

A PEEP AT THE BIRD-SHOPS.



INTERIOR OF A NEW YORK BIRD-SHOP.

EVEN the brick and brown-stone wilderness of New York city affords the alert disciple of Audubon refreshing glimpses of the feathered race. Not infrequently some broad-winged, roc-like bird wheels its slow and ponderous flight above the roofs of Manhattan Island, inciting observant street ur-

chins to brisk speculation as to its probable identity with the bald-headed emblem of freedom. Every day the Quaker-feathered sparrows, cheery and familiar, flit singly or in social beves through the squares and less crowded streets, uttering, with timid, broken chirp, their small petition for the luxurious

crumbs which bright-aproned housemaids considerably scatter. Twittering canaries, in cages gay with paint or gilding, flutter in the windows, or hang perilously, like Macbeth's banners, "on the outward walls," in every block from the lace-curtained mansions of Murray Hill to the dingy barracks of the Five Points. Sturdy parrots, here and there, amuse themselves and the passing public by posturing with all the gravity of tipsy harlequins, and making eldritch remarks at intervals concerning crackers and other topics of interest. Clear-eyed doves, with pearly plumage, whir gently down from some lofty sheltering roof, glean fearlessly along the unswept pavement, and then, with a soft flutter of wings, flee away again unharmed. Luckless fowls, destined to the spit, support a cheerless existence in rough wooden coops, piled up in markets or in front of butcher-shops, while in the very heart of the city the wakeful listener, in the small silent hours, rarely fails to catch the "shrill clarion" that echoes from the valorous throat of some chanticleer, held captive within the brick and mortar limits. Mysterious and predatory owls lurked secretly about the smaller parks a year or two ago, and grew aldermanic upon slaughtered sparrows, until the pistols of avenging policemen cut short the sanguinary careers of a dozen of Minerva's prowlers. Even after death the feathered tribes subserve metropolitan purposes beyond their inevitable gastronomic fate, as when an ample stuffed goose, half embedded in the plucked plumage of its fellows, appears in a show-case at some warehouse door as a sign of unrivaled pillows within; or a dozen flame-winged humming-birds, posed under glass in a glittering group, attest the skill of some fine-fingered taxidermic artist.

These odds and ends of bird-life suffice to give the city a certain ornithologic standing, happily enhanced by a troop of scattered bird-shops, wherein, at least, all such sage mortals as, Hamlet-fashion, "know a hawk from a hand-saw," may find an entertaining field for curious inspection. A noteworthy shop* of this singular sort lurks in the Chatham street corner of Printing House Square, monopolizing half the ground floor of the middle house in a trio of small and ancient two-storied brick structures, huddled together under the same sloping, shingled, trap-doored roof. On one side mugs of lager, frothy and

brown, are vended almost without ceasing, and on the other a demure "policy shop" entices picayune gamblers to stake their hard earnings on lottery chances. Noisy street cars clatter harshly by in an endless chain, and newsboys in turbulent squads jostle each other on the neighboring sidewalk, along which busy wayfarers, with jaded faces, tramp in perpetual procession. Notwithstanding this prosy environment, our little bird-shop maintains, even in its sign-boards, a certain quaint distinction. Across the front the visitor reads, in ordinary black letters, the bird-fancier's name, and the mildly presumptuous legend, "Birds' Emporium," but at each end of this sign and of the smaller one above, inscribed "Importer of Birds," is perched a round, tenantless cage, with rusted wires and weather-beaten paint, while in the middle sits a mummy of a squirrel, with dilapidated fur, and a ridiculous remnant of a tail still pertly cocked over its forlorn back. The wreck of a parrot cage swings from the hooked end of a slender iron rod, side by side with a green wooden shield-shaped sign, profusely lettered with an inventory of the bird-fancier's wares. A like inscription also appears on the green post between the narrow adjacent doors that give entrance to the separate halves of the building.

