

TALES OF THE BIRDS

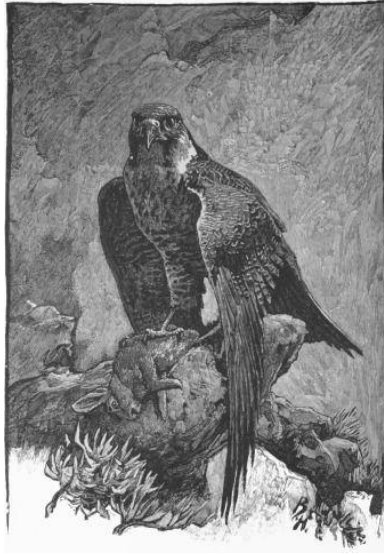
TALES OF THE BIRDS



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... And stood there, proud and fierce, one foot still grasping its victim.—
Front.

TALES OF THE BIRDS

BY

W. WARDE FOWLER

AUTHOR OF "A YEAR WITH THE BIRDS."

"Μετά δέ χρόνον την πελειάδα ἀθροιστή
φανή αὐδᾶσθαι λέγουσι."

HERODOTUS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRYAN HOOK

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TO

G. J. E.

IN MEMORY OF PLEASANT DAYS

IN THE SUNNY SUMMER

OF 1887.

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... AND STOOD THERE, PROUD AND FIERCE, WITH ONE FOOT STILL GRASPING ITS VICTIM

THUS THEY PASSED THE NIGHT, TOLERABLY WARM AND COMFORTABLE, AND EVEN SLEEPING

“HOW THAT BIRD DOES SING!”

A “JUBILEE” SPARROW

AND THE BLACKBIRD BEGAN HIS ORATION

... DEEP IN MEDITATION ON THE PROBLEMS WHICH OCCUPIED HIS MIND

“WOULD YOU MIND TELLING ME, AS I SEE YOU WAG YOUR OWN TAILS SO CONSTANTLY AND SO NICELY, WHY YOU DO IT?”

PIPI LOOKED UP AND SAW FLIP; IN AN INSTANT THEY WERE TOGETHER

HE IS SITTING AND EATING HIS DINNER AT THE FOOT OF HIS FAVOURITE OAK

TAIL-PIECE TO “THE OWLS’ REVENGE”

TALES OF THE BIRDS.

A WINTER'S TALE.

THERE is a certain quiet bit of land, just where two midland counties meet, that is in winter a favourite resort of the fieldfares. There they find all they need—the hedges are usually bright with hips, and with the darker crimson berries of the hawthorn; the fields are all pasture-meadows, and the grass is tufty and full of insects; a little stream winds snake-like through the fields, hidden by an overarching growth of briar and bramble. No well-worn path crosses these meadows, and you may count on being undisturbed if you sit for a few minutes, to enjoy the winter sunshine and watch the shy birds, on the bole of one of the scattered elms that shelter the cows in summer. The fieldfares are in clover here: they get food, drink, sunshine when there is any, and above all the solitude they so deeply love. In other parts of the district you may see them, or you may not, for they move about and show their handsome forms and slaty backs, now here, now there; but in this favoured haunt some are always to be seen, and set up their loud call-note from elm or hedgetop as soon as your intruding form is seen moving in their direction.

One autumn there had been but a poor crop of berries; and by the time the fieldfares arrived in middle England the blackbirds and missel-thrushes had already rifled the hedges of much of their fruit. But up to the middle of January enough remained to feed the usual number of visitors, and when once January is past, they may hope for open weather and a plentiful supply of grubs and worms to help them out. During the third week in that wintry month, the sun shone bright and warm, though the fields were covered with hoar frost at night; no thought of trouble entered the hearts of the birds; in the middle of the day you might even have heard them uttering a faint kind of song from the hedge-top over the brook, as the genial sun warmed them and bade them think of the spring that was surely coming.

