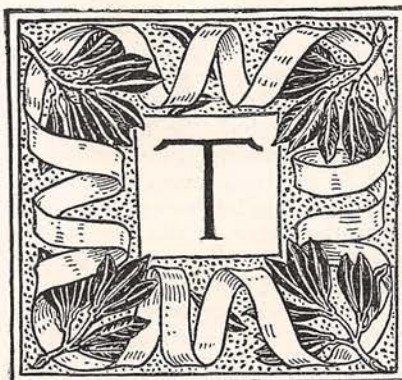




THE BIRDS OF LONDON.

By BENJAMIN KIDD.

With Engravings by GEORGE LODGE from Drawings by J. WYCLIFFE TAYLOR.



THE rooks no longer build their nests in the Temple Gardens, and the thrushes and red-breasts, which, even fifty years ago, were wont to haunt the suburban gardens in the neighbourhood of what are now the main arteries of London traffic have long since retired before the ever-rising tide of bricks and mortar. Nevertheless what is left of London bird-life has not ceased to be interesting. On the contrary as the fog-pall has thickened over modern Babylon it has acquired a new interest which is peculiar to itself.

It is early morning in the month of May, and I am leaning against the window casement. It is light, but still some time before sunrise, and the air has that feeling which

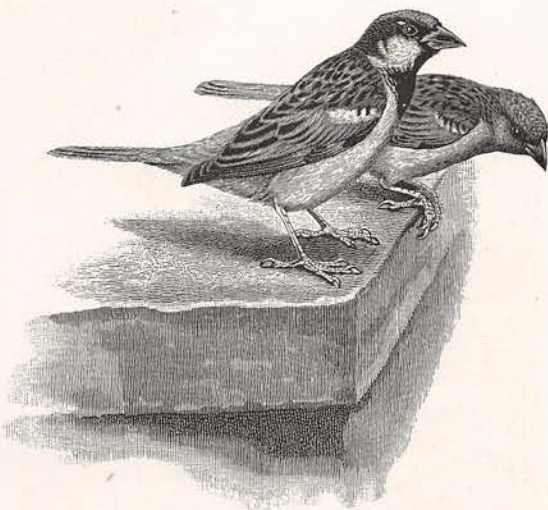
is peculiar to London air only at this time of year and in this hour out of twenty-four. The faint fresh odour brings into the mind for a moment a vision of a far off lake amongst my native hills from whose still surface the mist is just now beginning to rise, and the familiar cry of the coot as she sails out from the sedge, where during the night she has added another speckled egg to the store in her floating nest among the tall bulrushes. As I lean out of the window and catch the rumble of a belated cab my ears are filled with a peculiar noise which Londoners do not often listen to; for it is only to be heard about this time, and this is just the hour at which the great city falls into such short and fitful sleep as she gets. In the still air it sounds not unlike an army of stone-cutters at work with chisels and mallets on hard stone; but strange to say it does not come from anything so harsh as steel and stone, but from the throats of innumerable sparrows.

It is everywhere, along the street, on the slates overhead, in the trees in the gardens below, and a good deal of it comes from the sooty ivy on the wall where the birds have their nests. As the grey light grows brighter the eye begins to follow the movements of the birds in the back gardens below, and the sight is one worth seeing. It is the London sparrow at work in the breeding season during the first hour after the dawn. The incessant chirruping which goes on comes principally from the young birds. Some of them are still fledglings in the nests hidden away out of sight; others are standing about in lines and groups, along the ledge under the roofs, on the walls and palings, and on the branches of the trees. They are cold after the night and sit huddled up in their feathers, and they are all hungry. Their impatient cries drive the old birds frantic; I can see these going and coming in short quick flights over the opposite house to and from the deserted cab-rank in the adjacent street; they are hopping with

quick anxious gait over the gravel below exploring everywhere for food; they are round the doors, on the window-sills and in the dust-bins. Few morsels will escape their sharp eyes; the city is asleep and they have the world to themselves.