Bird-fancying, pure and simple, does not lead to independent fortune with startling rapidity, and hence almost every bird dealer in the city seeks to enlarge his gains by adding to his feathered store numerous other salable bits of nature. Our "birds' emporium" proprietor is no exception to this general rule, as appears from the fine conchological array and the curious compound of aquarium, menagerie and aviary wherewith he baits his commercial hook for passing customers. The "pent-up Utica" of a single show window somewhat confines his powers, and reduces him to the economical expedient of displaying his shells in one of those upright glass cases which thrifty milliners employ for the sidewalk exhibition of marvelous bonnets. Around the top of this modest coffee-colored casket, behind the large panes that form three sides of its upper half, hang a dozen capacious scallop shells, each with its row of mysterious perforations, and all with the rich, glimmering tints of wine when "it giveth its color in the cup." On convenient ledges of tin, painted intensely blue and resembling half a pyramid cut into stairs, pearly "silver shells," tiger-spotted "Turk's caps," and "morexes" as jagged as elks' horns, are

* Since this sketch was written, the whirlpool of business has swept away the shop here described, and left no trace of it except this record.

neatly ranged in an iridescent group, with a round, rough, fragile "sea-egg" for a snow-white center-piece. The bottom of the case, about the lower ledge, is evenly strewn an inch deep with tiny specimens, some spiral and pointed, others oval and smooth, some brilliantly scarlet tipped with black, and others delicately brown and checkered as daintily as a dragon-fly's wing. The portrait of a Lilliputian Cinderella in a veil of gold lace also appears, ingeniously bordered with fine glossy cones, among half a dozen other shell-work pieces shaped like hearts or diamonds, while, inserted here and there, red roses, not of Nature's making, give a whimsical finish to the picture.

The strange shapes and exquisite colors of these spoils of the sea attract many passing glances, but they cannot compare in fascinating effect with the medley of life and motion revealed in the populous show window. A sharp November wind blows nippingly along the street, and a suspicion of snow is in the air, but for the last ten minutes a stray bit of a tenement-house lassie, in a thin and tattered dress and with a little scarlet shawl drawn tightly over her head, has been gazing in at the window intent and motionless, save for an occasional slight shifting of position and a perpetual caressing of the top of each little bare foot in turn with the sole of the other.

A searching glance behind the four large panes, set in a stout unpainted sash, shows that the room usually devoted to a broad sill is mainly usurped by a rude wooden aquarium, a yard square and twenty inches deep. A narrow space along the front of the sill is garrisoned with a troop of rusty-gray, rose-lipped conch-shells, while two wire baskets, conchologically filled with rainbow specimens, are pendent in the background. The broad front edge of the tank does duty as a shelf, whereon appears a battalion of gold-fish globes of glass, three of them goblet-shaped and taller than the two small, round intermediate ones, and all of them freshly plenished with sparkling Croton and with handfuls of green and feathery water-plants. In the first of the taller globes half a dozen little fishes with gossamer fins and tails are swimming restlessly around, thrusting their cold noses against the incomprehensible glass, while a bigger, flame-colored brother, with a black face and a jet stripe along his back, poises himself among the fern-like leafage and tranquilly disregards the impertinent nibblings of two or three scaly and comical little fellows, with brown backs, flat white bellies, beady black eyes, and half a dozen slender

ebony feelers, waving about their mouths like so many fierce mustachios.

In the second large globe a score of little olive-green eels, beautifully lithe, glide to and fro with sinuous smoothness, or, startled by a passing shadow, slip out of sight with proverbial celerity among the feathery foliage. In the third a community of small brown snails is securely housed, their fine indifference to alarming circumstances, and their philosophic deliberation of movement, affording an edifying contrast to the superfluous squirminess of their finny brethren. In one of the smaller globes are six or eight docile minnows, while the other is full of a wrestling crowd of youthful tortoises, an inch or two in length, who look demurely vicious as they claw their way persistently along the smooth glass, displaying the vivid scarlet and yellow stripes on the under sides of their shells, slowly wagging their acute little tails, and thrusting forth their long necks at intervals with an air of preternatural penetration.

