

Glimpses of Nature.

IV.—A WOODLAND TRAGEDY.

BY GRANT ALLEN.



NATURE is rich in tragedies; but somehow, the tragedies which are long familiar to us cease to be tragic. We accept them as merely picturesque little episodes in our daily existence. Nobody is astonished, for example, when a cat plays with a mouse before killing it; nor when she teaches her attentive kittens how to let it go in sport, maimed and half dead; it does not shock us when the poor dazed little beast, thinking the danger over, makes a wild burst for freedom, that she shows them how to pat it with one cruel paw and still further disable it. Facts like these are too common and too long known to appeal to us strongly. We note them with a very languid interest. But when people first learn some unfamiliar example of nature's cruelty, I almost always find they are profoundly struck by it. The novelty of the case gives it vividness and makes it sink in deep. And I know no instance which impresses the ordinary observer so much at sight as the first time when, wandering accidentally through some peaceful English copse or wood, he finds himself face to face with that hateful hoard, a butcher-bird's larder.

For what the cat does with the mouse for a few short moments, that the butcher-bird does with it through long lingering days and nights of agony. He impales his mouse alive on the stout thorn of some may-bush, and keeps it there, maimed but struggling, or slowly dying, for a week at a time, until he has need for it as food for himself or his family.

A clever artist devised a cover for one of our popular scientific papers many years ago, which enforces well the universality of this ceaseless struggle of kind against kind, each wholly regardless of the other's feelings. In the centre foreground, a fly flits airily over the surface of a river, searching for its mate in the full joy of existence. Beneath, a small fish jumps up at the fly, and seems in the very act of seizing and swallowing it. Behind and below, however, a pike lies grimly in wait for the small fish with open mouth; but he is anticipated by a kingfisher, which snatches it from his jaws before they can close over it.

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In the background above, a hawk poises itself on even wings, ready to swoop down in triumph at last on the successful kingfisher. There you have the epic of animal life in brief; you have only to throw in an angler on the bank, fishing for the pike with a live-bait of minnow, and an enthusiastic ornithologist pointing his fowling-piece at the rare species of hawk, in order to complete the whole cycle of slaughter. And observe that each actor in this drama of death is as careless as to the life he sacrifices and the pain he causes as the angler is careless as to the feelings of the minnow he impales upon his barbed hook, or the sportsman is careless as to the feelings of the happy birds he brings down with his cartridges.

Nevertheless, when we come across one page in this vast mute tragedy of sentient life among the calm and quiet surroundings of an English wood, it always surprises us afresh; and that is why I have chosen as a good illustrative case of this phase in nature my wicked old friend the shrike, or butcher-bird.

Externally, I do not know that there is anything about his personal appearance which might lead you to suppose he was much wickeder or fiercer than the remainder of his family. In costume and colouring he is quiet and demure, not to say almost quakerish. To be sure, there is a lurking gleam in the corner of his eye, when you get a close view of him, which betokens a crafty and cruel disposition; while something about the peculiar curl at the tip of his beak seems to suggest a lordly indifference to suffering in others. But on the whole he is a hypocrite in his outer dress; you would hardly suspect him at first sight of the high crimes and misdemeanours of which I admit him to be really guilty. Still, you do not know a thrush till you have seen him eat worms alive slowly, a mouthful at a time, pulling them out of their holes and chewing them gradually as he goes; and you do not know a butcher-bird till you have lighted upon him at home in his woodland haunts, with his living and writhing larder collected all round him.

In size, the butcher-bird (No. 1) is about as large as a lark; but he is a stouter and handsomer bird, especially in his fresh spring plumage, when he goes a-courting, and wins his soberer bride by the beauty of his coat and the gallantry of his bearing. His colouring is fine, but somewhat difficult to describe, his recognised specific name of "the red-backed shrike" being perhaps too strong for his actual hues. Chestnut, shading into reddish brown above, would be a more accurate mode of stating the facts; but he is pinky-white below, and has dashes of blue, of grey, of pure white, and of black scattered about in various parts of his plumage. A bright black bill and a dark hazel eye add beauty to his sharp and vigorous countenance. Alertness, indeed, is the keynote of his character.

