THE DEBT WE OWE TO BIRDS AND BEASTS.

By GORDON STABLES, C.M., M.D., R.N.

BETWEEN the mawkish sentimentality of the old maid, who would not permit her servant to turn the bluebottle fly out of doors until it left off raining, and the conduct of the brutal costermonger, who looks upon his ass as a mere machine to be goaded to action on a minimum of food and a maximum of thwacking, there is a great gulf fixed. Probably most of us would prefer the old maid, for whatever be the reason thereof, we find the close of the nineteenth century characterised by a greater and more universal diffusion of kindness to the lower animals than was ever before witnessed. I see in this cause to rejoice rather than complain, despite the fact that owing to the strain on body and mind of our work-a-day population in the struggle for wealth, or even existence, so-called nervous disorders are vastly on the increase. Do we descry herein the relativeness of cause and effect? Are we really becoming morbidly sensitive to the sufferings of the creatures beneath us—our fellow-mortals? I am not prepared to answer the questions; but for every new book, inculcating directly or indirectly kindness to animals, placed on the reviewer's table, we shall find one on debility of the nerve centres, or some kindred subject.

But the person who does not turn aside to avoid crushing a beetle in his path is now-a-days the exception rather than the rule, while those people whose minds are cultured and refined are saddened, even on the brightest summer's day, when walking in fields or woods, by witnessing acts of pain and cruelty perpetrated on every side of them by the stronger denizens of the wilds over the weaker. And these are seen in every grade of life, from insects upwards to that of birds and beasts. Here is a harmless fly in the talons of a monster spider; here a polecat darting away with a blackbird torn from its nest, her pretty mate, who has seen all, making the "welkin" ring with his notes of anguish; or here again the blood-stained feathers of a cushat-dove, that has been torn in pieces by a hawk, and who will croodle no more at eventide in yonder thicket of spruce. The mystery of pain is one of the mysteries of Nature herself, which she will not reveal; and there are times when one cannot help envying the almost terrible Christianity of a Gordon, who believed that everything that is is good, and could see Heaven's hand and mercy even in a massacre.

Now while cheerfully admitting that there is an increase in acts of kindness to animals in our day, and a larger spirit of "live and let live" prevalent, we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that there is also a vast amount of thoughtless and destructive cruelty, coupled with thoughtless extravagance in the use of Nature's gifts and bounties.

In old school books there used to be a story of a boy who first ate the cake his mother had sent him, and then cried because it was all gone. We are very much in the same position; we are eating our cake, and our posterity of a few centuries hence will have to cry because we have left none for them.

There is a sad lack at present of what may be called national economy. This is noticeable on all hands, and in some instances the crime—for needless extravagance is a crime—brings its own punishment. About one-third of our precious life-giving coals, for example, is wasted in smoke; and in consequence, during at least one-third of the year the great world of London, to say nothing of many other of our large cities, is enveloped in a health-destroying fog and gloom, which might almost be called the very shadow of death itself, so fearfully does it increase our annual bills of mortality. Everyone knows there is a remedy for this state of matters, and that this remedy will be applied as soon as—the Irish Question is settled. Even the dark and loathsome streets and lanes of the East-end will catch glimpses of glorious sunshine then, and light and heat will help to banish sin and disease.

In lesser matters we are also madly, and, in a moral sense, penally extravagant. The destruction of our song birds, notably larks, to form table tit-bits for the upper ten and the middle million, is so great that already it is rare indeed to see or hear those charming birds anywhere near to a large town.

Again, the very fairest of our women-kind are still nothing more nor less than beautiful savages, for they go on "adorning" (?) themselves with the skins of birds, a large proportion of which, it is well they should know, are captured under circumstances of the greatest cruelty, torn from their nests in spring-time, when their coats or plumage are most lovely; when they are dressed, one might say, in their bridal garments. Small mercy receive they at the brutal hands of their captors; they are strangled on the spot, in sight of the despairing male birds, whose songs of joy are hushed for a season, and whose young are left in the nest to open their yellow beaks, to gape in vain for the food that never comes, and so to perish miserably of cold and starvation.

The same wanton and thoughtless extravagance goes on in the fur world, and in that of ivory and wild beasts' skins. Already the very noblest of our larger animals that dwell afar in forest or jungle are becoming woefully scarce; sacrificed they all will be ere long at the shrine of fashionable folly.

It will surely be a poor sort of a world to live in when neither buffalo nor bison roams in the wilderness or prairie; when the roar of the king of beasts awakes no more the echoes of African hills; when the elephant, the seal, and the bear can only be met with stuffed in museums; when coals have gone down, and heat and power can only be obtained from the earth's dark depths, or from the heaving breast of ocean; when the woods shall be silent in spring, and the only notion of bird-song shall be that handed down or preserved by the phonograph. It certainly will be a poor sort of world, and we creatures of the present age will be well out of it.

