

Parrot Stories.



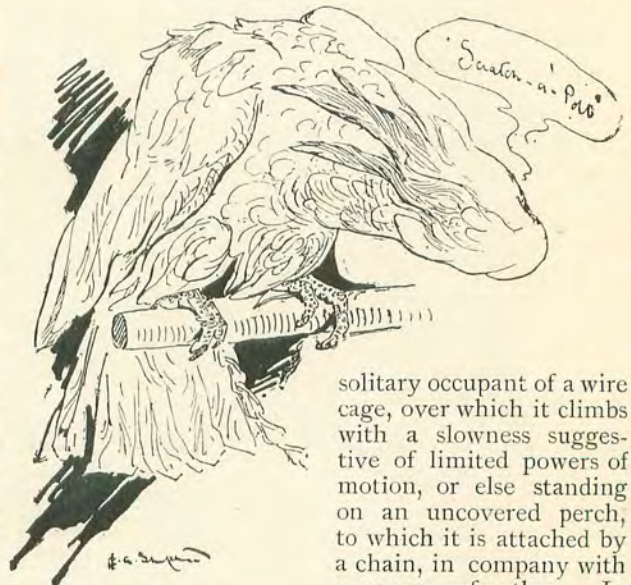
F all the members of the feathered tribes, there are none which have been greater favourites, and have been regarded with a greater degree of genuine attachment, than parrots. The beauty of their plumage, with its wealth and variety of gorgeous colours, their symmetry of form, and their gracefulness of manner, would alone have been sufficient to give them their popularity. But the closest link they have established with our affections is, of course, found in their wonderful faculty for the repetition of spoken words and various familiar sounds, together with their possession, in many instances, of a reasoning power which suggests that they are not always mere imitators, but really understand the general sense of what they say. Combined with this power of speech, the fond attachment which they are capable of showing towards those who feed or are otherwise kind to them leads to their being among the most favoured, as they seem to be also among the best fitted, companions of human beings. This place of honour in the animal world they have held for very many centuries. There was, indeed, a time when they were regarded in India and elsewhere as sacred; and anybody who dared to injure one of them was regarded as guilty of a dreadful crime. It is true that since then they have fallen somewhat from their high estate, and that in this more degenerate age the common Amazon parrot has been shot in great numbers in the eastern parts of Brazil for the prosaic purpose of

making a particular kind of soup, to which the natives are partial; while the naturalist Gould waxes quite eloquent when he sounds the praises of parakeet pie. But, in our own country, though we do not go either to the one extreme of holding them sacred, or to the other extreme of putting them into pies, parrots still occupy a place of honour in our households; and a well-behaved "Pretty Poll" who has been duly instructed in the accomplishments of her kind, is still the source of as great a degree of pleasure as ever.

Yet those English people who do not travel far beyond the limits of their own land fail to see the parrot to the best advantage. Their acquaintance with the bird is chiefly confined to seeing it either the