As in most dominant races, his lady differs much from him. She is duller and darker, and lacks the occasional white patches that adorn her lord. But she shares his general air of keen life and his rapidity of movement, being in every respect a helpmeet for him.

Mr. Enock has represented her in No. 2 in a characteristic attitude, perched on a small twig of hawthorn, and ready to pounce down upon a luckless fly, whose movements she is watching with interested attention.

I say hawthorn on purpose, for the peculiarity of the butcher-bird is that in England or abroad it haunts for the most part thorn-bearing bushes. With us, it is but a summer migrant, occurring pretty frequently in the southern counties; but its winter home is on the Upper Nile and in East and South Africa, where it can find in abundance the thorny shrubs of the desert ranges, which stand it in good stead as pegs or hooks on which

to base its larder. In England, it usually selects a hawthorn for its scene of operations.

No. 3 shows far better than I can describe it the nature of these food-stores, where the butcher-bird lays by meat for himself, his mate, and his unfledged young. The larder is always situated in the neighbourhood of the nest, and the male bird hunts for flies, bees, and other insects, while the female sits on the eggs hard by. He eats

a few at once, to allay his hunger, spitting them first as a means of holding them; but the greater number he preserves alive upon the cruel thorns for the use of his mate and his callow nestlings. "*Les pères de famille,*" said Talleyrand, "*sont capables de tout.*" And we may well exclaim, "Oh, parental affection, what crimes are perpetrated in thy name!"

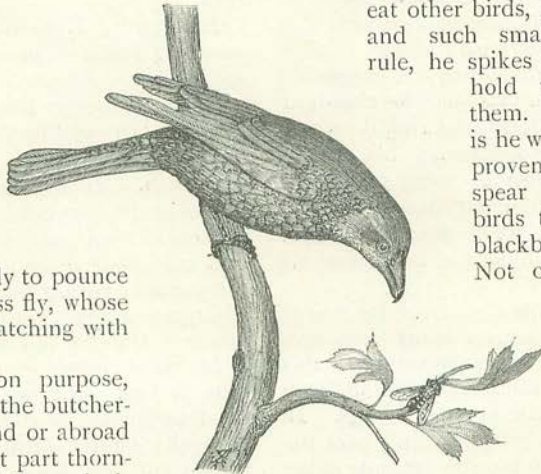
The particular portion of the larder which Mr. Enock has selected for representation contains a bumble-bee, two large flies, and a nestling hedge-sparrow, stolen from its mother; for the butcher-bird does not wholly confine himself to a diet of insects; he is cannibal enough to catch and eat other birds, not to mention mice and such small mammals. As a rule, he spikes them on a thorn to hold them while he eats them. So fierce and savage is he when on the hunt after provender, that he will even spear and impale larger birds than himself, such as blackbirds and thrushes. Not content with hanging

them on the thorns alive, he will fasten down their legs and wings by an ingenious cross arrangement of twigs and branches, so as to prevent them

from escaping; for he does not so much desire to kill his prey, as to keep it alive till he is ready to eat it or to distribute it to his family. He knows that dead birds soon decay; and he doesn't like his game high:



1.—THE BUTCHER-BIRD.



2.—THE BUTCHER-BIRD'S WIFE.

but he also knows that wounded birds will live on and keep quite fresh for days together; so he is careful to disable without actually killing the creatures he captures.

Among the animals I have seen in butcher-birds' larders I may mention mice, shrews, lizards, robins, tom-tits, and sparrows; among



3.—PART OF THE BUTCHER-BIRD'S LARDER.

the smaller birds he especially affects willow-wrens and chiff-chaffs: but keepers tell me that they have even found them seizing and spitting young partridges and pheasants. Whether this is true or not I cannot say; but the game-preserving interest certainly looks upon shrikes with no friendly eye, and you may sometimes see one hung up on a nail among the jays and hawks and stoats and weasels on the "keeper's trees," where the guardians of the wood display the corpses or skins of evil-doers as a terror to their like, much as mediæval kings displayed the heads of traitors above the gates of the city.

