

Now the Nightingale, though certainly a plainly-feathered bird, is not to be compared in the way of plumage with either a peacock or an angel, except by the extravagant strains of poetic intoxication.

It is about the size of a canary. The head and back is of a pale fulvous colour, with a sprinkling of green; its tail is of a dull red—hence the Italian *rosignuolo* and French *rossignol*. The belly is whitish-grey, and the breast, throat, and under the wings are darker with a tint of green. Simonides uses the epithet "green-necked" nightingales. Hesiod has it "neck-streaked nightingale." Looked at from an ordinary distance the bird appears of a ruddy brown appearance, by no means attractive.

Opposed to Dunbar's extravagance is Fenton's error in the other direction:—

But the poor nightingale in mean attire
Is made chief warbler of the woodland choir.

The plumage of the nightingale, though not conspicuous, is by no means mean. Probably Dunbar had never seen the bird except in print, and so has given us one of those second-hand descriptions which are the second-hand clothes of literature, and seldom fit.

This was probably a poetic license taken by the ebullient thought of the moment for verbal adornment, and is pardonable; but other poets have attributed such abnormal conduct and qualities to the bird as would astonish and shock it, could it but understand.

From Penserhurst to Palestine most of the poets have made the *nocte canens gallus* of the female sex, a tribute perhaps to the fair ladies for whose delight the bird was so often invoked; but, of course, utterly untrue. The male bird is invariably the singer, and the reasons for his song are simple and common to all songsters: the calling and wooing of his love; the invitation to marriage; the inciting to nest-building, and the necessary encouragement of his mate during the patient period of incubation. Under all these varying circumstances my lady Nightingale, whom Hood has called "the sweet and plaintive Sappho of the dell," is discreetly and properly silent—or, at the most, merely utters a few unmusical notes now and again, probably in reproof of her better half's apparent laziness, after the manner of her sex. Nevertheless, most of the poets make the female to sing; the Earl of Surrey, leading the way among English sonneteers in "A Description of Spring," as follows:—

The nightingale with feathers new she sings.

Strangely enough, Mallet, a forgotten poet, has made the nightingale of the male sex, but by a curious transposition of the error calls the cock-bird *Philomela*.

The bird sings at its best for some weeks after returning to England from his winter residence in Asia Minor or Africa. He comes back (in fine feather, as Surrey notices) a few days—not some weeks, as the sonneteer avers—in advance of his mate, a scientific fact common to most migratory birds. This incident in the nightingale's career has been turned to poetic advantage by Charles Tennyson Turner in the following sonnet:—

NIGHTINGALES.

What spirit moves the quiring nightingales
To utter forth their notes so soft and clear?
What purport hath their music, which prevails
At midnight, thrilling all the darken'd air?
'Tis said, some weeks before the hen-birds land
Upon our shores, their tuneful mates appear;
And, in that space, by hope and sorrow spann'd,
Their sweetest melodies 'tis ours to hear;
And is it so? for solace till they meet,
Does this most perfect chorus charm the grove?
Do these wild voices, round me and above,
Of amorous forethought and condolence treat?
Well may such lays be sweetest of the sweet,
That aim to fill the intervals of love!

Cowper wrote some verses, "To the Nightingale which the author heard sing on New Year's Day, 1792." This was a most unusual season for such a performance, and, as we gather from the poem that the bird was not a captive, the winter must have been a very open one; but such a statement of fact from so respectable an authority cannot be disputed.

In England the bird begins to sing about the middle of April and stops about the middle of June, facts which are beautifully recorded by Shakespeare in his 102nd sonnet:—

As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
And stops her pipe in growth of later days.

Philomel also stops her pipe for reasons quite unknown during the period of song, and it is the ill-luck of many—even when the locality of the bird is exactly known—to be disappointed, night after night, of the expected song. Charles Tennyson Turner appears to have gone on such a fruitless errand on the night of some 31st May, but he turned his "frustrate hope" into a sonnet, entitled

NO NIGHTINGALES, OR COMPENSATION.

Long time I waited for the nightingale,
Befool'd by that dumb coppice; till the dove
And finch descried me watching in the grove,
Poor client of the darkness, worn and pale;
But oh! how often is our frustrate hope
Exchanged by Heaven for unexpected mirth!
'Tis said, baulk'd and sleepless, yet I could not mope
'Mid the full matins of the awaken'd earth;
Bold chancicleer, alighting from his perch,
"The night birds play thee false," he said—and crow'd;
"Welcome to truth and day?" The lark uprode
And caroll'd. Thus, amid my weary search
For song in bowers of silence, June was born,
And tuneless night exchanged for choral morn.

