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Title: Birds and Beasts

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Release date: April 24, 2016 [EBook #51847]

Language: English

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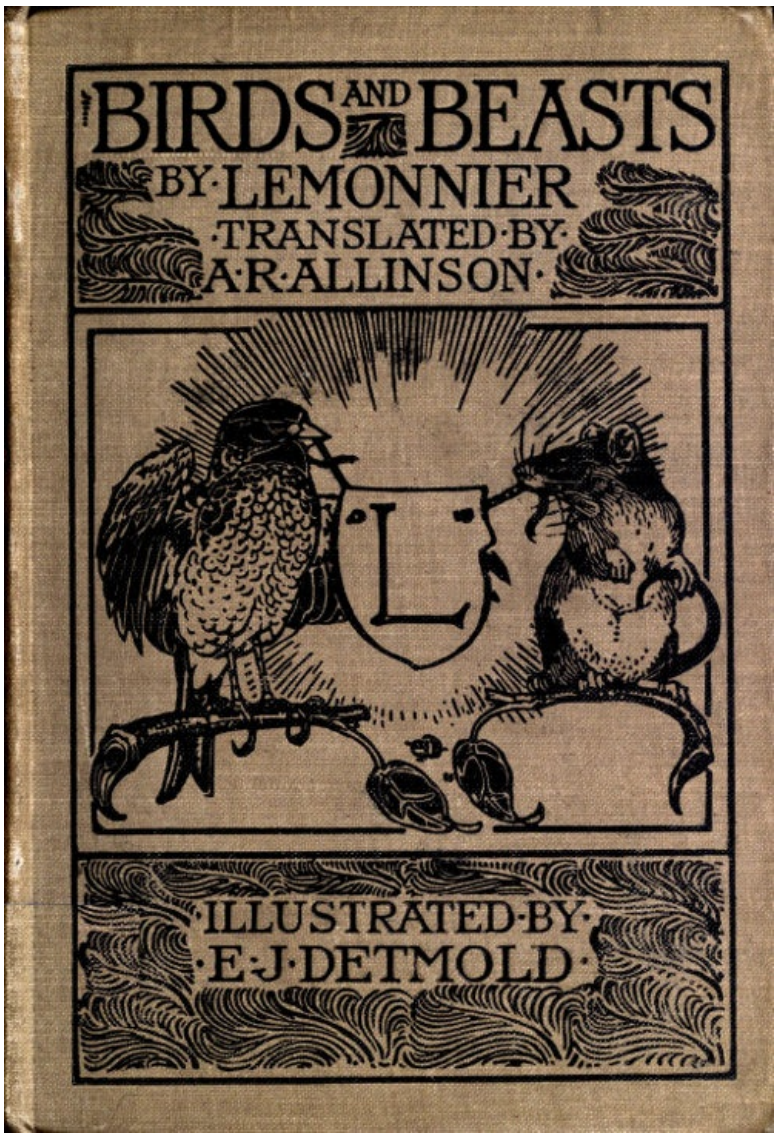

Birds and Beasts

Translated by A. R. Allinson *from the French of* Camille Lemonnier

Illustrated by
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London: George Allen & Company, Ltd.
Ruskin House, Rathbone Place. Mcmxi

Printed by Ballantyne, Hanson & Co.
At the Ballantyne Press, Edinburgh

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Birds and Beasts

JACK AND MURPH

Jack and Murph

I

Jack and Murph were friends, old friends, trusty and tried.

It was now nearly six years since the day chance had brought them together as members of the same company. Jack had come straight from the African forests; he had crossed the seas, and set foot on the continent of Europe for the first time; his amazement knew no bounds.

It is not for nothing a little fellow of his sort is torn from the freedom of his vagabond life in the woods and surrendered to the tender mercies of a showman of performing animals. He learned to know the cruel tedium of captivity; shut up in a cage, he thought sadly of his merry gambols in the tree-tops; his little face grew wan and withered, and he came near pining to death. But time damped the keenness of his grief; by dint of seeing around him other little creatures that, like himself, had wearied for their native wilds, then little by little had grown reconciled to their fate, and now seemed to get a prodigious

amount of fun out of their new life, he made the best of the bars, the tainted air of the booth, and the clown's grimaces, rehearsing his drolleries before the animals' cages.

At the same time he could never quite share the gaiety of his companions in misfortune. While they were enjoying everlasting games of hide-and-seek, scuffling, squabbling, pelting each other with nuts, he would cower timidly in a corner, too sad at heart to join in their noisy merriment. Sometimes, when his feelings grew too much for him, he would break out in a series of sharp, shrill outcries, or wail like a new-born babe in his doleful despair.

The master was very fond of him, for he was both intelligent and teachable. In a very short time he learned to do his musket drill, to walk the slack-rope, and use the spring-board. But these accomplishments only earned him the ill-will of the other pupils. There was never a prank they did not play him. No sooner had he cracked a nut, to eat the kernel, than a hand would dart over his shoulder and snatch the morsel just as he was putting it between his teeth. They slapped his face, pinched his tail, scarified his head with their nails, jumped upon him, or half strangled him in a corner, till a day came at last when his master, noticing how he was bullied, put him in a separate cage all by himself. But this loneliness only made him more unhappy still; he spent his life in lamentation, sitting stock-still all day long, with his arms hanging limp, and his eyes fixed on vacancy, refusing either to eat or drink. This would never do; so they left him at liberty to wander at will in the house.

II

Oh! but this house was not a bit like mine or yours; yet it had doors and windows like any other house, but so tiny these doors and windows were, they were hardly worth mentioning. Imagine a house on four wheels, and no higher than a man of middle size, with three little windows high up admitting light and air from outside; you entered by a wooden staircase that looked more like the ladder of a windmill than anything else.

This queer construction rolled most part of the year along the high roads, jolting, gee-wo, gee-hup! in and out of the ruts, and carting about in its interior men and animals, to say nothing of household stuff—beds, cooking-stoves, chests crammed with clothes, and a whole heap of other things. An old horse, who was little better than a bag of bones, was in the shafts; when a halt was called, they let him crop the grass alongside the hedgerows.

It was the funniest thing, being hauled along like this, tossing and tumbling in this box on wheels where the furniture seemed to be always just on the point of starting a polka. The table would throw up its legs in the air, and the chairs turn head over heels, while the pots and pans knocked together in the corners, making the quaintest music, sharp or flat in key according to the jolts.

Jack, perched atop of a big press, held on tooth and nail to save a tumble. More often than not he found himself under the table along with his good friend Murph, a Stoic philosopher, who let nothing ever disturb his equanimity, but calmly went on beating the bush of his thick woolly coat in search of the game that lived there. All the while the caravan, bumping and thumping with a terrific rattle, was tacking and luffing over the rolling billows of the stony roads.

III

It is high time to tell you that Jack was a dear, pretty little monkey of the chimpanzee kind, with tiny, delicate hands, nervous and semi-transparent, almost like a sick child's. He was no bigger, the whole body of him, than a pocket-handkerchief, and you could have easily hidden him inside your hat. He was slim and slender, daintily made, with narrow chest and sloping shoulders—a creature all nerves, with a wonderful little pale phiz of his own, puckered and wrinkled, and long, drooping eyelids, greyish-white, and as thin as an onion skin, that slowly, rhythmically, opened and closed over brown eyes ringed with yellow. He bore the solemn, serious look of those who suffer; his eyes seemed fixed on something beyond the visible world, and now and again he would pass his long, dry fingers across his eyes as if to wipe away a tear. He seldom gambolled, and never indulged in the grotesque contortions of other apes; their restless, ceaseless activity seemed foreign to his nature, and even his grimaces had nothing in common with theirs.

Noise scared him; he was never angry, but habitually silent and thoughtful. He preferred to lurk alone in dark corners, where he would spend long hours, squatted on his tail, almost motionless, dreaming sadly of some mysterious, unattainable future. But, for all his unlikeness to his colleagues and their comicality, his queer little crumpled, wrinkled face never failed to produce its effect on the spectators. Jack was perfectly irresistible; no one *could* look at him for any length of time without bursting out laughing. His aspect was at once so piteous and so ridiculous, his gaze so pathetic and so grotesque, his deadly earnestness so side-splitting, while his eyelids would droop suddenly ever and anon in so anxious and appealing a wink, that the result was comic beyond belief. An old, old man's head on a baby's body, a mask that was for ever changing, twitching, wrinkling, with eyes that looked out grave, intense, solemn, from beneath a low, flat brow crowned by what looked for all the world like a wig!

The louder the merriment he excited, the more serious Jack became. On show days, while the audience was convulsed with mirth, the gravity of his mien, the careworn look in his eyes, over which the lids dropped mechanically at regular intervals, as if weighed down with their load of melancholy, reached the acme of fantastic absurdity.

Alas! men cannot tell what monkeys are thinking of. If they knew, they would not always laugh. Jack was dreaming of the sun, the vast green

forests, the friends he had left behind; he was dreaming of the delights of swinging high in the air, cradled in the leafy hammocks of the boughs, dreaming of the trailing lianas, of the romps and games with his fellows throwing cocoanuts at one another's heads, and of the endless chivyings and chasings from tree-top to tree-top above the rolling billows of the wind-tossed jungles, through which the wild beasts—elephants, panthers, and lions—plough their way like ships on the high seas, leaving in their wake a broad furrow of floating odours and deep-toned sounds.

IV

But Jack had a friend, and he never embarked on his voyages into the far-away dreamland without calling on his old chum Murph to join him.

Yes, Murph gambolled with him in the tropical jungles, Murph frolicked with him in the tall grasses, Murph and he amused themselves together at never-ending games of play; if ever it was granted him to see his native land again, he fully hoped to take Murph along with him. 12

Poor Jack! he did not understand that the worthy Murph, acrobat as he was, would have found it hard to follow him in the lofty regions where his congeners are wont to disport themselves, nearer to the stars than the earth. Not a doubt of it, Murph would have had to kick his heels at the foot of a tree, while his friend was off and away aloft; and the smallest of his perils would have been to find himself, on looking round, face to face with a python-snake, just uncoiling his folds to spring, or else, on the river-banks, confronted with the gaping jaws of a crocodile.

Murph could play dominoes, tell fortunes, hunt for a handkerchief in a spectator's pocket, read the paper. Murph had many other accomplishments besides, but it is far from certain that he would have extricated himself successfully from a *tête-à-tête* of this sort with beasts that could boast neither his education nor his manners. 13

The liking was reciprocal. From the very first Jack had taken a fancy to the big woolly-coated dog, as woolly as a sheep, who never barked or growled or grumbled or showed his teeth—so unlike the other dogs in the menagerie; in the same way Murph, the big dog, had formed an affection for the well-behaved, sad-faced little ape, who never pulled his tail and never tried to scratch out his eyes.

As it happened, the showman had made up his mind to make them perform together. Murph was the best runner in the troupe; there was nobody like him for a round trot or a swinging gallop, for wheeling suddenly round and dropping to his knees just before making his exit, nobody to match Murph, always good-tempered and imperturbable, always on the look-out, with his bright eyes half hid under the bushy eyebrows, for a bit of sugar and a round of applause. 14

Jack, for his part, had very soon become a brilliant horseman, lissom and fearless, an adept at leaping through the hoops and vaulting the 15

bars. Thus the two seemed made for each other, both in body and mind. They bore the hardships of the life together, and they shared its successes; by dint of standing so often back against back and muzzle against muzzle, they found their hearts brought close together too, and became fast friends. Murph was never to be seen without Jack; wherever Jack was, Murph was there as well; they lived curled up on the same rug, in the same corner, under the same table, Murph licking Jack in the neck, and Jack stroking Murph's nose, each bound to each in perfect trust and amity.

V

Murph was older than Jack by nearly nine years, and his years made him nearly as serious-minded as his friend. But it was a different sort of gravity. Murph was neither morose nor disillusioned; his was the gentle seriousness of old age. He had seen many things since he had been in the world, but life did not appear to have left only its dregs in him. He still believed in springtide, in friendship, in the master's kind heart; then he had neither family nor native land to regret, for he had been born in the menagerie of a father and mother broken in like himself to circle the trapeze and leap through the hoop.

His horizon was bounded by the four walls of the caravan in which, as a puppy still sucking at his mother's breast, he had been carted from fair to fair. Day by day he had watched from behind the window-panes the long procession of cities and countries filing past; he had visited most parts of Europe, in company with the strange *omnium-gatherum* of apes, goats, parrots, and dogs that at each halting-place was the delight of the infant population. But he had never taken it upon him to covet the kingdom of this world; he had never craved to roam at liberty through the streets; never, in one word, had he so much as dreamt of playing truant. He was a very learned dog, and, like other learned people, he lived absorbed in his own thoughts, self-centred within the circle of his meditations, seeking nothing of things outside.

VI

Murph was a poodle by breed, and you might have searched long before you found a bigger or better-built one. Standing well on his legs, with a good, strong, supple back of his own, he carried his head high, as a self-respecting poodle should. I mean, of course, in the days when Murph was still young, for since age had crept on him, it *would* droop more or less; but even so, there was something proud and dignified about its carriage that always attracted attention. He walked slowly and sedately, as if intent on the solution of an ever-insoluble problem. His thick, curly fleece clothed his neck like a mane, while a stout pair of long drooping moustaches gave him the look of an old cavalry officer; his skin was smooth and polished where the coat had been cut very close; he wore heavy ruffles round his ankles, and his tail ended in a woolly tuft.

Thus accoutred, Murph was a fine-looking dog;

the curs of low degree that came prowling round the van, and caught a glimpse of him through the crack of the door, gazed at him with admiration. He had the majestic port of beings destined to greatness; it was easy to see he might have been a diplomatist, or a great general, if nature, in fashioning his lot, had not chosen rather to give him the shape of a poodle; nor was Murph slow to appreciate and enjoy the impression he produced.

Fine fellow as he was, he was not altogether free from vanity; the humblest animal with which Murph compared himself was the lion; he had seen one once in a travelling menagerie, and been struck by his own likeness to the king of beasts. Why, had he not, like the lion, a mane about his neck, a tuft to his tail, and bracelets of hair about his ankles? Had he not likewise his Olympian look and superb carriage? By dint of a little imagination, Murph had come to believe the lion a degenerated type of poodle dog.

But let us pass lightly over his foibles; every one has his little weaknesses. Time, moreover, that damps the foolish ardour of mankind and dogkind, had tamed our friend's ambitions. He was by now as contemplative and calm as some wise philosopher satiated with the glories of this world. More often on his back than on his feet, he would watch the younger dogs, his juniors in the profession, capering and giving themselves the airs of a drum-major heading his regiment, without any other feeling towards them but one of kindly indulgence; and if any one else was disposed to rebuke them, he would shake his head, as much as to say, "There, there, we have all of us done the like in our day!"

VII

Jack had come as a solace to his old age; he had loved him as a friend, almost as a son, with a truly fatherly affection.

This little suffering, delicate creature, so morbidly nervous and excitable, had roused in him some mysterious instinct of protection, that had grown little by little and ended by forming an unbreakable bond of brotherhood. Ceaselessly he watched over his protégé, sheltered him, defended him, kept for him the best of his bodily heat and his warm heart. If a bullying animal ran after Jack, in one bound the latter was beside Murph, who would show a determined front, that soon sent the would-be tormentor to the right-about. One day, indeed, Murph, usually so good-tempered, showed his teeth to the master himself, who, for some small fault, had thought good to lift his whip at the little monkey. If Jack was a-cold—and he was always shivering, blow the wind from what quarter it might—quick he would slip between Murph's paws and cuddle against his breast in the warm, cosy place. Murph was Jack's special providence.

