

BIRDS IN THE SNOW.

[Ouida in Belgravia.]

There was a very hard winter in the world. It was a hard winter everywhere, and the snow fell over land and sea so heavily, so blindingly, so continually, that ships were wrecked, trains were wrecked, trains were blocked, posts were stopped, and traffic well-nigh came to an end in many of the districts even of Southern England, and how much more so in the cold bleak North! Even down in Dover snow was deep and ice was thick—even in mild, moist Dover, where mostly in winter time the roses blow, and the south winds too, and all is green as Yule.

Some little people who lived at an old vicarage on the Dart River did not know what to make of it. None of them, except Ray, the eldest, who was seven years old, had ever seen snow lie on the ground at all; he had, and knew all about it, because because he had spent a Christmas-tide on the moors of the East Riding with his god-mother; but his brothers and sister, Rob and Tam and Dickie, and the twin sisters, Susie and Nellie, never had seen the earth white in this way before, and they were very much delighted and very much alarmed, which is a state of mind that has its pleasures at all ages, and its pain, too.

These six little mortals lived in a vicarage, and their father was the Vicar, and mother, alas for them! they had none, for she had gone away into the sky (so they were told) when little Susie and Nellie came down from there on to earth.

"Perhaps it is the down of mamma's wings," said little Rob, who could remember her very well, and cried for her still, when he saw the fine snow-flakes coming down through the air.

"If she had wings I am sure she would come to us," said Ray, wistfully looking up. "I don't believe she has wings; I don't."

"But papa says she is an angel, and angels always have," said Rob, who was very positive.

"She would come to us if she could fly," said Ray; "at least, if God would let her," he added, on reflection. "Don't you think, if he said to Him, I want to kiss Rob and Ray and Tammie because they miss me so, He wouldn't say no?"

Rob thought a minute, then said to his brother:

"Papa always says 'No,' so perhaps God does too."

"Perhaps," sighed Ray, with a tired voice.

"No" was always said to them, and how much sorrow that means in the life of a child!

The vicarage was an old long wooden house, over-run with creepers, the very house to be a paradise for children and dogs, with all kinds of deep old casements and chimney-places, and corner cupboards and paneled passages; the very place for twilight romps and firelit stories, for fun and play, and mirth and mischief. But fun and play, and mirth and mischief were all a quartet frowned upon at the vicarage, and though they crept in at times, because they can never be wholly absent where six children are, yet they came in timidly and were in hiding for the most part, and never laughed out lustily or scampered about without fear. For a cold dark shadow was upon the house and the hearts of the children; and this shadow was that of their father. He was the vicar of the out-of-the-world parish of Goldenrod, that lay on the banks of the Dart in a secluded part of the county, as Herrick's did before him; but he was in every way unlike that bright-hearted and genial country priest. Unhappily for his children, he was of a taciturn and gloomy nature, very mean too, and very harsh, and the sound of his heavy foot along the passages made Rob and Ray flee trembling, and the younger morsels cry. What little tenderness he had ever had was buried with his wife under the big green yew on the south side of the church, and the children were afraid of him; sadly and terribly afraid.

Their father was a very good man; that is to say, he was very truthful, very honest, very laborious, never shrank from any duty, however distasteful, and never indulged in any pleasure however tempting. But he was a stern man and rigid, and he was also very mean; "close-fisted," Keziah called it. His parish was immense in extent, and very poor in what it rendered to him. There was scarcely a well-to-do person it, and the Vicar, though he had a snug sum in the county bank and was by no means straightened, living like a very poor man too, from inclination rather than necessity; his thoughts were apt to be sordid, and his laws apt to be harsh.

They were very happy very often indeed, because there were the old mossy orchards and the broad green meadows, and the hedges, and the woods, and the cattle, and the chickens, and the huge kitchen, where they could curl on the wooden settles, and eat their porridge, and hear wonderful tales from Keziah, who was cook, and nurse, and dairy-woman, and housewife, all in one. Keziah loved them; she had seen them all born, and when their mother had lain dying, had promised not to leave them, and she kept her word, though she was a buxom woman, much beloved, and might have married the rich miller that had the water-mill eight miles away down the river. But there were many things Keziah wished to do for them that she could not do, for she never disobeyed her master; and she had given them water when she would have given them milk, and cold porridge when she would have given them hot bread, and was often ashamed at the darning and threadbare clothes in which she had to array their little bodies—"the children that ought to be the first in the parish!" she would say to herself. "It is good to be a saint, no doubt, but it is bad to be a skinflint too." For a skinflint she called her master, in the secrets of her soul.

When the snow fell she called him so more bitterly than ever.

The snow made all the little people very cold, and she could not set big oaken logs and good canal coal roaring with flame up all the chimneys, as she would have liked to do, and Goldenrod grew damp and chill.

"Run out, my chicks, and get warm that way," she said to them when the white covering was so strange to them, stretched over field and wood, and made the leafless trees and the swollen river look quite black against it.