Perhaps many think it is but poor policy to look so far ahead. Let us consider, however, what we owe to birds and beasts in this good year of 1889. A few minutes spent in such consideration will not be time wasted, if it shall lead us to treat with greater care and kindness the dumb beasts whose pleading, wondering eyes are always upon us, look where we will.

Let us take the birds first. Directly or indirectly, we depend upon the feathered race for a very large portion of our food supply, both in eggs and in flesh. As regards game and poultry, we have very little to complain of; the former are most carefully and judiciously preserved, and since poultry shows have become an institution in the country, the breeding of fowls has almost reached the rank of an exact science.

I hope ere long to see the laws of economy as rigorously applied to the waters that surround our islands as to our moors and hills themselves, so that the living wealth that creeps and floats about our shores may have a chance of increasing for the national weal.

Indirectly we owe a very large debt indeed to the wild birds of the fields and gardens, although they are trapped and shot in the most heartless manner, and begrudged even the hips and haws and holly-berries that help them to tide over the severity of the winter season. The ignorance of gardeners especially causes them to look upon birds as their enemies. That they do a little harm at times and eat a little fruit, there is no gainsaying, but we would have neither fruit nor vegetables were it not for the wild birds. Insect life, particularly in the larval state, would become a plague, and good gardening a penance, if not an impossibility, were it not for the birds.

To say nothing of the thrushes and blackbirds that remain with us all the winter destroying the cocoons and chrysales of thousands of hybernating moths and destructive flies, and even the snails that have hidden in crevices to sleep throughout the cold season, we have such well-known gardeners' assistants as wrens, warblers, stone-chats, hedge-accentors, wagtails, titmice, larks, robins, redstarts, etc., etc. Even sparrows, and many kinds of finches, I maintain, and am able to prove, do excellent work in the garden. In addition to the above we have owls that destroy mice, and nightjars that catch moths, and by day, martins, swifts, and swallows.

In mentioning gardeners' assistants it would be unfair to forget the bats, the toads, and our good friends the frogs.

But it is to the insect-eating or soft-billed birds in particular that we have to be grateful for keeping down the truly terrible *aphides* or plant lice — these are ordinarily known by the name of green flies—on roses, etc., and black flies on beans and cherries. They increase during the summer months with enormous rapidity; the eggs are laid in autumn, hatch in the spring sunshine, then begin to multiply viviparously till autumn again; but it is in the early season that the birds assist us so well. Birds also keep down wasps and earwigs, that are so great a plague or curse to the fruit-grower. They devour also wire-worms, and many other kinds of destructive "crawlin' ferlies." I have already mentioned owls as useful in keeping down mice. These latter are at times most troublesome garden pests, especially in the early spring months, when, having devoured their stores of winter food, they come forth to eat the roots of everything palatable.

A proof of the sort of plague these creatures may become, as well as of the folly exhibited by ignorant keepers in shooting down every bird of prey wherever seen, was afforded a few years ago in the south of Scotland. A raid

had been made, and war *à outrance* declared against hawks and owls; this was carried out to the bitter end, but the field-mice increased to such an extent that whole fields of grass were utterly destroyed, the little creatures being actually in millions. So true is it that there is a balance of nature that cannot be interfered with with impunity. By this law no one species of animal is allowed to preponderate to the destruction of others, nor can any natural family be wantonly removed without others suffering in some way or another.

Birds, especially in the far north, are trapped and shot for the sake of their feathers and down. It is well known now, even outside the medical profession, that feather beds are not so healthy as mattresses; still, feathers will always be utilised for making pillows, and as for down, it will be a valuable article of commerce for centuries yet to come.

The song birds of this country have a value which it would be difficult indeed to compute. Consider them first as they are in their native woods and wilds, when in the sweet spring-time every tree harbours a musician, every bush shelters a songster; when in thicket and copse every leaf even seems to have found a voice, while far above us the fleecy clouds themselves are ringing with the gladsome melody of birds. One does not need to be a poet, nor a naturalist either, to enjoy such a concert as this; to the weary, to the tired brain-worker, to the toiler in towns, who has escaped from drudgery for a day, and come down to the cool green country, it means life and health itself. The soul seems to borrow from the birds a portion of their ecstatic joy, the mind becomes calm, the nerves are soothed by their songs, cares and worries are for a time forgotten, and the thoughts carried far away "to better worlds than this."

Very early on a summer's morning in the wooded midlands we are awakened by the sweet soft fluting of a blackbird on the lawn. No occasion to get up; the sun itself has not yet cleared the horizon. We sleep again, and the melody mingles with our dreams; by-and-by the robin will fill up the intervals with his pleasant lilt, and later on the bold loud notes of the chaffinch will burst forth in the blossoming orchard, and the mavis among the limes will make echo ring from tree to tree. All day long, wherever we walk, the birds will be with us; at eventide we may listen to the plaintive song of the linnet on the thorn, the drowsy whirr of the partridge among the corn, or croodle of cushat in the spruce thickets. In the silence of the night, and all the livelong night, we have melody that we scarce could distinguish by day—the voices of blackcap, woodlark, and nightingale.