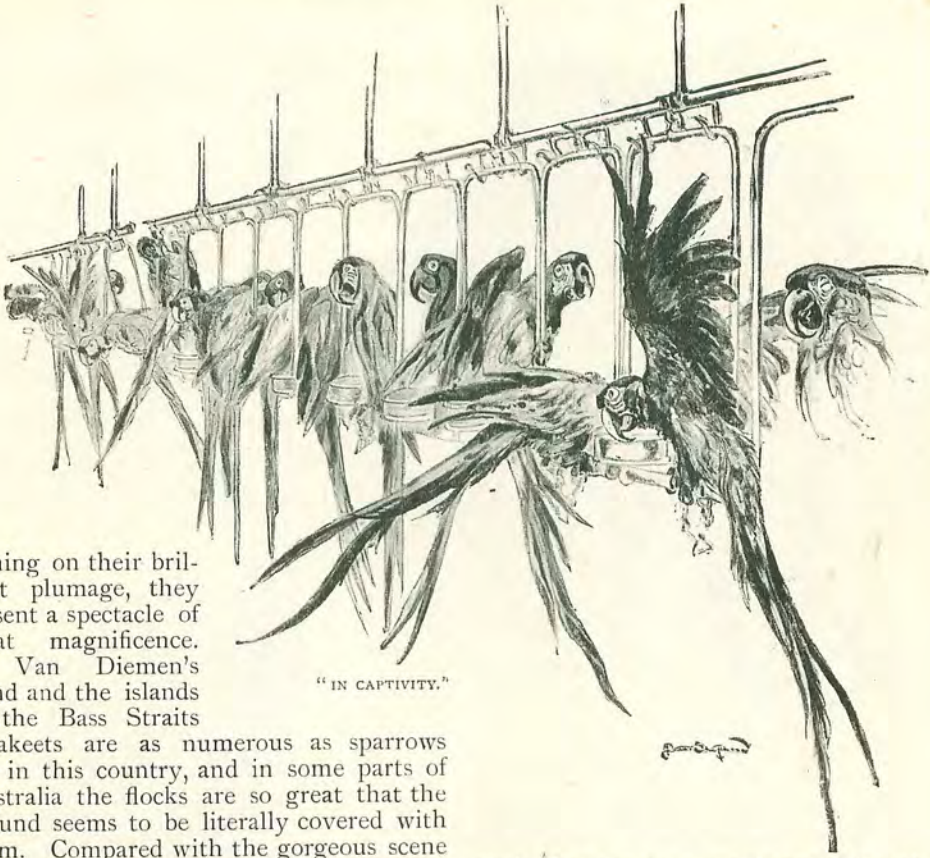
solitary occupant of a wire cage, over which it climbs with a slowness suggestive of limited powers of motion, or else standing on an uncovered perch, to which it is attached by a chain, in company with a group of others. In their native condition, however, the parrots are

found in vast assemblies, which are often a thousand or more in number, and, seen clustered together and talking in loud and excited tones on the trees of some dark forest or sequestered swamp, or taking long, though low, flights through the air to their favourite watering places, with the sun



"PRETTY POLL!"

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"IN CAPTIVITY."

shining on their brilliant plumage, they present a spectacle of great magnificence. In Van Diemen's Land and the islands of the Bass Straits parakeets are as numerous as sparrows are in this country, and in some parts of Australia the flocks are so great that the ground seems to be literally covered with them. Compared with the gorgeous scene which they must present in these circumstances, even such a collection as may be found at the Zoölogical Gardens in London falls altogether into insignificance.

Le Vaillant, in his description of the habits of the *Psittachus infuscatus*, says that every bird keeps loyally to its own mate, and at daybreak the whole of the colony located in a particular district assemble with a great noise, perch on one or more dead trees, according to their number, and expose their plumage to the first rays of the rising sun, for the purpose of drying their feathers, which will have become soaked in the heavy dews of the night.

Altogether, something like 170 kinds of parrots have been enumerated as inhabiting various parts of the globe, and there are, naturally, great variations in size, plumage, and powers in the different species. In size they range from birds not much bigger than a thrush to others such as the great green macaw, and the red and blue macaw, which measure forty inches in length, the tail alone being nearly two feet long. In

their plumage they may have all the colours of the rainbow, or one colour only, while in accomplishments they range from the deafening shrieks of macaws, to the "gentle soft warbling kind of song" of the grass or zebra parakeet of Australia, and the marvellous powers of speech of the true parrots. But the most talented of all these varieties is the grey parrot, which is a native of West Africa, and, when taken young, and well trained, displays some really wonderful gifts. In the days of sailing ships, the sailors who brought the birds home were able to spend a good deal of time in teaching them before they arrived here; but the shortening of the voyages, owing to the powerful steamers now in use, has led to the education of the parrots being less advanced when they reach England than was formerly the case. On the other hand, however, their vocabulary of sailors' expletives is not so extensive, and this is some consolation for the falling off in other respects, one oddity about parrots being that when once they learn really wicked words they never seem to forget them, and the most mor[?]l



training never completely frees their good manners from the corruption of evil communications.

