

VARIOUS

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SPRING

Gentle Spring! in sunshine clad,
Well dost thou thy power display!
For Winter maketh the light heart sad,
And thou, thou makest the sad heart gay.
He sees thee, and calls to his gloomy train,
The sleet, and the snow, and the wind, and the rain;
And they shrink away, and they flee in fear,
When thy merry step draws near.

Winter giveth the fields and the trees, so old,
Their beards of icicles and snow;
And the rain, it raineth so fast and cold,
We must cower over the embers low;
And, snugly housed from the wind and weather,
Mope like birds that are changing feather.
But the storm retires, and the sky grows clear,
When thy merry step draws near.

Winter maketh the sun in the gloomy sky
Wrap him around with a mantle of cloud;
But, Heaven be praised, thy step is nigh;
Thou tearest away the mournful shroud,
And the earth looks bright, and Winter surly,
Who has toiled for naught both late and early,
Is banished afar by the new born year,
When thy merry step draws near.

– *From the French of Charles D’Orleans,*
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

ABOUT PARROTS

Naturalists place the parrot group at the head of bird creation. This is done, not, of course, because parrots can talk, but because they display, on the whole, a greater amount of intelligence, of cleverness and adaptability to circumstances than other birds, including even their cunning rivals, the ravens and the jackdaws.

It may well be asked what are the causes of the exceptionally high intelligence in parrots. The answer which I suggest is that an intimate connection exists throughout the animal world between mental development and the power of grasping an object all round, so as to know exactly its shape and its tactile properties. The possession of an effective prehensile organ – a hand or its equivalent – seems to be the first great requisite for the evolution of a high order of intellect. Man and the monkeys, for example, have a pair of hands; and in their case one can see at a glance how dependent is their intelligence upon these grasping organs. All human arts base themselves ultimately upon the human hand; and our nearest relatives, the anthropoid apes, approach humanity to some extent by reason of their ever-active and busy little fingers. The elephant, again, has his flexible trunk, which, as we have all heard over and over again, is equally well adapted to pick up a pin or to break the great boughs of tropical forest trees. The squirrel, also, remarkable for his unusual intelligence when judged by a rodent standard, uses his little paws as hands by

which he can grasp a nut or fruit all round, and so gain in his small mind a clear conception of its true shape and properties. Throughout the animal kingdom generally, indeed, this chain of causation makes itself everywhere felt; no high intelligence without a highly-developed prehensile and grasping organ.

Perhaps the opossum is the best and most crucial instance that can be found of the intimate connection which exists between touch and intellect. The opossum is a marsupial; it belongs to the same group of lowly-organized, antiquated and pouch-bearing animals as the kangaroo, the wombat, and other Australian mammals. Everybody knows that the marsupials, as a class, are preternaturally dull – are perhaps the least intelligent of all existing quadrupeds. And this is reasonable when one considers the subject, for they represent a very early type, the first “rough sketch” of the mammalian idea, with brains unsharpened as yet by contact with the world in the fierce competition of the struggle for life as it displays itself on the crowded stage of the great continents. They stand, in fact, to the lions and tigers, the elephants and horses, the monkeys and squirrels of America and Europe, as the native Australian stands to the American or the Englishman. They are the last relic of the original secondary quadrupeds, stranded for centuries on a Southern island, and still keeping up among Australian forests the antique type of life that went out of fashion elsewhere a vast number of years ago. Hence they have brains of poor quality, a fact amply demonstrated by the kangaroo when one watches his behavior in the zoological

gardens.

Every high-school graduate is well aware that the opossum, though it is a marsupial, differs in psychological development from the kangaroo and the wombat. The opossum is active and highly intelligent. He knows his way about the world in which he lives. "A 'possum up a gum tree" is accepted by observant minds as the very incarnation of animal cunning and duplicity. In negro folklore the resourceful 'possum takes the place of the fox in European stories; he is the Macchiavelli of wild beasts; there is no ruse on earth of which he is not amply capable; and no wily manoeuvre exists which he cannot carry to an end successfully. All guile and intrigue, the possum can circumvent even Uncle Remus himself by his crafty diplomacy. And what is it that makes all the difference between this 'cute marsupial and his backward Australian cousins? It is the possession of a prehensile hand and tail. Therein lies the whole secret. The opossum's hind foot has a genuine apposable thumb; and he also uses his tail in climbing as a supernumerary hand, almost as much as do any of the monkeys. He often suspends himself by it, like an acrobat, swings his body to and fro to obtain speed, then lets go suddenly, and flies away to a distant branch, which he clutches by means of his hand-like hind foot. If the toes make a mistake, he can recover his position by the use of his prehensile tail. The result is that the opossum, being able to form for himself clear and accurate conceptions of the real shapes and relations of things by these two distinct grasping organs, has acquired an unusual amount of

