



By GRANT ALLEN.

OUR WINGED HOUSE-FELLOWS.

WE have been sitting this afternoon in the Big Drawing-room, enjoying the view from its extensive windows. It is a spacious apartment for so small a house—about three acres large, with windows that open all round over miles of moorland. The carpet has a ground-work of fallen pine-needles and green grass and bracken, irregularly threaded with a tiny pattern of brocaded flowers—yellow tormentil, white bedstraw, golden stoncrop, red sheep-sorrel; while by way of roof the room is covered by a fretted ceiling of interlacing fir-branches, through which one can catch at frequent intervals deep glimpses of a high and bright blue dome that overarches with its vast curve the entire Big Drawing-room. No finer throne-hall has any earthly king; it is quite good enough for ourselves and our visitors.

But as we leaned back in our easy-chairs—spring seats of brake, backed with a bole of red pine-bark—we gazed upward overhead through the gaps in the boughs, and saw our winged house-fellows, the black-and-white martins, sweeping round in long curves after flies in the sunshine. It was immensely picturesque for the martins and ourselves; how the flies regard the question, I forbear to inquire at the present juncture. We had lamb chops for lunch; let him that is without sin among us—for example, the editor of the *Vegetarian Times*—cast the first stone at the house-martins. For myself, I am too conscious of car-

nivorous and other sinful tastes to cast stones at anybody. We are all human, say I, or at any rate vertebrate; let us agree to take things with vertebrate toleration.

The house-martins abide under the same roof with ourselves; literally under the same roof, for their tiny mud nests cling close beneath the eaves of our two spare bed-rooms, familiarly known as the Maiden's Bower and the Prophet's Chamber—the last because it is most often inhabited by our friend the Curate, and furnished, after the scriptural precedent, with "a bed and a table and a stool and a candlestick"—"Every luxury that wealth can afford," said the Shunamite lady. "Under *our* roof," we say, when we speak of it; but the house-martins think otherwise. "Goodness gracious," I heard one of them twitter amazed to his wife the day we moved in for the first time to our newly-built cottage, "how terribly inconvenient! Here are some of those great nasty creatures, that walk so awkwardly erect, come to live in *our* house without so much as asking us. How they'll frighten the children!" For to tell you the truth, they were here before us. They came while the builders were still occupied in giving those "finishing touches" which are never finished; and they regarded our arrival as an unwarrantable intrusion. I could tell it from the aggrieved tone in which they chirped and chattered; "Gross infringement of the liberty of the subject"; "In England,

every martin's nest is called his castle" ; " Was it for this our fathers fought and bled at Agincourt against the intrusive sparrows?"—and so forth *ad infinitum*. But after a day or two, they cooled down and established a *modus vivendi*, the terms of the concordat being that we mutually agreed to live and let live, they under the eaves, and we in the interior. Since then,

For myself, I will admit, I just love the house-martins. They may be given to eating flies ; but what of that ? the skylark himself, Shelley's skylark, Meredith's skylark, affects a diet of worms, and nobody thinks one penny the worse of him. Even Juliet, I don't doubt, ate lamb chops like the rest of us. Indeed, it happened to me a few mornings since, during some very hot weather, to be positively grateful for these insectivorous tastes on the part of our feathered fellow-citizens. We were sitting on the verandah, much tried by a plague of flies ; it was clear that "the blood of an Englishman" attracted whole swarms of midges and other unwelcome visitors. As soon as the house-martins became aware of this fact, they drew nearer and nearer us in their long curves of flight, swooping down upon the insects attracted



this arrangement has been so honourably carried out on both sides by the high contracting parties that the martins allow us to stand close under them on the garden terrace, and watch while they bring flies in their mouths to their callow young, which poke out their gaping mouths at the nest door to receive them. They know us individually, and return with punctuality and dispatch to their accustomed home each summer. But when strangers stand by, I notice that though the parent birds dart back to the nest with a mouthful of flies, they do not dare to enter it or to feed their young ; they turn hurriedly on the wing, three inches from the door, with a disappointed twitter, a sharp cheep of disgust, and won't return to their crying chicks, which strain their wide mouths and crane their necks to be fed, till the foreign element has been eliminated from the party.

by our presence before they had time to arrive at the verandah. We sat quite still, taking no notice of the friendly birds' manœuvres ; till after awhile they mustered up courage to come close to our faces, flying so low and approaching us so boldly that we might almost have put out our hands and caught them. I am aware, of course, that the martins merely regarded us from the selfish point of view, as fine bait for midges ; while we in return were glad to accept their services as vicarious flycatchers. But on what

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else are most human societies founded save such mutual advantage? And do we not often feel real friendship for those who serve us for hire well and faithfully? In the midst of so much general distrust of man, I accept with gratitude the confidence of the house-martins.

All members of the British swallow-kind are amply represented in and about our three acres. The common swallows breed under the thatched eaves of the ruined shed in the Frying Pan, and hawk all day over the shallow trout stream that bickers down its middle. You can tell them on the wing by their very forked tail; it is, I think, in part a distinguishing mark by which they recognise their own kind and discriminate it from the martins; for the outer-tail feathers are particularly long and noticeable in the male birds; whence I take them to be of the nature of attractive ornaments. At the beginning of the breeding season, too, the males assume a beautiful pinky blush on the lighter parts of the plumage, which may specially be observed as they turn flashing for a moment in bright April sunshine. The sand-martins, again, the engineers of their race, have excavated their long tunnelled nests in the crumbling yellow cliff that flanks the cutting on the high road opposite; I love to see them

fly in with unerring aim at the narrow mouth as they return all agog from their aerial hunting expeditions on cool summer evenings. They are the smallest and dingiest of our swallows; they have no sheeny blue-black plumage like their handsome cousins, but are pale brown above, and dirty white below. The house-martin, last of all, can be recognised at once upon the wing by his conspicuous belt of pure white plumage, almost dazzling in its brilliancy, which stretches in a band across the lower half of his back; as he pirouettes on the wing, this badge of his kind gleams for a moment against the sky and then fades as if by magic. His shorter tail scarcely shows forked at a distance, but when you watch him at close quarters, it is delightful to observe how he broadens or narrows it as he flies, to steady and steer himself. In order fully to appreciate this point, however, you must have the quick keen eye of the born observer. As for the pure black swifts, those canonical birds that haunt the village steeple, they are not swallows at all, but dark and long-winged northern representatives of the humming-birds and trogons. All these alike are summer migrants in England, for they can but come to us when insects on the wing are cheap and plentiful.