Many parrots will live from twenty to



thirty years, and Le Vaillant mentions one which attained the venerable age of 93. It was the property of an Amsterdam merchant, and it talked remarkably well. It

would fetch its master's night-cap and slippers, and would call out if any stranger came into the shop when no one was there to serve, screaming until somebody came. It had a good memory, and easily learnt sentences in Dutch; but at 60 this faculty began to fail, and at 65 the moulting was irregular, and at 90 the bird was decrepit, blind, and voiceless, gradually sinking into a kind of lethargy, in which condition it finally died.

Another famous parrot was that of Colonel O'Kelly, in whose family it had been for fifty years, being so much thought of that one hundred



guineas were refused for it. The accomplishments of this bird, whose death will be found recorded in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for 1802, have been thus described:—

"The tone of his singing was very odd. It

correctly. It could, too, not only answer questions but give orders and express its wants in a manner strongly suggestive of a rational being.

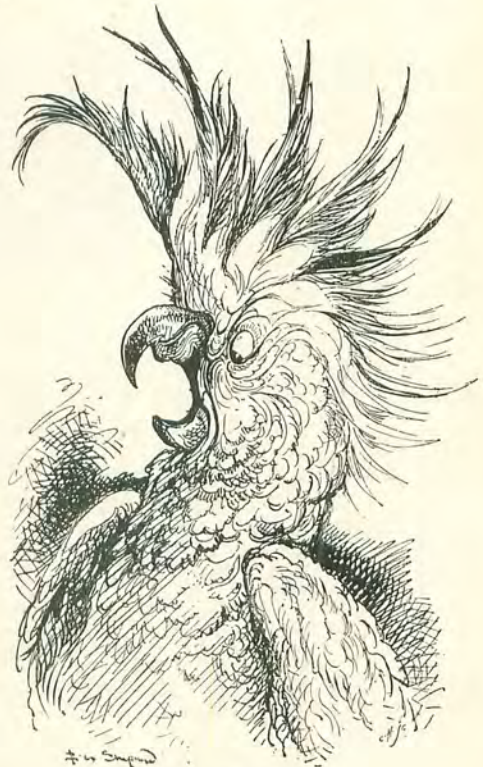
When Prince Maurice was Governor of Brazil he heard of the remarkable conversational powers of a certain old parrot that was said to be able to answer questions just like a reasoning creature. He accordingly sent for the bird, which was brought into a room where the Prince was with a number of other persons. A few minutes afterwards the bird called out, "What a company of white men are here!" Asked "who he thought that man was," the Prince being pointed to, it answered, "Some general or other." The Prince then asked, "Where do you come from?" "From Marinnan," answered the bird. "To whom do you belong?" "To a Portuguese." "What do you do there?" "I watch the chickens." The Prince laughed, and asked, "You watch the chickens?" "Yes;



"AN ACCURATE EAR FOR MUSIC."

sounded like an automaton imitating the human voice. The maid prompted him to sing 'God Save the King.' He sang all the verses of it, but now and then wandered into 'The Banks of the Dee,' which seemed his favourite, and one or two Scotch songs, the names of which I forget. . . . Col. O'Kelly told us that his power of catching sounds was quite astonishing; that on one occasion when a newspaper had been read aloud in his presence, the Colonel, on coming into the room, half an hour after, had, as he opened the door, been convinced by the sound that the same person was still reading aloud, and was scarcely able to believe that it was the parrot repeating to himself inarticulate sounds precisely in the tone and manner of the reader."

Among other peculiarities of the same bird may be mentioned its possession of an accurate ear for music, so that it would beat time while it whistled, and if it mistook a note it would revert to the bar where the mistake occurred, and finish the tune quite



"GIVING ORDERS."

and I know how to do it well," rejoined the bird, which then called out three or four times, "chuck! chuck!" as though bringing a number of chickens together.

