

PREFACE

MOST of the chapters in this book appeared originally as articles in the *Nineteenth Century*, during the years 1902-1904; and I wish to thank the editor, Sir James Knowles, for his kind permission to reprint them after a shorter interval than is usual. They have all been carefully revised, and have, in many places, been recast and received large additions. Of the other chapters, one, that upon "The Wild Duck," was published, many years ago, in *Bailey's Magazine*. The account of the Short-eared Owl appeared, as recently as August last, in the shape of a separate article in the *Outlook*, and it was followed up in October by a second article in the same paper, on the birds of Norfolk. To the editors both of *Bailey's Magazine* and the *Outlook*, I have to return my grateful acknowledgments for the leave which they have given me to reproduce them.

The remaining chapter, "The Old Manor House and its Surroundings," which appears now for the first time, explains itself. The Old Manor House of Bingham's Melcombe is to my later life, in its relation to birds, something of what the "Old Thatched Rectory" at the little village of West Stafford, was to my earlier years; and the chapter describing it serves, among other purposes, to give to the birds of which the next one treats, "a local habitation, and a name." Its old grey walls and its surroundings seem to enhance the charms, and even, to some extent, to modify the habits of the birds which haunt them; while they, in their turn, lend something of life, of activity, of enjoyment, of music to the atmosphere of peace and undisturbed repose which always seems to hover over its ancient precincts.

It will be observed that in a portion of two of the chapters, those on the Thatched Rectory, and on the Manor House, I have dropped, for the time, my special subject of birds, and have endeavoured to bring out something of the characteristics, the manners, and the ideas of the country folk. Birds have their human surroundings, and, in spite of their much greater natural powers of locomotion, are often as strictly local in their habits as the villagers them-

selves. They are, both of them, "attached to the soil," in the best sense of that phrase, by hereditary instincts, by association of ideas, and by inclination. It is natural, therefore, in one who loves the country in all its aspects, to endeavour to give to his favourite birds something of a human setting or background, especially when the inhabitants are so interesting in themselves, and have, as yet, been so little influenced by the rush and crush of modern town life.

Birds have been to me the solace, the recreation, the passion of a lifetime, the more serious and continuous work of which has lain in quite other directions; and in collecting, now that I am somewhat advanced in years, some of my out-of-door experiences, and the results of such study of the literature of the subject as I have been able to give to it, into the form of a book, my object has been twofold: first, to communicate, as far as possible, to others, some portion of the enduring happiness which the love of birds has given to me; and, secondly, to do all that lies in my power towards the preservation of all birds, more especially of those interesting and beautiful species which are habitually persecuted till, in many parts of the country, they are threatened with actual extinction;

some of them, through the mere lust of killing, others, through an inordinate, and selfish, and short-sighted love of sport, which often defeats its own object.

Let me, even at the risk of anticipating what may and must be said repeatedly, in other shapes, in other parts of the volume, endeavour to explain in a word or two, the scope and limits of my work as regards these two main objects.

First, my book does not aim at exhausting all the knowledge that can be obtained even of those birds of which it treats most fully. It contains a series of studies or of sketches rather than of complete pictures. Nor does it pretend to be "scientific" in the strict, perhaps I might rather say, in the narrower sense of that word. My knowledge of anatomy and physiology, interesting and essential though these studies are to "scientific" knowledge, leaves a good deal to be desired. I say nothing of the weights or of the measurements of birds, or of the exact length of their feathers. I could not dissect a bird, even if I would. I would not dissect it, even if I could. My book deals, not with the dead, but with the living bird; least of all, does it deal with the bird that has been "stuffed"—hateful word—and confined for ever within the

uninviting prison of a glass case. It is conversant with birds in the freshness of the prime, in their noon-tide dreams, in their renewed activity at the approach of evening. If it, in any degree, answers its purpose, it will take my readers, some of them, perhaps, for the first time in a newly awakened love for the subject—even as it has taken me back, as I have been writing in my study, in imagination and in happy memories—to the barn or to the belfry, to the marsh or to the meadow, to the heather or to the bracken, to the cosiest corner in the thatched roof, or to the barren ledges of the rifted rock, to the tangled thickets of the common, or to the “bare backs of the bushless downs.” Above all, it will take them to the deep silence of the solemn oak or pine woods, or to those clumps of weather-beaten Scotch firs, which in Dorset more, I think, than in most counties, crown the knolls or hilltops, form the main landmarks on the horizon, bind, with invisible cords, the most widely scattered portions of the county, each to each, and, with their dreamy outlook on the centuries of the past, perhaps also on the centuries of the future, awake, in those who know and love them well, “thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.” It deals with the homes and haunts of birds, their times and

their seasons, their eggs and their nests, their notes and their food, their loves and their hates, their merry courtships and their parental anxieties, their intense local and family attachments, and their still more imperious instincts of migration. In other words, it aims at penetrating, as far as may be, behind the bright eyes—and few eyes are so bright as those of a bird—behind the graceful shapes, the lissom movements, the beautiful mask of feathers, to the eager little life, vivid, attractive, mysterious, almost, but not, I think, quite impenetrable, which underlies them all. By so doing, it aims at creating an interest in birds, a sympathy with them which, if once awakened, will, perchance, never go to sleep again; but like a love of flowers, will give a kind of sixth sense to its possessor, lending a fresh charm to every walk, to every copse, to every hedgerow, peopling them with ever appearing, ever disappearing, friends—friends who were hitherto unnoticed and unknown—and enabling the eye to see what it has never properly seen, the ear to hear what it has never fully heard, and the imagination to picture to itself what it has never consciously imagined before.