general intelligence. And further, in the keen competition for life, he has been forced to develop an amount of cunning which leaves his Australian poor relations far behind in the Middle Ages of psychological evolution.

At the risk of appearing to forsake my ostensible subject altogether, I must pause for a moment to answer a very obvious objection to my argument. How about the dog and the horse? They have no prehensile organ, and yet they are admitted to be the most intelligent of all quadrupeds. The cleverness of the horse and the dog, however, is acquired, not original. It has arisen in the course of long and hereditary association with man, the cleverest and most serviceable individuals having been deliberately selected from generation to generation as dams and sires to breed from. We cannot fairly compare these artificial human products with wild races whose intelligence is entirely self-evolved. In addition, the horse has, to a slight extent, a prehensile organ in his mobile and sensitive lip, which he uses like an undeveloped or rudimentary proboscis with which he can feel things all over. We may conclude, I believe, that touch is "the mother-tongue of the senses;" and that in proportion as animals have or have not highly developed and serviceable tactile organs will they rank high or low in the intellectual hierarchy of nature. It may well be asked how all this concerns the family of parrots. In the first place, anybody who has ever kept a parrot or a macaw in slavery is well aware that in no other birds do the claws so closely resemble a human or simian hand, not

indeed in outer form or appearance, but in apposability of the thumbs and in perfection of grasping power. The toes upon each foot are arranged in opposite pairs – two turning in front and two backward, which gives all parrots their peculiar firmness in clinging on a perch or on the branch of a tree with one foot only, while they extend the other to grasp a fruit or to clutch at any object they desire to possess. This peculiarity, it must be admitted, is not confined to the parrots, for they share the division of the foot into two thumbs and two fingers with a large group of allied birds, called, in the exact language of technical ornithology, the Scansorial Picarians, and more generally known by their several names of cockatoos, toucans and wood-peckers. All the members of this great group, of which the parrots proper are only the most advanced and developed family, possess the same arrangement of the digits into front-toes and back-toes, and in none is the power of grasping an object all round so completely developed and so full of intellectual consequences.

All the Scansorial Picarians are essentially tree-haunters; and the tree-haunting and climbing habit seems specially favorable to the growth of intellect. Monkeys, squirrels, opossums, wild cats, are all of them climbers, and all of them, in the act of climbing, jumping, and balancing themselves on boughs, gain such an accurate idea of geometrical figures, distance, perspective and the true nature of space-relations, as could hardly be acquired in any other way. In a few words, they thoroughly understand the tactual realities that answer to and underlie each visible

appearance. This is, in my opinion, one of the substrata of all intelligence; and the monkeys, possessing it more profoundly than any other animals, except man, have accordingly reached a very high place in the competitive examination perpetually taking place under the name of Natural Selection.

So, too, among birds, the parrots and their allies climb trees and rocks with exceptional ease and agility. Even in their own department they are the great feathered acrobats. Anybody who watches a wood-pecker, for example, grasping the bark of a tree with its crooked and powerful toes, while it steadies itself behind by digging its stiff tail-feathers into the crannies of the outer rind, will readily understand how clear a notion the bird must gain into the practical action of the laws of gravity. But the true parrots go a step further in the same direction than the wood-peckers or the toucans; for in addition to prehensile feet, they have also a highly-developed prehensile bill, and within it a tongue which acts in reality as an organ of touch. They use their crooked beaks to help them in climbing from branch to branch; and being thus provided alike with wings, hands, fingers, bill and tongue, they are the most truly arboreal of all known animals, and present in the fullest and highest degree all the peculiar features of the tree-haunting existence.