Ray and Rob were taught their lessons by their father in his study, a little dark, close place, that was as terrible to them as if it had been a torture-chamber; for their acquaintance with letters was small, with the cane was large, and their canings were always given them there. But this morning they were free, for their father had been called away to a dying parishioner on the other side of the big brown moor that shelved away from the edge of their orchards. So Rob and Ray ran out into the air and dragged their little brothers with them, and the babies even in their wooden cart, and romped about, and raced, and slid, and pelted, and danced, and made themselves merry, as though no cane were lying on the study-table, and no blurred copy-books waiting, grim and grimy. They played at sledging, of which they had seen some prints in Christmas papers, and have made belief the babies were Princesses; they then played at being Napoleon at Moscow, whose story they had just come to in "Markham's History," and were so delighted with their marches and battles, and their own deaths and burials in the snow, that they never heard the one step which at all times sent a tremor of fear through them. The cold voice of the Vicar cleft the cold air like a knife.

"Are your lessons done?"

Rob, who was burying Tammie in the snow, and Ray, who was carrying Dickie as a frost-bitten soldier of the Old Guard on his shoulders, both heard, and their innocent sport ceased as a dog's play ceases at the sharp crack of a whip.

"We have done no lessons, papa."

"What have you done, then?"

"We have been at play."

"Very well, go into the study."

Rob began to cry, and Ray's lips quivered. They knew what the order meant. "It was all my fault, master, all mine," cried Keziah, but the Vicar put her aside.

"You spoil the children; that is well known," he said coldly. "But the boys are too old to know their own duty."

Keziah spoke in vain; the boys were bidden to go to the study.

"Whip only me, papa," said Ray, timidly; "only me, please, because if I had staid in, Rob would have staid in too."

The Vicar in his inmost soul recognized the generosity of the plea, and felt proud of his little son, but he did not seem to have heard it, and he gave both equal punishment upon the palms of their small, sunburnt, cold hands. Then they were shut in to do their lessons, with two lanches of dry bread instead of dinner.

The Vicar was a man who held discipline in high esteem, and enforced it.

They did their lessons; Ray quickly, Rob tardily, both watering the pages of primer and copy-book with scalding tears. Then they huddled together in the deep bay of the one narrow window to hear each other repeat what they had had to learn by rote. The casement looked on the lawn at the side of the house; on the grass was a big hawthorn tree, and under the tree were huddled together, like themselves, a score of birds.

"Do look at the birds," says Ray.

"How puffed out they look and how dull, and all their feathers stick upright."

"They're cold," said Rob, thoughtfully, and added with fellow-feeling, as he heard the sound of dishes and knives and forks in the adjoining chamber:

"Perhaps they are hungry, too."

"Hungry" repeated Ray, who had never thought how birds lived. Then the color flushed back into his little pale face, he jumped up, and upset all the lesson-books.

"Of course they are hungry—how silly I am!—the ground is frozen—they eat worms and seeds, and now they can't get any. Oh, the poor, poor, poor little things!"

He jumped off the window-seat, got his dry bread, and jumped on again, threw open one of the leaden window panes, and crumbled up his bread and flung it out to the birds. Instantly they darted down, a motley little throng; brown sparrows, gray linnets, speckled thrushes, chaffinches with their variegated wings, three big blackbirds, one tiny blue tomtit, and many robins. They were no longer dull; they hopped and pecked and fluttered and chirped to each other and ate in concert, and were very much better behaved than a famished crowd of human beings ever would have been.

The great hawthorn-tree spread above them, glittering with icicles on every branch, the white, hard, smooth snow was beneath them, the bright-natured feathered things soon grew themselves again, and their merry chirping made the frosty air alive with "Lieder ohne Worte," as gaily as if the hawthorn there were in flower, and they were at work in it making their nests. Rob and Ray were in ecstasies; they hung against the casement, pouring out showers of crumbs, laughing and half-crying in delight at their clever and wonderful delicacy that the birds in the snow had that they themselves would be very hungry themselves, for in their excitement and sympathy they had crumbled away both bits of bread. They watched the little multitude eat every crumb, shake out their feathers, and fly away. One robin flew up to the lower boughs of the hawthorn, and sank as if he was deputed by the rest to speak their common praise and thanksgiving.

"Oh, how lovely!" cried Ray, with clasped hands and caught breath. "Oh, how beautiful! Oh, how clever of you, Rob, to remember they were hungry."

"And me who isn't clever!" said Rob, with a chuckle of content.

"What are you doing at the window, boys?" said their father's voice.

Their joy ceased, and the robins flew away. Rob was the one to answer this time.

"We gave our bread to the dicky-birds. It was me thought of it."

"All your bread?"

"Yes, papa, both bits."

The Vicar frowned. "Then you may go hungry until your tea-time, and remember that I will have no folly of the kind again. Keep your crusts for worthier objects. Birds are more thieves. They steal fruit and grain, and it is God's merciful provision that frost should come to aid, amid other of His means, in the destruction of their numbers. It is very impious to interfere with God's designs."