Another error is made for poetical effect by suggesting a sadness about the Nightingale's Song. Drummond has, the following couplet in a sonnet:—

The Bird, as if my questions did her move,
With trembling wings sobb'd forth, I love! I love!

The impression produced is untrue. His old compatriot, King James the First, in his poetical "Description of His Prison Garden," had long before sung of

The little sweete nightingale.

And Remi Belleau, in the next century, has the following lovely little verse:—

Le gentil rossignolet,
Doucelet,
Découpe, dessous l'ombrage,
Mille fredons babillards,
Frétillards,
Au doux chant de son ramage.

Early in the fifth century B.C., Aristophanes produced his play, "The Birds," in which the nightingale is thus referred to:—

O Jupiter! the dear, delicious bird!
With what a lovely tone she swells and falls,
Sweetening the wilderness with delicate air.

The nightingale's song is not a melancholy one. He does not lean his breast against a thorn and then bitterly complain to his love of such suicidal conduct, as we are informed by many old poets, *vide* Sir Arthur Gorges in a sonnet published 1612:—

So sings sweet Philomell against the sharpe.

Such behaviour may be a poetical requirement, and by some it may even be considered as a poetical embellishment; but it would be as absurd as a nightingale singing to his mate of his having recently seen a human serenader, who deliberately impaled himself on a garden railing and warbled forth "Stars of the summer night," every evening after dark.

Coleridge sets this matter right in a "Conversational Poem" thus:—

A melancholy bird! Oh! idle thought!
In nature there is nothing melancholy.
But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain.
And many a poet echoes the conceit.

Charles Tennyson Turner has echoed it and given a very proper explanation.

TO THE NIGHTINGALE.

O honey-throated warbler of the grove!
That in the glooming woodland art so proud
Of answering thy sweet mates in soft or loud,
Thou dost not own a note we do not love;
The moon is o'er thee, laying out the lawn
In mighty shadows—but the western skies
Are kept awake, to see the sun arise,
Though earth and heaven would fain put back the dawn.
While, wandering for the dreams such seasons give,
With lonely steps, and many a pause between,
The lover listens to thy songs unseen;
And if, at times, the pure notes seem to grieve,
Why lo! he weeps himself, and must believe
That sorrow is a part of what they mean.

The nightingale, it may be remarked, has only one mate, and he does not answer her, but keeps up an almost incessant song. Virgil has "*Qualis populea mærens Philomela sub umbra*," etc.; but as John Burroughs remarks: "To the melancholy poet she is melancholy, and to the cheerful she is cheerful. Shakespeare in one of his sonnets speaks of her song as mournful, while Martial calls her the 'most garrulous' of birds." Old Jean Passerat says:—

Entends les oiseaux jargonner
De leur ramage.
Mais écoute comme sur tous
Le rossignol est le plus doux.

Some poets have made the bird sing every night; but there is no perpetual motion in the nightingale's throat. There are times when he is not melodiously inclined. He would not feel musical if he did not feel well, or whilst he was moulting, and birds, like other bipeds, may sometimes have their blue fits or brown studies, when solfeggios are out of the question.

After the young are hatched his song becomes "like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh." If persons approach the nest he will pursue them along the hedge with notes suggestive of any bird but a nightingale. Yet if by ill chance the mossy nest and olive-tinted eggs are destroyed, he sings again as melodiously as before, inciting his mate to build the home anew and hatch another brood. The real and practical episodes in the life of the nightingale are all omitted in the poetical descriptions and as a matter of fact a manufactured caricature is put in his place, without regard to sex, place or feelings. Nightingales can be reared from the eggs by other birds and, if they survive the first period of moulting, can be kept in captivity, when in due time they will break into song. Their nests, however, are as a rule difficult to find, being hidden away in holly bushes and the thickets of woods. Charles Tennyson Turner, who had a special love for the bird, reared some nightingales in the open and was rewarded by their returning to the locality in after years. As the nightingale is very choice and exact in its locality such a fact was exceedingly gratifying. Recently a nightingale located near the entrance of a railway tunnel outside the town of Lincoln, and drew hundreds of people nightly to hear its song in the unwonted place. Tennyson Turner's sonnet reads thus:—

A COLONY OF NIGHTINGALES.

I placed the mute eggs of the Nightingale
In the warm nest, beneath a brooding thrush;
And waited long, to catch the earliest gush
Of the new wood-notes, in our northern vale;
And, as with eye and ear I push'd my search,
Their sudden music came as sweet to me,
As the first organ-tone to Holy Church,
Fresh from the Angel and St. Cecily;
And, year by year, the warblers still return
From the far south, and bring us back their song,

Chanting their joy our summer groves among,
A tune the merle and goldfinch cannot learn;
While the poor thrush, that hatch'd them, listens near,
Nor knows the rival choir she settled here!