But the frost went on, day by day; and now the blue sky was covered with dull cloud, driven before a bitter north-east wind, so that the sun could no longer melt the hard-bound meadows with his midday glow. The fieldfares found themselves quite alone. The redwings had gone to the neighbourhood of the towns and villages, and so too had the robins and wrens, who had lived in the hedges all the winter through till now. The rooks and starlings were in the ploughed fields, and searching even there almost in vain for food. A chance crow or magpie was all the company

they had for several days together; and crows and magpies are not always agreeable neighbours.

At last the berries were all gone, and the ground so hard-frozen that no bill could break it and no bird hope to find grub or worm there. Some of the elder birds went a long distance one day to forage; they returned very tired with news of a single hedge on which there was still some store of berries, but they had left one of their number behind them. The old birds looked very grave; they called a meeting, and then the eldest, with drooping tail and lack-lustre eye, told them that they must stay no longer where they were, and no longer keep all together. They must break up into small parties and find their food as best they could for themselves; if they did not go far, and the frost broke up, they might all find their way back again in a few days; all might yet be well. "But I must tell you," said he, turning to the younger birds, "that if the frost goes on, or if snow falls, we shall all be in peril of our lives. And see, a light, dry snow is falling already! You that are young and strong must leave us at once and go southward. Do not delay a moment; fly while you can. We, who are already tired out, will seek the berry hedge we found, and try and recruit ourselves before we move further. We left our poor old friend under that hedge this morning, with his head under his wing, and we do not know whether we shall find him again alive. But we will all hope for the best, and try to struggle through a bad time. Good-bye, young ones, good-bye! Be sure you break up into companies of three or four, or you will never find enough to keep you from starving. Keep a good heart, and go straight southwards towards the mid-day sun, and when the frost goes, come again northwards, and hope to find us here." Then he flew away, slowly and feebly, and most of the other old birds followed him.

The young ones, who still had plenty of life and hope in them, and hardly knew what it was to be in peril of their lives, soon broke up into different divisions, and started different ways, but all in a southward direction. Each company had its leader, and there was much rivalry as to which should belong to the company which was led by a handsome and lively bird named Cocktail, to whom they all looked up. But Cocktail would not have more than three with him; and Cocktail was wont to have his own way. He chose his great friend Feltie^[1] and two others, Jack and Jill; and off they went with a loud and hearty good-bye; the other three quite confident in Cocktail's prudence, skill, and courage. He was nearly two years old; he had had a nest and family last summer in a Norwegian pine-forest; he had attacked a magpie that was threatening his young, and beaten it away in disgrace; he had led a large party across the Northern Sea last autumn to

England, and had found them all a breakfast within an hour of landing. Whatever he did was sure to be right, and wherever he went there was sure to be food. He was well aware of all his virtues, and liked, in a cheerful and pleasant way, to be made much of; and he had taken young Feltie under his protection from their first acquaintance, because Feltie had very soon made it plain that in his honest eyes there was no such bird as Cocktail to be found in the whole world. Jill was chosen because she was a young hen-bird of a mild and yielding disposition, yet of pleasant manners and ladylike ways; and to say the truth, during these sunny days of late, Cocktail had cast an approving eye upon her, and had half made up his mind to select her as his partner for the coming spring and summer—provided of course that no one with superior charms should meet his eye in the meantime. As for her own choice in the matter, that never entered into his calculations. Lastly, Jack was the brother of Jill, and very fond of her—which is not usually the case with brothers and sisters among the fieldfares; and on this account he was allowed to join the party. “We must have one more,” Cocktail had said before they started, “and it really doesn’t much matter who it is provided he will follow me and do what I tell him. No swaggerers here, please; I want some one who’s nobody in particular!”

“Oh, if you wouldn’t mind, Cocktail,” said Jill humbly, “I don’t think Jack is any one in particular, mayn’t he come?”

“Let him come forward,” said Cocktail magnificently; “let me see him. Here, you Jack, are you any one in particular?” Jack declared that he was no one but himself, and therefore could not be any one *in particular*, like Cocktail; and on the strength of this he was admitted to the little company.