Thus they had been living for nearly half-a-dozen years. Never a cloud had dimmed their good accord; never an angry snap of the teeth—never a pettish fit; mankind might have taken a lesson in the art of friendship from them. Thus they had grown old, loving, fondling, helping each other, making between them the prettiest happy family

ever known in the world, never weary one of the other, but realising the ideal of the most perfect union.

Mutual esteem further increased their affection. 23
Murph had never seen an ape more alert and clever, more intelligent and active than Jack; he would gladly have stood for hours watching him performing his tricks, clinging to the cords with his delicate, dry little hands, then hurling himself into space to alight again on his feet, or else holding on by his tail and swinging from earth to heaven on the trapeze.

On his side Jack—Jack the cynic, whose lack-lustre eyes seemed incapable of any curiosity—admired his friend Murph as a creature of extraordinary gifts.

And what wonderful things the good dog could do, to be sure! I have mentioned some of them; I could tell of many others. Murph could climb a ladder; Murph could walk along a line of bottle necks; Murph could nose out the prettiest lady in the audience; Murph could play the cornet-à-piston; Murph could smoke a pipe; Murph was almost a man.

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VIII

It did one good to see him “come on,” a big pink bow knotted in the tufts that adorned his tail. He would enter gravely, bow politely to right and left, then cast a questioning look at his master, quite motionless the while, except for a slight quiver of the tail, waiting for the conclusion of the introductory remarks which the “old man” never failed to address to the audience. At last came the loud “Hi, Murph!”—and the good dog began his evening’s work.

He could have given points to the most 25
experienced actors by his aplomb, his punctiliousness, his patient and never-flagging attention. Nothing ever distracted him from his part. Wags would amuse themselves sometimes by offering him a lump of sugar, or even pitch a sausage or a cake right between his paws; but Murph was adamant against such temptations. How the crowd cheered and clapped hands and stamped feet when he went bounding from hoop to hoop, so supple and nimble and self-possessed, never losing step or missing a spring, striking the paper with his head fair and square in the middle every time, crashing through and landing again on his feet, gravely and yet so elegantly.

His tricks finished, he would repeat his bows to 26
right and left, still quite sedate and unintoxicated by the thunders of applause. The fact is, Murph respected both his audience and himself; he knew how to keep his feelings to himself—how different from those ill-trained dogs that yelp and bark and lose their heads in the hurly-burly, quite forgetting that the finest thing on earth is to take one’s triumph modestly.

IX

But Murph was particularly admirable in the

tricks he went through with Jack. Each of the two friends seemed made to help out the other, and each vied with the other in sacrificing himself to enhance the general effect. Now it was “Mazeppa’s ride”; you know—Mazeppa bound on the back of his fiery charger and borne on and on in wild career over the steppes in a whirlwind of flying stones and smothering dust. Now it was a *powder-play* of Bedouins, pursuing, retreating, prancing, curvetting, rising in their stirrups and brandishing their muskets; or else a mortal combat between two troops of horse, firing at each other, reloading and firing again. The spectacle, whatever it was, was always thrilling.

Murph would stand waiting in the side-scenes for his cue. Suddenly he would give a spring, a tremendous spring, and like a bomb-shell he was on the stage, with mane erect and flashing eyes; clearing every obstacle, upsetting everything he encountered, animate or inanimate, he hurled himself on to the boards; on his back, clinging to his woolly coat, shaking and shivering, teeth hard set and mouth awry, rode a little black figure wrapped in a voluminous burnous that flapped in the wind. 27

And bing! bang! bang! as his steed dashed by, with all the flash and dazzle of red saddle braided with gold, scarlet bridle, and red, green, blue spangles, shaking the boards, rattling the lustres, rustling the curtain, to reiterated cries of “Hi! hip! hurrah, hurrah!” and the crack of the whip going off like pistol-shots behind, Jack would fire off his gun over and over again, till he was shrouded in a cloud of smoke, through which he could be discerned still tireless, still indefatigable, bestriding Murph in every possible position, now perched on the neck, now on the crupper. He seemed made of iron, the frail little being! Murph might prance and jib and shy, buck-jump and leap fences—nothing could unseat Jack. The performance over, the latter would shake his little head under its jockey-cap two or three times, by way of bow, and so exit, as his friend the poodle gave one last tremendous bound that carried him and his rider out of sight. 28

The enthusiasm of the spectators followed him behind the scenes, and the floor trembled and shook under the drumming of heavy boots. The applause grew deafening, and suddenly Jack and Murph made a final whirlwind dash across the stage, executed a last frantic *fantasia*—and retired for good and all. 29

X

But, alas! Murph was getting old. His exertions tired him dreadfully; after each performance he had to be rubbed down and attended to, or he would have lain moaning and groaning for an hour.

His master was sorry for him, and with deep regret—for he saw no glimpse among his troupe of any talent to take the place of the “falling star”—he set him to do his more quiet tricks—playing dominoes, finding handkerchiefs, walking on bottles. 30

At the same time he resolved to try a young

poodle to fill the hole in the receipts his good, faithful Murph's retirement was bound to make. He trained the animal to run in circles, to leap through hoops, to clear obstacles, and one fine day clapped Jack on his back.

Banco—that was the poodle's name—had not gone three steps before he was bitten, beaten, garrotted, and left blinded and bleeding. The master punished Jack severely, and presently made a fresh attempt. But, no—Jack *would* not obey; he tore Banco's ear in two, and then sprang from the saddle and hid himself in a dark corner.

Much the same thing happened at every new trial. The whip was no sort of use; Jack was not to be moved. At last, wearied out, the showman gave in, and Jack and Murph remained inseparable, living and working together as before. 31

One night Murph came in from his performance utterly worn out, his tongue hanging out of his mouth and his strength exhausted; his midday meal had proved indigestible, and, to cap all, the applause to-night had been faint and feeble.

Ah! few of us know how actors live on that elusive thing, the favour of the public, and what renewed force, when they are grown old and have one foot in the grave already, what fresh vigour the smiles of a delighted audience instil in their veins, when the blood is beginning to run feeble! 32

No, the thankless audience did not for once acknowledge Murph as their old favourite, the veteran of the boards, the good and gallant beast that had so often been their darling and their delight. Under his outward show of indifference Murph hid a vast fund of sensibility, and the coldness of his audience cut him to the quick, coming so soon after his late successes. He thought the dark night of public neglect was beginning for him; he realised his loss of vigour, his waning energies, and, like other old players, he saw himself superannuated, out of date, unknown, and misunderstood by a new public, become a mere shadow on the scene of his former triumphs. Add to this his master's evident ill-humour, as he foresaw the inevitable moment when his old servant would be a mere pensioner on his bounty.

Murph staggered off, and fell panting on the rug that formed his bed. 33

Then Jack came to help him; but, alas! even Jack could not console him just at first. Murph rejected his friend's ministrations, so bitter was his rancour against mankind. But his pique was soon over, and his wounded heart found healing under the gentle hand of his lifelong companion.

34

XI

But the fatal hour had struck; old age was upon him. Murph had grown infirm; he would take a dozen steps, crawling from one corner to another, and then sink down helplessly. His legs, once so prodigiously strong and active, tottered and stumbled from sheer weakness. In vain his

master’s voice called him to show his tricks; he would struggle to his feet, for an instant his head would recover its proud carriage of old days; then suddenly, his momentary strength exhausted, his limbs tingling with rheumatic pains that cut like whip-lashes, he would slink away to fall back again into the lifeless attitude of an aged invalid.

A cloud floated before his eyes, he could no longer see things clearly, and a growing deafness filled his head with a buzz-buzzing that never stopped. Life was slowly dying down in the old body. He would lie torpid for hours and doze away the time in dark corners, under tables, where nothing would wake him, neither the yapping of the other dogs nor the chattering of the monkeys, neither the noise of footsteps coming and going nor the shrill trumpetings of the clown’s cornet-à-piston playing “Malbrouck s’en va-t-en guerre!” 35

It was a deep, dreamless sleep. Jack did not like it, and would crouch down beside him, watching him with sad eyes, like a friend at a sick man’s bedside. Poor beast, he could make nothing of this new state of affairs. Some change he could not comprehend had come over his chum and laid him low. He seemed to be mutely questioning him, asking him why he never nowadays trotted about behind the scenes. But it was all Murph could do to see his little anxious, sorrowful face; he could only view him as if through a fog, an indistinct shape of sympathy hardly distinguishable from surrounding objects.

Nevertheless, he still tried hard to make out in the dusk of his blindness his kindly comrade of yore; he would raise his palsied head, and from the depths of his dim eyes, veiled by a milky film, dart a pale look of infinite gentleness. 36

Sometimes the two bushy tufts on his forehead dropped right over his eyes and further confused his vision. But Jack would put them back lightly with the tips of his delicate fingers. Indeed he never left his side, tickling his ears to amuse him, tapping and stroking him, ever on the watch, a tender-hearted nurse of inexhaustible care and foresight.

This lowly being had learnt to love like a mother; his little dim soul had emerged from its darkness to answer his dying comrade’s need, and now, shining bright in the light of day, was working deeds of charity. 37

XII

One evening the show pitched on the outskirts of a big town. The booth was raised, the trestles fixed, the boards laid, and the costume-chests emptied of their miscellaneous finery.

Murph lay curled up by himself behind the stove; all round him reigned a deafening uproar, a rush and scurry of feet, a perfect hurricane of noise. The master was shouting and scolding; the Jack-pudding with his hoarse voice was yelping like a dog, mewing like a cat, crowing like a cock, getting into trim for the patter-speech with which to tickle the ears of the groundlings, while the general hands were bustling about, nailing and hammering, stimulated by copious libations

of wine.

The monkeys, too, bore their part; hearing all this uproar, they joined in with a will. Their shrill scolding rose above the hammering, and they chattered incessantly and shook the bars of their cages. The dogs barked, a solemn-faced parrot repeated a bad word over and over again, while the musicians hired for the evening performance drew lugubrious notes from their instruments by way of keeping their hand in. 38

Hurrah! the stage was set up at last.

Then the dogs were dressed, the seats given a last wipe-down—and suddenly boom! boom! the big drum, furiously beaten, rolled out its deep-toned summons. Instantly a perfect hurricane of discordant, ear-splitting noises was let loose in front of the show-tent. Answering the deafening rumble of the big drum, the fifes and ophicleide awoke, the kettledrum began its rub-a-dub, the cymbals clashed, and the whole booth shivered and shook from floor to roof-tree. 39

Shouts, yells, bursts of ribald laughter, combined in one deep-toned, incessant roar to form the bass, while cat-calls, cries of vituperation and repartee, the trampling of many feet marking time before the doors, the clown's voice rising and falling amid a tempest of scuffling and kicking, all met and mingled in the air above the red glow of the pitch-pine torches flaring in the wind, and punctuating the general din one never-ceasing refrain—

"First seats one franc; second seats half a franc; third places twenty centimes—*only* twenty centimes. Walk up, ladies and gentlemen; just about to begin! Citizens and soldiers, walk up, walk up!" 40

XIII

A torrent of humanity surged up the steps, pushing, shoving, shouting; then, suddenly released, poured tumultuously over the seats of the auditorium. Then the big drum redoubled its efforts, the fife blew its shrillest, the ophicleide lost all control of its keys, tom-toms and hand-bells, frantically beaten, added their quota to the din, the kettledrums made a terrific rub-a-dub, and the whole force of the company, a mad whirl of startling colours and flashing spangles, danced a fandango on the platform.

"Walk up, gentlemen, walk up!" the master-showman kept yelling; "here you shall see what you *shall* see—marvels and miracles you've never seen the like of before! Look at me! I am the world-famous Brinzipoff, director-in-chief to the Royal Theatre of St. Petersburg and to all the crowned heads of Europe! Hi! ho! hup! *only* twenty centimes the back seats! Halloa! ha! hurrah! here you are, here you are, ladies and gentlemen, *this* way for the front seats!" 41

A pause of comparative calm succeeded this grand chorus of ear-splitting noises.

The close-packed audience was waiting, stamping with impatience, for the curtain to rise. Then Jack-pudding came on, pulled his funny faces, and let off his jokes amidst a dropping fire of jeers and bravos, and presently 42

made way for Esmeralda, the performing goat, “the unique, the incomparable Esmeralda, the very same identical animal described by the immortal *Alexandre* Hugo!” The musicians struck up an appropriate air, mostly made up of the vigorous thumping of drumsticks on drumheads.

XIV

Murph had never budged from his corner; he was quite insensible as yet to the din that had once had such power to excite him. His head resting on his outstretched paws, he lay asleep, stolid and stupid, callous to all external things. Round his neck, buried in the dirty, matted fleece, now long untouched by the curry-comb, were wound Jack’s arms; for Jack never left his side.

Esmeralda made her exit, and then suddenly bombarding the audience with a tornado of sound, the big drum rolled again, as if to announce some special and extraordinary turn. 43

Murph knew this furious, frantic prelude well; this was always the way Mazeppa’s headlong ride began. Yes, next moment, fifes, drums, bells, tom-toms struck up together in a mad concert of all the instruments combined, whereby the bandsmen strove to depict poor Mazeppa’s terrors as his galloping steed bore him off to be the prey of all the fiends of hell!

44

XV

Then something stirred in the old dog’s brain. Did he recall his former triumphs, the shouts of excited audiences, the encores, all the intoxicating successes of his life on the boards? Did some vision of an applauding multitude, of arms outstretched, and voices raised in gratitude, amid the crash of trumpet and drum, in the hot air thick with men’s breath and the fumes of powder—did some vision of all this pass before the poodle’s dying eyes?

It was a strange awakening, at any rate. Murph sprang suddenly to his feet, took a leap, and bounded on the stage, tail proudly swinging, and head erect, Jack hanging on to his woolly coat. Delighted, entranced, amazed, the poor little beast kept craning over to peer into his comrade’s face, to see if it was really true, and watch the light of life dawning and brightening in his deep-set eyes.

So his friend was himself again at last! So they were to begin the old merry life again, to gallop and leap, and risk their necks as in the dear, daredevil days of yore! Jack danced and pranced on the poodle’s back, as if drunk with the delight of this miraculous transformation. 45

At sight of this great, hollow-flanked, unkempt beast, with his dirty, greasy, tangled fleece, standing there stark and stiff, his legs tottering under him, his body shaken from head to foot by a nervous tremor, paws sprawling, back bending, a few scanty hairs bristling in his tail—when the crowd beheld this pitiful ruin, to which

Jack, alert and debonair, Jack and his grimaces and contortions, Jack and his caresses, the tender eyes he made, and the close, loving embrace he cast about his comrade's neck, all added a touch of comedy, at once sad and irresistibly ludicrous, a mighty shout of laughter arose.

It burst like a rocket, then spread from row to row of the spectators, till it ended in a tempest of merriment that from the audience extended to the stage, and burst on the dying comedian who stood there. 46

Suddenly the dog's legs gave way beneath him, and Murph fell over on his side. His supreme effort had killed him; he had succumbed, as great men sometimes will, at the very moment of their greatness.