An interesting study in bird life is the London sparrow now. All the birds are not looking for food. Some are collecting building materials and are making short flights backwards and forwards, returning with straws, bits of rag, and odds and ends in their beaks. This is not the first venture in housekeeping with these; they have already reared one brood this year, and now they have begun again, and they will rear another before the season is out. The London sparrow is a by-word and proverb among birds for his breeding propensities; poor little fellow! it is the only way in which he can manage to make headway against the risks which continually beset his life, and the consequent high death-rate amongst his tribe.

Look at the crowd of eager nest-builders around that heap of house-sweepings against the dust-bin yonder. One after another of the little odds and ends of rubbish are taken up, weighed in the tiny bills, and found wanting according to some occult standard of the sparrow mind, until at last one suggests some element of fitness and the owner flies merrily away with his find. To give them their due these nest-builders look a somewhat disreputable lot. Sooty they are, hard worked, and with many a feather missing. The cab-horse has a luxurious and well-to-do look compared with a London sparrow in the height of the breeding season. The latter quarrels with his comrades for straws, loses his tail-feathers in duels and love-affairs, plucks out his breast feathers himself to line his nest, and works himself to the bone for his family in the intervals of quarrelling and love-making.



COCK AND HEN SPARROWS. DRAWN BY GEORGE LODGE.

A quick harsh note and a flutter of wings. Every sparrow has left the ground. One looks round to find the cause of the alarm, but sees nothing at first. But we have been on the brink of a tragedy. A familiar form comes out from behind the wooden paling which tops the brick wall of the garden; it is my own cat, and he slinks into the open with that foolish sullen look peculiar to all the members of the feline tribe when they have been balked of their prey. I call him softly by his name and he looks up and blinks his grey eyes at me. The marks of nocturnal dissipation are upon him. As he walks along the wall one may see the advantage of that grey fur striped with dark lines which is so common among the London cats; in the half light he is almost invisible on the dull back-ground. The London cats mostly go their own ways and natural selection is only slightly tempered by human interference. This one walked into our house as a kitten and we took him in; he was housed and fed and petted; but a street arab he was born and will remain. From an early age he took to sparrow-hunting; we tried to break the old Adam in him, but after he had tasted blood and the pleasures of the chase the attempt had to be given up in despair. Some one sat in the room with him and a young tame sparrow for four hours scarcely taking eyes off him. Blandishments were tried, but he was deaf to them; the attempt was given up and a stick was tried, but his spirit was unaffected. He feared the stick but he meant to have the sparrow—and he had it, under our eyes. He killed it with a stroke of his paw at a distance of some two feet even while he crouched down in fear from the punishment he knew would follow. I do not think any power could curb the lust for sparrow-killing in that grey blinking creature on the wall.

He is off now after some other mischief and the sparrows come back again. Along the flower border there is a dark discoloured patch. It has been raining recently and it was here that the water collected in a shallow pool. The water is gone, absorbed

by the sandy sub-soil beneath, and the surface is covered with a thin film of black mud, on which here and there the blades of a tiny bunch of grass lie stretched out, whitened now with the heavy dew they have gathered in the night. It is just the spot the earthworms like to come to the surface to feed in, and last night has been a night such as they love; one can see the fresh casts which have been thrown up since the rain. One of the blue and pink burrowers has evidently come to the surface to stay, and he wriggles feebly and aimlessly on the moist ground. Presently a sparrow hops this way, the early bird is about to have his worm you think. But no he passes by and almost over it without appearing to see it.