On the same rude shelf with the globes stands a square cage of rusty wires and green woodwork, filled with a dozen Java sparrows—facetious creatures of canary size, with downy gray backs, slender black tails, little pink claws, chubby rose-red bills, and heads dark as a raven's wing and with a triangular, snow-white patch at each side, precisely like the long ends of a Shakespeare collar waggishly turned up over a wig of unnatural blackness. They are sitting very tranquilly just now on their three perches or on the edges of their two round white cups of water and of golden seed. Two affectionate couples are billing sleepily, and three or four bachelors are taking naps on one leg with their eyes shut. Order reigns; but suddenly yonder roguish fellow, without a moment's warning, begins to flap his wings like a crazy windmill. Another follows suit, and another, and in five seconds the whole cage is in a terrible flutter. Then a pause, and every bird is motionless. Presently the original windmill performer leans slyly down from his perch, wickedly pecks a harmless sparrow standing unsuspectingly on the floor below, and then hops sideways to and fro in frantic delight. Another scurry, and the next minute two of the designing little wretches are sound asleep, while the rest are meditatively quiet, and one is solemnly engaged in staring at the snails in the adjacent globe with an air of the deepest solicitude.

In a square, dingy red cage, placed atop of the sparrows' domicile, two "shell parro-

quets," somewhat bigger than canaries, are puffing and chuckling, and winking and wriggling in the most ludicrous and unnecessary manner. Their long azure tails and green breasts and mottled backs, and yellow faces absurdly spotted with blue, make a show more ludicrous than the motley wear of the circus jester, whose pranks are quite equalled by these feathered jokers, whereof the little airs and comic graces soon lead to a matrimonial quarrel in which Polly drives her mate to the wall and remains in exclusive and victorious possession of the perch. Upon the parroquet cage are certain cans and bottles of delicate provision for the fastidious palates of melodious mocking-birds; while at the right, on the sparrow-house, two small square cages, one above the other, contain a twittering green linnet and a restless russet-colored "mule-bird," or cross between a canary and a finch.

On an upper shelf three little wooden cages are piled in the middle, each with a small canary tenant, yellow as a dandelion, and sweet-voiced as a lute. At the opposite ends are two large squirrel-houses, in one of which a gray and foxy fellow contemplates passing events with a sedate but piercing look, while his small brown compatriot of the forest makes the wheel fly in the other with more speed than dignity. Above, at the top of the window, hang three new parlor cages, patiently awaiting their destined occupants, and meantime crowning the scene with their gay tints and ornamental tracteries.

The treasures of a bird-shop are naturally grouped in the front windows, but still it is quite worth our while to turn the brazen handle, push, enter, and survey the crowded interior. The barbaric screeches of a dozen parrots vie with the melodious twitterings of a hundred warblers in a mixed and almost deafening chorus of welcome, while a pet canary flits fearlessly forward and eyes us inquiringly from the top of a squirrel-house. The room is long and very narrow, with a sawdust-sprinkled floor, and a ceiling completely hidden by hanging rows of gayly-painted cages. At the rear a narrow stairway leads to some mysterious upper region, and a single window affords a glimpse of a large black dog, vigilantly fierce, chained in the yard. Two well-worn wooden chairs, and a round high stool, silently invite us to a seat or a perch, whichever we may prefer. The bird-fancier, a good-natured little German, accustomed to visits of curiosity as well as of business, tranquilly awaits our pleasure, interchanging meanwhile an occasional word

with his two sons, lads of ten or twelve in red-edged woolen jackets and tufted caps, and with such brown cheeks, bright eyes, and long lashes as inspire the suspicion that their father must have wandered beyond the Alps in quest of nightingales, and found his wife in some Italian orange-grove.

