, but wage war on their own account upon the rose-aphis, and other insects, even going so far as to play boy, and snare the butterfly that lays the eggs upon the cabbage, that produce the green caterpillars, that devour the leaves, creep into the innermost recesses, refuse to be washed out, and come to table, and make lovers of this succulent plant quite cross.

We can forgive the finches and sparrows, then, and with them the starlings and their cherry-stealing propensities, for their keenly-pointed bills dig out the larvæ of the tippulæ that swarm in the garden—those fat, dirty-looking, insidious grubs that burrow under ground, and eat the tender roots of flower and vegetable, making them perish and die. Millions of those grubs do they destroy, and without them lawn and pasture would be brown and bare.

As to the jays and magpies and rooks, the two former are thieves and brigands; they are murderers, too, and the only good to be set to their credit is that, as destroyers of young birds and poachers of eggs, they keep down the too great increase of small birds. The rook is an awkward bird to deal with, for a flock can dig up beans, peas, and corn wholesale; but at the same time they destroy vast numbers of injurious insects and their larvæ, so that the scales hang equal when they are held up.

I have dealt with the chief offenders, and now we come to the insectivorous birds, the annual visitors—chiff-chaffs, nightingales, blackcaps, whitethroats, and the rest of their race, without counting the swallow family—swifts, swallows, and martins. Taken in the aggregate, the myriads of insects these birds destroy is something so appalling, as a calculation, that it is like reckoning the awful distances with which astronomers have to deal. But what are those insects to us? may be said; a few more or a few less gnats, and buzzing creatures of that kind, do not interfere much with our comfort.

Indeed! You forget, good gardener, florist, or farmer, whatever you be, that these insects represent the blights that would devastate your crops, and that silently and without ostentation the birds are ridding you of pest after pest. One way and another, when the least favourable view of the work of birds is calculated, the scale goes down in their favour, for the mischief they do is after all so little that it ought not to be taken into consideration. "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn," is a Divine command. Why then grudge our little feathered friends their reward of fruit, seed, and buds?

They take seeds? Well, sow more, as better men have done before, and be grateful that these wondrous works of your Creator's hand affect your home, making it beautiful with their presence, divine with their songs; and glory in the fact that they find your garden a sanctuary, and hardly flee at the tread of your foot. The tameness of the birds may have been shocking to that hero of the poet who was "lord of the fowl and the brute," but nothing in a country home is more interesting than to watch the gradual confidence that grows amongst birds, when they find that they can mate and nest in peace. I speak with no exaggeration, but I write from a place that literally swarms with feathered fowl—one of the quiet nooks of Old England, where save at certain seasons the gun is never heard; where the hawk hangs poised in the soft blue sky; where the night-jar utters its rattling note, the peewit tumbles headlong over the marsh; where the heron gathers in goodly company, and, amidst the ruins of a fine old castle, the jackdaw rears his powdered-headed brood. The lover of bird life and ways could find enough for observation here, where, as night falls, out come the owls to hawk over the fields in silent ghostly flight, saluting you with a hideous shriek if startled on their way, whilst their young sit waiting and uttering a curious hiss, looking in the gloom like goblins of the night.

"But look at the mischief you own the birds can do," says the man who carps. I do look at it, and say in return, look at the immense good. Let me follow Uncle Toby again, and say there is room enough in the world for birds and all. Their beauty of form and song should be strong enough plea that they might live, without one's having to put the feathers in the scale to prove that they do not kick the beam.

GEO. MANVILLE FENN.