The sparrow is no lover of creeping things, but it comes quite as a surprise many of his admirers to learn that he is a vegetarian. Yet this is the trait in his character which will probably earn for him a place in history. It is because he is a vegetarian that the English sparrow has followed in the wake



THE SONG THRUSH.

of the great Anglo-Saxon invasion of the world's wildernesses, even as his ancestors probably followed long ages ago in the wake of the Aryan invasion of Europe. The sparrow does not love the wood and the silent haunts of nature. He follows the settler with a very practical purpose in his head; he comes to steal his corn, and to hang about the homestead to pick up scraps. He is no solitary hunter of winged and creeping things in waste places, but

has always grown fat amongst the sheaves and pig-troughs of his patron. Nor has the revolution in our habits affected the sparrow. In these days some of us, alas! no longer keep flocks and herds or grow our own corn; we show an unmistakable tendency to crowd together in towns; we shut out most of the sky and cover the face of nature for league upon league with bricks and asphalt; nearly every feathered thing retires before the desolation we make. But the sparrow remains, for our habits suit him better than ever.

It is because the sparrow is a vegetarian that he is the only wild bird which really lives in London. We have many occasional feathered visitors to favoured spots in London, but none of them except the sparrow can truly be said to inhabit the great circle twelve miles in diameter which stretches outwards from St. Paul's. Here it is that the sparrow has the world practically to himself. For him our hundreds of miles of streets spread daily a bounteous feast; even the poorest neighbourhoods find him a congenial home, and their dust-bins and cab-ranks spread a table continually before him in the presence of his enemies the cats. No wonder the London sparrow endures the soot and risks the cats, few others of the feathered tribe have their daily bread provided so regularly.

Frank Buckland used to say that the London sparrows went out of town in August and took to the corn-fields. Some of the sparrows in the outskirts of the city may do this, but it cannot be true of the London sparrow proper for he has no reason to migrate, and he is certainly never absent from his usual haunts. Did the London sparrow take it into his head to strike wing for the country it would be a vast exodus and the Kentish farmer might almost as hopefully prepare for a flight of locusts.

The song thrush and the blackbird are still visitors to the open spaces and private

gardens in suburban London. The thrush may occasionally be both seen and heard in Kensington Gardens and Regent's Park, especially in the early morning. The thrush though a shy bird loves the earthworm and he likes to hunt it amongst the short grass or under the fallen leaves, one reason doubtless why he still finds so many spots which suit him in and about London. It would be hard to find earthworms anywhere so plentiful as they are in many of the open spaces in London. Whether this is the result of abundant food and a favourable soil, or of the absence of the enemies which keep them in check, or of the great age of the turf which is not broken up from time to time as it would be if under cultivation, it is difficult to say. Probably all three conditions have something to do with it. Kensington Gardens in particular is at the present time a splendid hunting ground; all through last winter, even in frosty weather, I was able to get a constant supply there for some frogs with no further aid than the point of my umbrella.

The starling is another bird which hunts the earthworm and which is occasionally to be seen on the turf in the Parks and open spaces in London. There is no bird which goes to work in such businesslike fashion; his constant swingings from side to side so as to work the ground on both sides of him, the incessant jerking of his head up and down as he drives his beak inquiringly into the earth, and his motions varied every now and then by a short quick run as he seeks a more favourable spot, all combine to give one the idea that the bird feels he has not got a moment to lose over his work. The starling breeds in large numbers round London and is said to be on the increase in some neighbourhoods, Chislehurst for instance. He frequents the better class villas-residences a good deal, and likes to build in holes in trees or about houses. He particularly affects a hole in the wall out of reach or a broken roof. Starlings are generally to be seen in the open spaces in London in flocks of three or four birds to a dozen.

Last January I counted twenty-five birds in a single flock on the turf in Gray's Inn Gardens.

One of the most interesting birds which still figure in London bird life is, beyond doubt, the rook. His connection with London is historic. We are all familiar with Goldsmith's experiences of the rooks which he watched at work on their nests in the Temple Gardens. The rook has however long since forsaken the precincts of the Temple and even living memory cannot now connect him with the place. But it may surprise many Londoners to hear that we have still a rookery in the very centre of London, a sight which certainly constitutes one of the greatest curiosities connected with the city.