Oddly enough, however, these "keeper's trees" themselves are favourite haunts and hawking-pitches of the butcher-bird, who is so little deterred by the supposed lesson that he uses them as convenient places for catching insects. For, in spite of his occasional carnivorous tastes, your shrike is at

heart, and in essence, an insect-eater. He adds a mouse or a tit as an exceptional luxury. Now, he knows that the owls and stoats hung up on the keeper's rustic museum attract numbers of carrion flies, and he therefore perches calmly on the boughs above the mouldering remains of his own slaughtered brother to await the insects that come to devour him. Then he darts upon them with something of the fly-catcher's eagerness, eating them up at once, or flying off with them alive to impale in his store-house.

In No. 4 we see the female butcher-bird, on her return from a successful chase after prey of greater importance. She has caught a harvest-mouse, the tiniest and prettiest of our English mammals, and though without a license to hang game, has threaded it through the neck on a branch of hawthorn, as a preliminary to eating it. This enables her to hold it conveniently as on a fork or skewer while she pecks at it. Sometimes you will find

the mice fastened through the body, and gnawing the twig with their teeth in their prolonged agony. But the butcher-bird takes no notice of their writhings and their groans: she treats them with the indifference of a fishmonger to lobsters. It is her business to provide for her own young, and she does it as ruthlessly as if she were a civilized human being.

The shrike's ordinary method of capturing prey closely resembles that of the fly-catcher, to which, however, it is not really related. The resemblance is merely one of those due to similarity of habit. Every well-conducted butcher-bird has a settled perch or pitch on which he sits to watch and wait, and to which he returns after each short excursion. Flies and bees he catches on the wing, darting down upon them suddenly with a swoop like a kingfisher's; but he also often takes them sitting, especially when they are settled on a leaf or branch, or are eating carrion. One of his most favourite hunting-boxes is a telegraph wire, and he prefers one that crosses the corner of a wood; there he will sit with his head held sapiently on one side, keeping a sharp look-out from his beady brown eyes in every direction. If

a bee lights on a head of clover, if a cockchafer stirs, if a mouse moves in the grass, if a fledgling thrush makes a first unguarded attempt to fly—woe betide the poor innocent; our butcher-bird is upon him, with a fierce darting beak, and in ten seconds more, his writhing body adds to the store in the shrike's larder.

A good place and time to watch a butcher-bird at work is in a quiet field by a copse just after the mowing. But you must hide carefully. The short grass is then full of beetles, crickets, and grasshoppers, as well as of mice, shrews, and lizards, who can conceal themselves less easily than they were wont to do in the long hay before the cutting. At such times, hawks and owls make a fine livelihood in the fields; but their habit is to hunt their quarry on the open. They hover and drop upon it. That is not the butcher-bird's plan; he is a more cautious and secret foe; he sits casually on his branch or his telegraph wire, with his head on one side, till his prey stirs visibly; then he pounces on him from above, making a short excursion each time, and returning to rest on his accustomed position. When he catches a bird, and eats it at once, he begins by spitting it on a thorn: then he attacks the skull first, breaking it through and eating the brain, which is his favourite tit-bit. He also makes raids on the nests of other birds, and carries off the nestlings.

If you open the crop of a butcher-bird, the contents will show you that, in England at least, its main articles of diet consist of bees and flies, but especially of beetles. It is full of their hard wing-cases. Now, ornithologists have long noticed that the distribution of butcher-birds in the land is very capricious; in one district they will be fairly

numerous (though, at best, they are rare birds), and in another, close by, they will be very uncommon or quite unknown. It is probable that this relative frequency or scarcity depends upon the distribution of their proper food-insects. Indeed, just as we all know that an "army fights upon its stomach," so we are beginning to know now that commissariat lies at the bottom of most problems of animal life. I used to wonder on the Riviera why trap-door spiders, with their long tubular nests, were abundant in certain deep red clay-banks, but wholly wanting in others, just as sunny, just as soft, just as easy to tunnel; till one day it struck me that

the spiderless banks were exposed now and then to the cold wind, the *mistral*, and hence were naturally almost flyless. As a matter of course, the spiders went where the flies were to be found; and these open banks, though sunny and warm, were from the spider's point of view mere Klondykes or Saharas.