Cocktail now found the fondest desire of his heart realized; so far his genius had always been hampered by older birds, who in spite of their inferior talents would always contrive to direct the movements of a troop by combining together: but now he was in sole and happy command of three admiring subjects, who would not worry him with advice, and would obey his orders implicitly. He took them first to the top of a tall elm, whence they could see over the fast whitening fields to a range of hills not far away to the southward; he told them that he should cross those hills and rest for the night on the other side in shelter which he would find for them. Meanwhile they were to fly at a little distance apart, in order to keep a good look-out for berries; but they must always keep their eyes on him, and when they heard his signal “Chak-chak,” they were to join him again at once.

“The first who fails to come at that signal,” said Cocktail, “or who is guilty of any negligence or disobedience, WILL BE AT ONCE LEFT BEHIND!”

With these words he started off, and the others followed him as they had been told, at a little distance to right and left. Very little in the way of food was found that day, and Jack and Jill were getting tired and hungry, when after rising to the hills, and passing for some miles over high, desolate country, where there was hardly a hedge to be seen, and the white carpet was only broken by low gray stone walls which could not help a hungry fieldfare, they descended towards evening into the shelter of a little well-wooded valley,^[2] where were the pleasant grounds of a gentleman’s house. Cocktail made straight for this house, but stopped short on a tall tree outside the garden, and began to look round him.

It was about four o’clock, and fast getting dark. He could see the lamp lighted in a room in the house, and a bright fire burning; a lady sat by the fire at work; then a maid came in with tea, and the blinds were drawn down, the shutters closed, and all was gray and cold again. But Cocktail’s keen eye had seen something by the bright firelight which made him jerk his tail and sit more upright on his bough—berries, scarlet berries, arranged all about an old oak chimney-piece!

“Shame!” said he indignantly; “but there must be more of them in the garden.” And bidding the others follow, he flew down into the well-planted grounds. They here found themselves nearer to human habitations than they had ever been in their lives before; but hunger made them bold. “To right and left,” said Cocktail, “and look for holly-bushes.” His own search was a failure; he found several bushes, but not a berry was left. He felt very angry when he thought of the rich store of berries inside that cosy room, where no starving birds could get at them. There was the well-fed lady enjoying her tea by the fire, and looking with admiration at the berries (*looking* indeed, thought Cocktail, and not eating them!), and here were four poor birds starving outside in the cold for want of them.

But now a “chak” was heard from another part of the garden. Making his way there, he found that Jack was the lucky discoverer of a bush that still boasted a fair store of berries; up came the others too, and now they had a good feast on the berries as long as the light lasted: then, at Cocktail’s order, they dropped down to roost in a thick shrubbery some distance from the house, where the evergreens had as yet kept the snow from lying very deep upon the ground. In a few minutes their four heads were under their tired wings, and they were fast asleep.

Next day they were awake early, but their breakfast on the remaining berries was rudely interrupted by the gardener, who came to sweep the snow from the walks; and after lingering in a tree for a few minutes, Cocktail gave an angry “chak,” and led the way again southwards. To have his breakfast broken into in this way was more than he was used to, and for several days he had had no morning bath. And more than that, he was tired and stiff with the night’s hard frost; so his temper was not so good as usual, and he flew high and quick, hardly looking at the hedges as he passed over them. Many a time the others would fain have stopped to pick a stray berry, or try for grains on a stubble-field where they could see partridges cowering below them; but on went Cocktail without heeding, and on they had to go too.

About midday they came to the foot of another long range of hills, which they had seen in the distance for some time. The north-east wind was blowing hard, and had driven them some way to the westwards; and they had turned still farther west to avoid a large town,^[3] where engines were puffing, and trains rushing continually in and out. Under these hills they found a large park, with thorn-bushes planted here and there, on which a few berries were still showing red through the white rime that clung to them; and here Cocktail at last halted, and allowed his famished followers a little rest. But he was more severe and imperious than on the day before, and strictly forbade them to go out of his sight.

“We shall go on again before long,” he said; “we must get further south yet, so be ready to start at any moment.”

“Don’t you think,” said Jack, “that we might stay here a day or two at least? The park is large, and there are a few berries on a good many of the trees.”

“Did I ask your advice?” said Cocktail angrily.