Almost within a stone's throw of the heart of London, a little to the east of where Chancery Lane debouches into High Holborn, one may notice on the opposite side of the way a low archway. Through it a passage leads between high buildings to an open space nearly surrounded on all sides by legal offices. The place is known as Gray's Inn Gardens, and is well kept and little frequented. The sooty stretch of grass which looks as green and fresh as it is possible to look in the centre of London, is studded with a large number of tall plane trees in good condition which give the place a charmingly rural aspect quite unexpected in such a quarter. It is here, separated

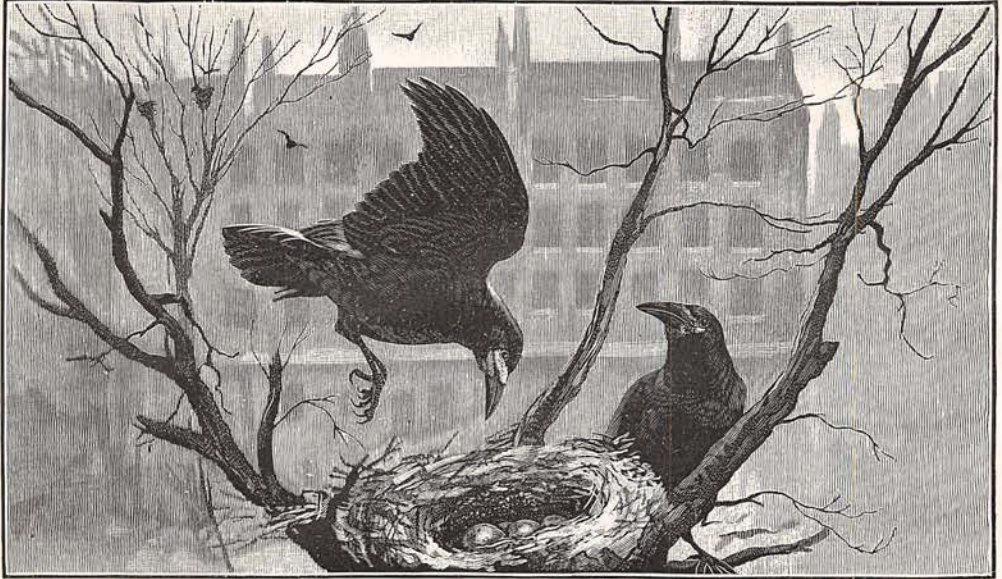


THE STARLING.

by some miles on every side from the open country, that there still exists in dwindling numbers one of the most ancient colonies of rooks; the nests still hang in the branches of the plane trees and up to the present the birds have always returned in the spring to put them in repair and hatch out their young.

At one time this rookery was far more extensive than it is now. Even in 1878 there were twenty eight full nests in the breeding season; this year I count eighteen nests only. An interesting feature of the place, and one which, doubtless, tends to attach the colony to it, is the care which is taken of the birds. They are fed regularly, the food given being dog-biscuit steeped in water. It is spread by the gardener on an enclosed mound in the centre of the gardens, and it proves very attractive to a host of sparrows as well as to the rooks.

The rook, most conservative of all birds as he is, is now almost driven out of London. Even twelve years ago there were still several fairly extensive rookeries in London. Writing so recently as 1878 Dr. E. Hamilton gives in the *Zoologist* an



ROOKS IN GRAY'S INN.

account of the rook in London which seems to separate the time by a long interval from the present. The rookery in Kensington Gardens was then still in existence and was said to contain thirty-one nests, which makes the writer recall with regret, the year 1836 when the rookery extended from the Broad Walk to the Serpentine and contained close on one hundred nests. Since some of the higher trees were cut down in the gardens some years ago the birds have left the gardens, doubtless never to return, and there is not now a single nest in the place. Dr. Hamilton also mentions other places which the rooks then frequented but which they have since forsaken. He says: "In 1875 a rook's nest was built and the young hatched out in a tree at the back of Hereford Square, Brompton. The following year the birds returned with others and ten nests were built in the fine elm and plane trees there." But in 1879 there is a note in the same paper stating that the rooks' nests near Hereford Square, Brompton, which had been for several years frequented in the spring, had been that year deserted, the result being attributed to the noise of the workmen in the numerous buildings which were being erected in the vicinity.