He lay there, the death-rattle in his throat, the death-agony shaking his poor body in a last, dreadful spasm. He opened his eyes wide, unnaturally wide, in a stony, sightless stare, as empty as the heads of the thoughtless crowd in front. 47

Then they came and dragged him off the scene.

XVI

Jack was farther from understanding things than ever; his wonder had only increased.

Why had his friend stopped short when so well under way? He could not tell; he could only gaze at him with questioning eyes, his eyelids winking very fast in a startled way.

He pressed closer and closer to Murph, and felt a shock as of something snapping, a shudder, the quiver of a breaking chain. A deeper darkness still crept over poor Murph's senses; he was dying!

Jack crouched over him, gazing down at his friend. 48

Just then Murph made a supreme effort, half turned his head and peered up in his friend's face, while a look of tender affection passed over his glazing eyeballs, mingled with the reflection of the objects he had known all his life.

The tip of a white, dry tongue came out between his teeth, and lengthening out like a slender riband, licked Jack's paw. It was not drawn back again; Murph was dead.

Close by in the slips the fifes were shrilling, the drums beating, the audience in front clapping hands and stamping.

Jack watched beside his friend all night. At first he had crept in between his paws, as he had always done; but the chill of the cold, rigid limbs had forced him to abandon his position.

His little brain was sorely exercised, you may take my word for that. What was this icy chill, like the coldest winter's frost, that drove him from his dear comrade's bosom, generally so warm a refuge? He lay there by Murph's side, dozing with one eye open; then, suddenly starting wide awake in a panic, he would touch 49

his friend with exploring fingers to see if he was still asleep.

Finally, he lost all patience at the other's prolonged slumbers; he shook him, he plucked at the tufts of his woolly coat, he tickled his nose —gently at first, then more roughly. But it was all no use.

Then he took Murph's head in his little arms; it was as heavy as lead and dragged him down all sideways. But he would not let it go, holding it hard against his breast, examining it all the while with surprise and consternation. Presently, recalling what he had seen his master's wife do, he began to rock it to and fro, cradling it softly and swaying it slowly, unceasingly from side to side, his queer little head swaying in time, like an old man's crooning over an infant. 50

The dawn filtered in through the shutters of the van, and a sunbeam trembled for an instant in the dead poodle's eyes.

XVII

Jack absolutely refused to be parted from Murph. He fell into a fury, and bit the men who tried to separate them on face and hands. He had to be dragged away and shut up in a cage. There he lived for three days, whimpering like an old man fallen into the imbecility of dotage, his haggard eyes looking out despairingly from between his wrinkled temples, his little face all shrivelled like a medlar, his lips as pale as wax, and an expression of utter life-weariness in every feature.

He would eat nothing, leaving untasted the carrots he was once so fond of, and refusing to touch either sugar or milk. All day long he cowered motionless in a corner, moaning, his eyes fixed on something invisible to others, outside the cage, far away. 51

52

XVIII

On the morning of the third day they found him stark and cold, his angular little skeleton almost piercing through the skin. His long, dry hands were closed convulsively; the lips were drawn back and showed the small, white teeth; two deep, moist furrows were visible on either side his nose, as if, before he died, the ape had been weeping for his friend.

THE CAPTIVE GOLDFINCH

The Captive Goldfinch

I

Once upon a time, far away in the depths of a great orchard, there lived a goldfinch. He was born in the spring, amid the fragrance of the fresh leaves, and there was not a prettier, sweeter little fellow to be found in any of the nests round about. His mother longed to keep him near her always, she loved him so dearly; but then, there is nothing so tempting as a pair of wings, and once July was come, the month of daring flights and dashing enterprises, light and agile as only young birds are, he left the maternal nest in search of distant adventures.

Oh! but it is enough to turn any goldfinch’s head, this flying free over the blue expanse of the skies! Hardly had he passed the limits of the orchard where he was born ere he clean forgot all about his fond mother, her warm breast, and her dark eye so full of tender solicitude.

A sort of frenzy seized him. Thinking the leaves were as eternal as the springtide, he boldly took

his flight, and away across the sky; soaring ever higher and higher, he rose into the heat and glory of the sun, into the regions where the larks sing and the swallows dart, where all the wild wings make a sound as of a mighty fan opening and shutting.

Wonder of wonders! now the earth below him looked round and shining like a ball of flowers floating in an enveloping cloud of gold-dust; and bathed in splendour, he saw the sun rise and set in the glory of limitless horizons.

Oh! what glorious flights he had in the blue depths of the clouds! what games of hide-and-seek among the flickering leaves, what cries and songs and dartings after gnats, and all the delights known only to the little winged souls we call birds!

The nightingales lulled him to sleep with the melody of their concerts, the cock woke him with the shrill clarion-call of his crowing; all the day long he flitted and flew amid the endless twittering and warbling of linnets, tomtits, bullfinches, sparrows, and chaffinches, taking *his* part too in the orchestra, and near bursting his little throat to produce his finest notes, with that vanity that makes us one, and believe Nature has implanted in us the soul of an artist —a great, mysterious, unappreciated artist.

II

But the summer passed into autumn, and drenching rains succeeded the sunny days; the poor goldfinch had to perch of nights in rain-soaked trees, where he had to sit cold and shivering, feeling his feathers getting wet and draggled one by one. Furious winds tore away the leaves, and lo! one morning when he opened his eyes, he saw a new and strange world—the ground was covered with snow, and far as sight could reach were only white roofs, white hedges, and white trees. Winter was come!

Then oh! how bitterly he regretted his mother’s warm breast! How gladly would he have given the joys of the past summer to find himself once more pressed close to her side and feel her heart beating against his in the cosy nest! But all summer the wind had been busy confusing the pathways of the air, so that it was now impossible to discover the one that should have led him back to the nest; nay, a more blighting wind than all the rest blew out of the skies; the wind of forgetfulness had breathed upon his spirit, carrying away the memory of that happy road—the first that young folks forget. And now winter grew fierce and fell, devastating the orchards, bombarding the cottages with hailstones, driving hope from all breasts and killing the little birds in the nests—the young birds that are the hope of the verdant springtide and happy days to come.

The little goldfinch was quite sure this horror would never end, that the trees would never grow green again, that never more would the harvest clothe the fields in green, that gaiety, sunshine, and youth were vanished away for good and all.

Cowering in the hollow of an old branch, he watched the days go by like a procession of white phantoms, each uglier than the other, and his little feet all stiff with cold, his feathers frozen together with hoar-frost, sad and shivering, he thought many and many a time his last hour was come.

In vain the old birds told him of a re-birth; he could not believe in the resurrection of things when this dreary time of mourning should be over.

59

III

Little by little, however, the snowstorms grew rarer, stray sunbeams pierced the murkiness of the heavens, and a verdant down, at first light as a vapour, but which presently grew denser and soon took on the solidity and sheen of satin, hemmed round the sombre garment of the fields. A mildness filled the air—something restful, calm, and kindly, that was like a benediction, something the winds distilled, the sun diffused, the growing grass and humming insects and fragrant violets spread abroad, something which, like a river fed by a myriad rippling rills, gushed forth along the torrent-bed of creation.

A door seemed to open in the sooty firmament of winter, and this portal, rolling back on golden hinges, suddenly revealed the sun in his splendour, like a king stepping forth to bring peace to the peoples. Then sounded the first chord in the plain-song of the woods; waters, sky, and earth joined in the harmony with a deep, long-drawn note that rose and swelled, sobbed and sighed, grew louder and louder, assumed the majestic breadth of an orchestral symphony, and waxing gradually, ended by filling the depths and heights of air with a mighty diapason, as if all mouths, all voices, all breaths were raised together in one vast unison.

60

I leave you to guess if the goldfinch lifted up *his* voice in this universal hymn of praise!

So it was true, then! The sun had indeed returned! A fine lacework of filmy greenery began to clothe the tree boles, and the water-springs to sparkle in the shy recesses of the forest; the air was free; once more he and his comrades could laugh and sing, flit idly to and fro, pilfer and steal, plunder the orchards, peck the flowers, drink in from a drop of dew intoxication to last the livelong day, and revel in that twice-blessed existence that is full of a fine frenzy of delight to make the thrushes envious.

61

Good-bye to the winter covert, the crevice in the protecting bough, the moss that still keeps the impress of his little body! Nothing will satisfy him now but the wild fields of space; and with a bold sweep of wing the masterful goldfinch has left his dolorous refuge, never to return. A second piece of ingratitude, another act of forgetfulness! Yes, it must be allowed a little bird’s head has small room in it for remembrance.

62

IV

Good times began again. White and pink, the orchards blossomed like bridal bouquets. It snowed butterflies' wings and flower stamens in the tall grass; lilacs hung in clusters over the walls; like a good priest saying mass, the earth donned a golden cope, and all Nature trembled and loved.

Then was the time for our pretty bird to abandon himself to endless idle wanderings and loiterings, hopping hither and thither, always on one leg, barely lighting and then off again, shaking the leaves with an incessant flutter of wings, twittering and chirping, flirting with the daisies, ruffling the hawthorn, hooting the holly. At peep of dawn he never failed, when the harebells rang their morning summons, to come down to attend the good God's church whither the flies and sparrows assemble, still half asleep and blundering against the pillars; next the beetles get under way along the roads, teased and tormented by the butterflies and ladybirds; then the linnet leaves her bough and flies off to where the bells tinkle, but of a sudden darts back again, finding she has left something behind, lost something—more often than not her head—for the poor lady generally wears it wrong side before! Thither fly the chaffinches too, and the grave-faced oriole, the pretty bullfinch, and the chattering cock-sparrow. Then the cockchafers come, too, too often, alas! trailing after them the thread of captivity clinging to them—the burly cockchafers that, with the bumble-bee, are the bass voices of the underwoods. Plain and woodland are all alive, for there is never a creature at this fair hour of daybreak, while the skies are brightening, but is eager to come and make its orison to God in His temple. 63

So the little goldfinch followed their example; he preened his feathers, looking at himself admiringly in a dewdrop the while. Then, his toilet done, like all the rest of the world, he bustled off to his business and his pleasures. 64

V

Goldfinches' hearts are made much the same as men's; the spring awakes both to thoughts of love.

Our hero had remarked in his neighbourhood a sweet little hen-goldfinch. She lived with her parents in the tall branches of an apple-tree; more than once, coming home at evening, he had admired the fascinating smile of her beak at the window, embowered in foliage, where she sat watching for his going-by. 65

Was it his fancy? Was it really and truly a modest blush, or only the rosy reflection cast by the setting sun? Yes, sure—he had seen her redden. It needed no more to decide him to ask her hand in marriage.

One morning he made his bravest toilet, scented himself with lavender and thyme, polished up his little claws, and in this gallant array he set out, with a shining face but an anxious heart, to see the parents. They received him politely, but could not make up their minds, and begged him to come again.

He came again and again, and the more he saw of his little sweetheart, the deeper he fell in love. She was as pretty as seven in her little brown mantle with yellow facings, and her dainty head in its red hood was poised on her neck with an incomparable grace. Saucy and alert, she was as slight and slim as a flower waving in the breeze, as bright as a sunbeam piercing through the leaves, as agile as the wind. Dewdrops seemed to sparkle in the depths of her little round pupils. She was a vision of the spring-tide made into a bird!

True, our hero was no less brave to see. Gallant and gay, he cocked his beak boldly and carried the colours of his race with becoming pride.

At last the wedding-day was fixed; but the bride's trousseau was still to seek. No doubt birds are able to start housekeeping at small cost, neither needing tables and chairs nor pots and pans; still, there must be some little fitting-out to be done.

And so thought the bride's parents, who were prudent people, and loved their daughter.

A fine to-do there was, to be sure, on the bough where the old couple had their home; a stir that never ceased all day long kept the green hangings of the house shaking, and the doors banging; everlasting comings and goings turned the stairways upside down. Pale and eager-eyed, the little hen-goldfinch awaited the happy hour when she could fly away with her mate.

VI

Soon the news of the betrothal spread amongst the neighbours. The nearest trees were all agog; nothing was to be heard but twitterings and whisperings, not to mention backbitings, for envy is to be found everywhere in this world. The tomtits above all took a delight in saying evil of the bride, calling her a silly, insipid little thing; they chirped and chattered, whistled and whispered, pecking and pulling to pieces the poor innocent child's good name. In vain the bullfinches, good, decent bodies, tried to interfere: the tomtits' cackle quite drowned their grave remonstrances. The critics had enlisted a naughty grisette, a chaffinch, a minx who had kicked over the traces in her day, and was renowned for her spiteful tongue; a blackbird too had joined the conspiracy, and now, perched all together on a high branch, from which they could spy upon the comings and goings of the goldfinch household, they kept up a famous uproar.

The Master of Ceremonies of the birds' parish arrived in the afternoon; he had come to inquire the hour at which the young folks were to be married, and if they wanted choristers to attend. It was agreed to engage a lark and a chaffinch; nightingales were too expensive. A pretty carpet of green would be laid down, as green as on the finest summer's day; the porch was to be decorated with anemones, and the chancel with daisies; the sun would be ordered for five o'clock, to make a grand show of purple and gold. Of course the drones would be at the organ, and they would ask the wind to give them

a helping hand by roaring in the pipes. The harebells would strike up a merry peal at peep of day, and ring till the bridal pair arrived. The holy-water stoup would be filled with dew. As for incense, the violets would see the censers were well filled, and the bees would keep them swinging all through the ceremony.

I forgot to tell you that a wedding breakfast had been ordered, at which, besides flies and worms galore, they were to regale themselves on a cricket and a locust—a magnificent spread indeed. The nearest spring would supply the wine; they were to have corn-berries for dessert, and the table would be laid in the thickest of an apple-tree in full blossom, where a cloud of gnats was always buzzing and making beautiful music. A yellowhammer was invited; he was a rollicking blade, and there was nobody to match him at singing a comic song.

All was going as well as could be; yet how long seemed the hours of waiting to the little bridegroom! To and fro he flitted, up and down the roads he sauntered, trying to cheat his impatience by incessant movement; presently he would light on a bough and fall a-dreaming, while his little heart beat fast and furiously.

Every minute he kept glancing up at the great dial God has set in the sky, and which only the birds can read; but the sunbeam which is the hand of this aerial clock would *not* move fast enough for his impatience. He could only bewail his lot, and force himself to drop asleep to kill the lagging time. He even went to see the village clockmaker, an old cuckoo, a greybeard bird with a nid-nodding head, who all day long used to strike the hours with exasperating punctuality, and besought him to quicken up the evening a bit.

But the cuckoo shook his head.

“Little madcap,” he told him, “am I to put out all the folk of the countryside for you? Don’t you know everything goes on by rule and regulation among your neighbours, and that each hour brings its own tasks? Why, whatever would they think if I rang vespers before the great timepiece of the heavens had indicated the time of twilight? What would the mole say if I brought him out of his underground house, looking black as a collier, before nightfall, and if suddenly the sun dazzled him with its light—poor purblind fellow who had never in his life dared look at anything but the moon?”

So, the cuckoo having shown him the door, he wandered off again, flitting from hedgerow to hedgerow, burning with impatience.