“No, you didn’t, but—”

“Then hold your tongue, Mr. Nobody-in-particular. I did not bring you here to tell me what I ought to do. Leave this bush directly. Do as I tell you at once—it’s all you’re fit for.” So Jack retired in disgrace, and in great wrath, and Jill went with him. Poor little Jill! She was getting very faint, and had hardly had strength left to get as far as she had come; but being a brave little soul she kept it to herself and struggled on. But when she was alone with Jack she told him how bad she felt.

“Jack,” she said, “I can fly no further to-day. Why does he want to go on?”

“Because he knows more about it than we do, I suppose,” said Jack. “And we have promised to follow, you know. You must have a good dinner and come on somehow.”

“But I can’t eat,” said Jill: “I’m so tired, I can hardly move, and the berries are so hard and dry, I can’t get them down my throat.”

“That’s serious,” returned Jack; “you must certainly have rest. I’ll go and tell Cocktail, and he’ll be sure to stay a day or two.”

So Jack flew back to Cocktail’s bush, but was instantly ordered off again. Feltie however flew after him to ask what he wanted, and on hearing the state of things, undertook to be his ambassador to Cocktail. But that imperious captain would not listen.

“Rubbish,” he said. “Do you suppose I didn’t know that we should have this kind of thing going on? What’s the good of a leader if he is not to whip up lazy birds?” And he instantly gave the signal for starting, and flew off towards the hills. Feltie followed him by instinct, and turning to look back, saw Jack and Jill starting too, the latter flying slowly and feebly. Feltie’s heart sank within him; he couldn’t help thinking that it was cruel of Cocktail, and that there was no real reason why they should not stay. He looked at the line of hills; they were one long range of pure white, not even broken by the dark line of a wall or a hedge. As the ground rose below them the cold wind blew still colder. How much more comfortable it had been in the park! He would make a last effort to save Jill’s strength, and perhaps her life. If they could only halt on that large clump of trees at the top of the great curving hill they were now flying up, all might be well; Cocktail might be persuaded to turn back again.

He put on his utmost speed, and overtook his leader.

“Cocktail,” he said, “dear captain, will you perch for a moment on these trees to let the others come up?”

Cocktail was really fond of Feltie, whereas he only patronized Jill and tolerated Jack. He also felt that he had been harsh, and was willing to be gracious once more. He agreed to halt, and when they reached the trees he turned round to the wind and gave his loudest “Chak-chak.” But there were no birds in sight.

They waited a moment, Feltie’s heart fluttering; Cocktail sitting strongly on his bough, with head erect. Then he called again, and then again. After that there was a long silence. Feltie dared not break it; Cocktail was too proud to do so. Not a living creature was in sight; not a labourer returning

to his fireside; not a rook, not a rabbit. There were tracks of four-footed creatures on the snow below the clump of trees, but all was deadly still, except the branches as they swayed in the bitter wind.

Suddenly the shriek of an engine coming from the distant town broke in on the silence, and gave Feltie a kind of courage.

“Let us go back,” he said, “and find them. Jill can’t go on, I feel sure, and Jack has stayed with her. Let us go back and pass the night in the park.”

“Feltie,” said Cocktail, “I never guessed you were such a coward. *You* want to stay behind too, do you? Go back and join Jack and Jill; the berries won’t last so long as the frost, and you will be less able then to fly further south. There you’ll stay, and there perhaps you’ll die; and I shall never see you again. Why can’t you trust in me? I expected to be obeyed, and you are all rebelling and deserting me!”

Feltie made up his mind in a moment. Jack and Jill must take care of themselves; he and Cocktail must hold together. A shade of pity crossed his mind for Cocktail’s disappointment. “He was meant to lead,” he thought, “and we are not giving him a fair chance. Whatever happens I will stick to him, and perhaps he will need my help yet.”

“I am ready,” he said; “I will not leave you.”

“That’s a good fellow,” said Cocktail. “Now fly your best; the sun must be sinking soon, for though it is all cloudy, I can see a faint pink light on the hills we left behind us this morning. Remember how easily we got across them, and what a good supper we found on the other side. We shall soon be across these hills too, and then we will find another garden and more holly-trees.” And off he flew.

