

THE BIRDS AND THE BEGGAR OF BAGDAT.

BY MISS JEWSBURY.

“WHAT a miserable world this is!” exclaimed Karoun the beggar, as he sat one day at the gates of the city of Bagdat; “were I to make it over again, I could exceedingly mend it! My world should contain no kings, and certainly no cadis—every one should do that which was right in his own eyes—it should be possible to get money without working for it—and knowledge without learning. Allah! what a miserable world is this. Of what use are the tribes of children, for ever interrupting one with their noisy play?—Without doubt, we should be well rid of some thousands;—and their mothers,—why are women such tender, delicate creatures? In my world they should be as strong as horses, and dig, and plant, and go to

battle, like their husbands. Then, with regard to gold, and silver, and precious stones, there should either be plenty for every one, or else none at all,—the same of palaces—the same of fine horses and rich clothes. As to diseases and misfortunes,—I would abolish them altogether, just as I would do away with poisons, precipices, storms, earthquakes, and whatever else tends to shorten life. Oh, what a beautiful world I could make of this! However, I feel inclined for a nap, at present, so I will remove to yonder grove for the benefit of the shade.”

The self-complacent beggar accordingly stretched himself beneath a large plane tree, and presently fell into a sound slumber; in which slumber he was visited with the following dream. —He fancied himself exactly where he was, lying under a plane tree, but he also fancied he heard a most extraordinary noise proceed from the branches. He further fancied that, on lifting up his eyes to discover the cause, he found the plane tree filled with birds of all nations, and occupied, according to their ability, in screaming, singing, whistling, and chattering. They were more vociferous than all the beggars of Bagdat, and grievously annoyed our friend Karoun. By and by the plane tree became

quiet, the birds ranged themselves on the boughs, in companies according to their kind,—and the beggar discovered that it was a “Parliament of Birds,” met to deliberate on the state of the feathered world. The golden eagle sat aloft in silent majesty; and a venerable horned owl opened the business of the meeting, by entreating the members to conduct the debate with decorum, and bear in mind that wisdom was never confined to the birds of one generation. He was followed by a superb red-and-green parrot, who scratched his head, and spoke as follows.

“I conceive that, for many ages, birds have been grossly ill used by nature; and I hail the meeting of the present assembly, as a proof that the rights and privileges of all who have claws and beaks are about to be better understood. I do not speak for myself. My fate makes me the associate of man, and the favourite of ladies; I am fed with dainties, and observe all that passes in dining and drawing rooms—for myself, I have little reason to complain—I speak as a patriot;—why should not all birds have the privileges of parrots? Is it not gross partiality, that we alone should have gilt cages?”

The speaker ceased amidst tremendous applause. A crow spoke next.

“I agree with the parrot,” said he, “in blaming nature; but I disagree with him, as to his mode of charging her with injustice. The evil lies deeper. There ought to be *no* gilt cages; *no* fine plumage; *no* sweet voices amongst us. Why is one kind of bird to be exalted over another? and yet this will ever be the case whilst these vain and useless distinctions remain in force.

“Why am I to serve the farmer, by clearing his fields of grubs and worms, and be considered a lowlived bird because I am only useful; whilst the nightingale is to be followed by admiration, because she—sings! Why does not man write poetry about me? What is the nightingale but a bird like myself? is not she”—

Here the crow was called to order, and a very beautiful dove spoke next.

“I do not complain,” said she, “of what the preceding orators have complained; my complaint is, that distinction does not make amends for conscious weakness. What signify my delicate plumage and tender note, while I want the eagle’s wing, and the hawk’s eye?”

Here the owl attempted to speak next, but was prevented by a magpie.

“My case,” said that chatterer, “is harder still;

my plumage is beautiful, but no one will own it;— I talk, but no one will listen to me;—I am a persecuted bird—an envied genius.”

Here the magpie was interrupted by a sparrow.

“Why am I to be shot for a dumpling, any more than the red-breast?”

“And why,” said the lark, “am I to be roasted, any more than the nightingale?”

“Why are we to be preyed upon by kites and hawks?” said all the little birds in chorus.

“Let us rebel,” said the tomtits.

“Let us be kites and hawks ourselves,” said the jenny-wrens.”

“Let us leave man to pick up his own caterpillars,” said the sparrows; “the world will come to an end without us!”

“It will! It will!” screamed all the birds that were precisely of the least consequence.

At this point, at once of the dream and the debate, Karoun fancied that he was called upon for his opinion, and that he thus addressed the congress of birds:—

“With the exception of the eagle and the owl, who, to do them justice, are sensible, well-behaved bipeds, you are a set of foolish, insolent, half-witted creatures, not worthy of wearing feathers. Listen

now to reason; and since birds cannot blush, hide your heads under your wings for shame.

“In the first place, Mr. Parrot, if every bird is to live in a gilt cage, and hang up in a drawing-room, pray where is man to live himself?

“In the second place, I ask Mr. Crow, whether he clears the farmers’ fields of worms from love to the farmer, or from desire of a good meal?

“Thirdly, if any of you, after a reasonable enjoyment of life, object to being killed to feed man, why, I ask, may not the grubs and flies also object to being killed, in order to feed you?

“Fourthly, if you were all of one kind— all eagles or all kites—would there not be ten times more fighting amongst you than there is? and what, I ask, must you all live upon?

“Fifthly, if you object to dying altogether, and yet continue to treble your numbers every year, how, I ask, is the world to hold you all? As for you,” continued the beggar, turning in great wrath towards the sparrows, the chaffinches, the larks, the wrens, and all who resembled them, “who is it that steals man’s corn—eats man’s cherries—pecks man’s peas? Little, mischievous, prating varlets as you are, your lives are forfeited fifty times before they are taken!

“Lastly, I entreat you all, from the eagle down to the tomtit, to look away from your own individual interests, to the interests of the world, of which you form but a small portion. I do assure you, my friends, it is infinitely better, *on the whole*, that you should differ from each other, just as you do;—that some should be strong, some weak, some beautiful, some ugly; some wear fine coats, and some plain ones. And now begone, every one of you.—Disperse, I say!—and instead of wishing to amend nature, try to mend your own manners.”

Straightway there was a great whirring of wings in the air, occasioned by the breaking up of the bird parliament; and in a few minutes all was silent. It was now Karoun's turn to be reproved.

“Presumptuous mortal!” said an awful voice. Karoun started—and behold, he saw in his dream, a majestic form by his side, clothed with wings and shining garments.—“Presumptuous mortal!” continued the Genius, “thou hast had no pity on the folly of the birds, and yet thine own is far greater. Thou mend the world! Thy mending would be its destruction! Were there no disease and no misfortune, how could man exercise the virtues which fit him to enjoy Paradise? As to death, is it other than a blessing to the righteous? And if thou art wicked,

is it not thine own fault? Next, if all possessed riches, who must work? And if no one had riches, who must pay for that work? Also, if every one were wise, who must learn? And if every one were ignorant, who must teach? Again, if all had leisure, and there were no law or cad, thou thinkest the world would be happier;—no such thing! where there are two battles there would be twenty; where there are five robberies there would be fifty; and for one lazy, discontented vagabond like thyself, there would be a thousand! Get up, Karoun, and go about thy business; and instead of wishing to mend the world, try to mend thine own manners.”

Thus saying, the Genius vanished, and Karoun immediately awoke. After musing awhile on his strange dream, he returned to the city of Bagdat much wiser than he had left it. It is but fair to say, that he immediately gave up his profession as a beggar, and hiring himself to a fisherman, became a much more respectable and contented personage than he had ever been before.