Nor is this all. Alone among birds or mammals, the parrots have the curious peculiarity of being able to move the upper as well as the lower jaw. It is this strange mobility of both the mandibles together, combined with the crafty effect of

the sideways glance from those artful eyes, that gives the characteristic air of intelligence and wisdom to the parrot's face. We naturally expect so clever a bird to speak. And when it turns upon us suddenly with some well-known maxim, we are not astonished at its remarkable intelligence.

Parrots are true vegetarians; with a single degraded exception, to which I shall recur hereafter, they do not touch animal food. They live chiefly upon a diet of fruit and seeds, or upon the abundant nectar of rich tropical flowers. And it is mainly for the purpose of getting at their chosen food that they have developed the large and powerful bills which characterize the family. Most of us have probably noticed that many tropical fruit-eaters, like the hornbills and the toucans, are remarkable for the size and strength of their beaks; and the majority of thinking people are well acquainted with the fact that tropical fruits often have thick or hard or bitter rinds, which must be torn off before the monkeys or birds, for whose use they are intended, can get at them and eat them.

As monkeys use their fingers in place of knives and forks, so birds use their sharp and powerful bills. No better nut-crackers and fruit-parers could possibly be found. The parrot, in particular, has developed for the purpose his curved and inflated beak – a wonderful weapon, keen as a tailor's scissors, and moved by powerful muscles on both sides of the face which bring together the cutting edges with extraordinary energy. The way the bird holds a fruit gingerly in one claw, while he strips off the

rind dexterously with his under-hung lower mandible, and keeps a sharp look-out meanwhile for a possible intruder, suggests to the observing mind the whole living drama of his native forest. One sees in that vivid world the watchful monkey ever ready to swoop down upon the tempting tail-feathers of his hereditary foe, one sees the parrot ever prepared for his rapid attack, and eager to make him pay with five joints of his tail for his impertinent interference with an unoffending fellow-citizen of the arboreal community.

Of course there are parrots and parrots. The great black cockatoo, for example, the largest of the tribe, lives almost exclusively upon the central shoot of palm-trees; an expensive kind of food, for when once this so-called "cabbage" has been eaten the tree dies, so that each black cockatoo must have killed in his time whole groves of cabbage-palms. Other parrots live on fruits and seeds; and quite a number are adapted for flower-haunting and honey-sucking.

As a group, the parrots must be comparatively modern birds. Indeed, they could have no place in the world till the big tropical fruits and nuts were beginning to be developed. And it is now generally believed that fruits and nuts are for the most part of recent and special evolution. To put the facts briefly, the monkeys and parrots developed the fruits and nuts, while the fruits and nuts returned the compliment by developing conversely the monkeys and parrots. In other words, both types grew up side by side in mutual dependence, and evolved themselves *pari passu* for

one another's benefit. Without the fruits there could be no fruit-eaters; and without the fruit-eaters to disperse their seeds, there could not be any great number of fruits.

Most of the parrots very much resemble the monkeys and other tropical fruit-eaters in their habits and manners. They are gregarious, mischievous and noisy. They have no moral sense, and are fond of practical jokes. They move about in flocks, screeching aloud as they go, and alight together on some tree well covered with berries. No doubt they herd together for the sake of protection, and screech both to keep the flock in a body and to strike consternation into the breasts of their enemies. When danger threatens, the first bird that perceives it sounds a note of warning; and in a moment the whole troupe is on the wing at once, vociferous and eager, roaring forth a song in their own tongue, which may be interpreted to mean that they are ready to fight if it is necessary.

The common gray parrot, the best known in confinement of all his kind, and unrivalled as an orator for his graces of speech, is a native of West Africa. He feeds in a general way upon palm-nuts, bananas, mangoes, and guavas, but he is by no means averse, if opportunity offers, to the Indian corn of the industrious native. It is only in confinement that this bird's finer qualities come out, and that it develops into a speechmaker of distinguished attainments.

A peculiar and exceptional offshoot of the parrot group is the brush-tongued lory, several species of which are common

in Australia and India. These interesting birds are parrots which have a resemblance to humming birds. Flitting about from tree to tree with great rapidity, they thrust their long extensible tongues, penciled with honey-gathering hairs, into the tubes of many big tropical blossoms. The lorries, indeed, live entirely on nectar, and they are so common in the region they have made their own that the larger flowers there present the appearance of having been developed with a special view to their tastes and habits, as well as to the structure of their peculiar brush-like honey-collector. In most parrots the mouth is dry and the tongue horny; but in the lorries it is moist and much more like the same organ in the humming-birds and the sun-birds. The prevalence of very large and brilliantly-colored flowers in the Malayan region must be set down for the most part to the selective action of the color-loving, brush-tongued parrots.