VII

A heap of little white grubs lay under the hedge of an orchard. More for lack of anything else to do than because he was hungry, the goldfinch flew up and fell upon it.

Ah! have a care, pretty birdie. A man was busy thereabouts just now.

But, alas, it is too late; a whole life of happiness

is ruined by a moment's curiosity. Hardly had the poor fellow plunged his beak in the mass when a string pulled the catch; down comes the trap, and he is a prisoner. Then the shape crouching behind a tree comes out from its hiding-place; it approaches, looms larger and larger, turns into a big bearded man, who opens enormous great hands, seizes the poor bird, and claps it in a cage, grinning a broad grin of satisfaction. Good-bye, little bride! Good-bye, marriage-feast and wedding-march! Good-bye, woods and orchards, gardens and flowers! Good-bye, twittering nests! Good-bye, life and love!

Consternation nailed our little hero to the spot; something had befallen him he could make nothing of; he gazed at the cage with haggard eyes, too scared to think. 74

Ah! if only he had lost his memory! But this consolation was denied him. He shook himself, dashed at the bars, pecked and bit at them, thinking maybe they would open and leave him free as air again.

But no; the bars would *not* give way.

Then he shuddered from head to foot. Anger and terror frenzied his little brain. He flew wildly at the bars; but all in vain—the cage was solid and strong. 75

Suddenly he realised his calamity, and, filled with a perfect frenzy of despair, with panting breath and trembling, shuddering limbs, he hurled himself at the bars, beat his head against the wires, tearing and lacerating beak and claws, flew madly up and down, breaking his wings, till, battered and bruised, his feathers all dripping with blood, exhausted and out of breath, he rolled half-dead into a corner.

It was all over!

While joy was paramount yonder in his bride's home, while song and laughter were the order of the day, while preparations for the wedding—bitter mockery!—were completing, and all things, leaves and butterflies and nests, were a-flutter, the poor bridegroom lay in his agony amid the silence of a prison.

76

VIII

Evening lit up the sky with its gleaming tints of copper; little by little the chattering family groups fell silent, and the darkling trees assumed the look of long-drawn, solemn colonnades. Alas! it was not under this familiar aspect that night fell for our captive goldfinch. A dirty whitewashed wall, on which hung strangely shaped objects, replaced the sable curtain spangled with stars that twilight spreads over the countryside. A guttering, flaring candle smoked on the table, bearing how faint a resemblance to the silver moon! and by its sordid light the hard-hearted wretch who had robbed him of his liberty was moving to and fro.

Ah! what right had he, this miserable birdcatcher, this highway robber, to tear him from the free air, the hedgerows and the green fields? Tiny though he be, is the bird therefore of 77

no import to the leaves, the winds, the trees, which without him would be voiceless? Has the blue sky no need of his outspread wings, his echoing song, the flutter of his plumage?

What use the pool glittering in the woodland, if he was not there to dip his beak in it and absorb in a drop of water the red of dawn, the gold of noon, the deep shadow of the quivering leaves? Is not a little bird the less a disaster in the forests and orchard-closes, a voice silenced in the symphony of nature, a furrow left barren in the fields of space, a bright point vanished from the azure sky? Is not the universe disturbed for the loss of a little creature wherein all nature is summed up and glorified?

The man blew out the taper, and a moonbeam shot in at the garret-window and fell on the poor captive. 78

It formed, as it were, a luminous rail on which his thoughts glided; and they always travelled in one direction—to his little *fiancée*, who at that moment, softly cradled by the night wind, was fast asleep and dreaming of the great to-morrow.

The moon paled and daylight appeared.

Yonder no doubt all was ready; the harebells were ringing their peal, the drones were organing their deep music, while the trembling bride, white as the lilies, was asking herself why her bridegroom did not come.

The cuckoo clanged out the hour of dawn. One and all were ready for the fête; only *his* arrival was waited for. 79

The hours slipped by without his appearing, and little by little the murmuring and muttering, low at first, grew louder and louder, and rose into a perfect tempest of cries and jeers and gibes. The chaffinches were jubilant, the parents disconsolate. And what of her, the poor, despairing bride? Her pretty innocent eyes could not bear the light of day; stricken to the heart by this unaccountable desertion, she was borne away fainting, half dead with shame and sorrow.

80

IX

Dark days followed. At first only a prisoner, his cruel master now made him into a galley-slave. He put a chain round his foot, and condemned him to the servitude of the car and cord. So drag your weight, work your pulley, haul in your little car, poor outcast! Who has not seen the monstrous spectacle—one of God’s creatures, created to fly free in the realms of air, coming and going on a toy platform, a ring about its leg? Who has not seen the unhappy captive, to win meat and drink, drawing up by little laborious jerks the water-jar and car, its eye gleaming with pitiful longing, gaining its subsistence by a never-ending useless martyrdom? Only he who has seen the cruel sight knows to what lengths the cruelty of bad men can go.

This was the fate of the poor goldfinch. 81

The man had given him a cage to imitate a Swiss

châlet, in front of which was a little terrace. On the terrace was fixed a post, with a pulley attached worked by a thread. This thread the captive had to pull in with his beak, little by little, till the little drinking-bucket hooked to the other end rose to the level of the platform; then putting his foot on the cord, he had to hold it in place and so drink a drop, bitter as a tear, hurriedly and fearfully, lest the thread should slip from under his claw and suddenly let the bucket run down again.

More often than not the bucket upset in its descent, and then he had to go without water for the rest of the day. 82

A second thread made it possible for him to haul to the edge of the platform a miniature car running on an inclined plane outside the cage; this held his bird-seed. What a struggle it was to drag it up! At each snap of the beak the car would ascend, but oh! so slowly. By successive jerks, never tiring, never stopping, with straining neck, working with the adroitness of a galley-slave, and clapping his foot on the cord after each pull, he had to drag up the accursed car, which would sometimes elude him and dash down the incline again, spilling the seed and mocking all his laborious efforts!

A hundred times a day he was forced to begin the horrid task again.

Many a time the goldfinch resolved to give in and die of hunger; but hunger is a terrible thing, and no sooner did its pangs begin to pinch his little stomach than he would seize the cord afresh and pull for dear life. 83

X

So passed the hours for the once happy bridegroom. Never a chirp now, never a flirt of the tail! Disconsolate and draggled, every feather of his little body betraying the misery of his broken life, he seemed an embodiment of the bitter protest of the winged creation against the cruelty of man.

A feeble ray of sunshine used to flicker on the garret walls towards midday; he would watch for it, and when it came at last, shooting a slender pencil of gold, in which the dust-motes danced athwart the gloom of his prison-house, it was like a brief instant of recovered freedom; for a moment he forgot his chain, his car, his slavery, and away he flew in fancy to the great orchards that showed their black masses of shadow on the horizon. Alas! the sunbeam slid along the wall and disappeared, and the appalling reality came home to him again. 84

What had he done to deserve this cruel fate? To filch a grain of corn here and there, to forage in the kitchen-gardens, to play the truant, to make the most of life, all day long to fly hither and thither, the free denizen of air—was this a crime? He never reflected how he had forgotten his mother, and that this crime alone deserved the sternest expiation.

His master was one of those good-for-nothing workmen who make the whole week a series of Sundays. One night he forgot to come home at 85

all; next morning the ill-starred captive found bucket and car both empty. No use hauling them up to him and pecking about in every corner; never a grain of seed was to be found, never a drop of water! Then indeed he knew the torments of hunger and thirst. In vain he toiled at his cruel, slavish task; the car ascended, the bucket rose, but without bringing solace to his famished cravings. His tools refused their office; with pale eyes of consternation the poor prisoner gazed at them, and could not understand.

As if by the irony of fate, the window had been left wide open, and he could plainly see the green of the nearest trees, in which the birds, his more fortunate brethren, were squabbling. He saw the sun slowly sink and the shadows of the house-roofs lengthen. Then a frenzy of madness seized him; with quick, frantic pecks he tore at the chain riveted round his leg, and by sheer fury burst its rings. 86

To dart to the window, to sail away for the paling blue of the sky, was the work of an instant; but next minute he fell to earth again, so weak was he with hunger. Luckily, not far from the foot of the tree where he had dropped, a flock of pigeons was enjoying a feast of oats at the door of a stable. He joined the band, and in a very short while had plumped his crop to such good purpose that he felt his full strength come back to him.

A long time had passed since he had quitted his bonny bride, and he trembled to think what changes the days might have brought with them in her life. Still the longing to see her again grew so irresistible after he had been free an hour that, even if she had forgotten him, he was fain to bid her farewell. 87

And pr-r-r-rt! he was off like the wind.

All the world was asleep when he arrived—even the tomtits, those inveterate gossips, who love to loiter at their doors long after dark, talking scandal of their neighbours.

“Little bride! little bride!” he breathed softly.

A yellowhammer answered him in a cross voice —

“Third tree to the left in the next orchard!”

Why, actually the goldfinches had removed! He hurried to the tree indicated, and once again, “Little bride!” he whispered. 88

A faint cry answered, and next moment his sweetheart appeared.

“I was waiting for you,” she cried.

Ah! these were happy moments that made up for all their sufferings. He told her all his adventures; she told him how her faith in him had never faltered. They woke the parents, who warmly welcomed the returned prodigal.

“Just think,” said the mother, “those odious chaffinches positively forced us to leave the neighbourhood. Life was become unbearable; morning, noon, and night it was nothing but insulting remarks. But now you are come back again! So these spiteful folks will be finely

confounded.”

Another old hen-goldfinch was there, who was gazing at him with wet eyes and wings all a-tremble.

“Ah!” cried our hero, “why, it is mamma, my poor mother I had forgotten so long!”

Yes, it was his mother indeed: his little bride, after his disappearance, had never wearied till she found her, telling herself that, with her for company, there would be two of them to wait for his return.

Their happiness was complete.

Two days after, but soberly this time, without drum or trumpet, the wedding was solemnised.

The story has its moral, as every story should. It was the goldfinch’s father-in-law who undertook to draw it for his young friend’s benefit.

“Son-in-law,” he said, “I hope you will teach your little ones two lessons. The first is—never forget your mother; the second—beware of traps in the hedgerows.”

STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A LITTLE WHITE RABBIT

Strange Adventures of a Little White Rabbit

Four little rabbits had seen the light in a hutch snugly stuffed with straw, where they lived cosy and warm by their mother's side.

They were pretty, plump little things, all four as fat as butter, and just as well-liking one as the other; but while three of them had white bellies and dappled backs, one was white all over from head to foot, and his mother was mighty proud of his beauty, you may be sure.

You could not have found so exquisite a rabbit, no, not for three leagues round, and every day he grew handsomer and handsomer, like a king's son. Two great rubies glittered in his fine eyes, and his teeth were just like the edge of a saw; yes, and he had a moustache—three hairs, which made him, oh! so conceited.

Mother Rabbit loved them all tenderly; but she loved Jannot, her firstborn, best of all.

To begin with, he was the eldest; then she had had more trouble to rear him, and ill-health always draws a closer bond between mother and child; besides, she was inordinately proud of his white coat, and dreamt he was destined for greatness. What form would it take? This she could not tell. Perhaps he would take first prize at a show—perhaps he would found a breed of white rabbits like himself. She lavished every delicacy upon her darling, and his prospective honours consoled her for the triviality of everyday existence.

They would soon be two months old, and that is the age when young bunnies are taken from their mothers. She dreaded the moment of parting; Jannot would have to go with the rest.

In fact, all four were weaned by this time; they were beginning to gnaw at carrots now, and would often try to get out through any gaps they could find, for they longed to see the great world. The hutch had open bars, and they could look out into a kitchen-garden with lettuce-beds, and beyond that see a flock of ducks paddling about beside a brook. There was an apple-tree to the right, with a cloud of sparrows always squabbling round it. To the left an outhouse door gave a glimpse of cows and horses, dimly outlined in the gloom of the interior. There were cats, too, stretching themselves in the sun or stalking sedately up and down.

At peep of day the whole farmyard woke up; noon brought a momentary silence; then, as the sun grew hotter, sparrows chirped, ducks quacked, cows lowed, and the din went on uninterruptedly till dusk.

The little bunnies would fain have joined the other animals; they would gaze wistfully at the birds flying high in the air, and the sight of the cattle marching off cheerfully for the pastures gave them a craving for the green fields.

How big the farmyard seemed, to be sure! and how amazed they were when Mother Rabbit told

them there were other places bigger still which they could not see. She described the woods and ravines and burrows, for she knew these well enough from hearsay; why, they could not have travelled round the world in a whole day, so enormous it was! Squatted round their mother, the youngsters listened to all this, and their hearts almost failed them.

But not so Jannot; *his* imagination was stimulated by what he heard.

“Ah!” he would cry, “will they never let me out, that I may have *my* chance of seeing all these wonderful things?”

Then his mother was alarmed; but he would kiss her and promise he would come back again directly, once he had seen the world. But she only shook her head, and could not make up her mind to let him go.

“The world is full of cruel beasts; you will never, never escape its dangers.” 96

“I have teeth and claws.”

“So have they, child; but their teeth are longer and their claws sharper than yours. Restrain your eagerness; time enough yet to go forth into the wide, wide world.”

He would shake his head impatiently and fall to gnawing at the woodwork of the hutch; in fact his mind was full of guilty thoughts of escape. At last, one fine morning, when his mother was tidying the litter, he made a bolt for it.

Scarcely had he gone a hundred steps when he was arrested by a startling sight. He beheld half-a-dozen hairy brown skins nailed up in a row. They still retained the shape of the bodies they had once clothed, and little trickles of blood ran down the wall where they hung. There was no mistaking; they had belonged to rabbits like himself.

“Oh, dear!” he thought, “so they kill rabbits, do they?” 97

But this sinister sight was quickly forgotten in the variety of new wonders he encountered. A pig was grunting on a dunghill, with a young foal kicking at him and destroying his peace of mind, and a goat gambolling near by; one after the other he saw a rat, a dog, a calf, and a flock of pigeons that suddenly took wing.

They rose in the warm morning air, glittering in the sun, flying so high he soon lost sight of them altogether. Looking down again, he noticed a cat watching him, and remembered he had seen her in the garden, prowling among the lettuces.

The width of the yard was between them, and he had a barn behind him. The cat lay crouched on the kitchen steps; she never moved, but her eyes were wide open and glittered cruelly. Then she got up slowly. 98

Jannot believed his last hour was come; he thought of his mother, and shut his eyes. A furious barking made him open them again. The cat was gone; with one bound Jannot sprang into a cart round which a bull-dog was racing with his mouth wide open, and leapt from there into the barn.

Inside the straw was piled up mountains high, so close to the wall he had some difficulty in forcing a passage; still, it was only betwixt the wall and the straw he could hope to find a safe refuge. He durst not come out again, and stayed there in hiding till nightfall.

Then he plucked up spirit, took a step or two in the dark, and came upon a hole close down to the floor through which he could slip. 99

What a sight met him outside! The country lay white in the moonlight, house-roofs, pools, watercourses glittering in the beams. The leaves quivered restlessly in the night wind, and the distant clumps of brushwood stood out in clear-cut outline. It was very beautiful; but look! suddenly, close to him, two long, black, moving shadows scared him out of his seven senses.

The cat!