A friend of Buffon's possessed a yellow-winged parrot which showed great attachment to its master, but was very capricious in its temper, expecting a full return for every demonstration of its civility. It would, in play, sometimes bite a little too hard and then laugh heartily. If rebuked it became refractory, and could only be reclaimed by gentle and kind treatment. It was dull and silent if confined in its cage, but when set at liberty chattered incessantly, and repeated everything that was said.

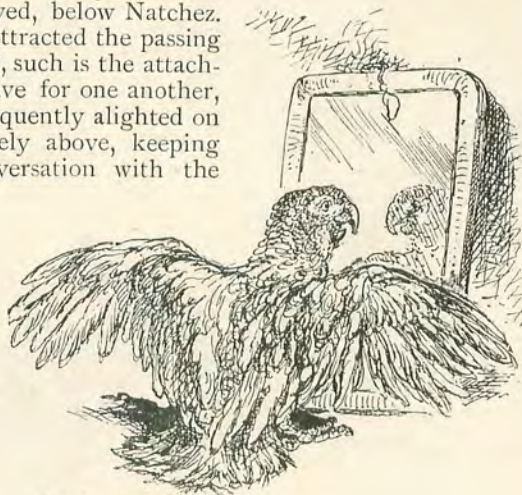
Alexander Wilson, the author of "American Ornithology," while on one of his expeditions caught a parrot, which he put in a cage and placed under the piazza of a house where he stayed, below Natchez. By its call it soon attracted the passing flocks of parrots, and, such is the attachment these birds have for one another, numerous parties frequently alighted on the trees immediately above, keeping up a constant conversation with the prisoner. "One of these," Mr. Wilson continues, "I wounded slightly in the wing, and the pleasure Poll expressed on meeting with this new companion was really amusing. She crept close up to it as it hung on the side of the cage, chattered to it in a low tone of voice,

as if sympathising in its misfortune, scratched about its head and neck with her bill, and both, at night, nestled as close together as possible, sometimes Poll's head being thrust among the plumage of the other. On the death of this companion she appeared restless and inconsolable for several days. On reaching New Orleans I placed a looking-glass beside the place where she usually sat, and the instant she perceived the image all her former fondness seemed to return, so that she could scarcely absent herself from it a moment. It was evident that she was completely deceived. Always when evening drew on, and often during the day, she laid her head close to that of the image in the glass, and began to doze

with great composure and satisfaction. In this short space she had learnt to know her name, to answer and come when called on, to climb up my clothes, sit on my shoulder, and eat from my mouth."

A friend of Mr. Wood's family had a grey parrot which became so energetic in her demonstrations of affection towards some young goldfinches she found in a nest in a rose tree, that she frightened the parents away, and then, seeing them deserted, herself became their foster-mother. "She was so attentive to her little charges that she refused to go back to her cage, and remained with the little birds by night as well as by day, feeding them carefully, and forcing them to open their beaks if they refused her attentions. When they were able to hop about they were very

fond of getting on her back, where four of them would gravely sit, while the fifth, which was the youngest, or at all events the smallest, always preferred to perch on Polly's head. With all these little ones on her back Polly would very deliberately walk up and down the lawn as if to give them exercise, and would sometimes vary her performance by rising into the air, thus setting the ten little wings in



"SHE WAS COMPLETELY DECEIVED."

violent motion, and giving the five little birds a hard task to remain on her back. By degrees they became less timid, and when she rose from the ground they would leave her back and fly down. They were but ungrateful little creatures after all; for when they were fully fledged they flew away, and never came back again to their foster-mother. Poor Polly was for some time in great trouble about the desertion of her foster-children, but soon consoled herself by taking care of another little brood. These belonged to a pair of hedge-sparrows, whose home had been broken up by the descent of some large bird. Polly found the little birds in dire distress, and contrived in some ingenious manner to get



"A FOSTER-MOTHER!"

them, one by one, on her back, and to fly with them to her cage. Here she established the little family, never entering the cage except for the purpose of attending to her young charge. The oddest part of the matter was that one of the parents survived, and Polly was seen to talk to her in the most absurd manner, mixing up her acquired vocabulary with that universal bird-language that seems to be common to all the feathered tribes, and plentifully interlarding her discourse with sundry profane expressions. At last the instinctive language conquered the human, and the two birds seemed to understand each other perfectly."