It is just the same with the butcher-birds. Beetles and bees frequent for the most part warm, crumbling soils; they are infrequent on damp clays and chilly, marshy places.

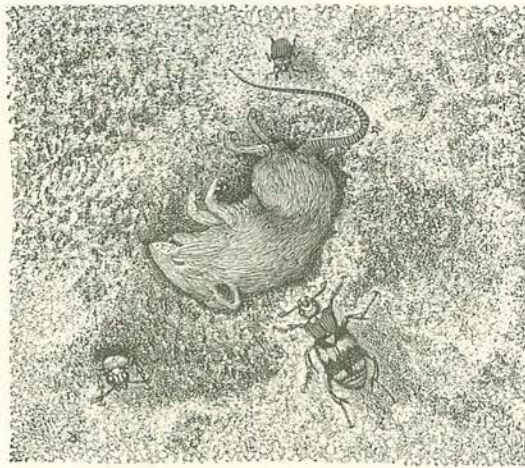
Sandstone and chalk attract them; on London clay or the damp flats of the Weald they are few and far between. Hence, where the beetles are, there will the shrikes be gathered together. They abound (comparatively) in the warm sandstone hills of Surrey, but are almost unknown in chilly clay districts. Not that they mind the cold as such; it is the question of food that really affects them. So, too, with the swallows and other long-winged insect-hawkers. The swift flies very high, and lives on summer insects, which come out in July and August only; so he arrives here late, and goes away again sometimes as early as the date of grouse-shooting. The house-



4. — THE BUTCHER-BIRD'S WIFE IMPALING A HARVEST-MOUSE.

martin, on the other hand, subsists on low-flying midges which surround houses; he therefore comes first of all his group, and goes away latest. The night-jar flits over fern-clad or heather-clad moors, and feeds almost entirely on certain night-flying beetles and moths; hence he arrives when they hatch out from the cocoon, and flaps southward again on his big, overlapping wings as soon as they have disappeared or been mostly eaten. It is all a question of commissariat. Our early English Kings had manors of their own in many parts of the country, in all of which supplies were laid up throughout the year for the royal table; in due time, the King arrived with all his court, stopped a month or six weeks, ate up all that was provided for him, and then rode on with his hungry horde to the next royal manor. It is just the same with the birds; they come and go as supplies are assured them. The shrike stops in England while bees and beetles last; when provender fails, he is off on his own strong wings to Rhodesia.

No. 5 introduces us to another strange scene in the eternal epic of prey and slaughter. It shows us how beetle proposes, but shrike disposes. Here, parental feeling wars against parental feeling. A busy group of burying-beetles have lighted upon a dead field-mouse — itself hawked at, perhaps, and wounded by "a mousing owl," but not quite killed at the time, and now abandoned on the open. The burying-beetles, all agog, proceed to cover it with a layer of earth — not, indeed,



5.—BURYING-BEETLES AND FIELD-MOUSE. BEETLE PROPOSES, BUT SHRIKE DISPOSES.

out of such instinctive piety as that which induced the robin-redbreast and the wren in the story to cover the Babes in the Wood with mouldering leaves, but for a much more prosaic and practical, though none the less praiseworthy, motive. They want to lay their eggs in it, so that the maggots may have plenty to eat when they

hatch out — for these burying-beetles are carrion-feeders, whose larvæ thrive on dead and decaying animals; and they desire to bury the corpse in order to keep it intact for their own brood, without interference on the part of other and more powerful carrion-eaters. When successful, they cover the mouse entirely with mould, and thus leave their young supplied with a liberal diet.