Cocktail was quite himself again, but he had reckoned without his host: how was he, poor bird, to know what the Marlborough Downs were like in winter? How was he to guess that instead of reaching some deep warm valley at sunset, they might fly on till after dark, and indeed perhaps all through the night, without a chance of escaping from that terrible wind? Long, undulating plains, all shrouded in white; rounded hills, whose dim whiteness melted into leaden gray as it met the snow-laden clouds; here and there a shelterless dip, down which the wind swept almost more wildly than on the open plain: between these they had to choose, if choose they would: and as one was no better than the other, they went straight on.

At last they reached a rather deeper and wider hollow, at the bottom of which a large road ran.^[4] A high bank sheltered this road to the north, and at the top of the bank was a hedge. It was now dark, blowing and snowing furiously.

“This is our only chance, Feltie,” said Cocktail: “but see there where the road turns a little; there we can get a better shelter.”

And here, just where an old ruined turnpike cottage stood between the road and the bank, with long brown grass growing behind it, they settled down for the night—a night which few who live on those downs will ever forget. Feltie himself used afterwards to say that they must have died, but for one solitary piece of good fortune. The two birds had crouched down in the long grass at the foot of the bank close to each other, and put their heads under their wings, but sleep would not come; they were too hungry and too wretched. Some time after dark a rustling was heard in the frozen grass; some four-footed creature was coming.



Thus they passed the night, tolerably warm and comfortable, and even sleeping.—

“Fox!” whispered Cocktail; “but I can’t fly, and if I could, where should we go? It’s all up, I fear, but crouch closer in the grass and see.”

It was not a fox; it was a hare. Puss came softly in behind the ruined cottage, and crouched down quietly close to the birds. They kept perfectly still. When she was fast asleep Cocktail whispered to Feltie to move up to her, and did so himself, getting as near her warm breath as possible. Feltie followed his example. And thus they passed the night, tolerably

warm and comfortable, and even sleeping. Puss never offered to stir, and was still fast asleep when they left her in the morning.

The next day, no breakfast. Not a morsel of food was to be found anywhere. The fields were deep in snow. Once they tried a rickyard, but the farmer's son came out with his gun, and they had to take to flight again, frightened out of their lives. Their wings were getting feeble, and they often had to alight on the ground and rest; and after resting, every fresh starting was more difficult than the last. Cocktail said little, and seemed to be getting deaf and sleepy; Feltie had to take the lead and keep the lookout. They passed at midday over some lower-lying country,^[5] and then, almost without knowing it, they once more found themselves upon a high, bleak table-land of never-ending down.^[6] As night fell they sank quite exhausted on the sheltered side of a high hill, whose flanks were clothed thickly with gorse, hoping that some friendly hare might again favour them with her company.

In the middle of the night Cocktail suddenly spoke: "Feltie," he said, "we ought to have stayed in that park. If I had known what was coming I would have stayed, but one can't know everything. You may have to go on without me to-morrow; if I can't fly, you must go on. I'm your leader, and this is my last order. Go on till you get food, and when the frost goes, come back this way if you care to. If you don't find me, tell Jack and Jill that they were right, and I was wrong. Good-night once more, old Feltie; mind and do as I tell you."

Cocktail said these last words with something of his old cheerful tone of authority; then he put his head under his wing again. Feltie said nothing, but nestled closer to him. When morning broke, and Feltie ruffled his feathers and looked about him as usual, Cocktail did not do the same. His head was still under his wing, but not a feather stirred; Cocktail was dead, and frozen hard. Feltie shuddered and flew away, hardly knowing where he went.

It did not indeed much matter which way he went. Death was all around. The only living creature abroad was a wandering carrion crow, whose melancholy croak seemed to tell that he too was starving. The broad white pall lay silently over the whole plain; the sky was still overcast, and the wind blew from the north-east with hardly less cruel violence than on the day before. It was more the wind than his own wings that carried Feltie along. Those wings were stiff and painful, and would do their work no longer. And he, too, like poor Cocktail, was getting drowsy with hunger and fatigue; life was going slowly out of him. He did not feel much pain; he

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