"Their loud delight
Breaks through the stillness of the night,
And music's softest airs fill all the plains."

But consider the value of our song birds, even when confined in cages! To appreciate this thoroughly one would need to be an invalid for a few months; then, indeed, bird-song is soothing, and bird ways and tricks and manners well calculated to banish *ennui*, and make the weary time seem shorter.

In this country we perhaps do not owe a great deal to birds as scavengers, except on the immediate sea-board; but in the native towns and villages of Her Majesty's Indian dominions, to the vagabond crow (*Pica vagabunda*), the adjutant (*Leptoptilos argala*) and a few other birds, assisted, I may add, by buffaloes and blue-bottle flies, millions owe not only the health they possess, but life itself.

To the homing instinct of pigeons the world is indeed deeply indebted. Especially are these birds useful in time of war, or to a town that has been placed in a state of siege, as Paris was during the Franco-German war, when but for balloons and pigeons the city might have been considered for a time blotted out of existence. The subject is far too extensive to enter into here; but let me briefly remind the reader of a few facts. The utility of the voyageur depends upon the love of home inherent in the bird, and the power it possesses of making its way over tracts of country quite unknown to it at a great speed and unerringly. They are trained to this by being taken at first only short distances from the parent loft on favourable days. After a year of such training a bird will be able to fly over a hundred miles, and two hundred miles in the second year. What is known to the "fancy" as the carrier pigeon, is not the bird which is in use for long-distance flying, but a cross-bred pigeon—the Antwerp. Some of these, when fully matured and trained, have been known to do a journey or voyage of five hundred miles in twelve hours. Something of the enormous speed they attain on wing may be gathered from the following curious incident: A large round hole was lately found in a shop window of plate glass, cut as clean as if done by a glazier's diamond, while in the shop itself, and opposite the aperture, was the dead body of a Belgian homer, with battered head and broken neck. It had doubtless flown against the glass during the fog and darkness.

Pigeon flying as a pastime is only in its infancy in this country, though in Belgium alone there are 1,200 societies; and while the season is at its height every Saturday from that country over 200,000 birds are despatched by train to far-off parts of France, and even Spain, there to be thrown up.

It is not training alone, however, that accounts for the homing power the pigeons have, for extraordinary but authentic stories are told of even untrained birds making their way back to their lofts from places hundreds of miles away. This proves that pigeons have some curious instinct or even sense which we ourselves cannot understand, and brings to our minds the words of the poet—

"I hear a voice you cannot hear,
Which says I must not stay:
I see a hand you cannot see,
Which beckons me away."

Many sea-birds possess the same instinct, notably gulls and albatrosses; but as yet mankind has not attempted to dominate these birds, though I could easily fancy the albatross, or even some species of gulls, bringing messages betwixt Australia and the Cape of Good Hope, or betwixt Australia and America. The day may come.

Little need be said of the debt we owe to our ordinary domestic animals, such as the horse, the bullock, the donkey, dog, and harmless necessary cat. This is all self-evident. That we do not treat them with sufficient care and kindness is a fact that we ought to be heartily ashamed of.

The extraordinary love one cannot help developing for a dog or even cat, that has for many years been a fireside friend and faithful favourite, is in itself a proof of the value of such an animal.

People are often ridiculed for bestowing affection on a dog, but only by the unthinking. Everybody almost likes a good dog; few of us happily require to love the animal. But to thousands in this country the companionship of a faithful dog is an incalculable boon. From disposition, or indisposition, or force of circumstances, such may be prevented from mingling much in society. It is small wonder, then, that they come to love the dog, who seldom leaves them for a minute, whose fond brown eyes watch and read every movement and look—the dog with his ways so winning, his affection so unbounded, his heart so leal, the same in trouble or sorrow in weal or woe, and who loves his master all the more when low and lonely.

Well, my subject is too large to do aught save touch lightly and suggestively on, and lest I outstay my welcome I draw my article to a close. But there is one thing I must allude to in conclusion—namely, the very great and intrinsic value of little pets as companions for little children.

Let them be but white mice or guinea pigs, a kitten or a puppy, I care not what, but I say that on the very day the child has been presented with a living pet, the gates of a new world have been opened wide to him; his mind will be moulded, his heart enlarged, his very soul softened by observing and studying the life and ways of even the littlest of God's lowly creatures.

OTHER DAYS.

BY THE REV. WILLIAM COWAN, M.A.

OH, would they might come back again,
Those days before my house was bare,
When little voices thrilled my ears,
And little feet were on the stair.

Sweet was the stir of dear young life,
And sweet the cares it brought me then;
Oh, would that stir, those blessed cares,
Were in my silent home again!

Oh, would those days were back again,
When little hands clung round my knees,
And little lips to mine were pressed—
I feel them strange, these hours of ease.

Now I am poor, I dwell alone,
And totter on through strangest ways,
Still longing for what never comes—
The life and love of other days.