But hidden among the greenery of a tree overhead, a cynical butcher-bird is calmly watching those insect sextons from the corner of his eye. As soon as enough of them have collected on the spot, he will swoop down upon their bodies unseen from above, and will carry them off to spike them on his own pet thorns for the benefit of his struggling young family. Thus does parental affection war unconsciously against parental affection. Each kind fights only for its own hand, and regards only the young of its own species. For as Tennyson says well in "Maud":—

Nature is one with rapine, a harm no preacher
can heal;
The Mayfly is torn by the swallow, the sparrow
spared by the shrike,
And the whole little wood where I sit is a world
of plunder and prey.

No. 6 shows us one member of the butcher-bird's young family, just hatched and fledged, in his streaky grey plumage, and beginning to go out upon the world for himself. He is trying to catch an insect on a thorn above him. It also suggests to us the appropriate moral that if you train up a butcher-bird in the way he should go, when he is old he will not depart from it.

Lessons of cruelty are here imbibed—I cannot truthfully say, "with his mother's milk," but at least from his father's and mother's example. While the mother-bird sits upon her nest (as you see her in No. 7), the little chicks are fed "by hand," so to speak, with captured insects. But as soon as they can fly a little, they come out and perch upon the twigs of the larder,

that they may learn fly-catching by helping themselves to insects spitted on the thorns, where parental affection, however misguided, has placed them for that purpose. Thus they imbibe a taste for living food from their earliest moments. As Prior long ago put it:—

Was ever Tartar fierce and cruel
Upon the strength of water gruel?
But how restrain his rage and force
When first he kills, then eats, his horse?

What the butcher-bird requires in his place of residence, then, is, above all things, easy access to warm sandstone or limestone tracts, with plenty of insects, lizards, mice, and small birds; he also needs an open common to hunt over, bushes and trees on which to perch at watch, and clumps of thorn-bearing shrubs to provide him with a larder. There he builds his rude nest, one of the roughest and most inartistic I know; and there the mother brings up her young in her own wicked fashion, training them first to snatch flies from

a thorn overhead, and later to pounce down upon the hapless insects from a twig or a telegraph wire. But though a rather shy bird, the shrike does not wholly fear or shun civilization; for the rich insect population of our gardens often attracts the wicked pair; and in July and August, when flies are rife among the fruit-trees, they will bring their young brood into the currant and gooseberry beds, and teach the young idea how to shoot in the manner proper to so carnivorous a species.

As a matter of evolution, the shrike's position is a very interesting one. For he is not exactly a bird of prey—certainly he does not belong to the hawk and eagle order.

His near relations are all mere insect-eating birds; but he has gone a little beyond them in his carnivorous habits, by adding mice, birds, and lizards to his diet. His great discovery, however, is his cruel device of using thorns for his larder; this ingenious but hateful invention it is which has secured him a place in the struggle for existence. It is curious to note, too, how the habit has reacted on the bird's structure and appearance. He has acquired the quick eye and

nervous alertness of a bird of prey, and has even grown like that higher group to some small extent in his beak and talons. He is a wonderfully plucky little fighter, too, both against his own kind and against other species.

Have you ever reflected how wonderfully varied and eventful is the life of such a migratory bird as this cruel butcher? We human beings, who can only travel south in one of the crawling expresses *misnamed trains-de-luxe*, have little conception of the freedom and variety which

every mere shrike can claim as its birthright. Let us follow one out briefly through its marvellous life-cycle.