The Australian continent and New Zealand, as everybody knows, are the countries where everything goes by contraries. And it is here that the parrot group has developed some of its most curious offshoots. One would imagine beforehand that no two birds could be more unlike in every respect than the gaudy, noisy, gregarious cockatoos and the sombre, nocturnal, solitary owls. Yet the New Zealand owl-parrot is a lorry which has assumed all the appearances and habits of an owl. A lurker in the twilight or under the shades of night, burrowing for its nest in holes in the ground, it has dingy brown plumage like the owls, with an undertone of green to bespeak its parrot origin; while its

face is entirely made up of two great disks, surrounding the eyes, which succeed in giving it a most marked and unmistakable owl-like appearance.

Why should a parrot so strangely disguise itself and belie its ancestry? The reason is not difficult to discover. It found a place for itself ready made in nature. New Zealand is a remote and sparsely-stocked island, peopled by various forms of life from adjacent but still distant continents. There are no dangerous enemies there. Here, then, was a great opportunity for a nightly prowler. The owl-parrot, with true business instinct, saw the opening thus clearly laid before it, and took to a nocturnal and burrowing life, with the natural consequence that those forms survived which were dingy in color. Unlike the owls, however, the owl-parrot, true to the vegetarian instincts of the whole lory race, lives almost entirely upon sprigs of mosses and other creeping plants. It is thus essentially a ground bird; and as it feeds at night in a country possessing no native beasts of prey, it has almost lost the power of flight, and uses its wings only as a sort of parachute to break its fall in descending from a rock or a tree to its accustomed feeding-ground. To ascend a steep place or a tree, it climbs, parrot-like, with its hooked claws, up the surface of the trunk or the face of the precipice.

Even more aberrant in its ways, however, than the burrowing owl-parrot, is that other strange and hated New Zealand lory, the kea, which, alone among its kind, has adjured the gentle ancestral vegetarianism of the cockatoos and macaws, in favor

of a carnivorous diet of remarkable ferocity. And what is stranger still, this evil habit has been developed in the kea since the colonization of New Zealand by the British, the most demoralizing of new-comers, as far as all aborigines are concerned. The English settlers have taught the Maori to wear silk hats and to drink strong liquors, and they have thrown temptation in the way of even the once innocent native parrot. Before the white man came, the kea was a mild-mannered, fruit-eating or honey-sucking bird. But as soon as sheep-stations were established on the island these degenerate parrots began to acquire a distinct taste for raw mutton. At first they ate only the offal that was thrown out from the slaughter-houses, picking the bones as clean of meat as a dog or a jackal. But in course of time, as the taste for blood grew, a new and debased idea entered their heads. If dead sheep are good to eat, are not living ones? The keas, having pondered deeply over this abstruse problem, solved it in the affirmative. Proceeding to act upon their convictions, they invented a truly hideous mode of procedure. A number of birds hunt out a weakly member of a flock, almost always after dark. The sheep is worried to death by the combined efforts of the parrots, some of whom perch themselves upon the animal's back and tear open the flesh, their object being to reach the kidneys, which they devour at the earliest possible moment. As many as two hundred ewes are said to have been killed in a single night on one "station" – ranch, we should call it. I need hardly say that the New Zealand sheep-farmer resents this irregular

procedure, so opposed to all ideas of humanity, to say nothing of good-farming, and, as a result, the existence of the kea is now limited to a few years. But from a purely psychological point of view the case is interesting, as being the best recorded instance of the growth of a new and complex instinct actually under the eyes of human observers.

A few words as to the general coloring of the parrot group. Tropical forestine birds have usually a ground tone of green because that color enables them best to escape notice among the monotonous verdure of equatorial woodland scenery. In the north, it is true, green is a very conspicuous color; but that is only because for half the year our trees are bare, and even during the other half they lack that "breadth of tropic shade" which characterizes the forests of all hot countries. Therefore, in temperate climates, the common ground-tone of birds is brown, to harmonize with the bare boughs and leafless twigs, the dead grass or stubble. But in the ever-green tropics, green is the proper hue for concealment or defense. Therefore the parrots, the most purely tropical family of birds on earth, are chiefly greenish; and among the smaller and more defenceless sorts, like the little love-birds, where the need for protection is greatest, the green of the plumage is almost unbroken. Green, in truth, must be regarded as the basal parrot tint, from which all other colors are special decorative variations.