Jannot never stopped till he reached the woods, after darting across the garden, leaping a brook, scurrying over the fields, breathless and exhausted. Vague shadows loomed around him; flying footsteps sounded about his path; suddenly, by the startled cry that escaped a little creature which halted right before his nose, he knew he was in presence of another rabbit. 100

“I am Jannot,” he said, in a low voice; “perhaps we are relations.”

From the first moment the rabbit saw him, he loaded him with polite attentions, declared he loved him already, and offered him the hospitality of his house; so the two of them jogged off in company. But after a moment or two Goodman Rabbit stopped dead, saying—

“You’d best go by the clearing, and I through the scrub; it will never do to let the polecat see us. We will meet at the foot of a great oak you can’t help seeing.”

Jannot followed his companion’s advice; but no sooner were they together again than the rabbit, after fifty yards or so, cried out once more— 101

“The place we’re in now is just as dangerous as the other. A wild-cat lurks hereabouts, and slaughters whatever comes under his claws. You go that way; I’ll go this. A rock you will see will serve as rendezvous.”

They reached the rock at the same moment, and then trotted off again. They were just coming to a coppice of young trees with narrow winding paths through it when his experienced friend called a halt for the third time, crying—

“Well, we did well not to travel side by side. My advice is that we go each his own way again, without bothering about one another, till we come to the crossroads you’ll find down yonder. Ah! d’ye see those snares? Mind you don’t get into them, for if the polecat and the wild-cat are lords of the lands we have just been through, the poacher rules here as monarch paramount.” 102

The advice was good, but its giver had no time to finish it; he was caught by the foot in one of the gins, and the more he struggled to get free, the tighter the dreadful noose was drawn.

“Help! help!” he clamoured.

But already Jannot was off and away, panic-stricken; he ran on and on, never once stopping till he won back as quick as ever he could to the edge of the woodland where he and Master Rabbit had first met.

“If the world is so strewn with dangers,” he thought to himself, “better to live in peace and quietness in a hutch. What use in roaming the woods, when death is at the journey’s end?”

Then in his mind’s eye he saw his mother again and his brothers; and the safe shelter where they awaited his return seemed a far-off, happy refuge he could hardly hope to reach. 103

Field-mice and weasels and martens were stirring in the dark underwood and shaking the leaves. Suddenly a new terror, more appalling than all the rest, gripped him; he thought he was being pursued. Then he dashed out into the plain that lay clear in the moonlight, and, with ears pricked, thinking all the while he could hear at his heels the unwearying, unflagging trot, trot of the fell creatures that were on his track, he pushed through hedges, leapt ditches, climbed banks.

He had his back to the moon, and two black shadows, the same he had seen at the outset of his escapade, stretched out before him; this time they went in front, never leaving him, and sometimes lengthening out to portentous proportions. 104

No doubt about it, a whole host of enemies was after him!

At last his breath failed him and he sank down in despair, waiting for death; but as it was a long time coming, he began to recover a little courage, and, turning round, stared hard into the night.

Not a thing was visible amid the loneliness of the fields, and the moon seemed to be grinning down at him from the sky.

Then he discovered that the two shadows that had terrified him so were only the shadows of his own two ears. This was mortifying!

Day dawned by slow degrees; and presently he found himself back by the brook, the ducks, the cow-shed and the kitchen-garden. 105

“Mind this,” his mother told him, “there’s no adventures so fine as to match the pleasure of being safe at home, among the folks who love you.”

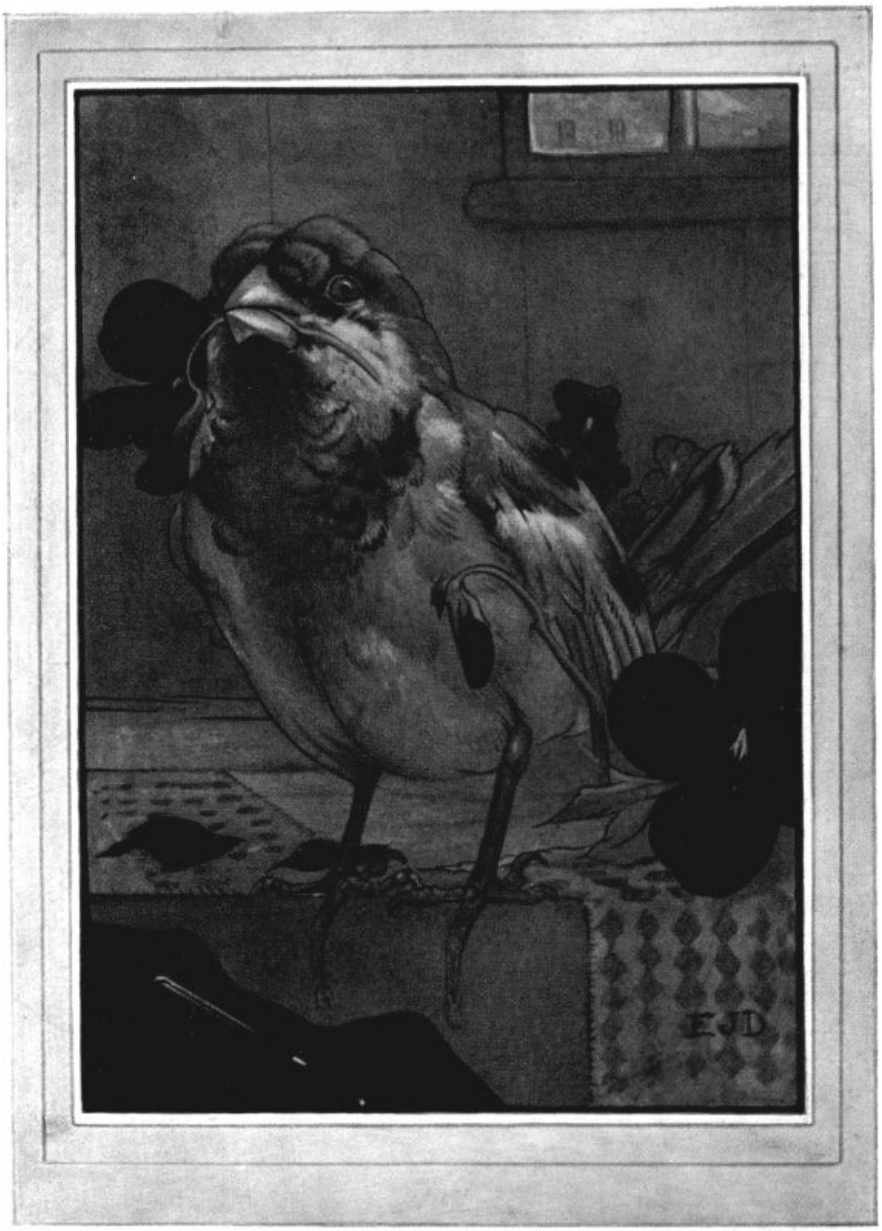
106

“Monsieur Friquet”

Nature had not been generous to the poor thing; Claire was born a hunchback, and a hunchback she had grown up—if indeed she can be said ever to have grown up—an undersized, sickly, suffering creature, who at thirty was not as high, from head to heels, as a little girl of nine.

She had been left an orphan when quite a child; first her mother died, and her father had not survived her long. So Claire had had to face the

world alone, with her own ten fingers for all her fortune. Her parents had never spoilt her with overmuch indulgence. They were poor, hardworking folks, who hardly knew what it was to smile. Even when they were alive, she had led a lonely enough existence. Still, after their death, she missed the life lived in common, the destitution shared with others, the bustle of the hugger-mugger household, where scolding and grumbling were by no means unknown. Her parents were her parents after all; with them life had its happy moments, now and then.



"MONSIEUR FRIQUET"

They were hard times now for Claire. Shut up all day long in the unhealthy air of workrooms, she seemed to grow more and more emaciated, and smaller and smaller every day. Nobody ever thought of pitying the poor, uncouth being who sat sewing apart from the rest, who, with a gentle humility, always sought the shade, where her deformity was less noticeable; nobody ever dreamed of asking if there was a soul within that misshapen body, and her great eyes—light blue, sickly-looking eyes, which she would raise slowly and languidly, as if afraid of the light—encountered only mockery and indifference from all about her.

The tall, handsome girls who sat round the sewing-table had nothing but hard words for

her; scarcely knowing why, yielding to a cruel impulse which a little thought, if nothing better, would have checked, they treated her vilely.

Little by little she had become the general butt of the workroom; one dismal day in December a last outrage was added to all the rest.

109 An ill-conditioned cripple, a girl who had borne Claire a grudge from the first day of her coming, because of their sisterhood in misfortune, which caused twice as many gibes to be levelled at her own club-foot, contrived to secrete a piece of silk, in order to accuse Claire of the theft. She declared stoutly she had taken the piece and hidden it inside her dress. In vain the poor girl, bursting into tears, swore she was innocent. The head of the shop ordered her to strip. She begged piteously for mercy, clasping her hands in supplication; but the cripple moved heaven and earth to set the others against her. Rough hands were laid on her; she was bruised and shaken and hurt; all she could do was to stammer out appeals to their compassion; she was nearly fainting, and the tears were streaming down her cheeks. No use; the poor back was bared, and while the mistress was searching her, the pretty, rosy-cheeked workgirls were feeling the deformity curiously, examining what like a hump exactly was.

110 Claire had buried her face in her hands; her hair had fallen about her ears, and there she stood, quite still and helpless, terrified at the angry faces about her; her throat was dry and her whole body quivering with overmastering agitation. She wished she was dead.

The mistress’s hard voice dismissing her roused her at last; she got to her feet amidst the jeers of the workroom, buttoned her frock, collected her needles and scissors, and, shuddering and shaking, catching her feet in her skirts, she hurried to the door; there was a loud buzzing in her ears, and she seemed to see everything through a sort of mist.

111 She dashed downstairs two steps at a time and reached the riverside quays, looking in her despair for an unfrequented bridge from which an unhappy hunchback might throw herself into the water and not be noticed. But everywhere she seemed to see mocking eyes pursuing her.

By degrees she began to think of the dreadful publicity of such a death; she saw herself dragged from the river, laid on the crowded bank, under the eyes of a throng of curious onlookers, in the glaring light of day.

No, what she craved was a quiet death in some dark corner, where she would be sheltered from prying looks.

She retraced her steps, bought a supply of charcoal, which she hid in a fold of her gown, and made her way home. Her poor worn hands had helped her—how hardly!—to live, now they should help her to die.

112 Possessed by these ideas, she pushed open the door of the room—and suddenly stopped....

How, when, by what way had he got in, the little sparrow she saw beating his wings against the walls, looking so scared and frightened, trying in

vain to find a way out of the garret he had invaded so impudently, like the little good-for-nothing scamp he was?

Yes, she remembered; that morning, before leaving, she had left the window ajar; but no doubt the wind had blown it to, and after coming in unhindered, like a conquering hero taking possession of a new kingdom, the bird was now a prisoner.

A prisoner? But why a prisoner? What had she and he in common? He only asked to live, to fly, to soar in the free air, while she, she was fain to die. Begone, little madcap! you shall have your freedom again.

She went to the window; but as her hand touched the latch, she paused. The sparrow had stopped fluttering about the room; cowering in the corner of a cupboard, his little breast heaving with terror and breathlessness, he was looking at her with his frightened eyes. 113

To see him shivering and shaking and ruffling his feathers in terror, she seemed to recognise a fellow-sufferer. *Her life*, from first to last, had it not been one long quaking agony of fear, exposed to never-ending uncertainties and disappointments? The similarity made a sort of common bond between them, and her heart stirred with a longing for a last touch of love and sympathy with the living creatures of this earth she was about to quit.

She left the window, advanced a step, and held out her finger to beckon and encourage him. But the movement, gentle as it was, was misunderstood by the bird; he spread his wings and darted up to the ceiling. Then she spoke to him, and very humbly—she found it very easy to be humble—besought him— 114

“Poor birdie, why should you be afraid of me? Do you think I want to hurt you? I only ask you one favour—to kiss you once, just once, before.... There, come, light there on my hand; let me just hold you; you shall fly away again directly after. Come, dear birdie, I know I am ugly to look at, but I am not cruel.”

And stepping softly, silently, she followed him about the room, with outstretched fingers and smiling lips, almost like a mother, as if she were talking to a little child. Then, as he would not come— 115

“Come, now.... Does my back shock you—like the others? Why should you care if I *am* hunchbacked, when you are so pretty? Come, pretty birdie—if only to give me the strength I need so badly.”

She crumbled some bread on the table. This made the bird hesitate; he did not come down at once, but, still perching aloft, gazed down at the white crumbs, craning his neck, his eyes glittering with greediness.

Finally appetite overcame prudence. He darted down on to the table and began to peck—*tock, tock!* at the food, stopping every now and then to shake out his feathers and cocking up his head to look about him.

Presently she scattered more crumbs, first on 116

the floor and then on the window-sill, and he soon came hopping up to them on his little pink toes, flirting his tail and looking as happy as a king, the glutton!

What a darling he was, to be sure! She forgot all thoughts of death, to see him so alive and so handsome, coming and going, marching up and down with his mettlesome air, his rolling eye, his tossing head, his everlasting pickings and peckings and his fine look of swagger and impudence. He had a way of peeping at her askance, winking one eye with a merry, mocking glint in it, that seemed to say unmistakably: “I don’t mind eating your bread, because it’s downright good; but never you think I’m going to give up my freedom for you. I shall be off and away again just whenever I choose.”

Other times he would fix his little black beads of eyes meditatively upon her face, scrutinising her features as if bent on reading her inmost thoughts, but never missing a peck at the food for all that, or one crumb of this long, luxurious repast. 117

When he had eaten up every scrap, she got some more and offered it him, this time in her palm.

Up he fluttered, took his stand in front of her hand, examined it from every side, from above and from below, wishing but not daring; then suddenly caution carried the day, and he hopped away.

“Pst! pst!” she chirped to him, but never stirred. Her stillness reassured him; with a determined air, feeling a sinking again in his insatiable little stomach—it was not every day he had such a chance of filling it—he hopped forward, then drew back again; finally, making up his mind once for all, he began to peck warily at the contents of the well-stored hand. 118

She watched him with delight and admiration. The sight of him and his pretty ways stirred deep, unsuspected feelings within her. The blue sky seemed to have entered at her humble window, as if the bird had brought in along with him a fragment of space. Under his wing he hid, Claire thought, all the gaiety and brightness of the spring.

Memories awoke in her heart; she dreamed of the woodlands, the fields of golden grain, the water-springs, all the glories of kindly Mother Nature. Three or four times in her colourless life she had been taken into the country; she had heard the birds sing, the great trees swaying and rustling in the breeze and the prattling of the brooks. One day—it was fifteen years ago at least—she had actually dropped asleep on the moss in the warm shadow of the woods, and when she awoke the old oaks seemed to be smiling down on her. 119

Her black thoughts fled before this memory of rosy hours.

Besides, after days of gloom do not happier days follow? Had not he, too, her little friend, had not he known the hardships of winter? Shivering with cold, he had endured frost and bitter wind; his nest battered by the hail, his plumage soaked by the rain, his wings stiff with pain—was not all this far harder to bear than the gibes and insults 120

of a few silly girls, giddy-pated perhaps rather than really ill-natured? Twenty times, a hundred times over, death had hovered near, when the storms scattered the leaves and tore down the nests all round him; but he had kept a good heart, and when spring-time came back again, had he not been rewarded for his bravery by happy, happy days? As she thought of the stubborn courage of the little sparrow, she was ashamed of her own weakness.