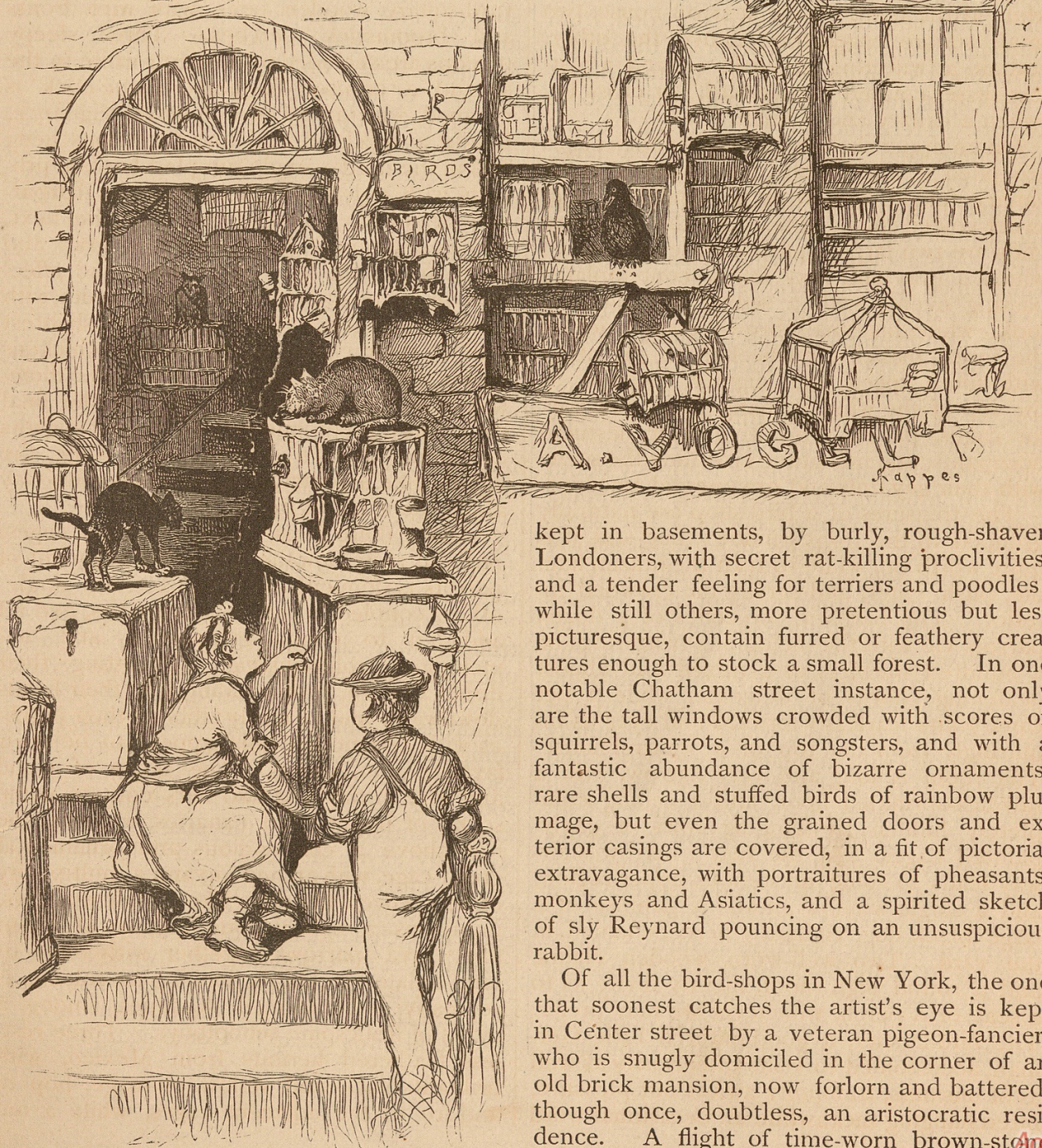
The left side of the shop is completely walled with square and dingy cages of rusty wire and red or green wood-work, while on the other side a hundred and fifty canaries are piled up to the ceiling on a long shelf, each in a trim little wooden cage, such as a Yankee whittler would soon improvise with a jack-knife and a new shingle or two. Along the floor at the left is a row of six yard-square wooden pens, with wire fronts and broomstick perches. Three sleepy pigeons are secluded in the first; while in the second a crimson-feathered game-cock is perched, with an air of combative vigilance, beside a speckled and unostentatious hen; and in the third a single rumped bantam protests with doleful cluck against the barbarism of solitary confinement. In the next, two round-nosed Java monkeys, gray and hairy, lie on the floor in a drowsy and affectionate heap, showing their white teeth with a menacing grin in response to the slightest pull at their chain. Two crested chickens in the fifth are vainly trying to hide themselves behind each other; and in the final cage seven green and yellow-visaged parrots are perched in a solemn row; while the eighth, like a sentry, grimly clutches his way along the wires in front.