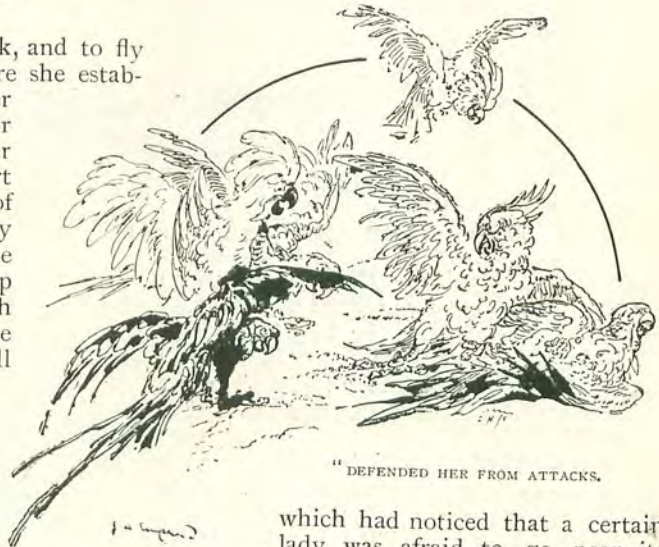
A somewhat similar instance is recorded by Mr. Buxton, as quoted by Darwin in



"THE TWO BIRDS SEEMED TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER PERFECTLY."

his "Descent of Man." In this case a parrot took care of a frost-bitten and crippled bird of a distinct species, cleansed her feathers, and defended her from the attacks of the other parrots which roamed freely about the garden. The tender regard, too, which birds of this class may have for one another is still further shown by the experiences of Wilson, who says, concerning the parakeet, that when, on shooting at a flock, he wounded a number of them, the others did not move off, but continued sweeping around their prostrate companions, manifesting so much sympathy and regard for the wounded as to completely disarm him.

Parrots, too, occasionally display a decided sense of humour. A cockatoo



"DEFENDED HER FROM ATTACKS."

which had noticed that a certain lady was afraid to go near its perch thought it a good joke, whenever the lady did approach, to set up its feathers and yell and screech in the most hideous way, as if it intended to attack her, doing all this evidently for no other reason than the pleasure of seeing her run away terrified.

There is, too, a strong suspicion of "a good joke," on the part of the parrot, in a story told in Lord Dundonald's autobiography. This particular parrot was on board ship, and had picked up a number of nautical phrases. The vessel was visited one day by some

ladies, who were taken on board seated on a chair to which a rope, worked by a pulley, was attached. Two or three of the ladies had reached the deck safely, and another was in mid-air, when suddenly a clear voice rang out, "Let go!" The

brought forward. The cover was taken off the cage, and thereupon the bird looked around and suddenly exclaimed, "By Jove, what a lot of parrots!" It was awarded the prize at once.

Another parrot we have heard of, which also endeavoured to rise to the occasion, was the property of a publichouse-keeper whose patrons were characteristic for their thirst rather than for their patience and politeness. One day the bird escaped from its cage in the bar. It was discovered shortly afterwards on a tree, surrounded by a flock of rooks who were pecking at it from every side while the parrot was calling out, "One at a time, gentlemen! One at a time!"