It is hatched from a creamy-coloured and dappled egg^a in a nest in England. From four to six brothers or sisters occupy the home, and, indeed, to be strictly accurate, more than fill it. Everybody knows the old conundrum, "Why do birds in their little nests agree?" with its quaintly sensible answer, "Because, if they didn't, they would fall out." Well, with the butcher-birds, that remark is literally accurate. The nest is a ragged and rickety structure, hardly big enough to hold the young as soon as they are fledged. It is built in the boughs of a thorn bush, and near it stands the well-stocked parental larder. The young butcher-bird, as soon as he can fly, is taught to eat insects from the family hoard, and later on to pick



6.—THE NAUGHTY BUTCHER-BIRD—"I WANT THAT FLY!"

them up for himself on the wing in the open. He is usually hatched about the beginning of June; by the middle of July, his mamma and papa take him on the insect hunt into neighbouring gardens. In his early plumage, he takes after his mamma, but already shows some signs of the white tips and black markings which will distinguish him as a male bird in his adult existence.

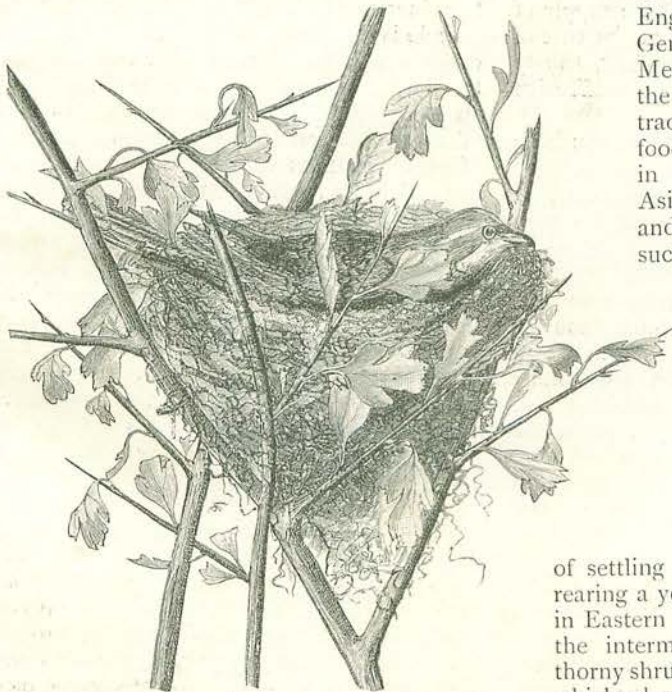
Once abroad in the world, he grows apace; and this is necessary, because, about September, he will have to fly off with his affectionate parents on a long, forced journey to warmer winter quarters. Not, of course, that he minds the winter in itself; but in England, he says plaintively, there's nothing to eat between October and April. The flies and beetles are gone; their sole representatives are now the eggs and chrysalids; mice and lizards have retired into winter quarters; no small birds are about in the unfledged condition where one gets a fair chance with them; and altogether there is nothing for it but to travel south and find more plentiful support in some warmer country.

So southward the family flits, when partridge shooting begins, first over Channel to France, and then on to the Mediterranean. But food is scarce even in Provence and

Italy during the winter months; so our wise young shrike and his parents do not loiter about with the invalids and *flâneurs* at Cannes or Naples; they strike right across sea, *viâ* Sicily and Tunis, to the Nile Valley. Thence, anticipating Mr. Cecil Rhodes and disregardful of railways, they keep straight on, with glorious views of sea and mountain, past the Mahdi's land, till they arrive at the great lakes and British South Africa. At least, that is the course pursued by the greater number, though a few more original families (mostly Russian by birth) trend eastward towards the Persian Gulf, and winter, after the now fashionable manner, in India.

During his absence in the south, our shrike grows adult, and also puts on his fine spring colours (which are his courtship suit, *intended* to charm his prospective mate), just before his return in May to England, or rather to Europe; for of course I do not mean to say that he necessarily comes back to his native country; though there is reason to believe that most migratory birds do really return year after year to the same quarters. They have a summer residence, so to speak, in France or England, and a winter one by the banks of the Zambesi or the Indus. Most butcher-birds that visit Europe in the spring come fairly far north, nesting in Northern France, Southern England, Belgium, Holland, or Germany. Few nest on the Mediterranean, probably because the summer droughts in that arid tract are unfavourable to their food-insects; those that remain in Southern Europe or Western Asia choose, as a rule, the cooler and moister mountain regions, such as the Balkans, the Greek hills, Armenia, and the Caucasus. The English residents fly back from their African home (where they now enjoy the blessings of British rule quite as fully as in Britain) well fattened on juicy southern insects, dressed in their courting dress, and ready for the serious business

of settling in life, choosing a mate, and rearing a young family. Indeed, observers in Eastern Africa have noted them *during* the intermediate period, sitting on the thorny shrubs, such as the Egyptian acacia, which abound in that region, and already