Above these pens, in a dozen stout cages, red and rusty, another gorgeous regiment of parrots is domiciled, some peacefully single, others coupled in quarrelsome pairs, and all addicted to comic gymnastics and unmelodious soliloquizing. Upsetting their dishes of corn, promenading with their heads downward, and viciously nibbling their perches with destructive bills, appear to be their favorite amusements. The boxes of wood and wire in the next two tiers contain some scores of bright-eyed canaries, while in the row above a commodious and ornamental green cage, with arched top and a multiplicity of wire-woven tracteries like Gothic windows, imprisons a mischievous colony of about forty Java sparrows, together with three or four sedate blackbirds, looking as solemn as so many old-fashioned dominies among a troop of frolicsome schoolboys. Three restless feathered hermits from Mexico, with brilliant black and yellow plumage, hop to and fro in the adjacent cages, while a nu-

merous and undemonstrative company of bobolinks, thrushes and mocking-birds occupy the remaining space, save in one corner where two modest German nightingales tantalize us by hiding their musical talents under the napkin of persistent silence. The thrifty shopman, observing our scrutiny of these renowned songsters, volunteers in fragmentary English to sell us one for the mere trifle of fifteen dollars. We deem it our duty, however, firmly to resist this temptation, and with a final glance at the shifting labyrinth of fins and tails in the wooden show-window aquarium, we turn our backs upon the tropical profusion of piercing melody and gorgeous

plumage, and pass regretfully forth into the snow-storm that has suddenly begun to drive with polar fierceness along the wintry street.

Other shops, a grade lower than this, are



FRONT OF A BIRD-SHOP.

kept in basements, by burly, rough-shaven Londoners, with secret rat-killing proclivities, and a tender feeling for terriers and poodles; while still others, more pretentious but less picturesque, contain furred or feathery creatures enough to stock a small forest. In one notable Chatham street instance, not only are the tall windows crowded with scores of squirrels, parrots, and songsters, and with a fantastic abundance of bizarre ornaments, rare shells and stuffed birds of rainbow plumage, but even the grained doors and exterior casings are covered, in a fit of pictorial extravagance, with portraiture of pheasants, monkeys and Asiatics, and a spirited sketch of sly Reynard pouncing on an unsuspecting rabbit.