Ray's face grew very weary and perplexed, Rob's very grave and resolute.

"God kills birds," asked Rob, at last. His father replied:

"The frost God sends kills them—yes."

"I don't like God, then," Rob said, after a little while.

"Hush!" said Ray. "God is good. Papa it is that makes some mistake."

The father grew gray with horror, and stony white with rage. Were these blasphemies his own children?"

They were once more punished alike. They were this time flogged instead of being caned, and their little stiff hands were set to write in large crooked characters:

"Frost is a provision of nature, instituted by the mercy of God, to destroy the numbers of birds that devastate the autumn crops of farmers, and destroy the buds of gardener's summer fruits."

"It is not true," said Ray, between his teeth, and his hands traveled painfully over the long sentence. "I am quite sure it is not true."

"No, it isn't true," said his echo, Rob, whose chubby, fat fingers could scarcely manage at the best of times to make a round O, and now that they were numbed with the cold not make it anyhow. "I don't care for the farmers," added Rob. "The farmers trap the bunnies; that they do."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Animals at Different Heights.

[Contemporary Review.]

Different animals ascend to very different heights. Thus, for example, the orange-ouzel is confined to the hot and humid coast of Borneo, while the most snub-nosed of all apes (Semnopithecus roxallana) was found by Pere David amid the snowy mountains of Moupin, in Thibet, at an elevation of nine thousand feet, in a region where frost and snow last for several months. Most of the great cats are inhabitants of warm regions only, but the tiger flourishes in the Amoor country in an almost arctic climate.

In Europe the bear is found at an altitude of over 8,000 feet, but the badger does not seem to have been met with above 5,000. The chamois and ibex ascend (in the Alps or Pyrenees) to the region of trees and the snow-line; but the fallow deer does not extend above 6,000 feet. While the camel is an inhabitant of the plains, the allied American form—the llama—ascends to 18,000 in the Andes, and the Burriel sheep of Central Asia bounds along at an altitude of 17,000, where man breathes with difficulty. Although serpents are creatures loving warmth and abounding in both humid forests and arid plains, yet boas ascend the Andes 3,000 feet, and the viper is found in the Alps 5,000 feet above the sea.

The greatest height attained by any large animal seems to be that attained by the great condor vulture, which soars more than 22,000 feet above the sea level. As to the inhabitants of different depths of the ocean we yet know little, as only an infinitesimal portion of its floor, at a greater depth than that of 2,500 fathoms, has been explored. The great ocean area is that of the South Pacific, of which all other oceans and seas may be regarded as diverticula or reaches, the most important being the great offshoot constituting the Atlantic Ocean.

Until a few years ago, the distribution of life beneath the sea's surface was supposed to fade away downward into lifeless, abyssal depths beneath it, answering to lifeless, iceclad peaks above it. It now appears, however, that there is no depth-limit to life, especially of animal life. No plants, indeed, are known to live at great depths, and one hundred fathoms seems practically to limit what is generally understood as vegetation. Animals, however, do live at the lowest depths, though probably in diminished numbers, both as regards species and individuals. At a depth of 2,000 fathoms the ocean fauna presents much richness and variety.

A Physician's Mistake.

[London Telegraph.]

Dr. Clemenceau, the eminent Parisian physician, is also a member of the French Legislature. He is a brisk and busy man, keenly cognizant of the fact that "time is money," and, the other day, while he was in attendance at his Montmartre consulting-room, two men simultaneously solicited an interview with him for the purpose of taking his advice. One of them, admitted to his presence, asked, "What was the matter with him?" complained of a pain in his chest; whereupon he was ordered to take off his shirt, and Dr. Clemenceau subjected him to a careful examination.

Before the Doctor, however, sat down to write his prescription, he rang the bell and ordered the servant to show the other patient into the consulting-room. As the latter entered the doorway, Dr. Clemenceau, without looking up from the desk at which he was writing, said to him, "Just undress yourself, too, if you will be so good. We shall save time by your doing so." Without a moment's hesitation, the second visitor proceeded to take off his clothes, and by the time the Doctor had finished writing his receipt, taken his fee, and dismissed the preceding patient, was stripped to the waist ready for inspection. Turning toward him, the Doctor observed, "You are also suffering from pain in the chest, are you not?" "Well, no, Doctor," the man replied, "I have called upon you to beg that you will recommend me to the Government for a place in the Post Office."

Robert, who fears he is rejected—But you know, Rebecca, we are commanded to love everybody. Rebecca—Yes, and so I do love everybody. Robert (Pinaforeally)—What everybody? Rebecca (shyly)—Well, you know, present company is always excepted.

Truth and Honor.

Query: What is the best family medicine in the world to regulate the bowels, purify the blood, remove costiveness and biliousness, aid digestion and tone up the whole system? Truth and honor compels us to answer, Hop Bitters, being pure, perfect and harmless.—[Ed. See another column.]

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