This or a similar fate has now befallen nearly all the rook settlements in London. That the birds cling so long to their old haunts, despite many incongruous surroundings, is due to the well known conservative instincts of the family. The rook is like the salmon: when he grows up he goes abroad far afield to sow his wild oats and seek his fortune, but when he settles down in life and elects to take upon himself parental responsibilities he always returns to the haunts of his youth. So it is that the family breeding grounds are tenanted from generation to generation until it becomes impossible to hold them any longer. Richard Jefferies once suggested the planting of the Thames

Embankment thickly with trees in the hope of attracting the rooks to build there ; but it is much to be doubted if this plan would now be successful, such feeding grounds as are within reach in London, are now very restricted, and are much too frequented for the rook's taste.

The rook is however still occasionally to be seen in London. He used to affect the grounds of Lambeth Palace as much as anywhere, probably because of the seclusion. He might sometimes be seen there at work on the sward, or perched on a sooty branch of one of the trees that have become almost as black as his own plumage. In his visits to town he may be seen at times accompanied by his friend the jackdaw. It would be interesting to know the grounds of the friendship which everywhere seems to prevail between the rooks and the jackdaws. In the winter time in the country a flight of rooks is usually seen thickly interspersed with jackdaws. Starlings and other gregarious birds often fly with rooks too and mingle with them on the ground, but when they take to the wing the former always keep together. The jackdaws however mingle with the rooks indiscriminately both on the ground and on the wing and even in the roosting places. White of Selborne suggested that perhaps the jackdaws followed the rooks from interested motives : "because rooks have a more discerning scent than their attendants and can lead them to spots more productive of food. Anatomists," he quaintly adds, "say that rooks, by reason of two large nerves which run down between the eyes into the upper mandible, have a more delicate feeling in their beaks than other round-billed birds, and can grope for their meat when out of sight. Perhaps then their associates attend on them from motives of interest, as greyhounds wait on the motions of their finders ; and as lions are said to do on the yelpings of jackals."

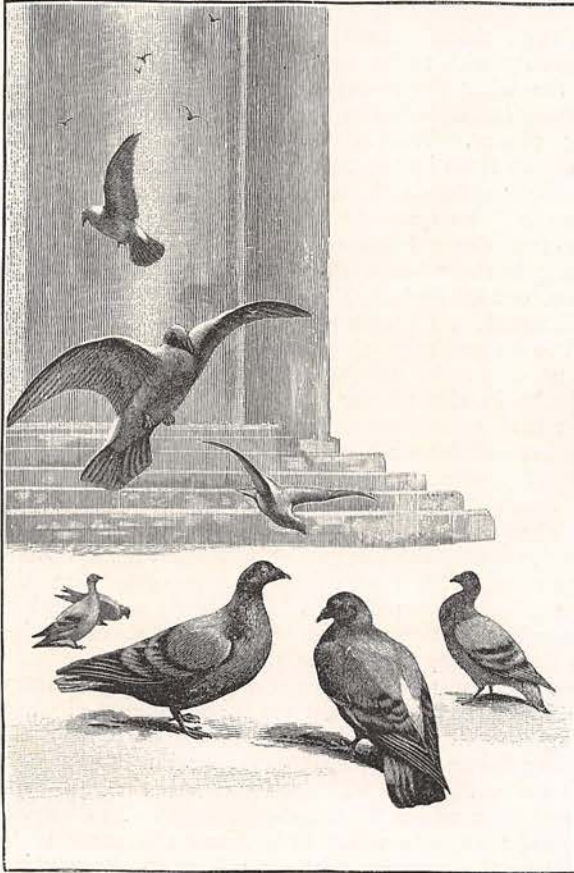
The jackdaws like the rooks used to be much commoner about London than they are now. They go in flocks in the winter but pair off in the breeding season. If they bred in London they would probably keep the sparrow down, for the jackdaw is rather an awkward neighbour for the smaller birds ; he robs their nests and carries off the unfledged young as dainty morsels. Church steeples and ivy-covered ruins within easy reach of the open country are the jackdaw's favourite breeding places. In the absence of such he has forsaken London at present ; but he will doubtless return to await the advent of Macaulay's New Zealander, for the promised sketch of the ruins of St. Paul's would not be complete without him. Cathedral towns he is generally associated with. The birds also build in the disused chimneys and continue dropping the twigs down until one lodges crosswise and holds the others, so enabling the foundations of the nest to be laid.