Who knows?—perhaps the bird had been sent to call her back to duty, to encourage her never to despair, to bring her a lesson straight from Mother Nature. Something of Nature's tender care for the weak and unprotected was in his coming to visit her garret; it was not for nothing he had chosen out the barest and poorest of them all, driving away with the rustle of his tiny wings those other dark, overshadowing wings—the wings of death. She found herself calling down blessings on him, thanking him for arriving so opportunely, weeping with joy to see his graceful gambols; for he was not frightened now, but bright and gay, and rather amused than otherwise at the four walls that had suddenly replaced the boundless plains of air.

A new life began for the two.

Monsieur Friquet—that was the name she had given him—seemed to be quite content to take his place as house-mate with the poor work-girl, whose heart was so full of affection, and who, to his partial eyes, looked as pretty as the prettiest things he had ever seen in the world outside. Did she not always wear a kind smile on her lips whenever she came home? And is not kindness, when all is said and done, the same thing as beauty?

Monsieur Friquet had forgotten all about the distractions of the streets. Like a rakish younger son who has been living for years on his wits, he thoroughly enjoyed this life of slippered ease in a cosy house, where, it is true, the sun did not often penetrate, but then neither did the wind. Its quiet was unbroken all day long while his mistress was abroad, allowing him to doze and dream away the long hours till her return set stove and saucepans in activity again.

He was a lazy loon, and nothing could have suited him better than to have a place at table laid out for him morning and evening, without his having so much as to put his head outside the door.

He had known so many of his comrades who had perished miserably under a cat's claws, at the corner of a gutter-pipe or in the treacherous shadow of a chimney-stack; so many who, grown old and impotent, and unable to find themselves a warm lodging, had died a lonely death on some deserted housetop; in fact, he had witnessed so much disappointment and disillusion and misery that he was ready—some days, at any rate—to swear he would not exchange for all the spacious blue of heaven shining in through the windowpane the indigo-blue paper with white bunches of flowers that covered the garret walls.

He had put on flesh, and his chirp had grown thick and fruity; nowadays the graceless fellow had nothing but ill to say of the freedom he had lost, but which, after all, was limited, in summer,

to scolding and squabbling in the tree-tops, and, in winter, to freezing on a wretched perch.

And *pr't! prr't! chirp! chirp!* he went, in scorn of everything that could remind him of the old bad times of his life. 124

How much better to sit soft and warm over a good feed of bird-seed, to sleep away his afternoons in slothful ease, never to soil his feathers scratching for doles in a dungheap, but to live like a gentleman on his means, among his own belongings, without even a thought of work or worry!

Monsieur Friquet, you see, was a philosopher of an accommodating temper.

Thank God! everybody does not think alike; for what would become of the sky and the woodland if all the race of sparrows forsook them like him for cosy quarters and a free table? He was one of those selfish folk who deem all is well directly all is well with them, and who only think of being on the best terms with the world and with themselves, without ever a care beyond. 125

True, he was barely awake ere he saw his kind mistress bustling about in her room and filling up his bowl with new milk; true, she shared her loaf and her eggs with him, always giving him the best of everything and cheerfully keeping the crust and the white for herself; true, all day long the table was laid for him, and he had nothing to do but to eat and drink to his heart's content, like the regular glutton he was; but Monsieur Friquet never once thought at the cost of what painful sacrifices he enjoyed all these good things.

Claire had resumed the cruel slavery of the workroom. 126

Every morning, at seven o'clock, she set out, a meagre hunch of bread in her basket, and along the sleeping streets where the yawning passers-by were few and far between, half dozing herself, but brave and thinking of Monsieur Friquet, she would make her way to the dismal room where she was to be kept prisoner all day. Her companions never dreamed what strength to bear unhappiness a friend affords, a good friend you are sure to find at home on your return, who welcomes you with bright eyes of pleasure and who fills your thoughts even when he is not there.

How he filled her thoughts, to be sure! What endless dialogues she had with him down in her own heart, just between the two of them.

"Now then, Monsieur Friquet, what are we going to have for dinner? A couple of poached eggs? I've just bought them, new laid, at the green-grocer's. Oh! you can almost see through them; just you look. And not too dear either, thank God! There, the fire just burning up nicely. Well, have you made up your mind? Will you have them poached or boiled? Oh! never mind me. To begin with, I don't care which; I like one as well as the other. I've got some salad too—fine fresh salad. Ah! so you're laughing, Monsieur Friquet! You'll laugh better still directly. Boiled, then, it's to be, eh? You see, you bad boy, we only think of pleasing you." 127

She was hardly home before the fire was crackling, the egg-boiler singing; in next to no time the eggs were on the table, and the two of them, Claire and the sparrow, were pecking away, she sitting in front of the cloth, he perched in front of her on the edge of a glass or else clinging to her fingers. 128

At every mouthful he would give his wings a shake, looking saucily now at the food, now at Claire, with his head on one side.

Chirp! chirp! chirp! he would say in his shrill treble. It was at once an appeal to his mistress to give him more, and a way of thanking her for the trouble she took in feeding him.

His impudent little beak would dive into every single thing—bread, salt, salad, the hollow of his mistress's hand, poking everywhere, filching bits from her very lips, never still for an instant. Teasing, defying, thieving, he was in perpetual motion, as his brethren are among the leaves of the forest trees.

They drank out of the same cup, ate off the same plate. Ah! but Monsieur Friquet had his wilful moods too at times; *he* was not the fellow to be satisfied with everything; now it was the bread he refused with a little decided peck that said as plain as words: "I won't have it!"—now it was the egg, or the salad, or something else. You see, he knew quite well, did Monsieur Friquet, there was a biscuit waiting for him in the cupboard, and he was inordinately fond of biscuit. 129

Sunday was a special festival.

Up betimes as usual, for workgirls are never lie-abeds, Claire would set to rights the disorder of the week, tripping on tip-toe about the room, not to wake Monsieur Friquet, who was snoring in a corner, a fat ball of feathers, with his head under his wing.

"Monsieur Friquet won't be awake for another hour," she would think to herself. "I shall have time enough to set all straight"—and she would set to work, dusting, sweeping, washing the floor, happy in the prospect of the coming Sunday that would release her a while from her chain of servitude. 130

At last the bird would wake up, and there would be quick cries of: "Good morning, Monsieur Friquet! How have you slept?"

"Chirp! chirp!" would come the answer.

And she would reply—

"Oh! so have I—excellently, thank you."

Then breakfast would be served at once. He would come to table still half asleep, with heavy eyes, to be scolded and fondled and chided. 131

"Lazybones! why, it's close on eight o'clock!"

But he would hop on her shoulder, and put his little round head to her lips as if to ask pardon.

Then they would talk of serious matters.

"Monsieur Friquet! I say, Monsieur Friquet!"

“Chirp! chirp!”—which meant: “Well, what? I’m all attention!”

“Monsieur Friquet, I want your advice. What shall we have to eat for Sunday?”

“Chirp!”

“I hear you! Biscuit! biscuit! But people can’t live only on biscuit! We must have something else *to go with it*. Suppose we bought a couple of artichokes! Do you like artichokes, Monsieur Friquet? Yes? Ah! I knew an artichoke would please you. Wait here for me, and I’ll run round to the greengrocer’s.”

So the Sunday wore away in happy play and merry nonsense between the pair.

What more was needed to transform the sharp thorns of pain into fragrant roses of content? She had invested the bold little chattering fellow with all the treasures of her tenderness; on him she lavished all her care and devotion; he was father and mother and family to her, and where he was, was home.

They lived long and happily together, and their love was never interrupted.

A LOST DOG

A Lost Dog

I

Have you ever noticed the melancholy pensive look masterless dogs assume at the hour when the press thins, and the passers-by slacken their pace on the side-walks, like waters from a tap running dry?

As the silence deepens they appear from every side, these poor, friendless beasts, their meagre forms slinking through the fog and gloom; up and down the streets they prowl, noses to the ground, and tails drooping, like so many lost souls. Some have sound legs to run on, others can hardly drag themselves along; but all have hollow flanks and protruding ribs. They are out in search of food, nosing in the refuse heaps, scratching in the mud, filching from the scavengers bones as fleshless as themselves.

What the world lets fall from its table is still a banquet for their starving bellies. They are not hard to please; till the wan light of dawn surprises them, they hunt the streets, rain-soaked and frost-bitten; then they creep back into mysterious holes and corners, where they curl themselves up in a round and sleep away the livelong day.

Most of them are wild and shy, for they have only known the blackest side of life—cuffs and kicks, wretchedness and desertion. For them no hope survives the shipwreck of friendships betrayed; alone they live and alone they creep into a hole to die—creatures of the dunghill whose obsequies will be performed by the scavenger's cart.

But if some are discouraged and disillusioned, there are bolder spirits too who will sometimes, when they hear the steps of a belated wayfarer, tear themselves from the heap they are foraging in and stand panting and eager in the dark street, with the desperate eye of a swimmer looking out across the raging foam in search of a port of safety. Hope is not yet dead in *them*; they still have faith in mankind, and each shadowy form that emerges in the light of the gas-lamps entices them as offering promise of a home. For hours they will trot, with a humble, gentle, deprecating gait, at the heels of a casual passer-by, a shadow among shadows, dogging his steps to the last, hoping against hope. It is a *friend* they are fain to run to earth; but alas! the chase is one that is repeated night after night—and it is almost always unsuccessful. More often than not, the pursued has no inkling even of the dumb escort that attends him through the night.

How *should* he know? Behind his back the dog treads noiselessly, with paws of velvet and nose to earth, checking his pace when the stranger slackens his, stopping when he stops, bit by bit learning his walk and ways. At last, when he has journeyed far through the dark streets, when his legs ache with pursuing under the wayfarer's form a dream that is never to come true, a door will interpose, a ponderous, an impassable barrier between him and his fond hopes. Yet,

who can tell? perhaps he will still linger on, shivering, till daylight, so unconquerable is his faith in man.

137 It was one of these hopeful but unappreciated souls that encountered an old schoolmaster one night, when the latter had tarried late in the fields outside the fortifications, anxious to assist at the noble spectacle the sun gives gratuitously to one and all, as he sets in the glowing west.

He was returning by the boulevards, his heart full of these glories no fireworks have ever yet been invented to match; as he jogged along, he was thinking of God's goodness, who every night lights up these ruddy lamps of the sky to make fine flame-coloured curtains for the slumbers of His creatures.

138 A little black dog, the ugliest little dog you ever saw, without ears and without a tail, or as good as without, saw the solitary stranger. Did he divine perhaps beneath the man's easy, good-natured exterior a fellow-sufferer, the heart of a disappointed, disillusioned being like himself? Sometimes animals can see very far into things.

At any rate he started off in pursuit.

The stranger noticed nothing, but marched along, striding over gutters and stamping across pavements, knocking sometimes against benches and trees in his preoccupation. It had been raining for an hour past, as it does come down in spring, in floods of warm soaking rain and sudden showers that wetted man and dog to the skin, without either one or the other being much disturbed.

139 Absent-minded as he was, the old man presently felt something rubbing softly against his leg, and, looking down, was surprised to see the wretched-looking cur beside him.

It was crawling and cringing, and with little half-stifled barks seemed to be appealing to the generosity of this unknown friend, perhaps less hard-hearted than the generality of mankind.

Many people, seeing what a hideous beast it was, would have said "No, no!" at once. But it was just the creature's hideousness that moved the worthy man's pity irresistibly. Touched by its repulsive looks, he guessed at the pitiful hardships the wretched animal must have borne in secret. He saw its sunken flanks, its mangy coat, its sharp-ridged back, and loved it with a sudden ardour of affection—the affection poor suffering folks feel for one another. All very well for happy people to test and try one another for ever so long to see if they suit each other, but they who have nothing to lose by mutual affection make no bones about clapping hand in hand straight away and swearing eternal friendship.

140 And so it was with these two new comrades.

Both were poor, and they fraternised at once. The dog was enchanted to have met a kind stranger to help him in his need, while his benefactor thought to himself how pleasant it would be to have the faithful creature to share his solitude. He stooped, patted the animal's streaming coat, tickled his ear, or as much of it as there was to tickle, and ended by taking him

home to his garret.

141 It was many a day since the poor beast had known the comfort of four walls and a roof—if indeed he ever had! For two whole days, barring meal times, he slept like a log; on the third he roused himself from his lethargy, trotted up and down the room, poked his nose into every corner, and showed every sign of being wide awake at last.

The dog must have a name, and the good schoolmaster was not long in finding one. Azor and Faithful are names that never come amiss for poor folk's dogs; he chose Azor, perhaps keeping Faithful for himself—and he well deserved it! He had only to move his lips, pronouncing the two syllables "Az-or" below his breath, and the dog was instantly on the alert, looking up at him with roguish eyes, wondering what he was going to say next. No doubt of it, he was a very intelligent animal.

142 It was a happy household. Not that bread was over and above plentiful; but people who have nothing are cheaply satisfied, and if stomachs were pinched some days, at any rate hearts were never chilled. The dog had come into the man's life like a special providence; henceforth his existence had an object; he had some one to love, some one besides himself to think of; poverty, so heavy a burden for a lonely man, seemed almost a boon now there were two to bear it—like a load of which each carries his half.

143 He loved and indulged him like a child, and something of selfishness entering into all ardent affections, Azor soon came to represent all humanity in his eyes. One day, to make him look fine, he fastened in the coarse hair of his neck a pink bow a young girl had dropped in the street, and told himself the dog was the handsomest beast alive. Slender greyhound, fleet-footed pointer, sturdy Newfoundland, none were a patch, in the eye of this partial judge, on the little ragged-haired, undersized mongrel he had introduced to his hearth and home.

Azor had just as great an admiration for his master. Sitting up on his haunches in front of him, he would gaze into his face for hours together in a sort of ecstasy.

144 Did he see him transmuted into something other than he was, or did the rough face, scored with its network of heavy wrinkles, from amid which the nose shone like a beacon-fire, embody for the wee doggie the beau-ideal of manly beauty? For my part, I think Azor beheld in it a beauty of a higher sort than the perishable beauty of the features; the old man, to be sure, was goodness incarnate, and is not goodness the highest form of beauty?

They lived for one another. Azor yapped, and the old man talked, and between them they had wonderful fine dialogues; beginning in the garret, these were resumed in the street the days they took the air together.

The pair might be seen marching side by side, the old man laughing, the dog laughing, too, in a way he had of his own. And so they wandered through the streets, in search of quiet, both taking little short steps. True, Azor was young

still, and would have liked to dart on ahead; but his friend could not have kept up, and that was quite enough to make him adopt the peaceful gait of a dog who has ceased to care for the distractions of the roadside.

But out in the fields you may be sure this sedateness was exchanged for wild excitement. Intoxicated by the open air, Azor would dash away, gambolling and wheeling and leaping like a mad creature, and performing a hundred tricks that mightily amused his good old master. 145

II

Azor had his little ways. Every morning he used to go down into the street to inspect the gutters and pay a visit to the dogs of the neighbourhood. He was always back in a quarter of an hour or so.