It will be observed that many, indeed most of the birds which have most attracted me, which I

have had most opportunity of observing, and which, therefore, I have described most fully, such as the raven, the various species of the owl, the magpie, the rook, the jackdaw, the cuckoo, the swallow, the kingfisher and the woodpecker are also those which have had the most enduring influence on the thoughts, the hopes, the fears, and the out-lookings of man. They have played a large part in history, in poetry, in painting, in sculpture, in folk-lore, in legend, sacred and profane; and it has been not the least interesting part of my work to attempt to bring out this close historical connection of birds with man, by somewhat copious quotations from the poets, and by illustrations drawn from every quarter, ancient or modern, to which I have been able to obtain access.

Secondly, and as the result of the first, it is my earnest hope that the book may tend towards the better protection and preservation of all birds; and most of all, of those which need it most. I have some reason, indeed, to believe, from communications which have reached me from all parts of the country, that such has been already, to a considerable extent, the result of the articles, as they appeared in their original and more fugitive shape. The pole-trap, with all its unspeakable tortures, has,

since my paper on owls was first published, been abolished by law. I have thought it well, however, in spite of the passing of the Bill, to leave the passages in which I denounced it exactly as they originally stood, and that for two reasons. First, because in the eyes of lovers of birds, they may, perchance, have acquired, as a humble contributing cause to so happy a result, some little additional historical interest of their own; and, secondly, and much more important, because to pass a Bill into law is, unfortunately, not the same thing as to see it carried out, especially when the means of evading it are comparatively easy, and when the permanent forces of ignorance, of selfishness, of *laissez faire*, or of indifference to animal-suffering — as is the case with some game-preservers, and many, or indeed most gamekeepers—are arrayed on the other side. Much must depend, henceforward, on the zeal and energy of the county magistrates, of the county councils, of the county police, if the law is to be properly carried out. Almost as I write, I hear from a brother who has just returned from Scotland that he saw, on the open moor, a pole-trap, “naked and yet not ashamed,” in full and hideous operation there; and, only a month or two ago, I heard from a friend on the borders of the

county of Dorset, that a gamekeeper finding, I presume, that he could no longer, with impunity to himself, put up pole-traps on his master's ground, had induced the gardener of a large garden which adjoined one of his owl-haunted covers, to plant the forbidden instrument of torture there, and that, in the few weeks it was allowed to remain, it had caught and lacerated to death seven owls of various kinds—for every week, in fact, an owl!

Much has been done of late, by various public bodies or private individuals, towards inculcating greater kindness to animals, wild as well as domesticated. The Society for "the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals" and that for "the Protection of Birds," have, each of them, done a noble, and, as it would seem, an ever extending work. The horrors of the slaughter-house have been, in some measure, diminished by moral influences; and it is to be hoped, now that the Commission on the subject have, at length, published their Report, that it will not be long before the remaining abuses are, as far as possible, swept away by law. Admirable books like those by Richard Jeffries, Mr Ward Fowler, Mr Cornish, Mr Dixon, Sir Herbert Maxwell, Mr Hudson, and Mr Kearton, not to mention half a dozen others of the same type,

have awakened a new and keener sympathy with animal life, and specially with birds. But much remains to be done. In particular, it must be remembered that much that I have said in denunciation of the pole-trap, may, *mutatis mutandis*, be said, in lesser degree, of other modes, which are still in full employment, of capturing or killing wild animals.

The heart of my book, the germ from which most of it has been developed, is to be found, if I mistake not, in the chapter on "The Old Thatched Rectory and its Birds." In the rapid changes of the years, it may soon be said with only too much truth—even in the county of Dorset, which knew the value of Stafford Rectory and its associations best—in the words of one of the most exquisitely pathetic poems ever written, that by Cowper "on the receipt of his mother's picture out of Norfolk":

"'Tis now become a history little known
That once we called the pastoral-house our own."

But short-lived memories do not necessarily make good influences to be short-lived also; and, if I may be allowed to do so, I would thankfully acknowledge, with all filial reverence, that if there be anything in this book which, in spite of all

PREFACE

xv

its shortcomings, of which indeed no one can be half so conscious as myself, leads to a closer observation of Nature, or to a deeper and more living sympathy with animal life, it is due, in its origin at least, to the influences which permeated "The Old Thatched Rectory."

BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE,
November, 1904.