

PEARLS AND PEBBLES;

OR,

NOTES OF AN OLD NATURALIST.

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WITH

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THE ENGLISH SPARROW: A DEFENCE.

“And He that doth the ravens feed,
Yea, providently caters for the sparrow,
Be comfort to my age.”

--*Shakespeare.*

HARMLESS, persecuted, despised, reviled sparrows, who is brave enough to take your part? Who will take you under a sheltering wing and say a word in your behalf?

I dare so to do, setting at nought the torrent of invective which is sure to fall on my defenceless head.

It was “Don’t Care, that came to the lions.” So ran the awful warning for wilful folk that I used to pore over with childish credulity in Doctor Fenning’s Spelling Book, an ancient volume out of which I learned my first lessons, and where villainous type, hideous pictures, bad paper, and the use of *f* for *s* puzzled the brain and confused the eyes of the little scholar of three years of age.

Well, I “don’t care” if I do come to the lions, I will

have my say about those poor sparrows, remembering the words of the gracious Lord, "Not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father."

"Doth God take care for oxen?" saith the apostle. Yea, He careth; yea, and for the birds of the air also. He openeth His hand and feedeth them. Not one—not even the sparrow, despised among thoughtless men—is forgotten by the great Creator,

"Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,
Atoms or systems into ruin hurled,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world."

There is a war of extermination against these birds going on in the North-West, and among the farmers and gardeners in country places. A regular hue-and-cry is being raised for their destruction, and nowhere are they to be shown mercy.

Now, I would fain take their case in hand and endeavor to prove that this wholesale persecution is both unjust and unreasonable.

In the first place, were not the birds first brought into the country through avarice or ignorance, as a speculation, by some adventurous Yankee, who "assisted" them across the Atlantic in order to make merchandise of them?

Were they not introduced into the agricultural districts as destroyers of the weevil, army-worm and all other kinds of injurious insects?

Yet it was very well known that the sparrow was a

granivorous, and indeed an omnivorous, bird. He is not dainty; he will take anything and everything that falls in his way. As *paterfamilias* he is a good provider for his numerous offspring. Small blame to him! Sparrows and their young must live, they will not starve.

Yes, the sparrows will eat grain, and the farmer says they *do* eat the wheat, and therefore they must be killed.

But stop a minute. When do they eat the wheat? Only in the season, and that a very short one, of the ripening grain, as it is only then that they can get it, and when, with many other grain-eating birds, the sparrows flock to the harvest to take their share.

‘Audacious robbers!’ the farmer calls them, and straightway all the blame of his loss is laid on the immigrant sparrows. He forgets that the sparrows have been cultivating the crop, too, in eating and destroying the numerous insects that infest it while it has been in the blade and in flower, and does not stop to consider that the laborer is worthy of his hire. The sparrow but takes his due for service unseen and unrecognized by the master of the field. Then when the crop is garnered, he is but one of the many gleaners who are busy for awhile in picking up the fallen wheat kernels scattered by the reapers.

The harvest and the gleaning season over, let us follow the sparrows to the villages and towns. There are here no fields of ripe grain to make havoc of, no farmers to offend, but the birds must be fed. How?

Look down on your streets and thoroughfares. On every heap of refuse, every scrap of garbage, in every dirty gutter or dropping in the roadway, about the sweepings from yard or store, are groups of these despised birds, busy, hard-working and unpaid scavengers.

Who knows what evils they prevent, what they devour that otherwise would become decayed vegetable matter, decomposed and typhoid-breeding filth; the larvæ of beetles and other noxious insects, half-digested grain that if left would shortly breed corruption and disease hurtful alike to man and beast.

True, the birds are bold. The sparrow takes possession of the eaves and cornices of your buildings, your sign-boards and your window sills. Any projecting beam or odd angle he makes his coigne of vantage from whence to spy out what he wants. But in this he really interferes with no one, and it is only the braggart assurance of his manner that excites our aversion. His ragged nests are usually hidden away in out of sight corners or sheds, so we have not that to cite against him.

Ah! but someone comes down on me with the accusation that the cruel, wicked, malicious and altogether disreputable sparrow kills and drives away all our dear little song-birds.

Wait a bit, my good friend. Did the other birds never fight or attack strangers? The bill and claws of the sparrow are not those of the *Raptors*. He may be pugnacious, but so is our dear pet the redbreast.

‘Fair fight and no favor,’ say I. Fight? Yes, they all fight at times, robin against robin, when they are in the humor for it, and the weakest goes to the wall.

As to the accusation that the sparrows drive away other birds, let the other birds defend themselves. In physical strength they are all his equals.

I cannot help thinking, however, that it is a fact yet lacking confirmation. There is an old saying, “Give a dog a bad name and of course he suffers for it.” It is my impression that in this instance it is but a newspaper scandal got up for “copy,” and endorsed by the farmers who first *introduced* and then *traduced* the poor sparrows; used them first to get rid of the pests that blighted their grain, then abused them for helping themselves to the wages begrudged them.

I have here the testimony of a very intelligent observer of Nature, one who has carefully watched the habits, food and peculiar ways of the sparrows in this country as well as in England. He says: “I have never been able to detect wheat or any other hard grain in the crop, and it is my opinion that these birds are more insectivorous than granivorous, and that it is the larvæ of insects that they obtain in the buds of the fruit trees and in the ears and joints of the wheat and oats which induces their visits to the fields; and if they pick the husks it is not for the kernel itself, but for what is really destroying it. The sharp pointed bill of the

sparrow is more suited for picking worms than taking up hard grain."

To sum up, the sparrow, an invited guest, an assisted immigrant, was at first welcomed; then, when he had done the work required of him, we find he has other qualities for which we gave no contract, consequently we would like to assist him home again or exterminate him, as one who has out-worn his welcome.

Though he betrays no secrets, he is an eaves-dropper of the worst description. He makes holes in our eaves, and scatters the straw about, and is a nuisance; yet, on the other hand, he is a good scavenger and helps to keep the air about the house pure.

He is a bold, impertinent fellow who is always at hand to eat up the crumbs thrown out for his betters, and moreover he labors under the imputation of driving away other birds of more value in our eyes, but is known to be possessed of no more superior powers than they are provided with.

Thus the two heaviest counts in the indictment are: First, the destruction of grain; second, the driving away of the smaller and more valuable birds—both of which indictments have been pleaded by counsel as not proven.

Have I made out a good case for the sparrows? I have said my say. I am only an old woman after all, with a Briton's love of fair play, so let us give the poor sparrow a chance.