Although the rooks have forsaken Kensington Gardens some interesting country birds have recently established themselves there. In recent years some wood-pigeons have built their nests and reared their young in the Gardens, and these extremely shy birds may now be seen almost any day flying from tree to tree or on the ground feeding. These birds must not be confused with the true London pigeon of the blue-rock blood, which never takes to the trees and from which the wood-pigeon is quite distinct.

The term wild bird would technically exclude what is perhaps the most truly London bird after the sparrow, namely the pigeon, without which no description of bird-life in London would be complete. The London pigeon may not be called a wild bird but he is so in reality. He makes his nest where he pleases, and like the sparrow and the street arab, he lives in the streets. One of these days the London County Council may claim suzerainty over him ; at present he owns allegiance to no man. Nearly all the larger public buildings and many of the churches in London are inhabited by pigeons ; the birds make their nests in the inaccessible nooks and corners of the roofs and they increase and multiply from year to year. St. Paul's cathedral, the British Museum, the Houses of Parliament, Somerset House, the Guildhall, the Law Courts, and nearly every building of the kind, has each its own particular flight of pigeons. These places with their carved masonry and wide spacious roofs with many an aerial nook and cranny offer just the kind of retreat which every descendant of the rock-pigeon loves. The pigeons which frequent some of the buildings are fed regularly, others forage for themselves, and it is one of the pleasantest sights of the city, and not an uncommon one, to see the London cabby emptying the remains of his nose-bag in the middle of a flock of pigeons which show every sign of appreciation of the largess.

One of the most interesting things about the London pigeon is the way in which he is working out and confirming one of the most striking of the Darwinian

theories. The wild pigeons in London are beyond doubt the descendants of stray birds which, finding food plentiful, took to their present mode of life, and their numbers are still occasionally recruited by tame birds which join them with the usual instinct of pigeons in such cases. The present pigeons are in fact the descendants of a motley crew of birds of many breeds and all colours. It is generally acknowledged that all varieties of our domestic pigeon came originally from one wild species, the common blue-rock, still found wild on many parts of the coast. This bird has a characteristic colour and very peculiar markings which distinguish it from all other species of pigeons throughout the world. The colour is slaty-blue, and the wings



BRITISH MUSEUM PIGEONS.

are marked with two dark transverse bands, the tail feathers having also a dark band across the end, while the outer tail-feathers are edged with white at the base. Despite the many distinct breeds of domestic pigeons at the present day, not only is it held that they are all descended from a common stock, but it is asserted, that if all the varieties were turned loose and allowed to inter-breed freely, their descendants would, in course of time, all once more return to this blue-rock type in which they all originated. The London pigeon is doing something to work out this experiment. Any one who watches a flock of the pigeons which frequent the buildings in London will certainly see amongst them traces of many breeds and will find nearly all the colours represented. The blue-rock is, however, the predominant type and there is little doubt that if uninterrupted it would be only a question of time till it extinguished all minor peculiarities.

One result of the crowding of buildings in the central parts of London is that winged insect life is driven away, and as it has failed the swallows have retreated to the suburban fringes of London.