Mr. Jesse gives a remarkable account of a parrot which belonged to a resident at Hampton Court, whose sister had supplied him with the narrative. "As you wished me," says the lady,



H. K. Stephens
"PUSSY MARCHED MAJESTICALLY ROUND THE ROOM."

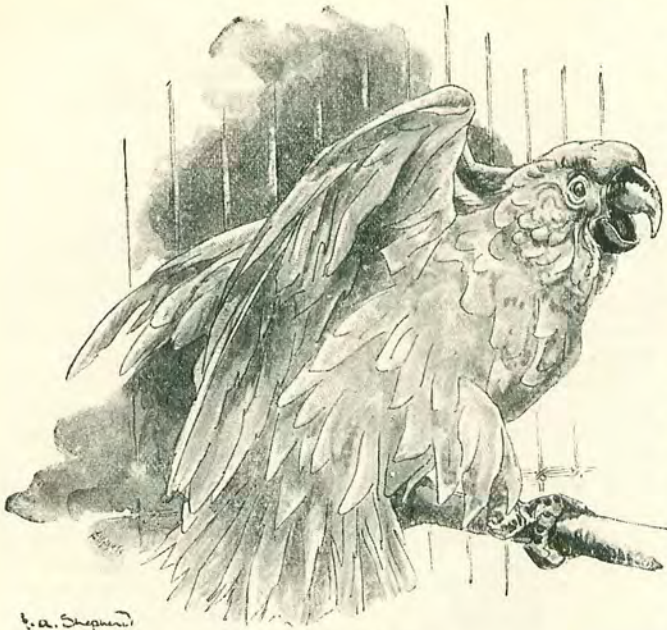
sailors, thinking it was the boatswain who had given the order, obeyed it instantly, the result being that the lady had a cold bath in the sea. It is scarcely necessary to relate that the order to "Let go" came, not from the boatswain, but from the parrot!

Mr. Wood gives an interesting account supplied to him by a correspondent concerning a ringed parakeet, which, on reaching Plymouth from Trincomalee, "was put into a rickety old cage, with two buns for her nourishment, and sent all by herself in the train to London. On her arrival there, she was forwarded to a person who had formerly been confidential servant to my wife. One morning this person, hearing a great chattering down-stairs, looked in at her back-parlour door, and there, to her infinite surprise, she saw Polly seated upon the cat's back, chattering away, while pussy was majestically marching round the room."

A parrot show was once held in the North of England, at which, among the prizes, there was one to be given to the bird that could talk the best. Several had been produced, and showed off their accomplishments; and then another was



"DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH!"



"NO, YOU WON'T!"

"to write down whatever I could recollect about my sister's wonderful parrot, I proceed to do so, only premising that I will tell you nothing but what I can vouch for having myself heard. Her laugh is quite extraordinary, and it is impossible not to join in it oneself, more especially when, in the midst of it, she cries out, 'Don't make me laugh so! I shall die! I shall die!' and then continues laughing more violently than before. Her crying and sobbing are curious, and if you say, 'Poor Poll! What is the matter?' she says, 'So bad—so bad! Got such a cold!' and after crying for some time will gradually cease, and, making a noise like drawing a long breath, say, 'Better now,' and begin to



laugh. The first time I ever heard her speak was one day when I was talking to the maid at the bottom of the stairs, and heard what I then considered to be a child call out, 'Payne' (the maid's name), 'I am not well—I am not well!' On my saying, 'What's the matter with that child?' she replied, 'It's only the parrot! She always does so when I leave her alone, to make me come back.' So it proved, for, on her going into the room, the parrot stopped, and then began laughing, quite in a jeering way. It is singular enough that when she is affronted in any way, she begins to cry; and, when pleased, to laugh. If anyone happens to cough or sneeze, she says, 'What a bad cold!' One day when the children were playing with her, the maid came into the room, and, on their repeating to her several things which the parrot had said, Poll looked up and said, quite plainly, 'No, I didn't!' Sometimes when she is inclined to be mischievous the maid threatens to beat her; and she often says, 'No, you won't!' Before I was well acquainted with her, as I am now, she would stare in my face for some time, and then say, 'How d'ye do, ma'am?' This she invariably does to strangers. One day I went into the room where she was, and said, to try her, 'Poll, where is Payne gone?' and to my astonishment, and almost dismay, she said, 'Downstairs!'"