But one day he did not return.

His master waited patiently for him till midday. Animals are like men, and love to linger; perhaps he had met friends—and the old schoolmaster smiled indulgently at the notion. 146

However, when half the afternoon was gone, and still Azor did not appear, he began to get anxious. Had some accident befallen him? and he thought of carriage wheels and horses' hoofs and the rush and roar of the main streets.

His first impulse was to rush to the stairs; but Azor might come back at any moment, so he stayed where he was, more dead than alive.

The window opened on the roof; the old man took a chair, climbed on it and craned his head over the sill till he could see down over the edge of the rain-shoot. There he stood for ever so long watching the little black dots darting in and out among the legs of the passers-by. But not one of them was Azor. 147

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead; he was obliged to get down off the chair.

At last, as dusk was falling, a paw came scratching at the door, and he flew to open it.

Yes, it was his old comrade—but in what a plight! dyed blue, with a rope's end still dangling round his neck! Some tragedy had befallen, no doubt, of which he had been the victim—and he patted the poor beast, his mind a prey to a hundred sinister apprehensions. Azor meantime fawned round him, looking as contrite as a culprit who cannot hope to be forgiven.

The dye refused to be washed out; soap was of no avail, and they had to resort to caustics; but for all they could do, a tinge of blue remained. It lasted nearly a month, but at last the black reappeared. While his master was busy over these operations, Azor would lick his hands, only stopping to sneeze, when the strong fumes got up his nose. He seemed cured of all wish for adventures. 148

Nevertheless, when a month was over, these prolonged absences began again. Sometimes he would stay away an hour; one Saturday he was abroad six hours. This irregular behaviour vexed

his good master exceedingly. What could the mysterious attraction be that kept his faithful friend like this? He determined to find out.

149 He had noticed that Azor, the better to elude his vigilance, apparently used always to loiter a bit in front of the house, not starting away before he felt certain no one was looking; then in one bound he would be at the end of the street and disappear.

One day he followed the truant. Now and again the dog would stop, nose all along the pavement, then, reassured, set off again at a trot. He turned the corner, then down a broader street, and so eventually into a square. The clumps of rhododendrons hid him for a moment from his master, who came puffing up; but presently he caught sight of him in the middle of a group of children. He was barking joyously, leaping up at them, rolling on his back in the grass, in transports of delight. They were five little pale-faced things, and among them one face paler still and pinched with illness.

150 The shock nailed the old man to the spot. Was it possible? Was Azor a traitor to his friend? And he gazed first at the dog and then at the children with the look a man wears who sees an edifice he has long been labouring at crumbling into ruin. He had put his trust in the animal; he esteemed him as well as loved him—and, lo! the ingrate was sharing his caresses with others. He hated duplicity, and his gorge rose at the thought.

“Come here!” he shouted.

Azor knew his voice instantly, and, crawling along the ground like a serpent, he crept up to his benefactor, his tail dragging in the dust. But the latter never so much as thought of punishing him, and patted him on the back gently. Their eyes met; the man’s were full of sadness, the dog’s besought forgiveness. Then, still in the same humble attitude, he tried to draw his master towards the little group of pale faces.

151 The children had come forward—all except the little invalid, who stayed where he was; and all with one accord, their hands behind their backs, were staring at the new arrival.

Was he going to take their dog from them? Their brows were puckered with anxiety, and as he watched them, he was amazed to think his anger had been so easily roused.

What harm had Azor done after all? Ah! the blow would have been harder to bear if he had betrayed him for another man; but children! The piteous air of the little one who had remained behind touched him so that he took his hands with a smile and asked him if he loved Azor too.

“Oh! yes,” cried the child.

152 His eyes moved languidly under drooping lids, and he wore the careworn look of an invalid. Azor laid his head on the child’s knees, and he caressed him with his thin fingers long and lovingly.

The others soon found their tongues. Azor, they said, used to come every morning, and they romped together. They had known him for a long

time in fact; but he had been a month once without appearing, and they had believed he was dead. A dyer's apprentice, after tying a cord round his neck, had dragged him off, and as they never saw him any more, they had laid his death at the bad boy's door.

"So that's the explanation!" the old man muttered, and remembered the long day of agonised suspense when he waited for him at the garret window, and then how he had come back dyed blue. It was a relief to know the truth. 153

He went again at the same time next day, the dog careering gaily ahead as if he quite understood. Presently all found themselves in the square again, and all faces lit up with a common pleasure.

They became fast friends; he learned their names, and that two of them were brothers of the pale-faced little fellow; their mother always sent them to look after him in the garden; they lived only a few steps away. His heart was filled with compassion for the frail-looking little lad. As Pierre could not walk, he got into the way by degrees of carrying him home in his arms as far as the door, Azor galloping after them, wagging his tail.

One day the child's mother came down to thank the "kind gentleman," and they fell into talk. The boy's father was a workman on the railway, while she worked at fine sewing; the little one was a sore trouble to them; he had to be taken out for fresh air, and constantly looked after; and all hope of cure had had to be abandoned long ago. 154

"And yet he's no fool either, sir; of the three he's the cleverest."

He only nodded, his head full of a notion that still occupied him after he got home; Azor lay at his feet and watched him thinking, thinking all day long. At nightfall he took the dog's head between his hands.

"There!" he cried merrily, "you'll be pleased with your old master this time."

Three days later he bought a go-cart, in which he installed Pierre, and every morning they used to set out for the country, Azor scouting ahead and his master following with the child in tow. 155

The old schoolmaster would explain all they saw to him—animals and things; he had made him a present of an alphabet with coloured pictures where a yacht stood for Y and a zebra for Z. And Pierre soon learnt to read.

On Sundays, instead of three, they were seven; the whole family would join the expedition, and they would linger on till dark in the starlit fields.

They were very happy, and their happiness lasted many long years.

156

Misadventures of an Owl

His plumage was glossy and abundant, his eye alert, his claws long and strong; in all points he

was everything a handsome young owl should be. For two years he had slept snug under his mother's wing, the fond object of her jealous care; but when spring came round again, his father, who was a very sententious bird, addressed him in these terms—

MISADVENTURES OF AN OWL

"You are grown up now, and the time is come when we must part. The nest would be too small to hold both you and those who will come after you. Moreover, no owl is ever happy save as head of a household. All sorts of trials and tribulations await us; men feel nothing but anger and contempt for our race. No matter for the watch and ward we keep over the orchards, the war of extermination we wage on the prolific broods that devastate the wheat, for all our well-meant efforts to aid the harvests to grow and the fruit-trees to bloom, our only guerdon is to be shot at with guns. Alas! the most of us end by being nailed up to a barn-door, with spread-eagled wings. A wife and family will console you under all this cruel injustice. Year by year your heart will grow green again amid the joys of domesticity, and you will attach a higher value to life when you no longer stand alone to bear its burden. So quit the nest, as I did before you; choose a good helpmeet of your own age, and may you be happy together, as we are, your mother and I."

Accordingly the youngster took his departure. Gravity comes early to owls, and though only two years old, he already wore the severe air of an old philosopher. But the young lady owls, likewise brought up to scorn worldly pleasures, prefer this serious deportment to the gay exterior the other birds find so fascinating. 158

He went methodically round the village, and was well received by the parents, while more than one young thing turned her head to look after him. But there was not one of them, he thought, like his mother, and as she was the paragon of all merit in his eyes, he had sworn only to choose a mate who should resemble her in mind if not in face. He was in despair, and on the point of returning to the paternal roof when, one evening, as he was hovering about an old church-steeple, he caught sight of a charming little head peeping out between the luffer-boards.

Was he weary of the search perhaps, or did the little face really remind him of the adored image of his parent? He lingered long in admiration, never tired of watching her dainty ways, and little by little something began to thump inside him, something he had never felt before. She was busy crunching a mouse, pecking and worrying at it with her sharp beak, and had very soon left nothing but the bare bones. Then she wiped her beak and preened her feathers prettily, as every well-bred young lady owl should. 159

Just as she was finished, she saw him sitting in the next tree, and, startled at being caught at her toilet, she hid her head under her wing; nor was he a whit less embarrassed, and each of them gazed at the other in equal confusion, without saying one word. At last he made up his mind and spoke to the parents, who both thought him a very charming fellow. 160

It was a quiet wedding, as weddings always are among the owls. There was no music or nonsense; they were married at night, in the old steeple, and the moon lent her illumination. When all was over, the parents gave their blessing, and the young couple set out on their honeymoon.

But it was not the sort of jaunt the sparrows indulge in, sailing away into the blue, so high, so high they seem as if they would never come back again; *they* lighted sedately on the bough of an old oak, and, finding it a good place, stopped there for good. Besides, the oak, being decrepit with years, had not, as a younger tree would, a whole host of impudent little cock-sparrows for its denizens; a blackbird lodged on the first floor, and a magpie had selected the trunk as his residence, and though both were great chatterers, the owls did not find their company disagreeable. 161

But it was not so with Father Blackbird and Mother Magpie; they were fond of gaiety, and the newcomers struck them as dismal neighbours to have. So they went off to see the tomtits, who are naturally very daring fellows, and told them about the hum-drum life the happy pair led; and between them they planned a fine *charivari* for the benefit of their new neighbours in the early hours of the morning.

Our friends were still fast asleep, snugly ensconced in the depths of a hollow bole, when the hostile band appeared. Suddenly an appalling uproar woke them with a start; screwing up their eyes, they tried to discover what was the matter, but they could not see a thing. Meantime dawn had broken, the sun was already shooting his beams like fireworks through the boughs, and great dragonflies were darting to and fro, glittering like emeralds. At last they made out a whirl of wings, looming like a black shadow in the clear morning air. Their assailants swept down and crowded every branch of the old oak, which hummed like a gigantic harp with the twittering of a thousand throats. 162

The poor owls could make nothing of it; owls are simple-minded folk, and all they could think of was that another newly-married couple were celebrating their nuptials, and that the discordant noises they heard were the cries of transport to be expected under the circumstances. They shrunk away still deeper in their hole, not wishing to interrupt other people's enjoyment. But the tomtits were not satisfied—not they; it was nothing merely to have startled them in their slumbers; they meant to expel them from the old oak altogether. Prompted by the magpie, who sat screaming defiance from the foot of the tree, some of the bolder spirits poked in their heads at the entrance of the cavern. Inside it was dark as night, and from the depths four eyes blazed out like balls of fire. The champions took fright, and fell back hurriedly on the main body. 163

"Cowards!" screeched their amiable ally, raising her harsh voice to its shrillest pitch; "d'ye mean to leave the villains in peace in their den? Think of the horrid carnage there will be in the woods every night! Not one of you will be safe in his nest any more. From time immemorial the owl tribe has been the scourge of the whole bird nation. Their heads are full of nothing but wile and wickedness, and the better to shed blood, they go to work like murderers in the dark! Worse still, they are all heretics. The witches use them in their incantations. They are birds of hell. Slay, slay the foes of Holy Church!" 164

This speech rallied the waverers, and all together they forced a way into the dark, yawning cavern.

In a moment a hundred beaks were pecking savagely at the two victims, who, blinded by the light, struck out wildly in self-defence. Two of the tomtits were left on the field, while the rest flew away in a panic, screaming in chorus —"Vengeance! vengeance on the rascally owls!" 165

What had they done? What crime had they committed? Astounded as they were, and amazed to think what motive should have prompted the attack, they could no longer doubt that open war was declared upon them.

So they went in search of another home, and as night was falling, found a safe retreat under the eaves of a lonely presbytery. "Here, at any rate," they thought, "no one will come to molest us. Alas! it is only too true—we are not made for the society of our fellow-creatures, and this deserted roof will hide us better than a prison."

They had happy times; they reared a family of little ones, and lived a patriarchal life in the hollow under the roof. Everybody has his own way of being happy in this world of ours, and for all it was different from the general fashion, this was good enough for them. To begin with, dwelling by themselves, they knew nothing of envy, and no thought of ambition vexed them; their only wish was to live as long as possible, pariahs and outcasts as they were, and grow old together. 166

Let others go in search of adventures; their desires were limited by the modest horizon they had before their eyes, and a secure abode, poor and bare though it might be, seemed to them preferable to all the treasures of Golconda. You see what reasonable, respectable people they were!

Certainly their dun-coloured plumage was not of the sort to let them flaunt in the sunlight like other birds; after spending a luxurious morning dozing side by side, they would wake just when the linnets, goldfinches, and chaffinches were going to bed. A great silence brooded over nature; for the giddy-pates who had been playing truant all the day, and had left a feather or two of their plumage to dance in every sunbeam, it would have seemed as dull as death; but they thought otherwise, and for them the night was filled with infinite music. Did not the breeze blow soft in the leaves with a murmur as of running waters and prattling brooks? A wide peace fell upon the woodlands which from noon to twilight had throbbed under the golden beams of the sun, while the moon, the owl’s sun, spread her white beams over the landscape like a river of milk. 167

Then their keen ear, an instrument of extraordinary delicacy, being very large, and forming, as every bird-lover knows, a double spiral of enormous dimensions, and admirably adapted to catch the faintest sounds, noted from afar light rustlings and soft sighs, and a confused murmur of music, wherein the wind seemed, turn and turn about, to pipe through clarinet and oboe. Silent and awe-struck, the two outcasts felt the kindly beneficence of nature moving on the face of the world. At times louder sounds would mingle with the whisperings of the night, telling them of the fawns pushing through the matted undergrowth, of companies of woodland creatures sallying out to feed, lovers like themselves of the darkness—badgers, polecats, wild-cats, weasels, and rabbits, of a vast stir of life and activity down in the dim, intricate forest tracks. Cats were prowling, their yellow eyes flaming along the darkling ways, while from the homesteads rose rhythmically, pledge of security for all the host of fur and feathers, the heavy snoring of the sleepers within. 168

Then they would come out and stand at the edge of the eaves, and gaze forth, as from a balcony, on all the moving spectacle of the kindly night. Sparkling gleams would flash along the ground like diamonds, and the slates glitter like so many mirrors on the house-roofs. They could see the stars reflected in the brook; mysterious eyes looked out from under the trees, vague shapes went gliding along the road, while high in the heavens, with a round face that seemed to laugh 169

good-humouredly, sailed the lady moon.

As long as they had no children, they enjoyed these hours of contemplation like true artists who grudge to miss one note of harmony or one gleam of beauty; they would never stir till dawn, hardly troubling themselves even to go in search of food. But when the brood of youngsters arrived, they had perforce to forgo these ecstasies. The little beaks were for ever crying for more, and Goodman Owl, who was the best of parents, became a mighty hunter. 170

Scarce was evening fallen ere he had taken post on the roof, heedless now of the mysterious splendours of the night, the furtive comings and goings of his prey occupying all his thoughts; the music of the spheres was henceforth confined for him to the rustling of the field-mice climbing the espaliers and the house-mice scuttling along the walls; still as a statue he stood there watching and picking out the fattest victim. Before the little creature had time to turn its head, he held it in his terrible jaws, and was flying off with his prey, panting in mortal terror, to his young ones, who instantly made a meal of it. 171

The poor little mouse saw nothing, heard nothing. A soft, fanning sound from the night-bird’s velvety pinions was the only warning that anything untoward was near; but already the ravisher had seized his prey; there was a stifled squeal, and all was over!