But fruit-eating and flower-feeding creatures – such as butterflies and humming birds – seeking their food among the

brilliant flowers and bright berries, almost invariably acquire a taste for varied coloring, and by the aid of the factor in evolution, known as sexual selection, this taste stereotypes itself at last upon their wings and plumage. They choose their mates for their attractive coloring. As a consequence, all the larger and more gregarious parrots, in which the need for concealment is less, tend to diversify the fundamental green of their coats with red, yellow or blue, which in some cases takes possession of the entire body. The largest kinds of all, like the great blue and yellow or crimson macaws, are as gorgeous as birds well could be; they are also the species least afraid of enemies. In Brazil, it is said, they may often be seen moving about in pairs in the evening with as little attempt at concealment as storks in Germany.

Even the New Zealand owl-parrot still retains many traces of his original greenness, mixed with the brown and dingy yellow of his nocturnal and burrowing nature.

I now turn to the parrot's power of mimicry in human language. This power is only an incidental result of the general intelligence of parrots, combined with the other peculiarities of their social life and forestine character. Dominant woodland animals, like monkeys and parrots, at least if vegetarian in their habits, are almost always gregarious, noisy, mischievous, and imitative. And the imitation results directly from a somewhat high order of intelligence. The power of intellect, in all except the very highest phases, is merely the ability to accurately imitate another. Monkeys imitate action to a great extent, but their

voices are hardly flexible enough for very much mimicry of the human voice. Parrots and some other birds, on the contrary, like the mocking bird, being endowed with considerable flexibility of voice, imitate either songs or spoken words with great distinctness. In the parrot the power of attention is also very considerable, for the bird will often repeat to itself the lesson it has decided to learn. But most of us forget that at best the parrot knows only the general application of a sentence, not the separate meanings of its component words. It knows, for example, that “Polly wants a lump of sugar” is a phrase often followed by a gift of food. But to believe it can understand an exclamation like “What a homely lot of parrots!” is to credit the bird with genuine comprehension. A careful consideration of the evidence has convinced almost all scientific men that, at the most, a parrot knows the meaning of a sentence in the same way as a dog understands the meaning of “Rats” or a horse knows the significance of “Get up.”

Lawrence Irwell.

How can our fancies help but go
Out from this realm of mist and rain,
Out from this realm of sleet and snow,
When the first Southern violets blow?

– *Thomas Bailey Aldrich, “Spring in New England.”*

POLLY

Letty was out under the big elm tree watching the kitten playing with the autumn leaves that were on the ground.

Suddenly something struck Letty on the shoulder. She looked around quickly, thinking that somebody had thrown a stone at her. No one was in sight, though she looked all about and even up in the tree. Then she noticed that the kitten was rolling something with its paws. She stooped and picked up what looked like a little bunch of elm leaves. She thought it strange that they should be stuck together, and when she found that it was quite heavy she was still more surprised.

She carried it into the house to show to her mother. "What is it?" she asked. "It came down off the tree and hit me on my shoulder. Is there a stone inside of it?"

"No," said her mother. "It is a chrysalis. Some worm that lived on the elm tree drew these leaves together and spun a little case inside, and when the leaves were ready to fall, the chrysalis came down with them."

"What kind of a worm do you suppose it was?"

"I do not know, but it must have been a large one, or the chrysalis would not be so heavy. We will keep it, and in the spring when the worm has turned into a butterfly and comes out of the case, perhaps we can learn what its name is."

"But how will it get out?" asked Letty, anxiously. "It is so hard

and tough. I tried to pull off one of the leaves and it stuck on tight.”

“Yes,” said her mother, “it is very tough and you could not tear it open with your fingers even if you tried very hard. But the butterfly throws out some kind of fluid which softens the silk – for it is a kind of silk, you know – and makes a hole large enough to crawl through. It does not have to be very big, as the butterfly’s wings are soft and wet. It has to let them dry and grow strong and stiff before it can fly.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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