This sonnet is in the author's best manner and exhibits the pensive sweetness and sympathetic character of his nature.

Another fallacy is that the bird only sings at night. He is a day-singer as well, but is heard to less advantage among the chorus of the light than when he appears as the soloist of the evening; then his solitary song, though sweet, produces to many a melancholy impression. Poets have mixed up the natural and the classical nightingale until they have evolved a most unnatural and unclassical hybrid of poetically pretty, but scientifically absurd, proportions. The story of King Pandion's daughters may be briefly told in explanation. Tereus, King of Thracian Daulis, loved Philomela; but in return for bellicose assistance rendered was rewarded with her sister Procne in marriage. Determined to obtain his first and only love, Tereus pretended Procne was dead and married Philomela. When the latter discovered the bigamous fraud Tereus cut her tongue out to prevent the truth becoming known; but woman's wit prevailed and Philomel sent a robe to her sister whereon the sad story was told. The furious sisters killed Itys, the son of Procne and Tereus, and served him up at his father's table. Tereus ate his heir, but the gods punished the revolting crime. The usual transformation scene occurred—Tereus became an owl, Itys a pheasant, Pandion an osprey, Procne a swallow, and Philomela a nightingale.

Such is the myth that has interwoven itself with the real nature and habits of the nightingale until, after centuries of repeated error and added imagination, the bird has become a strange fowl, indeed. When the poet makes the hen-bird sing, despite Nature's ordering, it is Philomela in metamorphosis. When they turn the really sweet and glad song into a sad complaint, it is a reminiscence of King Pandion's daughter's trouble. In "As it fell upon a Day," Shakespeare even hints the name of the false Tereus:—

Fie, fie, fie; now would she cry;
"Tereu, tereu!" by and by.

Granting, then, that the poets have the right to reconstruct the nightingale for their special purposes, and allowing them all the latitude they require, let us glance at a few of the sonnets addressed to the bird that has delighted the sons of song from Provence to Persia. The Scottish Petrarch leads the way in his quaint and quiet philosophical style.

TO A NIGHTINGALE.

Sweet bird, that sing'st away the early hours,
Of winters past or coming, void of care,
Well pleased with delights which present are,
Fair seasons, budding sprays, sweet-smelling flowers;
To rocks, to springs, to rills, from leafy bowers
Thou thy Creator's goodness dost declare,
And what dear gifts on thee He did not spare,
A stain to human sense in sin that lowers,
What soul can be so sick which by thy songs,
Attired in sweetness, sweetly is not driven
Quite to forget Earth's turmoils, spites and wrongs,
And lift a reverend eye and thought to heaven!
Sweet artless songster, thou my mind dost raise
To airs of spheres, yes, and to angels' lays.

This is one of Drummond's best sonnets, and it has received much praise from most critics. Nathan Drake calls it "a strain of hallowed gratitude which seems worthy of ascending to the throne of heaven."

There is certainly no melancholy note recorded, and it is probable that Drummond wrote it on or after hearing the bird sing, in spite of the fact that it does not visit Scotland. He may have listened to it in England, or perhaps in France, where he resided on more than one occasion, and in which country it has been a common object of poetic address, ever since the Troubadours sang of *le rossignolet salvatge*. There is a passage in Walton's "Compleat Angler" (1653) that has been paralleled with this sonnet, viz.: "But the Nightingale (another of my Airy Creatures) breathes such sweet loud musick out of her little instrumental throat, that it might make mankind to think Miracles are not ceased. He that at midnight (when the very labourer sleeps securely) should hear (as I have very often) the clear airs, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the redoubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth, and say: Lord, what Musick hast Thou provided for the Saints in Heaven, when Thou affordest bad men such musick on Earth?"

Old Isaac has committed the error of attributing the song to the female bird; but he writes truly of its wonderful sweetness.

David Main says: "This sonnet is partly an echo of Petrarca's 317th 'Vago augeletto,' etc., lines 10-14; but I fail to find it." The trend of thought is entirely different. Petrarch complains sadly; Drummond hopes cheerfully. It requires more than mere critical skill to determine the influence of one poem on another; the echo is more often betrayed by the tone and sentiment than by the mere verbal similarity, which may often accidentally occur in addressing the same object.

SAREPTA.

THE present difficulty, amounting often to impossibility, in the way of the peasants in Russia attending mass has been overcome in those sparsely inhabited tracts of country which are crossed by a railway by the novelty of introducing a travelling church capable of seating seventy persons and performing parochial duties at several stations during the day.