Of all the bird-shops in New York, the one that soonest catches the artist's eye is kept in Center street by a veteran pigeon-fancier, who is snugly domiciled in the corner of an old brick mansion, now forlorn and battered, though once, doubtless, an aristocratic residence. A flight of time-worn brown-stone steps, with a slender iron rail at each side

leads up to a doorway which is barricaded with piles of square cages, red, green and blue, till only the narrowest defile is left for entrance. A bevy of snow-white chickens, a family of restless bantams, and two or three martial game-cocks, share these cages with some dozens of pigeons, pure white or diversely marked with delicate iridescent shades of gray or brown. Some of them are preening their glossy plumage, while others are puffing out their fluffy bosoms and sleepily winking their lustrous eyes, and others, still, with tails spread out, peacock fashion, are chasing their mates furiously around the cage, and pecking them with a comic appearance of the most vindictive rage. Inside, the walls of the small triangular room are crowded, from the sandy, corn-sprinkled floor to the dingy, cobwebbed ceiling, with tiers of the rudest green cages, full of cooing and quarrelsome tenants. Here and there a stray thrush sits speechless and solitary, while in a large double cage a dozen of the yellowest canaries are merrily hopping and twittering and feasting at intervals upon a hemisphere of savory apple. In a distant corner, a small, green, white-billed parrot parades soberly to and fro on a wire-roofed cage, while his red-billed brother, imprisoned for misconduct, crouches on a black perch, and moodily munches a cracker, promoting digestion by an occasional screech. In two or three cages sleepy rabbits are penned up, while others of the long-eared tribe are skipping fearlessly about the floor, nibbling cabbage-leaves, or napping peacefully in convenient nooks. The shaggiest of black and white dogs walks slowly around with the air of one in authority, or stretches himself on the floor, and crosses his forelegs in an attitude of the most dignified repose. Another smaller dog, with thin legs and black, silky hair, seems chiefly intent on keeping out of harm's way and yet seeing all that goes on, while a third sturdy white fellow with a black nose barks and whimpers at the end of a slender cord which restrains his liberty in a way that he evidently despises. A black and yellow cat stalks deliberately along the tops of the cages, dividing her parental solicitude between their feathered occupants and a solitary white-nosed kitten, which betrays a furtive disposition to arch its back at the smallest and most inoffensive of its canine companions. So well trained are these cats and dogs, that even the perching of a stray canary on their

backs does not incite them to hostile demonstrations.

The guardian of this happy family is an old white-haired man, in gray trowsers, linen coat, and the hugest of blue cotton neck-ties. His short and bristly beard surrounds a face full of wrinkles and good-nature, and of an obvious affection for his feathered charge, which further manifests itself in ceaseless attention to their slightest wants. His English is so remarkably unintelligible that we turn for a translation to his daughter, a black-eyed, round-faced, bare-armed little woman, with a small, square checked shawl across her shoulders, and a blue dress pinned up over a striped skirt. Red stockings, flowered slippers, and an ample chignon complete her attire. She pauses in her very leisurely sweeping, leans on the broom, and answers our look of inquiry by asking:

"How old do you think he is?"

"About sixty."

"No, he's seventy-five!—born in 1797," and her eyes sparkle as if she felt a justifiable pride in the paternal venerableness.

"He is not German, is he?"

"O, no, Holland. He did live in England, too, and traded in geese and turkeys—hundreds of 'em—seven or eight hundred at once." (Here a bit of Dutch colloquy between father and daughter.) "Seven or eight thousand, he says." (More colloquy.) "Twelve thousand geese once, one Michaelmas." Her eyes sparkle again at the remembrance of such former commercial glories, and then she adds regretfully, with a disdainful gesture,

"*This ain't no business to what he done then!*"

Nevertheless, "this business" is not so trifling, after all, for a trip up an old-fashioned winding stairway discloses two small, crimson-walled rooms above, full of several hundreds of fluttering pigeons, debarred by hempen nettings across the doorways from escaping out of what might once have been some fair lady's boudoir. The white-nosed kitten, curled up on the stairs, regards us solemnly as we descend, and a black-eared rabbit scuds out of the way with a cabbage-leaf in its mouth. The old man, with a pigeon in each hand, adds a nod and a smile to his daughter's "Good-day, sir," while the parrot in the far corner startles us, as we slip out between the barricades of cages, with the cry, "Good birds cheap! Come again!"