Every ten minutes—the same regular interval has been observed in all owls questing for food—he would bring fresh provender to the nest. The darkest night was no hindrance; his shining eyes, with their widely dilated pupils, pierced the blackest shadows as if they were transparent, and there was no hole or corner where the little night prowlers did not go in terror of their lives. 172

Meanwhile the mother-bird was feeding her brood, sometimes when the mouse was particularly tough, tearing it piecemeal for her little ones to devour more easily.

At other times father and mother together would guide the little family along the roofs, patiently teaching the inexperienced wings to fly, and giving a helping touch with beak or wing when they stumbled and tumbled in their attempts. At full moon they carried the youngsters to a neighbouring tree, he taking one, she another, and it was pretty to see their amazement when, craning their little necks, they watched the dim outlines of moving objects against the blue distance. 173

But they were getting big now, and the old owl lectured them sagely, as his father had lectured him; he would tell them of the joys and sorrows of life, and advise them to marry. No, it was not callousness—far from it; he loved them tenderly, for by reason and instinct he was a pattern of all the domestic virtues. But he was a wise and far-seeing parent, who dreaded what their fate would be, should he and his mate one day meet the doom all owls are liable to. Perhaps one morning a yokel would climb to their hiding-hole and carry them off to kill them. True, the good Curé, whose house sheltered them, had forbidden their being molested; but he was an 174

old man now, and nobody cared much what he said; then, with a ladder, it was so easy to reach the nest! The old owl always spoke like a philosopher; the future did not terrify him, and he seemed quite resigned to the cruel lot men mete out to his species. His words were without gall or bitterness; but a deep-seated melancholy gave them the gravity that ever marks creatures born to suffer.

In younger days he had known rebellious thoughts, and the sense of human injustice had oppressed his spirit; he had even dreamt of flying his country for the lands the swallows in September told him of, and far away from cruel men, living in peace and quietness with the mate who had joined her life to his. But time had softened these resentments; he had bowed his head, recognising a higher power above him, and content to live on, harmless and obscure, asking only to repay good for evil. 175

One morning the young birds deserted the nest.

Then, alone once more, they resumed their former existence in the dark hollow of the old oak, so solitary and silent now; they bore their children's departure as only another of nature's inevitable necessities. They seldom stirred from home now, seeing hardly a soul except a couple of old friends sometimes on Sabbath days; as of old, they held long, long talks of nights with the moon. Perched side by side on the eaves, their dark shapes threw long black shadows across the roof; there they sat stiff and still, save when, from time to time, they spread their wings, swooped down on their prey, then resumed the same rigid attitude. These murderous assassins were at heart the most peaceable of good citizens. It was never their way, coming home at night, to wake the other birds asleep among the foliage; no one ever heard them quarrelling or shifting the furniture or pecking at the wall, as the cuckoos, linnets, and chaffinches are so fond of doing; only, six or eight times in the night, to advertise the country folk, they would cry *To-hoo! to-hoo!* if next day was going to be fine, and *To-whit!* if it was going to rain, at regular intervals, like talking barometers. 176

A pair of young turtle-doves nesting on the next roof found this habit annoying, and went to the judge of the district to lodge a complaint. 177

The judge was a very old raven, whom years had only made more sly and artful; he was said to be a hundred, and certainly his bald pate was as shiny as a polished stone. He lived in a crevice in the rocks, alone with his own thoughts. But these thoughts, unlike most old men's, were full of mockery for all created beings. This feathered Methuselah had seen so much in his day! and experience had only taught him to laugh at griefs and joys and everything else.

While appreciating his usefulness, he did not like Mr. Owl, and was not sorry to make things unpleasant for him; he could always dismiss the case in the end, after getting his fun out of it, if the turtles proved, as he half suspected, to have been in the wrong after all.

Three blackbirds he employed as constables arrived at break of day at the owls' front door and knocked. Three times they had to repeat the summons, so fast asleep was the worthy couple, 178

till, roused at last, the latter poked out their heads in great alarm to ask what was wanted with them. Both looked so upset, he, poor fellow, in a nightcap, and she, good dame, in morning deshabille, that the blackbirds, who are always fond of a joke, burst into such a peal of laughter it took them ten minutes to recover their gravity.

They laughed so heartily that the sparrows of the neighbourhood were attracted by the noise, and began to turn and wheel in flocks above the roof, while a horrid hubbub, a vile chirp! chirp! chirp! broke out, deafening and confusing the poor owls still more.

The blackbirds, when they had done laughing, called for silence, which, however, it took some time to establish. Then they announced— 179

“We, assistant officers of justice of this district, and by order of His Honour the Judge, do hereby summon you to appear this day before stroke of noon at his Court, situate, to wit, in the first crevice on the right hand, beginning from above, of the cliff bordering the Great Meadow.”

This order was promulgated in shrill, nasal tones amid the rustling of the wings of all present, who, the instant the last word was uttered, began to amuse themselves by screaming in frantic delight. On the blackbirds departing, a number of sparrows lingered on to enjoy the confusion of the two owls.

These had shrunk away into the deepest recess of their lair, terrified yet resigned, and their inquisitive tormentors heard none of the lamentations they expected. 180

What black deed had been laid to their charge? The blackbirds had given no indication, and they began mentally to review their past, searching in vain for any crime they could be accused of. They had not robbed other people’s goods, nor slandered their neighbours; they had never, no, never caused any one’s death, while they had honestly and honourably performed the duties Nature had given them to do. What more could be asked of them?

The Judge was waiting—they must be off. It was a woeful pilgrimage. The bright daylight dazzled them, and they went along blindly, running against everything and perpetually losing their way; twenty times over they lost their bearings and had to retrace their steps, covered with confusion, while their dusky plumage made a dirty-looking blotch in the fresh morning air. 181

“This way!” cried some tomtits, flying ahead of them—and, taking their word, they blundered into a nest of yellowhammers, which luckily happened to be empty.

“Don’t listen to them—come along with us,” the chaffinches advised them next—and they went crash! head first into a wall.

A cloud of small birds followed behind. They were clawed and scratched, and half-dazed, as they wandered about like phantoms of the night masquerading at high noon. 182

When at last, after a thousand tribulations, with eyeballs starting from their heads, battered and beaten and jeered at, they reached the Court,

another swarm of tormentors was waiting to receive them. There were at least eight hundred, and every second others kept coming up, who, after flying wildly about in search of places, lighted here and there and everywhere, chattering and squabbling. The rock was soon so crowded from top to bottom that a linnet, who had been detained at home feeding her chicks, could not find a perch anywhere, and fluttered up and down the tumultuous ranks, beseeching the audience in vain to sit a little closer. The ladies especially seemed determined not to give up a single inch of room, and all vied together in raising a hubbub, shrieking and laughing and chattering as if they would never stop.

“Accused,” ordered the raven suddenly, “stand up. Our Clerk of the Court will now read the statement of misdemeanours charged against you.” 183

For a little while the uproar still continued, mingled now with sharp calls to order and appeals for silence; then, diminishing gradually, died away into the light rustle of many wings. Then a magpie was seen to rise briskly to his feet; his dark eye rolled roguishly, as he unfolded with his beak a huge sheet of paper scribbled all over with writing and read out in a dry, rasping voice—

“We, Clerk of the Court, &c., &c., do hereby certify that the appellants, to wit M. Narcisse Tourtereau and his consort, Mme. Virginie Tourtereau or Colombelle, have duly appeared before us and deponed that the said appellants, cohabiting near by the messuage whereat the Owls, man and wife, have taken up their abode, are nightly awakened by the clamours, complaints, moans, groans, and quarrels of the aforesaid Owls, who, instead of sleeping in their beds during the interval of time falling betwixt sunset and sunrise, as do all the other birds, do choose these selfsame hours, that are customarily devoted to repose, for robbing and murdering and maliciously and mischievously disturbing their neighbours’ night’s rest by reason of unseemly and uncouth noises.—I have spoken.” 184

The magpie flirted his tail four times in token of satisfaction at his own performance, snapped up a gnat to clear his throat, and, resuming his seat, devoted himself to an endless succession of smiles directed to the feminine portion of his audience. An approving murmur greeted the conclusion of the statement of accusation. 185

Then, after a few moments of disorder, which was promptly checked, “Caw! caw!” went the raven, with a fine attempt at seriousness, his great round-eyed spectacles perched on his nose; then, turning to the owl, he lisped in an affected voice—

“The word is with you; the Court will hear you in your own defence.”

Never, never had the birds enjoyed so laughable a spectacle before, as they beheld the fowl of night step forward, looking oh! so awkward and uncouth, with such a heavy hang-dog air! His great eyes rolled in his head, he stumbled at every step, while behind his back grimaced his shadow, mimicking every movement of his neck as it jerked in and out, first short, then long, like 186

the barrels of an opera-glass.

A wild spasm of merriment seized the vast concourse at sight of the grotesque creature, and tomtits, linnets, birds of every sort and kind, broke into a frantic peal of mirth.

“Silence in the Court!” shrieked the magpie.

But laughter is infectious. Quickly it extended to the lower ledges of the rock, where the spectators sat half hidden from each other in the semi-darkness, and the mighty cliff shook as if lashed by a hurricane.

The contagion caught even the magpie, the blackbirds, the Judge himself, who began to sneeze again and again, in the effort to recover his dignity. By fits and starts, the laughter would die down, only to burst out afresh with redoubled vigour, and it was long before the excitement subsided and heads ceased to wag. When at last the audience had recovered something like composure, even then fans could be seen here and there waving to hide behind their shield a last dying echo of hilarity. 187

Meanwhile, the poor buffoon, the butt of all this scathing opprobrium, stood silent and uncomplaining, humbly waiting his chance to speak. Finally, when quiet was restored, he said —

“I am aware, your Honour, that men and birds all hold me and mine in detestation. There is no villainy they do not impute to us, no crime they do not charge us with, and when we have the misfortune to show ourselves, the howl of hate rises as high about us as a tower. But are we criminals? Do we lurk in the woods to rob our fellow-birds by night or day? Do we plunder the granaries? Do we go thieving in the hedges? Do we ever interfere with the livelihood of any of God’s creatures with whom He has bidden us live in peace? Never, your Honour, never! All the day we lie quiet in our hole, loving our wives and children, and troubling nobody; then, when night is fallen, we win our nourishment by exterminating rats and mice, field-rats and field-mice. I would hurt no one’s feelings, but it is well to make comparisons sometimes, and I ask myself—Which fulfils the more useful function, he who from dawn to dark scours the orchards, stealing cherries, plums, and pears, so that the countryman, when winter comes, has but the half of the crop he hoped for, or he who, seconding the farmer’s toils with an incessant but unseen activity that wins no reward, secures him the proper reward of his pains?” 188

Protests were heard at these words, the goldfinches and sparrows crying out indignantly — 189

“Ah! he shifts the blame on us, the sly-boots! He knows he can say what he likes here, but outside the Court—why, he durst not so much as look us in the face.”

“Oh! but, my good gentlemen,” retorted the orator quietly, “it is no fault of mine if I cannot look at you in the way you wish; a natural infirmity makes it impossible for us to see in daylight; such floods of light beat into the wide pupils of our eyes as would blind us if we had to face the sunshine long. That is the reason why

you mocked at us just now, when you saw us disabled by this excess of light, whose rays pricked and pained our eyeballs like so many needles. Would you not feel yourselves at the same painful disadvantage if you were obliged to fly at night, when we owls come and go at our ease, our great pupils serving us as lamps to see by? You would very soon break your heads against a wall, let me tell you!

“But let me come to the allegations that have brought me here, into the dock. Indeed, I have touched on them already; for is not the specific charge against us that we choose the night to come out of our holes and find our food? Why, what else could we do, when by daylight, by dint of seeing too much, we cease to see anything at all? Nature has given us the night, as she has given other birds the day, unwilling, in her kindly wisdom, to see the dark less useful than the light; she has appointed us her guardians to watch over the storehouses and orchards and granaries, which, above all in the night-time, become the prey of a host of pillagers. 190

“They talk of robbery; why, what robbery can they reproach us with? Is it a malefactor’s work to purge the earth of the creatures that pick and steal, and, like unnatural cannibals, would bring their mother to her death, if we and some others, our colleagues in the same beneficent task, did not put a check on their never-ending mischiefs? Just think if we folded our arms and left them a free field; they would end by devouring the trees, along with the bit of ground where they grow, and the very folks who can never satiate their spite against us, finding themselves deprived of shady leaves and luscious fruits alike, would very soon come begging and beseeching us to return to our never-ending task. 191

“Yet the owls, as your Honour knows, win neither respect nor profit from their irksome labours. They are not proud; you will never hear them bragging of the services they render; but modest, as becomes good workers to be, they roost quietly at home all the time they do not devote to the chase. Scorned by their brethren the birds, and persecuted by mankind, they are victims of consistent ingratitude from the very creatures they benefit; if I say this, it is to have the fact known once for all, not to protest against a state of things established for all time. We are therefore compelled to find in ourselves a happiness which society refuses us, and, living in solitude, we rear our little ones for a lot like our own. There is the head and front of our offending. 192

“There is yet another grievance against us; we disturb, so they allege, our neighbours’ rest by our uproar. Surely the word is rather strong to apply to us who are lovers of silence, shunning noise in others as much as we avoid it in our own homes. If we make ourselves heard, it is not for the pleasure of listening to our own voices! We well know we are no sweet-voiced choristers, and when the nightingale sings, we have never dreamt of posing as his rivals. There are, so the migrants have told us, in the far-off cities of other lands, men who proclaim the hour from the tall minarets in the silence of the night. We do not announce the time—the cuckoo alone has this office to perform during daylight—but we 193

instruct the swallows on the point of winging away, we inform the cricket, the bee, the ant, the ploughman, all to whom rain and sunshine are not matters of indifference, if they may count or not on a favourable morrow. So the kindly mother of man and beast has put two notes in our throats, deeming we needed no more, not to make us singing birds, but only birds of good help.

“I have no more to say, for indeed we are no great talkers, and oratory is an art unknown to us. I will say no more, therefore, save only this—that if you are not satisfied with my pleas, I offer myself—and my companion here present will do the like—I offer myself a willing victim to your resentment, if so be the common good, which could not heretofore exist without our aid, is now only to be secured by the sacrifice of our lives.” 194

Not a little surprised at his own eloquence, the bird of night stepped back to his place with tottering limbs. Thereupon the jays and yellowhammers began a hoot of derision, which was quickly drowned by the protests of the mother birds trembling for their young; and then the old raven, rising slowly to his feet, folded up his glasses, coughed, croaked, and, inspired apparently by the general sense of justice, summed up as follows— 195

“You, Sir Owl, you have done wrong in crying out over loud; but you, young Turtle-dove, you have done a far graver wrong by haling an innocent prisoner to the bar. You therefore will pay the fine to which you would have had your neighbours condemned, and the costs of the trial to boot. Moreover, I will take this opportunity to do an act of justice, and extend a hand of brotherly affection to our honoured friend the owl, who is henceforth to be treated with proper consideration and respect, or I will know the reason why.” 196

Little by little the audience dispersed, the swarm of birds scattered into space, and the raven’s rock was left to its former solitude.

Printed by Ballantyne, Hanson & Co.
Edinburgh & London

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