7.—THE BUTCHER-BIRD'S WIFE SITTING ON HER NEST.

adorned in their brilliant breeding plumage in anticipation of their return to their northern quarters.

Some people say that the shrike even makes two nests a year (as the swallow certainly does), one in the north and one in Africa; but this is unlikely, and Dr. Sharpe, of the British Museum, will have nothing to say to it.

Arrived in England, about May-day, our young butcher-bird chooses himself a mate for the season, by displaying his charms and his nice new plumage, in emulation of his fellows, before the eyes of the ladies of his species. Probably, also, he fights for his wife with his rivals. As soon as he has succeeded, *by his beauty* and prowess combined, in attracting the attention of some demure young spinster, they select a nice convenient thorn bush, in dry sandy or chalky soil, where insects abound, and begin weaving their rough nest of twigs and roots, lined more softly inside with moss, wool, and grasses. Then the mother of the future family lays her five or six eggs, and sits upon them assiduously; while the father, keeping a sharp look-out from his leafy covert or his perch on the telegraph wires, begins to stock the larder with bees, flies, lizards, mice, and young birds for the use of his wife and his unhatched children. By the time the tiny chicks emerge upon the world, he has amply provided for their immediate wants by a nice supply of fresh meat, all alive, oh!—but at the cost of what unspeakable misery and long, thirsty suffering to how many other inoffensive creatures!

It is at this season especially that you have a chance, if ever, of catching sight of the butcher-bird himself, seated, all eagerness, on his look-out tower; and enjoying life with the calm begotten of that fine old recipe—a bad heart and a good digestion. He sits and utters his amatory feelings now and again in an abrupt little “chuck, chuck,” which is whipped out suddenly, with a jerk of the head sideways as an appropriate accompaniment. About the same time, too—say the beginning of June—you stand the

best chance of coming upon one of the larders, all stocked with fresh meat; for later in the year, when the young are well fledged, the shrike gives up its murderous practices a little, and takes its young on the prowl for themselves in orchards and gardens, in order to accustom them to the habit of catching prey. But I suspect my evil friend of often murdering for mere murder's sake, as generally happens with predatory animals; they acquire a certain love for the chase as such, and even seem, as one may observe in cats, to delight in cruelty for the sensuous pleasure of inflicting pain on others.

So, year after year, the shrike divides his time, like a fashionable gentleman, between his estate in England and his wintering place in the south. He has change of air and scene in abundance. Each autumn he sails off to his African hunting grounds; each spring he returns in a fine new suit, and with his youth renewed, to choose a fresh partner for the season's nesting. And, like most bad people, he seems to have on the whole a very jolly time of it; for he has few enemies, and he can choose from so wide a range of food that scarcity must be rare with him. He sees the world, and enjoys it, like a masterful and imperial animal. The difference between his mode of travelling, alone, and ours must be the difference between a railway train and a pleasant bicycle trip, increased a hundred-fold; for while the bicycle is shut in by hedges and confined to dusty roads, the shrike's path lies slantwise through the open air, with the landscape spread abroad like a panorama beneath him. Woods, fields, and lakes, and towered cities of men unroll before his eyes. It is an easy, a cruel, and a sensuous existence, with all the joys of the hunter and the excitement of the arena combined—a Spanish bullfight superimposed upon the sport of the grouse-moor and the deer-forest. Above all, your shrike has no inkling of a conscience. He does wrong boldly, with sublime indifference; and believes himself to the end to be a model father, a tender husband, an ornament to society, and a useful citizen.