The swallow like the rook has no

objection to town life in itself, but insect food must be abundant to enable it to thrive. Early last September, great numbers of swallows were to be seen in the Crystal Palace neighbourhood circling high up in the air previous to their annual flight. For some days previously they were to be noticed from the South Eastern Railway, between St. John's and Grove Park stations, perched together in groups on every available roosting-place and chattering loudly as they always do in these yearly meetings.

The swallow breeds freely round London. It is indeed curious to see the attachment of this shy gentle bird to the places frequented by man and the buildings used by him. The rafters of a roomy shed is the place which, above all others, the swallow loves to build in, failing this he is content with a place under the eaves or he will make shift as best he can with any other corner about the house. Like the sparrow the swallow has always been with us, and he probably twittered from his clay built nest beneath the roof-tree of our Aryan forefathers; he has clung to us through all the varying phases of our architectural progress, and he takes to the capital of the Corinthian column as a nesting place as familiarly as he probably did to the crevices in the roof of the family cave in primeval times. Even our habit of living in towns

does not drive him away, and it is only when his food supply fails that he retires from the London smoke and leaves us alone with the sparrow.

It may have occurred to others, as it has to me, to question whether some explanation is not to be sought of the curious habit which the swallow so persistently clings to, of building its nest about our houses. There is no reason why we should expect to find the swallow, like the sparrow, in association with man. It is by nature a shy bird; we do not provide for it in any way, for it subsists on a diet of insects which it hunts abroad on the wing; and, above all, it is a migrant, leaving us after a short interval for strange quarters in distant lands. Why is it that such a bird should come and build its nest familiarly round our windows and under our eaves? I have often wondered whether there may not be some connection between the instincts of the swallow and the rock-dwelling habits of our ancestors the cave-men. Judging by the

relics which he has left behind him, primeval man must have occupied and for enormously long periods most of the suitable caves within reach of the greater part of the world. The swallow is naturally a cave-frequenting bird; it builds and breeds in great numbers about the roofs and walls of caves at the present time, and beyond doubt it must often have been the sharer of these rocky shelters of early man.



THE ENEMY.

The sparrowhawk is a casual visitor to London and the neighbourhood, and like all his kind he is often mobbed by the swallows and other birds. Here on a southern Common just outside the smoke zone one may see him sometimes. The swallows have been flying all the afternoon over the smooth surface of the pond, dipping occasionally into the tepid water, and in the still air sending the tiny wavelets travelling all the way to the distant edges. The house-martins distinguished by the white patch on the lower part of the back fly in and out amongst them. But what is this excitement which has suddenly come amongst the birds? They have forsaken the water and are flying overhead, the swallow's shrill excited note—tweet—tweet—coming from several throats at once. The eye travels inquiringly round. There is a flash of wings at the corner of the copse where the furze ceases and the white-thorns grow thickly, followed by a little bird-like cry of agony. A sparrowhawk has swooped down among the bushes and some little nest of half-fledged yellow-hammers hidden in the gorse, has been orphaned. Now you may see the meaning of the swallow's note of alarm; the air is full of birds which seem to have gathered as if by magic. The hawk has secured his prey and stands for a moment holding it beneath him in his talons on a branch of the stunted oak. The swallows dash down furiously at him within an inch of his head screaming loudly as they pass and rise again on the wing. He is off now with his prize in the direction of the wood mobbed by the whole troop of birds which continue screaming in anger and making dashes at him the whole of the way. Nature is still red in tooth and claw even in these quiet neighbourhoods close to London. The excitement amongst the swallows does not calm down for a long time.

The great city grows apace and the feathered tribe retires steadily before it. Even our parks and open spaces do not seem to tempt the birds to linger with us. The nightingale still sings on Hampstead Heights, and the blackbird pipes on the fringes of Clapham Park; but even there they are in retreat before the speculative builder. Only the sparrow and the pigeon remain with us.

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